



REFLECTIONS

August 2, 2020 Refreshed from the archives of January 10, 2010

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

John 8:31-32

Hidden Wounds

Fresh from the war that left him maimed for life, Samuel stood before a small group of men to tell his story. His disfigured face told of flames that flashed from the explosion beneath the vehicle that carried him. Little remained of his ears, and scars stretched tightly across his face blocked any semblance of a smile. He even had to speak through clinched teeth. But there he stood bearing it all to the group of men sitting before him. They had wounds too, but none had courage to share them.

Life inflicts wounds on all of us. No one is immune. Some wounds are but soft blemishes to vanity. Others, more severe, inflicted by loss of loved ones, relationships broken, approvals never granted, trusts violated, failures undiscovered, forgiveness not received. Those pains don't easily pass. So we hide them, or try to.

Some veiled wounds conceal shame. Some concealed to protect cherished relationships. Some are scars from wars fought that rekindle pain at the sight of them. Even from ourselves we hide some wounds to avoid reliving the sting that placed them there.

Hidden wounds are among the burdens we carry through our lives. They sometimes change who we are or become barriers to who we hope to be. They reshape the way we live our lives. I wonder if hidden wounds caused my uncle to live as more than he could be. I wonder if scars unhealed contributed to the estrangement of my aunt from her only child. And I wonder what life would be like if I could bring myself to expose wounds I harbor deep in my soul—the ones I don't reveal even to myself.

Samuel doesn't have a choice. Yet he wouldn't change a thing. Given a second chance he says he would remove none of them. Samuel's unhidden wounds reveal the truth of who he has become.

And he is free.

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Richard +

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REFLECTIONS

August 2, 2020 Refreshed from the archives of January 17, 2010

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." '

Luke 12:18-19

An Idol God

Today we may have counted the number of cars in his garage, the size of the planes he owned, or his ranking among the world's wealthiest people. The rich man in a parable Jesus told measured his wealth by barns of grain.

We don't know his name or much of his background. He may have grown up in wealth or poverty, but his wealth measured his success. He couldn't give it up, a signal of an idol god. The rich man's wealth might be our envy today.

There may be nothing wrong with accumulating multiple barns of grain to serve a cause. But if wealth accumulation became his primary motivation, the rich man may have fallen into the hands of an idol god. It's easy to do.

It is easy to imagine that the rich man once had a dream and the dream called for a large supply of grain. Perhaps his dream was to feed the world during periods of famine as Joseph did so many years ago. Perhaps grain was a medium of exchange that would fund higher education for some deserving students. Maybe it would advance a new mode of travel or innovations to bring world peace. But it is also easy to imagine that along the way the rich man lost sight of his dream. It's easy to see how he might have become so immersed in creating wealth that he forgot the dream it was to serve. It happens. But it didn't happen to my friend J.J.

"I have enough money," he said. "I have seen people with all they need and when they chase after more, they never seem to have enough. So, I want to use what I have to do what I was called to do." And isn't that the message of Jesus' parable?

When pursuit of wealth serves no greater cause, it may have become an idol god. Our greater purpose in life is to serve God's purpose for it. That's what earthly wealth is for. We may never become rich on earth; but we will never serve an idol god.

We will serve the Living One.

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REFLECTIONS

July 26, 2020 Refreshed from the archives of May 7, 2006

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Romans 12:4-5

Reflecting the Savior

We live our todays in continuous pursuit of dreams awaiting us in the mysteries of the tomorrows to follow. Then, on one of those tomorrows, dreams unfold. Only not as envisioned. They unfold in joy and peace held in the loving arms of God. And we discover them to be everything we dreamed of all along.

Maybe that description summarizes life to its end on earth; but while we have life here, a desire burns within us to live a life that makes a difference, that leaves a mark on others that adds meaning to their lives.

So, I think of Jesus' assignment to his disciples, "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" We refer to their assignment as "The Great Commission."

I sometimes refer to the Great Commission as a graduation ceremony picturing the disciples one by one marching across the stage to receive their diplomas from the Lord Jesus. Training complete. Through their travels with him in those three years, He prepared them with all they needed to meet the challenges they would face in their tomorrows to follow. And I believe He has prepared you and me too to carry his message into our tomorrows too.

The underlying premise of all the *Reflections* I have shared over the years is based on the assignment Jesus gave to his disciples; and as believers, I believe we are included. We [mankind] were born into a beautiful and wonderful garden—heaven-like perhaps—only to find it corrupted by disobedience to God's commands. Jesus came into your life and mine because someone or a multitude of someone's cared enough to tell us the story.

We all come from diverse backgrounds and with differing interests and abilities. Our tomorrows will present every kind of challenge. *Reflections* addresses many of them: adversities and perseverance, life's disappointments, sacrifices, revelations of God's glory, along with stories of daily ministry opportunities seized by an army of laity to reflect the Savior.

While he was in the world, Jesus declared, "*I am the light of the world.*" But he also proclaimed, "*you are the light of the world.*" Jesus is the Light, but He commissioned us with authority to reflect the Savior. And just in case we feel overwhelmed by the assignment, Jesus promised, *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

God created each one of us with a purpose for our lives. I won't question whether I will fulfill my purpose because God always does; but I do question whether I have identified myself with God's purpose for my life, and then dedicated my life in service (obedience) to it.

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Your comments are welcomed and encouraged. Richard may be reached at richard@reflectingthesavior.org.

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REFLECTIONS

July 26, 2020 Refreshed from the archives of May 7, 2006

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Colossians 3:16

Remembering Bora¹

The day it went to others I mailed Bora a copy of *Reflections* written about him. When I last saw him, a broad smile filled his face followed by a barrage of “thank you.” His machinegun repetition left me feeling a bit embarrassed. But you just never know what to expect.

A few weeks later I learned of Bora’s unexpected death. It felt too soon to lose his mastery. The wonders he could do with a suit of clothes were left for someone else to do—someone with a passion to make people feel good about themselves as Bora did.

Bora never fit me for a suit of clothes. So, I didn’t personally experience the skill God blessed him with. But he gave me something even more special—his story. He told me how he came to this country unable to speak the language. He told me how he learned his trade from his father, also a skilled tailor. As he spoke, his eyes became wet with passion. “I make people feel good about themselves,” he explained. “I like to see people happy. I like to reach into the feelings of each customer as they see themselves in my final work. Their smile is all I need.”

When he recounted his story, Bora could not have imagined how his story would reach beyond the world he lived in daily. He could not have imagined how it would touch lives he would never see and in ways he could never dream. He could never have dreamed that an ordinary tailor could have a ministry to inspire others to excel in the worlds in which they live. Bora practiced his trade “to make people feel good about themselves.”

Because he defined an ordinary job in an extraordinary way, Bora made people feel different and better. He had no idea when death would come; none of us do. That’s why we should strive to live today in ways that allow Jesus to reveal himself through our lives. That’s *our* role in making other lives different and better. And if we do, the difference reaches further than our eyes can see, or our minds imagine.

That day Bora had no idea how he touched my life. And he certainly didn’t know he might also be touching yours. From his story we learn how our stories too touch those around us. And for that lesson, we owe our Lord a debt of gratitude for allowing Bora’s life to touch ours.

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¹ Originally posted May 7, 2006 under the title *A Debt of Gratitude*

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REFLECTIONS

Date Refreshed from the Archives of June 8, 2008

**Let my teaching fall like rain
and my words descend like dew,
like showers on new grass,
like abundant rain on tender plants.**

Deuteronomy 32:2

Teachers

Many of them pass through our lives, of course. But over the years, I have come to admire them all more and more. Philip, a departed friend, stands among them.

Philip was a lonely man, a romantic, highly educated, and articulate. He lived a rather unconventional life perhaps arising from his endless search for the ideal, or he felt himself a victim of his birth; or maybe from disappointment that he didn't reach his potential. But Philip should have felt no disappointment in himself. His mission in life may have been the unconventional life he led. How else could I have ever become his pupil?

In one of his letters, he wrote: "You've got to look and see the real gull, the good in every one of them, and get them to see it in themselves. That's what I mean by love." Philip then followed the quote from *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* with a purpose statement of his own. "Today I am devoted to that last part: 'and get them to see it in themselves.'"

Philip took a keen interest in the people around him and he had a passion to share the warmth and joys of life he found through nature and in writings about it. From nature he learned much about himself, other people, and the wonders of God's presence in this world. His eyes danced whenever he could introduce someone to his discoveries about God's beautiful, love-filled world.

We are blessed by teachers like Philip. Though he may have felt time passed him by, it didn't. He found insight into the real person, to see the good in every one of them. And just as he did most of his life, he helped them see it in themselves. It was his expression of love.

No matter how unconventional our lives may seem, we are all called to love; and to become teachers of it through our actions. The very purpose in a teacher's life is to shower knowledge like dew falling on tender plants, and to nurture it into understanding. With understanding the real person can be seen, the good in every one of them; and then we get them to see it in themselves.

That's what we mean by love.

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REFLECTIONS

July 19, 2020, Refreshed from the Archives of October 12, 2008

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day.

Exodus 16:4

Manna

The escape seemed long ago. Freedom finally theirs—freedom from excessive workdays; freedom from unreasonable production demands; freedom from beatings when quotas went unmet. Escape in search of better life.

Harsh conditions made travel difficult though. No one expected the arid heat to suck away their breath, parch their lips, and dry their tongues. No one prepared for land too barren for significant plant life to grow, or for water supplies to become more valuable than gold. Freedom seemed worse than the enslavement they left behind. What had God done to them?

Lost in their memory was how God spared the lives of their firstborn while those around them died. Forgotten was how God parted the Red Sea to spare them from an angered army. Distant from their minds was God's promise for a land of abundance. And blind to their eyes was food enough to sustain them each day. Manna they called it since they did not know what it was. But manna appeared each morning in quantities enough to feed them for the day.

Much like the Israelites, we also seek escape to a better life too often overlooking God's guiding hand like Passover was. We forget good fortune from God's hand like the parting of the Red Sea waters. But each day we pursue a better life than yesterday as if we can make it so. Each day we seek provision for tomorrow as if our own resources are sufficient. But trouble like we never imagined seems to accompany our efforts.

How easily we forget the troubles of the past. How quickly present problems discourage the quest for a better tomorrow. How easily we dismiss today's miracles before our eyes. How soon we ignore the gifts of today while in search of a trouble-free world. But God does not promise a trouble-free world. God promises to provide what we need to persevere our trouble—manna from God to sustains us, his shield to protects us and his enduring love that secures us.

And shouldn't we thank our Father for those today?

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REFLECTIONS

July 12, 2020, Refreshed from the Archives of June 9, 2013

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

1 Peter 1:15-16

Set Apart

Dawn's quiet glow filters silently through the windows disturbing only the darkness. Its appearance is much the same as other days, but this dawn *is* different. It's different not from the presence of it but from what will happen next. This one is set apart. No other day has been like this one nor will another one ever be. It is holy.

Holiness is a state of being that feels out of reach. Only God is holy we think. But if only God is holy, would He tell us to be holy? Does God ask us to be something more than He made us to be? Isn't your life set apart from all others? No other has ever been like it. No other will ever be. It is holy.

When we stop to think about the way we live, what do we see? When we pause to consider why God placed us on this earth, do we find that God asked us to blend into the crowd, to become like everyone else? Or do we discover that God made us special, set apart, holy?

Day after day, we find ourselves in pursuit of food to sustain us, shelter to protect us, and knowledge to help us grow. We see successes others enjoy and seek to be like them. We rear our children to help them be the best *they* can be, while examples we set teach them to be like we are. But our creator set us apart from all the others; and He set apart our children too.

Dawn's quiet glow filters silently through the windows each day into the places we live. So does your life. Each day may seem to begin the same. But this one is different not for its presence, but for what you will do with it. It is holy.

Today is set apart to express love to someone dear and to forgive someone who has hurt you deeply. Today is set apart to bring joy to those with saddened hearts and to feed those in need of nourishment. Today is set apart to lead the lost, and to care for the needy. Today is set apart for those special things unfinished from yesterday and to ask forgiveness of those you mistreated or overlooked. Today is holy—a day to thank God for the blessing of life. Today is holy, set apart just for you to be who God made you to be.

God set you apart from all others. You are holy because God is holy. He set you apart to bring a quiet glow of light into the world that only you can bring. He told you so when He said:

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REFLECTIONS

July 5, 2020 Refreshed from the Archives of July 7, 2013

When the Lord your God brings you into the land— a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant — then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord...

Deuteronomy 6:10-12

Lest We Forget

From atop Mount Nebo, Moses peered across the land he would never enter. But the people he led there would. So as he looked over the land flowing with milk and honey God had promised them, he recalled the struggles they had faced in the forty years of their travels and the many timely blessings from God that came along the way. But he also thought about the battles still to face, the spoils from the victories they would enjoy, and the future they would shape for their children yet to be born. He found a message there--a message that he expressed in part:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe... so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:1-9)

Moses' words to the Israelites ring just as true for our nation today. Each day we awaken blessed to live in cities we did not build, with wells we did not dig, gardens we did not plant, and we live like we feel entitled to it. Yet above us a banner of stars and stripes flies majestically in the wind as our symbol of liberty and freedom to honor God. We pause to salute its presence from time to time, but even more its meaning. We pause to thank those who gave their lives for the way of life we enjoy; but lest we forget and that they should know, we must remember to tell our children the stories of sacrifice that made it so. We must live those stories as if they are our own. And we also must tell them that victory wasn't won alone.

We must tell them of God's love and grace. And lest we forget, we must tell of the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus the Christ, who gave his life that our lives may be eternal.

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America the Beautiful, the song played through the air; the words rang in my mind:

“Oh beautiful, for spacious skies for amber waves of grain...” How hard fought the wars had been to make it so and to defend the beauty so ably said by the music. Then the prayer within it. And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea. God did. But maybe we haven’t.



REFLECTIONS

Date

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. So Abram left, as the Lord had told him... Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

Genesis 12:1, 4

Hearing God

God spoke so clearly to Abraham that day. With that much clarity, *I* might have even found it easy to pick up everything I have and move to a foreign land. But hearing God is not that easy for me. God doesn't lift his voice to me directly the way He spoke to Abraham. If God would lift his voice to me as He did to Abraham, not only would I be able to hear him, it would also make me surer that I understand his direction.

These days it is quite easy to believe that God doesn't speak to people anymore. But it's not God's failure to speak, but our failure to hear Him when He does.

I began to think about this recently as I wrote in my journal. It was good to journal again. It had been ten months since I last captured my thoughts on the little steno pad that I use to uncover my thoughts and feelings at the beginning of a day. Journaling is good for me because it slows me down enough to listen to myself and all that is around me. More importantly I have found that as I write my own thoughts on the pages, I discover that God *is* speaking to me after all. I need only to take time to hear Him. Journaling provides private moments for hearing God as I learn and grow. But God speaks to me even when times are not so private.

I have discovered that He feeds me little messages all the time. God scatters messages all around me and from different sources. He speaks to me in the expected places like when I go to Him in prayer, or read the Bible, or listen to a pastor's sermon; but God also speaks when I reflect on my own life. God speaks through the radio programs, and books, and visits with friends. God speaks to me through the countryside drives, or meet people I don't know, and when I watch others as they travel different roads of life. God speaks unceasingly. The challenge is not the absence of his voice. The challenge is paying attention.

Just as God spoke to Abraham, God speaks to us. As we go about our daily lives distracted by the world around us. But the world around us is where we find God's voice most often. We must only pay attention to hear it.

And when we hear Him, we are sure to understand his direction.

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REFLECTIONS

June 28, 2020

So Abram left, as the Lord had told him... Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

Genesis 12:4

Adventure

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) Now stop there.

Imagine you are 75-year old Abram (to be renamed Abraham,) and God tells you to leave the place you know and all the people you love to trustingly, but blindly embark on an adventure into a place unknown. Would you do it? Are you adventurous enough to consider it? Do you trust God enough to follow him to a place He will show you?

In reviewing my own life, I find God's hand on the wheel. He often nudges me in new directions, usually little more than course corrections. Sometimes though, He pulls the plug and drains the pool to make way for new ideas just as He did with Abram. It feels like God tossed me into the drained pool without letting me know He has refilled it and taught me how to swim.

Abram may have found the same truth as he embarked on his God directed adventures. He chose to go where God told him to go without knowing anything about the destination. Now like Abram, I feel called to a new but relatively brief adventure too.

Today's *Reflections* marks the midpoint of the 16th year of these writings. The writing adventure has been just that, and it still is. At first for me, the *Reflections* venture felt like a bold, unusually risky undertaking that could expose both my intellectual limitations and questionable writing skills. Probably these weekly pieces have done both; yet your encouraging responses keep the fires burning. It has been, and is, all God's doing. The times through the years I have struggled with the message are traceable to my inclination to draw on my own thoughts and resources; but God is always there to provide the material.

Weekly *Reflections* will continue, but next week will begin a series of repeat or refreshed *Reflections* while I undertake the adventurous side-trip I feel called to pursue. While I leave open the possibility of an original piece from time to time, for a few months *Reflections* may have a familiar ring for veteran followers.

Now, during this brief adventure away from my established routines, I ask your prayers for the wisdom and courage to follow God's guidance and to serve his will.

I only pray that I will not lose my faith nor sense of purpose for the adventure.

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REFLECTIONS

June 21, 2020 Refreshed from the Archives of May 23, 2010

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Luke 9:23-24

Mountain Climbing

Rising to a height of more than 9,000 feet above sea level, the snowy top of Mt. Hermon comes into view from a hundred miles away. Located just northeast of Caesarea Philippi, it is the place commonly believed to be where Jesus led Peter, James, and John to “*see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*” (Matthew 16:28)

The biblical account of the mountain climbing adventure doesn’t mention the rugged terrain they traveled or the strenuous ascent up the mountainside; but a 9,000-foot mountain presents a formidable trial of human endurance. Steep inclines, jagged boulders, loose soil, and unstable footing make for a stern test of stamina and courage. The expedition taxed the trio, but what they witnessed at the summit exceeded anything their minds could imagine. Just as Jesus promised.

There [Jesus] was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ...a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:2-3, 5)

What a day that must have been. Awestruck, the disciples may have overlooked the challenges they faced coming down the mountain. Or maybe they were accustomed to the demands. Following Jesus was never easy. He didn’t promise it would be. “*In this world you will have trouble,*” He warned. (John 16:33) And He cautioned, “*They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.*” (Luke 21:12) Still, they followed him.

At some time, perhaps even now, each of us will stand at the foot of a Mt. Hermon somewhere. Jesus will challenge us to some mountain climbing there—a formidable trial of human endurance. Steep inclines, jagged boulders, loose soil, and unstable footing will sternly test our stamina and courage. Yet when we follow him to the summit, we what we witness will exceed anything our minds can imagine—

Just as Jesus promised.

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REFLECTIONS

June 14, 2020

Let your gentleness be evident to all.

Philippians 4:5

Unhurried Peace

Daylight's unhurried peace hides beneath the horizon until its glow peeks over its hiding place to announce a new day. Nature waits for it to awaken the breeze to flutter the leaves and enliven the birds' soprano voices to invade the peace and arouse other sounds that define our busy world. Life entices us to join in.

"Life's a dance you learn as you go." Words like these from a country song, hit the mark; only we don't learn life in a studio. We learn life on the world's dance floor.

It's hard to learn about the life without seeing it all. Who can imagine the Alps without being there at least once? Or driving through Colorado's mountain passes without driving through them. Who can imagine the dense foliage along the Amazon, or the endless sand dunes of the Sahara without being there? And who can understand the people of this world without spending time in their living rooms, in their circumstances, practicing their customs and speaking their languages, experiencing their lives without dancing a mile or two in their shoes?

"Life's a dance you learn as you go." Every day offers a new lesson; and troublesome to learn among them is to dance in someone else's shoes. Jesus cautioned us, "*Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*" (Matthew 7:1) Or as Stephen Covey wrote in *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, "Seek first to understand and then to be understood." Learn to dance in another's shoes.

When self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law brought Jesus a woman caught in adultery, he answered them, "*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*" (John 8:7) For you, perhaps adultery isn't one of them, but before we seek punishment to some other sinful person, may we first consider our own sinfulness. We all dance in sinful shoes.

But it doesn't mean we should not express ourselves. Even Jesus stirred things up from time to time. To help bring better understanding and peace, He turned the tables on the money changers, he called out the hypocrites, he challenged the teachers of the law.

Unhurried peace. We are all in search of it. So, why are we in such a hurry to disturb it? Perhaps because we want to make it last forever. One day it will, only not as we imagine it to be or by our own hands. But by the peace of God, which transcends all understanding.

May gentleness guide our hearts and minds until the day Jesus comes again. *When He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4)

And we will find peace like we have never known.

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REFLECTIONS

June 7, 2020

As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

John 13:34

The Basics of Love

“Let’s go to Luckenbach Texas...” the song goes, *“Maybe it’s time to go back to the basics of love.”* The 1977 recording performed by Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson rose to Number One on the charts that year. And as the story goes, the writers of the song found their inspiration from what they heard about a place they never visited. But they have the story right.

Friendships happen at Luckenbach Texas, a place filled with joy, laughter, country music, and peace. “Everybody’s somebody at Luckenbach,” it proclaims. One of the founder’s daughters once quipped, “At Luckenbach everyone wears the same size hat.” No one’s head is larger nor smaller there than anyone else’s. Her touch of humor describes the basics of love.

God is love. (1 John 4:16) That’s basic. Our Creator is love. In love He created the heavens and the earth. In love He prepared a beautiful place for us to live, to work, and to be. In love He made the world’s many parts work together in flawless order we know as nature. It grows itself, replenishes itself, energizes itself, reproduces itself, and provides all our worldly needs for life. For God so loved the world that he gave—the basics of love.

Before creation, nothing—formless and dark. From it, God created a place to give birth to mankind—living beings in his own image, God in kind, but not God, rather children of God. And He loved us so much that He allowed free will to love him back—or not. And He sacrificed his only Son to forgive us even when we don’t. That’s the basics of love.

When God created the world, He made each of us to be like no other, but—He made us all to wear the same size hat.

That’s the basics of love.

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REFLECTIONS

May 31, 2020

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Luke 24:5

He Lives

"Why do you look for the living among the dead," the angel asked. Startled of course, Mary Magdalen expected no one at the grave site. But not only was someone else there, they suggested that the one she was seeking walked among the living, not the dead.

The scene draws me to a cemetery visit of my own many years ago. Cemetery visits usually find me feeling unfulfilled and empty when I leave. I find final resting places marked by stones engraved with the time people walked through this world. But like the ones I came to visit, the people are not there. This visit was different.

That day my eyes focused on the marker of my grandfather's grave and the large headstone engraved with our family name when a voice from an adjacent plot said, "I loved that man." Turning toward the sound I found an elderly man's loving eyes looking straight into mine. Almost speechless as Mary Magdalen must have been, I answered, "I did too."

"Why do you look for the living among the dead," the angel asked Mary Magdalen. Now, I wonder if an angel wasn't asking me the same question that day. I went in search of the dead only to find he was not there. He lived! In the heart and mind of his old friend named Sam Bourland, my grandfather lived.

Today Paw-Paw lives when I remember private moments with him. He is alive through stories I heard about him. He is alive when I read what someone wrote about him that made a difference to them. And when I find myself doing or saying something he once did or said, he lives through me.

Mary Magdalen found an empty tomb. Jesus wasn't there. He was alive! Peter and John raced to the tomb to discover her story was true. He is alive today when we tell our own stories of what he has meant to our lives. And Jesus is alive when others see him through our lives, yours and mine. And when our own lives depart from this world, yet shall we live. We live on in the hearts and minds of those we leave behind.

That day I went to visit my grandfather's gravesite, but I found him alive. Through the love of Jesus Christ, he still lived through the heart and mind of his old friend Sam Bourland. And I found Paw-Paw alive that day too when his old friend said to me, "I loved that man."

And for Jesus in my life? Well, the hymn tells the story:

*He lives. He lives. Christ Jesus lives today. /
He walks with me and talks with me, / along life's narrow way /
He lives, He lives, Salvation to impart / You ask me how I know He lives
He lives within my heart.²*

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² "He Lives" is a Christian hymn, otherwise known by its first line, "I Serve a Risen Savior", composed in 1933 by Alfred Henry Ackley. Permission is hereby granted for reproduction and redistribution of this edition of *Reflections* provided all applicable copyright laws are properly observed.

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REFLECTIONS

Date

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Special Times/ (Published below as Rays of Hope)

Sometimes we see them coming. Sometimes we don't. Special times are memory makers. Wedding days, birth of children, and special achievements rank high among those we look forward to. But then there are those unforgettable times we might like to forget—a bad accident, loss of a loved one, or a debilitating disease.

Evening light cast a ray of hope on tomorrow. Pollsters awarded him the presidency of the United States, the next leader of the free world. Thomas Dewey had labored hard toward tomorrow, that 2nd day of November 1948. Then tomorrow came.

Live for today with rays of hope rising like the morning's sun. Easy words aren't they; but today's reality differs from yesterday's prospects. Most days find their inspiration in hope for tomorrow. We have plans for it. Dreams live there; paintings of the future hang on its walls; joy makes its home there. Love houses the tomorrow we dream for.

Today's news reports its happenings together with conjecture about who the Cowboys will draft, how China will respond to economic challenges, and whether there's rain in tomorrow's forecast. We listen to the daily chatter to help plan for tomorrow—what we will do, where we will do it, and how. But tomorrows come with surprises, someone's unexpected choice, reactions shaped by perspectives not considered, storms strike without warning, election tallies that disprove pollsters' outlooks.

No matter what tomorrow brings, we find ourselves living within its mysteries, reacting to the unexpected, adapting to the unexplained, and as we always have done, still preparing for the tomorrows yet to come. Hope inspires life within us; hope to make life better for ourselves and others who follow; and to set an example as *[we] wait for the Lord, my soul waits, / and in his word I put my hope.* (Psalm 130:5)

Then evening light casts a ray of hope that tomorrow Christ Jesus will brighten the darkened sky with rays of hope rising like the morning's sun.

And hope does not disappoint... (Romans 5:5)

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REFLECTIONS

May 24, 2020

**My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.**

Psalm 121:2

Rays of Hope

Evening light cast a ray of hope on tomorrow. Pollsters awarded him the presidency of the United States, the next leader of the free world. Thomas Dewey had labored hard toward tomorrow, that 2nd day of November 1948. Then tomorrow came.

Live for today with rays of hope rising like the morning's sun. Easy words aren't they; but today's reality differs from yesterday's prospects. Most days find their inspiration in hope for tomorrow. We have plans for it. Dreams live there; paintings of the future hang on its walls; joy makes its home there. Love houses the tomorrow we dream for.

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REFLECTIONS

May 17, 2020

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.

1 Corinthians 12:14

Moving Parts

They don't seem as plentiful today as they were when I was a boy. Back then, there were so many around I often and unknowingly found myself standing in the middle of one until a sharp sting on my ankle told me I had disrupted a community of moving parts busy at work.

Red ant beds represent one of the busiest places in the world. From above we see a tiny bullseye in a circle of worn desert teeming with unstructured busyness. Only if you watch long enough, you see that there *is* structure. Every ant has a job to do, and they go about their duty with total dedication. No time wasted and no shortage of effort to go forth in search of a payload often larger than the bearer of it.

Hidden inside that tiny bullseye, beneath all the bustle above, is the cause for it all. Through a labyrinth of narrow tunnels, the workers deliver their payload to its place. All in service to the community, but especially to honor the queen. And so life goes, a bed of moving parts in endless pursuit of something they are born to do.

Everyone seems in pursuit of something in our busy world. The affluent bask in luxury but never enough to exceed their neighbors'. Children run about their playgrounds seeking victories in the games they play but learning most from the hard knocks received when they don't. Neighborhoods, bonded by ethnicity, beliefs, or status—social or economic—rush about in busy pursuit of something they believe will better their lives. Beneath bridges here and there finds gatherings of those with no place else to go, all in search of means simply to survive another day. But no group seems to find lasting satisfaction or contentment. Those with money, never have money enough, those seeking power or pleasure never have any that lasts, and the means to survive today offers no assurance that tomorrow's needs are met.

Red ant beds with all those moving parts are one of nature's fascinating animations, going in all directions all day long. But at dusk, those moving parts gather around to savor the cause that brought them to live as one. And in the end, isn't that what we are all looking for?

Our world is an ant bed of moving parts and each of us is one of them. I believe most of us live in search of the place to belong, and among other moving parts, to play the role we do best in service to our community and the world; but especially to honor God. Might that place be the body of Christ? We are a part of it, you know. And Apostle Paul explained the role:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. (Colossians 3:23-24)

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REFLECTIONS

May 10, 2020

**I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.**

Joel 2:28

Dreams and Imagination

There is a difference, you know. The difference is daylight and dark. The link between dreams and imagination is a story, really a fairy tale of sorts, only dreams often come without an ending. I remember one haunting dream when I was about 5-years old. A large, scaly snake, one with legs, chased me and my little legs couldn't move fast enough to get away. I don't know how the dream ended because fear awakened me. What I *do* know is that I had that same dream a few days later. That time it scared me enough to wake my dad by crawling into the safety of his arms.

On the other hand, daylight unleashed boundless imagination as I went about my childhood play, most often alone. Toy soldiers fancied me most. I positioned them around on the living room floor, built stockades for them with Lincoln Logs and Tinker Toys and scattered toy cars and trucks from my toy box about to finish the scene. Let the war games begin.

With childhood friends, the games usually patterned after the most recent Saturday western movie. One of us would take on the role of the cowboy hero in the movie, and the other a hero in a previous one. Neither chose to play a hero's sidekick like Gabby Hayes or Smiley Burnette. And we avoided the singing parts and the mushy stuff with the girl. The girl was always the object of our heroism, though. We would gallop on our imaginary horses about the yard, cap guns blazing, until we saved the girl from the villains in the black hats.

Dreams and imagination. Among God's many blessings. I wish I would pay more attention to them. I admire those who do. Who was it that said, "Some see the world as it is and ask why. Others see the world as it might be and ask why not." Someone saw birds flying across the sky and said, "Why not me." Someone felt gravity's strong pull but imagined liftoff for a journey to the moon. Someone saw a world in pain from smallpox infection but imagined a way to prevent it.

God created the world as He intended it to be. With coaxing from a snake, we messed it up. Jesus showed us the Way for redemption, and beyond our imagination, to overcome death. He taught us to look past the barriers of this dark and dreary place to see the world as it could be. Then, in the light of day, he recruited us for a hero's part to carry the message into the world.

And he blessed us with motivating dreams and inventive imaginations to make it happen.

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REFLECTIONS

May 3, 2020

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Matthew 8:20

Search for Home

How painful it is to think of the masses in this world who have no place to lay their heads, who see life only as a daily struggle to survive. Unthinkable poverty deprives them of shelter from nature's elements, of safety from evil lurking about them, or understanding of the home they long to find. In contrast, I'm drawn back to my great-grandmother's recall of that little log cabin she and my great-grandfather built on a 40-acre farm in northeast Texas. Certainly short of luxuries we know today, still she wrote of the home they made there, "*No palace was ever more beautiful and our happiness knew no bounds, and we never forgot the most important thing in building a Christian home—the family altar.*"

Home is a place. Yet it is much more than a place. Home is where we look for protection, care, and support. It's where one belongs, a resting place one longs to find, and to go, and to be. Those are the things Great-grandmother Bettie found in their little log home. Not everyone has them. Sometimes I wonder if anyone does.

Most people I know have a place they call home, or once did. Mostly, the reference is to a present-day residence. Often though it is a childhood home, or some other place connected with life's formative years. But no matter the reference, there seems to be a nagging yearn to build a home of our own, one filled with that little empty something that has been missing.

Jesus left behind a place in Nazareth he called home as a child. Through his childhood, Mary and Joseph cared for him with all their affection, but the time came to move on, to leave that comfortable home and live the remainder of his time in this world without one. *Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.* Yet Jesus knew what home is. He came from there. *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. ... my kingdom is from another place."* (John 18:36)

We make our way through this wayward world in endless search for home, that warm, welcoming place we long to be. Myself, there are memories of the place I grew up—where Mom and Dad and a community cared for me as a child, made me feel wanted, and taught me to love them by loving me. Those lessons had little to do with the places we lived, or the small town filled with dear hearts and gentle people, or those places of my ancestors. Now as I more deeply explore what made it home, I think my Great-grandmother Bettie had it right. The common thread in all those places was Christ's presence in them. And though she didn't write it down, I imagine a large inscription carved above that family altar. It reads:

seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you

(Matthew 6:33)

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REFLECTIONS

April 26, 2020

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7

Our Stories

There is a powerful story buried beneath a tombstone in a small cemetery at a place called Allen's Chapel. Few have ever heard it; even fewer likely found meaning in it. But the story of Lemuel and "Bettie" is meaningful to me.

Most of my great grandparents' story I learned from newspaper clippings, notes of remembrance by family members and a few memories Bettie wrote herself. Here is one of them:

"I remember so well that little log schoolhouse with spit-log benches, the girls seated on one side of the house and the boys on the other, all spelling their lessons out loud from the old blue back speller ... A little girl of seven, I was thinking what an ugly bunch of boys when over toward the corner I saw the prettiest little brown-eyed, dark-haired, ruddy-cheek boy I ever saw. He looked across and smiled at me and I smiled back at him and then I knew I liked him and felt at home then because I had found a friend."

Polly, one of her granddaughters, summarized the scene, **"So little blonde Bettie Saunders fell in love with brunette Lemuel Ramsey her first day of school and never stopped."**

They married March 19, 1862, built a log cabin on a 40 acre farm that Bettie described, **"no palace was ever more beautiful and our happiness knew no bounds and we did not forget the most important thing in building a Christian home—the family altar. The very first night in that dear little home Lem got the family Bible, read a chapter and he had prayer (and we had so much to be thankful for) and we tried to keep this practice up through all the years"**

The story of Lem and Bettie is meaningful to me because the way they lived their lives formed a pathway into mine. My grandmother grew up under their roof, ate at their table, listened when her father read from the Bible, and prayed with him before the family altar. Jesus was their centerpiece. Later in her own way, my grandmother made a home for children of her own and lived by the principles instilled in her as a child—Jesus Christ as her centerpiece

Like Lem and Bettie, our lives tell our stories too. Each day we write a new episode. Though mostly edited from the story; the sum of them still composes the story of who we are and what we stand for. For our children, grandchildren, and others who know us well, our stories are woven into the fabric of their lives to live on in the fabric of those who follow them.

Our lives tell our stories. Lem and Bettie made Jesus the centerpiece of theirs.

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REFLECTIONS

April 19, 2020

"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:8

Journey to the Cross—Telling the Story

They watched in awe while Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives. So entranced by the sight, two men dressed in white joined them unnoticed. *"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."* (Acts 1:11)

With that they dropped their eyes and gathered themselves to return pensively to Jerusalem and the upper room where they were staying. Events of the week passed through their minds along the way. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, the supper they shared, Jesus prayer in the garden and his arrest there. Joy by his resurrection and appearances to them over the forty following days blocked their minds from his excruciating death they witnessed.

Back in the room where they were staying, Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers, and others joined them in prayer. They reflected on Jesus' final instruction: *"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8) *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20)

Those parting words might have rekindled Cleopas' story of the walk to Emmaus with his companion. *[They] were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"* (Luke 24:14-17)

Along their walk, they told about Jesus, not knowing who they were telling it to. They told the story as part of their own—how they found Jesus, followed him, learned from him, found hope in him only to watch him die on the cross *"And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive."* (Luke 24:21-23) He has risen. He lives!

Seems like a simple way of telling the story—as personal witnesses with stories from our own "Emmaus" walks through this world! Only, we know what the Emmaus walkers didn't.

Jesus is walking with us.

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"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." Luke 24:19-24

21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.

"... Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;

They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

19 "What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. 13 When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. Acts 1:9-14

Luke 24:13-53

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14

25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. 29 But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. 32 They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together 34 and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." 35 Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.

44 He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

NIV

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REFLECTIONS

April 12, 2020

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:57

Journey to the Cross—The Victory

For more than a thousand days they followed him. Now with Jesus gone, the disciples huddled in the upper room without him. Two nights and one lonely day passed in fear of being next. Sunday morning promised to be another. Then Mary burst through the door.

Mary Magdalen slept little since her Lord's death. Jesus filled every thought. She wanted; no, no, she *needed* him. To be with him, Mary hurried through the morning darkness to his tomb. Whatever her expectations might have been when she arrived, she didn't expect what she found.

"He is not here," the angel said. "He has risen!" Stunned yet elated by the news, Mary ran to find the disciples; then bursting through the door, she gasped, "He has risen! He has risen!"

John and Peter in doubt raced to see for themselves. The empty tomb said it all.

He has risen! He has risen indeed!

Heavenly Father, your Light shines so brightly this Easter Sunday. Today air smells fresher, hope feels greater, and your love most clearly revealed. It is your day, loving God. It is the day we remember who you are and what you did for us. On this day you conquered death.

Every day we seem to live as if you were not there. Every day we fail to follow your commands. We fail to love others as ourselves; and we fail to love you above all else. Yet you so *loved us that you gave your only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Today we come to you in celebration of the time you walked with us in this world, when you suffered humiliation, pain, and a tortuous death all because of your love for us. Today, "*Death is swallowed up in victory.*"

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)

This Easter day we celebrate victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We give thanks to you today Loving God for this indescribable gift!

Amen

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Gracious and loving God. Precious is your name in all the earth. From you everything came into being; without you nothing would be. Without the touch of your hands there would be no earth, no people, no human souls, and no love. But through your love for us, you made it all. And we have come to take it all for granted.

Because you love us you came into the world and walked among us, and we didn't know who you were. You taught us how to live, yet we have followed our own ways. You showed us unconditional love, yet our love is shallow and weak. We denied you those many years ago, and even though we know now who you are, we often deny you still.

It was the greatest of human sacrifices that you laid down your life for us. You revealed your love by your death on the cross. But you overcame it.



REFLECTIONS

April 5, 2020

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

John 13:1b

Journey to the Cross—It Is Finished

Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. (John 13:1a) From the Mount of Olives he could see Jerusalem and everything about to unfold there.

Beyond the Kidron Valley he could see the east gate where he would enter the old city, astride a donkey, to waiving palm branches and shouts of hosanna. He could see the temple court where money changers had turned his Father's house of prayer into a den of robbers. He knew of the upper room where he would share the Passover meal with his disciples and wash their feet. Then the arrest and unfair trial. He must have shivered over spit hitting his face, scourging lashes ripping his skin, nails pounded into his hands. Oh, how he needed to pray for his Father's love!

So, after the Passover meal, Jesus led his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. *He fell to the ground and prayed, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."* (Mark 14:35-36) Then, looking toward heaven, he prayed:

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:1-3)

"I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ...protect them by the power of your name — the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one. (John 17:6, 11)

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see...the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." (John 17:20, 23-24)

Crucifixion. Two other men, both criminals, were crucified with him. (Luke 23:32-33) [One of them] said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:42-43)

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land ...for the sun stopped shining. (Luke 23:44-45) And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Luke 23:46) "It is finished."

With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30)

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. (Matthew 27:51-51)

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34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. Luke 23:34

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. John 13:1

21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me.

25 "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. 9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. 12 While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

Across the Kidron Valley he saw arches of the east gate where he would enter the old city astride a donkey; and the temple court where money changes had turned his Father's house of prayer into a den of thieves. He still had lessons to teach, and people to heal before he faced an unfair trial, humiliating treatment, and torturous crucifixion and death. He tried to prepare his disciples for it all, but they seemed unable to grasp his warnings.

*And lightning flashed, thunder rolled, mountains trembled.
And Jesus cried, "It is finished"*

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, 45 for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:44-46

30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit John 19:30

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. 52 The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. Matt 27:51-52

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42 and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." Luke 19:41-44



REFLECTIONS

March 29, 2020

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them

Matthew 9:35-36

Journey to the Cross—Places Jesus Walked

Halfway down the grassy slope of Mount of Beatitudes offers a panoramic view of the Sea of Galilee. Today though maybe we can use our imaginations to visit there and a few other places Jesus walked to experience some of the many lives he touched. Capernaum is a place not far away from that grassy slope. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law there. He also healed a paralytic at Capernaum; and there he answered the plea of a grieving ruler. *When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw...the noisy crowd, he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." After the crowd [was gone], he...took the girl by the hand, and she got up.* (Matthew 9:23-26)

Rolling white caps on the Sea of Galilee stir images of Jesus' walking on the water to join his disciples on their way to Decapolis, the region on the other side of the lake. When their boat landed the next morning a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet them. Jesus chased demons from him into a herd of pigs that then stampeded down the steep bank into the lake and drowned. Then the man began to tell in Decapolis all Jesus had done. (Mark 5:1-18)

Rugged countryside surrounds the small Samaritan town called Sychar. Nearby is Jacob's well. Jesus met a Samaritan woman there when she came to draw water. Knowing the burden of her sinful life, he said, *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst."* (John 4:13-14)

Near the center of downtown Jericho there's a large sycamore-fig tree like the one Zacchaeus, the tax collector, climbed so he could see Jesus when he came through town. *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."* Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, *"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."* Jesus said to him, *"Today salvation has come to this house. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."* (Luke 19:5-10)

Then at the temple court, Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery, Jesus said to them, *"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* When they went away, Jesus asked her, *"Has no one condemned you?"* *"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."* (John 8:1-11)

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:25)

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John 21:25

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NIV

... and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time until only Jesus was left standing there. Jesus asked her, "Woman, where are they?"

Walked about the Temple Mount where Jesus turned over the tables, Luke 19:45

We stood atop Mount of Olives peering down on the old city of Jerusalem and the gate where Jesus entered astride a donkey. After a short walk down, we reached the gate to the small but beautiful garden called Gethsemane. I felt his presence there, felt fear of the torturous death he faced, agony

Adulterous woman--

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3

Sycamore-fig tree in Jericho Zacchaeus

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matt 9:37-38

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:8

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20) They did.

Today, we are beneficiaries of their work. It's now our turn to prepare leaders. But fear not. Jesus words are still true, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We have a snapshot standing in front of a Jesus once took his apostles to the region of Caesarea-Philippi where people were known to worship the Pagan god, Pan. We stood before a large-mouthed cave where evil spirits were believed to reside, and the place from which the Antichrist will ascend. At Caesarea-Philippi Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:15-16)

Partial walls and several large columns stand as symbols



REFLECTIONS

March 22, 2020

When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles

Luke 6:13

Journey to the Cross—Preparing the Leaders

Following a night in prayer, Jesus called his disciples to him to choose twelve of them for preparation as leaders. In his prayers, he surely pondered which of them he should choose. Much as Moses had done on the advice of his father-in-law, Jesus needed to select capable men to teach the principles of the law and to show them ways to live them out.

Likely he considered each follower before him one by one. His early thoughts may have fallen on Andrew. Jesus would remember after his own baptism that Andrew was one of the two disciples who spent the day with him. And notably, Andrew had then been quick to share his experience that day with his brother, Peter. Jesus wanted people excited to witness like that. Jesus may have also remembered asking Andrew and Peter to leave their fishing boat to follow him and then extending a similar invitation to two other fishermen, James and John. All four of them followed without hesitation—another quality Jesus required.

Gazing into the crowd Jesus may have also recalled his time with Philip and Nathanael, with Matthew the tax collector, and others like Thomas, James the Less, Jude, Simon the Zealot, and to Judas Iscariot. Whatever the prompting, Jesus chose these men and called them apostles.

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His [apostles] came to him, and he began to teach them. (Matthew 5:1-2) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, hungry, merciful, pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted.” He declared, “You are the light of the world like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden.” He also explained how the law addresses actions but also emotional thoughts; and what it means to love your enemies, how to pray, and where your treasure is. He told them parables to illustrate his points. Later, to reveal his deity, they saw miracles happen before their very eyes.

He turned water into wine, calmed a storm, made a crippled man walk, and gave sight to a blind man. He fed 5,000 men with five loaves and two fish; he walked on water. He raised Lazarus from the dead. Then to give them a taste of the life he is grooming them to live, Jesus divided them into pairs and sent them to put all they had learned into practice. He exposed the apostles to these things and more in preparation for the day he would look at them and say:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20) They did.

Today, we are beneficiaries of their work. It's now our turn to prepare leaders. But fear not. Jesus words are still true, *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

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And they did. God selected Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. The journey took the remainder of Moses' life. When he died, another had been prepared to carry on.

As Moses most likely did, Jesus selected his disciples carefully and unhurried. He needed just the right ones to carry on the responsibilities assigned to them. Andrew found Jesus while following John the Baptist. And he was one of two of Jesus followers that spent an evening with Jesus after John baptized him; then rushed home to tell Peter, his brother, that he had found the Messiah. But it was at least a few days later before Jesus called them from their fishing boat to follow him. That same day Jesus invited James and John to join the team of fishers of men. Philip and Bartholomew (first called Nathanael)...Jesus found Matthew

listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. (Exodus 18:24)

He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. 21 But select capable men from all the people — men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain — and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 22 Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. 23 If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

Andrew, Nathaniel, Peter, James & John.

Without new leaders to carry on, organizations die when their leaders are gone. Developing new leaders is a key responsibility of leader. Along Jesus' journey to the cross, he did.

After formative years in a loving and growing home, and more years in preparation, Jesus ventured into for public life. God sent someone to prepare the way.

John's message of repentance drew massive crowds to the Jordan. One day Jesus emerged among them. John expected him. *"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."* (John 1:26-27)

The next day John saw Jesus coming to be baptized. *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"* (John 1:29-30)

At first John tried to dissuade Jesus, *"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."*

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Likely heartened by the baptism of the Spirit and his Father's encouraging words, Jesus followed the Spirit's direction into the desert. As so often happens at high points of life, Jesus faced a stern test. Satan waited for the right moment.

After fasting forty days and forty nights Jesus was hungry when the devil approached him with a tantalizing offer, *"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."* Jesus firmly answered, *"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* But the devil hadn't finished. He took Jesus to the highest point of the

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temple in the holy city to challenge his identity. *"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, /and they will lift you up in their hands, /so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"*

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Next Satan took Jesus to a high mountain overlooking all the kingdoms of the world. He offered them all to Jesus, *"if you will bow down and worship me."*

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan!" ...Then the devil left him. (Matthew 3:13-4:11)

In this early venture into public life, Jesus stood firm with John to be baptized. And He stood firm against Satan's temptations. Jesus lived what He taught us.

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."³

³ John 16:33

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REFLECTIONS

March 15, 2020

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan!"

Matthew 4:10

Journey to the Cross—Into Public Life

After formative years in a loving and growing home, and more years in preparation, Jesus ventured into for public life. God sent someone to prepare the way.

John's message of repentance drew massive crowds to the Jordan. One day Jesus emerged among them. John expected him. *"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."* (John 1:26-27)

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⁴ John 16:33

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REFLECTIONS

March 8, 2020

**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor
with God and men.**

Luke 2:52

Journey to the Cross—First Steps

Linus found comfort with his blanket in tow. The comic strip character represents many young children who find comfort in Raggedy Ann and Barbie dolls, or other soft and warm objects. Mine was a stuffed animal I named Little Lamb. Each night I fell asleep rubbing my hand across its cotton coat and my tiny fingers over its felt-lined ears. I never felt alone with Little Lamb at my side.

Like most stuffed toys, threads binding Little Lamb's seams became too weak to hold its stuffing and his coat darkened from wear and tear. I cried for Mom to repair it. But she couldn't. So Little Lamb was cast away and lost to me forever.

It seems normal for young children to find comfort in items like my Little Lamb; and there's little reason to think Jesus' childhood was different. He was, after all, a normal person. Like us, he probably didn't recall his birth, its humble setting, or the human nature of his entry into the world. Neither did he remember hearing angelic voices rejoice in the sky, shepherds gathered around his manger, or his mother's warm breast. His journey through this world began like ours. If he had lived in our time, Jesus would have learned to say Mama and Da-Da in his home setting, learned to read and write in kindergarten and elementary school, and ride a bike with mom or dad encouraging alongside. His childhood was so normal Luke summed the entire period, "*and Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.*"

Jesus' first steps on his journey to the cross were recorded when he was twelve. His family had begun the return home from the Passover Feast in Jerusalem, only Jesus wasn't with them. In adolescent manner Jesus stayed back without telling his parents. They searched in frantic concern for him; then, "*After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.*" (Luke 2:46-47)

These first steps recorded on Jesus' journey to the cross carry me back to remember fondly and perhaps longingly about Little Lamb. I could not have known then that one-day Little Lamb would return to my life. Only his name is Jesus, the Lamb of God. And just like the toy lamb that gave me comfort as a little child, I feel his softness and warmth at my side. Because of him I am secure in each day and I sleep comfortably each night. Through him I feel the inestimable love of my Father. But unlike my childhood plaything, the Lamb of God will never wear out or become only a memory.

He lives.

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For those who believe in him, he becomes Little Lamb I remember the comfort of a stuffed Little Lamb that helped me sleep each night. I wonder if he something like that in his crib.

I think back fondly and perhaps longingly about Little Lamb. It made me feel secure in my bed and gave me comfort in my sleep. And through it I felt the inestimable love of my mother and dad. I think that is the reason I remember it so fondly now.

- X Formative
- X Preparation
- His teaching
- His prayers
- His suffering
- His intolerant compassion**
- His obedience
- His deity

What we leave behind in this world defines the measure of the life we led. It's measurable not by how much wealth or power we had or passed along, but by the character represented in the lives of our children, our children's children, and all the many others we may have been blessed to influence in our journeys.



REFLECTIONS

March 1, 2020

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2

Who Is This Man?

No one knew back then; nor does everyone understand now. When God took on the massive project to create the heavens and the earth, He had help alongside. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* (John 1:1-3)

He made the day and night, waters and dry land, vegetation and seed-bearing plants, the moon and stars, fishes of the sea and birds of the air, and all living creatures to roam the earth. Then, *“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,’”* (Genesis 1:26) The entire Trinity became involved—the Architect who drafted the plans, the Overseer who hovered in support of it, and the Builder who *In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* (John 1:4)

Who is this man?

He is the source of our incarnation and salvation, and of his revelation. He was there in the beginning, with God, and He is God. *From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only.* (John 1:16-17)

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

You are a city on a hill—

You are the light of the world,

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REFLECTIONS

February 23, 2020

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Matthew 6:20

Trophies

Eric Liddell won the gold medal in the 400-meter race at the 1924 Olympic Games. He qualified to be there in a different event; but he refused to run in that event because it had been scheduled for Sunday. Even if it meant he could not compete at all, he honored God on Sundays.

Eric's story is told in the 1981 movie, *Chariots of Fire*. Eric Liddell used his giftedness to win a trophy. "God made me fast," he said, "When I run, I feel his pleasure." But neither the subject of the movie nor the accolades for Eric's life focus much on his Olympic treasure. Both are remembered for the strength of his commitment to glorify God.

Trophies. Who will want my trophies when I'm gone? It gave me pause when I saw those words written somewhere. Who would? Trophies recognize personal achievements; some may even be impressive achievements. A few may represent marks made on the world; but mostly they represent personal achievements with no lasting contribution to anyone else's life. Most trophies shine on display shelves for a time while they gather dust, tarnish, and are finally tossed away and forgotten.

Jesus said, "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..." What do we meaningfully leave to this world through the lives we live? Legacy we call it. Ultimately it seems, meaningful trophies reside in memories made. Not our memories; the memories others have of you and me. What little bit of yourself will others carry on from the life you live?

In some form, most of us carry on family traditions in loving memories of those who travelled before us. And those memories are driven out of respect for those we knew more than for those we only knew about. If we wish *our* memories to continue to honor the ancestors we knew, their qualities and values must be represented in our lives for others to see.

Eric Liddell's Olympic treasure lives on today through a chain of memories of his commitment to glorify God. The root of them traces through a chain of memories linked to the love of Jesus Christ whose love for and obedience to the Father led to the cross. And because the Father's love for you and me is so great that he gave his only Son that we might live.

The source of memories we each leave rests in what we lived.

There can be a treasured trophy waiting there.

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We may know about our great-grandparent's history. We may even find some of their trophies stashed in a closet somewhere. But their enduring treasure stored in heaven lives on through those who live those treasures. The roots of them trace through a chain of memories linking to the love of Jesus Christ whose love for and obedience to the Father led to the cross. And all because the Father's love for you and me is so great that He gave his only Son that we might live.

In some form, most of us carry on family traditions in loving memories of those who travelled before us. And those memories are driven in respect for those we knew more than for those we only knew about. If we wish *our* memories to continue to honor the ancestors we knew, their qualities and values must be represented in our lives for others to see. The source of memories we leave is in what we have lived.



REFLECTIONS

February 16, 2020

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 4:10-11

Do What You Do Best

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. (Acts 8:1)

Just doing my job Saul might have thought while watching Stephen die a brutal death. Trained by Gamaliel, the renowned Pharisee, Saul (whom we come to know better as Paul,) became a zealous law enforcer callously [*persecuting*] *the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison. (Acts 22:4)*

Saul's misguided aspirations led him to a common human failing—trying to be someone he was not using gifts he did not have. Only when *a bright light from heaven flashed around [him and he] fell to the ground and heard a voice say, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'* (Acts 22:6-7) did he begin to search for his sweet spot—speaking and teaching, not policing.

He later wrote to the Romans, *"We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."* (Romans 12:6-8)

Peter condensed those gifts down to two: *If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.*

To his own surprise, Paul discovered his role. He described to Timothy: *...For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men — the testimony given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle — I am telling the truth, I am not lying — and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles. (1 Timothy 2:5-7)*

In their writings to you and me, Peter and Paul are sending us a message, the same message Jesus sent to Paul with that *bright light from heaven*—

Be who God made you to be with no pretense and do what you do best for the glory of God.

You are the light of the world,

Richard +

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3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. 4 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

NIV

Acts 5:34-35

But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

NIV

Acts 22:3-5

Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. 4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5 as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

NIV



REFLECTIONS

February 9, 2020

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

Why Am I Here?

I am me...*appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began.* (Proverbs 8:23)

God created my inmost being; [knitted] together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; (Psalms 139:13-14)

And I am God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

Now I can't help but wonder what good works God prepared in advance for me to do? Why did He bring me into this world? How does God expect my life to make a difference?

Many if not most people go through life wondering about their life's purpose. God created a role for each of us to play in his plan for this world. We may never fully understand our reason for being since God explained that his thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways. Still, in service to him, it seems we should seek to accept to understand how he made us to be, and to try to identify and use the talents and abilities in the manner he intended.

We wrestle with questions like: How did God make me to be; What do I do well; and How can I glorify God with my giftedness in my little part of the world? Then there is this one: What do I do that brings joy to me and to those around me?

For me, joy doesn't mean pleasure or fun. For me pleasure is pleasing, fun is exhilarating, but joy is fulfilling. Pleasure and fun are fleeting. Joy instills passion in the heart.

Remember the adage that calls *parents to give their children roots and wings*. Our Father gives us both—roots grounded in his love for us, and wings of talents and abilities that carry joy into lives around us. Joy is love language that lifts smiles onto saddened faces and streams tears from gladdened eyes. Joy rouses the heart's deep passion and stirs wind beneath the wings. That's what makes you fly.

Joy carries love and light to the world.

Isn't that reason enough for God to bring you here?

You are the light of the world,

Richard +

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The answers I found are not important to share except for one. I wonder though what we would do if we found our answers and mastered the changes required to make us better. Maybe we chase the wrong question. Consider a different one. Maybe we can survive in a secular world without discovering the truth of who we really are. But can we serve God's purpose for our lives by living a lie? That begs the next question:



REFLECTIONS

February 2, 2020

**For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully
made;**

Psalms 139:13-14

Search for Self

Body, soul and spirit, God made each of us special. From our first breaths to the very present, we live our days to sustain the life given us. Daily work provides food and shelter for ourselves and those we find in our care. Along the way, relationships form and grow, and together with incidents around us, knit a veil to hide whatever there is about us that we want no one else to see. We even deceive ourselves; and the search for self begins. Who am I?

In the Broadway musical *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean faces that very question. He agonizes over the lie he lives by pretending to be someone he is not. He questions, “*Who am I? Can I conceal myself evermore? Pretend I’m not the man I was before? And must my name until I die be no more than an alibi? Must I lie? Who am I?*”

Our world is filled with meetings to attend, appointments to make, and commitments to keep. Our plans and projects move us through life allowing little time to wonder if any of them are worthwhile. What compels us then to present ourselves as something we believe will meet the approval of the world, and to disguise things that fall short of worldly expectations? The questions may lead us to try to uncover who we are. We take personality tests, read self-improvement books, engage in intimate conversations with close friends in the search to know ourselves and to understand reasons that drive our own behavior. But why do we need to know?

Jean Valjean found the freeing power of truth as his crescendo concludes, “*How can I ever face my fellow men? How can I ever face myself again? My soul belongs to God, I know. I made that bargain long ago. He gave me hope when hope was gone. He gave me strength to journey on. Who am I? Who am I? I’m Jean Valjean!*”

*For you created my inmost being; /you knit me together in my mother's womb. / I
praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; (Psalms 139:13-14)*

God made you and me to be just as He intended (nothing more nor less.) Comparing how we have *chosen to be* with how *he made us to be* exposes our sinfulness. Realizing our own sins helps us more readily forgive others for theirs and draws us closer to Jesus—

Because we need a Savior.

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Maybe we can survive in a secular world without knowing who we really are. But can we serve God's purpose for our lives by living a lie? That begs the next question:

Why did God bring me into this world?

But here are some thoughts of mine to go along with it.

Love each other. We refer to Jesus' command

Our hero in the show also experiences the freeing power of truth as his crescendo concludes, *"How can I ever face my fellow men? How can I ever face myself again? My soul belongs to God, I know. I made that bargain long ago. He gave me hope when hope was gone. He gave me strength to journey on. Who am I? Who am I? I'm Jean Valjean!"*

Deceit becomes a dreadful burden when we disguise who we are in our efforts to convince the world of our invulnerable strengths—

But when we expose the truth of who we are, the burdens are freed, and God is revealed through our weakness.

Truth frees Jean Valjean, but maybe not the whole truth. The hero found courage to reveal who he is not without discovering for himself the heart of who God made him to be.

I wonder though what we would do if we found our answers and mastered the changes required to make us better. Maybe we chase the wrong question. Consider a different one.

Why am I here? Or, why did God bring me into this world? Isn't that the question we most deeply long to understand? How does God want my life to make a difference in the world? *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Eph 2:10

Many if not most of us question our life's purpose. God blessed us with a role in his plan for this world. We may never fully understand our reason for being, but a personal mission statement has added meaning to my own life. It has established a purpose for what I do and clarity as I face the choice of roads to follow.

We live in a busy world with meetings to attend, appointments to make, and responsibilities to uphold. Our plans and projects move us through life distracting any wonder if any of them are worthwhile. Should we wonder why we allow the world to influence how we define who we are? What compels us to disguise ourselves as something we believe will meet the approve of the world, and conceal things that fall short of worldly expectations? These questions lead many of us to try to uncover who we are. We take personality tests, read self-improvement books, engage in intimate conversations with close friends in the quest to know ourselves and to understand reasons that drive our own behavioral patterns. But why do we need to know? Can't we still thrive in a secular world without knowing who we really are.

Should we wonder why we allow the world to influence how we define who we are?



REFLECTIONS

January 26, 2020

**I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.**

Proverbs 8:23

I Am Me Revisited

“To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” This familiar Shakespeare quote from “Hamlet” expresses a truth as powerful for me as any of Solomon’s proverbs. While it expresses simple logic, further reflection uncovers the difficult challenge to first understand the truth about the self God made me to be. The thought drew me back to my first step toward gaining that understanding. It’s described in a *Reflections* titled “I Am Me,” first published August 7, 2005 and revisited here:

Fear shivered through me. Blood rushed from my head and my face fell flush. I was maybe five years-old then, but I remember how a shocking awareness electrified my being. Whatever prompted the moment, it struck reality—*“I am me! no one else, and no one else is me.”* Then a second jolt, *“when I am gone, I am gone!”*

I tried to shove the whole idea into the darkest cellar of my mind, lock it up and not ever let it out again. But the thought often returned. I could never find a lock secure enough to keep that realization from haunting me now and then.

Peace finally came one day—when I am gone, I am *not* gone. It took years to discover that there is a difference between *I am me* and *I am the body I live in*. It took years for me to understand my body is nothing more than the housing that encases who I really am. It serves me during my time in this world much like a space shuttle serves astronauts. It is a vessel that moves me about, provides the tools that God granted me during my time in this place, and it makes me visible to others. But my body does not define who I am.

God made me before the world began. When my ride is over in this life, I will be born into a new a new world just as God planned. In that new world I will have a new home, more secure, total peace, and life for eternity. It is God’s home and He prepared a room for me there.

I am not gifted enough to imagine much beyond life on this earth, but God’s home will exceed everything experienced in this world. It will be in an incomprehensible form. Joy will be complete. There will be no hurt nor pain, nor hunger nor thirst. There will be no war, no terror, no evil—only peace and love.

And I will still be me.

There’s still more to learn since that first step led me to grasp the truth that I am me. I’m still on a journey to understand the truth about the self God made me to be. The story, though, is not about what I’m learning about me. The story is to encourage the journey.

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REFLECTIONS

January 19, 2020

"Be still, and know that I am God;"

Psalms 46:10

Be Still and Know

Memories of my hometown school years include a couple of our classroom clowns. In elementary school, Richie consistently found ways to interrupt our teachers with an endless array of antics that drew attention from the teacher's lesson. His hilarious conduct even found the teachers unable to conceal their laughter while still frantically trying to regain classroom order.

Eugene added equally clownish antics to our middle school classrooms when he moved to town. He had a knack for disrupting class with untimely requests for restroom breaks followed by some comical exit that left us unable to suppress our laughter. Of course, an orderly environment is important for students to concentrate attention on the teacher's lessons. Much to our teachers' chagrin, both Richie and Eugene masterfully diverted ours.

Jesus faced similar issues with his disciples. Remember when Jesus took Peter, James, and John to pray in Gethsemane only to find them sleeping? He asked Peter, "*Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?*" (Matthew 26:40)

Scripture tells of Jesus' long nights in prayer; so like most of us, the disciples were challenged to maintain their attention. Perhaps one of his long prayer sessions had once prompted one of his disciples to say, "*Lord, teach us to pray,*" (Luke 11:1) In response, Jesus taught them the beautiful prayer we know as The Lord's Prayer. But to pray all night, or to *pray without ceasing* as Paul encouraged the Thessalonians,⁵ even Jesus must have engaged with God in something more than a list of requests. Perhaps most of that time Jesus simply directed his attention on being present with the Father.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30) Note that Jesus placed no requirement to utter a word—only, "*Come to me and [connect] with me.*"

Be still, and know that I am God. Sometimes, I find it helpful to enter prayer like a private tutoring session. With no one with me except the Teacher, I speak about anything I want him to hear. Then in the stillness, listen for his wisdom. Sometimes I hear him speak in the quiet of my mind. Sometimes I hear him through scripture, or what someone wrote or said. And sometimes in stillness, I simply feel his presence.

A classical definition of prayer is "lifting mind and heart to God." Prayer is communion with God. Communion forms a bond. A bond establishes oneness.

And Jesus was one with God.

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⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:17 NKJV

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REFLECTIONS

January 12, 2020

**Train up a child in the way he should go,
And when he is old he will not depart from it.**

Proverbs 22:6

Train Up a Child

There's an adage that says, "It has been said that there are two things parents should give their children. The first is roots; and the other is wings" What a heavy responsibility! Parents hold delicate human lives in their hands; and most parents seem imbued with love for each child to do their very best to prepare them with roots and wings to face the life ahead. But as I think of this familiar adage, I find myself as a beneficiary of those roots and wings my parents worked so tirelessly to provide.

Through the years, *Reflections* have often noted the blessing my parents were in my life. But alongside them during those nurturing years stood my grandparents behind them and close friends encircling them. Collectively they taught principles to live by through the stories they told and set examples by the way they lived them out. Looking back, those lessons shaped my perspective of life and instilled the values for how I have chosen to pattern my life.

At no time during those years did I sense any intentionality or duty from any of them to train up a child. They just did it. All of them gave me their attention willingly and freely. Without their attention, it seems unlikely I would have given much attention to them. From Mema reading me Bible stories, or Millie challenging me to competitive card games, or J.P. teaching me hit, throw, and catch a baseball, I learned about life and how to live it.

I watched Mema live what she taught as a Sunday school teacher until she was 90 years old. Millie's games instilled my competitive spirt; and my hand-eye coordination from J.P.'s training proved to open more doors for me than I can count.

Train up a child in the way he should go, the proverb says. But parents don't have to go it alone. Mom and Dad were blessed with a team to help—my grandparents who had trained them well, and a circle of friends who served the Lord and lived principled lives. Perhaps this child of theirs fell short of everyone's hopes; but today he looks back in thanksgiving for all those whose love and training helped give him grow roots and wings to become me.

And it seems now the proverb ascribes responsibility for more children than our own. We are all God's children. And we should feel blessed when God chooses us to help give roots and wings to some of them not our own. He assigned such a team to Mom and Dad.

And I have been blessed by it.

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REFLECTIONS

January 5, 2020

**The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.**

Psalms 23:1 NKJV

The Shepherd

Through the passenger car window, it's impossible to remove my eyes from the kaleidoscope of color passing by. Restful meadows, serene waters, powerful ocean waves, and mountains' majesty reveal God's inspiring presence in every scene. No person in the world can create such magnificence. Strange, though, that no other passenger sees the world passing by as I see it. Even those seated nearby experience it differently. We ride the train of time together, but everyone aboard travels on a track unique to themselves alone.

The Lord is our shepherd, yours and mine. He is a *lamp to [our] feet and a light for [our] path[s]*⁶ leading each of us down our unique tracks of life. We pause with him from time to time to find comfortable places to rest our minds, relax our bodies, and restore our spirits. But our journeys are never without its trials

Many times our lives pass through desolate places—starkly barren places, blanketed with suffocating sand and lifeless seas. And evil in its many forms rears its ugly head—pride seeking to confuse God's provision *through us* with attainments *we claim*; gluttony's insatiable appetite for more, and greed caressing possessions, position, and power. But we have no fear of them. The Shepherd is always there with his protective shields and comforting presence.

Then one day, toward journey's end, we look back at it all to discover that every place along the way prepared us for the place we were going next. And, standing in awe of God's ineffable love poured upon us, we drop to our knees, overflowing with thanksgiving, to see:

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

3 He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

For You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord

Forever. (Psalms 23 NKJV)

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⁶ Psalms 119:105

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