

# EPIC:

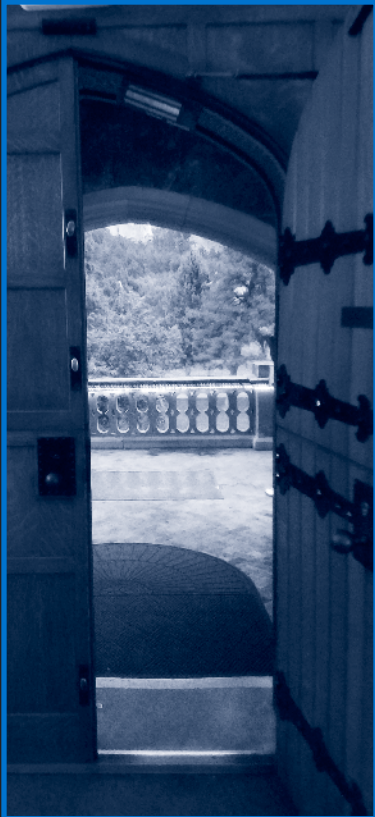
extending beyond the  
ordinary especially in  
size or scope



Faith  
Calling  
Pain  
War  
Forgiveness

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



Curtis Shelburne

**E**pic. Now there's a big little word! It's not a word we toss around lightly. Not a denim and tennis shoes sort of word, this word is black tie and tails. Dignified. And versatile. If it's a work of art such as a poem, it's a long one with a big hero. If it's an adjective, it's "beyond the usual or ordinary." The writers we welcome to our pages in this issue point us to some truly "epic" aspects of our faith. Most of all, they point us to the epic Lord before whom all other heroes, all other lords, bow.

—Curtis Shelburne  
*Managing Editor*

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# EPIC: FAITH

*Knowing the stories of God's  
people long ago is crucial to  
living as his people today.*

BY RICKY LEWIS

# Epic

is a word that aptly describes both our deep faith in Christ and the journey in which he leads.

When epic is an adjective, it describes something “extending beyond the usual or ordinary especially in size or scope.”

Yes, but “epic” is also a noun denoting “a long narrative poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero.” Think of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Epics.

The term has been expanded in our modern times: “a long film, book, or other work portraying heroic deeds or adventures covering an extended period of time.”

The word is a particularly apt description of the Christian faith. Our faith is truly epic in scope, and the Bible is *the* book, the epic that chronicles not only the stories of great heroes of faith but also chronicles my story and yours.

How important it is that we remember the biblical accounts

of the heroic deeds, adventures, and tragedies that inform our “story” as we live the lives God calls us to live today!

In the Bible we get a close-up view of how God’s people whose stories are written there lived out their faith in ways that still inspire us, direct us, and inform us as we seek to live our own story in

ways that honor our God.

Not least, these stories also serve for us as cautionary tales as we see even “epic” heroes of faith dealing with, falling into, running toward, or blundering into failures of sometimes epic proportions. We look at their lives and at God’s work in them—his power, love, mercy, grace, redemption—and their lives and stories become a testament to the truth that God is revealing to us today.

What an epic blessing! Our Father allows his children today to know others, his people of faith, who have gone before us and were willing to sacrifice, fight, move, endure pain, and even die for the truly epic faith—a life-altering, life-changing, life-coloring belief in the God who created this world and loves us so deeply that through his own Son he is restoring this world and our lives to what they should be,

what they *will* be, renewed and given life forever in him.

My hope is that God is opening our eyes each day, each moment, to the ways he truly is leading us in our journey of faith. I pray, first, that we are coming to know him better each

*What an epic blessing that God allows his children today to know the stories of amazing people of faith who have gone before us!*

day and to realize more fully how deep his love for us truly is. I pray, secondly, that we may see clearly that the work God is doing in our lives is a light for others who have yet to know and understand the grace and peace and freedom he offers them every moment of every day.

May we dig ever deeper into the epic faith God wants to reveal in each of us!



# EPIC: WAR

*Make no mistake!,  
God's people are soldiers  
fighting in the ultimate war.*

BY CLAY JOHNSON

“I

**wish there was a war,”  
wrote a bored teenager  
Alexander Hamilton in a  
letter to a friend.**

Hamilton wrote on November 11, 1769, bemoaning his own meager status as a shipping clerk.

Being of low birth and a Scotsman, the only way Hamilton could see to “rise up” (if you recall the song from the musical) was by being a soldier on the battlefield. Little did he know that seven years later the American

colonies would declare their independence and his wish for war would come true. Hamilton would not only fight as a patriot in the Revolution, he would be selected by General Washington as his aide-de-camp, and he would then be appointed as the first United States Secretary of the Treasury.

So, was it the war that made Hamilton?

What makes us crave battle? Why do we have our own wishing-for-war moments? We cannot deny it.

Any good story must have con-

flict or the public won't buy it. Sporting events are more appealing with tales of underdogs beating the odds. Tabloid magazines capitalize on our “need” for a good fight, and apparently the only reason Twitter exists is to encourage little skirmishes all over the Internet.

Yes, we crave it. But is this craving inherently wrong? Clearly, the sinful manifestations

are wrong, but the emotional desire itself may actually be part of being created in the image of God. The celebration of carnage, of course, comes from Satan. But the quest for victory and justice, bravery and courage, comes from above.

*Since Lucifer fell, this war has been raging, and Scripture bears witness to it. From beginning to end, humanity is under attack.*

And what if this longing within us actually serves a higher purpose as it points us to the invisible, but very real, epic war being waged between Satan and the followers of Jesus (see Revelation 12:17)? What if our wish for war (as in Hamilton) is at a deeper level a wish for triumph? After all, no one wishes to lose. Remember the Apostle

Paul's triumphant words, "I have fought the good fight" (2 Timothy 4:7). We're not talking here about a bar room brawl or a soap opera spat, though every conflict should jostle our hearts into remembering the war we're in and the victory that is ours through Jesus Christ.

Since Lucifer fell, this war has been raging, and Scripture bears witness to it. From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Lot, from Moses to Pharaoh to David and Goliath. From beginning to end, humanity continues to be under attack. Instead

of stewing and grumbling about the petty scuffles we find ourselves in, and instead of pursuing artificial means of experiencing victory, we, as God's people, should commit ourselves to engaging in this war that truly matters, this epic battle that is not a fight against flesh and blood but is a raging battle against the invisible darkness of

evil (see Ephesians 6:12). Yes, we must engage! But how?

### **Be Still**

Too often we try to fight alone in this invisible war. Impossible! And since we can't see our targets, we wind up wounding the visible. Remember God's word to Israel as his people were trapped at the Red Sea: "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:13-14).

### **Pray Boldly**

When our hearts are still and we know that the Lord is God, we can speak to him in prayer. And since he is God, we can come to him with a large vision! We should pray boldly like Joshua who even asked God to make the sun stand still so that the battle might be won" (Joshua 10:14).

### **Stand Firm**

"You will not have to fight this battle. . . . Stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord

will give you" (2 Chronicles 20:17). Again, our job is not to fight, but neither are we to be spiritually "on leave." The Apostle Paul tells us to "put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand" (Ephesians 6:11). Three times

*Since our battle is not against flesh and blood, and since we can't see our targets in this invisible war, too often we wound the visible.*

in Ephesians 6:10-18, Paul uses the word "stand." We are never told to attack, but we are to stand firm in our faith that Jesus is Lord.

War is not a thing to wish for, but this spiritual war is here and real. So, engage, dear soldier of Christ! And receive the victory our God will assuredly give!



# EPIC:

## FORGIVENESS

*In the Bible we have  
God's epic story of  
love and forgiveness.*

BY NATHAN KELLER

# In

**today's romantic silver-  
screen depictions of love,  
conflict, and resolution,  
Hollywood productions**

receive piled on praise and accolades and millions of dollars.

What if I told you I knew a story of romance, love, and forgiveness that made all other stories pale in comparison? Where can you find this masterful work? The Bible! In this amazing book, the Holy Spirit tells us God's epic story of forgiveness.

The story begins in a garden where Adam and Eve were content, busy, and together. Only one rule was given to them. They were not to eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 3:17). Their contentment was shattered when Eve listened to Satan and, in an attempt to obtain wisdom, ate the forbidden fruit and then

gave it to her husband who also ate. A sad variety of punishments followed that disobedience, but the greatest punishment was

that Adam and Eve were exiled from God's presence. The resulting sin-spawned rift reaches far beyond our First Parents.

The Apostle Paul tells us that Adam's sin brought death to all people. But just as one man's sin brought death to all, another's righteous act leads to justification for all (see Romans 5:18). This epic story that begins with the fall of

Adam and Eve, reaches its climax with God's forgiveness of our sin through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In between we see the constant battle that is being waged over the souls of men and women, and we see human pride fight-

*A willing sacrifice, a perfect Lamb, takes away from us all of our sin, all of our guilt. The game-changer is the cross!*

ing against God's will and desire for reconciliation. The climax of the story, though, is not found in humanity's ability to wake up but in God's ability to forgive.

In fact, Paul draws a dramatic contrast between the fallen character of man and the loving character of God. In Romans 5:6-8 we see that our

forgiveness hinges upon God's ability, through Christ, to show us mercy rather than the just punishment we all deserve. A willing sacrifice, a perfect Lamb, takes away from us all of our sin, all of our guilt.

The game-changer is the Cross! Forgiven, redeemed, we are left with this question: "How should God's gift in this epic story of forgiveness affect our own story?"

Oh, it colors all of our lives! It changes everything! But let me share two especially beautiful truths.

### **God's Example**

First, forgiveness is God's example for us. Since our Father has forgiven us, we are to be "kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ" has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). God's forgiving work should transform the way we view people and their sin, even when

their sin is directed against us. Remember, when Peter asks the Lord how many times he has to forgive someone who has wronged him, Jesus famously replies "seventy times seven times" (Matthew 18:22). He is not saying, "Start counting!" He is actually telling Peter and us that we are to forgive "times without number." Just like God. And a parable then follows as Jesus makes the sharp point that the real matter is not how many times we have to forgive; what really matters is how much we've been forgiven.

### **Free from Sin!**

Secondly, forgiveness means that we are free from sin. As slaves to sin, we've been tethered to death, but through Christ we have been set free from sin (see Romans 6:18). This new-found freedom changes the way we live, the way we feel about life, the hope we have for life

here and hereafter, our relationship with God, and our relationship with everyone around us.

So God's work on the cross has resulted in the redemption of all humanity, all nature. Since the Resurrection, everything has changed and God's genuinely

*Freedom in Christ changes everything as it changes our relationship with God and our relationship with everyone around us!*

new creation is under way. And the forgiveness we receive is incredibly personal as well. As we each one look at our Father, see the love in his eyes, and accept the freedom Christ has given us, we begin to forgive others and free both ourselves and them.

Epic forgiveness? Oh, yes!



# EPIC: PAIN

*An abundant life is full of hills.  
They are part of the adventure  
that God ordains.*

BY ALLISON LEWIS

# W

**When I am running, I like to attack hills. As the upward grade approaches, I pick up the pace.**

I lean in, pump my arms, will my legs to carry me to the top as quickly as possible. I've been there before, and I know the journey up will bring pain, but I also know the deep exhilaration of reaching the top. I've actually come to long for a few hills in my workout so I can again experience that view, that feeling.

Pain changes us. My husband

and I have three adopted children who came into our hearts out of a very broken situation. From our earliest moments together, we knew the act of saying "yes" to raising them had changed us forever. We experienced the marvel of having a front row seat at a miracle. We launched into years of waiting, longing, praying, groaning, and planning (and plan-shattering).

Eventually, though, as the hills levelled, we were able to lean on our hands on our knees for a minute and look back.

At the top of the hill, we were out of breath, our bones ached, and our lives were completely rocked. But there was something more. At the top, we could see just how far we'd been carried.

An abundant life is full of hills. They are part of the adventures that God ordains, those that are ours only if we are willing to seek after them with a discerning humility. As



we climb those difficult hills, we experience the Lord's pleasure.

In Scripture we learn the stories of God's faith-filled people. The backdrop of their pain creates an epic display of God's glory in their lives. They climb hills they did not seek, hills that

*In climbing hills they did not seek, climbers find themselves uniquely positioned to experience the miracle of God's love.*

none would have dared to set foot on if they could have been avoided. But in the climbing they find themselves uniquely positioned to experience the miracle of God's love, and all who watch them also experience God's glory.

In our lives we will all have hills. Perhaps you are staring at one right now. Whether we're discerning our next God-ordained

adventure or, because of a life-twist no one would choose willingly, the hill looms. A nagging feeling tells us that more is ahead if we're willing to climb. A hesitation says that our fear—fear of failure or apparent lack of resources or pain—may

prevent us from leaning into the hill that is right in front of us.

But I know this truth: each time you chase the Lord's will and provision, you will absolutely find it. His pleasure will redeem every ounce of energy you've exerted.

At some point, you'll catch your breath, look back, realize how far

you've come, and forever be changed. You'll have seen the Lord at work for your good and his glory, and you'll long for another taste of his pleasure. You'll be more likely to plot a course that includes an uphill climb. You'll run with assurance that while pain in climbing may be real, your view from the hilltop is . . . *epic!*

# EPIC:

## CALLING

*How does God's calling on our lives as his children bring order out of chaos?*

BY DEVON WATKINS

# W

**What does God want me to do with my life? What school should I attend? What job should I take?**

What is my purpose? And what answers might we find in the Scriptures about our place in God's epic story? Perhaps we should start at the very beginning.

I had always pictured the first chapter of Genesis as describing God bringing something out of nothing, but our Creator doesn't start with nothing; he starts with a mess. We're told that "the

earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep" (1:2). We don't have "nothing"; what we have is shapeless and vacant with a "surface" and "waters," an unintelligible, amorphous ball of "stuff" shrouded in darkness.

Genesis 1 is not so much a story that moves from nothing to something as it is a story that moves from chaos to order.

God brings light, separates light from darkness, and water from sky. The story of creation is less like a magician making things

appear out of thin air and more like God "cleaning the room" of the universe. Our Creator orders, arranges, finds places for things to be, sets up a schedule for things to happen, groups like things together, and decides on an organizational scheme (the "sun to govern the day and the moon, the night," etc.). The "mess" becomes beautiful.

Now, the purpose of cleaning

your room is not to show off your organizational skills or impress your friends, it's to have a space you can live in, a space that suits your needs. Genesis 1 culminates in God "resting," taking up residence in the world he has made. So the whole of creation itself is the temple where God himself will dwell.

### What About Us?

And so, what about us? We too are described as God's dwelling place, as a church and as individuals made in God's image. Our lives sometimes seem like chaos, random moments, pointless encounters, endless cycles of school, work, sleep, meals, entertainment, with no real awareness of what it all means. What would it look like for us to shape what is already there in our lives, creating order out of chaos?

For centuries Christians have created and followed daily and weekly practices, disciplines of prayer, solitude,

service, worship, activities intended to shape our lives. There is a reason that historically societies of monks and nuns are called "orders" and spiritual practices are called "disciplines."

Since we are called to be

*God has called us to be disciples, empowering us to make "every day" a place where he dwells.*

disciples, what might it look like to intentionally order our lives so that God might inhabit our days more fully?

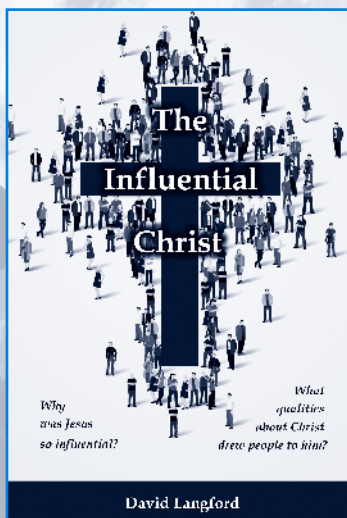
Living out God's amazing purpose for our lives means inviting our Creator to make us "new creations" as he "cleans house" in our souls through prayer, worship, study, service, and loving community. He is calling and empowering us to make "every day" a place where God will dwell.



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