

# THE Outlook

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DEDICATED TO THE EXPOSITION AND DEFENSE OF THE REFORMED FAITH | 75 YEARS: 1951–2026



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and Desiderata  
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# The Promises of God Fulfilled in Christ

**T**he old year is history and the new year is beginning! What are the longings of your heart for this new year? Is the world's approach of wealth and prosperity, health and a restful life in this new year, your desire? While those things may have their place, it should not give us peace. Every breath we take is a gift of God. He is the sustainer of each one of us.

Look back on all the things that happened this year, with all the fears that we had. Fear is a debilitating thing. We look at the evil in the world, and why would we not fear? But Christ said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The faithful and true God is still in control using all the seemingly evil things to work for His glory and the good of His church. This world was created to glorify God in His triune being to establish the kingdom of God from the masses. The gospel goes out by God's called servants to bring the good news of the Christ-child, born to be the propitiation for lost sinners. "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of

darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in



**Mr. Cornelius VanKampen**

known as Case, has been married to Susan for sixty blessed years. They attend and are members of Heritage Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, MI.

For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. -2 Corinthians 1:20

the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:5-7).

All these things have been given by the power of the Holy Spirit, revealing the cross of Calvary as the open gospel door of hope in the new year. "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Yes, the world is perishing, but God's church is in safe keeping as Christ their Savior guides them through this wilderness to their eternal home. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19). The new year's outlook may be dismal, but by the grace of God all things will work out for the good of His people! The cross of Jesus is the dividing line as to how we begin this new year! Without the cross there is only fear, but in Him there is divine security. How are you approaching 2026? "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2). Knowing Jesus and His righteousness, we may enter the new year with all its unknown trials confidently following Him fully.

*God is our refuge and our strength, a helper ever near us;*

*We will not fear tho' earth be moved, for God is nigh to cheer us.*

*Although the mountains quake and earth's foundations shake,*

*Tho' angry billows roar*

*And break against the shore, our mighty God will hear us.*

*God's city is forever blest with living waters welling;*

*Since God is there she stands unmoved 'mid tumults round her swelling;*

*God speaks and all is peace, From war the nations cease; The Lord of Hosts is nigh,*

*Our fathers' God Most High is our eternal dwelling.*

*Behold what God has done on earth; His wrath brings desolation.*

*His grace, commanding wars to cease, brings peace to ev'ry nation;*

*Be still, for He is Lord, by all the earth adored; The Lord of Hosts is nigh,*

*Our fathers' God Most High is our strong habitation.*

*Psalter 128 (Psalm 46)*

# Anniversaries, Unions, and Desiderata



Dr. Michael R. **Kearney**



**W**e are entering a year of milestones: the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA)<sup>1</sup>, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Reformed Fellowship, and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the congregation I grew up in, West Sayville Reformed Bible Church—not to mention the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States of America.

The church in West Sayville has some connection to each of the other anniversaries as well. Founded as a mission work of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1876, that congregation has affiliated with the URCNA since 1998. Located on the south shore of Long Island, about fifty miles east of New York City, the congregation followed the history of

waves of European immigration to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s and the rapid demographic transformation of the East Coast in the last several decades. The church has shifted from serving the families of a small community of Dutch fishermen to being a waystation for all kinds of people in various walks of life who are seeking answers to life's questions from God's Word in the fellowship of believers.<sup>2</sup>

## **An Old Church in a Young Federation**

The West Sayville congregation was not technically a charter member of the URCNA, although its leaders and concerned members participated in many of the conversations that led

to the creation of our federation of churches. Nonetheless, I believe the West Sayville church is the oldest *congregation* in the URCNA—that is, the oldest local body to join the federation intact, without a church split, while maintaining its legal and ecclesiastical identity. Many other congregations, from brand-new plants to churches with more than a century of history, have thrown in their lot with this fledgling group of churches that now turns thirty this year.

The conversations that led to the formation of the URCNA, in turn, are closely tied to the history of Reformed Fellowship. Now and then the discussion comes up in a board meeting or conversation with



a Reformed Fellowship supporter: is Reformed Fellowship a URCNA entity? Many of our members attend URCNA churches; several of our board members are URCNA ministers. Multiple United Reformed congregations in West Michigan have offered us the use of their facilities for events and storage. We publish works by numerous United Reformed authors, we distribute the *Life in Christ* catechism series used across the URCNA, and we print the official URCNA membership directory each year. Reformed Fellowship seems to be as official of an unofficial publishing house of the URCNA as you could get.

And yet we are also not. In principle, Reformed Fellowship and *The Outlook* have always been open to all individuals and churches who adhere to the Reformed faith as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. We actively try to recruit board members from multiple Reformed denominations and to be present at a variety of Reformed and Presbyterian events. If you ask anyone involved in the leadership of Reformed Fellowship, I think you will get a consistent answer: Reformed Fellowship is not meant to be exclusively or even predominantly centered on the URCNA.

As URCNA officebearers and members think about the opportunities that lie ahead of our federation in the next thirty years (and that is what I am envisioning in this series of articles, a kind of prospectus of some of the unique opportunities that confront us), the relationship between the URCNA and Reformed Fellowship deserves a little more historical explanation. One exchange that occurred on the pages of this very magazine in 1977 and 1978, in particular, helps us understand the directions and relationship of the two institutions today.

Let me set the context. Rev. John Vander Ploeg had taken up editorship of *The Outlook* after editing *The Banner*, the official periodical of the CRC, from 1956 to 1970. He was a well-respected minister with an established audience, and he used the platform of Reformed Fellowship's magazine to launch a wide-ranging critique of departures from Reformed orthodoxy in the CRC.

Vander Ploeg changed the magazine's title from *Torch and Trumpet* to its present name.<sup>3</sup> He saw the mission of the magazine as just that: providing an outlook, a direction—a proactive voice rather than just a reactive one. Vander Ploeg's editorship was marked by an activist spirit and a sense of urgency, eliciting many notes of support as well as critique from readers. In an age without the internet and social media, members of the Reformed community spread across the United States and Canada engaged in fellowship and debate largely on the pages of this magazine.

### **An Agenda-Setting Editorial**

Vander Ploeg's July 1977 editorial was titled "Desideratum—A United Reformed Church."<sup>4</sup> This was not only the first time a term as arcane as "desideratum" appeared in *The Outlook*; it was also, to my knowledge, the first published use of the phrase "United Reformed Church" to describe a vision of a confessionally Reformed union of congregations in North America. That vision, again, was both reactive and proactive: if a union of congregations would "purge themselves of the foe within the gate and of those bold innovations that now threaten to undermine the Reformed faith," Vander Ploeg contended, the result would be a new "denomination that would not shilly-shally in its witness to the Reformed faith but a church that would rather be unambiguous, consistent, and

enthusiastic in the profession of it." While the CRC was the primary harbinger of the "foe within the gate" in Vander Ploeg's estimation, his vision of a new denomination extended to all Reformed churches that desired to make *sola Scriptura* the central principle of their unity.

Vander Ploeg voiced the sentiment of many conservative Christian Reformed members who objected to liberalizing developments in their denomination, but his proposal was a call for educated collective action, not just grandstanding. First, church leaders as well as laypeople needed to read, investigate, and examine the issues confronting their denomination. Second, *The Outlook* needed to offer a forum where "contributions from our readers as to how to bring into being a truly United Reformed Church are welcome." Third, members of the CRC and other people of Reformed convictions ought to consider organizing local chapters of Reformed Fellowship. The goal was to help a concerned group of members find a sense of direction.

Vander Ploeg wanted responses, and he got them. An anonymous reader from Florida wrote to agree with Vander Ploeg's basic proposal but to offer a different name: the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church. "Why should we lose our precious name?" he demanded. "After all, we are not leaving the church—the church is leaving us." Interestingly, the same reader also predicted, "No doubt THE OUTLOOK will be the new church paper."<sup>5</sup> Another reader pointed out that, since 1972, there already was a (liberal) denomination named the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. A Protestant Reformed contributor to *The Standard Bearer* commended Vander Ploeg for raising the alarm but claimed that any new denomination would need to revisit the CRC's 1924 decision about common

grace.<sup>6</sup> A writer for the Canadian Reformed paper *Clarion* supported the editorial but stated that secession must be pursued in and through seeking unity with other likeminded denominations.<sup>7</sup>

Others were not as enthusiastic. Rev. Jelle Tuininga offered a stern response: while he shared Vander Ploeg's desire to return the CRC to its confessional heritage, he believed that planning a secession, as opposed to being forced into a secession, was arguably schismatic. Moreover, he found the vision of a confessional group of Reformed churches "unduly idealistic and unduly illusory."<sup>8</sup> Tuininga's response got its own counter from Donald Blaauw in Holland, Michigan. Blaauw stood behind Vander Ploeg all the way: "We ought to thank our God again and again for the spiritual idealism and the courageous foresight (illusions?) of our forebears, and we ought to be praying that the same kind of God-given courage may be our portion today and in the days ahead."<sup>9</sup> As it turned out, seventeen years later, the same Rev. Tuininga would serve as vice-chairman for the 1995 Lynwood meeting that launched the formation of the URCNA.

Vander Ploeg followed up his initial proposal with a few more editorials, although his editorship was cut short soon after due to poor health. In "That United Reformed Church—An Ongoing Challenge," Vander Ploeg spoke of the need for not just a torch of destruction but a hammer for building: "Hope thrives only when, like Peter, James, and John, we see no man save Jesus only as the One Who builds His church. And if it be his will, already on this side of glory, to effect and bring forth a union of those united in the Reformed faith, He surely can and will bring it to pass."<sup>10</sup>

## Unity as a Founding Principle

I recount all this history in order to make two observations, ending with opportunities for Reformed Fellowship and for the United Reformed Churches in North America today.

First, this was 1978. Vander Ploeg did not live to see the formation of the URCNA in 1996, but the discussion in the pages of *The Outlook* set the fundamental coordinates for the emergence of that federation twenty years later. The two proposed names of "United Reformed Church" and "Orthodox Christian Reformed Church" spelled out two different visions of what a restoration of Reformed doctrine and piety should look like. One was a new group of churches with biblical ecumenicity as a central goal; the other was a restored CRC, realigned with its positions at some previous point in history.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, another group of former Christian Reformed churches in Canada did form a small denomination named the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church in 1988; they merged with the URCNA in 2008.

Second, this history gets to the roots of that longstanding, ambiguous relationship between the URCNA and Reformed Fellowship. The Florida reader could write that *The Outlook* would "no doubt" be the official magazine of a future United Reformed Church. Why was he so sure? Perhaps the sentiment was that the URCNA would obviously comprise ministers, officers, and members who valued theological literacy, Reformed sensibilities, and a clear biblical worldview on the issues confronting the church and society—just the kind of people who would read *The Outlook*. Perhaps he thought *The Outlook* offered the best counterpoint to *The Banner*, which embodied much of what was seen as problematic in the CRC. In

any case, it seemed clear that the fledgling idea of a United Reformed Church needed Reformed Fellowship in order to grow its wings and fly. But for a host of other reasons, neither Reformed Fellowship nor the URCNA have ever wanted to formalize that relationship. Their collaborative efforts so far have remained healthy, voluntary, and organic.

So what is the point of all this? For Reformed Fellowship, the vibrant discussion on the pages of *The Outlook* decades ago is a vision we should still strive for today. While technology has changed dramatically, the need to offer a forum for reasoned, balanced, and tenaciously committed discussions of Reformed faith and life has not ceased. People, families, churches, and whole denominations need our support as they wrestle with newfound challenges to our creeds and confessions. It is heartening to see how widely our publications are sold, far beyond the bounds of the URCNA and even beyond North America.

For the United Reformed Churches in North America, we must continue to take our name seriously. We are not the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church; our federation did not come into being merely to rewind the clock on denominational decay. We have a positive and distinctive task of promoting gospel unity far beyond our origins. From the beginning of the URCNA, its founders made decisions that sought unity in a common confession rather than ethnic or historic ties alone, and that biblically ecumenical spirit continues to represent a unique and profound opportunity for the URCNA today.

And for West Sayville Reformed Bible Church, and for every other local congregation of the church of Jesus Christ, the sacred tasks of

worship, discipleship, and evangelism go on—whether for another year or for 150 years.

1. This could also be the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary if the organizational meeting of independent Reformed churches in Lynwood, Illinois, held on November 15–16, 1995, is taken as the founding of the URCNA.

2. See <https://wsrbc.org/our-history>.

3. See W. Robert Godfrey's article "Fifty Years of Faithfulness: The Witness of *The Outlook*," *The Outlook* 51, no. 4 (April 2001), 7–12.

4. John Vander Ploeg, "Desideratum—A United Reformed Church," *The Outlook* 27, no. 7 (July 1977), 2–4. This article was reprinted in *The Outlook* 66, no. 3 (May/June 2016), 27–30.

5. "Letter to the Editor," *The Outlook* 28, no. 1 (March 1978).

6. John Vander Ploeg, "That 'United Reformed Church'—An Ongoing Challenge," *The Outlook* 28, no. 4 (April 1978), 2–5.

7. Vander Ploeg, "That 'United Reformed Church,'" 2–5.

8. "Letter to the Editor," *The Outlook* 28, no. 7 (July 1978).

9. "Letter to the Editor," *The Outlook* 28, no. 9 (September 1978).

10. Vander Ploeg, "That 'United Reformed Church,'" 2–5.

11. I realize I am glossing over some details here. At the first synod of the new federation, four names were under consideration: Evangelical Reformed Churches in North America, Orthodox Reformed Churches of North America, Reformed Christian Churches of North America, and United Reformed Churches of North America (Acts of Synod 1996, Art. 9). Individual congregations that had left the CRC had already chosen a variety of naming schemes,

from "Independent Reformed Church" to "Christian Reformation Church" to "Reformed Bible Church" (hence the present name of West Sayville Reformed Bible Church). Other overlapping names and groups played a role in this story as well: the Consistorial Conference, the Interclassical Conference, the Alliance of Reformed Churches, and others. Nevertheless, I do believe that the particular names discussed in *The Outlook* marked the earliest substantive discussion of the direction that the new group of churches would take.

## Dr. Michael R. Kearney

is an assistant professor of communication at Dordt University in Sioux Center, IA, and a board member of Reformed Fellowship.

## NAPARC 2025

## Fifty Years of Promoting Organic Union

The 50<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) convened November 11–13, 2025, at Hope Community Reformed Presbyterian Church in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, and the neighboring campus of Geneva College.

Discussion centered on past efforts and present prospects for organic union, a primary purpose of this council of thirteen confessionally Reformed denominations in the U.S. and Canada. The assembly was encouraged to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3), promoting bottom-up forms of collaboration between member churches.

As part of its deliberations, the council recommended that its member churches observe a day of humiliation, prayer, and fasting regarding sexual sin by church officers, with Wednesday, April 22, 2026 as a suggested date. The Heritage Reformed Congregations received permission to organize a consultation (a separate meeting of member



John Bernard, Geneva College Staff Photographer.

churches) on biblical counseling, with the date to be determined. Numerous bilateral meetings between delegates of member churches provided fruitful time to discuss practical expressions of interdenominational unity.

On Wednesday evening, delegates enjoyed a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner in the Metheny Fieldhouse of Geneva College and a keynote address by Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn of Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, with more than one hundred guests present.

Full minutes of the council can be found at [naparc.org](http://naparc.org). The next meeting will be November 10–12, 2026, at First United Reformed Church in Oak Lawn, Illinois.





# Old Paths

Rev. Greg **Lubbers**

Statistics can be confusing to interpret but they can also be sobering to consider. This is especially true with statistics in relation to the Christian church and covenant young people. While there are many variables to be considered, numerous studies show that an alarming number of covenant young people are departing from the visible church. A recent Barna study reported, “Nearly two-thirds of U.S. 18–29 year olds who grew up in church ... have withdrawn from church involvement as an adult after having been active as a child or teen.” This sad phenomenon, historically known as apostasy (i.e., “a falling away”), has brought about such terms as “deconstruction” and “dechurching.”

This trend is especially troubling for those who love the Christian church and its young covenant members. Out of a desire for God’s glory as well as these individual’s spiritual well-being, the mature members of the church desire the next generation to “prosper in all things and be in health, just as [their] soul prospers” (3 John 3). In order for God’s covenant people to prosper spiritually, they must take the “old paths” of biblical orthodoxy.

## The Need for the Old Paths

The late teenage and early adult years are critical for setting a person’s course in life. As they reach these milestones of maturity and independency, their beliefs and practices become their own rather than simply those of their parents. While not an absolute rule, generally the pattern of life set in a person’s twenties gives a reliable indicator of the pattern of their entire life.

Our culture bombards our young people with voices speaking to which way they ought to take in life. Such voices include the opinions of peers, the instruction of professors, the musings of authors, and especially the clamoring of podcasts and social media influencers. Along with cultural trends and the opinions of one’s own self, all of these voices form an unrelenting call to “come this way” in life.

Many of us have had the experience of being in a busy airport. Thousands of travelers make their way to hundreds of gates to catch flights leading to a host of destinations.



Thus says the LORD: “Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls . . .”

–Jeremiah 6:16

Human life is similar, in a way. There are billions of people following millions of paths through life with contrasting convictions on the meaning and purpose of life. Some find themselves boarding the plane of Secularism<sup>1</sup> while others stand at the gate of Humanism<sup>2</sup>; others prefer Narcissism<sup>3</sup> while their fellow travelers wait in futility for Nihilism.<sup>4</sup>

While there are various worldviews with their respective beliefs about God, salvation, and the meaning of life, all roads through life ultimately lead to the same destination: eternity. Human life does not end with a “Game Over” or an exit into nothingness. Rather, upon physical death, “the dust [body] will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit [soul] will return to God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7).

However, in relation to the common destination of all humanity into eternity, there is also a remarkable and irreversible difference: either heaven or hell. This is the clear revelation of Jesus in Matthew 7:13–14: “Enter by



the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” In light of such a truth, there is a need for all of us to “stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is . . .” (Jer. 6:16).

## The Identity of the Old Paths

Since it is important to find and walk in the old paths, it is also important to identify the old paths. In the context of Jeremiah, the Lord, through His prophet, is calling His covenant people away from innovative idolatry adopted from the surrounding nations and back to covenant loyalty focused upon the divine revelation.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis warns against what he calls “chronological snobbery.” This is the mindset of “the uncritical acceptance or the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.” Essentially, “chronological snobbery” is the mindset that believes the simple, Christian faith of the fathers must be dismantled by progressive, post-modern insight of the children. But it is upon the old paths that a person finds the good way. The old paths are the gracious provision and revelation of the covenant of grace. It was and is this gracious, covenantal redemption that was revealed to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. It was and is this gracious, covenantal redemption that revealed the way for reconciliation between the Lord God and His chosen people.

The old paths form the good way of covenantal redemption that is centered upon the Person and work of the Mediator of the covenant, Jesus Christ. It includes the revelation of and conviction in the miraculous incarnation, the

substitutionary atonement, and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the good way is the belief in the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting based upon God’s grace and mercy in and through Jesus Christ.

These old paths are what our covenant forefathers and mothers studied and believed with their open Bibles, bent knees, believing hearts, and active faith. Many of them suffered persecution because of these good ways, and they pursued immigration because of it. These paths have guided innumerable saints through this life into glory, saints who now form an encouraging cloud of witnesses for those of us who follow behind (Heb. 12:1, 2a).

For those tempted to deconstruct their faith and “dechurch,” what is needed is not a new path but rather a return to the old paths. It is upon the old paths of the apostolic faith that one finds the good way.

## The Blessing of the Old Paths

The Bible often attaches promises to commandments. It does so to encourage obedience. The promise given to those who walk in the good way of the old paths is that of rest. Long ago, Augustine reflected that “our souls are restless until they rest in God.” Sadly, our modern culture is overflowing with persons who are restless and searching for a “safe place” for their spirit. While the higher institutions of our contemporary age beckon with the promises of “safe places,” these often turn out to be dead end roads of selfish, subjective preoccupation that only increases the restlessness of those who seek refuge.

True soul rest is found in the old paths of the good way of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus authoritatively and truthfully proclaims to weary travelers, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” As the

way, the truth, and the life, He invites and promises, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29).

There is a vast difference between simply knowing about the old paths of the good way and actually walking on them. We all need to walk in the old paths of the good way by a personal, living faith in the Lord: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not simply a philosophical curiosity in or a historical affirmation of the faith of our fathers. It is a living faith in the Triune God.

The new path of deconstruction and “dechurching” leads further and further away from peace. Nevertheless, the Father stands at the head of the old paths of the good way eager to receive prodigal sons and daughters who come to their spiritual senses and return home on the path of repentance and faith. The call is the same for us today as it was for Israel in Jeremiah’s day, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls.’”

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1 “Secularism” could be defined as “the principle of seeking to conduct human affairs based on naturalistic considerations, uninvolved with religion.”

2 “Humanism” could be defined as “an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.

3 “Narcissism” could be defined as “excessive interest in or admiration of oneself and one’s physical appearance.”

4 “Nihilism” could be defined as “the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless”

## Rev. Greg Lubbers

is currently serving as Minister of the Word and Sacraments at Covenant Reformed Church (URCNA) in Pella, IA.

# WALKING WITH JOB



Rev. Ryan Swale

## THROUGH MISCARRIAGE

### 10 LESSONS I LEARNED WHILE PREACHING THROUGH JOB (2)

In addition to the consolation that came from knowing Christ knew our suffering, God was also faithful to provide for us very concrete assurance that the children we lost *were indeed children*. Dan Doriani, writing of his family's own experience with early infant loss, confesses a fear that sometimes crept into his mind after their loss: "Could the orthodox doctrine be wrong? Maybe my child wasn't yet a person, not yet 'my child.'"<sup>1</sup> This thought crept into our minds as well. But God was faithful to give very concrete assurances from the book of Job that, yes, they are children, made in His image and loved by Him.

The first of those assurances was in Job 10, where Job says: "Your hands fashioned and made me, and now you have destroyed me altogether. Remember that you have made me like clay; and will you return me to the dust? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese?

You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit" (Job 10:8–12). These verses, much like Psalm 139, speak of God's loving creation of our children in the womb. Job speaks of the earliest stages of fetal development as a time when God knew and cared for him.

Likewise, in Job 31, as Job protests his innocence and argues that he has not mistreated his servants, he says, "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:15). Already at conception, children are viewed by Job as human beings with civil rights.

These two passages were immensely comforting to us. They reaffirmed for us that the children we had lost were knit together by God in the womb, and they reminded us of the precious truth that they are loved by Him. Much like Psalm 139, they calmed

our fears that "the orthodox doctrine could be wrong," and reassured us of the reality of our loss, and therefore also the covenantal comfort that "godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy."<sup>2</sup>

Again, this did not mean that we did not still struggle with why God would call these children out of this life in infancy. But it settled any doubts about where they are now. And as we would continue our study through Job, God would graciously continue to address some of our other concerns about His purposes for us.

### God Shows Us That He is a Loving Father Whose Plans Sometimes Include Our Suffering

When I finally came to God's speech at the end—a passage that, sadly, is sometimes used to squash any lament



or grappling with God's purposes in our suffering—I was struck by the tenderness with which God answers Job. First of all, it is worth noting that He answers Job at all. “Certainly, God is under no obligation to respond to any demand we may put on him. . . . He is God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. He is by no means subject to our beck and call. . . . But God does appear. . . . In an act of humble grace, he condescends to interact with him.”<sup>3</sup> And, as He does, he “puts Job in his place more as a father might do it to his dogmatic adolescent than as a judge to an offender.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there is almost a “playfulness” to His speech.<sup>5</sup>

The Lord's method of asking Job *questions* grants him dignity by inviting him into the conversation and also answers him far more gently than God could have by speaking His whole speech in the indicative (“I did this, Job; *you* didn’t. I know this, Job; *you* don’t.”). Michael Fox says God speaks to him “with compassion and gentleness, albeit a stern gentleness.”<sup>6</sup> And then He takes him on a tour of creation, showing him His loving care for all that He has made.

In this, God impresses upon His beloved children that they have a very limited perspective on this world.<sup>7</sup> There are things that Job does not understand. And God communicates this gently but clearly, as a father to a son.

His tour of creation also shows God's gentle care for all He has made. In fact, Job 38:8–9 literally describes God as diapering the sea. Eric Ortlund writes, “God cares for [the waves] like a squealing infant! Is it too much to imagine God singing the chaotic waters a lullaby? Maybe. But describing the restrictions God places on the chaotic sea as a diaper is a strikingly gentle, nurturing image. . . . What profound goodness and kindness must there be in him if he treats even the raging waters as a father would a wailing infant?”<sup>8</sup> God's tour of creation shows that He is a gentle father over all He has made. Yet, at the same time, this loving Father allows some chaos (raging waters in 38:8–11, predators and prey in 38:39, even death in 38:17). But

even this must be understood in the context of His fatherly goodness and our own limited understanding.

These chapters helped us to see the goodness of God who listens to our cries and does not respond as a stern judge, but as a loving and gentle father. He showed us His intimate care for all that He has made (including our children), even though He allows, in His infinite wisdom, some of His creatures to die. They gave us a grid through which to interpret these things: (1) through the knowledge of His loving, fatherly care; (2) through a reminder of our own limited understanding; and (3) through the knowledge that, “in some strange and wonderful way, even disorder has a place in God's order.”<sup>9</sup> And when He allows that disorder, we must cling to the knowledge of His loving fatherly care.

Jonny Gibson had a wonderful way of explaining this to his son after the loss of his still-born daughter. He would ask his son, “What shape is the moon tonight?” And his son might answer: “A crescent moon, a half-moon, a gibbous moon, or a full moon.” But he would then follow up: “What shape is the moon always?” to which his son would reply: “The moon is always round.” This was his way of explaining to his son that God is always good, even when we cannot see it. “We couldn't see the whole of God's goodness because [our daughter] Leila was dead. But we knew that the moon was round, even when we couldn't see all of it.”<sup>10</sup> Job 38–39 helped us grasp this.

### **God Shows Us That He Will One Day Restore Our Fortunes**

The epilogue to the book of Job helped us see not only God's purposes in our suffering, but how He will one day make all things new. Job 42:10–17 pictures the restoration of Job after his long night of weeping, and does so in language that hints at its purpose in pointing to the coming age. Job 42:12 speaks of this as the “latter days” of Job, which is stock language in the prophets for the coming age. And Job

42:10 speaks of God “restoring Job's fortunes,” which is also the language used in the prophets (e.g., Amos 9:14). God seems to be picturing, in Job, the restoration that awaits His children on the other side of their suffering.<sup>11</sup>

This was a vision that we desperately needed. As I said, I preached this final sermon just one day before our third miscarriage. And God had prepared us, through it, to lift our gaze to the age to come in the midst of the suffering of this age. He reminded us that glory awaits us on the other side of our suffering, when He will make all things new. And that glory includes even the resurrection of our children.

I believe God hints at this in Job 42:13. If you compare the numbers of animals listed in Job 42:12 with Job 1:3, it is clear that God doubled all of Job's possessions. However, he does not appear to double the number of Job's children (Job 42:13). Rather, Job has the same number at the end than he lost at the beginning. Why would it be that God does not give him twice the number of children? Glenda Mathes suggests, “God gave Job the same number of children because his original seven sons and three daughters still existed.”<sup>12</sup> So, at the close of the book, God gives a subtle reminder that our children are not lost, but we will see them again. Though we sowed in tears, we will reap with shouts of joy (Ps. 126:5).

### **God Teaches Us How (And How Not) to Comfort Those Who Mourn**

From beginning to end, Job provided us with precious lessons in the midst of our suffering, and precious lessons to prepare us for our suffering. But the book not only holds lessons for sufferers; it also has lessons for caregivers and those who come alongside mourning mothers and fathers. In the cold comfort of Job's friends, God gives us numerous examples of what *not* to say.

In fact, Eric Ortlund suggests that “one of the reasons that the poet lets the debate go on for so long is to provoke such disgust at the friends that we resolve never to speak to a

modern-day Job in the same way. The author is trying to inoculate us against this way of thinking and speaking.”<sup>13</sup> Here are five suggestions for how not to be like Job’s friends.

*First, don’t assume you understand what God is doing.* Job’s friends are very certain about God’s purposes in his suffering (namely, to punish him for sin). We can often do the same thing. Sometimes we do it by ascribing a relationship between someone’s sin and their suffering. But we also do it by suggesting God is using this suffering to teach them some lesson, or is going to use it to enable them to minister to others, etc. It’s okay for us not to have it all figured out. Psalm 131 says that some things are too great and too marvelous for us to comprehend, and that’s okay. We need to be humble and not presume to know more than we do.<sup>14</sup>

*Second, don’t blame them for their suffering.* This is what Eliphaz does implicitly in Job 4:7, and what Bildad does explicitly in Job 8:4 when he suggests that the death of Job’s children was because of their sin. Sometimes we do this explicitly (I remember one Christian telling me that when they suffered multiple miscarriages, a fellow church member suggested that it must have been because she and her now-husband had been intimate before marriage).<sup>15</sup> Other times, we do it implicitly without even realizing it, like when people asked us if we had gotten the COVID vaccine and if that was what caused our miscarriages. These sorts of statements can often compound the guilt and confusion that those reeling from loss are already feeling. Let us not assume the role of the “Accuser.”

*Third, don’t forbid them from grieving.* This was one of the first missteps Job’s friends made. Perhaps they did well to sit with him for a week.<sup>16</sup> But as soon as Job offers his lament, one of the first things Eliphaz says is, “You are impatient.” He says that grief has touched Job, and he is dismayed and not “fearing God” (Job 4:5–6). For Eliphaz, fearing God and crying

out to God in lament were mutually exclusive; to lament meant to lose faith. He failed to realize that Job’s lament was actually an *exercise* in faith. We too should realize that sometimes “tears fit as well as, and often better than, smiles this side of the eschaton.”<sup>17</sup>

*Fourth, don’t feel the need to correct them.* Especially while grieving, people may say things that are not theologically accurate, but we must resist the urge to treat these statements “as if they were the calm and rational conclusion of a heretic’s doctrinal statement rather than the agonized thoughts of a desperate man.”<sup>18</sup> The same is also true for when they may say things to us in frustration that they don’t really mean. Job’s friends became far too defensive at times (for example Job 15:2–4), but we must resist the urge to become offended or defensive when our advice is not welcomed or they act out at us in their grief.<sup>19</sup>

*Fifth, don’t offer doctrine without sympathy.* When our grieving friends are ready to listen and seek our counsel, we must not provide it in a way that lacks sympathy. This was one of the most obvious missteps of Job’s friends. Many of the statements they made were true. In fact, Ferguson says, “From their mouths issue some of the most sublime discrete theological statements anywhere to be found in the pages of the Bible. But they had disconnected them from the life-giving love of God for his needy and broken child Job.”<sup>20</sup> “They [were] more attached to their theories than their friend.”<sup>21</sup> May that not be true of us. But may we enact for them the sympathy of their Savior, and may we point them to their sympathetic Savior.<sup>22</sup>

Eric Ortland writes, “One of the ways we can tell that we have read the Book of Job rightly is if we finish the book with a greater caution in how we speak to others—a deeper humility, an unwillingness to assume we understand what God is doing in the midst of suffering, and a deeper hesitance to blame others.”<sup>23</sup> So, may we learn from the cold comfort of Job’s

friends never to deal with bruised reeds and smoldering wicks in this way.

## God Teaches Us to Be Gracious with Those Who Offer Us Miserable Comfort

One final lesson from the book of Job is worth mentioning. As people inevitably *will* say insensitive things to you in the midst of your loss, what does Job teach us about how to respond? In Job 42:7, God rebukes Job’s friends for how, in their cold comfort to Job, they have not spoken of *God* what is right. So, He commands them to provide a sacrificial offering while Job intercedes for them so they might be forgiven.

This penultimate scene is one of the clearest places where Job’s typological character is seen.<sup>24</sup> Here, not yet restored but still lying in dust and ashes and covered in boils, he intercedes for sinners who mocked and accused him, so that God’s anger might be turned away from them. Like Christ, he says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Bill Cotton says, “Job’s response was immediately gracious. He had been justifiably angry with his friends, but he refuses to entertain any bitterness. He doubled his knees and prayed for them!”<sup>25</sup>

As Job here foreshadows the Spirit of the crucified Christ, so he models for us the grace that Christ works in us. When our comforters offer cold comfort as “worthless physicians” (Job 13:4), we must refuse to let bitterness take hold of us, but pray for them.<sup>26</sup> It also helps for us to realize that: (1) before our experience of grief, we likely did not know what to say either; (2) the people who have said hurtful things to us *have* at least tried (cf. Job 2:11); (3) God has been gracious toward us (as he was gracious toward Job and overlooked what he said in ignorance), and so we must be gracious toward them.<sup>27</sup>

If Job can forgive the things that his friends said to him, surely, we can forgive the insensitive things that our friends say to us in ignorance! May we learn from this faithful sufferer (and



the One whom he foreshadows) not only how to lament and how to trust the Lord who slays us, but also how to overlook the cold comfort of our loved ones and friends, extending a hand to help them, and refusing to let their words drive a barrier between us.

1. Dan Doriani, "Miscarriage of an Early-Term Infant," in *The Hardest Sermons You'll Ever Preach*, ed. Bryan Chapell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 103.
2. Canons of Dort I.17.
3. Bill Kynes and Will Kynes, *Wrestling with Job: Defiant Faith in the Face of Suffering* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2022), 177. They add, "he doesn't send an emissary—an angel or a prophet. God cares enough to respond in person" (Ibid., 178).
4. Derek Kidner, *Wisdom to Live By: An Introduction to the Old Testament's Wisdom Books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 71.
5. Anderson writes: "There is a kindly playfulness in the Lord's speeches which is quite relaxing. Their aim is not to crush Job with an awareness of his minuteness contrasted with the limitless power of God, not to mock him when he puts his tiny mind beside God's vast intellect. On the contrary, the mere fact that God converses with him gives him a dignity above all the birds and beasts . . ." (Anderson, *Job*, 292; cf. Kidner, *Wisdom to Live By*, 70; Wilson, *Job*, 180; Kynes & Kynes, *Wrestling with Job*, 178).
6. Michael Fox, "Job 38 and God's Rhetoric," *Semeia*, 18 (1981), 58.
7. Eric Ortland, *Suffering Wisely and Well: The Grief of Job and the Grace of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 126.
8. Ibid., 129.
9. Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 381.
10. See the children's book *The Moon is Always Round* by Jonathan Gibson (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2019).
11. James 5:7–11 confirms this, where James says to be patient until the coming of the Lord, and then

tells his readers to consider the steadfastness of Job and the "end" (literally *telos*) that the Lord brought about. This *telos* refers to God's gracious reward on the other side of Job's suffering.

12. Glenda Mathes, *Little One Lost: Living with Early Infant Loss* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2012), 72; cf. Hywel Jones, *A Study Commentary on Job* (Welwyn Garden City: Evangelical Press, 2007), 294.
13. Ortland, *Suffering Wisely and Well*, 81.
14. See Kynes & Kynes, *Wrestling with Job*, 71; cf. Nancy Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew About What Really Helps, And What Really Hurts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 54.
15. Of course, this is a sin. But Christ had forgiven their sin, and to suggest that he was now punishing them for sins already forgiven is to deny the gospel.
16. Though even this is up for debate. I think Christopher Ash is onto something when he says the following: "But while their silence may initially have been appropriate, it seems unlikely that it continued so. To sit quietly with a sufferer, to hold his or her hand, to listen patiently as he or she pours out his or her grief is one thing. But this silence is 'hugely extended.' To refuse to speak a word to a sufferer for seven days and seven nights is eerie and not comforting." He also points out that a seven-day silence symbolized mourning for the dead, and so it may be that his friends are mourning for him as one already dead. "It is as if they call for the hearse and sit by Job with the coffin open and ready for him . . . To them Job is no longer a living person. Their silence may be not so much a silence of sympathy (although it may have begun as such) but a silence of bankruptcy" (Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 62; cf. Thomas, *The Storms Breaks*, 63).
17. Strain, "Why I Chose to Preach on Job." Another way that we can do this is by putting a time-limit on grief, as if it is only permissible for a certain period of time but then they need to move on (see Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew*, 44; Gibson, *You Are Still a Mother*, 14).
18. Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 155; cf. William Henry Green, *Conflict and Triumph: The Argument of the Book of Job Unfolded* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 51; Ortland, *Suffering Wisely and Well*, 85–86; Kynes and Kynes, *Wrestling with Job*, 70. I can't recall where I read it, but one writer says we must realize the questions they

ask are not "armchair questions," but "wheelchair questions," and they must be treated accordingly.

19. See Wilson, *Job*, 369; Thomas, *The Storm Breaks*, 140.
20. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance: Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 74.
21. Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 94.
22. Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew*, 116. "In the loneliness of grief, remind [them] of the friend who is closer than a brother."
23. Ortland, *Suffering Wisely and Well*, 81.
24. O'Donnell says, "The final chapter of Job reinforces this gospel-centered reading of the whole drama. Job 42:7–8 reads like a traditional gospel tract.
25. Bill Cotton, *Will You Torment a Windblown Leaf?* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2001), 168. Likewise, John Hartley says, "He did not bear a grudge against those who had condemned him so harshly. Acting as an intercessor, he assisted them in finding favor with God" (Hartley, *The Book of Job* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988]), 539–40.
26. Ortland notes how, by asking Job to pray for them, God also prevents "any lingering resentment on Job's part against his friends" (*Suffering Wisely and Well*, 170).
27. See Nancy Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew*, 175–177.

## Rev. Ryan Swale

is a 2019 graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, and is the pastor of Immanuel United Reformed Church in Jordan, Ontario, where he lives with his wife, Caroline, and their children, Ezra, Zeke, Nora, Keziah and Payson. Rev. Swale is a board member of Reformed Fellowship.

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# The eye of the needle:

## The Paradox of Money



Dr. Bryce **Bartruff**, Ph.D.

**W**hen I was a young boy, my parents lived on Stevens Street—a gravel road with lots of mud puddles. On one hand, it was a wonderful place for little kids with great imaginations. Each puddle represented a lake, and the newly discovered sticks and pinecones became imaginary weapons used against our perceived enemies, enabling us to spend countless hours defending and protecting our fictional kingdom.

But our home on Stevens Street was hardly a castle; instead, it was a converted chicken house that probably would raise the ire of current day animal rights activists. It had no insulation or inside wall boards, just studs and spacers against outside siding. While the spacers between the studs were a great place to put my rock collection and small toys, they did little to turn this into suitable family housing.

Our landlord, Mr. Read, had taken what was once a factory for laying eggs and put it up on stilts, building a bedroom, kitchen, and eating area underneath. I doubt it was up to current day municipal code. Our version of central heat was a stove in the middle of our eating area which had to provide enough warmth for the main floor.

My sister and I slept in the upper portion of the house. Unfortunately, regardless of how much heat the stove could put out in a valiant attempt to heat the lower part of the house, that warmth did not waft up to where we slept. The lack of insulation meant that when it was 30 degrees outside, it was also 30 degrees in

our bedrooms. Our mother used to give us glass jars of hot water to take to bed so we would have something warm to cuddle with as we tried to fall asleep while shivering through another cold Oregon winter.

Our dietary options were not exactly a buffet either. Breakfast usually consisted of day-old bread my father purchased from the Franz Bakery outlet . . . sometimes getting eight loaves for a dollar. The bread was often so hard that my ever-resourceful mother would take powdered milk, add water, and beat into a watery liquid. She would then put the bread in a large bowl and pour this grayish-white concoction over it. It was less than appetizing, but it was our breakfast.

While life on Stevens Street was not exactly the Ritz-Carlton, or even Motel 6, we did have a roof over our heads and food, regardless of what it tasted or looked like, to eat. In Sunday School, we were taught that we were happy, but people of substance were not. If that was the



case, we should have been the most joy-filled people in our church. After all, Jesus spoke frequently about the dangers of having too much treasure (Luke 18:24–25, Matt. 19:23–24, and Mark 10:23–24). He said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The message I heard, while shivering on Stevens Street, was that if you wanted to be a good Christian and be happy, you needed to be poor—sleeping with a glass jar of hot water and eating day-old break soaked in powdered milk. The hazards of wealth were too big a price to pay: an inability to love God and to enter His Kingdom.

The memories of my childhood, and this lesson, came back to me the other day when a friend asked me, “Is it OK to be rich?” How much is too much? What do we do with the statement of Christ that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to get into heaven? I knew what I had learned as a child, but something seemed to be missing, so my friend and I decided to explore this subject further.

One of the first questions we asked ourselves was, “What is wealth?” According to the 2023 UBS Global Wealth Report, Americans hold 30% of the world’s wealth yet only make up 4% of the world’s total population. We are better off financially than 92% of the rest of the world. In addition, 26% of the global population do not even have access to safe drinking water and 3.4 billion people (or 2 in 5) do not have safely managed sanitation service.<sup>1</sup>

By any definition, the poorest people in the United States are better off materially than the rest of the world. For example, the net monthly income in the United States is \$4,320.92, compared to \$469.58 in Brazil and \$668.21 in Argentina.<sup>2</sup> It is ironic that many in America consider

themselves poor when comparatively they have a lot. It all seems to be in the eye of the beholder, and, in America, our eyes are wider than much of the world.

Thus, we, as Americans, have been blessed by God since He is the owner of it all (Ps. 24:1). All blessings come from Him. They are not of our doing. However, some people are blessed by God with an abundance of possessions while others are not. The bottom line is that God calls us to be faithful with everything He has given us, regardless of the amount.

Jesus drove this point home during His interactions with the rich young ruler in Luke 18:22–24, when it became evident that the man’s wealth was more important to him than his surrender to God. Jesus knew the man’s heart and so He challenged the young ruler to give away his wealth to the poor and follow Him. The man was sorrowful because he was not willing to do that, and he walked away downhearted. He wanted to gain eternal life (v. 22) but when challenged, he chose his earthly wealth over giving his heart to Jesus. Earthly treasure was more important than eternal life and Jesus had exposed the one thing the young ruler was not willing to surrender.

Jesus was a great communicator. He could captivate His audience through storytelling, such as parables which were stories drawn from everyday life that audiences could relate to and understand. He also used direct teaching and instructions, such as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) and it was not unusual for Him to ask probing questions to expose motive or provoke deeper thinking, as He did with the rich young ruler.

One of his means of communication was His use of hyperbole—exaggerated statements which were not to be taken literally. A scholarly review of his statement made immediately after His interaction

with the rich young ruler, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” reveals a consensus among theologians that this was an excellent use of hyperbole.<sup>3</sup> Jesus was making the point that wealth can create a false sense of security, thus hindering our dependence on God. Our life’s focus needs to be our relationship with and dependence on God, not the accumulation of earthly wealth. When believers replace that dependence and a relationship with Him with reliance on and love for possessions, their relationship with God is negatively affected.

For example, look at the parable found in Luke 12:16–21: “And he told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself but is not rich toward God.” In this passage, true wealth is defined as a rich relationship with God, not earthly riches and possessions—both of which will eventually dissipate while a relationship with God lasts eternally.

Which brings us to the importance of tithing. The Lord declares that He will bring blessing to His children who faithfully tithe (Mal. 3:10). The Apostle Paul reinforces this in Philippians 4:19 when he declares, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to the riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” Psalm 67:6–7 and James 1:17 also remind us that our blessings come from God.

It was this concept of blessing that compelled the Pilgrims to share their abundance with their new friends to thank God for His provision, which led to Thanksgiving Day, a day dedicated to celebrating and thanking God for His blessings on us.

In Matthew 25:14–30, Jesus teaches us about how we should not hoard the time, treasure, and gifts God has given us. It is the parable of the talents—one of the most famous of all the parables Jesus taught. In the parable, a rich man gave each of three servants money to be invested for him. To one he gave five talents, another he gave two, and the last one he gave one. For context, a talent was equivalent to 20 years of wages, so it was a good sum of money. The man indicated he would return at an unspecified time and see how they had invested his money.

The servants who received five talents and two talents doubled the man's investment and he rewarded them handsomely. But the servant who received only one talent dug a hole and hid the money, resulting in no profit for the master. His master was not pleased and severely reprimanded the servant.

The point Jesus was making was that God provides each of us time, talent, or treasure to be used for His glory. It is our responsibility to utilize them all. But if we squander it, fail to do anything with it, or use it only for our glory, He is going to hold us accountable for our decisions. The bottom line is that life is not about building a wonderful lifestyle for us or hoarding the resources the Lord has provided, but building the Kingdom for the Master.

Thus, our goal should be to find a balance that enables us to focus on a total reliance upon God for all things—including our money and possessions—which, if used correctly, will lead to a God-centered

lifestyle that glorifies and draws others to Him.

Proverbs 30:8b–9 states it well: “Give me neither poverty or riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of the Lord.” This passage does not condemn wealth, but it does ask God to provide us with the right balance so we can place our trust in Him, and not ourselves. This balance may be different for each person, but the point is that our first focus should always be our relationship with God and using the resources He has provided for us for His glory.

To get back to my discussion with my friend, we determined that the idea that people of wealth cannot be happy or close to God is untrue. In fact, there are numerous historical examples of how God used people with tremendous wealth to make a great impact on the world for His glory. Here are just a few examples:

**Constantine the Great** (272–337) was a Roman emperor. He legalized Christianity, funded the building of churches, and supported councils like the Council of Nicaea which addressed the heresy of Arianism and formally established the Nicene Creed.<sup>4</sup>

**Robert Raikes** (1736–1811) inherited a successful newspaper business in Gloucester, England. He used his resources and platform to establish and promote the Sunday School movement, initially aimed at educating poor working-class children who had no access to schooling. His model spread globally, laying foundations for mass education and evangelization including the American Sunday-School Union.<sup>5</sup>

**William Wilberforce** (1759–1833) was born into a wealthy merchant family. A member of Parliament, he used his resources and political

influence to lead the movement that abolished the British slave trade.<sup>6</sup>

**John D. Rockefeller** (1839–1937) was one of the richest men of his time. The founder of Standard Oil, he was a devout Baptist and gave away over half a billion dollars to missions, education, medicine, and social causes.<sup>7</sup>

**Henry Parsons Crowell** (1855–1944) was the founder of Quaker Oats. He gave much of his fortune to Christian ministries.<sup>8</sup>

**R.G. LeTourneau** (1888–1969) an industrialist lived on 10% of his income, giving away 90% to mission organizations and he established a Christian institution of higher education called LeTourneau University.<sup>9</sup>

**David Green** (born 1941), the founder of Hobby Lobby, was committed to giving half of the company's pre-tax profits to evangelical ministries.<sup>10</sup>

**Samuel Truett Cathy** (born 1921–2014) was the founder of Chick-fil-A. He donated tens of millions of dollars to fund Christian education and religious charities.<sup>11</sup>

These people had the right priorities. Their faith and allegiance were to God. They also recognized they were in a position to help build God's kingdom in significant ways.

Throughout the Scriptures, we find individuals who used wealth to help build God's kingdom:

**Abraham** (Genesis 13:2, 24:35) was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He used his resources to bless others, including the digging of wells that others could use for their water supply and tithing to Melchizedek, the king-priest.

**Job** (Job 1:3; 42:10–17) was initially depicted as a man of immense wealth, possessing thousands of livestock, camels, oxen, and donkeys,



along with many servants, making him the wealthiest man in the East. He was committed to God and was known for his integrity.

**Isaac** (Genesis 26:12–14) prospered greatly: “The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy.” His blessings were directly attributed to God’s covenant.

**Jacob** (Genesis 30:43) became exceedingly prosperous through flocks, herds, servants, camels, and donkeys. He recognized God as the source of his prosperity.

**Joseph** (Genesis 41:39–44) was a gifted leader. He rose to power as second in command in Egypt and managed the nation’s wealth during famine, saving countless lives.

**Boaz** (Ruth 2:1) was a “man of standing” (wealthy and influential). He showed faithfulness by redeeming Ruth and caring for the poor.

**David** (1 Chronicles 29:28) became king, accumulated great wealth, but devoted much of it to building the Temple of God. His prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:12–14 acknowledged all wealth came from God.

**Solomon** (1 Kings 10:23) was the wealthiest king of his time. In his early years, he sought wisdom above riches, which God granted along with wealth.

**Joseph of Arimathea** (Matthew 27:57–60) was a “rich man and a disciple of Jesus.” He gave his own tomb for Jesus’ burial.

**Zacchaeus** (Luke 19:1–10) was a wealthy tax collector who repented and gave half his possessions to the poor, plus restitution. Once Zacchaeus declared his full allegiance to Christ, Jesus said, “Salvation has come to this house.”

**Lydia** (Acts 16:14–15) was a successful businesswoman (seller of purple cloth). She was the first

convert in Europe and opened her home for Paul and the church.

**Philemon** (Philemon 1:1–2) was a wealthy believer who hosted a church in his home. He was known for his faith and generosity.

These people saw wealth as stewardship. They knew God is the owner of all and they sought to use it judiciously to build God’s kingdom. Their example is one that we should all follow with the treasure the Lord has given us.

The Scriptures teach us the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). It is not money that is evil, it is our worship of it, instead of our Lord, which leads to evil. Money should be used to build the Lord’s kingdom, not ours.

It should not matter if you live in a modified chicken house or an oceanfront mansion, eat dry crusty bread or dine in the finest of restaurants. The true meaning of life rests in our love and commitment to God because our reliance is to be totally on Him, regardless of what we have or don’t have. Life is not “all about me” but instead is “all about God.” We should not be seeking what we want to get out of our lives, but how we can glorify God through our time, treasure, and talent. It is not about our pleasure but bringing Him pleasure (Rev. 4:11).

So, let’s not bury our “talents,” but instead use them to grow His kingdom, regardless of our circumstances. Even a shivering young boy eating day old bread can do that. What the Lord wants most of all is our faithfulness with what He has provided, whether it be in abundance or in want.

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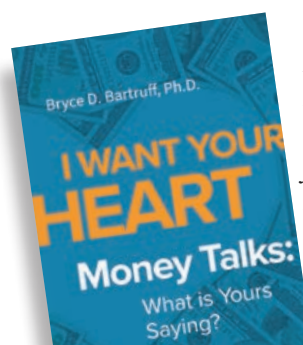
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## Dr. Bryce Bartruff

has taught on personal finance for over 20 years. He has served as an office-bearer at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and Highlands Church in Scottsdale, AZ, and currently serves as Board Treasurer for the Sterns Missionary Fund. A prolific author, Bryce is the founder of Marketplace Ministry, designed to help Christians thrive in the workplace. Past works include “*God, Your Money, and You*” (Crosslink) and “*A Cheerful Giver*” (Reformed Fellowship).



Summit 2025 Chalk Art



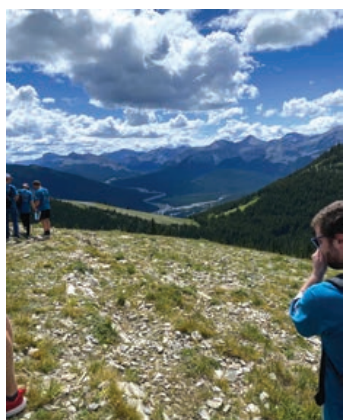
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Hiking out day in Kananaskis Country

## Exceedingly, Abundantly More...



Rev. Keith Davis



Girls 3-on-3 Basketball



Rev. Keith Davis and wife Laura

### Have you ever Heard of Summit?

If you live south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, then it is very likely that you have never heard of Summit Reformed Youth Conferences. Rev. Keith Davis and his wife, Laura, who live north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, sometimes refer to Summit as “RYS North” (RYS = Reformed Youth Services).

Before making the big move to Canada in 2015, Keith and Laura served two churches in the states: Hills URC in Hills, Minnesota, and Lynwood URC in Lynwood, Illinois. Over that seventeen-year period, Rev. Davis served as a break-out session speaker at several RYS conferences, and most of their older children attended RYS. Laura herself attended one year as a chaperone. So Keith and Laura were familiar with the way the conferences were run and they also knew what a great blessing RYS was to the youth of our churches.

### Summit: Born of Necessity

About a year after moving to Calgary, Alberta, to serve the saints at Bethel URC, the Bethel Council had a discussion about the high cost of sending the youth group to attend the RYS convention in the USA. They estimated that with flights plus ground transportation, as well as the registration cost, plus the exchange rate, it was costing about \$2000 per person to attend RYS.

Bethel URC was generously covering about 50% of that cost, but parents and council members realized this was not sustainable long term. That is when Rev. Davis started to think about organizing a Youth Conference in Calgary—a conference that would not only be affordable for Canadian youth groups, but be more accessible for those living in remote areas of western Canada. And since RYS was not able to host a conference

in Canada, this was the only option that remained.

Over the next few days, Rev. Davis made a few phone calls and sent out a few emails to his fellow pastors in Classis Western Canada, asking them for their input about this idea. He received overwhelming encouragement and support. After that, he contacted Dr. Alan Strange from Mid-America Reformed Seminary and Rev. Rick Bout, the URCNA Missions Coordinator, and asked if they would be willing to speak at a “hypothetical/yet to be organized” youth conference in August of that same year. They both agreed to come and speak.

Armed with that encouragement and buy-in from pastors and potential speakers, Rev. Davis approached a couple from his congregation to get their feedback. Although hesitant at first, they saw the potential as well as the great need, so they climbed on



board. Rev. Davis then presented this proposal to the Bethel Council who unanimously approved it. All that was left to do was organize a youth conference from scratch in less than 6 months!

## Why Are We Here?

By God's amazing grace and providence, everything fell into place quite quickly. Within two weeks, we found a local University in Calgary (Mt. Royal University) that was a perfect venue to host the conference, and with the Rocky Mountains within an hour away, we knew we would have plenty of awe-inspiring Out-Day options.

On August 8–11, 2016, we hosted our first conference. As planned, Dr. Strange and Pastor Bout served as main session speakers. Pastor Bout also presented a break-out session. Other break-out speakers included pastors Ralph Pontier, Rich Anjema, Brian Cochran, Bill Pols, and Gary Zekveld; Angela Bout, the wife of Rich Bout, led a ladies-only session.

The theme that first year was “What in the World are we Doing Here” which had to do with our calling as Christians living in this world. The Summit staff also thought that this theme was quite fitting (and funny), as we asked ourselves this question over and over again that week!

## Abundantly More than All We Ask or Imagine!

God is so good! That is the best way to try to sum up the way Summit has grown over the years. To give you some perspective, at that first Conference in 2016, we were blessed to have 160 people attend. This past August, 492 people attended. About 15 came from the USA; one young lady came from Australia; we had attendees come from as far east as Ontario and even Prince Edward Island, all the way west from

Smithers, Houston and Langley, British Columbia!

Summit is open to both high school age young people as well as young adults. About sixty young adults attend the August Conference each year. Four years ago, we began a separate Reformed Young Adult Conference (RYAC) in February that Bethel URC hosts in Calgary. 162 young adults (that's our cap) attend that conference every February.

Thus far, the Council of Bethel URC has served as the overseeing body, but Summit has filed and been granted corporate status, so organizational changes are on the horizon.

## Organization, Ecumenical Expansion & Ongoing Financial Support

The August Summit conference is organized and operated by a committee of eight people, all members of Bethel URC Calgary. Rev. and Laura Davis, Russell and Beckie Vanderveen, Leonard and Jessica Van Woudenberg, and Vincent and Marelize Valentine.

Participation in and support for Summit Reformed Conferences has been expanding over the years, with significant growth among the Canadian Reformed Churches. As of a few years ago, about 1/3 of the annual attendance at Summit is from Canadian Reformed Churches. We see this as a wonderful and welcome development.

However, as Summit grows, so to do the financial demands. While attendees pay for the variable costs (the registration fees, food, a dorm room, a t-shirt and Out-Day activity), the fixed costs (related to the guest speakers, travel, the Summit Director's part-time salary, as well as leasing all the required meeting space at Mt. Royal University), amount to \$175,000 and are covered by donations.

Summit relies heavily on the generous giving and contributions of the Churches of Western Canada (URC), several generous Canadian Reformed Churches, and a host of “friends of Summit” who give generously also. Without that annual support, it would not be possible.

## 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in 2026

Believe it or not, 2026 will mark the tenth anniversary of Summit. Due to the COVID lockdown in 2020, we had to cancel Summit that year, so that means that next August 3–6 we will host our tenth conference in eleven years!

To mark this milestone, we have invited Dr. Alan Strange to return to where it all began! Dr. Strange (OPC pastor and Professor and President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary)—who spoke at the first three Summit conferences—will team up with Rev. John Bouwers (Hope Reformed Church, URC, Brampton, Ontario). They will address the Topic: “Counselor, Comforter, Keeper”—the Person & Work of the Holy Spirit. Lord willing, registration will open in mid-March 2026 and may be limited to the first 500. For more info and to view and hear the Main Sessions from 2025 (Dr. Joel Beeke and Dr. Jerry Bilkes spoke), and to see videos and media from recent years go to [www.summitrefcon.ca](http://www.summitrefcon.ca).

### Rev. Keith Davis

is a 1998 graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He is married to Laura (38 years), and they have 7 children and 13 grandchildren. Previous to serving Bethel URC in Calgary, AB, pastor Davis served the URC in Hills, MN, and Lynwood, IL. Keith and Laura (along with Bethel URC) have been involved with Summit Reformed Conferences since its beginning in 2016.



# Crying Blood



Rev. Peter **Holtvliwer**

**Meditation text:** Genesis 4:8–16  
**Suggested reading:** Hebrews 11:1–4; 12:22–25

Just how far will the seed of the serpent fall? That's the issue as Genesis 4 unfolds. So far in verses 1–7, Cain has shown both unbelief and resistance to God's personal word of correction. Will he yet listen and repent? Sadly, our text reveals that Cain moves in the opposite direction.

## Bent on Evil

First comes Cain's invitation to Abel to go out where they could be alone and then comes Cain's cold-blooded murder of his very own brother (v. 8). Notice that all through our passage the hatred comes entirely from the seed of the serpent. Cain can't stand his brother's godly conduct and so he goes after him. Cain is the angry one, the hostile

one, the aggressor—those are marks of Satan's offspring. You can see it throughout Scripture: in Ishmael who mocks Isaac, in Esau who vows to kill Jacob, in Pharaoh who persecutes the Israelites, and in Goliath who publicly insults the LORD and His king. While the people of God seek peace and pray for God to stop the evildoer, it's the children of Satan who conspire together and say, "Come, let us wipe

them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more!" (Ps. 83:4).

The seed of the serpent have a hating nature toward God, but the children of God—having been regenerated by the Holy Spirit—have a loving nature. Can we not see this in the silent suffering of the righteous Abel, the shadow of Christ? Though not without sin, Abel did what was right. Christ was without sin and did what was right in every respect. Abel was hated by his brother and Christ was hated by His brother Israelites. In fact, the whole human race stood together against Him: Pilate and Herod became friends as Jesus was condemned to death, and these Gentiles joined with the Jewish leaders in hating Christ! (Luke 23:12)



How hard would it have been for them to support the Lord's punishment of Cain by letting him go off, away from the Lord's presence where they dwelt, to forever be a restless wanderer? Letting Cain go was Adam and Eve loving Christ more than they loved their unrepentant son.

That's something we Christians should be prepared for: hatred from any corner—from stranger, family member, or friend. Think of how Jesus was betrayed by His close disciple Judas. Or rejected by His siblings. Or how the apostle Paul was deserted by fellow gospel worker Demas (2 Tim. 4:10). And didn't our Savior warn us to expect opposition and division close to home? "A person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:36–38).

The enmity between the two seeds that God imposed in the beginning continues to cut through family, friends, and whole communities. And it hurts. Consider how painful it must have been for Adam and Eve to experience their first-born son—born with such promise (Gen. 4:1)—become a remorseless murderer. And how hard would it have been for them to support the Lord's punishment of Cain by letting him go off, away from the Lord's presence where they dwelt, to forever be a restless wanderer? Letting Cain go was Adam and Eve loving Christ more than they loved their unrepentant son.

## Restless Wanderer

Cain indeed shows himself to be unrepentant. His reply to God's inquiry is insolent: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). As if the Creator of heaven and earth does not see all and know all! God's answer is implied: *Yes, Cain, I made you to care for your brother but you have destroyed him.* And in the Lord's response, judgment comes swiftly and surely, in three parts. First, Cain will be cursed from the ground. This is the first time a human is cursed by God. Earlier, after Adam's sin, the *ground* had been cursed because of Adam and tilling the soil made harder, but here Cain's act of murder earns *him* the very curse of God just like his

spiritual father Satan was earlier cursed (3:14). Like father, like son.

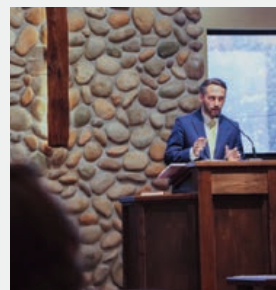
Second, that the farmer Cain should be cursed "from the ground" is especially hard-hitting because he earned his living from the ground. The Lord expands on what this means when He adds, "When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength" (v. 12). This too is an increase from Adam's punishment for while Adam could yet receive fruitful crops through the sweat of his face, Cain would receive only scraps. Cain would constantly live on the edge of survival—can you imagine the stress of that?

Third, Cain will be a "fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (4:12). As the land fails to produce enough to live on, Cain will have to move on to try and farm the next field, and the next one after that. But even if Cain manages to find a stable food supply through trade or the like (for he does "settle" in the land of Nod and later builds a city), yet a deeper restlessness will remain; verse 16 says his wandering will be "away from the presence of the LORD." On the one hand, God assures Cain through some unspecified sign that people will not come after him seeking his life in revenge (v. 15), but, on the other hand, Cain would bear the punishment of God's curse for the rest of his days.



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When we pull back the camera and see what all of this meant for Cain the picture becomes clear: Cain's hardening in rebellion against the Lord leads to him being permanently alienated from Him and His favour, a perpetual excommunication. And what is that but a living hell? What a warning for those early generations! Leaving restless Cain alive on the earth showed to all what happens to a person who rebels against God—he becomes a bitter wanderer on earth with no rest for his soul. Cain's way is the way of futility, curse, and death!

That's a warning we still need to take to heart today. Snubbing God and going our own way has consequences even as Isaiah writes, "'There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked' (Isa. 48:22). Paul speaks in the same way about those who "have wandered away from the faith" having "pierced themselves with many pangs" (1 Tim. 6:10). We might be physically alive on the earth but if we are living away from fellowship with God then we are nothing more than the walking dead. Each of us needs to humbly repent daily of our sins and walk closely with the Lord as Abel did.

## Faithful Son

We might look at Cain's pride, hatred, and murder and be shocked at the depth of his depravity, but the real shocker is that *both* brothers aren't like that! After all, isn't Cain following in the footsteps of his rebellious parents? Cain's actions are not something foreign to what Adam and Eve had done, only Cain pressed the gas pedal and went further down that same road of defiance.

But then there's Abel, given the name "breath," and who turns out to be a breath of fresh air. In our text, he speaks no words. In the whole Bible, Abel is not recorded as speaking a single syllable, but his actions speak volumes. He was clearly a man of

faith. He gave his first and his best out of love for God. He looked to God's promise of a Savior who would defeat the serpent with the shedding of blood. While Eve considered Cain to be the miracle child, it turns out that Abel was the real miracle for not only was he born but he was born again, with a heart that yearned to walk with God!

If we look for words from Abel, we should look to his blood about which the Lord said, it is "crying to me from the ground" (v. 10). Hebrews 11 tells us that Abel is still speaking today. What does his shed blood say to God? "Give me justice!" God granted a measure of justice in punishing Cain but only a measure, for the Lord was waiting for the day when the blood of one better than Abel would do more for His people and His world than Abel's blood. Abel's blood cried out for justice, but Christ's shed blood on the cross announced that justice had been satisfied—and that indeed is a much better cry than that of Abel's blood (Heb. 12:24). Abel was a victim of murder beyond his control, but Jesus was the victor over the serpent through the willful sacrifice of His life. Abel's blood helped no one, but Christ's blood helps all who look to Him in faith, for that blood was shed to pay for the sins of all the seed of the woman.

## Gracious Separation

Cain was driven off that day, removed from fellowship with God, placed directly under God's curse, and left wandering as a fugitive always looking over his shoulder. In sending Cain away, the Lord separated the warring seed of the serpent off by itself in order to protect the seed of the woman, to create a safe place for a new seed to be raised up in place of Abel. In later times, the seed of the serpent would come back to hunting the seed of the

woman, but for now the line of Cain was moved a safe distance away, east of Eden in the land of Nod.

Are you and I keeping a safe distance from the seed of the serpent? Still today, the Lord calls us to remain separate from the unbelieving world. James writes, "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." (James 4:4; see 2 Cor. 6:14–18). This is tricky because we also have the command to love our neighbor and spread the good news of salvation to all mankind, many of whom are currently enslaved by Satan. How do we remain the true seed of the woman while still calling out with gospel hope to the seed of the serpent? How can we stay spiritually safe?

By being spiritually faithful to our covenant God even as we seek to do good and be light in a dark world. By never joining the world in their ungodly pursuits, never becoming united in romance (let alone marriage) with someone who rejects Christ, never compromising God's Word, never allowing ourselves to be influenced by the devil's lies, but diligently, faithfully, and persistently obeying the word of the Lord and trusting in His promises. Just like Abel and, even more, like Christ. Let's be true to God and loving toward our neighbors, all the while understanding what fuels the anger and hatred of unbelievers. And let's seek to overcome their hatred with the love of Christ.

## Rev. Peter H. Holtvliwer

is minister of Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church (ON) and editor of *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms*.

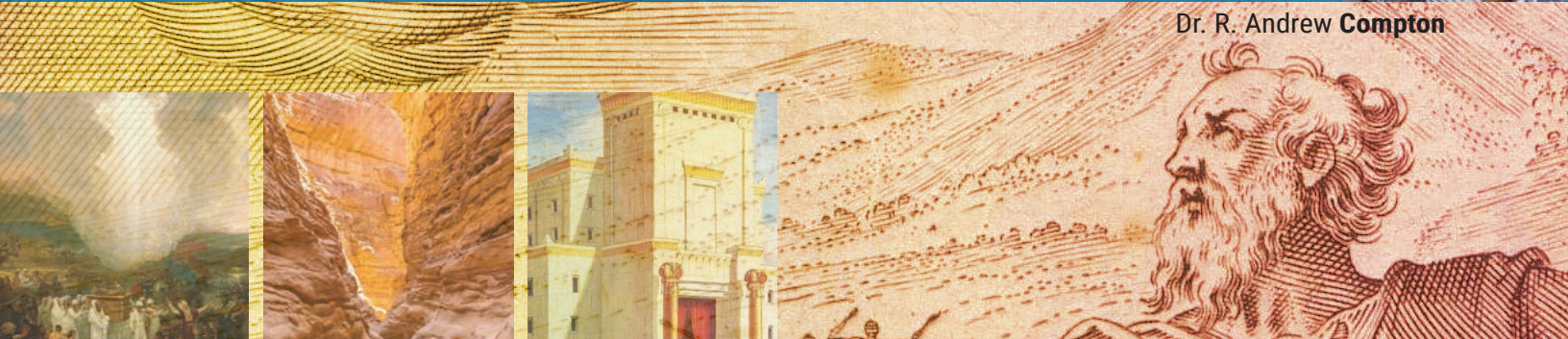


# History that Convicts, Grace that Restores

## Ezekiel's Theological Retelling of Israel's History of Idolatry and Hope of Restoration



Dr. R. Andrew Compton



**T**he Northwest High School Tigers varsity football team clamored into the locker room at halftime. They were playing the number one team in the league, Central High—last year's state champs and undefeated at 7–0 for the current season—so being down 28–10 had them feeling like things could be much worse. The players hooted and hollered it up: “We got this, guys! We’re holding ‘em! We’ll get back in the second half!” But when Coach Stevens walked in, the boys had a rude awakening; that wasn’t his assessment of the first half: “You’re not doing ‘pretty good’! You’re playing sloppy! You’re missing the most basic tackles! You’re blowing the simplest plays! That score doesn’t reflect you being outfoxed by a better team—it reflects you playing awful!” The Tigers hung their heads in silence as Coach laid into them, the wind knocked out of their sails.

While Ezekiel 20 tells a story of something much weightier than football, a similar dynamic is evident. In Israel’s “locker room,” we see that her sense of what is

normal and acceptable is completely skewed. The elders of Israel, gathered in front of Ezekiel, are not urging each other on in the face of a stronger team; they are complaining about the rules! “Why are *we* in exile? What did *we* do to deserve this?” But, like Coach Stevens, Ezekiel has a rude awakening for them. Israel has gotten so used to the LORD’s patience throughout history that their sense of what constitutes sin and apostasy is completely wrong.

No doubt Israel had many high points in her history that Ezekiel omitted from his lesson. But the elders have failed to appreciate just how egregious the sins of previous generations were and have especially failed to see that they are guilty of the same things! Back in Ezekiel 18:2, Israel was trying to hide behind a popular proverb: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” There, and especially here in chapter 20, Ezekiel shows that the exiles are not suffering because of their *ancestors’* sins. *They* have apostatized!

What we find in this survey in chapter 20 (along with chapters 16 and 23 to be considered in a future article) is not a neutral, unbiased account. It is an emotionally charged, selective presentation about the past. But this is hardly “fake news” or propaganda. Ezekiel’s history is true history, but it is what Christopher J.H. Wright calls “history with attitude.” He writes: “We need to remember that in the early years of the exile, Ezekiel’s contemporaries were for the most part still convinced that they were being treated unfairly.”<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we consider Ezekiel 20:1–44, God’s response to the elders of Israel who are seeking out the prophet not out of deep conviction of their sin and need of God’s grace, but as a rote religious routine. The elders have sought Ezekiel twice before (8:1 and 14:1) and were accused of secret idolatry in each case (8:11 and 14:3). God’s refusal to listen in 20:3 suggests that the elders have made no progress. So Ezekiel is called to “judge them” and “make known to them the abominations of their fathers” (20:4).<sup>2</sup>

Yet God's word of judgment is not His last word; Ezekiel 20:33–44 continues to hold out hope. As is often the case, the bad news of sin and guilt directs repentant sinners into the gospel path of the Lord's covenant faithfulness. Only two chapters earlier, the Lord made clear that His will was for Israel's repentance:<sup>3</sup>

“Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” (18:31–32; cf. v.23).

## Israel's History of Rebellion

In Ezekiel 20:1–32, Israel's history is schematized into four stages:

1. Israel in Egypt (vv. 5–9)
2. Israel's first generation in the wilderness (vv. 10–17)
3. Israel's second generation in the wilderness (vv. 18–26)
4. Israel's life in the land (vv. 27–31)

This is the same way that Psalm 106 schematizes Israel's history, although there it does so as part of a prayer of confession, owning up to sins of past and present and seeking the Lord's grace and mercy. Within each of these four stages (the fourth being the only exception), a sequence of four events takes place:

5. The Lord declares His gracious intention and/or acts in a significantly gracious way (vv. 5–7, 10–12, 18–20, 28a)
6. Israel responds with an act of rebellion (introduced by the word “but”) (vv. 8a, 13a, 21a, 28b)

7. The Lord declares His anger and/or intent to destroy the people (introduced by the word “so”) (vv. 8b, 13b, 21b, 31–32)
8. The Lord withholds or limits His judgment for the sake of His own name (vv. 9, 14, 22; its omission in the fourth stage is intentional)<sup>4</sup>

God chose Israel (v.5) and chose a lush land for her, one “‘flowing with milk and honey,’ the glory of all lands” (vv. 6, 15). He told her to cast off her inept, false, enslaving gods and follow Him alone (v. 7). He led Israel out of Egypt (v. 10). He gave Israel good, life-protecting statutes and rules (v. 11) and a cycle of feasts and events (sabbaths) to underscore the life-sustaining and sanctifying role He played in her national life (v. 12). Time and time again, the Lord mitigated His wrath and did not destroy Israel (vv. 9, 17, 22).

How did they respond? Idolatry. Rejection of His word. Profanation of His sabbatical signs. Presumption of His goodness. Continued worship of the very Egyptian “gods” (idols) that were unable to deliver them from slavery. (As a side note, God shows His disdain for their choice by using a word for idols that resembles the word for human waste. He is effectively accusing them of bowing down to excrement!<sup>5</sup>)

One would have thought that upon arrival in the Promised Land, upon finding supernatural victory over the giants and mighty peoples living there, and upon the establishment of a vibrant kingdom (led by a Davidic king, centered upon God's word, and gathered around His temple-presence), Israel would have abandoned these pseudo-gods for the real thing. Yet they refused. Instead of sacrifice and ritual at the chosen and beautiful temple of the Lord, they worshipped at sketchy, illicit shrines on high hills and under leafy trees (vv. 27–28). Not only does

Ezekiel connect the elders gathered before him to these earlier stages of history, showing that they are part of the problem, he shows just how bad the problem has become: “For when you offer your gifts and *make your sons pass through the fire*, you defile yourselves with all your idols, even to this day” (v. 31a). Not just illicit sacrifice, *child* sacrifice!

Israel's history of rebellion is a history of idolatry. Terrible forms of idolatry. But let us not forget that where there is idolatry, there is also sadness and fear. Idolaters are generally looking for peace and wholeness. They fear that the Lord may not be up to the task and turn to seemingly more reliable and tangible help. But idols are demanding. They over promise and underdeliver, all the while keeping idolaters scrambling to unlock the blessings they supposedly offer, even going so far as to sacrifice their children.

I wish it could be said that people no longer sacrifice their children, but they do. Even here in the modern West children are “sacrificed” metaphorically to any number of things: careers, hobbies, social lives, community pressure about how and where to educate, overscheduling, technology, youth sports, etc. Throughout history, children have too often served parental ambitions rather than being received as God's greatest entrusted stewardship!

## The Lord's Restorative Response: God's Gift of Bad Rules?

We have already noted that within the sequence of four events accompanying each of the four stages of history, God shows Himself gracious. His response of judgment is mitigated in verses 9, 17, and 22; yet, He still scourges Israel. His response in verses 25–26, however, has tripped up many readers: “Moreover, I gave them statutes that



were not good and rules by which they could not have life, and I defiled them through their very gifts in their offering up all their firstborn, that I might devastate them. I did it that they might know that I am the LORD” (ESV). This is similar to what God said the last time the elders consulted Ezekiel: “And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel” (14:9, ESV).

How does this square with James 1:13: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone”? (Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, art. 3.1; Belgic Confession of Faith, art. 13.) How do we square these passages in Ezekiel with what we know about God’s holy character elsewhere?

Several scholars have noted that there is more than meets the eye in these verses.<sup>6</sup> An interpretation that fails to see Ezekiel’s use of irony and his priestly vocation will miss the proper meaning. Space does not allow a full resolution of these tricky verses, but it is sufficient to note two things.

First, the grammatical form of the word “statutes” (in Hebrew) suggests that this refers not to deceptive statutes authored by the Lord but to something else, either (1) to His decree to exile Israel (v. 23; “not good” in the sense that exile was a painful act involving death and destruction) or (2) to perverse and life-crippling statutes practiced by the nations all around them (v. 32 notes that “being like the nations” was one of Israel’s perverse desires). The latter approach seems to underlie the NKJV translation of verse 25: “I also gave them up to statutes that were not good” (cf. Rom. 1:24–32).

Second, the phrase “I defiled them” is what linguists call a delocutive verb. It does not simply record an action God is doing to produce a result but records God’s verbal pronouncement: “Unclean!” or “Defiled!” Just as the priests in Leviticus 13 pronounced individuals “clean” or “unclean,” the LORD—here acting as a priest—is doing the same. This is how the NKJV translates it: “I *pronounced* them unclean. . . .”

But as we move into verses 33–44, we see that God’s disciplinary actions have the same goal expressed in 1 Corinthians 5:5: “Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

## The LORD’s Restorative Response: Israel’s New Exodus

Though verses 33–44 show some continuity with what comes earlier, at least for some of the exiles, they also show a significant contrast. This contrast is not initially apparent in verses 33–34, where the Lord speaks about pouring out His fury. But when we consider the details of His actions, we see a rich deliverance for the remnant of true believers. The Lord’s fury is not targeted at everyone but against the rebels, the dross that is polluting His holy remnant.

God promises six benefits for those who trust Him.

*I will reign as king over you* (v. 33). This is a verbal form of the word “king” and is found only here in Ezekiel. Usually, Ezekiel uses other words to depict God’s kingship, but this particular word echoes Exodus 15:18, the “song of the sea” wherein the exodus-deliverance from Egypt leads to the Lord settling His people in their land and reigning as king forever and ever. What follows is a new and better exodus, one that will culminate in the exodus-departure

of the new and better Israel, our Lord Jesus Christ. Luke 9:31 says literally that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah discussed His “exodus” at the transfiguration, that is, His death, resurrection, and glory that will deliver His people from bondage to sin and death unto new life and glory.<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 20:33–34 states that God does this “with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm,” a phrase Deuteronomy uses regularly to describe the exodus (cf. Deut. 4:24, 5:15, 7:19, 26:8, etc.).

*I will bring/gather you out* (v. 34). What happened to Israel in Egypt will now happen to Israel in Babylon. No, God does not pour out plagues on Babylon. But He will bring them out, not just from a land but from “peoples.” Though verse 32 shows that Israel’s goal was to merge itself with its new pagan neighbors, God’s plan was the opposite.

*I will bring you into the wilderness* (v. 35). Again, this new exodus echoes the first exodus, though this wilderness wandering has a different character. This will not be a time of punishment for rebellion as was the case in Numbers 13–14; rather, it is a time of testing, where God’s people learn to travel the pilgrim path, trusting His Word over the claims all around that seek to challenge it.

*I will enter into judgment* (v. 35, ESV). Here “enter into judgment” introduces God’s careful, discriminating dealing with His people. God is about to perform surgery on Israel’s spiritual life.

*I will make you pass under the rod* (v. 37). This is an image from shepherding where the shepherd would guide His flock into the pen and take a careful count. Here, however, the Lord does more. John MacKay explains: “[He] presented himself as [a] discriminating shepherd who ensured that each sheep was genuinely his and rejected the counterfeit.”<sup>8</sup>

*I will bring you into the bond of the covenant* (v. 37). This is the result for the remnant of faithful Israel who sought the Lord in repentance and faith, knowing that Israel has sinned throughout history and has no claim on God's favor, but believing Him to be what He promised—"A little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone" (Ezek. 11:16), a God desiring life for His own (Ezek. 18:23, 30–32).

But for those who still insist that they have been doing pretty well—who believe that the exile has been unjust, who remain committed to their idols—the rod will not usher them into the safe pastures of the "bond of the covenant," but out of God's patience and into His wrath: "I will purge the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against Me; I will bring them out of the country where they dwell, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord" (v. 38).

### Life Today in the Wilderness of the Peoples

The passage ends with a remarkable picture of restoration, though one that has some of Ezekiel's characteristic ambiguity. Yes, the remnant is brought back into the land to dwell on God's holy mountain, offering worship that the Lord accepts as a sweet aroma, and being a testimony to the Gentile nations that the He is holy (vv. 40–42). But verse 43 talks about them "loathing themselves," something that is difficult to square with the peace of mind and clear conscience that God gives to those who are the recipients of His salvation. In a future article, we'll consider this same difficulty from Ezekiel 16:60–63. We cannot resolve this here except to say that what Ezekiel describes as loathing and shame does not present a state of despair which would be in contradiction to the scenes of

heavenly worship in Revelation 4, 5, and 19.

But ambiguity is also evident in terms of when this fulfillment takes place. In distinction from dispensationalism which sees this restoration as taking place during a purportedly future millennium, and in distinction from critics who see it as a false optimism for returnees under Ezra and Nehemiah, we instead see this as a type of the restoration that we experience "already" and "not-yet" in Jesus Christ. Just as Ezekiel treated the first exodus from Egypt as a type of the new-exodus return from Babylon, so too we see that the return from Babylon paints a shadowy, typological picture of our redemption in Christ.

This is where we are today. In Christ's death and resurrection, our punishment has been averted and we've been restored. We've been plunged through judgment waters in baptism and emerged radiant, clinging to Christ, now purged and purified. And as we live our life as "exiles of the dispersion" (1 Pet. 1:1), we continue to cling to God's promises in Christ. We live before Him in worship, providing the "required offerings" (Ezek. 20:40), and live at peace, knowing that God has accepted us as a "sweet aroma" (Ezek. 20:41).

Ezekiel 20 was the last chapter of the Bible that John Calvin taught and commented upon before he died. At the end of his life, Calvin's sickness became increasingly painful and debilitating. Derek Thomas, reflecting on this, noted that "one of God's giants drew assurance of heaven from Ezekiel's words in chapter 20!"<sup>9</sup> It is fitting that we end this article with Calvin's final recorded prayer which was based on this final section of Ezekiel 20:

Grant, Almighty God, since we have already entered in

hope upon the threshold of our eternal inheritance, and know that there is a certain mansion for us in heaven after Christ has been received there, who is our head, and the first-fruits of our salvation: Grant, I say, that we may proceed more and more in the course of thy holy calling until at length we reach the goal, and so enjoy that eternal glory of which you afford us a taste in this world, by the same Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>10</sup>

1. Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (IVP Academic, 2001), 127.
2. Translations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.
3. Theologians distinguish between God's will of decree and precept; see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:220–21; cf. Cornelis Venema, *Chosen in Christ: Revisiting the Contours of Predestination* (Mentor, 2019), 350–54. Ezekiel here speaks of God's will of precept.
4. Wright, *Message of Ezekiel*, 157. Modified by the present author.
5. Judith M. Hadley, "Gillulim [Hebrew]," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997), 1:864–65.
6. Of note is Kelvin G. Friebel, "The Decrees of Yahweh That Are 'Not Good': Ezekiel 20:25–26," in *Seeking out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Eisenbrauns, 2005), 21–36.
7. William Hendricksen, *Luke* (Baker Academic, 1978), 504; Bryan D. Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif* (IVP Academic, 2018), 249–50.
8. John L. MacKay, *Ezekiel: A Mentor Commentary, Volume 1: Chapters 1–24* (Mentor, 2018), 601.
9. Derek Thomas, *Ezekiel: God Strengthens* (Evangelical Press, 1993), 177.
10. John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (Logos Bible Software, 2010), 346.

### Dr. R. Andrew Compton

is professor of Old Testament studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary (Dyer, IN), and a Reformed Fellowship board member.

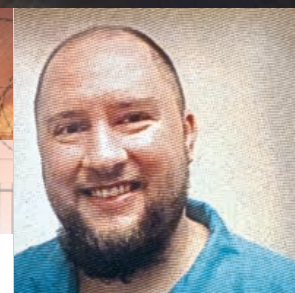
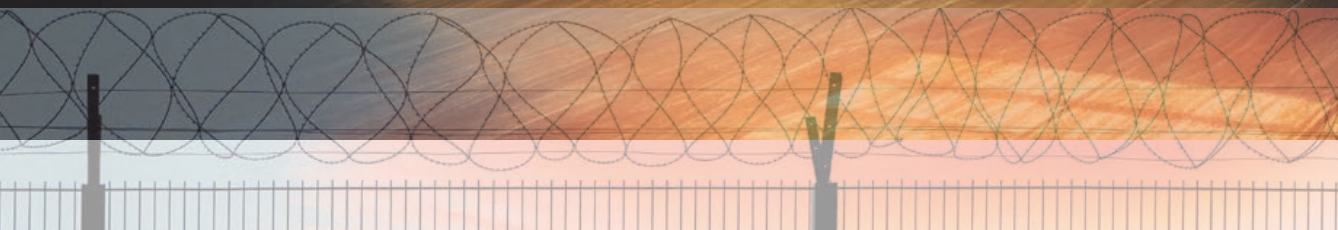




# Divine

# PROVIDENCE

(2)



Mr. Daniel Olaska

## Providence Article 2 of 6

### Psalm 104: God Upholding and Governing Nature

In this second installment in my series on the doctrine of Providence, I am going to take a close look at Psalm 104. Studying this psalm will begin to establish the Scriptural basis for God's supremacy in nature. God's providence over nature includes both His sustaining of creation and His meticulous governing of it.

This Psalmist begins by praising God. He states: "Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent" (vv. 1–2).

Here we see the proper orientation of our hearts as we contemplate the magnificent works of God in creation and providence. It is with awe and reverence that we come to the Creator and Sustainer of all. We praise and bless God and rejoice in His awesome majesty.

Verses 2–9 provide a brief synopsis of creation. This poetic account fully agrees with the creation account in Genesis. The entire psalm contains parallels with the first two chapters of Genesis. It is particularly noteworthy that, in verse 6, the Psalmist shifts how God is addressed.

In verses 1–5, God is referred to in the third person as "He." However, in verses 6–30, the Psalmist speaks directly to God in the second

person "You." The conclusion (vv. 31–35) returns to the third person in offering glory, blessing, and praise.

Beginning in verse 10, the tense changes from past tense to present tense: "You make [present] the springs gush forth. . . ." Part of the reason for this change is to emphasize that God not only created the universe but that He still upholds and governs it. While much of the rest of the psalm maintains certain similarities to the creation account in Genesis, the Psalmist intentionally puts the remainder in the present tense. God, the LORD, is a hands-on Creator and providential God. He is deliberate and wise. God is and has been at work in the universe since the beginning. This is clearly

acknowledged by the use of present tense. He has rested from His work of creating; there is no need for Him to keep on creating. But He has never for a moment ceased upholding and governing all that He has created. This beautiful psalm illuminates this comforting truth.

In verse 10, the flowing of the springs is attributed to God's agency: "You make the springs gush forth in the valleys..." Scientific explanations comport with God's work in providence. God's sovereignty over springs of water is not at odds with our scientific understanding. He is not chaotic or fickle; He does things in an orderly manner. It should not surprise us that part of God's eternal plan involved decreeing natural laws for His creation. I do not deny that pressure in underground aquifers makes springs to flow. But, as verse 10 makes clear, the ultimate agency in springs flowing with water is God's sovereign action. How does God do this? A part of that answer is that He uses pressure in underground aquifers. Our true scientific understanding will never be at odds with the providence of God presented in His Word. Unscientific conclusions are often at odds with the knowledge of God. But these are not science; they are philosophy and fantasy masquerading as science.

In verse 11, the Psalmist states: "They (the springs God makes gush forth) give drink to every beast of the field..." One thing this verse illustrates is the idea that God's providence consists largely in "providing." God sees and meets need. Little birds can rely on a caring Creator to provide for their every need. Jesus taught this providential care for birds while encouraging people not to be anxious during the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 6:25-34). By human reasoning, the life of a single sparrow, pigeon, or even a large and beautiful hawk is inconsequential. Not so for God.

God cares for all His creation. In Deuteronomy, we see that God is responsible for sending the rain; it is not merely a meteorological process.

"And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today . . . the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of the ground, within the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands". (Deut. 28:1a, 11-12a)

God providentially uses meteorological processes, but He is the prime agent. While the above example is tied to the children of Israel's obedience, Matthew 5:45 explicitly states that God sends the rain on the just and the unjust alike. According to Jesus, a part of God's providential care of all is meant to be an example for us to love our neighbor.

God even causes the grass to grow and every plant man cultivates, as verse 14 states: "You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate." God providentially provides food for man by causing plants to grow. God is sovereign over the fermentation of grape juice into wine (v. 14). He is providential over the parts of plants, such as the oil that can be squeezed out of olives (v. 15). He is sovereign over the processes that cause bread to rise and bake to strengthen man's heart (v. 15). It is of great significance that wine is not necessary to human life, nor is oil (for making one's face shiny). God is providential over things that are beyond need and that are merely enjoyable. Such is God's deep love for His creation, particularly humans.

In verses 16-18, the Psalmist states

that the LORD provides shelter for His little creatures. God waters the trees (that He planted) abundantly. Such a tree may appear to have taken root where its seed arbitrarily landed (or perhaps where the animal that ate the seed relieved itself). But such a tree isn't there by happenstance; God planted that tree there purposefully. One of those purposes is given in our psalm: the birds build their nests in the trees. Mountain nooks and crannies are not random results of geologic forces (though God uses those forces to put them there). They are placed with purpose. One purpose is that the goats and badgers shelter there. God is as meticulous in His providence as He was in creation.

Verse 19 seems at first to support the idea of a hands-off creator: "He made the moon to mark the seasons." This appears to be a statement about God's intent in creating the moon without respect to providence. Furthermore, the verse goes on to say: "the sun knows its time for setting." A deist may seize on this verse to say: "See, the sun knows! God may have set things in motion but now all is simply clockwork." I would urge they continue to read verse 20: "You make darkness, and it is night, when all the beasts of the forest creep about." Though we know that the rotation of the Earth results in the day-night cycle, here the coming of the darkness is attributed to God. Does this mean the world is flat? Absolutely not! The world rotates (and continues rotating) because God makes it so. Part of how He does that is through His laws of physics. But He upholds and undergirds those laws and causes them to operate.

In verse 21, the young lions seek their food from God. We've all probably seen a nature special on lions. Lions stalk their prey, spring in ambush, and chase it down. Lions work hard for every meal, yet even in all this hard work, verse 21 tells



us that it is from God that they seek their food. If we skip ahead to verses 27–28, we see that all creatures look to God to give them their food in due season: “these all look to you, to give them their food on due season.” In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus urges us to consider ravens: “They neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them” (Luke 12:24). God feeds the ravens. Do they need to fly around, looking for a worm or some fat beetle? They do, but it is still God who feeds them. Similarly, in Job 38:41, God speaking for Himself notes His providential care for ravens (and lions in verse 39).

God’s providential care over nature extends even to the life and death of His creatures. Verse 29 tells us, “When you take away their breath, they die.” Animals (and people) die for a variety of reasons, but ultimately God is sovereign in the death of His creatures. Jesus affirms this in one of His exhortations not to fear. Jesus reassures us that “not one of them [sparrows] will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt. 10:29).

The final five verses of this beautiful psalm give us a glimpse of God’s purpose in His creation and providence. Verse 31 proclaims, “May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in His works” Verses 33–35 show us the proper response of the creature to the Creator and providential Lord: “I will sing praise to my God while I have being.” God’s glory is the point. God is not a megalomaniac; His glory is the point because He is so glorious and so eminently enjoyable! Men insisting on glory are a mockery. But for God, glory is fitting. Enjoyment of God’s glory by His creatures is the primary purpose in His creation. This is also so in all God’s providence.

In his *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created The World*, Jonathan Edwards concludes that the end presented in the 104th psalm is the one great end in all God does: “Thus we see that the great end of God’s works, which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed but ONE; and this one end is most properly and comprehensively called, THE GLORY OF GOD; by which name it is most commonly called in Scripture; and is fitly compared to an effulgence or emanation of light from a luminary.”<sup>1</sup> (Edwards, 119).

Similarly, in his book *Providence*, John Piper calls into question our assumptions about God seeking His own glory with several examples. He concludes with the two questions: “In other words, what if, in the end, we discovered that the beauty of God turns out to be the kind that comes to climax in being shared? And what if the attitude we thought was mere self-promotion was instead the pursuit of sharing the greatest pleasure possible for all who would have it?”<sup>2</sup> I believe that Psalm 104 (indeed, all of Scripture) confirms

that the answers to both questions are a resounding Yes! This is definitely the case!

It is my aim in this series to give glory to God and praise His wondrous works, particularly in His providence. I pray with the Psalmist for the reader and myself: “May my meditation be pleasing to Him, for I rejoice in the LORD. . . . Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Praise the LORD!” (vv. 34–35b).

1. Jonathan Edwards. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, March 2004 ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1834), 1:119.

2. John Piper. *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 42.

## Mr. Daniel Olaska

is an inmate at Danville Correctional Center, IL., where he is a student in the Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary. Mr. Olaska receives a subscription to *The Outlook* through Reformed Fellowship’s prison ministry fund.

May the **GLORY** of the **LORD**  
endure **FOREVER**; may the  
**LORD** rejoice in His works.  
–Psalm 104:31

I will sing **PRAISE** to my **GOD**  
while I have being.  
–Psalm 104:33b

# THE TOP TEN

## REASONS WHY IT'S HARD TO BE A CHRISTIAN IN PRISON



Life in a prison environment presents unique sets of circumstances on a daily basis; things that matter here are different from things that matter in the free world. It is difficult to be a confessing Christian in prison. I have reflected on the top ten reasons why it's hard to be a Christian in prison.



Mr. Robert **Heitbrink**

### 1. No Consistency

In the penitentiary, consistency in anything is a rarity. There are a number of factors that can have an adverse affect on a smooth schedule. Some of the more popular are lockdowns, weather, medical codes, and staff shortages. These things effect chapel services, Bible studies, and even seminary classes. Sometimes volunteers have difficulty getting into the facility. You can't count on anything happening on time. You soon come to the realization that you must stay ready and on point just in case. Often you find yourself dressed and ready with nowhere to go.

### 2. Cellies

This is a big one, maybe deserving of two positions on the list. A bad cellmate can make everything unnecessarily more difficult. Even

a great celly situation will pose daily challenges. It is a very unique relationship to say the least. We live in a very, very small space, a medium sized bathroom if you will. Differences that come up between men can be amplified, and it can become a volatile environment. It takes a lot of effort to make it work, but it can be done. Much patience and compromise is needed.

### 3. Chapel

Chapel services in prison are very different from church services in the world. You never know if chapel is going to happen until it's time to go out the door (see reason # 1). Sometimes it's hard to get out of your cell even if you are on the list to go to chapel. Many attend for reasons other than worshipping God, which can be very

distracting. There is a lack of access to church sacraments: I have seen one communion service in ten years, and baptisms are sporadic at best.

### 4. Forgiveness

In prison, your commitment to forgive your neighbor is challenged often. To forgive as Jesus forgave us is a difficult command for Christians in any environment or location. This difficulty is amplified in prison. There seems to be a lot more that needs to be forgiven. Many will take your kindness for weakness. When you exhibit forgiveness, they will exploit this and continue to try to harm or "get over" on you. You can't get away from those who offend or wrong you. You are compelled to deal with the situation right now, and this can be very difficult.



## 5. Love Thy Neighbor

Another biblical command that is difficult to adhere to while incarcerated is loving your neighbor. As in #4, this mandate can be difficult for any Christian in any location; it is not prison specific. But in the free world, you choose who you are around and who you spend your time with. In the penitentiary, you are surrounded by those who can be hard to love without the option of removing yourself. Some people are genuinely offensive. The chance of daily encounters with the hard to love is much, much higher.

## 6. Peace

In prison, your inner peace is assaulted on a daily basis. This is a very noisy place, always. The people in prison are generally loud. There is no “inside voice,” like the one you tell your kids to use when they get too loud. The structure of prison buildings, at every level, promotes loud noise. There is no drywall or carpet to absorb loud sounds and voices. The whole place is nothing but concrete and steel. There is a huge echo effect, like being in a locker room. Constant bright lights invade the peaceful sleep of a dark room. There is extreme heat, with no air conditioning in the cell houses or chow hall. It can get pretty cold in the winter months depending on the cell you are in. Cold showers are always a possibility. All of these things can assault your inner peace.

## 7. A Non-Christian Environment

Before becoming a resident of the IDOC, I naively thought that most people were Christians. This is not the case; we are not the majority in prison. Some of the guys in here believe in nothing and a large number believe in false religions. There is quite a large number of religious “brands” that are offered at the chapel in a state prison. There are belief systems

that I didn’t even know existed. Very unfortunately, this amounts to a large number of lost souls.

## 8. Pure Evil

Sometimes in a prison environment, you are forced to come face to face with pure evil. There are demon-influenced humans in here. Sometimes in this setting, the violence can be sickening. Sadly, over time, you get used to it. There is racism and there is open hatred of Christians. Evil forces are alive and well in prison. The knowledge of and trust in God’s absolute providence is the ultimate comfort. As Christians we are on the winning side, always and every time, but prison certainly feels like deep enemy territory.

## 9. Space Limitations

The cell size in a modern prison is very small. It is roughly sixty square feet with a usable floor space of about 1/3 of that amount. This is not a lot of room for two grown men to live in. Storage space is extremely limited. Everything you own must fit in two plastic boxes. Bibles and Christian study materials must be pared down to the bare minimum. Internet access would go a long way toward solving this problem if it was available, but it is not. The days of built-in bookshelves, walk-in closets, and 3.5 car garages are on hold for now.

## 10. Hard to Be a “Light”

For all of the above reasons, it is difficult to be a light in this much darkness. It can be a challenge to stay on the path that God has called us to. It is difficult to be the example we are called to be for those who are in desperate need of one. It’s hard to keep our tongues bridled. It’s hard—very hard—not to grumble and murmur about everything when there’s worthy new material every day.

These are just ten reasons why it’s hard to be a Christian in prison. I could easily come up with thirty

reasons. On the other hand, I could also give ten reasons why it’s easy to be a Christian in prison. The Lord’s presence is greatly amplified in times and places of suffering and tribulation. I find myself much more grateful to my Creator for all that He graciously provides. The little things become big things and you can see His hand in everything. His divine providence is on full display. Or, more truthfully, you are more fully aware of it. You are humbled early and often as you find out you are not in charge of anything. Here again, you see the providence of Almighty God. This is a very great comfort to me. Many fight against this reality and are miserable for years or even decades. You must embrace it as the gift that it is.

In prison, we obviously have a lot of time on our hands. We have abundant time to study God’s Word and pray. This is truly a blessing. We have ample time to build relationships and bond with Christian brothers. There is much fellowship in the penitentiary. We are in similar dire circumstances and our strength comes from the same all powerful source. Wherever you get moved to, if you seek, you will find the brethren on any cellhouse wing. We stick together.

In Romans 5:3–4, the Apostle Paul wrote: “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” God is here. He continues to cause all things to work together for good to those who love Him.

### Mr. Robert Heitbrink

previously served time at Stateville Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison, before being transferred to Danville. He is currently enrolled as a student at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary, where he deeply loves studying God’s Word. Mr. Heitbrink receives *The Outlook* through the generosity of donations received for Reformed Fellowship’s Prison Ministry Fund.

# 10 YEARS OF SERVICE: 2016-2026



After serving as editor of The Outlook magazine (formerly Torch and Trumpet) since 2016, Mr. Dan Van Dyke is now stepping down from this role. Mr. Van Dyke joined Reformed Fellowship as a board member and brought with him a lifetime of experience in the printing industry, where he owned and managed his own business. This background provided invaluable expertise to the publishing work of Reformed Fellowship.

Dan's deep love for solid Reformed material was evident in the thoughtful selection of articles that helped shape the magazine and its ministry. We are truly grateful for his expertise, faithful time commitment, and strong relationships with our authors. His column, "Did You Know?" added a delightful touch of curiosity and charm to the magazine. We thank him for his many contributions and pray that the Lord will continue to bless him and his wife Kathy in the days ahead.

Mr. Van Dyke follows in the footsteps of well-known men and women who shared a passion for relating our reformed confessional heritage to a wide range of applications for the ordinary Christian.

Former editors include John Piersma, 1951–1957; H. J. Kuiper, 1957–1963; P. Y. de Jong, 1963–1970; John Vander Ploeg, 1970–1977; Peter de Jong, 1978–1990; Tom & Laurie Vanden Heuvel, 1990–2001; and Wybren H. Oord, 2001–2016.

As one editor steps down, it is time for the torch to be passed on to another. We are seeking someone to fill this role. Those committed to the Reformed confessions and with a skill set matching the job description are asked to please contact us at [office@reformedfellowship.net](mailto:office@reformedfellowship.net)

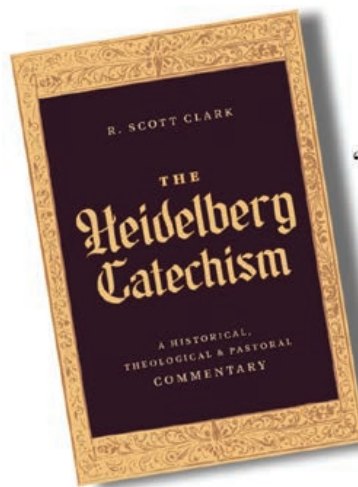


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# Lord's Day 35: You Can Be Freed from Irreverence

Rev. William Boekestein



96 Q. What is God's will for us in the second commandment?

A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than has been commanded in God's Word

97 Q. May we then not make any image at all?

A. God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images in order to worship them or serve God through them

98 Q. But may not images, as books for the unlearned, be permitted in churches?

A. No, we should not try to be wiser than God. He wants the Christian community instructed by the living preaching of his Word—not by idols that cannot even talk.

In the early twentieth century, a phrase was born that has become a cultural assumption: a picture is worth a thousand words. And for some jobs, an image is the right tool. You could write a thousand words that wouldn't do nearly as good a job at describing someone as a single photograph would. Clearly, images communicate.

But are images the right tools for the worship of God? The second commandment regulates how we must worship the one true God identified in the first commandment.

## God Will Not Be Pictured

We understand the impulse to portray God. We want to see and feel

what we value. Instead of reading about a sunset, we want to sit on a beach and watch the sun go down. We frame and display pictures of people we love. And this is good! God isn't against art ("creatures may be portrayed"). In fact, "the church surely may and must use art" lest we deny "a precious gift from God."<sup>1</sup> God has even commanded artistic production (1 Kings 6:29). Good art honors the Creator by imitating His creativity.

But we can't give form to the God who has no form. "There is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God—eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite."<sup>2</sup> People cannot give shape

to *that* without degrading God's majesty. False gods *must* be pictured; they are nothing unless creatures give them shape. The uncreated Lord is different. God will not be reduced to an image crafted by the imagination of people He Himself made.

Remember the historical context of the second commandment. God gave the command after Israel had lived among image-worshippers for four centuries. Egyptian images brought the gods near. As Moses was receiving God's law after the exodus, Aaron answered Israel's demand to portray their deliverer. When the people saw the golden calf, they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land

of Egypt” (Ex. 32:4). The people thought they were improving divine worship. But their image-focused worship was “a great sin” (Ex. 32:21).

## What about Images of Jesus?

May we portray Jesus to communicate the gospel and evoke spiritual impressions through various media like movies, crucifixes, and Sunday school curricula? Here are four considerations.

Theologically, Christ is one divine Person with two distinct natures, human and divine. Images cannot communicate Christ’s deity and thereby emphasize His humanity in a way that Scripture is careful not to.

Ethically, the ends do not justify the means (Rom. 6:1–2). Spiritual reactions to portrayals of Jesus cannot confirm God’s blessing. God has given us His prescribed means of grace: the word and sacraments.

Historically, revivals have come through the preached Word (Rom. 10:17). In the Middle Ages, images abounded, but many people did not know God until His Word was preached in power.

Practically, most images are poor instructors (Jer. 10:8; Hab. 2:18–19). Images are inspirational but not propositional. “Art can do no more than awaken emotions in us.”<sup>3</sup> A picture worth a thousand words cannot say which words. Christ is God’s image. If we have Him through His Word and Spirit, we don’t need copies.

## God Governs Worship

The second commandment prohibits the use of images as worship tools. But it also regulates all of worship. “Prohibitions pre-suppose as their foundation positive commands. We are forbidden to do something because we are inclined to do it and because we ought to do the opposite. Every ‘thou shalt not’ implies a deeper ‘thou shall.’”<sup>4</sup> So what does this command demand of our worship?

*Worship must be regulated by the Word.* We may not worship “in any other way” than God’s word commands. “Nothing is more wicked than to contrive various modes of worship without the authority of the Word of God.”<sup>5</sup> We should learn from the Old Testament to revere God and serve Him with precision, and from the New Testament the beauty of thankful, simple, spiritual, sacrificial, covenantal conversation. Scripture is our ultimate worship guide.

Worship must be rich in the Word. Scripture both informs and forms true worship. The preached Word should be central to gathered worship;<sup>6</sup> the unlearned need to be taught “by the lively preaching of [God’s] word.” “Our worship services must breathe a spirit of Bible. The Word must saturate our services as we sing it, pray it, preach it, and receive it via the sacraments.”<sup>7</sup> This must be so because Christ is portrayed—literally “painted” (Gal. 3:1)—not through images but through the Word. We draw near to God in Christ through His Word.

*Worship must respect the visible Word.* Though God forbids the use of man-made images in worship, He has not left us without gospel images. The sacraments are God’s authorized “visible, holy signs and seals” that He uses to “make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel” (Q&A 66). In the Lord’s Supper, we taste and see His goodness through bread and wine; in baptism, we witness God’s promise of the new birth. If we fail to appreciate these images, we will endlessly search for other ones.

*Worshippers must respond to the word.* Worship in “spirit and truth” (John 4:24) has both objective and subjective components. “The worship of God is said to consist *in the spirit*, because it is nothing else than that inward faith of the heart which produces prayer, . . . purity

of conscience and self-denial, that we may be dedicated to obedience to God as holy sacrifices.”<sup>8</sup> The Spirit enables true worshipers to grasp the nearness of God in Christ and respond with faith, hope, and obedient love.

We live in an increasingly visual culture. This fact has advantages and disadvantages. But we must walk with God by faith, not sight. We look to Jesus by faith (Heb. 12:2) until that day when our faith shall be sight and we will finally see and feel what is most important to us.

*This article is part of a series, “Our Life’s Comfort,” which was first published at corechristianity.com on September 2, 2022. <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/you-can-be-freed-from-irreverence-lords-day-35>*

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1. Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 53. Herman Bavinck considered it a violation of the third commandment to “repudiate art” as it dishonored God’s kind gift of representing divinely ordered beauty. See *Reformed Ethics: The Duties of the Christian Life*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 193.

2. Belgic Confession, 1.

3. Kuyper, *Our Worship*, 53.

4. Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of the Holy Scripture: Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, n.d.), 99.

5. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 154.

6. Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America, art. 38. <https://www.urcna.org/church-order>.

7. William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde, *A Well-Ordered Church: Laying a Foundation for a Vibrant Church* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2015), 97.

8. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 161.

## Rev. William Boekestein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. He has written several books and numerous articles. He and his wife, Amy, have four children.



# Lord's Day 36: You Can Be Freed from Blasphemy

Rev. William Boekestein



99 Q. What is God's will for us in the third commandment?

A. That we neither blaspheme nor misuse the name of God by cursing, perjury, or unnecessary oaths, nor share in such horrible sins by being silent bystanders. In summary, we must use the holy name of God only with reverence and awe, so that we may properly confess him, call upon him, and praise him in everything we do and say.

100 Q. Is blasphemy of God's name by swearing and cursing really such serious sin that God is angry also with those who do not do all they can to help prevent and forbid it?

A. Yes, indeed. No sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than blaspheming his name. That is why he commanded it to be punished with death.

Have you ever overheard someone slandering you? How people talk about us, especially when they think we're not listening, can reveal what they truly think. This is true of how we talk about God. If we could see God, we would never blaspheme. We can't; we live by faith. But God always sees and hears us, and He is zealous to protect His good name.

Honoring God's name is part of how we love Him, the point of the law's first table. The first two commandments teach *who* and *how* we must worship. The third teaches *the language* of worship. We must not use God's name as if it were inconsequential.

## Why Is This Law So Strict?

Why does Scripture say, "The Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Exod. 20:7)?

Why did God allow the execution of blasphemers (Lev. 24:15–16)?

Divine names are the holy property of a holy God. They are used in Scripture not, like our names, as labels for Him. God's names are special self-revelations of His being. To call upon God's name is to worship Him (Gen. 4:26; 12:8; Ps. 113:1). To claim His name is protection (1 Sam. 17:45; Ps. 20:7). His name is our help (Ps. 124:8) and salvation: "There is no other name under heaven . . . by which must be saved" but Christ's (Acts 4:12). God

cares for His name because He values His glory.

So misusing God's name is a horrible sin. "No sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than blaspheming his name." Blasphemy is blatant treachery. No one curses God accidentally; blasphemy assumes enlightenment, an awareness of the names God calls Himself but a refusal to honor Him. So how we use God's name reveals what we think of God. In fact, "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>1</sup> God will not be mocked; blasphemers will reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7). The penalty for misusing God's name is still death;

blasphemy is a certain way to make shipwreck of your faith. And unless we learn not to blaspheme, we will endure the same fate as Satan (1Tim. 1:18–20). Since the name of God is so important, and the penalty for misusing it so severe, we need to know how not to use it.

## How Is God's Name Misused?

*We must not blaspheme.*

Blasphemy is deliberately and brashly contradicting what the Bible reveals about God. Blasphemers call God evil, mock His goodness, taunt His judgment, and put themselves in His place.

*We must not curse.*

Cursing here is different from using foul language (which is also unlawful, according to Eph. 5:4). We may not invoke God's name in cursing, saying, "God d\*\*\* you." God isn't our hired gun. And part of our spiritual worship is to bless and not curse even our persecutors (Rom. 12:14). Pray for justice; leave cursing to the Lord.

*We must not commit perjury.*

When we "swear to God," we invoke Him as a witness to our integrity. So we may not swear falsely (Lev. 19:12) or back out of even inconvenient oaths (Ps. 15:4). We may break an oath only when fulfilling it would be sin (Matt. 14:7–12), when a mutual oath is broken by the other party (1 Cor. 7:15), or when circumstances prevent compliance. Even then, broken promises will bring consequences.

*We must not make unnecessary oaths.*

Some people regularly "swear to God" to portray sincerity. The Pharisees were careful not to swear in God's name, but they commonly swore by other holy things. In comparison with trivial swearing, it is better to "let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'" (Matt. 5:37; cf. 23:16–22; James 5:12).

*We must not misuse God's name in any way.*

God's name is a precious treasure, not an ordinary word. God's name isn't an interjection: "Oh God." It isn't texting shorthand: "OMG." We should not make light of divine things, joking about heaven or hell. Our talk of godly things—even the weather He controls—should show that everything about God is respectable.

*We must not be party to blasphemy.*

We must honor God's name even when others are misusing it. What would you do if someone misused the name of your wife, child, or best friend? Why would it be different when people misuse God's name? Our silence is culpable (Lev. 5:1).

## How Should We Use God's Name?

The command is negative: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." But that warning assumes a positive command. First, we must have the right, reverent attitude toward God. Do we believe that God reigns in holiness? Let us tremble before Him (Ps. 99:1). Do we know that our exalted God has come down to rescue us from sin's destructiveness? Let us love Him more than any created thing. How we use God's name depends on whether we believe Him to really exist and truly care about us and how we live. We must hallow God (Matt. 6:9). To do so we must use God's name well. Here are three ways.

*Confess God's name.*

First, we confess God's name privately. The Spirit convinces us that there is no other name that can save us. We come to believe that the name of the Lord is a strong tower and by faith we run into it (Prov. 18:10). We receive a new name when we confess Christ's name. For believers to live is Christ! But second, we also confess God's name publicly. We talk about Him to

others (Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9, 10), giving Him credit for His providence (Heb. 13:15; contra Acts 12:23).

*Call upon God.*

Pray! "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" (Ps. 50:15). Don't simply call yourself a Christian; entrust yourself to God. It is vain to maintain an appearance of godliness but deny its power by prayerlessly refusing the help of the most high God.

*Praise God.*

Use the names of God to worship Him in His manifold beauty. Praise the Father as your Creator, the Son as your Redeemer, and the Spirit as your Sanctifier. Praise Jehovah as your covenant-keeper, the Lord of Hosts as your protector, and God Almighty as your strength. God's names assure us that we can know Him and enter into a loving relationship with Him. This truth should make us "praise Him in everything we do and say."

The third commandment teaches the language of worship. Someday everyone will confess God's name (Phil. 2:11). Those who learn the language of worship now are preparing for an eternity of rejoicing in God's great name.

*This article is part of a series, "Our Life's Comfort," which was first published at corechristianity.com on September 8, 2022, <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/you-can-be-freed-from-blasphemy-lords-day-36>*

1. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 1.

## Rev. William Boeckstein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. He has written several books and numerous articles. He and his wife, Amy, have four children.



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**Circulation Office**

1988 140th Avenue, Dorr MI 49323

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