

The background of the top half of the cover is a photograph of a calm lake with mountains in the distance under a cloudy sky. The image is tinted with a purple hue.

FOCUS ON

faiith

Essays by Curtis Shelburne

Series 7, Volume 1

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



John Gulley

“Faith,” writes Max Lucado, “is not the belief that God will do what you want. It is the belief that God will do what is right.” In any circumstance. In good times. In tough times. In all times, Christ’s people can trust their loving and faithful Lord to “work for their good.” Join us this month as Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne again encourages us to focus our faith in Christ.

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“God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear.”

Romans 3
The Message



“Dear Father,
We trust completely and only in your Son, and we praise you for pardon, freedom, and power.”

Amen



Curtis Shelburne



“THOU SHALT TAKE SOME TIME TO REST”

Our refusal to regularly rest is both a form of
idolatry and a costly lack of discipline.

focus
faith

Do kindergartners still take rest mats with them to school as the term begins?

It was actually first grade for me when I started public school in Amarillo, Texas, at San Jacinto Elementary. I had already completed kindergarten, diploma in hand. That K for “kindergarten” was the private kind my folks paid for because they thought I could do with the socialization. School districts had not at that time signed on to pick up their students at the hospital the moment the birth certificate ink was washed off their itty-bitty feet.

Mrs. Marvine Francis was my kindergarten teacher, and we did fun things like growing beans in soil in little milk cartons. Except for the first day or so, it was great, and she was, all through the year, wonderful.

I do remember, on Day One, that Mom and Dad had promised me that we were just visiting to check things out and that I didn’t have to stay if I didn’t want to. I can’t imagine that they actually uttered those words, but that’s the message that lodged in my head. The place seemed okay to me, but I had weighed the decision carefully and figured I’d just go home and continue with my life. Nope. My school career had begun, and my life would never be the same.

On the following autumn, my post-kindergarten graduate work commenced at San Jacinto Elementary. I can, and one day will, tell you more stories about an absolutely wonderful principal and some amazing teachers, but what I’m thinking of now is school supplies.

A cigar box. (Sadly, I don’t think it smelled like cigars, but, come to think of it, I do remember you could buy candy cigarettes at the school store.) It held scissors which could hardly cut paper but would certainly not cut your fingers. Your little bottle of Elmer’s Glue (with its orange top) would fit

nicely into that box. Throw in a couple of big—I mean *really* big and fat—pencils. Large erasers were forbidden at this point, and my impression was that having an ink pen in your cigar box would issue in at least a paddling and probably jail time.

Also, of course, each student had the obligatory Big Chief ruled tablet. These things wouldn’t fit into your cigar box, but they were impressive. Deep red. With a formidable Indian chief’s visage splashed across the front in bold black. I wonder if you can still find those. Maybe they’re Big Commander tablets now. Big Commies, for short. Good grief.

But the largest and, I thought, perhaps most important item I took with me to first grade was an inch-thick, quarter-folding, plasticky-smelling, “rest mat.” Mine was blue and red, foretelling, I’m sure, my destiny to excel six years later when I began seventh grade at Sam Houston Junior High (“Hail the red and blue! / Honor, love, and true devotion / We will give to you!”).

I went to San Jacinto prepared to learn—and to rest a bit each day. Mrs. Carmody (hair redder than Lucille Ball’s and fiercely determined that her students would succeed) wouldn’t put up with talking out of turn, dirty fingernails, or any funny business at all at any time during the day. And, yes, when it came time to roll out the rest mats for our daily nap, napping was the serious business at hand. No snickering.

I don’t remember being excited about nap time. Now, I’d pay somebody good money to make me take one. Every day. No ifs, ands, or buts. No talking. Dream if you wish. There’s stuff to do later. Cut. Color. Paste. String some letters together. Read some letters other people have lined up. But, for now, our serious business is rest. Get to it or face a paddling.

Most of us adults are so pig-headed that we’ll resist ever taking any real time to rest, even if God orders it in a commandment. Our refusal doesn’t mean that we’ll get away unscathed and avoid the crashes that will come from a lack of rest and the idolatry which says that if we ever stop for a moment, God probably won’t be able to spin the world without us. But we are (forgive me) as dumb and undisciplined as we are arrogant. Stressed-out families pay a high price for such foolishness.

I still think Mrs. Carmody was right. And I still think, on this and many other points, God and Mrs. Carmody were completely agreed.





DO FAITH HEALERS HAVE SPECIALTIES?

"I'm not sure, but take two aspirin and call me tomorrow. Or not? If you have faith?"

focus
faith

Do faith healers have specialties?

Doctors do, of course. I'd not be surprised to find an LDP specialist available should you need a Left Distal Phalange doctor for your port side little toe. Recently, I could have used an RDP specialist. But I'm fine now.

Yes, doctors have specialties. But, for some reason, I found myself wondering about faith healers and specialties. I'd never even consider "hanging out my shingle" as a faith healer. But, if I did, I'd be more tempted to work with cancer or heart disease (or maybe headaches or upper respiratory infections) than amputations/prosthetics. If my "cure" rate became troublesome, I could always just blame the patient.

"You have committed sin," I could charge, and hit the mark since 100% of folks miss the mark. "You need more faith," I might say. Well, thanks, a patient who'd limped in, crawled in, was carried in, might say. Who doesn't?

"You not only need more faith, you need higher quality faith." Guess what? My patient already knows that, too, and now has the added burden (if he's not very good at thinking) of thinking that folks with "Grade A" faith don't get sick, have accidents, lose loved ones, see marriages fail, etc., so his faith must be "Grade B." Deal with it and take two aspirin. Or not. If you have faith.

Or what if I, the malpracticing faith healer, said or implied, "You just need more faith and better prayer technique. You need to use the right words, phrases, and formulae (incantations?). Sure is a shame you or your loved one caught this malady, has this difficulty, is dealing with this loss, but if you just prayed with enough vigor and used exactly the right technique . . ."

Phooey! Tough things happen. Bad things happen. Good people suffer. Bad people suffer. It's far too simplistic to say that good people always

prosper and bad people always suffer, and thus, if you're suffering, you did something evil or wrong and certainly didn't "do faith right."

The simplistic—and wrong—answers are nothing new and always tempting. Look at the Book of Job. Old Job and his friends (whom he could have done without) had the usual theories about his suffering—all sounded plausible, and all were wrong. The friends were, Job says, "worthless physicians," but Job also failed as a diagnostician, as God makes clear by the end of the book.

I don't like suffering. If I am ill, I'd very much like to be healed. If Jesus would like to do an eye-popping miracle, fine! He can. If he chooses to use the usual methods, just as much his blessing, I'm for that, too.

I take it for granted that the Lord who sees when a sparrow falls really does care about the hairs on our heads, our left little fingers, livers, legs, kidneys, and all. But he seems to care most about our hearts, our souls.

I love the account in Mark 2 where Jesus first heals a man spiritually and, only then, physically. He seems to think that the former is more important.

This brings to my mind a hypothetical question. I doubt the Lord would force this decision on the Mark 2 guy or on us, but what if the choice were between one or the other? Spiritual or physical healing? Not both. Hmm.

And, oh, do you need more faith? Me, too. But remember that Jesus seemed to esteem "faith as a grain of mustard seed" to be real faith, albeit small. For my part, I think most of us will be spiritually healthier and have greater faith if we avoid those who are sure that their own faith is quite large.

And prayer? Our Father has promised to hear and give us what we need. Just don't forget that the best gift by far is the gift of himself.

A lot of these faith, prayer, and healing questions are way above my pay grade. Still, I don't think our Father minds us asking them. I think he wants us to use our brains more, not less, than we do.

But, as Job found out, God is God, and we are not.

I choose to trust my Father who is completely good, completely powerful, and completely loving. He loves and delights in all of his children. Me, too. As weak and faithless as I often am, I think my Father likes me a lot. That, my friends, is a miracle indeed!





FAITH AND PRAYER, HEALING AND RAIN

Jesus prayed, and he taught us to pray about any concern. Prayer matters! Relationship matters!

focus
faith

I've been thinking some more about this "rain thing" (say it Southern!).

I recently wrote about rain—specifically, the heart-breaking, soul-sucking, economically disastrous lack thereof.

In the previous column, I wrote about faith and healing, centering on the wonder-filled account in Mark 2. Jesus is teaching, and a paralyzed man is brought to him, carried on a mat by four friends. The room is so crowded that the only way they can get the man to Jesus is to cut a hole in the roof and lower him down. (A mess, I bet.) Jesus, first, sees the faith of the friends. And then he says to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

The toxically religious leaders, always ready to throw cold water on any spark of joy lest a fire of it break out, grouchy, and ironically, hit the nail on the head: Who does this guy think he is?! "Only God can forgive sins." Bingo!

Then Jesus raises the ante. I paraphrase: "Which is easier? To forgive this man's sins or to heal him and let him dance out of here? So you'll know that I have authority to do the former, I hereby do the latter." And he did.

I wondered aloud what most folks might choose if we could only pick one: forgiveness or healing. Jesus asked, "Which is harder?" We might well ask, "Which is more important? Which is better?"

I know. So do you. If you think that means that I know for sure which I'd choose, your opinion of me is higher than my opinion of me.

This brings me to a little (perhaps thin) thought about rain, faith, and healing. In general, it seems clear to me that God has set up the physics and biology of this world to work pretty predictably and well, though not always as I like. If I kick a door frame and break my little toe, both physics and biology are at work. Painfully. But that my toe heals is also God's blessing and design. And the rain? It "falls on the just and the unjust" and

follows physical laws. Most often, we're blessed by it. But hail, floods, and such, loudly proclaim, "Not always."

God most often chooses to answer our prayers by helping us deal with what is. That is a very real answer, though I'd usually prefer "what is" to be changed to "what I want." But the fact is, Jesus prayed. He taught us to pray about any concern. He taught us that prayer matters. Relationship matters. We're kids. God is our Father. We can and should ask, and trust that our Father will answer by giving us what we need and what is best for us, now and forever. And so, I pray. For others. For myself. For our world.

When I pray about health situations faced by my family, my church family, and others I love, I pray for healing, and I shoot for the moon. God invited me to ask. Why not ask big? Do I sometimes get the answer I want? Yes. Always? Not even close. What about "flashy" answers and fireworks? Rarely. (If I always need fireworks, is that less faith or more? Less, I think.)

Do I sometimes pray, watch the health situation deteriorate, and then hate what looks like the end result? All too often. But I don't see the whole picture. I quickly assume that real answers must be obvious in the "here and now." I almost always assume that good health and longevity here are always the best for me and those I love. Is that correct? I doubt it. But it *is* what I want. I can be white-hot-angry when folks I love are hurting, my prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling, and even God's prayer promises seem a mockery.

God wants us to be honest about our feelings. Read the Psalms! Am I at times bitterly disappointed? Yes. But the Bible portrays God as the Father who loves us fiercely. He wants to build in us something far better than anything that constant doses of health, wealth, and prosperity could ever produce. In my better moments, I know that I can trust him completely, even if I'm shooting up hot prayers to heaven's Complaint Department.

And now, let's pause to pray for rain. Right now rain. Lots of it. I hate this drought, as my Father well knows. I've shaken my fist in the dirty face of the wind and used words saltier than "Peace! Be still!" To no avail.

But could it be that in the face of some deplorable meteorological physics, God can build something in us that "rain on demand" could not? In faith, I believe and hope so. One day, real rain—and not just blowing mud—will come. And I will thank my Father.





“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD”

Some words fill us with a deep need to bow,
to worship, and to praise.

focus
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I hereby confess: modern (English) poetry—or post-modern poetry, or post-post-modern poetry, baffles me. (As the late columnist and Yale writing professor William Zinsser has written, there’s no place to stop with “post-ness.”)

My preference should surprise no one. I am an English major but of an old, fossilized, and vanishing variety. I prefer a degree plan heavy on Shakespeare and very, very light indeed on Gender & Sexuality Studies.

And here, friends, is the most damning confession of all: I really prefer poetry that rhymes. Sometimes, on an even-numbered year, in a month ending in R, at a Corn Moon, I’ll find a non-rhyming poem that I really like.

No surprise, I am not much of a fan of modern art, either. I like colors, but I’m not very impressed with water balloon art, unless my grandkids created it. I’m fond of some of the work of the “impressionists,” usually their more realistic work. But, in general, if you want to paint an unrecognizable duck—you know, the way the duck makes you feel—first paint me an actual “ducky” that looks like a water foul that might actually quack, and we’ll hang them together.

So I’m not very modern. Or post-modern. And, nope, I don’t care much for modernist architecture either. Or contemporary. Cold, sterile, and ugly most of it is. A fossil I am. But I’m somewhat consistent. Or boring and predictable. Consistently fossilized.

So this fits the picture: most modern poetry baffles me. I have a hard time figuring out how poetry that does not rhyme is much closer to poetry than it is to flowery—or just drunken—prose, the kind I’d write just after my colonoscopy but before the anesthetic fully wears off. Is it poetry just because the lines are stacked, short, and/or indented? Most of it generally strikes me as a rather strange hybrid that looks weird, is filled with angst, rarely ever smiles, and always takes itself incredibly seriously.

In the animal kingdom, it would be a mule, I think, though mules are much less pretentious. In no way do I mean to disparage mules. Indeed, I have more reasons than most folks to hold the lowly mule in high esteem and consider him even an almost regal beast. But a mule, you see, is the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse.

Now, to extend my metaphor, let’s say that, in the creation of a mule, Daddy the Donkey is prose and Mommy the Horse is poetry. I’ve read beautiful prose that is almost poetry, and I’ve read soul-lifting poetry, some of which tends a tad toward prose. But much of the presently popular stuff seems to me to be a much more seriously unfortunate attempt at amalgamation. You see . . .

*The offspring of a
male donkey and a
female horse is
neither
donkey nor
horse.*

And that, friends, says the cut-rate poet who wrote it, is not poetry, however stacked or indented it may be. It is something weirdly neither—sterile and nowhere close to being as useful as a trusty mule.

Forgive me, please. I’m likely just being mulish.

But words matter, particularly the ones that are bathed in awe. It matters deeply that when the Apostle John begins his Gospel proclaiming “the Grand Miracle” (as C. S. Lewis calls the Incarnation), he writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Indent those words as poetry if you wish. I readily admit that they don’t need to rhyme (in English or biblical Greek) to give me goose bumps. They point to meaning and mystery that the most magnificent word pictures of the most wonder-filled poetry or most sublime prose could never adequately paint.

Those words move me and fill me with a deep need to bow, to worship, and, when my breath returns, to praise.





SWIMMING IN A SEA OF SELFISHNESS

A life filled to overflowing with what does
not ultimately matter is a sad life.

focus
faith

Believe me, I write this column as no sort of spiritual giant; I don't know my own weakness as well as I should, but I surely know it enough to see warning signs pop up everywhere when I'm tempted to feel self-righteous.

And here comes that dangerous word: but. But surely anyone with any spiritual sensitivity at all doesn't have to look long at our society to see that we are, as I recently heard someone opine, constantly swimming in a sea of selfishness.

We all do well to consider that, even if we can aspire to a little unselfishness, our default mode is to be self-centered. Literally. Our view of the world, our contentment in it, is easily focused, judged, and completely dependent upon how comfortable, prosperous, and happy we are at any given moment.

Are we making increasingly more money? Living more prosperously? "Standard of living" above average? Didn't lose too many golf balls on our last round? Possess slightly nicer cars than our neighbors? Attend a church where all of our "needs" are professionally met and we honor our crucified Lord by rarely ever having to sing a song we don't much like? Then life—or at least the top half-inch, whatever else is below the surface—is good.

Sadly, the evidence of our society's soul-sickening shallowness is all around us. But sometimes some little thing makes it even more starkly obvious. One "news" item did that for me yesterday.

Talk about a slow news day! This item popped up on my iPad in one of those news smorgasbords that pull from lots of sources, including one source that never gives real news unless you want to know who may be sporting a "baby bump" or what "stars" are beginning their latest affairs.

So I was not surprised to see, from that source, a headline discussing

a famous pop star's fuss with paparazzi. She didn't seem concerned that photographs of her short of clothes were everywhere. But it seemed to be driving her nuts (well, nuttier) that the pics, she claims, were altered to make her look, she said, forty pounds heavier than she is. She took to Twitter to urgently assure her fans that she is still "pencil thin."

That's a relief.

Okay. Seriously. Not many of us need an extra forty pounds.

But much more seriously, I feel sorry for this poor rich lady. I don't think she needs to worry much about her weight. She seems very small indeed. I wish she could find, and let her soul be filled with, real meaning and healing and purpose and hope. I feel sorry for her children who will likely grow up in financial privilege but with impoverished values that lead toward despair.

A life filled to overflowing with what doesn't ultimately matter, what will not last, and what cannot satisfy is a sad life. And I feel particularly sad for scads of sweet little girls who, growing up in a society that idolizes such people, receive yet another push toward physical anorexia and soul-shriveling poverty.

Our children deserve better. Real joy, not counterfeit. Real beauty, not soul-rot. Real riches, not just money. Real life that thrives by giving instead of shriveling in consumption as joyless as it is constant.

Sadly, as I write this column, I realize what frustrates me most. It's when I look inside and am forced to see how quickly my own soul becomes self-centered, atrophied, and pencil thin.

To point toward what really matters and will bless, not curse, those who follow us, we must know where real life is found. Our kids will look for it where they see us looking for it. What will they find?



If you enjoy these essays, you might also enjoy listening to some episodes of Curtis Shelburne's new podcast. You can check it out at www.CurtisShelburne.com/podcast.



CHRONOLOGICAL SNOBBERY: WE CAN'T AFFORD IT

Are we really any wiser than our
forebears just because we came later?

focus
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“Chronological snobbery” is the term C. S. Lewis used, in his book *Surprised by Joy*, to describe “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”

My over-simplified description is that it’s the unexamined belief that since we have come along at a later date than our ancestors, we are therefore wiser. “Years ago (pick any time past) they used to think A, but now (pat ourselves on the backs for the virtue of having been born more recently) we think B, and have thus arrived at a higher plane of knowledge, wisdom, and even morality.”

Really? I see very little evidence of that. But, if you begin to look for chronological snobbery underlying much of our era’s thinking, you’ll soon see how pervasive it is.

Of course, one of our largest temptations is to mistake factual knowledge and information for wisdom. I’ve heard varying estimates of how fast our world’s store of information is increasing. No doubt, the advent of computer technology has, by any of the many estimates you’ll find, exponentially increased the speed with which such knowledge accumulates. Warp speed. At a mind-boggling rate.

A nerd at heart, I am fascinated by technology and thankful for much of it. I love having vast amounts of information as close as my computer. But I can’t find any evidence that we are wiser than our ancestors. We are snobbish about “knowing” more, but are we any wiser in the use of what we think we know?

Can we “do” more? Yes, in many areas. But do we know more about what is worth doing, what is truly valuable in life, what constitutes a life well-lived, and what really is ultimately the meaning of life? Are we any better at all in understanding and dealing with human nature? If anything (and I may fall prey here to chronological snobbery in reverse), it seems to me that we may know far less than many of our predecessors about what is truly important, and are thus condemned by our own

arrogance to the same failures (and maybe worse) than those of our forebears.

I find myself agreeing with writer Lance Morrow who laments that we are living in “the Golden Age of Stupidity.” Among abundantly available examples, he mentions the “need” for two sexes to divide into 100 genders.

Lewis points to the heart of the problem when he talks about our “uncritical acceptance” of the fact (?) that ours is the age that has finally “arrived” [my term], and so our own era’s assumptions must be valid simply because they are recent, and I’d add—trendy, popular, and passionately held. We tend to easily discard the wisdom of the ages for the findings of the latest opinion poll. An opinion poll may tell us a lot about the respondents and their cultural climate, but it tells us nothing about how well a particular opinion will stand up to serious rational thought.

“Was it [this or that assumption] ever refuted,” Lewis asks, “(and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood.” He goes on to say that, as we think about this, we begin to find that every age is filled with its own “characteristic illusions” that are so widely accepted that no one “dares to attack” them or “feels it necessary to defend them.” Our age is no exception.

We point to this or that failure (real or just out of fashion) discovered in the life of a heretofore respected historical figure and adjudge he/she as completely discredited, even as we dance to the whims of our time and disregard the wisdom of the ages.

We gorge ourselves on the latest Internet conspiracy theories and subject ourselves to a drought of wisdom by never reading an actual time-tested and justly revered book. Even the dead—maybe particularly the dead—have much to teach us if we’d just let them. We’ll not invariably find their vision clear, but it will always be nothing short of a miracle to be able to see through their eyes. Casting that miracle aside as we find reading, and thus thinking, far too difficult, we flick our index fingers, and, with the attention span of gnats, scroll on. No wonder we blunder. We’ve poked our own eyes out.

Maybe, if we could at least realize how prone we are to chronological snobbery, we might open the door to some humility. To some truth. To some testing of our own biases and assumptions. And who knows? Maybe even to some wisdom.

Here’s a very old proverb that has stood the test of time: “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2).





HYMN-TINKERING: JUST SAY NO!

The writers of our most beautiful hymns
knew what they were saying and why.

focus
faith

It was none other than the venerable Charles Wesley, writer of hundreds of grand hymns, who in the preface to one of his hymnals (1779) pronounced a word of stern warning against anyone who would mess with the words—and thus the theology, not to mention the beauty—of one of his hymns. He had little use for “hymn-tinkerers.”

During most of my growing up years, my home church, and most others of our brand, used a hymnal that contained 665 songs, or 666 in one edition if you counted “1-a” printed inside the front cover. (Cue scary music here or not, depending upon your eschatological views.)

I later learned that 130 or so of those songs had been tinkered with by the compiler. I also learned why my Uncle Kline (not really my uncle but whose name was given to me as my middle moniker and whom I am proud to claim) referred to the hymnal as *Sacrilegious Selections*. Uncle Kline was an English professor, and much of the tinkering grated on his ears; more than that, he also loved the gospel and hated to see it gutted.

It’s rather amazing that while Christ’s people have so often made a mess of recognizing the unity for which the Lord prayed poignantly just before he died (John 17), at least we’ve all sung many of the same hymns. Few of us know or care about the “religious preference” (Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Assembly of God, etc.) of the hymn-writers; we just know that their Lord was Jesus Christ, and, as hard-headed as we often may be, music did what it does so well—tore down walls, lifted hearts, and united us in praise.

I’ve got the words in my head, verse upon verse, of many of those hymns, most of which included a bit richer vocabulary than the presently popular variations of “Father, I love you—Jesus, I love you—Holy Spirit, I love you”—repeated thirty-nine times. (Some of the newer songs are wonderful and will

bless God’s people for generations; many will pass mercifully away. That’s always been the case.) But I still occasionally discover, sadly, that the words in my brain are a few words or phrases off from what the writer originally wrote.

Some of them don’t surprise me much. References to harps, lyres, zithers, stringed, or other instruments might be all over the Psalms, but you can bet your pitch pipe they’d not make it into that particular hymnal. Sad but much worse was some of the theological tinkering. Done with pure motive, I don’t doubt, some of the tinkering nonetheless cuts at the very heart of Christ’s cross. (It was, thus, more serious than some of the modern linguistic atrocities perpetrated by politically correct hymn-tinkerers who failed to learn in, oh, about third grade or so, that “-man” is a suffix for “human” and that words like “mankind” are no male assault at all on “womankind.”)

Fanny Crosby could write beautifully, “Pass me not, O gentle Savior / Hear my humble cry.” And then in Verse 3, “Trusting only in Thy merit, / Would I seek Thy face.” But the hymn-tinkerer changes “only” to “always” lest folks get the wrong idea and think that salvation has nothing at all to do with their own “merit.” Never mind that the “wrong idea” is exactly the right idea that Christ’s sacrifice alone saves us. (Real grace is always scandalous and offensive to our pride.) Whatever the tinkerer’s intent, by altering “only,” he makes his “cry” a lot less “humble.” “Always” is not bad, unless the tinkerer is using it to sneak in our own merit (false doctrine indeed). But “only” makes a universe of difference. Angels sing, and we dance in the delight of the Good News.

“When We All Get to Heaven” becomes “When the Saved Get to Heaven.” As if someone unsaved might somehow sneak in?

The worst example comes in, of all places, “Amazing Grace” where Verse 2 is tinkered with and Christ’s cross is violated when “How precious did that grace appear / The hour I first believed” is changed to “When I His Word obeyed.”

So whazzamattuh? We want to obey Christ, right? Yes! But if for salvation I trust at all in my power to obey, I am not trusting *only* in Christ’s blood; my faith would be in *Christ plus a percentage* of me. “Christ plus” is false doctrine. Hymn-tinkered “grace” becomes something not amazing at all. The world has always had plenty of “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” self-help programs and do-it-yourself religions. What we needed was and is exactly what God’s Son did. He did it once. He did it all. He did it forever. On a cross. No tinkering allowed. No tinkering needed.





A TIME TO TALK ABOUT OUR “TIMES”

We can be sure that our Creator has all
the times of our lives well in hand.

focus
faith

For a long time, I’ve found the study of time—specifically, how we perceive its passing, and how it’s connected to our biological and circadian rhythms—fascinating.

Research rolls on, but it’s quite clear that, whether you’re a morning person, night person, or anywhere in between—a lark, an owl, a “third bird,” or whatever—your preference is not just your preference. It’s far more hard-wired biologically than we’d ever dreamed before this subject was seriously studied.

Oh, you can—and must—force yourself to roll out early, work late, or do whatever your employment or family obligations require. And some factors such as your age and health (of course) will also affect this a bit. The research, for example, is abundantly clear that earlier school starting times for all kids, and especially teenagers, are a terrible idea if you want the students to be capable of learning anything. (And “capable” is exactly the right word.)

Yes, you’ll do what you must do—you are a conscientious and responsible person— but the fact is, you’ll never be truly “in the zone” (your best time of productivity, efficiency, and creativity) in the morning if you’re an owl or at night if you’re a lark. And, though this analogy might be a bit overdone (but it might not be, and if it is, it’s very little past the mark), a lark has about as much chance of effectively becoming an owl as a right-handed person has of becoming a left-handed person.

Sure, you can mess with nature and quite effectively, though temporarily, change your hair color. But it’s ill-advised for any of us to mess with our SCN, “suprachiasmatic nucleus or nuclei,” a tiny bundle of cells in the hypothalamus of the brain, right above the optic chiasm (where the optic nerves cross). The SCN, I’m told, regulates our circadian rhythms. (Thanks here to Wikipedia and a couple of the authors I’ll soon mention. And curses on those who have ever indicated I could

morph into a morning person if I were just more motivated.)

Since this is biologically wired, genealogical and family studies are also fascinating. Just briefly consider your own family, your extended family, and the predecessors you knew well. You won’t find it hard to plot where on the chronological continuum (I may have butchered that description, but you know what I mean) each member falls. You know quite well how the various “birds of a feather flock together” and who’s dropping off at 9 p.m. and who’s hale and hearty, the life of the party, at midnight. Heredity is most definitely and seriously involved.

Already interested in this topic, I was glad to find that when I read Claudia Hammond’s *Time Warped: Unlocking the Mysteries of Time Perception*, I’d boarded a train. The next stop was Till Roenneberg’s *Internal Time: Chronotypes, Social Jet Lag, and Why You’re So Tired*. Then came Daniel Pink’s *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. And I hope not “finally” as in a caboose or a final stop, but a bit related and fun, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, by Mason Currey. I love trains!

A side point: Those are all non-fiction books. Fine. But I hope it’s also clear that one of the best ways to make our journey through this world worthwhile—and not to let it drive us crazy—is to hop on some book-trains (great fiction and stories) that take us around this world, out of this world, and, most of all, out of ourselves. Why in the world would we want to stay always trapped in our little part of the world and stuck in our own little heads when wonderful journeys are ready to open up all around us as we simply open a book?

Garrison Keillor is right when he says, “One reads books in order to gain the privilege of living more than one life. People who don’t read are trapped in a mine shaft, even if they think the sun is shining.”

Speaking of time—as we recently were—the wise writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that “there is a time for everything, a season for every matter under heaven,” and he lists a bunch of the “times” of our lives. He doesn’t mention “a time to read,” but, as a writer, he’d surely take that for granted and leave scrolls on his coffee table.

One thing is sure: Our Creator has the times of our lives—whether we’re larks, owls, or any other bird in between—well in hand. And ponder this! God is able to use and redeem all of “the times” of those who trust him.

If this is a rotten essay, I offer this excuse: I wrote it in the morning.



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