



Defending the Faith

Essays by Gene Shelburne

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



Defending the Faith

Acts 14 tells us that when the Apostle Paul returned to churches he had planted on his first mission journey, he encouraged his converts “to remain true to the faith.” What would this require of them? He closed his first letter to Christians in Corinth by urging them to “stand firm in the faith.” What was he asking them to do or to be?

In his series of essays this month, Senior Editor Gene Shelburne will help us to consider some of the ways we may be able to affirm and to defend our faith in Jesus.



Curtis Shelburne

“Stand united, singular in vision, contending for people’s trust in the Message, the good news, not flinching or dodging in the slightest before the opposition.”



The Apostle Paul

Philippians 1 (The Message)

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Defending the Faith

Blaming God

Trouble comes in devastating doses for some people I know. For some of the best people I know.

One godly church leader wiped tears from his eyes as he told me years ago that on the same day he found out his son was headed to prison, he also learned that his wife had terminal cancer.

How do you cope with that much anguish?

“In the past four months we have buried five of our dearest relatives,” one faithful Christian told me. She and her husband had played a major role in planning four of those funerals. Their spiritual boat obviously was loaded.

Joe Barnett sums it up this way. He says, “Some of life’s chapters are brutally painful and utterly unexplainable.” I was about to respond, “In spite of the fact that Joe is a pastor,” but on second thought I suspect that I should say, “Because Joe is a pastor,” he affirms that “reconciling God’s love with life’s agonies isn’t easy.”

How right he is.

Joe knows, as I do, that some of our friends with the strongest faith get hit the hardest when major tragedies engulf the people they love.

One of the greatest of the biblical judges was that gutsy farmer named


Gideon. When enemy raids had him and his neighbors hiding in caves and about to starve to death, Gideon asked, “If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?” (Judges 6:13).

All of us who read the Old Testament story of Ruth admire her mother-in-law Naomi. She was a tough lady with strong faith and good sense.

But when Naomi buried her husband and both of her sons in Moab, she returned home to Bethlehem bitter and forlorn. “The Lord himself has raised his fist against us,” she railed (Ruth 1:18).

Like a lot of believers today, Naomi blamed God when life imploded on her. She told her neighbors, “The Almighty has made life very bitter for me. The Lord has caused me to suffer.”

For centuries believers have made this mistake. They have given God credit for calamities he didn’t cause. Even righteous Job accused God of inflicting injuries that actually were sent by Satan.

Has it ever occurred to you, though, that the only people who blame God for their worst pain are those who really believe he exists? While their diagnosis is wrong, their faith is right on target. 

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A Reason for Hope

One troubled critic of society said: “Our earth is degenerate in these latter days. Bribery and corruption are common, children no longer obey their parents, every man wants to write a book, and the end of the world is evidently approaching.”

Another wise man was equally bothered. “Our youth today love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, disrespect for older people,” he lamented. “Children nowadays are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers.”

Let me hasten to say that I do not share these gloomy estimates of today’s youth. But let me put these statements into proper perspective.

The first comment was quoted years ago by presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson. It was found on an Assyrian tablet over 4,700 years old.

Quotation number two (the one about children gobbling food and tyrannizing teachers) was uttered by Socrates 425 years before Christ was born.

In every age some people have been down on kids—and *I am not one of them!*

When I think of young people, I think of kids like the ones I taught every day for forty years at Amarillo High School. They don’t come any better!


When I think of adolescents, I think of the youth in churches all across the land. They tend to be the best. In them I see cause for optimism and hope, not despair.

I realize that it is popular to be down on America in general, upset about modern trends, sure that our nation—both the young and the old in it—are leaving God, going to the dogs, headed for hell on a bobsled.

I’m convinced that the facts won’t support this message of doom and gloom.

To be sure, our nation and our world have their challenges. Always have. Always will. But the problems we face today certainly are no worse, and in many cases they are much less threatening, than ever before.

Do you realize that in an average week more Americans attend church than all who attend the professional sports events combined in an entire year? Faith is far from dead in our land.

In the headlines we read about the miscreants who make us think all modern kids are fouled up. Have you met the student leaders in your local high school or in your community’s churches? Doing so would give you good reasons to hope again. To smile again. 

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Explaining God

When Robert Ludlum vanished from the adventure/mystery novel writing scene, a good friend alerted me to similar books by David Baldacci. Over the years he has helped me waste a lot of hours when I need to disconnect from the real world.

I was surprised, though, when I opened Baldacci's novel *One Summer*. It's a story well-told, but it's nothing like his thrillers.

Instead of Baldacci's usual flock of killers and spies and cops and odd-wads complicating life for each other, this book lets us walk with a little family "through the valley of the shadow" after a drunk driver kills the wife and mother they love so totally.

I read this tale in a waiting room while my wife was getting a new hip. When I sneaked back into my study to see what had stacked up on my desk during my absence, one of the first email notes I opened took me instantly back into the issues that make *One Summer* so real.

In that email a friend told me how much it troubled her to hear well-meant but potentially troubling words used to comfort a family whose seven-year-old died in a tragic accident. "We know you miss her," the "comforter" told the parents, "but she's in a better place now."


Most Christians would affirm the truth of that statement, but how many of us would be pleased that one of our kids made a quick, terrifying trip to heaven? My friend was right. This explanation of the child's death probably hurt more than it helped.

Like most of us who try to explain God's role in some tragedy, these words of comfort raised far more issues than they solved.

Too often our "wise words of comfort" turn out to be as damaging as those offered by Job's famous friends. Instead of blessing their buddy, every explanation those guys proposed wound up making Job more furious both with them and with God.

When you and I hurry to the side of a grieving friend, our best help will be a hug and a shared teardrop. The worst thing we can do is to try to explain God.

"My ways are not your ways," the Lord tells us, "neither are my thoughts your thoughts." In fact, the Bible warns us that his ways are "past finding out."

God does not need us to defend him. But the God who is love does need us to convey that love. We help the most when we keep our hearts open and our mouths shut. 

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Long but Wrong

"Can it be wrong if it's been around so long?" the writer asked.

She was referring to some concept she had found in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Just what the idea was, I didn't take time to find out. For all I know, the principle she was recommending may indeed be wise and decent and wholesome, but her line to support it is spurious.

Is something true and right and commendable just because "it's been around so long"?

Telling lies has been the main strategy of con artists ever since the Garden of Eden. Does the lengthy history of deceit make it a practice we ought to support?

Letting appetite overrule our good sense cost Adam and Eve far more than they ever meant to pay. Does that make it sagacious to gobble apples just because they look tasty and promise to transform us into "somebody"?

Most of the misery in our world—the shattered relationships and the lost fortunes, the squandered health and the ruined reputations—can be traced to an experience like Eve's with that infamous apple.

That kind of life-demolishing behavior has been around just about as long as dumb humans have. How many times since Eden has someone

given up everything that really mattered to them simply because something looked good, smelled good, and promised to be a blast?


Does the longevity of such foolishness make it deserve a stamp of approval?

Having hammered home that point, however, let me hurriedly admit that this writer's shaky argument that we can identify truth by its antiquity yanked my chain for another reason. When I saw that line, I perked up because such reasoning contradicts what we hear so often in this ultra-modern age.

We live in a culture that chooses to discard all theological, philosophical, and social traditions simply because they are so old—because they are traditions.

Only the latest science, the most recent guesses, are given much credence by media pundits or on far too many campuses. Even our wisest forefathers were ignorant oafs if this modern assumption is correct.

Could it be that when that unnamed writer tipped her hat to some idea's long history, she did so to refute this generation's bias against the wisdom of the past?

If so, although I think she got it wrong, still I will applaud her intent and say Amen. 

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Photoshopped Stories

News reports of the last national elections and of the Black Lives Matters riots and bloodshed in 2016 offered us a slew of stories that had been edited and altered and pictures that had been photoshopped to reflect the peculiar political slant of some media outlet.

Students on college campuses across America must be fast-learners. Just a month after the election, students and administrators of a historic Rhode Island college skillfully altered candid statements of Professor Anthony Esolen. When they got through editing, his gracious offers to visit openly with any concerned student were made to sound like bigoted stonewalls to discussion.

I first became acquainted with Professor Esolen when a friend got me to reading *Touchstone* magazine. Esolen is a Senior Editor and a frequent contributor to this exceptional journal.

As a regular reader, I have been enjoying Esolen's perceptive writing for several years now. Not once have I seen a hateful or thoughtless word from his pen. Most of his *Touchstone* pieces lead us—always in a loving way—to ponder some scriptural truth.

But the advocates for diversity at Providence College have proven


themselves—like their kind across the land—to be the narrowest, most bigoted people on the planet. Anyone who disagrees with their views they brand as a heretic that should be silenced and vanquished.

I had just seen reports of the vicious attacks on Anthony Esolen when I came across a note I filed a few weeks ago—coincidentally a piece also from *Touchstone*.

In the May/June 2016 issue, J. Daryl Charles wrote an article titled, "It's Not Your Hijab: It's the Theology." In it he highlighted modern situations exactly like these recent attacks on Esolen.

"Contemporary American Christians often seem more worried about offending the sensitivities of the surrounding culture than about offending the Almighty," Charles lamented.

"But," he countered, "to affirm what the Church has always taught and to hold ourselves accountable for logical and moral truth—truth for which people lay down their lives—is neither 'bigotry' nor 'discrimination,' nor is it a 'scandal' in the way that many hyperventilating pundits self-righteously insist."

I never cease to be amazed that so many irate activists will lie about an opponent to protect "the truth." 

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Reasons to Live

I've been reading Timothy Keller's latest book *Making Sense of God*. Like everything else Keller writes, it's clear, precise, and incredibly well researched.

In one of the early chapters, Keller makes a good case that we humans can't live happy, vibrant lives unless we have a sense of purpose. To live well, you have to know you are "serving some good beyond yourself."

To support this assertion, Keller cites an illustration I loved. He says that physician/professor Atul Gawande reported that one of his colleagues convinced a nursing home administrator to bring in a menagerie of animals.

Soon the residents in that facility were caring for a swarm of parakeets, a colony of rabbits, a gaggle of dogs and cats. They even became responsible for a flock of laying hens.

Amazingly, the advent of the animals brought back life to patients who had effectively checked out. Some who had lost their speech began to talk again. Others who had been withdrawn and unable to walk started coming to the nurses' station and offering to take one of the puppies for a stroll. Soon every parakeet was adopted and named.

And the benefits were not just


cosmetic. Patients' need for psych drugs fell to less than half the demand before the pets appeared. The fatality rate in the facility was measurably reduced.

Dr. Gawande shared this simple story to demonstrate that all of us need "a cause beyond ourselves." Timothy Keller cited it to show how deeply a person can be damaged by the postmodern secularist contention that human life has no meaning.

All of us need to know that who we are and what we are doing makes a difference. A difference that matters.

I remember one sweet retired couple. Now in their mid-sixties and put out to pasture by mandatory retirement rules in their jobs, they were basically healthy, not really unhappy, but they were bored. No longer did they have a visible reason to get up and get with it every day.

Then tragedy struck. Crimes triggered by a mental break got their son locked up for a decade. Disabling addictions sidelined his wife. With no warning, my friends suddenly found themselves raising two grade-school grandchildren.

That "tragedy" transformed life for them. Today they appear to be happy and healthy. Could it be because they feel needed and useful again? 

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Who Sees You?

Several years ago in my weekly newspaper column I mentioned some of my Christian friends whose kindness and integrity (to borrow the apostle Paul's metaphor) made them "shine as bright lights in a dark world."

"Those aren't the Christians I'm seeing," one reader replied. She confided to me that she and the other tellers in her bank dreaded Monday mornings. She said, "You would not believe how ugly-spirited a lot of the church deacons are when they show up to deposit Sunday's offering."

What a shame, I thought. Jesus tells his people that we're supposed to let our lights shine in the world so that others will see us and give glory to God. How abysmally we are failing him if we elicit the opposite reaction.

A few months ago I had the privilege of editing Linda Kuhar's new book, *Worthy of a Miracle*. In it she tells of a time when she struggled with faith issues. Desperately fearful that she was not worthy to be loved or healed by God, she gave up her Christian coaching career and took a job in a posh dining place.

"I put on an apron in that upscale restaurant, only to be chewed out by customers who wore crosses around their necks and prayed before their meals," she wrote. "I politely


resigned at the end of my first shift."

Maybe it was this kind of incivility and rudeness Patrick Henry Reardon had in mind when he asked, "How are pagans to take seriously those who profess to be better than the world, when in fact they live by norms conspicuously lower than the world?"

When I ran across his question, I first thought Reardon was talking about the host of young Christians who indulge in pre-marital sex or cheat on their college exams even worse than their non-believing buddies. But my assumption may have been wrong.

As damaging as that kind of misbehavior can be, those of us who proudly wear Jesus' name may harm his cause far more when we Amen bigotry at a Starbucks table or heap angry criticism on a clerk who doesn't do things our way.

Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors. If our non-Christian neighbors obey that command better than we do, they have every right to question the validity of our faith and to doubt the reality of our Lord.

In one raunchy pagan place, Paul's most basic rule for evangelism was that the Christians behave so wisely and well that the pagans "have nothing bad to say about us." I'm sure that would be his advice to us as well. 

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Doctored Bibles

Touchstone magazine editor James Kushiner recently emailed a fundraising letter that got me to thinking. And sometimes that can be dangerous.

Kushiner told us he had been reading in the Proverbs. In the KJV of 9:12, the wise man wrote: "If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it." Just 19 words of wisdom.

Then Kushiner compared this to the same verse from the New English Bible translation of the Septuagint (the Greek Bible Jesus and the apostles used). Proverbs 9:12 in the Septuagint contains almost five times as many words.

Why? Why did this proverb in Jesus' Bible include half a dozen phrases unknown to his ancestors who had only the Hebrew text? Was the Septuagint translator working from a Hebrew copy some rabbi had expanded with his reflections? Or did the translator insert his own insights?

As I said, all of this started me thinking. When I'm evaluating a Bible translation, I am turned off if the modern translators start changing the content to tell me not what the original inspired author said but what the current scholars think he *should* have said.

A good example of this is my disappointment when I read very much in the updated New International Version.


After using the 1984 NIV as my pulpit and pew Bible version for two decades, I just assumed that my congregation would move seamlessly to the new NIV. I was wrong.

It didn't take me long to see that verse after verse in the new version has been amended to make Moses and Jesus and Paul voice today's passion for gender neutrality.

Now don't jump to the wrong conclusion. I am not anti-feminine. My evaluation of the new NIV was not triggered by disapproval of some current social trend.

What disturbed me was far more basic than that. I found myself wondering what else the translators changed just because they didn't like the way Jesus or Paul phrased an idea. If the translators were willing to edit the inspired word of God on an obvious topic, where else did they inject their PC biases into the mouths of God's holy spokesmen?

Expecting writers in past centuries to see and speak of life in our terms is a display of literary ignorance or myopia. But the same philosophy that would ban Mark Twain or Harriet Beecher Stowe from school library shelves makes some Bible translators expect Abraham or Moses to converse in today's sanitized language.

No thank you. Not in my Bible. No way. 

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The Day to Die

The ancient psalmist was praising the Creator for knowing so much about each of us.

Long before sonograms and hi-tech scans let us look at what was going on inside our mothers' wombs, God took a peek and kept track of our development. So that hymn-writer marveled in Psalm 139, "Your eyes saw my unformed substance."

And that was not all. God also gazed into the distant future. "In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them," that inspired poet acknowledged.

Then, in the very next line, he clarified that his main interest in this psalm is not human gestation or longevity. That his primary focus is on the incredible awareness of our Creator, he reveals when he prays, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!" (139:16-17 ESV).

For centuries Bible readers have debated whether or not this familiar psalm indicates that, even before we're born, God knows exactly when we'll die.


In the years following WWII some amazing stories of battle bravery surfaced—stories of single soldiers charging into withering fire and wiping out whole squads of enemy troops. When questioned later about

their seeming indifference to death and danger, the heroes repeatedly replied, "If it wasn't my day to die, I had nothing to fear," or something to that effect.

I first heard these true stories during my early school days when troops began coming home from places like Normandy and Iwo Jimo. I doubted then that this kind of fatalism—this belief that each of us has a preset "day to die"—was biblical. After decades of Bible study, I still do.

So I was surprised to learn that some sects of Islam subscribe to the same kind of fatalism.

When asked how they can dispatch girls wearing body bombs into crowded marketplaces where the blasts are sure to wipe out grandmothers and toddlers, some of the terrorists shrug it off. If it was their day to die, they were going to die anyway, they reason. If the bomb didn't get them, they'd go home and choke on a chicken bone or suffer a heart attack in their sleep.

I confess that I am woefully ignorant about Islam, but I suspect that the Muslims who use fatalism to justify the slaughter of innocents are a tiny minority in Islam, just as the soldiers using it to explain their insane bravery were also distinct exceptions in Christian ranks. 

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Jihad

Are you like me? I don't recall ever seeing the word "jihad" in a *U.S. News* report or on the front page of the *New York Times* until that sad day we call 9/11.

All across America, though, it didn't take long for most of us to associate "jihad" with terrorism fueled by the hatred of radical Muslims toward everything Christian or Western (two categories they lumped together).

So, for those of us who knew little about Islam until the twin towers fell, "jihad" has become a term we almost always connect to terroristic military operations of angry Muslims such as the Taliban and ISIS.

"Jihad" instantly conjures up in our minds gruesome scenes of hijacked planes and body bombers and machete-wielding zealots whacking off Christian heads.

Would it surprise you to learn that this is not the way our moderate, sensible, lovable Muslim neighbors use the word? It surprised me.

Those who know more about Islam than the rest of us learn about it on the six o'clock news probably could have told us all along (if we had been listening) that "jihad" in Islam's holy book always means "struggle" or "exertion."

In a few instances the Qu'ran does use "jihad" to refer to military

response to invasions or attacks, but when the word appears in Muslim scriptures, most of the time it refers to inner struggling in a believer's soul.


Have you ever wrestled with an addiction or tried your best to break a bad habit? A devout, non-terrorist Muslim might refer to such a struggle as a jihad.

Did you ever try to stop cussing? By the time I was a teenager, I had already worked a lot of hours alongside returning WWII veterans, and I had picked up their illustrious (but obscene) vocabulary.

A decade later I worked hard to bridle my tongue and clean up my wayward speech. But guess what still flies out of my mouth when I smash my thumb or almost get plowed under by a hotrod on the freeway? For me this has been a lifelong jihad.

Our Christian Scriptures never speak of jihad, but they often use military metaphors to describe our spiritual struggles. "We struggle not against flesh and blood," but against demonic forces, Paul wrote in Ephesians 6.

"The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world," he said in 2 Corinthians 10 as he described his efforts to defend doctrinal and theological truths.

These are the Christian equivalents of righteous jihad. 

Defending the Faith

“The End Is Near”

One day Jesus’ men asked him when “the End” would come and how they could know it was near. In every decade since then, we hear echoes of their query, often tinged with a weirdness that shows why Jesus warned them, “Don’t let anyone mislead you.”

Several years ago, for example, on a dairy farm up in Wisconsin, 200 cows were found dead in the fields. I don’t know where he got his information, but David Knowles reported that this news of the mass die-off of this herd “caused some jittery theologians to proclaim that the end of the world may be at hand.” It hasn’t happened yet.

That kind of faith-based hysteria may amuse us. Far more sobering, though, was the news report from Springville, Utah. Police there found Benjamin and Kristi Stock tucked into bed along with three of their four children—all five of them dead.

Friends reported that shortly before this family ingested fatal drug overdoses, the dead couple confided that they were deeply concerned about “a pending apocalypse.” History is littered with similar phobic reactions to end-of-the-world fantasies.

In his excellent little Revelation commentary *Reversed Thunder*, Dr. Eugene Peterson takes note of this as he reflects on the crazy reactions of


some Bible readers to the Armageddon predictions in Chapter 16. What the apostle John wrote to comfort and reassure God’s people often has had the opposite effect.

One of “the unintended and unhappy consequences of St. John’s Armageddon vision,” Dr. Peterson notes, “is that it has inflamed the imaginations of the biblically illiterate” and resulted in “consuming end-time fantasies.”

And he is right when he warns that people who have not studied “the imagery of the prophets” and who are “untutored in the metaphorical language of war” in the Scriptures are “easy prey for entertaining predictions of an end-time holocaust at Mount Megiddo in Israel.”

Jesus warns us that people who panic and spread scary predictions of the End are false Christs—false teachers who must not be allowed to mislead God’s people.

The only people who need to fear the End are those who are willfully wicked and oppose Christ. The Bible clearly warns that punishment awaits them.

But all those who love Jesus and obey his commands should welcome his return. They can join all believers past and present in praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” 

Defending the Faith

Jihad Today

Did you see my recent column about the traditional Islamic definition of the word “jihad”?

Some of my newspaper readers found it hard to wrap around the fact that in the Qu’ran this inflammatory word usually refers to spiritual struggles within one’s soul.

No doubt my readers who choke on “jihad” have seldom if ever seen the word used any way except as it appeared in the July 6, 2017, news reports about atrocities in a southeastern Nigeria village. According to AFP, “Boko Haram jihadists” kidnapped 37 women there and cut the throats of nine other victims.

In this Nigerian region alone, over 300,000 refugees have fled these jihadists, who serve their god by raping, kidnapping, and slaughtering their neighbors.

These same Boko Haram terrorists made headlines three years ago when they seized 276 school-girls from the Nigerian village of Chibok. At last report, over a hundred of these girls still are missing.

Hardly a week passes nowadays without this relatively new term “jihad” being used by English-speaking news reporters to chronicle some bloody massacre. When we Americans hear the word, it sends shivers down our spines as it awakens chilling images

proudly broadcasted worldwide by Al Jazeera.


My sensible, moderate Muslim friends seldom make headlines like the bad boys do. So they get unfairly lumped in with the car bombers and head-loppers whenever the media reports on the latest jihad.

So what? you may be thinking by now. Jihad happens on the other side of the globe from where I live.

Not really. Remember the twin towers? The first jihadists most of us ever heard of by that Islamic term were flying those planes.

But that kind of deadly, anti-American hatred is not what ignited my present interest in jihads. When I read today about this latest jihad, my immediate, gut-level reaction was concern for those who share my faith.

Instantly I recalled numerous times when all loving, sensible, decent Christians got branded as bigots or racists or Neanderthals because some harebrained Christian zealot made headlines that embarrassed the rest of us.

“All those dumb Christians are the same,” some uninformed secularists conclude when they hear such a report. Just as most of us Christians tend to blame all Muslims when we read about the latest jihad. 

Defending the Faith

Puddles

In earlier columns I've told my readers that my wife and I managed to slip away last summer for a blessedly quiet, lazy week in Colorado's high country.

That week we purposely went absolutely nowhere. To celebrate our fifty-eighth anniversary, though, for the only time during that getaway week, Nita and I loaded into our RAV4 and made our way down the unfamiliar road from our rented mountain cabin.

It had been raining most of that afternoon, longer and heavier mountain showers than usual. So the rather steep but solid gravel road down the mountainside was soaked, and the hard-packed caliche parking lot/entry way to Cuchara's handful of rustic businesses was wet.

We beat the dinner-hour crowd at Timbers Restaurant, so we had their elegant dining room all to ourselves. After we enjoyed a better-than-usual steak, Nita and I set out across the small parking area to see if we could find a book rack in the village gift shop.

That's when we spotted two precious four-or-five-year-old boys—sharp little guys—who obviously were enjoying each other. They had slipped away from their families who were over on the sheltered wooden

walkway, and the obvious ringleader of the two was tugging on his chum's sleeve, pulling him out into the parking lot.


In an almost-invisible furrow in the smooth caliche surface of the lot, this fun-loving little rascal had spotted what is almost irresistible to any boy that size—a mud puddle.

It wasn't a big one. Just a few inches across and less than an inch deep, it was too small to draw any attention from adults like us. I doubt that the parents of these two kids even saw it, but it held enough caliche-colored water to lure this feisty youngster.

Dragging his buddy to join him in the fun, he stood and looked thoughtfully at the puddle for just a second or two. And then, with delight twinkling in his young eyes, he stomped it with his light-green rubber flip-flops.

After hesitating for just a moment (maybe pondering what his mama might say about all this fun?), his more timid playmate squished the smaller of the two puddles under his flip-flops, and the two soggy boys ran giggling back to join their clan.

I doubt that either of them knew how much they had entertained us.

As Jesus said, "Of such is the Kingdom." 

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Time to Give Thanks

Without thinking, I turned north onto the street I usually use to go visit my people in the medical center. Not this time. Not this year. For more than a mile ahead of me that afternoon, multiple lanes of cars were backed up, brake lights glaring, barely moving.

Ten minutes of snail-like progress got me just two blocks closer to my destination. So finally I detoured into the neighborhood. On residential streets I took a two-mile loop east of that massive traffic jam.

In my part of my town, we have lived with this kind of frustration for several months now. Right when the state closed the main arterial roadway nearest to my church to replace the bridge across I-40, our city decided to tear up several of the closest alternate routes.

I realize that what we're fussing about is minor compared to every morning's commute in Los Angeles or Atlanta. But in our mid-sized town, we're not used to using our streets as twice-a-day parking lots. So this fall I've heard non-stop moaning and whining and cussing about the snarled traffic. Almost everybody is unhappy about this seemingly endless mess.

As Thanksgiving drew nearer, I began to wonder if this community-wide umbrage would blight the turkey.

About that time, I was reading


fellow-pastor Richard Dahlstrom's fine book, *The Map Is Not the Journey*. In it he tells of coming home to Seattle after a 40-day sabbatical spent trekking with his wife high in the Alps.

His timing was not good. Right after they returned home, they completed a long-dreamed-of move to a country home outside the metro area. Instantly he discovered that part of the price of living in heaven is getting to spend an hour or so every day in commuters' hell.

If you've visited Seattle, you know how the inner-city traffic flow can lock down, even in the calmer hours of the day. Driving to work at his church, Richard found himself "parked" on a Seattle freeway every morning.

After grumbling and groaning at first, he says he discovered he could turn that sour moment into a sweet one if he used it to thank the Lord for the freshness of the Puget breeze or the smoothness of his car's motor or the politeness of the driver who let him switch lanes.

Locked in that unmoving line of cars, he learned that gratitude is the perfect antidote for grumpiness.

It doesn't have to be Thanksgiving time for this to work. Instead of being grouchy, be grateful. Give thanks to the Lord and bless his Name. 

Defending the Faith

Growing Old

As the sum of my years keeps rising, I am more and more convinced that age is less a matter of math than of perspective.

In his thriller called *Tripwire*, I ran across a line where Lee Child said of one of his characters, “He was old. Maybe sixty . . .” I broke out laughing.

Was that Child’s view of the man? I wondered.

Or was the author looking at the fellow through the eyes of who he would like to have as his typical readers (maybe middle-aged or younger)?

Just a few days after I ran across that Lee Child line, one of our local newspaper reporters was dead serious when he called a sixty-three-year-old victim “an elderly man.” I wondered how old that reporter must be.

Don’t hear me wrong. I’m not being critical. All of this amuses me and interests me because I have seen too clearly my own sliding scale of age measurement. If I try to warm up a sermon script I wrote when I was in my early thirties, I chortle when I find that back then I was using fifty or sixty as generic terms for “old.” Now that I’m knocking on the door of eighty, what’s “old”?


When my late father was still active in his mid-eighties, one day I

asked him, “Dad, in your own mind, how old do you see yourself?” He pondered for a moment, and then replied, “About twenty-eight.”

Age is a matter of perspective. Comedian George Burns, who lived to be one hundred, said in his later years, “Retirement at sixty-five is ridiculous. When I was sixty-five, I still had pimples.”

General Douglas MacArthur wrote: “You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt; as young as your confidence, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, as old as your despair. In the central place of every heart there is a recording chamber; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer, and courage, so long are we young. When the wires are all down and your heart is covered with the snows of pessimism and the ice of cynicism, then and then only are you grown old.”

The biblical psalmist agreed. He wrote that those of us who are righteous will “bring forth fruit in old age. They will be full of sap and green, to show that the Lord is upright” (92:14-15 WEB).

And God promises us “old” folks: “Even when you’re old, I’ll take care of you. Even when your hair turns gray” (Isaiah 46:4 GWT). 

“TAKE
UP THE
SHIELD
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evil one.”



Paul
Ephesians 6

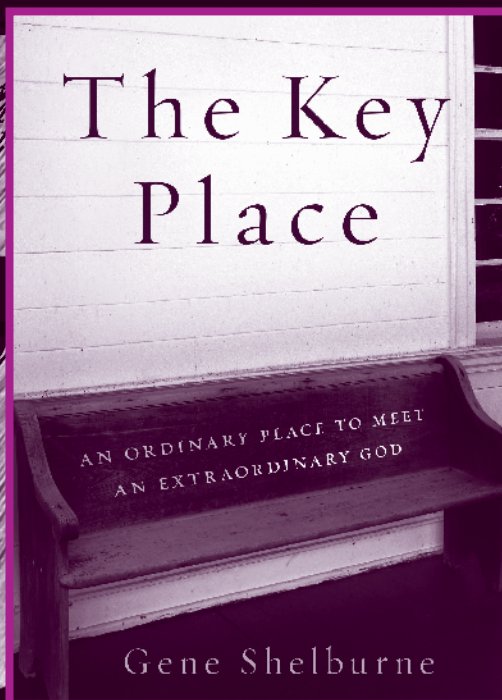


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