

critique

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LIVING IN A BORING
COSMOS

CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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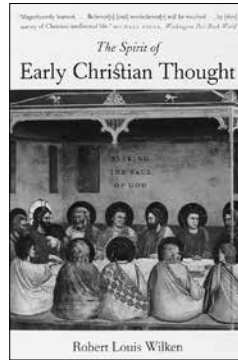
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Several sentences were inadvertently omitted from this section of "Faithfulness in Political Uncertainty," an article published in a previous issue of this magazine (*Critique* 2017:2, p. 13).

Being Under Authority



This past week I witnessed the consecration of an Anglican bishop. Ordinations always fill me with a sense of wonder because they are moments in time in which eternity breaks in and realigns reality. As I expected, Anglicans use words in the consecration, words of scripture and long tradition. They also use actions. We are physical creatures, so actions help make spiritual truths real. In the consecration of an Anglican bishop there is the laying on of hands, of course, but another action caught my attention. I had not seen it before.

During the consecration the archbishop presented the new bishop with a copy of the Bible. He did so by first holding it over the man's head. "Give heed to reading, exhorting, and teaching," the archbishop said. "Think upon the things contained in this book. Be diligent in them." Only then did he lower the book and hand it to him.

I loved the imagery of holding the Bible above his head. It was a striking demonstration of submitting to scripture, placing oneself under its authority. This should be my posture as well. If I believe the scripture to be God's revelation, I need to be under its authority as well.

But today living under authority

isn't embraced fondly. The notion smacks of rigidity, of acquiescing instead of thinking independently, of blindly following tradition instead of pursuing facts. We are told that submitting to authority—especially religious authority—means substituting unyielding dogma for the openhearted and open-minded pursuit of truth.

St. Augustine (354–430) saw the issue very differently. He said that everyone lives under authority; the only thing left to determine is what authority we choose to trust.

Think of it this way. We all believe all sorts of things and yet have personally proved almost none of them. I believe the hydrangeas in my yard need phosphate to grow well, but I've never done a double-blind study on it. When I see the northern lights, I believe the "Auroras are produced when the magnetosphere is sufficiently disturbed by the solar wind that the trajectories of charged particles in both solar wind and magnetospheric plasma, mainly in the form of electrons and protons, precipitate them into the upper atmosphere (thermosphere/exosphere), where their energy is lost." I believe that, but not only have I never proved it, I don't even know what that sentence means. And so it goes. Take any part of life and see just how much of it you have actually, carefully, and thoroughly proved, and you'll quickly see the truth of St. Augustine's claim. We believe a great deal about a great deal, and we accept almost every bit of it on the basis of some authority. "Nothing would remain stable in human society," he wrote, "if we determined to believe only what can be held with absolute certainty."

The whole idea takes on added significance, of course, when considering the things that matter most, on the

deepest yearnings of the human heart, on questions of meaning, purpose and reality, of life and death. Which authority am I convinced is most trustworthy? Which book do I take my stand under? In what do I place my faith?

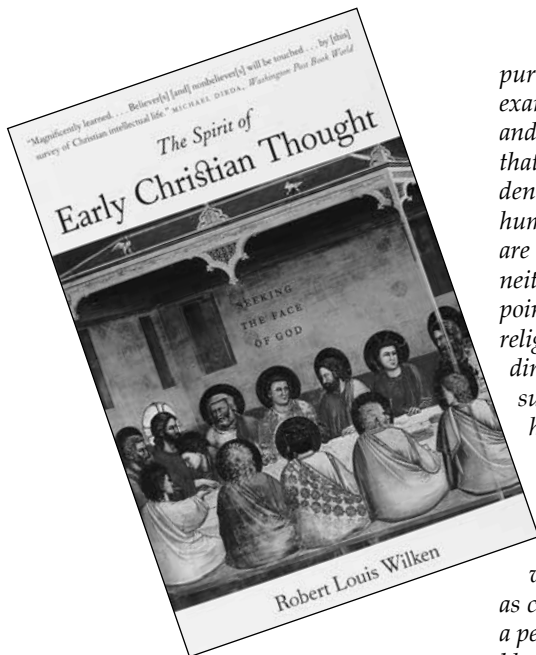
Different people give different answers to this question, and the public square is crowded with competing claims. I want to listen carefully to them, because my love of Jesus makes me passionate for the truth.

For myself, however, I agree with the Irish believers who long ago wrote a hymn to glorify the High King of Heaven. "Be thou my wisdom / And thou my true word / I ever with thee / And thou with me Lord / Thou my great Father / I thy true son / Thou with me dwelling / And I with thee one." In the story told by poets, prophets, and apostles in Holy Scripture and fulfilled supremely in the living word, Jesus Christ, I find the most satisfying, plausible, and compelling vision of life and reality.

So, this morning I stood in my office and held my Bible over my head. No one noticed but God, but that was the point. ■

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurora>; *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* by Robert Louis Wilken (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press; 2003) p. 162.

St. Augustine on the Just Society



It is only in God that human beings find fulfillment and perfection. If they have no sense of God, they have no sense of themselves. Although it may appear that a political community can form its people in virtue without venerating God, over time its life will be turned to lesser ends, to vice rather than to virtue. For virtue is not simply a matter of behaving in a certain way; it has to do with attitudes and sentiments as well as deeds, with loves as well as with duties and obligations. A society based on lies, for example, will not long endure. If the soul and spirit do not serve God, and reason does not bring the body and its impulses "into relation with God," a people will not be virtuous. "Without the good that is God one cannot have other goods. Only in honoring and serving God can human communities nurture genuine virtue. A just society, then, must be one that "serves God."

Augustine's City of God defends a fundamental truth about human beings and about society. Only God can give ultimate

purpose to our deepest convictions, for example, the dignity of the human person, and provide grounds for communal life that transcend self-interest. A society that denies or excludes the principle that makes human beings human, namely, that we are created to love and serve God, will be neither just, nor virtuous, nor peaceful. The point is twofold. All human life, not just religious life, if it is to be fully human, is directed toward that good which is God, the summum bonum, the desire of all human hearts, and the Lord of all. Second, life directed toward God is always social.

Virtue cannot be pursued independently of other human beings. Out of goodness and love God calls men and women to serve him and love one another as citizens of a city, the city of God. It is as a people, not as individuals, that they are blessed. The peace for which the city of God yearns will be found "in the enjoyment of God" and in a "mutual fellowship in God."

Augustine offers no theory of political life in the City of God. But he shows that God can never be relegated to the periphery of a society's life. That is why the book discusses two cities. He wants to draw a contrast between the life of the city of God, a life that is centered on God and genuinely social, and life that is centered on itself. Augustine wished to redefine the realm of the public to make place for the spiritual, for God. As Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has observed, the City of God is a book about the "optimal form of corporate human life" in light of its "last end." In Augustine's view, "It is life outside the Christian community which fails to be truly public, authentically political. The opposition is not between public and private, church and world, but between political virtue and political vice. At the end of the day, it is the secular order that will be shown to be 'atomistic' in its foundations." A society that has no place for God will

disintegrate into an amoral aggregate of competing, self-aggrandizing interests that are destructive of the commonweal. In the end it will be enveloped in darkness.

Some have argued that in the City of God Augustine makes place for a neutral secular space where men and women of good will can come together to build a just society and culture on the basis of "things relevant to this mortal life." Here there could be a joining of hands of the city of God and the earthly city to cultivate the arts of civilization. For Augustine, however, a neutral secular space could only be a society without God, captive of the lust for power, the libido dominandi. He was convinced that in this fallen world there could be no genuine justice or peace without the worship of God. Where a people has no regard for God, there can be no social bond, no common life, and no virtue. ■

Excerpt: Taken from *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* by Robert Louis Wilken (New Haven, Yale University Press; 2003) p. 206-208.

RESOURCE: *THE SPIRIT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT*

The Birth of the Christian Worldview

Imagine a citizen of Rome thinking about the world the year Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee—4 BC, the historians reckon. There are skirmishes at the far reaches of the empire, but no one seriously thinks the Roman legions will not be able to keep the peace and ensure security. The roads remain well maintained and guarded. Commerce flows within the empire and beyond. Roman culture, inherited from the Greeks, is a respected and rich tradition of religion, philosophy, science, and rhetoric that has birthed an outflowing of poetry, engineering, art, and belief. Overall things seem certain, and life by and large is satisfying. It is impossible to imagine the world without Rome.

If our Roman citizen thought about the minor province of Judea at all, it would not include the idea that a wandering teacher from a place called Nazareth would soon be born, work miracles, and be crucified as a criminal. And anyone imagining that would not have thought that this one's followers would, over the next several centuries, give rise to a distinctly unique, life giving, and world transforming worldview.

Yet it happened. The story of the birth and development of that worldview should be better known, especially by those who today name the crucified one as Lord.

The ones responsible lived in the four centuries after the apostles, known as the Patristic period. Most of us have heard some of the names involved: Ignatius (35–108), Polycarp (69–155), Justin Martyr (100–165), Tertullian (160–225), Origen (185–254), Athanasius (296–373), and Augustine (354–430). The church grew explosively, going from a tiny persecuted sect to the official religion of the Roman Empire. It also faced

challenges from without and within. Jewish and pagan thinkers wrote works seeking to discredit and disprove Christian belief and practice, and important doctrinal issues needed to be defined according to the tradition of teaching handed down by the apostles.

The Patristic thinkers were highly educated, sophisticated, and philosophically astute. The standards of rhetoric and reason honed by their Greek and Roman contemporaries were readily apparent in their work. But then, Robert Louis Wilken says in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, they read the scriptures.

The Bible formed Christians into a people and gave them a language.

As intellectuals formed by the classical tradition, the first Christian thinkers belonged to a learned and contented club, secure in the confidence they knew whatever was useful to know. In school they had memorized long passages from Homer or Virgil, and by imitating the elegant sentences of Isocrates or Cicero they had learned to write graceful prose and speak with polished diction. Before reading Genesis they had read Plato, before reading the prophets they had read Euripides, before reading the books of Samuel and Kings they had read Herodotus and Thucydides, and before reading the gospels they had read Plutarch's Lives. Intensely proud of their ancient culture, they took pleasure in the beauty of its language, the refinement of its literature, and the subtlety of its sages.

Yet when they took the Bible in hand they were overwhelmed. It came upon them like a torrent leaping down the side of a mountain. Once they got beyond its plain style they sensed they had entered a new and mysterious world more

alluring than anything they had known before.(pp. 52–53)

In *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Wilken summarizes for lay readers the process by which the Patristic thinkers gave birth to a distinctly Christian perspective on life and reality. “Christian thinking,” Wilken argues, “while working within patterns of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman culture, transformed them so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being” (p. xvii). He introduces us to the characters involved, explores their work, and helps us see the impact their thinking had on the culture of their day and on the church, giving birth to art, poetry, worship, spirituality, ethics, and learning.

Christians who do not know their rich cultural heritage need to read this book. ■

Book recommended: *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* by Robert Louis Wilken (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2003) 321 pages + notes + indices.

RESOURCE

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Letter to My Students

by Preston Jones

Dear Students,

I'll tell you about two key moments in my life. They came close together. I think I was seventeen. I'm not sure which event came first.

One came when I was praying in my room at home. I don't know what I was praying about, but I do know that I walked out of my room with a powerful sense of life's brevity—a strong recognition that time is always slipping away and that if I was to accomplish anything in life, then I would need to get busy. That feeling has never left me.

The second moment came during the first day of a high school class taught by Mr. Charles Grande. The class came in a season when I was actually going to school. Periodically since the eighth grade I had attended classes when I felt like it, sometimes skipping school for multiple days. Mostly, school seemed like a waste of time, and a neighborhood I had to walk through to get there was dangerous. I stayed home and read books, though I had no one to talk about them with.

Mr. Grande was serious in a way no other teacher was. I didn't know the Latin word *gravitas* at the time, but he embodied it. On the first day of class, his vocabulary was more suited for students at a selective college than for the apathetic herd facing him. He wasn't trying to impress anyone. He was saying, *I think we can be doing better than we're doing.*

It was obvious that he believed in his work. This wasn't so much about the class's subject matter as it was a clear, deep commitment to the cause of learning. Perhaps most impressive of all, he said that he wanted to learn from us, and we believed him. He made no attempt to be any student's special friend; he didn't bother much

about being liked. But we all knew that he cared about what he was doing. For the first time, I felt that my mind might have a purpose. Before the year was up, I learned that Mr. Grande was a Christian.

The effects of these two moments converged. I was now preoccupied with the always-pressing passage of time, and Mr. Grande showed me how to channel that energy. His commitment became my commitment. The kid who sat slumped and uninvolved in the back of the class (when he went to class) was now reading Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Martin Luther King, Albert Camus, and books by the Christian writer Francis Schaeffer. I didn't understand much, but sometimes I flip through the pages of the books I read back then, and I see the notes I wrote in the margins, and I remember a kid who was, as Mr. Grande would say, "working on it."

Most people will understand why meeting Mr. Grande was important. A kid's potential was tapped. A teacher had not only done his job but had left a life-long mark. I go further: as I said to a waitress at a restaurant where I took Mr. Grande, then in his 80s, for lunch: *This is Mr. Charles Grande. He was a teacher of mine, and he saved my life.*

But the constant, powerful sense of time's passing and life's shortness—this is not something many would consider a gift. A culture that rehearses sayings like "it's never too late" simply doesn't want to acknowledge some of the precepts that western civilization's most enduring philosophers, as well as the New Testament, have offered for consideration: that time is always running out, that a person's life is an always diminishing resource, and that, in this life, it is *constantly* too late. Stupid things said can't be unsaid; it's too late.

The voluntary degradation of the self and others can't be undone; it's too late. The character I have created as a result of myriad small decisions cannot be easily exchanged for another. At some point, it can't be changed at all.

One doesn't have to be a great sociologist to notice that American society is not shaped by a sense that time is short and that the squandering of a precious, ever-diminishing resource—one's own life—is calamitous folly. Mr. Grande did understand this. He talked about having "only" five years left to teach, as if the end of his career was just around the corner. He ended up teaching another fifteen years, but I'm sure the time flew.

I will mention another moment. This one came about 30 years after the other two. I was at a funeral. A person rose to give a eulogy. It was clear that she wanted to say something important, something befitting the sad occasion. But, as she spoke, it became obvious that she had nothing to say. It wasn't that she didn't want to say something meaningful, but the library shelves of her mind and soul were empty. She cobbled together a string of clichés and catchphrases and ended with a quotation from a TV drama. The heaviness of the event was compounded by a need for depth and significance being met by the trite and ephemeral.

It isn't that a psalm, a poem from John Donne, or an insight from Seneca, John of the Cross, or Julian of Norwich would alleviate the pain, but they might offer a sense of human solidarity. In the face of tremendous suffering, Abraham Lincoln turned to the Bible and Shakespeare's tragedies, both of which he knew before his time of testing not only as president during the Civil War but as a father who lost children. Lincoln had a powerful sense of life's

brevity and fragility, which is why he filled his mind with good resources. These did not make life any less brief or fragile, but they did give him company, counsel, encouragement, vision, and depth. That vision and depth informed his Second Inaugural Address, the most profound theological statement ever uttered by a U.S. president.

My dear students, everywhere we look, people are squandering their lives. They know they are squandering their lives. They say to themselves, "I spend too much time on my phone." They can feel their souls shriveling as they take in so much that's cynical, degrading, and dumb. They know that to improve their chances in life they should work to acquire important personal and professional skills, yet they repeatedly find themselves settling for "good enough" or less. They tell themselves: *I'll stop wasting time in the future. I'll become a responsible person in the future. In the future, I'll act as if this life is the only earthly one I'll have. In the future, I'll pay attention to important things. In the future, I'll consider the idea that I may have to account for my life.* They embrace the fiction that it's never too late. But it was late yesterday, and it's late today. "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

Our classes have their particular focuses, and we'll spend time on those. But something greater is at stake: our lives, our time, and what we're doing with both. ■

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Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University in Arkansas. He travels regularly to Guatemala to teach and learn from Christians there. Lately he has been involved in leading discussions at factories on the personal and economic importance of all useful work.

Source: www.brainyquote.com

“I BELIEVE THE BIGGEST THEMES OF LIFE ARE PUT INTO THE BEST FOCUS WHEN HELD UP AGAINST THE VERY SHARP LIGHT OF MORTALITY.”

[Mitch Albom, writer]

“ACCEPTING YOUR OWN MORTALITY IS LIKE EATING YOUR VEGETABLES: YOU MAY NOT WANT TO DO IT, BUT IT'S GOOD FOR YOU.”

[Caitlin Doughty, mortician]



Consider being alone, still, in complete silence.

It can be a precious relief, a lovely respite from noise, and busyness, and demands, and people. I need such times, but they are rare. Occasionally I turn off my phone, shut down my laptop, and find a quiet spot to sit where I won't be interrupted for a while. That can be refreshing, but the stillness in those moments is never fully still. My devices may be silenced but my brain isn't. Inside I'm pretty much as busy, as focused as ever and the noise inside my head keeps on, brain-box chatter that has a life of its own. For that to be stilled, I have to be in the second week of time away in a quiet place like a cabin in the country. Yet the writings of poets and mystics all suggest the level of stillness I achieve in that second week is only a hint of the quiet that is truly possible when you really give yourself to it.

In some seasons of life, even brief moments of stillness, snatched here and

there amidst the unrelenting busyness, is all we can muster. Small children have needs, emergencies erupt into our schedules, and vocations take us into urban centers where background noise and movement are unceasing. And some who are single and far from family need time away not alone at a remote cabin but with friends where, for a few days, they are never far from the lovely, unceasing clamor of loving community.

My experience, for what it's worth, is that being alone recharges and refreshes, and the stillness permits me clarity to experience just a glimmer of the immense mystery of reality. The stillness I enter that second week is a silence of intense discovery where creativity is renewed and the quiet reality of God is met in some renewed way.

Here is a paradox: it is entering stillness, a silence when I am alone, that reassures me I am not alone. It is stillness replete with signals of transcendence, a silence that is also a voice

if I have ears to hear. It is in being alone that I am most aware that someone greater is not far off.

The ancient seer of Israel, Elijah, hunted by an enraged queen whom he had royally offended by speaking a truth she refused to accept, took refuge in a remote cave in the mountains. It was not the first time he had run for his life, and he waited, alone, for an experience of God.

A great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13)

How I love that question. The one who did not need to ask a question and listen to the answer, for he knows all, asked Elijah to tell his story. And God reassured him he had not been abandoned to the whims of a wicked ruler. Elijah heard God in a “gentle and quiet whisper,” a “still, small voice” (as other translations render it). I am not suggesting my experience is parallel to Elijah’s, for I am no prophet and have heard no actual voice, but the sense of the text makes sense to me. It is when I am most alone and still that I am reassured I am not alone.

And of course, on the other hand, being alone and still, in complete silence, can also be terrifying. This is the suffering of those who are forsaken and abandoned. All who walk that path are wounded by the experience and some never make it to the other side.

This aloneness is a curse rather than a blessing and is also known in scripture.

THE CURSE OF BEING ALONE

The first negative statement made by God recorded in the Bible is found at the very beginning, in the creation narrative. “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone’” (Genesis 2:18a). It’s clear from the rest of the passage that he was referring specifically to Adam’s need to live in a world populated with life, with animals and plants, and especially with fellow creatures like himself, made in God’s image (Genesis 2:18b–25).

The point is that we were not made to be in an empty cosmos, and we will never be fully comfortable in one. The individual person has significance but is always found in community, in relationship. We need people and the teeming life of nature to feel at home. But there

is also a deeper sense of emptiness implicit in the story of creation. The ultimate nature of reality—what is really real and behind all things—is one God in three persons. “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” the Creator said (Genesis 1:26). This means that living in a cosmos empty of the divine is an ultimately lonely place to find oneself.

Voices that come later in scripture trace themes related to being alone—being forsaken or abandoned—with stark impact. For example, a Hebrew poet is harassed by those who wish him destroyed, and he cries out when God seems absent.

*Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
forsake me not when my strength
is spent.*

*For my enemies speak concerning me;
those who watch for my life
consult together
and say, “God has forsaken him;
pursue and seize him,
for there is none to deliver him.”*

To be forsaken by God is not merely to be alone but unprotected in a hostile world in which death haunts our steps from the moment of our birth. “O God,” the psalmist pleads, “be not far from me” (Psalms 71:9–12).

Artists have often explored this idea. Watch and discuss two films, for example, that brilliantly imagine, in very different settings, living in a world in which God, if he exists at all, is silent, aloof, uninvolved, and distant. The first, *The Silence* (1963) was written and directed by the great Swedish filmmaker, Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007), who was raised in a Christian family but later turned away from confidence in God. The second is *Silence* (2016), written and directed by Martin Scorsese,

based on the powerful novel of the same title by the Christian Japanese author, Shusaku Endo (1923–96). Both films allow us entrance into the horror of being ultimately alone, abandoned by the divine in a cold and impersonal universe. This is, in novelist Walker Percy’s words, what it means to be lost in the cosmos.

The prophet Jeremiah, speaking at a time of political uncertainty, division, and violence, describes cities depopulated, forsaken by citizens who have fled (e.g., 4:29–31). The media has recently carried stories of desolate cities in the Middle East, once teeming with people and commerce but now derelict and destroyed. The photos of empty streets are eerie and unsettling, and somehow less than fully human. In some cases journalists report that snipers cut down civilians fleeing the carnage, so that the bodies of women, men, and children rot in alleys and once busy thoroughfares. I cannot begin to imagine what it would be like to feel so forsaken, so alone, so frightened. To be also abandoned by God in that moment would be reason for total despair.

The poet king, David, knew suffering—physical, emotional and spiritual—in his lifetime, and expressed the depth of it in a poem that has long been recognized as foretelling the coming of the Messiah. He wrote out of his own personal experience yet transcended it, so that his cry became a greater cry that echoed through the generations.

*My God, my God, why have you
forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do
not answer, and by night, but I find
no rest. (Psalms 22:1–2)*

David's words came full circle when Jesus spoke them, crying out over God's abandonment that was far beyond David's greatest nightmare (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). Here I enter mystery far beyond my comprehension, and yet I believe. I may only guess at what it is like to live in a world utterly without windows, separated from the Father—hell, really—but Jesus actually went there and knows.

St. Paul, ever the realist, spoke of going through hard times. "We are afflicted in every way," he wrote, "but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). He was beaten, jailed, stoned, and left for dead, and yet even in the face of such hostility, when all those arrayed against him seemed to have the upper hand, Paul was not abandoned by his Lord. His suffering had a greater purpose, a transcendent meaning whereby "we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (4:11). In sharp contrast, in a world without God, such suffering can only be a miscarriage of justice, or perhaps being on the wrong end of the survival-of-the-fittest.

God's particular care for orphans and widows throughout scripture is a metaphor for how he is concerned that

the most vulnerable and powerless among us not be abandoned or forsaken or alone.

The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

Not surprisingly, the Hebrews knew God as "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Psalms 68:5). And

even when the powerless struggled to make their way in an unjust and selfish world, they had reason to hope in God. "For my father and my mother have forsaken me," David laments, "but the Lord will take me in" (Psalms 27:10).

We were not meant to live in a world without God and so will be restless and uneasy if we find ourselves so alone.

ALONE IN THE COSMOS

Today we live in an era of "exclusive humanism." This is the term coined by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* to refer to the belief that human meaning and purpose can be found entirely apart from any reference to the divine. In other words, more and more people assume that life and existence simply occur naturally, and no God or gods

are needed to make sense of things. It's the way they imagine things to be even before they begin to think it through—what Taylor calls their "social imaginary." Our social imaginary—we all have one—is shaped by stories and by what seems to fit our experience of life. And in our post-Christian world, more and more of our neighbors, colleagues, and friends hold a social imaginary that assumes that, unless scientists find evidence of life somewhere out in deep space, human beings are alone in an immense and expanding universe.

But there is more to this story. Science has shown us something of the immensity, the incredible vastness of the universe. Discoveries seem to come in a flood, amazing glimpses of the order and beauty of the cosmos in all its complexity. We wonder at the immensity of it all, and try to comprehend what it means to exist in a rapidly expanding universe with dimensions that beggar our imagination. The universe is impossibly huge and coldly impersonal while we are tiny, infinitesimal if viewed across the grand reach of numberless galaxies and endless time. And that is the problem—these discoveries, all so wonderful, also make us feel smaller and insignificant as a species. And unless some unknown, advanced species has discovered us, it turns out we live and die on a tiny, obscure planet, unnoticed and unremarked. Eventually, we are told, our sun will die and life on planet earth will blink out. Add the threat of extinction from some pandemic, or nuclear or ecological disaster, and our significance as a species becomes tentative at best.

But even this is not the end of the story. The social imaginary of the Western world used to be shaped, at

"WHEN PEOPLE REALLY UNDERSTAND THE BIG BANG AND THE WHOLE SWEEP OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSE, IT WILL BE CLEAR THAT HUMANS ARE FAIRLY INSIGNIFICANT."

(George Smoot, scientist)

least in part, by Christianity. And Christianity insisted that human beings were made in God's image; that Christ, the second person of the Godhead, became a man; and that God was at work in human history as redeemer and king. This meant that there was a divine focus on us that brought significance, purpose, and hope. The earth mattered so much that Christ died so there might

be someday soon a new earth, renewed and restored in glory. But in a post-Christian world, this too has been lost, or set aside. And that is one more way that the modern sense of being alone in the cosmos is sharpened.

As a Christian I would argue we were not made to fit comfortably in such a world. We are not meant to be alone in a universe where there is no God or gods, no transcendent, no realm of the spirit in which warfare is waged against evil until truth and justice prevail. Subtract all that from reality and existence threatens to become not merely meaningless but boring. Cause and effect plodding mindlessly forward though time towards extinction. The Christian view is that human beings are creatures who worship, must worship, must center their lives and hearts on something, and if there is nothing bigger than ourselves, we are lost.

So, there are two stories on offer. One story says that we are alone in the

cosmos; the other story insists we have not been abandoned. The first, it seems to me, is not merely the less satisfying of the two, but is actually rather boring. It could never generate a vision of reality as exciting as St. John's Revelation. This is a story that goes beyond matter and energy and random particles to cherubim and seraphim, dragons and pale green horses, iron clad locusts

that sting like scorpions, seven headed beasts, witnesses in sackcloth, whores and virgins, demonic hordes and angelic hosts, an epic battle at the end of days when all creation is renewed in glory, and the consummation of God's kingdom when the seen and unseen worlds are fully known, and evil is vanquished

and death consumed and justice fills the earth like the waters cover the sea, world without end.

And that, I would argue, is just about as far from boring as you can get.

REACTING TO A BORING UNIVERSE

In 1945, at the end of World War II, C. S. Lewis published the last volume of a trilogy of science fiction novels. The first, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), set on Mars, introduces us to the setting and characters of the series and helps us see the Christian doctrine of Creation in a new and sharper light. The second, *Perelandra* (1943), set on Venus, follows the same hero and unpacks

the nature of the Fall. The third, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairytale for Grown-Ups* (1945), set on earth, completes the narrative and explores a world in which science and technology have taken the place of Christian faith.

This series of books is very significant to me. I first read them as a young man and they fired my imagination with how fiction in general, and science fiction in particular, could unpack the biggest questions of human existence. The hero in the series is a philologist named Elwin Ransom, and that is how we got the name of our ministry, Ransom Fellowship. Margie and I decided we wanted to be in the fellowship of those who stood with this character in the service of the truth.

In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis proposes something that is rarely considered but that I am convinced is accurate. He proposed that when a modern Western society becomes post-Christian, it tends to drift towards paganism.

Which makes sense if you think about it. Human beings are not meant to live in a world where no transcendent is possible. Naturalistic science causes us to focus, naturally, on nature, on natural forces, events, and processes. And paganism is an earth-shaped spirituality, with myths born out of natural phenomena and finite gods to explain the natural, ordinary things that seem mysterious, overwhelming, and threatening to ordinary people.

I do not think this means that pagan temples, complete with sacrifice and rituals, will spring up any time soon in America. Rather, it seems more likely that a broadly pagan mindset will tend to shape the social imaginary of increasing numbers of people. Certainly an interest in classic pagan gods is

“ON A COSMIC SCALE, OUR LIFE IS INSIGNIFICANT, YET THIS BRIEF PERIOD WHEN WE APPEAR IN THE WORLD IS THE TIME IN WHICH ALL MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS ARISE.”

(Paul Ricoeur, philosopher)

a major theme in popular culture. Think of movies like *Thor* (2011) and Marvel's *Avengers* (2012). Books like Neil Gaiman's novel, *American Gods* (2001), and his retelling the old stories in *Norse Mythology* (2017).

Recently I watched season five of *House of Cards*, a Netflix series set in Washington, D.C., that reveals officials inside and outside of government to be cynical and amoral, interested only in achieving and maintaining power. Episode three opens at a private, luxurious retreat where only the wealthiest and most powerful individuals in business and politics assemble for a long weekend to strategize and network. The retreat opens in the woods with a pagan ritual complete with torches, chants, a looming statue, and masked, robed participants. Only after that is completed do the intense discussions and negotiations begin. What is striking to me is that this scene appears in a series that does not indulge in irrelevant or extraneous subplots but is highly focused on exploring the heart of amoral power in the cynical world of advanced modernity.

I don't want to overstate this but, as someone who has tried to keep a finger on the pulse of American culture, it feels to me that the yearning of the heart for something more is behind all this. We are not made to exist in a boring universe and, when we find ourselves in one, we look for stories that will relieve the boredom. We need such stories, and indeed cannot live without them. The desolation at the end of days is not signaled by the appearance of monsters but by the lack of stories of heroes who will save us from them.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO A BORING COSMOS

So, it is a wonderful time to be a Christian. Our story—the myth that is really true—is actually about the hero who not only can best the monsters but who already has. Repeatedly over the past two millennia, God's people have faced paganism and repeatedly the gospel has bested it. The tomb remains empty, confirming our story; God's Spirit remains with and in us, enlightening our telling of it; and the gospel remains divinely powerful to work redemption, which is our confidence. We can speak this story creatively into our culture as it becomes enamored with pagan myths. And it is the very best story, a story that takes all the great themes of the pagan myths and shows them fulfilled in Christ. The Christian story promises an end to the horror of aloneness in an empty and boring cosmos.

If it doesn't seem that way, I suggest we just need to learn to tell our story better. And for that I have four closely related and interlaced suggestions for our growth in the gospel.

We can learn to see clearly and speak truly.

Part of the problem may be that, too much of the time, we talk as if we are secularists.

Please don't misunderstand: at times we need to speak like secularists because so many of our neighbors are secularists. Just as a missionary learns the local dialect, so we must do the same if we are to share in the mission of God. Certainly we don't want to insist that our non-Christian neighbors first learn our narrow religious dialect that is spoken in most churches.

Still, it won't do for Christians to speak in ways that sound as if we are secularists who happen to hold private beliefs about God. The Christian perspective on life and reality is vastly different—in some ways boldly antithetical—to a secular perspective. That difference must not be masked and can be expressed in creative, intriguing ways.

Perhaps we aren't steeped enough in the truth of God's word, in terms of our assumptions and presuppositions. Serious regular Bible study in community is essential if the biblical story is to inform and shape us. Perhaps we are trying too hard to sound inoffensive in a world where the dominant perspective is shaped by exclusive humanism. There is hostility against Christian faith, so we need to review the meaning of Christ's call to us. "If anyone would come after me," Jesus said, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Perhaps we aren't doing the hard work of figuring out, in community with other believers, creative ways to live out and speak about our faith in ways that might intrigue and even surprise non-Christians.

Our secular world sees politics as the primary way to enact change in society, and so has a tendency to politicize everything. We must quietly but insistently refuse this vision of life. It is essential that we resist the politicized, secular dream of using legal and political means to enforce Christian values and ideas on fellow citizens who reject our faith in an effort to re-Christianize America. It is redeemed people with changed hearts and transformed lives that will transform the culture, which will transform every other aspect of society, including politics. Politics is

always downstream from culture.

We need to remember that, no matter how confident people might be in their secularism, from a Christian perspective they live in a boring universe. Human beings were not created to live in a world where there is no transcendent, no God or gods, nothing transpiring beyond the edges of space and time. The yearnings of the human heart include a deep desire for something more, for the hero who appears at just the right time to rescue the ones that are lost. We can relish poetry and stories that celebrate this messianic hope. We can drop hints that we see more than mere cause and effect in the unfolding of life, that we pray because more is going on than mere human effort, and that we can't imagine being satisfied in a world in which the darkness of deep space is not filled with glory beyond our wildest dreams.

In other words, we won't see clearly and speak truly unless we have imagination to see life and reality with the eyes of faith.

Nurture an active, creative imagination.

Christians living in a world of exclusive humanism must find significant time to nurture imagination through story. I don't say this as a legalism, as an onerous task we must assume with a sigh. I'm saying we need to allow ourselves to be deliciously swept into good stories. It isn't merely that our witness will suffer if we don't, though it will, but that our souls will suffer. Just as we weren't made to live in a world without windows, Christians are not born again to have stunted imaginations that struggle to see anything beyond the existence of bare facts.

A year or two ago, I don't remember

when, Margie and I watched a nature documentary on television—I've forgotten which one, though I've searched for it. In any case, my memory of it is that we were shown magnificent images of northern lights, the aurora borealis. As we sat entranced watching the mysterious weaving streams of colored light sweep across the night sky the narrator spoke and said something like this: "Thanks to modern science we now know that the aurora borealis is not the traces of spirits dancing across the sky but collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that enter the earth's atmosphere." Margie and I looked at each other and smiled. No, we said to each other. They are both, definitely, both.

Don't misunderstand: I am not about to produce some obscure text of scripture to "prove" that, nor am I going to guess what spiritual reality might be at work. All such silly speculation, I am convinced, is unbecoming to the Christian mind. I simply believe that obvious expressions of God's glory involve more than highly charged particles.

If we were sitting together in The House Between sharing coffee and wine, at this point in our conversation I would take a book off the shelf. Listen to this excerpt from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C. S. Lewis, one of the volumes in the Chronicles of Narnia. We find Caspian, Lucy, Edmund, and Eustace are speaking to someone they know as the Old Man.

"Are we near the World's End now, Sir?" asked Caspian. "Have you any knowledge of the seas and lands further east than this?"

"I saw them long ago," said the Old Man, "but it was from a great height. I cannot

tell you such things as sailors need to know."

"Do you mean you were flying in the air?" Eustace blurted out.

"I was a long way above the air, my son," replied the Old Man. "I am Ramandu. But I see that you stare at one another and have not heard this name. And no wonder, for the days when I was a star had ceased long before any of you knew this world, and all the constellations have changed."

"Golly," Edmund said under his breath. "He's a retired star."

"Aren't you a star any longer?" asked Lucy.

"I am a star at rest, my daughter," answered Ramandu. "When I set for the last time, decrepit and old beyond all that you can reckon, I was carried to this island. I am not so old now as I was then. Every morning a bird brings me a fire-berry from the valleys in the Sun, and each fire-berry takes away a little of my age. And when I have become as young as the child that was born yesterday, then I shall take my rising again (for we are at earth's eastern rim) and once again tread the great dance."

"In our world," said Eustace, "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas."

"Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of." (p. 208–209)

This is fiction in the true meaning of that word. It is also an accurate reflection of the Christian view of existence in God's good world. We see reality not merely as matter and energy but as multi-layered, rich in meaning, and alive to its creator. It is not static or dead, mindless cause-and-effect en route to

extinction. It is God's creation and he has not abandoned it; even though it is now so broken as to be a glorious ruin, he is actively working to redeem and renew it, far as the curse is found.

When we look out to the horizon we are gazing on a great stage in which the hosts of God serve grace in the face of an unrelenting onslaught of evil. We may feel bored today, but the cosmos in which we dwell is anything but boring.

Once when the king of Syria was warring against Israel, he took counsel with his servants, saying, "At such and such a place shall be my camp." But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Syrians are going down there." And the

king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God told him. Thus he used to warn him, so that he saved himself there more than once or twice.

And the mind of the king of Syria was greatly troubled because of this thing, and he called his servants and said to

them, "Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?" And one of his servants said, "None, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom." And he said, "Go and see where he is, that I may send and seize him." It was told him, "Behold,

he is in Dothan." So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city.

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:8–17).

So, Christian, what do you believe? Was the servant's vision merely an irrational mystical experience meant to comfort but not to actually reveal what was truly there? Or were the horses and chariots both real and present? For myself, I don't want to see them all the time (I have more than enough distrac-

tions already), but I want to live and talk as if I truly believe them there.

Read Lewis' science fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*, and allow the sub-text of the stories sink deep into your heart and mind. Read St. John's Revelation, not as a puzzle to be solved (which it isn't) but as an honest attempt

by an intelligent man to relate what he saw and heard when God allowed him a glimpse of the end of the story. Read the rest of scripture asking the Holy Spirit to show you the glimpses found there of the deep and hidden aspects of reality. Read Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*, lingering over the stories to wonder why such a book finds an audience among young adults today. And though it is not for everyone, consider reading Gaiman's *American Gods*, a fantasy that looks at America as a territory teeming with warring gods, some old like Odin and some new like Media and Technology. Watch the films that feature pagan gods as superheroes not merely as exciting entertainment but as a possible cry of a heart bored by a cosmos where our lonely voices echo off empty space.

And learn, in community with fellow believers, how we might drop creatively intriguing hints of the story we inhabit that is more glorious than we can possibly comprehend.

We can eagerly embrace mystery over popularization.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus answers questions or makes statements in the gospels where it is not immediately obvious what he means? Or instances in which what he says is open to possible, even probable misunderstanding or offense?

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (Matthew 5:29–30)

"SCRIPTURE SUGGESTS THAT THE ELEMENTS IN SPACE WERE CREATED FOR THE BENEFIT OF EARTH, WHILE EVOLUTION SUGGESTS THAT EARTH IS AN INSIGNIFICANT SPECK IN VAST SPACE."

(Walter Lang, film director)

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:22–26)

And it isn't just us being confused. It isn't just an issue of reading his words two millennia later, in a different language and culture, that makes what he says hard to understand. In some cases even his audience at the time wondered what he meant. And sometimes they were troubled enough by what he said to actually walk away. Consider the following text and notice how there are three instances (note underlining) in Jesus' conversation where we would think some clarity would be called for.

'I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his

blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.' Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.' (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.'

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. (John 6:48–66)

As a boy growing up in the church I was troubled by these texts. I was troubled not because I couldn't comprehend what Jesus meant, but by how preachers would tell us what Jesus actually meant to say in these texts, and in each case it was simple, obvious, straightforward, and utterly devoid of all mystery and all surprise. I always wondered why, if that

is what Jesus really meant, he didn't say it. And why Jesus didn't at least clarify things to those who stopped following him by providing these simple, obvious, straightforward explanations devoid of all mystery and surprise that the preachers assured us were what Jesus really meant.

I see things very differently now. I am convinced that Jesus said exactly what he intended. He could have expressed himself differently but didn't. And if he is our Lord, we should be content with that. Everything wasn't simple, obvious, straightforward, and utterly devoid of all mystery and all surprise, because that is not what the truth is like.

It is tempting to assume that we know a great deal about God and redemption and truth and reality and life and that, when we get to the end of it all, we think we'll probably find a bit of mystery. Not true. When we begin to seek insight into the things that matter most, we find great mystery, in the midst of which God has revealed a few things that we see dimly and in part. What he has revealed about himself is sufficient and true, but he remains beyond all human knowing. He has spoken his word in creation, scripture, and supremely in Christ, the living word, but we remain with far more questions than answers.

The gospel is simple enough that a child can believe but remains so rich in mystery that, for eternity, we will wonder, and then wonder some more. The scriptures reveal all that is needed for faith and life, and there is sufficient clarity in God's revelation that we are without excuse.

Nevertheless, there is mystery and surprise in the gospel as well as simplicity and clarity. If we don't hold

both, and display the reality of both as Jesus did, it will be obvious we aren't like Christ in the way we speak and live. Rather than wonder why Jesus couldn't have been clearer, we should ask why we sound so little like Jesus when we talk about the faith.

St. Paul prays "for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:1-3). Some of what we say should sound mysterious not because we are muddled in what we believe, but because the truth we believe involves mystery and surprise beyond all knowing.

We can learn to walk by faith.

If we believe the supernatural is real, that God exists and is our God, that the transcendent is not merely a pipe dream, should there not be some evidence for it in our lives? The Lord taught us to pray not just for the kingdom to come, but for necessities of life; in other words for tangible as well as nontangible things (Matthew 6:9-13).

Margie and I have worked as Ransom Fellowship for over three decades. All during that time we have had to trust that God would work through the generosity of his people to supply our financial needs. As many of you probably know, we do not ask for pledges, nor do we charge for *Critique* or *Letters from The House Between*, or for the material on Ransom's website, nor do we raise funding from foundations. We are not secretive about Ransom's needs—Margie mentions them as appropriate in *Letters*—but we do not engage

in traditional forms of fundraising. We have no problem with any of these other approaches to vocational ministry but felt strongly when we started that God was calling us to live by faith in terms of finances. In fact, we have helped others raise funds in some of these ways. But for ourselves, we pray and seek to trust God, and in different, often surprising ways God has provided the necessary funds for us to continue the work. Month by month, year by year he has been faithful, God's people have been generous, and we are very grateful. When we began back in 1982, several Christian leaders said it would never work. We were influenced by the example of Francis and Edith Schaeffer in L'Abri and simply determined that this was God's particular call to us.

It's been a privilege to live this way. There have been times when income to Ransom was very low and we wondered if we could continue. Occasionally, during times of weariness, I have wished I worked for a large corporation and so didn't need to wonder if my salary would be paid next month. Mainly though, watching God provide over so long a time has been remarkable, an ongoing demonstration of his existence, providence, and care.

We properly give thanks as Americans for living in a time and land of relative prosperity, but we also know that this prosperity can make it difficult to walk by faith. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," the ancient Hebrews said, "and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6). It's easy to talk about walking by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7) and really believe it, but the fact is that few of us really need to trust God

for much beyond our salvation in the next life. We pray for our daily bread but practically depend on a regular paycheck from a dependable employer. We pray for healing but go to the doctor and take the medications that are prescribed. And so it goes.

I don't mean to be negative here. The prosperity of America's twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a wonderful grace, and those of us who benefit from it should be grateful beyond measure. But I would argue that, even in these cultural and economic circumstances, we are called to live by faith. To live by faith in ways that a watching world can see us depend on God and for God to work by grace. To trust him for things

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO THINK VERY HARD TO REALIZE THAT OUR DREAD OF BOTH RELATIONSHIPS AND LONELINESS ... HAS TO DO WITH ANGST ABOUT DEATH, THE RECOGNITION THAT I'M GOING TO DIE, AND DIE VERY MUCH ALONE, AND THE REST OF THE WORLD IS GOING TO GO MERRILY ON WITHOUT ME."

(David Foster Wallace, novelist)

that clearly demonstrate his presence in our lives as the God who hears and answers prayer. So perhaps we should reflect, in community with other believers, on a few questions:

- In what specific things do I need to trust God?
- Are any of these things actual, tangible, and real as opposed to spiritual, unseen and untouchable?
- What am I praying for that I can only receive through prayer and God's gracious provision?
- In what things can a non-Christian friend see that I demonstrate active and living faith in God?
- When a non-Christian—particularly a secularist who does not accept the divine or the transcendent—challenges my claim to walk by faith, what can I point to as concrete evidence of the grace of God?

This is what Francis Schaeffer referred to as true Christian spirituality.

The Christian life means living in the two halves of reality: the supernatural and the natural parts. I would suggest that it is perfectly possible for a Christian to be so infiltrated by twentieth-century thinking, that he lives most of his life as though the supernatural were not there. Indeed, I would suggest that all of us do this to some extent. The supernatural does not touch the Christian only at

the new birth and then at his death, or at the second coming of Christ, leaving the believer on his own in a naturalistic world during all the time in between. Nothing could be further from the biblical view. Being a biblical Christian

means living in the supernatural now, not only theoretically but in practice.

Our task is to figure out what this can look like and then boldly pursue it.

As we do so, we will be demonstrating that God exists, and even if no one believes as a result, we will have accomplished two things. We will have brought

glory to the one who loves us unto death. And we will have lived in the reality that God created rather than a boring, empty one that exists only in the imaginations of those who insist there is no divine. ■

Sources: BrainyQuote.com; GoodReads.com; True Spirituality by Francis A. Schaeffer (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers; 1971) p. 64.

“DEATH THREATENS OUR SPEECH WITH FUTILITY BECAUSE DEATH IS NOT JUST A BIOLOGICAL EVENT — IT IS A REALITY WE FEAR MAY ROB OUR LIVING OF ANY SIGNIFICANCE.”

(Stanley Hauerwas, theologian)

Be of Good Courage

Editor's note: Several sentences were inadvertently omitted from this section of "Faithfulness in Political Uncertainty," an article published in a previous issue of this magazine (Critique 2017:2, page 13).

It might be wise to resurrect a biblical greeting that was used when God's people faced uncertain times—"Be of good courage." The story goes like this:

For three generations the people of Israel had been a nomadic tribe freely wandering the hills and land of ancient Palestine. Abraham had been the first, the patriarch who was followed by his son, Isaac, and in turn by his son, Jacob, and his family of twelve sons. Then famine swept through the land, as sometimes happens in a dry place dependent on seasonal rains. Harvests failed and the sprawling pasture the Israelites depended on for their flocks dried up. Word was that there was food in Egypt, so Isaac sent his sons there to purchase supplies and, in a series of events that need to be read to be believed, the Israelites ended up moving to Egypt as refugees fleeing famine. At first things went relatively smoothly, but then political change in Egypt transformed attitudes. The Egyptians feared there were too many Israelites in their land and that, in time of crisis, those foreigners could not be counted on to remain loyal. So the Egyptians changed the marketplace, and enslaved the Israelites in a system from which there was no escape. The Israelites prayed, but God was silent.

If you have read the Bible, you know the story, how that at long last an improbable man named Moses was used of God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. They wandered first east

and then north up into Palestine until they reached a wilderness area, Paran, famous for the caverns that pocket its hills (known as *Badiet et-Tih* today). At God's command, Moses sent spies into Canaan to search out the land they expected to become their own. The task was not without risk, of course, since the Canaanites had zero interest in giving up their land to the newcomers.

So when Moses sent out the spies, he had a special word for them: "Be of good courage," he told them (Numbers 13:20). Later, after the Israelites were settled in the land, war broke out, and Israel's army became trapped between two enemy armies, the Ammonites and the Syrians. The Israelite commander told his officers of his plan for the battle and, recognizing the danger they faced, told his men, "Be of good courage" (2 Samuel 10:12). Centuries later the exilic prophet Daniel was visited by a spiritual being so grand that he fell to the ground, trembling before such overwhelming glory. "'O man greatly loved,'" Daniel was told, "'fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage. And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, 'Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me' (Daniel 10:19–20). And the phrase appears again, repeated twice in a letter written by St. Paul. He was talking about the transience of life, the frailty of our bodies so broken in this fallen world, and the yearning we feel for something more permanent and settled and certain. "So we are always of good courage," the apostle said. Right now we walk by faith, not seeing the One we serve and looking forward to the day when our Lord's kingdom is fully consummated. "Yes, we are of good courage," Paul says, and in this in-between time when Christ's kingdom is established but not

yet fulfilled, "we make it our aim to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:6–9).

Be of good courage. I suggest this should become a blessing we say to one another as we end conversations. *Be of good courage.* Life may be uncertain, our neighbors may be afraid, and we may be disappointed by all that is unfolding. But these things, though significant, are not the ultimate realities. The tomb remains empty, God's promises remain certain, and Christ remains King. These are the ultimate realities we face; they have not changed, nor will they. So, *Be of good courage.* If our imaginations are so pummeled by news and rants of uncertainty and fearfulness that our hearts fail within us, we can choose to spend more time embracing reality than focusing on the transient and trifling affairs of a world gone astray.

A lot more could be said, of course, but remember this is meant to be a pointer to stimulate thinking and discussion, not a final answer. Take it from here. And whatever the details, be of good courage. ■



BOREDOM: THE DESIRE FOR DESIRES *(Leo Tolstoy)*

