



FOCUS ON

faith

Essays by Curtis Shelburne

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THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



John Gulley

Author Os Guinness has asked what we would think of a boy who gave up trying to ride a bicycle, complaining that every time it stopped moving, he simply had to fall off. If, Guinness writes, he “wanted to sit comfortably while remaining stationary, he should not have chosen a bicycle but a chair.” In the same way, “faith must be put to use, or it will become useless.” In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne points us to genuine and vibrant trust in God as we “Focus on Faith.”

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“Very truly I tell you,
whoever hears my word and
believes him who sent me has
eternal life . . . and has crossed
over from death to life.”

The Lord Jesus
John 5



Dear Lord,
We have heard
your word, and
we do believe.
We praise you
for the gift of life
both here and
hereafter!

Amen



John Gulley



THE DAY THE HEALER AND REAL HEALING CAME TO BETHESDA

For almost four decades one sad man had
been suffering, but then he met Jesus.

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What a surreal sight it must have been. The lame, the blind, the paralyzed, and people suffering from all sorts of diseases. A sad assemblage of hurting humanity lying, sprawling, crawling, languishing around Jerusalem's Pool of Bethesda. In the fifth chapter of his Gospel, the Apostle John describes the sad scene.

As is so often the case surrounding the most poignant examples of human suffering, humans trying to survive the situation and ravaged by an incredible range of emotions are torn between varying mixtures of faith and magic, genuine trust and irrational superstition.

Verse four here brings up an interesting (and astonishingly rare) textual question we'll not tackle here, but verse seven tells us what at least one man lying by that pool believed strongly enough that he somehow managed to get to the pool and spend days, weeks, months, years there.

I'm pretty sure we can assume that the rest of that sad crowd shared the same belief. They believed that when the water of the pool was "troubled," the first person who got into the water following the troubling would be healed. Word was that the intermittently stirred up waters were stirred up by an angel, and, somehow, power was left in the water. Get there first and get healed.

I find myself with some questions here. I wonder, for example, about the focus of this sort of "faith." Was it faith in water, faith in an angel, faith in a procedure?

We still hear about that last sort of "faith." Faith that God will have to give me the "right" answer (that means the one I want) if I do enough mental gymnastics to convince myself that no other answer is possible. It seems to me that the focus of such faith is more on me and my effort than it is on God.

I don't know what most of the suffering folks beside the Pool of Bethesda were thinking on the day Jesus was there. But John tells us a little about what one man, a man suffering terribly for 38 years, was thinking as Jesus asks him a great question, "Do you want to be healed?"

It's a serious question. Many people meet hardship with courage, but the sad truth is that others choose to make "victim" their identity. Healing is the very last thing they want. Such sickness is far deeper than physical and harder to heal.

Perhaps the sad man nodded his head, but his roundabout answer refers to a procedural problem: "I have no one to get me into the pool, so whenever the water is troubled, somebody else always gets in first." So he's saying, I'm messed up! Because of my bad situation, I need to get into the pool, but because of my bad situation, I can't. I'm a victim of my circumstances.

How much faith does this man have and where is it focused? That is debatable. But the Lord who is stronger than any circumstance, our God who is not impressed with our recipes for magic—however "religious" they may sound—and who is stronger than our weak faith, says simply, "Rise up! Take up your bed and walk."

Real healing has come to Bethesda. No trip to the pool required.





WHEN FOUNDATIONS SHIFT, CRACKS BEGIN TO SHOW

Should we be surprised if what we build on faulty foundations can't bear the weight of reality?

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“Wow, I wonder how much farther that old sagging column supporting the corner of this old sagging house can lean out southward before the corner of the house just collapses and wordlessly pleads, ‘Help! I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up!’”

Nothing about that column is plumb, square, or level anymore, but I do notice some symmetry this morning. I’m writing my weekly *Focus on Faith* column weakly, sitting beside a weak porch column, and displaying at least some weak faith that this will not be the morning when that weak column collapses.

I don’t think the problem with that porch column holding up part of my grandparents’ old house in Robert Lee, Texas, started with the column. I’ve got my bag chair perched on the porch; if I look down, I see two things: 1) concrete, almost 90 years old, of an incredible quality no longer available; and, 2) in spite of the quality of the concrete, one big almost inch-wide crack bisecting the porch.

So the real problem is that the column is perched on the porch, the porch is concrete perched on a stem-wall foundation, and the foundation is shifting because the ground below it (drought-ravaged) started shifting first. Hence, that porch column leans, and even world-class concrete is defiled by a big crack.

When foundations become weak and begin shifting, much that we depend on to be sturdy begins to falter. We can no longer count on “plumb, square, and level.” Cracks that have been forming

soon become too obvious to ignore. And, yes, eventually, columns tumble, and what they have long supported crashes down.

We don’t have to look far in our society to see cracks becoming obvious. Look for their source and you’ll find foundations that are shifting and no longer able to support the weight they were designed to carry. Cracks. Crumbling. Collapse.

We’ve laughed at truth. I hear phrases like “your truth” and “my truth” which make about as much sense as “your gravity” and “my gravity.”

We’ve twisted real freedom, freedom to live a truly freeing, unselfish life of love that broadens our souls and blesses others, into the counterfeit “I’ve Gotta Be Me” no matter who I hurt.

We’ve abandoned foundational values as timeless and real as the multiplication tables (“your math” and “my math”?) and then been surprised when what we’ve engineered and built using false figures won’t stay standing.

C. S. Lewis described the situation: “We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

If this old porch column is to go on bearing weight, my brothers and I are going to have to rebuild it on a firm footing.

And where can we find a foundation that will bear the weight of our lives so that our lives can be built not only to bless ourselves but to bless those around us?

May I suggest a walk down the street this Sunday morning? You’ll likely find a place where people meet to honor the Builder who set the foundation posts of this universe. As cracked and weak and crumbling as many of us who meet below them are, steeples still point in the right direction—to the One who is eternally faithful and strong.





WONDER OF WONDERS, GOD SIGNED ON THE DOTTED LINE!

Our Father initiates the new covenant, gives us his Word on it, and pays the entire price for it.

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How long do you have to live to learn to be really careful before you sign anything on that famous “dotted line”?

It seemed so easy at the time. That new ride was cool. But we were just a few “easy payments” into the seventy-for-darn-near-forever of them before we realized that they weren’t much fun and not very easy. Now we’re wondering if we’re working to one fine day finally own that vehicle or if it already owns us. Very legally. Our signature on the line was all it took. Hmm. Maybe “paid for” easily trumps cool. Dotted lines are speed bumps to rattle our brains into thinking before we sign.

We warn each other, usually from sad experience: “Better read the fine print! The devil’s in the details!” Most of us have learned that “what we don’t know” can definitely hurt us, especially if it’s in the fine print of a contract.

Along this line, dotted or not, I always feel just a little nervous when I’m installing a new computer program and that very familiar screen pops up so I can just click on “I agree. I’ve read and understood the vast verbiage of legalese below.” Sure.

What do 99.95% of the best people you ever met do at that point? They lie. *Cllliiickkkk!* And Mother Teresa or St. Francis of Assisi would do the same thing.

Of course, we haven’t read it and never intend to. Even if we tried, we’d need a Rosetta Stone course in legal mumbo-jumbo to understand a tenth of it.

But we click the button anyway. We all play the game, lest any software

attorneys be rendered homeless and left unable to drop lawyer litter on our screens. Most of the time, it matters not one bit or byte. But for all we know, we might have just promised to dedicate our firstborn child to a cult of nudist vegans in Tasmania, or, heaven forbid, to never again scarf down a medium rare steak, or to swear off chocolate for the rest of our days.

Oh, it’s probably not that serious, but I guarantee you, and you already know, in lots of situations, you’d better read the fine print before signing on the dotted line, sealing the contract, doing the deal, agreeing to the agreement, consummating a covenant. Not looking before you leap has consequences.

Yes, our signatures say yes. To some sort of agreement. To some serious obligation.

Such agreements are no new thing. Covenants. The party of the first part agreeing to buy something, sell something, do something for, to, or with, the party of the second part. Nothing new.

Ah, but what if it’s the God of the universe who signs on the dotted line? “Testament” means “covenant.” Read in the Old Testament about the agreement God made with his people on Mount Sinai, and you’ll be amazed.

But far more amazing is the covenant we call “new.” (Read about it in the New Testament.) The Father initiates it, gives us his Word on it, fully pays the price for it with one Lamb, one Son, one sacrifice for all forever, an agreement sealed with the most precious drops of blood, infinitely costly to him, but free to all who believe. An amazing covenant! Grace indeed.

Wonder of wonders, God signed it.



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Thanks to Web Designer and Web Master Terry Grimm, and assistant Charlie Grimm, current issues, searchable archives of decades of issues, Curtis Shelburne’s *Focus on Faith* blog, and more resources are available at your fingertips. Just point and click!



WHAT DOES GOD SEE WHEN HE LOOKS AT YOU?

The answer is not found in the conclusions and verdicts of others; it is found in the genuine grace of God.

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What do you think God sees when he looks at you?

I didn't ask what you think others see.

I didn't ask what you think you see when you look at yourself, but it's an interesting question.

We tend toward extremes. We might as well admit it. Most of us have had occasional fits of self-righteousness when we were pretty full of ourselves, pretty sure that God was lucky to have us on his team, pretty sure that, unlike that of ordinary unspiritual folks, our own belly button lint is perfumed. Because we're so very spiritual, don'tcha know? That view smells. Not like perfume.

But most of us fall off the fence more often in the other direction. When we look at ourselves, we tend to focus on our flaws. We know how very often our weakness, faithlessness, and improper focus throw us off the track.

But my question is, "What do you think *God* sees when he looks at you?" That can be a scary question. See the preceding paragraph for reasons why. We don't live up to our own standards, much less God's.

Somebody reminds us that the blood of Christ makes each one of God's people clean, and we try to believe it. But then we look around at God's people, and it surely seems that a good many of them "have it together."

They look so shiny.

They look so spiritual.

Shouldn't we feel good about that? Maybe, but it actually makes us feel even worse. Then we feel bad about feeling bad.

Oh, I thank God for the church. It can be the best place in the world to find acceptance, joy, healing tears, life-affirming laughter, and love. It can be so very good! And I so hope you're a genuine part of a great church. But sometimes . . .

Sometimes right there in the place where everyone's hope is in Christ's perfection, not their own, we find ourselves feeling hopeless and inadequate yet again, trampled in a stained glass version of the same competitive rat race that infects the world. We'd so longed for some comfort, some peace. Instead, we at times have found ourselves feeling like a pretty bedraggled rat, measuring ourselves, even in a place where everyone should know for sure that by their own power nobody measures up.

Ah, but there's the problem. We're measuring. We're comparing. In the world. In the church. Maybe we need to stop accepting the conclusions of others and accept only the verdict of our Father.

Maybe some who are religious are cold and thin and unsmiling, brittle and hard. But not our Father.

Maybe some who are religious feel pleasure when others feel small. But not our Father.

So, here's that question again. What do you think God sees when he looks at you?

He sees a child in whom he delights! When we think about that and focus on his strength, his tenderness, his love, how can we be anything but thankful?





A STORY ABOUT GOD, GRUMBLING, AND A SNAKE ON A STICK

Poisoned by sin, we are invited to look up
in faith to our crucified Lord and live.

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As John 3 begins, we have the account of Jesus' amazing words to Nicodemus the Pharisee about being "born again."

Just a few verses later, the Lord refers to a snaky incident recorded in Numbers 21. Unlike Nicodemus, we modern Christians have heard the term "born again" enough that it no longer properly surprises us. What does catch us by surprise is the story from Numbers 21, with which Nicodemus would have been very familiar.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14-15).

Moses, we know. The wilderness, okay. What, pray tell, about this snake? What was Moses doing with a snake in the wilderness? Ah, it's an amazing story!

If we want to find out what God thinks about grumbling, we need look no farther than Numbers 21:4-8. The people of Israel are being led by God "the long way around" Edom on their way to the Promised Land, but they are already tired of the trip. They also are fed up with what they call "this detestable food." The food (which in Numbers 21:5 the King James Version calls "light bread"; "our soul loatheth thith [make that *this*] light bread") was manna from heaven. If you're a modern child and have never been so persecuted by your parents that you have had to eat something you don't like, you won't understand this story. Let's just say that

God has very little use for grumbling and grumbles, and he doesn't appreciate having his cooking criticized.

To punish the grumbling people, an angry God sends "fiery serpents" among the people, poisonous snakes known both for the fire of their venom and also, some say, for the color of their skin. Many Israelites are bitten, and many die.

When the people quickly deem repentance to be prudent, Moses prays for them, and God directs him to build a fiery serpent of his own! Moses is to fashion a serpent of brass, affix it atop a pole, and God promises that anyone who is bitten but who fixes his gaze upon that snake will be healed, and it was so.

That's amazing, but what does that "souped up" serpent of brass in the wilderness have to do with Jesus? Much!

As the brass serpent was lifted up on the pole in the wilderness, so the Son of God was "lifted up" on the cross—and because of his sacrifice, "highly exalted," lifted up, by his Father. Those Israelites envenomated by the poisonous serpents simply looked up to that serpent on the pole and lived. Notice that they looked at the serpent, but that act showed their faith not in the serpent but in the God who had directed them to look.

Likewise, we who have been poisoned by sin are invited to look up in faith to our crucified Lord that we may receive his mercy, healing, and life. Like the snake-bitten Israelites in the wilderness, we face a choice: Will we look up to God in faith and live?





ONLY BROKEN DISCIPLES FIND GRACE TO BE WHOLE

Christ has always done his very best work
in “broken and contrite” hearts.

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“You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” said the servant girl.

Peter, standing near the fire, startled, began backtracking. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, and slinked out into the entryway.

But the girl is speaking again, not keeping her opinion to herself: “This fellow is one of them.” Again Peter denies it, but the meddlesome girl has struck the match, and the flames are spreading. Others chime in, “Of course, you’re one of them, for you’re a Galilean.”

Yes, a Galilean fisherman, to be exact. He certainly knew some knots, and he didn’t have to reach all that far back to pull up some nautical terms. He cursed and swore, “I do not know the man!”

When his Lord needed him the most, Rocky crumbled, and he thundered about the man he loved more than anyone else in the world, “I tell you, I don’t even know who this man is!”

Then the sound of a rooster crowing struck his ears for the second time, even as the words attesting to his cowardice hung in the air, and he was assailed by the memory of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, “You will all deny me.”

As the whole bunch indignantly protested, one loud voice had rung out above the rest. “Lord,” Peter had opined, “even if all the rest of these deny you, I never will!”

Oh, be careful, Peter! Tread lightly, disciples then and now! We

are never more dangerous or more in danger than when we’re feeling more “spiritual” than others nearby.

In that courtyard, Peter remembered Jesus’ words to him: “I tell you the truth, today—this very night—before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.”

As the rooster’s raucous call echoed away, another sound replaced it. Peter’s own sobbing. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and the rock was crushed.

On the miserable scale of human foul-ups and faithlessness, this was no small failure. But Christ does his best work not when we’re fat and sassy and so “spiritual” we have to tie rocks to our feet to keep from ascending prematurely. No, he lifts us up when we’re broken, and we know it.

After the Resurrection, Peter and crew have gone back to fishing. The risen Lord has given them a miraculous catch and cooked breakfast for them.

Then Jesus gazes at Peter. Three times he asks, “Do you love me?” Three times Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”

Three denials by the fire in that wretched courtyard. Three affirmations by the campfire by the sea. And three times Jesus tells Peter, “Feed my sheep.” And, yes, Peter would.

Jesus loves this broken disciple far too much to let him wallow in his woundedness. Healed with a kind of wholeness he could never know when he was cocksure of his own strength, he was filled with new gratitude, new love, new wisdom, and mercy enough to share.

Now rolling down his cheeks are tears of joy as his Lord has lifted him higher than he could ever rise when he was sure he’d never fall.





SO, TELL ME, WHAT'S YOUR CONTENTMENT NUMBER?

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I've learned by now to be content whatever my circumstances." Amazing!

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One to ten scale. One, terrible; ten, incredibly good. Here's the question: In general, in your whole life, how content are you?

This is not a trick question. The first number that pops into your head is almost certainly the "right" one. Stop to think about this too long and you'll mess it up. So . . . what's your contentment number?

Play it close to the vest, if you wish. Your number is yours. I might tell you mine, if you ask; I might not. But I'm pretty sure I know one apostle's number.

"I've learned by now," he basically said, "to be quite content whatever my circumstances. . . . Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am" (Philippians 4, *The Message*).

The Apostle Paul would say, "Ten! I am a completely contented man, and it's all because of Christ." Wow!

Most of the time, I think I score pretty high. But it bugs me that I've wasted any time being discontent. I have no good excuse. Neither, by the way, does anyone else, though many, many folks have far better excuses than I do.

The hard fact is this—I don't make the rules here, or I'd probably be tempted to ease up on this one—the poorest, most genuinely downtrodden, picked on, unfairly treated, sad soul you ever met, doesn't get a pass on this, a waiver authorizing life as a "malcontent," a "person characterized by being discontent."

In this fallen world, lots that is bad, unfair, terrible, rotten, and not right, happens. In Scripture, I find many places where God looks at humans with mercy, compassion, and love. But not a single verse where God tells anyone that it's okay to live with a chip on their shoulder, that in such an extreme case, discontentment makes perfect sense. I can find plenty of places where grumbling is clearly shown in God's view to be far worse than a mistake; it's a sin—even a capital crime.

God's will for us—we may be sure of this—is that we live lives characterized by contentment rooted not in circumstances but in him. When your digestion isn't all that good and your back hurts. When your hair is turning gray and your body is getting old.

When your teenager is driving you crazy and may even have broken your heart. When your boss hasn't given you or anyone else a real compliment since the Truman administration.

When your bills are coming in more regularly than your paycheck which is effectively shrinking. When the newest car in your fleet should be driven straight to a dumpster.

When the company where you've worked for twenty years has just been bought and, in the midst of their "Don't worry! Just work harder and be happy" scripted pep talks, they just laid off one of your friends six months before his retirement, and you're probably next.

I told you, I don't make the rules. Nor did I say that I'm even close to being good at this myself. But when the Apostle Paul writes, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18), it really is the Holy Spirit's recipe for our highest good. I didn't say it was easy.

And I'm not telling you my number just yet.





CEMETERIES HELP KEEP LIFE IN PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Cemeteries help us divide what really
matters from what really does not.

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I'm weird, and I know it, but I sort of enjoy spending some time in cemeteries. I'm talking, of course, about the times when I want to be there, not the times when I have to be. Big difference. There's been way too much of the latter recently, it seems to me.

But I find cemeteries peaceful and interesting. Strolling among the tombstones (since I don't have to mow around them, I much prefer the standing ones), you get the chance to play Sherlock Holmes and deduce all sorts of life stories from all sorts of inscriptions.

Some cemeteries are quite beautiful with well-kept shrubs and trees and grass. And, if I may say so, the folks who populate cemeteries tend to be incredibly easy to get along with.

Since I've been a pastor in my community for almost thirty-three years, more than a few of the names I see on the stones in our area cemeteries are connected with lives and stories that I know. I stood at the heads of quite a few of those graves and spoke words I hoped would point to the Author of Life just before we tucked them in and the earth's blanket was rolled over those remains.

When I think of my life and the life of our community, it's hard for me to visualize life without many of the folks I've just mentioned. I no longer bump into them at worship or at the coffee shop or wave at them as we pass on the street. I miss that. (One of the largest blessings of my life has been being part of a small community.)

But those dear folks are still very much a part of me. A part of us. And that's especially true if they were part of the community of faith. They may or may not have been part of my congregation or my denomination, but so what? Christ's church is so much larger than the fences we build to try to keep God all tied up and tamed. Thank God indeed, God won't be shut up in anybody's box, and he has never been willing to be successfully tamed.

Death is the harshest reminder of all that we'll never get even this world tamed, much less its Creator. We may not look long upon those boxes that we bury, but they are nonetheless a constant reminder that life can't be successfully controlled.

Cemeteries help put our lives in perspective. The "drop dead" date for filing federal taxes will soon be upon us, but dead people care not at all. Life's cost is almost certainly increasing at a steadier clip than your paycheck, but once your heart stops the meter quits running, too. Perspective.

Cemeteries help us divide what really matters from what really does not. What matters most is who we chose to ultimately trust in this life—ourselves or our Creator. That's a serious decision.

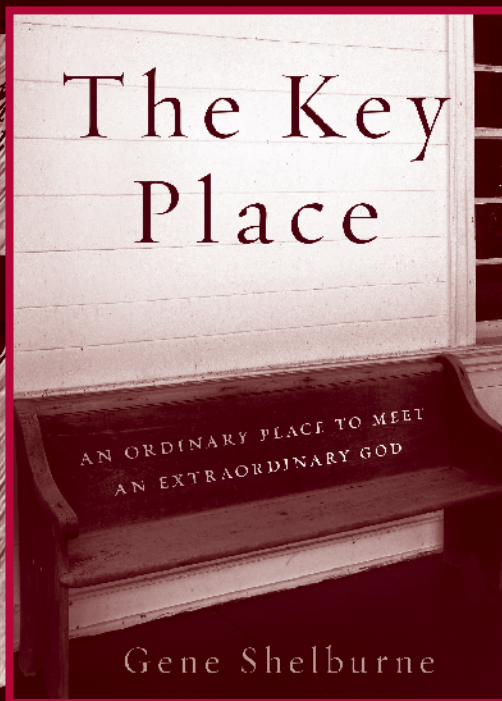
But once that decision's made, cemeteries also remind us that life is far too precious to be taken too seriously. God is the God of all joy. Those who love him can dance in his presence both here and hereafter. They know better than to think that love and laughter and beauty cease on the other side of the tombstone.



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IN OUR EARS AND TUG
AT OUR HEARTS.

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