

An aerial photograph of a suburban neighborhood with houses, trees, and winding roads. A large hot air balloon with a black and white checkered pattern is positioned in the center-right of the frame, partially overlapping the text. The balloon is inflated and appears to be in flight. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greys, with the white and black of the balloon providing contrast.

FOCUS ON

# f faith

*Essays by Curtis Shelburne*

*Series 5, Volume 2*

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



RRRRich B

**S**ome of the most wonderful gifts of God are mostly invisible to the human eye; we don't actually "see" love or mercy or joy, but we see the effects that attest to their very real presence when we or others are loving or merciful or joyful. Faith in God is like that. If it is present, what we see is the beautiful fruit attesting to its reality. In this issue we share more essays from the pen of Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne as we again center on God's real presence in our lives and "Focus on Faith."

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**"T**herefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . ."

The Apostle Paul  
*Romans 5*



Dear Lord,  
We thank you that on the cross your Son, who knew no sin, took on himself all of our sin and our guilt, and we have peace.

*Amen*



RRRRich B



## A TWEET FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL

For some great hashtags, we need look no further than Philippians 4.

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**If, like most folks,** you deal with email and its accompanying blessings and cursings, you know that the first step after you open your inbox is to obliterate 90% of it by clearing out a ton of junk and deleting a few nefarious attempts to set a hook in you through phishing.

I'd love to change email addresses to try to buy 30 seconds worth of a cleaner inbox, but my trusty ol' address is emblazoned on everything from a few thousand music albums to business cards to newsletters to coffee cups to . . . (An AOL address was really cool when I got mine. Cool marches on.) I've actually got several addresses, but all get a preponderance of junk and none more than my primary address.

Like you, I've long ago learned that anything marked "urgent" isn't. I know that anything from the FBI isn't. I know that Dame Nastasia Ambrovada living in exile in Nigeria and sadly short of relatives and heirs really does not want to deposit a million dollars in my account.

Most of us are all too accustomed to the daily task of hacking through our inboxes with DELETE key machetes to whack away stacks of dreary deadwood, knowing that a serpent or two lurking therein will need to be deleted and dispatched as well. But sometimes, I'm still surprised.

This morning, after clearing out the usual mess, I couldn't help but notice two items. The first, purporting to be from "NFL Cheerleaders,"

promised in the subject line that "these cheerleaders will delight your eyes." "Delight" is not the word I would have used, but I have no doubt that my eyeballs would have been engaged had I chosen to be reeled in by that one. I try to remember that those gals probably have grandpas who'd much prefer that they wear clothes.

Also eye-catching was the exclusive email opportunity to own a bobblehead figurine fashioned after a more or less famous sheriff in Milwaukee. Evidently, the figure is very large by bobblehead norms. And it talks. Since our world is in no short supply of bobbleheads already, and since bobbleheads that talk are never farther away than a button on a TV remote control (C-SPAN is a great place to look if you find yourself in desperate need of a bobblehead), I deleted that offer, too.

Of course, it's not just email that requires a little literate discernment. Most of us still receive plenty of Spam-equivalent paper via actual mailboxes. What we rarely receive are real letters. Do they still teach letter-writing in school? Lots of folks these days are as likely to write a good letter as they are to pen a treatise discussing alliteration in the Declaration of Independence. If letters, considered antiquated anyway, are far beyond our capability and a 350-word email is unbearably long (and even email is becoming "old school"), and if a twit with no attention span can hardly string together 140 characters cogently and almost never gets closer to opening (or downloading) a book than reading a two-screen text message, well . . .

But some things don't change. Whatever we let in our souls via our eyes, and whatever we expound or affirm via our words, written or spoken, says much about the condition of our hearts. By the way, the Apostle Paul recommends some great hashtags in Philippians 4: #WhateverIsTrue, #WhateverIsRight, #WhateverIsNoble, #WhateverIsPure, #WhateverIsPraiseworthy . . .





## THE OWNER'S MANUAL FOR LIFE: REFER TO THE SON

Life itself should be tagged: "Some (much!) assembly required. Trust the Maker."

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**I like seasons**, and I'm particularly pleased to live in a place where the seasons are distinctly different. Lest I'm ever accused of being less than politically correct, I hereby affirm that I'm in love with seasonal diversity.

I will say, though, that as much as I like green growing things, I find that grass with snow on top of it is a lot less trouble than the fast-growing stuff. I much prefer skiing to mowing. But 'tain't the season for skis. They're shoved lovingly under the bed. The lawn mower is now oiled up. And—I do like this part!—the barbecue grill is ready to go.

That took a little doing this year. When I opened the grill a few weeks ago, stuff started falling off the lid. Rusty stuff. I frugally figured I'd just clean it up, replace some parts, and grill right on. Then I touched a burner pipe. It fell apart. Along with a few burner covers and a grate or two. Okay, more parts required.

But when I put the pencil to it and pondered the engineering necessary to install a few of the new parts, the answer was obvious: "Do Not Resuscitate." Attempts otherwise would be, to change the metaphor, perfume on a pig.

So . . . a new grill. Same brand. Same configuration. Dual gas/charcoal. This time I ponied up for the optional smoke box and, with scenes of rust fresh in my mind, also purchased a grill cover.

The nice lady at the store asked if I'd like one already assembled,

mentioning with a tired look that it took her two days to put hers together. I was tempted. But such is not the Shelburne way. If something later malfunctions, an explosion ensues, and I make an ash of myself, I'd like to have the satisfaction of knowing that I was the one who blew it. Up, that is.

Assembly did not take me two days. But it did take 33 steps.

The grill was manufactured in China, but the company is obviously owned by somebody with barbecue credentials. And, contrary to what we've come to expect, they were smart enough to hire instruction writers who are fluent in English. I even smiled when I saw a label on the smoke stacks: "If you can see this, you've put this together wrong. This goes inside." I'd have felt even more at home and akin to the company owners if it'd said, "Whoa, Pard! If yer readin' this, that dog won't hunt! Ya just backed the cow out of the barn south-side first. Try 'er agin!"

Of course, the instructions include the usual lawyer litter. I'm not supposed to attempt putting this together if I'm missing any of my parts. Also, I'm supposed to perform a spray water/detergent leak test every time I light this thing. Right. If you hear of my incineration, you'll know I forgot. But I'm assured that noticing some smoke is normal.

The Owner's Manual for our lives is more straightforward. The Author pretty much brings it all down to this: If you have any questions about how your life should be assembled, just look at my Son.







## “PRAISE THE LORD, O MY SOUL”

When our gratitude to God is expressed through praise, our joy in the Lord blossoms.

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**If life, this world,** the universe itself, and all that is most beautiful and joyful in them, from the warm hugs of your three-year-old to breathtaking vistas across snow-capped mountains, from the gurgling laughter of a mountain stream to red-washed Mars winking across the night sky at twinkling Jupiter . . .

If all of that and immeasurably more—still astoundingly beautiful even in this fallen, sin-twisted, and often tear-stained world—is the gift of a loving Creator and not just a cosmic accident, then surely he is worthy of our highest praise.

And for those whose deepest desire is to praise God, the wisdom and experience of generations of our King’s people point to one place above all others: the Book of Psalms.

The psalms, poems written to be sung to God’s praise, express every human emotion and lift the souls of “even small-scale, earthbound creatures such as us” to the Creator, “musical praise ringing,” as Professor N. T. Wright says, “around the rafters” of the heart’s cathedral that we “could not otherwise reach” (*The Case for the Psalms*).

Interestingly, the biblical picture of our Creator is not just of a God who is worthy of and desires our praise, it is of a God who knows full well that we are fashioned in such a way that we are never happier and more deeply contented and joy-filled than when we are praising the One who made us.

It is not, C. S. Lewis writes in *Reflections on the Psalms*, that

God “needs” or “craves” our worship “like a vain woman wanting compliments” or “a vain author presenting his new books to people who never met or heard of him.” That would make even less sense, Lewis writes, than a silly author needing his dog to “bark approval” of his books. How much would such praise really be worth?

No, Lewis continues, the fact that God desires our praise is not in the least that he is a “silly” or “vain” Deity, it is that our Father knows that when we render gratitude for what is worthy of our praise—a sunset, a painting, a grand mountain—“the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment” and “our joy [is] no more separable from the praise . . . it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds.”

So, says Lewis, “Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”

When the snaggle-toothed grandchild you adore smiles up at you, let your heart smile up to God and thank him for it, and that child’s smile becomes an even more joyful gift as it is colored and completed by praise.

When the psalmists invite us, time and again, “Praise the Lord, O my soul,” we’re being invited to a feast, a rich banquet that grows richer and more sumptuous the more we feed our souls on praise to the Master of the feast.



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## “UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN”

For the little folks, everything is new and beautiful and wonderful, and their hearts are filled with trust.

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**“Unless you change** and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

So said the Lord Jesus to his disciples as he “called a little child to him.” No doubt, one of my favorite things about our Savior is that the children seemed to always flock to him. When his apostles tried to shoo the kids away, opining to their parents that the Lord was far too busy to mess with little folks, Jesus quickly disabused his disciples of that way-off-the-mark notion.

In fact, as he laid his hands on the children and blessed them, Jesus had those intriguing words for his followers: “Unless you become like little children . . .”

My back hurts, and I’m a little achy today. Not bad. Just a little. Some trampoline time, some rolling-around-on-the-floor time (thank the Lord our floors are carpet-covered and not bare!), some doing fun experiments sitting on the concrete (no carpet) in the garage time, some lift-them-up-and-hugging-them time, some crawling around in the living room sheet-constructed cave/castle time—all of these contribute to some soreness. But mostly, it all adds up to wonderful memories for grandparents and grandkids alike, a sweet recipe for one beautiful little word: joy.

Our deepest joys are usually best just experienced and accepted with deep gratitude to their Giver, but some reflection is also occasionally in order.

Why does time with the little folks so renew our souls even as it tests our backs? A million reasons, I’m sure, but . . .

*Unconditional love.* You learned about that holding your newborn children; you learn even more about it with their children. You for them and they for you. Just spending time together adds up to sheer delight. No strings. The upstretched arms of that little 18-month-old mouthing, “PawPaw.” Worth more than gold! You can live for a month just on one smile, and a giggle will make it two.

*Purity, simplicity, and trust.* The littlest folks have no qualms about “asking” for what they need, be it bottle or “blanky” or diaper change or nap on your chest. What looks bad in adults and, may I say, completely pathetic in high-officed politicians—neediness and almost no impulse control—is not only okay in the littlest folks, it’s appropriate and shows their absolute trust in us. As God cares for us all, continually doing infinitely more for us than we can possibly know, we gladly provide for the little ones he’s put in our care.

*Wonder and joy.* Everything is new to them. Everything is beautiful. Everything is full of wonder. That grass beneath the trampoline is a magical forest filled with mythical creatures. Those Christmas lights are as beautiful as twinkling stars. And PawPaw is a noble and valiant unicorn (with wings) who doesn’t at all mind being christened Sugar Cube if the little folks are doing the naming.

Long after we’ve grown to adulthood, it’s one of God’s most beautiful surprises to use little folks to help us grow back into children and much more like the Son who so delights in them and us.





## “SHAKY? NAUSEATED? PALE? YOU TURNED OFF YOUR CELL PHONE!”

If a few minutes away from our cell phone  
frightens us, we have a problem.

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**More than a few** of us are addicts. For all addicts, the first step toward recovery is summed up in one word: honesty. That means admitting we have a problem.

And we do. Nomophobia. That’s the official name for cell phone addiction. The term actually means “no mobile phone fear.” Of course, a phobia is an irrational or excessive fear. And “no mobile phone” means, in this context, that the digital device might be (Careful! I warn you, these are terrifying prospects!) lost, misplaced, turned off, battery dying or depleted, left at the house or office or in the car, etc.

The designers of these devices and their “apps” have long been aware of their addictive potential. Of course, the design folks work their technomagic to the best advantage for their company or advertisers to keep us checking, glued to, enslaved by, the devices we own that too easily own us.

The actual research regarding what happens in our brains, and, more sobering, the brains of our kids, when we/they feel a deep need to be constantly on or checking our phones or apps is as interesting as it is troubling.

In a *Business Insider* article, Madeleine Stowe quotes Dr. David Greenfield, a leading expert in this arena, who says that when we get a notification from our phones, an elevation in dopamine occurs in our brains. Dopamine is “a neurotransmitter” that “regulates the brain’s reward system” and is a key component in all addictions. Who knows? That notification might be something gratifying or important, and so, for our brains, our cell phones become the miniature slot machines we are

compulsively checking as our brain wants a payout, a fix, a reward.

“Google” this, if you dare: “signs you are addicted to your phone.” And get ready to be uncomfortable. You’ll find a bunch of articles on “10 Signs” or “25 Signs” and most of us don’t need nearly that many to fail (or be nailed by) the test miserably. If you’re a little nauseated or ticked off by the prospect of looking at such an article, I rest my case. Maybe “1 Sign” will suffice.

We might also just try some simple experiments.

*\*Keep a log* of how many times a day we check our phones.

*\*Notice how often we are phubbing others* (“phubbing” is “phone snubbing” and there’s no courteous way to do it) by focusing on our phones, disregarding, and thus demeaning the people around us.

*\*Eat a meal with our phone off*, put away, or throttled all the way down. I mean, really, is it vital for most of us non-emergency personnel to have our phones at the table during a meal—or is it just one more proof of addiction? Care about teaching your kids manners, parents? Teach them about this—and show them. Please!

I actually heard of a church recently where social media access is electronically blocked on their campus. Good!

Speaking of social media, here’s a way to get a daily dopamine fix by playing a game of chance. How about for a week or two or 52, flipping a coin each morning? Tails? No Facebook or other social media today. Heads? I mean, heads? Scroll your heart out, all a-twitter that day, as much as you want! How much courage/discipline would that test take from addicts like us? Probably more than we have. Still it’d be well worth a try.

Lots of blessings become curses—even idols—if we don’t use them wisely, throttle them back, give them away, quit bowing before them, or, in this case, just regularly turn them off. One God is enough.

*Note: I do not recommend tossing this column at your spouse or others—or whimsically sending it to their phone. 1) Addicts are easily angered, even dangerous. 2) Self-righteousness is as bad as addiction.*





## A GRANDFATHER'S VOICE POINTS TO MANY FATHERS

All of God's children are loved completely  
by the best Father of all!

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**It's been an interesting** Monday morning.

The dog and I were sitting in the recliner. My laptop computer was living up to its name. My column/blog deadline was looming. Waiting for words to start showing up on the blank computer screen, I was really waiting for the adrenaline rush that my sadly undisciplined brain seems to require. Coffee is an aid, but no sure cure. The deadline usually does it.

In the meantime, as I found myself piddling around, procrastinating, perusing some files on the computer, I somehow wandered into the "Family Audio" section and clicked on an old file labeled, "Big George 1972."

And that's when I heard the voice of my paternal grandfather, G. B. Shelburne—we called him "Big George"—who died in 1975, recorded by my oldest brother in 1972 at the old house in Stanton, Texas.

In the fourteen-minute recording, Big George, a longtime lay preacher and church elder who over the course of forty years held pretty much every non-elected position available in the City of Stanton, Texas—city secretary, water commissioner, city judge, etc.—shared a little family history.

He partially solved the family mystery of "G. B." as he said that "George" was the name of his mother's oldest brother and that "Beatty" (spelling?) was the name of the doctor who "presided" (his word) at his birth.

Oddly enough, what I found most interesting was the story he told of a spanking administered to my great-grandfather by my great-great-grandfather sometime in 1870.

Great-great-grandfather Shelburne had come home to Alabama in 1865 after his service in the Civil War. His son, Tom, my great-grandfather, was born that same year. Tom's father died when the boy was only five years old. That would be 1870. The incident Big George told about, that his father Tom had told him about, took place that same year and was one of the only memories Tom Shelburne had of his father.

As the story goes, my great-great-grandfather had just finished filing a hand saw in the blacksmith shop he had on his Alabama farm. Five-year-old Great-grandfather Tom had been playing in the shop. His dad laid the saw up on top of his workbench and said, "Now, Tom, don't you bother that saw. I'm goin' out." Tom told his son, my grandfather, later, "I had such a curiosity to try that saw that when Father came back in, I was tryin' it over a plow beam, and he give me a paddlin' fur it."

Funny. That old story of my great-great-grandfather's warming Tom's tail section actually seemed to warm my great-grandfather Tom's heart, too. He lost his father way too early, but he never lost the sure knowledge that he was loved by him.

It's a great blessing to me to hear my grandfather remind me that I stand in a long line of fathers who dearly loved their sons (and daughters). The best blessing of all is to know that all of God's children are loved by the best Father of all.

Yes, and the Bible reminds us (Hebrews 12:6, etc.) that some discipline is involved in love!







## “THAT PERSON REALLY KNOWS THE BIBLE”

The most important reason to read the Bible  
is to know the Lord to whom it points.

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“**WOW! THAT PERSON** really knows the Bible!” I hear that comment made fairly often, and I always wonder what the speaker means.

Usually they mean that someone is quite familiar with the words of the Bible, its many facts and wonderful stories, etc. On one level, that’s great, since most studies these days show that the general level of factual Bible knowledge among even Christians is appalling. (We evidently talk a lot more about reading the Bible than we actually do.)

But then I wonder, how much does that person whose Bible knowledge is being touted really understand about God’s written revelation? For example, how much does he understand about the various types of literature that are contained in the Scriptures? Does she realize that being serious about learning what a particular book of the Bible has to teach means being serious enough to learn something about its context and setting? And on we could go.

I don’t doubt for a moment that one doesn’t have to have credentials as a Bible scholar to derive great blessing from simply reading the Bible and learning about the amazingly good news of God’s love.

But neither do I doubt that those who have worked hardest to truly know the most about the facts, the message, and the meaning of the Bible are the very last to ever claim to know much about it at all. You might as well claim to truly know the Milky Way, and only the most

foolish and blind astronomer would ever make that claim.

I’ve been enjoying Dr. Eugene Peterson’s memoir *The Pastor*. One of Peterson’s most truly wise and learned teachers at the Johns Hopkins University was Professor William Albright, then perhaps the world’s leading scholar in biblical archaeology and Semitic studies.

Peterson says that one day Dr. Albright walked into the classroom greatly excited. For years scholars had been debating the exact location (and meaning) of Mount Moriah, where Abraham had “bound Isaac for sacrifice.” Dr. Albright had awakened that morning to suddenly realize that he had discovered some very important answers. He stood before his doctoral students and laid it all out, filling the chalkboard with Ugaritic, Arabic, Assyrian, Aramaic, and Hebrew words pertinent to the issue. He’d gone on for twenty minutes when one of his best students raised his hand and asked, “But Dr. Albright, what about . . .”

Peterson says that the professor stopped, considered for twenty seconds, and said, “Mr. Williams is right—forget everything I have said.” Amazing humility! And true humility is always impressive.

Most folks don’t even begin to realize how much we are blessed by those like the good professor and so many others who have devoted their lives to helping us better understand God’s written word.

May we never forget that the real purpose of God’s written revelation—every page—is to help us know and become like the Lord behind it. Knowing its facts but not its Author would be sad indeed. The more we truly know of God, the more truly humble we will become.





## PIOUS PETE DECLINES TO ATTEND

The younger son in Jesus' parable made many mistakes, but the older son is living a mistake.

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**Someone has called** Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son "the gospel within the Gospels" as in it Jesus tells us the story of us all, and the story of God's love.

You know the story.

A father has two sons. The younger son—immature, rebellious, and headstrong—impetuously demands his inheritance, takes off to a "far country," and proceeds to heartily party until his dad's shekels are spent and the party plays out. In the midst of a post-party famine, he finds himself starving and in such bad shape that he's glad to land a job feeding pigs. One dark day he catches himself envying the porkers who are eating better than he is.

That's when the prepositions start improving. Once full *of* himself, the younger son "comes *to* his senses" and realizes he needs to go home *to* his father and beg to be taken back not as a son but as a hired hand. Hired hands eat better than pigs.

His father sees him coming while he's still a long way off, and from then on in the parable, the predominant note is joy as the father runs to throw his arms around his son, his "lost" son who is found.

Before the now-much-wiser lad can finish his "just make me a hired hand" speech, the father orders up a robe and sandals and a signet ring, and he calls for a feast and the best of parties.

Joy abounds! Except . . .

Except in the heart of the older son who never left home but instead, as he puts it, stayed at home to "slave away" for the father. "And," Pious Pete whines, "you never threw me a party!"

Wonder why! This sad-sack is one of those folks who can put a damper on any party and lower the temperature in any room just by showing up.

The guy probably has some good qualities, but he's the sort that makes you wonder, "Ya know, if heaven's full of folks like him . . ." Don't worry. It's not.

I admit it: I don't like him, not least because all too often, I'm afraid I look way too much like him. He's long on the kind of "virtues" that give the term a bad name, and I suspect he's a bit short on vices. Vices are bad in many ways, but they do have the worthwhile effect of reminding us that we're human.

Good Puritans and genuinely good human beings are not, thank the Lord, the same cats.

The young son? Him, I like. Once he's come to his senses. At one time, yes, he had a mistaken view of real fun and real life. Early on, he had a warped view of joy and looked for it in all the wrong ways and places.

But at least he was looking for it. At least he knew life was something to be loved. Now he knows why. Now he knows where love and life come from: his father. Now he smiles more, laughs more, and drinks more deeply from real joy. He's found the real party, and his father is the one throwing it!

Henri Nouwen is right when he says that it's a lot harder to come home when you've convinced yourself that you're the good son, and you've never left.

The younger son made lots of mistakes. The older son is living a mistake. And he's missing the party.



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