



critique

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**POETRY, OBVIOUS CHILD,
PILGRIM'S REGRESS, AND**

**BLAMING
GOD**

CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE: *Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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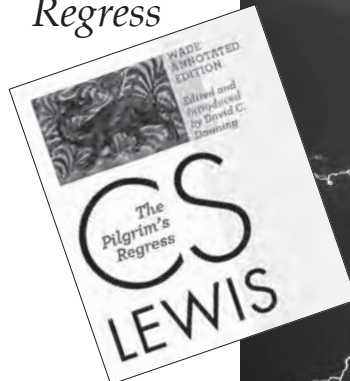
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Living in Time in a Fallen World



Though his ideas on the topic are much more richly complex than this, Thomas Oden proposes a 3-fold way to summarize human relationships in time. A theologian whose prolific writing has spanned the various movements that have shaped modern liberal theology, Oden has returned to classic Christian orthodoxy after immersing himself as a scholar in the wisdom and teaching—rooted in scripture and the apostolic tradition—of the patristic Fathers and Mothers of the church. In his remarkable memoir, *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (IVP, 2014), he recounts his spiritual pilgrimage and reviews the high points of his thinking and research over the years.

In *The Structure of Awareness*, which he published in 1969, he apparently (I haven't read *Structure*—just his summary in *A Change of Heart*) proposes a way to think about our human relationships as they are shaped by and lived out in time. Being a scholar intimately in touch with the conditions of life in advanced modernity, Oden's proposal strikes me a worth some reflection. It seems to echo what I hear in so many conversations with young adults as they search for a sense of significance in our broken world. Oden argues that since we live in time, all of our relationships—with God, others, the created world, and ourselves—are situated in a continuum of future, past and present. That is hardly a novel idea, but Oden's next move, it seems to me, is full of insight:

*the imagined future, which led to anxiety
the remembered past, which led to guilt
the experienced Now, which led to
boredom (p. 119)*

I wonder if this could not be the epitaph for our broken world in the broken moment in which we are called to live faithfully before the face of God.

I haven't been able to get these three lines of prose out of my mind since reading them. Future, past, present: anxiety, guilt, boredom—what a horrific, soul-sucking burden to carry. Human beings were not meant to have to bear this. No wonder there are so many who choose suicide, or self-medication, or the myriad distractions offered by career, entertainment, fitness, social activism, or religious busyness. The question is, how should I respond?

I have no illusions about what I can expect to accomplish as one person who also senses the reality of this burden of brokenness. My task is not to change the world but to be faithful, as you are also faithful, trusting that God will choose to do as he wills with our faithfulness.

So I have found myself praying that somehow, by God's grace, my life may demonstrate the reality of the cross and the empty tomb in a way that speaks to all three: anxiety, guilt and boredom. I will need to face all three honestly myself, and will need to choose the discomfort of walking into the anxiety, guilt and boredom of my neighbor, just as Christ willingly entered ours in incarnation.

It's been a challenging experience to ask myself whether and how my life demonstrates at least a hint of grace to address all three. One trap is to assume that because none of them plague me at the moment I must have it solved—when I might just be distracted or so subsumed in a pursuit of personal peace and affluence as to be inoculated against fallen reality.

And so it goes. Life in a fallen world while we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It will never be perfect on this side of the king's return, so let's not fret over the fact that anxiety, guilt and boredom will always haunt our steps and the steps of those we love. But there can be substantial healing, lovely hints of grace, and bright glimmers of glory demonstrated in quiet ways that point to the power of the gospel.

It's possible in time, and that makes it worth living for. ■



To the editor:
Dear Denis,

Thank you for your article on Fanny Crosby [*Critique* 2014:4]. We have started reading Christmas hymns and carols at morning and evening prayer. Some of my all-time favorites to sing are embarrassing to read out loud. Even in their artistic poverty they are powerful social and cultural glue that unites classes and generations of people. Christians need popular art of various kinds that can be shared together as a lowest common denominator. Thankfully almost all that the Christmas songs say is true.

I just found this hymn in the Episcopal hymnal of 1940 and thought it might thrill your heart.

*And have the bright immensities
Received our risen Lord,
Where Light-years frame the Pleiades
And point Orion's sword?
Do flaming suns his footsteps trace
Through corridors sublime,
The Lord of interstellar space
And Conqueror of time?*

*The heaven that hides him from our sight
Knows neither near nor far:
An altar candle sheds its light
As surely as a star;
And where his loving people meet
To share the gift divine,
There stands he with unhurrying feet;
There heavenly splendors shine.*
[H. C. Robbins, 1932]

God bless and keep you and Margie
in your lives and work.
Much love in Jesus,
Ellis Potter
Switzerland

To the editor:

"Rapturous Visions (or Not)" [*Critique* 2014:4] laid out a generous spectrum of opinions and facts about the hymns we sing. Although you didn't dwell on one aspect—the rich associations we bring to lyrics we've absorbed over decades, I believe that accounts for another phenomenon in today's worship services—setting old lyrics to new music. That might not make "Blessed Assurance" any more appealing to the editor, of course, but some of those catchy phrases and repetitive choruses of limited literary quality have the impact of scripture when a needy person is grasping for comfort.

There are probably a number of people like me who have sleepless hours when reading oneself back to sleep isn't a good idea. Internally recounting the words of old hymns has a more profound calming effect than counting sheep, certainly. Fragments of verses, sometimes complete stanzas, bring other circumstances, other settings to remembrance that help to slow down a racing mind. And the truth of even trite words can alter the direction of gloomy thoughts. A rainy night, when I was leaving the hospital where my mother was in uncertain health, remains vivid because an old hymn entered my thoughts and blessed me on the drive home with its repeated assurances: "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take him at his word; just to rest upon his promise; just to know 'Thus saith the Lord'...Jesus,

Jesus, precious Jesus—Oh, for grace to trust him more." Yes, sometimes one's critical faculty can bypass the desire to edit "Just," and dwell with relief on the name of Jesus.

Connecting "rapturous visions" to Daniel's visions troubles me. I question whether the visions spoken of in the hymn belong in the same category as the prophetic visions of a man singled out by God to record apocalyptic signs. One can sigh over a sunset and call it a "vision" or refer to a vivid dream of seeing a loved person who has died. Those are comforting to the ones who experienced them, and no doubt the folks who love to sing "Blessed Assurance" have some private encounters of their own to make sense of the phrase. Yes, Daniel's physical and emotional responses to his visions were grave; perhaps that's why he never composed a hymn about them.

Pondering this article provided many smiles and thoughts about jewels in tarnished settings. Thanks for revealing how you relate to one of them.

Marilyn Stevens
Los Alamos, NM ■



GAS STATION

Semblance of an oasis in the warm, cricket-rich dark,
illuminated with a steady glow of muted iridescence.
The teller is fully-fleshed, folds unhidden by oversized clothes,
reading a bad book while waiting for customers:
souls seeking gas—the world's uncontested elixir—
and the hope offered through lottery tickets.
Pages of a romance blend into memory...
a man in a bar smiling, one side-tooth missing,
delivering cliché after cliché, and later the awkwardness
of foreign flesh on foreign flesh and following disappointment,
thinking, *so this is it...* before snapping back
as a customer opens the door, sounding a buzzer.
Bruised-green tattoos scrawl up and down one arm,
images of uncertainty, a groping for identity.
He prepays and leaves, each avoiding the exposure of a direct gaze.
Through the window in-between twists of red neon advertising,
she sees the man's girlfriend, her glazed eyes failing to hide
a forlorn, nervous ignorance. He pumps the gas...
Fumes combine with exhaust as he sidles away.
The teller returns to her book.

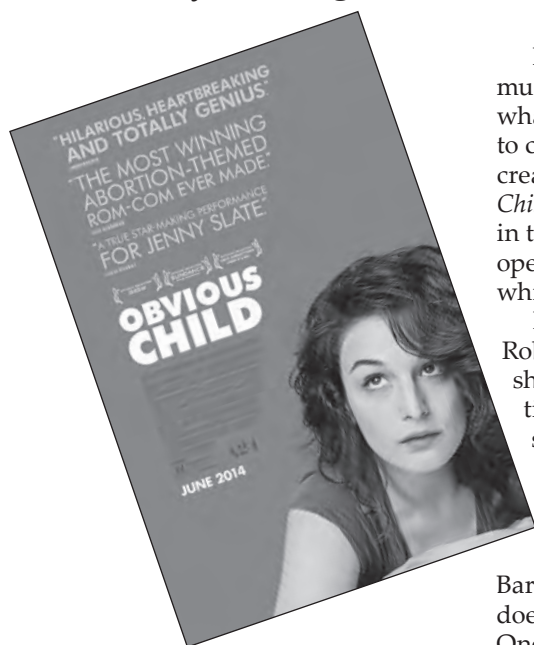
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Scott Schuleit received the MA in Christianity and culture from Knox Theological Seminary. His poems have appeared in the Mars Hill Review, The Penwood Review, Spring Hill Review, Christianity and Literature, and Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal. His non-fiction has been published in several print and non-print publications including Tabletalk, Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Monergism.com, The Gospel Coalition, and Modern Reformation. Scott is the youth ministry leader at Lake Worth Christian Reformed Church and enjoys walking, observing, reflecting, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.

Who's Obviously a Child?

reviewed by **R. Greg Grooms**



"Good Morning!" said Bilbo, and he meant it.

"What do you mean?" Gandalf said.

"Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good in?"

"All of them at once," said Bilbo.

[from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*]

When I was a student—back in the Dark Ages—"What does it mean?" was thought to be a good question to ask of a book or a story or a film. The correct answer lay in the intent of the writer or director; what he or she meant by it was what it was all about. It's an old-fashioned idea that has since been replaced by the belief that there simply isn't one true meaning in any story, just lots of ever-changing meanings in the hearts and minds of writers, readers, and viewers.

Now I'm not old-fashioned, but I must admit that I am curious about what inspires writers and directors to create and how this shapes their creations. Gillian Robespierre's *Obvious Child* hasn't exactly shaken my faith in the intent of the writer, but it has opened my eyes to the many ways in which a film can be seen.

In an interview this summer, Robespierre stated quite clearly what she intended for her film: it's a romantic comedy about "a safe, regrets-free, shame-free abortion." To that end she introduces us to Donna Stern (Jenny Slate), a young New Yorker who works in a quirky bookstore—Unoppressive Non-Imperialist Bargain Books—during the day and does standup comedy in a club at night. One evening, after she delivers a colorful monologue about sex, dirty underpants, farts, and parts of her boyfriend's anatomy, he dumps her, announcing that he's tired of being the butt of her jokes and that he's been sleeping with a friend of hers for a couple of weeks anyway. So Donna gets drunk, hooks up with a stranger—Max, played by Jake Lacy—and shortly thereafter learns that she's pregnant.

The rest of *Obvious Child* revolves around The Big Question. Not "Will I have an abortion?" The answer to that question is taken for granted. Robespierre quite deliberately has Donna avoid any Junoesque agonizing about whether or not she should have her baby. No, the question she and her friends struggle with is, "Do I tell Max that I'm pregnant?" *Obvious Child* is meant to be a romantic comedy and, true to form, the tension that drives it is whether or not Donna and Max can overcome their differences—she's Jewish, he's "so Christian"; he's a

business major, she couldn't care less about spreadsheets and profit margins; she's frightfully childish, he looks like stability incarnate—and find a path ahead together.

Why this title? Who's obviously a child? Donna certainly qualifies. She's smart and funny, but not so funny as she thinks. Her business-professor mom's critique—"And now you waste that 780 verbal telling jokes about having diarrhea in your pants"—fits her like a glove. She's funny, but also self-centered, flippant, seemingly incapable of running her own life, much less caring for a baby. Marian Wright Edelmans' comment about "the crisis of children having children" captures *Obvious Child*'s dilemma perfectly. Donna isn't ready to be a mother, despite the fact that she is one.

And despite answering The Big Question with a "Yes!" she finds herself unable to tell Max until the night before the abortion. He comes to her club and hears in her monologue that she is pregnant with his child and will be having an abortion the next day. The audience in the club and the audience in the theater in which I saw *Obvious Child*, responded to this as if it were the comedic high point of the movie. Lots of laughs, lots of close ups of people in the club audience laughing. I wept, and Max left, only to return the next morning, bearing flowers, to go to the clinic with Donna and take her home after the procedure. The film ends with them cuddling on her couch with cups of tea, watching *Gone With the Wind*.

This is Robespierre's story just as she intended it to be. But there's another story behind her story and, perhaps despite her intentions, it shines through in her film, too. Donna's abortion is never spoken of, either by her, her

friends, or her mother, without evoking tears and, once, anger. The images from the film that linger in my mind aren't laughing faces, but Donna in the bath on the morning of her abortion, washing her face over and over; a close up of her face with tears streaming from her eyes just as the abortion begins; Donna sitting silently in the recovery room afterwards, surrounded by lots of pretty, young women like herself, avoiding eye contact with all but one; her dark humor at the club the night before, when a friend tells her just before she goes on stage, "You're gonna kill it out there tonight," and she replies, "No. I'll do that tomorrow."

Am I suggesting that Robespierre made a film other than the one she intended? No, not at all, but I am saying that there are truths that cannot be fully obscured by any author's intentions. You can see them in her film just as you can see them in Paul Simon's song of the same title from his album *The Rhythm of the Saints* (1990).

*And in remembering a road sign
I am remembering a girl when I was
young
And we said
These songs are true
These days are ours
These tears are free
And hey
The cross is in the ballpark
The cross is in the ballpark
We had a lot of fun
We had a lot of money
We had a little son and we thought we'd
call him Sonny
Sonny gets married and moves away
Sonny has a baby and bills to pay
Sonny gets sunnier
Day by day by day by day
I've been waking up at sunrise*



*I've been following the light across my
room
I watch the night receive the room of my
day
Some people say the sky is just the sky
But I say
Why deny the obvious child?
Why deny the obvious child? ■*

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See next page and back cover for discussion questions, more photos, and film credits.



Greg Grooms, a contributing editor for *Critique*, lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How did you feel after watching *Obvious Child*?
2. What were you thinking about as the film ended?
3. What adjectives would you use to describe OC? Please, just use single words without explanation if at all possible.
4. We meet Donna Stern in the midst of OC's first monologue. Describe your reactions to that monologue. How did it shape the way you look at Donna? Why do you think Gillian Robespierre introduces her to us in this way?
5. In your opinion, is Donna an attractive character? What do you like about her?
6. In your opinion, is Donna a sympathetic character? What stirs your sympathy for her? If you don't feel sympathy for Donna, what do you feel for her?
7. As Donna and Max engage in drunken foreplay, Paul Simon's "Obvious Child" plays in the background. Why do you think this song was chosen for this moment in the film?
8. Donna discusses her pregnancy, her abortion, and Max with various friends and with her mother. What themes tie those conversations together?
9. In the post-abortion recovery room scene, none of the women with Donna are women of color. In your opinion, is this a coincidence or did Robespierre do this for a reason?
10. At the end of OC, Donna and Max seem to have made peace with each other. Do they live happily ever after? Defend your answer.
11. In your experience, is it possible to discuss abortion—not the political conflict, but the everyday reality of it—without tears?
12. If you were privileged enough to watch *Obvious Child* with Robespierre, what questions would you have for her afterwards?

RESOURCE: THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS

An Annotated *Regress*



It is not news to remark that C. S. Lewis's books remain remarkably relevant as the years and decades pass. Schooled in the enduring wisdom of ancient scripture, great literature, and deep myth, Lewis was a twentieth century man who was not attracted to or fooled by the passing fads and novelities of modernity. This is one reason we chose to name Ransom Fellowship after the main character in his superb space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945). If you have not yet read these novels, please do so. Not only are they imaginative and well crafted, they explore the deepest questions of human existence. (I am convinced that Lewis anticipated postmodernity in *That Hideous Strength*—see if you agree.) Be that as it may, his books remain worthy of repeated readings. A mind and imagination tutored by Lewis will be one better able to discern truth and foolishness, and know the reasons why.

Still, not all of Lewis's books are equally accessible. With his fiction, for example, the *Chronicles of Narnia* is more easily appreciated than either his Space

Trilogy or *Till We Have Faces*. That is a shame, since the Space Trilogy is so profound, and Lewis thought *Till We Have Faces* to be his best work. But of all Lewis's fiction, probably the most difficult is *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). As Lewis scholar David Downing explains, there is good reason for that:

The Pilgrim's Regress represents a number of firsts for C. S. Lewis: it was his first Christian book; it was his first book of fiction; it was the first book he published under his own name. (It may also be the first book composed in two weeks that is still in print eight decades later!) Yet this book of many firsts for Lewis may also be counted as last. The Pilgrim's Regress is one of Lewis's least read and least understood books, mainly due to its obscurity. Regress includes untranslated quotations in Greek, Latin, German, French, and medieval Italian. It also assumes the reader has a working knowledge of Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel, philosophers who were widely known to specialists in Lewis's time and are even less widely recognized in our own era. The book also portrays cultural figures and literary trends of the early twentieth century that are no longer familiar to contemporary readers. (p. xvii)

Written in a form that parallels John Bunyan's classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the book charts Lewis's experience of faith. His original title, rejected by his publisher, was *The Pilgrim's Regress*, or *Pseudo-Bunyan's Periplus: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*. It's possible, given all this, that Lewis did not originally write it for a popular audience but for his colleagues in academia who would question his coming to faith.

If you have never read (or finished, or

understood) *The Pilgrim's Regress*, help is now available. A beautifully printed, carefully annotated version is now available, edited by David Downing. It turns out that in 1937 Lewis had a student at Magdalen College for whom he personally annotated a copy of *The Pilgrim's Regress*. Some 500 of these notes, along with definitions, translations, explanations, and references to other of Lewis's writing by Downing are printed alongside the text. With this version, it's like having Lewis and Downing walk through the book with us as we read.

Please add a copy to your library. Working through *The Pilgrim's Regress* is something worth adding to your to-do list this year. ■

Book recommended: *The Pilgrim's Regress* by C. S. Lewis (1933), *Wade Annotated Edition*, edited and introduced by David C. Downing (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company; 2014) 219 pages + bibliography + notes + indices.

RESOURCE

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BLAMING GOD

by Steve Froehlich

The long line of ants parading across the kitchen counter leads to a jar of sticky strawberry jelly left open last night by someone who raided the fridge for a midnight snack. A perturbed voice echoes through the house: “Who forgot to put the jelly away? Daa-ad?”

Blame. We point a finger at another person and say, “It’s your fault.” When we blame, we assign responsibility usually in an attempt to hold someone accountable (for not putting away the jelly) or to explain an event (a thousand ants doing the conga in the kitchen).

Blame is almost always an indictment. The prophet Nathan stood before King David to confront him about his adultery and the murder of Uriah. Perhaps you’ve imagined the scene as he solemnly utters the words, “Thou art the man.” Blame. Responsibility has been placed at the feet of David.

Or, as the sign on President Harry Truman’s White House desk announced, “The Buck Stops Here.” In a folksy way, Truman invited citizens to blame him if things in the country weren’t going the way they should. At the same time, he wanted to take the credit if things were going well.

Now, I know I’m being a bit cheeky in using the word “blame” since both credit and blame are the similar action of assigning responsibility. But the issue on my mind is how we assign responsibility to God for what goes on in the world and in our lives. My hunch is that when we “blame” God, the doctrine of God takes a beating, our relationship with God suffers, and we open ourselves to doubt and fear.





As I reflect on my own behavior, particularly the opinions I blurt out without thinking, I have to admit that I frequently, and sometimes carelessly, assign responsibility to God for what I

observe and experience. I blame God for a lot of things, and I suspect you do, too. Why? We believe he is present and at work in our lives. Also, we want to understand why things happen, and we want to know who is responsible. If it's God, we want to bless him; if Satan, we want to curse him. Right?

EXPECTATIONS

Consider Martha as she grieves the death of her brother, Lazarus (John 11:17ff). The family has sent for Jesus to come, but Jesus, curiously, delays. He gets the urgent summons from his friends, but he waits. By the time he arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. But, Martha confronts Jesus with a surprisingly bold greeting. "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Really.

Martha knows this...how? What is it that informs her expectation of what Jesus would have done had he arrived sooner? Well, to begin with she has a good theological head on her shoulders. Martha knows that Jesus is the Son of God: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." Furthermore, she's confident about God's redemptive providence: "I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Plus, experience. She's been friends with Jesus

THERE ARE NO ROGUE MOLECULES TEARING ABOUT THE UNIVERSE THAT SOMEHOW MANAGE TO OPERATE INDEPENDENTLY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE.

long enough to know that healing the sick is exactly the sort of thing Jesus did all the time.

Martha, a woman of noble faith, dares to nudge the savior to action with her

belief that God will do anything he asks. But as there is a hint of disappointment in her remorse that Jesus did not come before Lazarus died, is there not in her prodding an air of expectation that what Jesus can do, he will do...or even must do?

EXPECTATIONS THAT LEAD TO BLAME

Our expectations of what we think God should do in the world have their roots in a crucial foundational belief: God is sovereign. He is the almighty, omnipotent God who causes "all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* V.ii). As Job acknowledges, as he covers his mouth after surviving an unexplained gauntlet of suffering, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). God finishes what he starts both personally (Philippians 1:6) and creationally (Revelation 21:5). His providence is so comprehensive that not a hair falls from our heads or a sparrow to the ground apart from our Father's care (Matthew 10:29; see also Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1). Or, to put it more whimsically, there are no rogue molecules tearing about the universe that somehow manage to operate independently of God's providence.

The truth of God's providence is the bedrock of hope, of what enables us to

put our feet on the floor every morning with any measure of confidence. But we are not deists or fatalists. God's sovereignty is not mechanistic indifference or impersonal determinism. We believe in the incarnation—God in Christ mingles his life with ours so that he is a "very present help" (Psalm 46:1), the good shepherd walking with us beside quiet streams and through death's dark valleys (Psalm 23). Jesus promises, even at the moment of his ascension (what seems like a departure, even an abandonment), "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Matthew 28:20; cf. Josiah 1:15; Hebrews 13:5).

We believe not only in God's presence, but also in prayer. We believe that God hears our praises and petitions, and he responds personally in real time. He delights in our adoration. He sees our needs and is moved. We believe God is at work in the world today, right now, in this place, even in our lives. Because of that Bible-informed belief, it's no surprise that we attempt to explain what he is doing. Our efforts to make sense of God's providence are so natural and genuine that it may seem silly to question them. In fact, questioning those responses may feel like we're questioning God. "Do you doubt God is at work?"

But I'm not suggesting that we question God. I'm suggesting that we question ourselves.

Sometimes there are moments of crisp, blue-skied clarity in which we know God has responded or acted. Hannah prayed for a son. God said, "yes" by opening her womb. Paul prayed for deliverance. God said "no" by leaving the thorn in his flesh.

When we believe that God has acted, we respond. On the one hand (when we like the outcome) we say things



like, “God comforted and encouraged me. God healed me. God gave me a job. God brought me a husband or a wife. God protected me and provided for me. He has heard my cry.” But on the other hand (when we don’t like the outcome), we’re unsure what to say. What verb do we choose for God’s action when he seems silent, far away, or even adversarial?

When our attempts to explain God’s actions are based solely on our observations, feelings, and expectations, we will almost certainly end up with a confused and inconsistent notion of God’s character and providence. The ground beneath our feet suddenly becomes less solid.

Critics of Christianity, if we are honest, often see this inconsistency far more clearly than do we as Christians. If we credit God with healing our diseases and define his providence by his ability to provide convenient parking spaces at the mall, why do we not blame him for passenger jets being shot out of the sky and neighborhood dogs yapping their heads off at every passing car? It’s a fair question. Few Christians are willing to join the cynics in holding God responsible for tragedy and injustice or blaming God for bad things that happen. That is, except when we are self-assured that we are on the side of justice. Then, it seems that we are often quite willing to think of disease infecting the wicked or bombs and bullets tearing the flesh of our adversaries as the arm of God giving people what we think they deserve. As Bob Dylan sang more than half a century ago, “you don’t count the dead when God’s on your side.”

BLAME

Many Christian athletes want to deflect the glory heaped upon them by the media and their fans by pointing

their finger to God whenever they accomplish something great. A football player scores a touchdown and immediately points to heaven, kneels, or genuflects. I commend these athletes for their courage and witness. However, in all my many years of watching sports, I have never seen a Christian running back, sacked in the backfield by a 300-pound defender, reach around the massive body pinning him to the ground and point a finger to heaven, “All praise to you, Jesus, for this pain and humiliation.” Why not? Why are we willing to acknowledge that God is at work in the touchdown, but not in the sack?

Job understood something about our ability (or really, our lack of ability) to explain the specific actions of God that impact our lives. In his unresolved misery Job confesses what we somehow need to recapture in reshaping our attempts to explain God’s actions in the world and in our lives: “‘The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong” (Job 1:21-22). He did not blame God.

Humans crave explanation. Urgency to understand drives research and discovery, and curiosity energizes wonder and creativity. Our bent to know why and how comes from our culture-making nature as God’s image bearers. Additionally, our belief in causality (things happen for at least mechanical if not teleological reasons) is an inescapable God-haunted dimension of our human existence. As Christians, we believe the ultimate explanation for “life, the universe, and everything”

WHEN JESUS SAYS TO THE BLIND MAN, “SEE,” WHAT ELSE CAN THE MAN’S EYES DO BUT WHAT THE CREATOR HAS COMMANDED THEM TO DO?

(thank you Douglas Adams) is the character and power of God.

However, if we’re going to try to make even basic sense of what God is doing, we

need to begin by thinking more clearly about how God acts in the world. That is, how God exercises his providence in the everyday stuff of life (as well as the grand sweep of human history).

THE BIG PICTURE

We know that God’s power is at work in the world because of the two big events of human history central to Christian belief: creation and redemption. The world came into existence and Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God. Only God can do these things.

Decree: In Genesis 1, God expresses his sovereign, omnipotent power in three ways. When we think of omnipotence, it’s common for us to envision God’s zapping things into existence. When Jesus says to the blind man, “See,” what else can the man’s eyes do but what the creator has commanded them to do? When Jesus tells the winds and waves, “Be still,” the elements must obey him. This is the first expression of power we see in Genesis: Decree. Out of non-existence God causes existence. If we’re honest, most of us probably think this is the most God-like expression of power, and it’s how we prefer to see God do things. “God, just make it happen.”

Design: The second expression of God’s power appears when the creator directs the creatures of land, sea, and air to reproduce “according to their kind” (Genesis 1:24). In other words, God is



commanding the creation to act according to the nature he has given to it. This is the second expression of power we see in Genesis: Design. God's power is at work in the nature of the things he has made. When gravity pulls apples from the tree, when ice melts and wood burns, when dogs mate and have puppies, when hunger makes our tummies rumble, the power of God is at work in the nature of the world he has created.

Delegation: To his culture-making image bearers, God gives royal responsibility to exercise stewardship and creativity over the whole world. Before God steps back and pronounces his "very good" blessing on his creation, he exercises the third expression of his power: Delegation. "Fill the earth," commands the creator. Humans are given the near God-like ability and responsibility to oversee the ongoing work of creation. The power of God is at work in the choices his image bearers make on his behalf for the flourishing and completion of creation.

With this three-fold perspective of God's expression of power, how might I expect to see God act when I pray, when I ask God to respond and use his power to heal me of the flu? Decree: I would be thrilled for God to just zap my healing, to speak the word and eradicate the infection. There is precedent for God's doing this and, therefore, good reason to hope that he might use his power in this way. Design: It may be that God will work in the nature of things—letting the flu run its course as my body regains strength perhaps encouraged by chicken soup, aspirin, or a physician's skillful care. Delegation: It may be that God will work in my own choices that are integral to my recovery—rest, diet, exercise, learning about how better to care for my body.

However, what am I to conclude about God's power, presence, and purpose when the answer to my prayers is shrouded in silence, when I can detect no evidence of intervention, change, or relief?

We can start by affirming that a mature faith will not privilege one expression of God's power over another. Whether by decree, design, or delegation, God's providence is at work. We also begin by acknowledging that God's power is at work accomplishing his eternal purpose quite apart from our ability to see or make sense of what God is doing.

The Old Testament plays an extremely important role in informing us about God's power at work in the world. (Yes, this is a shameless plug to keep reading the Old Testament.) We see the activity of God in the lives of people and among the nations much more widely and specifically than in the New Testament. It's critical to note that we would not have this information apart from God's disclosure of it in his written revelation. But because he has disclosed it to us, we may be confident that it accurately depicts his power at work in the world, throughout history, and even today.

Consider these examples. The book of Job opens with an unprecedented glimpse behind the scenes—God's power has the last word, but within the limits God has set, Satan is exposed as a prowling, "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Through Isaiah, God refers to Cyrus the pagan

GOD'S POWER IS AT WORK ACCOMPLISHING HIS ETERNAL PURPOSE QUITE APART FROM OUR ABILITY TO SEE OR MAKE SENSE OF WHAT GOD IS DOING.

ruler of the Persians in messianic terms, as one integral to his redemptive purpose: "my shepherd" and "my anointed" (Isaiah 44:28-45:1). We are told that by the leprous pagan (at the time), Naaman,

God gave victory to Syria over Israel (2 Kings 5:1). Jeremiah reveals that God wields Babylon as an arm of his judgment against his people and yet still holds Babylon accountable for the wickedness of her actions (Jeremiah 25:8-14).

In his word, God pulls back the curtain just enough to let us know that he is actively involved in the world, in the affairs of nations, and in the unfolding of history. He is also actively involved in every aspect of our lives: life and death, wellbeing and calamity, prosperity and poverty, light and darkness (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 1:5-6; 2:6-10; Isaiah 45:67). Wherever he is present (Psalm 139), he is at work.

The knowledge that God is everywhere at work resides at the heart of the life of faith. This belief is crucially foundational for our life in the world as followers of Christ. However, what we lack (and will never have) is a comprehensive interpretive key that connects our observation and experience of events in this life with a corresponding explanation of what God is doing in all that we observe and experience. Without God's explicit disclosure, we have no way of identifying God's particular and purposeful involvement at any historical moment. Inspired by God's Spirit, the prophets interpret events in the life of God's people (draught, harvest, victory,

defeat) to make the explicit connections between history and the hand of God, connections that are beyond our ability to make.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

Long after the voices of the prophets have fallen silent, we may continue to say with confidence that God is at work in the world and in our lives today. God answers prayer. God is omnipotently accomplishing his eternal purpose in creation and redemption. How then do we talk about God's actions in the world right now as we experience them? On what basis do we say, "God did that"? Or, should we ever say, "God did that"? One young woman prays from genuine faith in Christ for a hoped-for relationship that flourishes and fulfills. Similarly a young man prays for a hoped-for relationship that ends in disappointment and rejection. On what basis can or should either of these two Christians say, "God fulfilled my relationship" or "God frustrated my relationship"?

It's hard to look past our present circumstances to recognize that God is never doing only one thing at any given time or place. God's power is at work all around us in a complex array of expressions. He is working by the nature and design of the world, and he is working in our choices and actions as we carry out the responsibilities delegated to us. He is working by decree. In any one circumstance God can be working out justice, provision, and discipline in ways that to our limited perspective may seem contradictory. He can at the same time be restraining evil, using evil, and advancing the kingdom. In short, God is at work in multi-faceted ways that we can never fully comprehend.

It's difficult to admit that God's

providence is not all about me. We must not forget that while God always acts personally toward his image bearers, the focus of his action is on the redemption of his people and the world he has made for them. We have to adjust our perspective from trying to figure out how our individual lives are being fulfilled to affirming that God is completing all that he has promised in Christ. Christ and the gospel are always to be at the center of our expectations and understanding of what God is doing in the world and in our lives. Or, to put it another way, our trust in God's provision of our daily bread needs to be tethered to our longing for his kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

REFINING OUR PERSPECTIVE

How does this shift in thinking translate into everyday practice? Does this change in perspective really make a difference in how we live by faith and worship God? I believe it can, although the change will likely be gradual as we learn new patterns of thought and speech.

We all live with expectations. Many of us live with unmet expectations that hold us hostage, sometimes even in a death grip. Many of us live with deep disappointment and anger toward God for what we think he has or hasn't done. Many of us live with fear because we don't know what God will do. Many of us pursue careers and relationships with the expectations of specific outcomes that we connect (often inaccurately) to God's promises and providence: marriage, bonuses, loyalty, success.

Those who are pressed to hope in God amid all the chaos, injustice, death, and evil of life look eagerly for reassurance that God is present and at work in

the thick of our woundedness, despair, powerlessness, and brokenness. We read and believe the promise of God's presence and faithfulness, but we also want to see with our eyes that he is with us and at work. It's the expectation that we should be able to see with our eyes (hoping to use God's secret decoder ring) that gets us into trouble.

Yet seeing the indisputable hand of God at work does not automatically give us the courage and confidence we want. Moses met God at the burning bush but was still fearful and reluctant. After witnessing the plagues of Egypt and meeting with God face to face, he still pleaded for confirmation from God (Psalm 90). Moses, like us, had to stand with confidence on the character of God, not on the satisfaction that his experiences and observations met his expectations.

I wonder if this hopeful expectation is behind much of the appeal of the prosperity gospel movement. Christians want reassurance that prayer works. Christians want vindication for their causes and validation that they've heard God's voice in their decision-making. So, the proof of God's presence and blessing is good health and a new car. The proof that we really are in sync with the Spirit is all the money we raised to build a new church building. Or the formula works in reverse, too. What more evidence do we need that God has cursed the United States than the legalization of abortion and same-sex marriage?

As students of history, surely we can say that God is at work when justice triumphs over evil, can't we? Hitler was defeated and his barbaric cruelty was brought to an end. Surely this was the hand of God at work in history, and we can say, "God did that," can't we? However, when we leave the



comfortable distance of generalities, how do we assign responsibility for the individual actions that brought about that victory? Was God behind dropping the bomb on Hiroshima? Was God involved in brokering the Yalta Conference that doomed thousands to the Gulag? Of the many events that comprise the accomplishment of V-Day and the defeat of Hitler, which ones are we willing to say, “God did that”?

On a more everyday scale, you might recall being stranded on the road with a flat tire. A stranger stopped to help, and you said to your benefactor, “God sent you.” You might recall heading for a safe place in the house when the tornado sirens wailed. Afterwards, you said, “God directed the storm away from us” (which means by implication that he directed the storm to wreak havoc upon someone who uttered the same prayer you prayed). You remember being in a car accident in which everyone else was injured in some way, and you said, “God protected me from harm” (which means that he either failed to protect the others or inflicted injury upon them). You cannot forget how lonely you felt, completely alone, until that young man spoke to you at the church picnic. You said with confidence, “I’m not lonely any more—I’m loved. God has sent him into my life.” Many of you will never forget the struggle to choose a college or a major, and after much prayer and conversation you said, “God opened the door for me to go to UCLA and major in music.” Many of you have asserted with confidence that God told you whom to marry.

But is this the most helpful and accurate way to speak about God’s work in our lives and in the world? Is it necessary that we be able to say that we clearly and unequivocally understand

what God is doing at this moment in our lives? Do we have to explain God? Do we have to justify his actions to our satisfaction before we are willing to trust him or invite others to trust him?

I want to suggest that, too often, when we are explaining (“God did that”), we are blaming. I believe there is a better way to affirm and respond to God’s presence and work.

Consider this alternative proposition: **Gratitude is better than explanation.**

If this proposition is true, then we have some learning to do. But first, two comments.

1. We have to say something.

Please note that I am not saying that explanation is automatically wrong or arrogant. In the Bible, God does a lot of explaining and calls us to be ready to give an explanation of the gospel (1 Peter 3:15). But when it comes to expressing our view of God’s action in our lives and in the world, I’m suggesting that the language and posture of gratitude is better. It seems to me that the perspective of gratitude inclines us toward trust, thereby enabling us to live in the midst of a world of relentless uncertainty bounded by a very solid certainty.

I believe whole-heartedly that most of us use the language of explanation in an attempt to honor God. We believe in him and his promises, and we want to affirm that he is present and at work. We want to give him glory for the grace and faithfulness that he has lavished upon us.

THERE IS ALWAYS MORE TO WHAT GOD IS DOING THAN WE CAN EVER KNOW BECAUSE IT REQUIRES AN UNDERSTANDING THAT BELONGS TO GOD ALONE.

But this shift from explanation to gratitude could easily be frustrating, and I don’t want to discourage you from acknowledging God’s grace at work in your life. Keep confessing him in the most

honest and articulate way you know. But at the same time, don’t stop thinking about how you express that confession. Perhaps some of the ideas that follow will help you.

2. God is at work in ways we will never fully understand.

It bears repeating that even when we are confident that God is responsible for specific events in our lives or in the world, we must remember that he is at work (even in those same events) in more ways than we can comprehend. In every event, in varying degrees, he is attending to the completion of the redemption of each of his children. He is attending to the work of the church and the *missio dei*. He is attending to the preservation of the world and the completion of creation. He is restraining Satan and evil. He is punishing the wicked and executing justice. He is answering prayer. He is keeping his promises. He is lavishing grace indiscriminately upon people everywhere. He is making Christ known. He is delighting in all he has made. He is moving history toward the consummation.

All these speak to the complexities of God’s actions in the world. But there is also the dark mystery of a “frowning providence,” the giving and taking of which Job spoke. God does not always



INSTEAD OF PRESUMING THAT WE HAVE GOD FIGURED OUT, LET'S GIVE THANKS.

send the gentle rain—sometimes he sends the flood. He sends disease as well as healing. He closes as well as opens the womb, gives brevity of life as well as length of days. He impoverishes as well as prospers, makes war as well as peace, hardens hearts as well as opens ears. We know this because God tells us in his Word.

So, even if we could accurately explain an event and say, “God did that,” we are inescapably ignorant of all the other things God is doing in that same event. There is always more to what God is doing than we can ever know because it requires an understanding that belongs to God alone. Parents experience a similar limitation in their children. When a child believes the end of the world has come when a girl turns down his prom invitation, parents know there is so much more at work in their young man’s life than just the pain of rejection. We often try to explain away the pain by saying “this will all look very different five years from now.” But your young man wants an explanation for THIS moment. As compassionate parents, would we not give anything to call all the king’s horses and all the king’s men to put Humpty Dumpty together again...right now, because behind the explanation is a desire to heal the wound and fix what is broken. Somewhere, somehow, I believe our desire to explain is connected with a desire to control, a desire to fix and manage things, an impulse that reminds us that the line between compassion and idolatry can be razor thin.

Similarly with God, an explanation for one event does not begin to explain all that God is doing right now. We see little, but often too quickly or glibly presume to know much, and our

determination to find explanations often betrays an insistence that circumstances be different. Therefore, incomplete explanations (which are all we are able to muster) too frequently lead to distortions, misunderstanding, and manipulation.

Instead of presuming that we have God figured out, let’s give thanks.

Over 50 times in the Psalms we are summoned to give thanks. A favorite refrain of the poets saturating their praise is “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!”

The theme of thanksgiving and gratitude continues through the New Testament. Consider these two examples:

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Our response to every circumstance of life is to be joyful and prayerful thanksgiving. However, let’s not fool ourselves. That’s a tall order because many of life’s situations do not naturally or easily evoke joy and gratitude. But the focus of our response must be on the person and character of God, on knowing him well rather than having life figured out. In what ways, then, does gratitude liberate us from the bondage and burden of explanation?

1. We are free to be grateful because we know how the story ends.

While happiness breezes through our lives as the fickle and fleeting fair weather companion of

pleasant moments, gratitude (like joy) is grounded in the certainty of what endures. Martha says to Jesus, “I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” It would be difficult to exaggerate the practical importance of her affirmation. We know how the story ends. Even if we cannot explain how all the parts and pieces of what we experience today fit together as a seamless whole, we know how the story ends. Regardless of whether Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead or not, he will rise again, and nothing is lost.

The Apostle John stands slack-jawed at the apocalyptic vision unfolding before him. He sees the ancient promises of God coming together in fulfillment. Creation is flourishing as God intended. The nations have gathered like the stars of heaven in the glory of God’s presence, and shalom covers the earth. Evil has been vanquished and sin, banished. Christ, the Lamb, is on his throne, the host of the great feast. And, all creation sings. The incomprehensible wonder of the sight immobilizes John until the One seated on the throne nudges him: See with your own eyes. “Behold, I am making all things new. Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true” (Revelation 21:5). Take in the sight of this wonderful vision, and record in your book what you have seen so that generations yet to come might have confidence and hope.

This is God’s gift to us through John, uniting what’s happening in our lives today with the providential completion of Creation. This trustworthy and true



testimony becomes the solid ground upon which we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). We are living today (even amid tremendous chaos and confusion) toward certainty. The certainty of life is NOT dependent upon our ability to interpret the events of life. The uncertainty of life accompanies our incapacity to grasp how God is able to be at work using all the stuff of life to accomplish his purpose. By contrast, the great certainty for us each day in every circumstance of life is that God is at work taking us closer and closer to the end for which he has ordained creation and redemption.

Perhaps the often quoted “all things work together for good” of Romans 8:28 comes to mind. Too often we have been burdened with tortured readings of Paul’s assurance. Sometimes we are told to believe that bad things are really good things in disguise. Sometimes we are told, when bad things happen, not to fret because God has something better in store for us—a better job, a better spouse, a better outcome. We are told that cancer, the loss of a job, the death of a child, are all means by which God makes something “good.” Life may have given us lemons, you may have heard, but God makes lemonade.

But these well-meaning consolations are not the assurance Paul offers. The “good” which God is working in all things is our salvation, his calling to himself, the fulfillment of his purpose, the certainty of a journey that ends in glory. Believing that God is at work in all things does not mean that death, disease, and loneliness are transformed into anything other than what they

TO LIVE GRATEFULLY WE LIVE NOT WITH THE CLARITY OF THE MOMENT BUT WITH THE CERTAINTY OF THE FUTURE.

are, evidence of the brokenness of a fallen world. As Jesus did not exempt himself from his full participation in the trouble of the world as we know it, even death, so he calls us to live in this world as it is. This is why the voice and vision of the artist is crucial to mature faith.

The promise and assurance of Paul is not that we will be able to explain how God is making good out of brokenness and evil right now. The confident hope is that God really is at work in all things to complete what he started, to finish the salvation that has been won in Christ, and to bring to completion the world that he created. No explanation is given to Job as he sits in his ash heap scraping the scabs and pus from his body, but (anticipating Paul) he affirms this hope: “in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:26). No “good” is in sight as he staggers beneath the loss of everything but his life. Yet he concludes: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). Job situates his suffering and confusion within the certainty of God’s character and covenant. He knows how the story ends.

To live gratefully, we live not with the clarity of the moment but with the certainty of the future. Lest anyone accuse us of simply living in denial, we point to the cross. The cross has become our rock, our confidence, and the reason we dare to live with certainty, even in the face of failure, injustice, and the gut-wrenching sorrows of life. My health, my job, my success are not unimportant, but the cross gives us freedom to face life and death, sickness and health,

wealth and poverty, and say, “Thank you”—but, “thank you” for what? We definitely do not give thanks for the evil and broken things themselves. Rather we say “thank you” to the One who holds all these things in his omnipotent hand.

There is no uncertainty for us as Christians about how things end. Our health does not speed the success of God’s purpose and our failures do not impede it. The cross is the great demonstration in history that God keeps his promises so that in every situation of life we may say truthfully and joyfully, “Thank you, Father, for all that you are accomplishing even in this death that confuses me and this disappointment that is breaking my heart.” It is to the certainty of the cross that we come each week in the celebration of the Eucharist, the first fruits of the world made new, and the oath of God’s covenant ratified by the resurrection.

2. We are free to be grateful because every circumstance of life is an occasion to declare the character and kingdom of God.

If worship resides at the heart of the Christian life, then all of life is a confession of who God is. All of life is our praise and adoration for his presence, his virtues, his wisdom; and all of life is ordered by the *shalom* of his kingdom. Amid her grief, Martha offers her confession of who Jesus is, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Martha’s worship prompts us to ask if we could make this confession in our grief.

Every circumstance of life and death, sickness and health, wealth and poverty is an occasion to say with gratitude, “Jesus is a great savior.” Paul reflected on his wide range of experiences as a church planter and apostle in this way: “I have learned in whatever situation

I am to be content [Surely contentment and gratitude go hand in hand]. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all [of these] things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:11-13). Paul learned to view all his life situations through the lens both of Jesus's character and presence as well as the reality of the kingdom of God. Gratitude. In every circumstance the character of Jesus is being revealed and the *shalom* of God's kingdom is breaking through.

Everything entrusted to us—life, experiences, relationships, abilities, possessions, ideas—is a summons to stewardship. Many of these things we readily recognize as gifts, as good things that we are glad to receive. But not all of them. We are stewards of weakness, sickness, poverty, and loneliness as well. Yet in God's economy, all of these things are entrusted to us for glory—Christ's glory made visible in us, and Christ's glory bestowed on others. This pattern has been the way of God's people from the beginning when Yahweh spoke to Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3) and to Jacob, "Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:14). Those who have received God's grace are to make visible and present God's grace to others in the character and kingdom of our Lord. Our greatest joy in life is to exalt our God—Father, Son, and Spirit. Or, in other words, having received grace from God, all of life is

to be worship to God. Our calling as his people is to love the Lord our God with our whole beings and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37). Our worship to God rises from the very dust of the ground and the air we breathe so that in every circumstance our lives are directed simultaneously in love toward God (supremely) and others (necessarily).

As a result, Paul says that we are to comfort others with the comfort with which we have been comforted (2 Corinthians 1:4). We are to be kind toward others and forgiving, as God has been kind and tenderhearted to us (Ephesians 4:31). Grace does not arrive in our lives like mail, like a train that has reached the station. Grace does indeed come to us as the gift of healing, peace, confidence, and strength. But, as Peter says, we are to be stewards of grace: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied and abundant grace" (1 Peter 4:10). The fruitful expressions of Christ's character by the indwelling of the Spirit are to result in others being enriched by God's grace for his glory (Galatians 5:22-26). Gratitude produces the fragrance of the world made new, the aroma of *shalom* in the kingdom of God.

It's easy to be glib about living all of life for God's glory. It's easy to hide behind theologically nuanced masks and deny our own desperate need for grace. But there is no glory in triumphalism, the determination to be impervious to hardship and suffering—there is no worship offered in rugged self-reliance, only the prideful trumpeting of self-sufficiency and independence.

Shifting the trajectory of our lives often takes time, especially when we

are learning to respond to deep sorrow and great injustice. It takes others coming alongside to comfort us with the comfort with which they have been comforted before we can see our own circumstances through the hopeful lens of the gospel. When God's grace washes over us as we complete the sufferings of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:24), we are humbled in wonder and worship. We put our hands to our lips; we silence any effort to explain or blame; and we live by faith in our resurrected Lord who is at work now—he is making all things new.

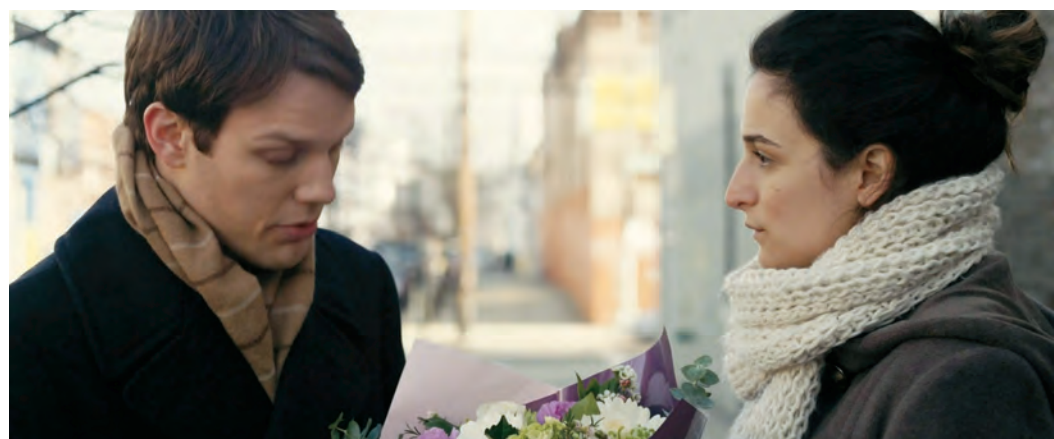
*I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but
Hallelujah*

[Leonard Cohen]

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Film credits: *Obvious Child*

Starring:

Jenny Slate (Donna Stern)
Jake Lacy (Max)
Gaby Hoffmann (Nellie)
Gave Liedman (Joey)
David Cross (Sam)
Richard Kind (Jacob Stern)
Polly Draper (Nancy Stern)

Director: Gillian Robespierre

Writers: Gillian Robespierre & Karen Maine

Producers: Gillian Robespierre, David Kaplan,
Jenny Slate

Cinematography: Chris Teague

UK, 2014, 84 minutes

Rated R (language and sexual content)