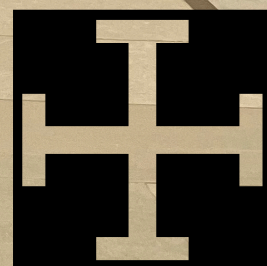


# *et Spiritus*

MIT's Journal of Christian Thought and Expression

## approach

ISSUE 8



# EDITORS' NOTE

Dear reader,

We write this after the Veritas Weekend, a gathering of Augustine Collective journals like *et Spiritus* from over 20 schools across the United States. Our team drew incredible strength and encouragement from the weekend, from the breakout sessions and discussion groups to the times of corporate worship. MIT's very own Cullen Buie, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, spoke on a panel central to our heartbeat at *et Spiritus* entitled, "Is Christianity good for the scientific university?" His faith, Buie said, helped him reason through the ethics of research decisions: asking not just "can we" but also "should we?"

Beyond Buie's talk, we saw little pieces of our journal reflected in the broader Christian community. One panelist, Phil Klay, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, spoke of his writings in the military fiction genre. His award-winning novel *Redeployment* explores the ties between faith and combat, topics with which some of our very own ROTC students at MIT have wrestled.

Another panelist, Mia Chung, who not only is an acclaimed concert pianist but also serves as the Board Chair for the MIT Octet Collective, spoke about faith in terms of her craft, music. Music has this fundamental dichotomy, she said, where the seemingly incompatible can come together to form harmony. In other words, with faith one may find "beauty in dissonance, strength in uncertainty, and power in weakness."

And in the last session, during worship, the student leader read Psalm 65, a reminder that He "crowns the year with his goodness...and answers us with awesome deeds."

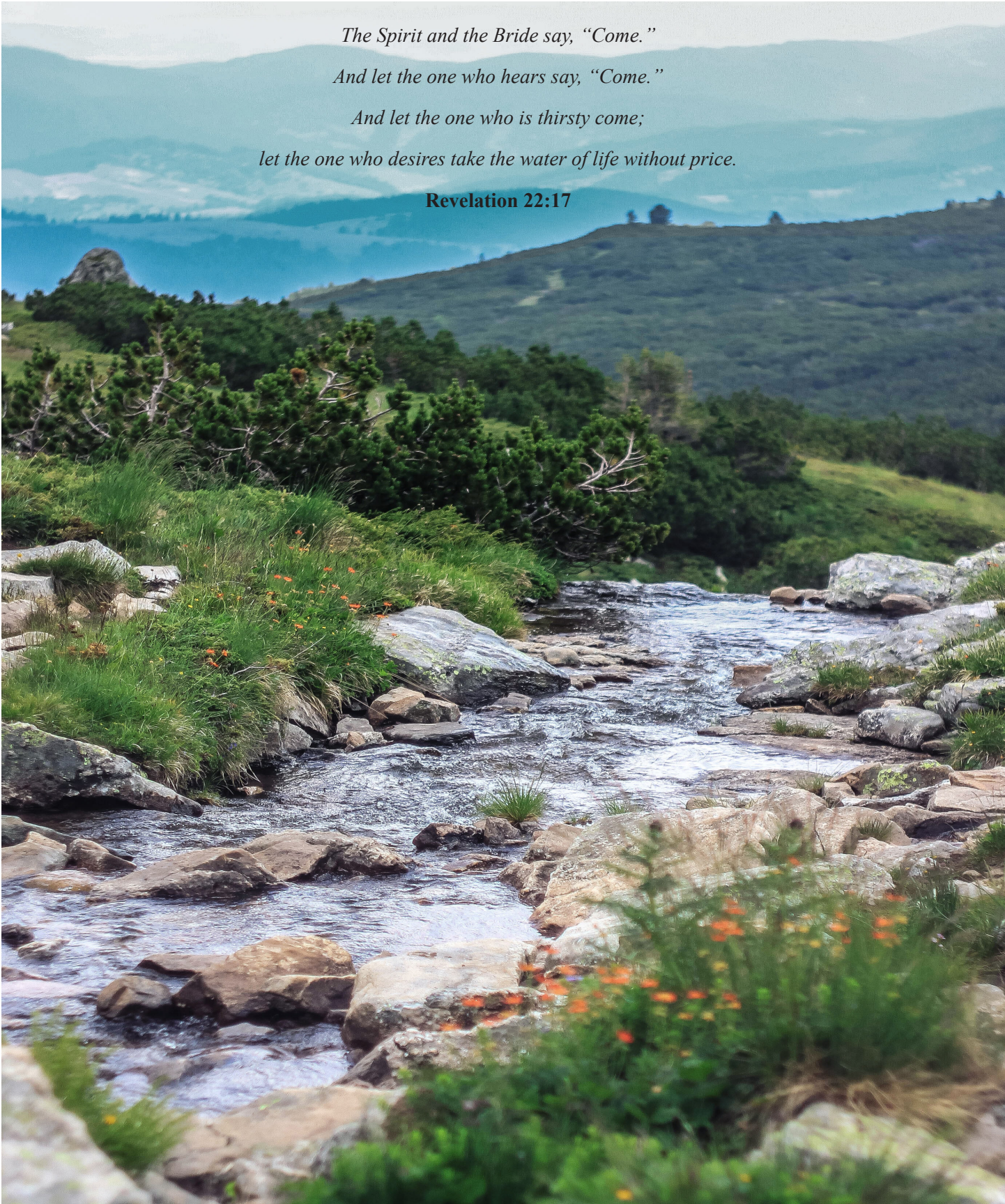
Moments like these remind us that the same God works far beyond MIT's campus. Amidst our shared experiences, questions, and struggles, maybe He has an answer for all of us. Maybe amidst the cacophony of voices one can hear the swelling of a beautiful harmony.

Will you take the time to listen with us and approach Him?

- Matt and Elena

**Matthew Turner – Editor-in-Chief.** Matt is an M.Eng student studying Computer Science and an instructor for 6.UAT Oral Communication. Matthew enjoys traveling (15 countries and counting) and trying new food, but that didn't work out for him when he ate 20 edamame pods in Israel because he didn't know one should remove them. He is currently exploring what it means to respond Biblically to current social issues.

**Elena Gonzalez – Editor-in-Chief, Design Lead.** Elena is a senior studying Business Analytics (15-2) and Urban Planning (11). She can sing the alphabet backwards and believes that career fair swag should contain more long sleeve t-shirts. She is currently wondering what we are to do with loneliness and longing.



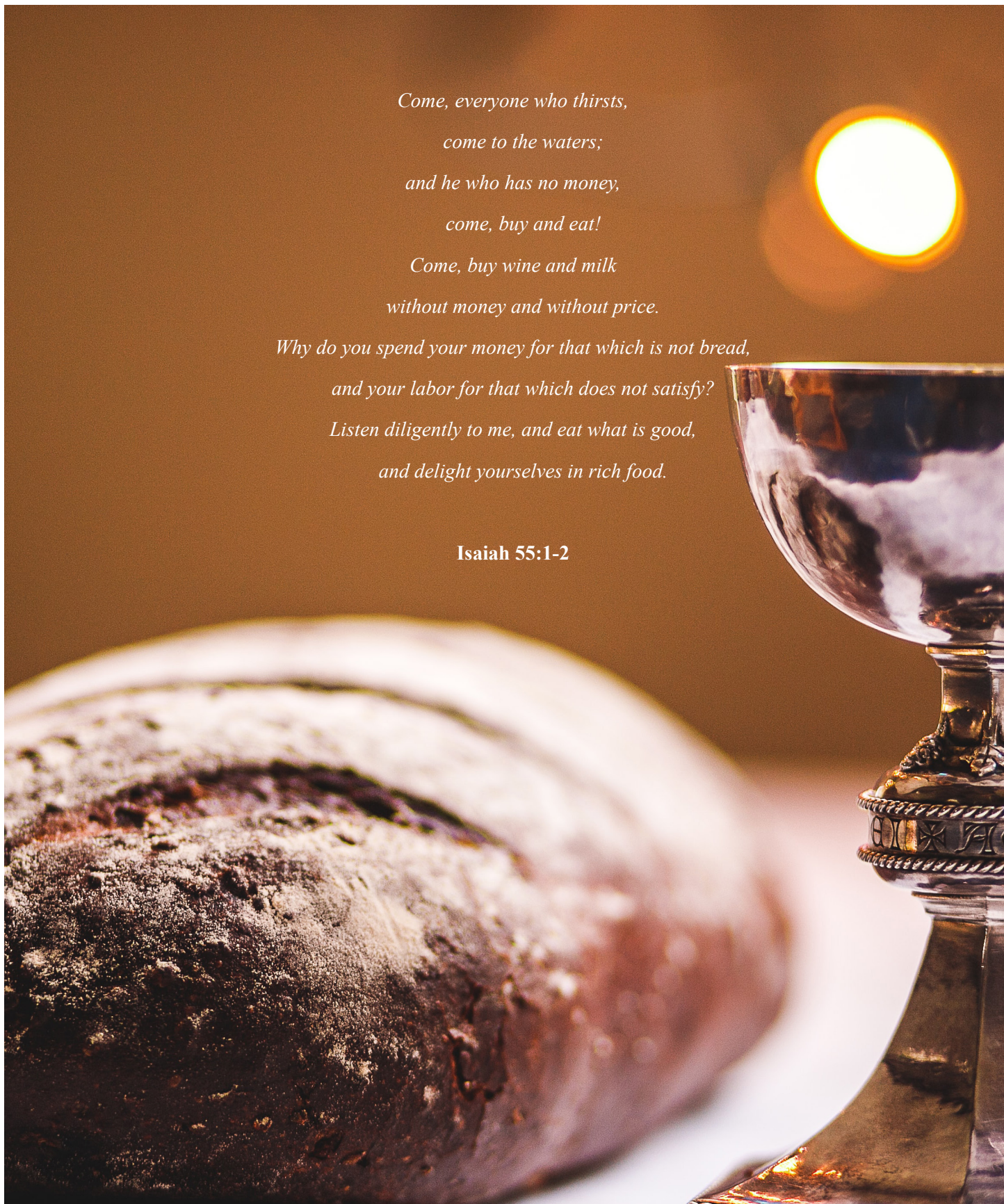
*The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come."  
And let the one who hears say, "Come."  
And let the one who is thirsty come;  
let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*

**Revelation 22:17**

*Come, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.*

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

**Isaiah 55:1-2**



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**Carolina Warneryd – Design.** Carolina is a junior studying Mechanical Engineering (Course 2) and minoring in computer science (course 6). She is a big fan of the McCormick East Penthouse gym, and a frequent tunnel system user. Currently, she's thinking a lot about how to surrender her plans to God while also being ambitious and pursuing life goals.

**Jared Scott – Editor, Writer.** Jared is a junior majoring in Mechanical Engineering (Course 2-A) with a minor in computer science (6). He enjoys learning about music and nature, and has once held a juvenile alligator. One topic that he is interested in exploring further is the effective use of intellectual argument/debate in evangelistic settings.

**Eric Wooten – Editor, Writer.** Eric is a junior studying Civil Engineering (Course 1). If and when he marries, it will be the second time he has taken an arrow to the knee. He does not have any major intellectual interest, instead thinking through whatever springs to mind from moment to moment.

*Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion;  
to you our vows will be fulfilled.*

*You who answer prayer,  
to you all people will come.*

*When we were overwhelmed by sins,  
you forgave our transgressions.*

*Blessed are those you choose  
and bring near to live in your courts!*

*We are filled with the good things of your house,  
of your holy temple.*

*You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds,  
God our Savior,  
the hope of all the ends of the earth  
and of the farthest seas,  
who formed the mountains by your power,  
having armed yourself with strength,  
who stilled the roaring of the seas,  
the roaring of their waves,  
and the turmoil of the nations.*

*The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;  
where morning dawns, where evening fades,  
you call forth songs of joy.*

*Psalm 65*



# YOU CROWN THE YEAR

God wants to bless you.

Hold up.

Before you toss this article as some Prosperity Gospel nonsense, hear me out. I'm not promising He'll make you rich. I'm not promising health or wealth or a luxurious beach house or a sporty new car. I'm not promising He'll drive away the global pandemic if only we perform a Lord of the Rings-style ritual with a magic staff.<sup>1</sup>

In Psalm 65, God talks about crowning the year with his goodness and blessing the harvest – but not in the way you would expect. Even in this Old Testament psalm, God is laying the groundwork for his upside down kingdom – a kingdom where blessings are primarily spiritual, not physical; where prayerful expectation for grace and faithful living go hand in hand; a kingdom whose reign has begun but not yet reached its fullness.

God wants to see to it that we are spiritually equipped to imitate Christ in every good work and that we leverage our newfound identity and strength to bring Him glory. He wants a people who look to the harvest: who wait upon him with prayerful joy and faithfulness to see the captives set free and “every valley...raised up...[and]...every mountain and hill made low.”<sup>2</sup>

Talks of blessing and harvest may seem inappropriate right now. In the midst of a global health and financial crisis, there is no need to convince you that this is a challenging and dry season. Even when the pandemic is over, the Christian will still face periods of drought, trial, and adversity. As it is written: “In this world you will have trouble.”<sup>3</sup> Psalm 65 may seem at first glance like it's written only for the high places, but a closer reading of the text paints a picture of a people faithfully waiting for God to intervene in the form of the symbolic triumphal entry into Zion.

In a sense, the Christian must prepare himself for God's fruitful harvest. This is exactly what God intends. As C.S. Lewis writes in his classic, *The Screwtape Letters*: “Now it may surprise you to learn that in His efforts to get permanent possession of a soul, He relies on the troughs even more than the peaks; some of His special favourites [sic] have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else.”<sup>4</sup> This same claim is backed up in multiple places in scripture, including James 1:2-3, which admonishes the Christian to “consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance,” and Romans 8:28, which states: “we

know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”<sup>5</sup> God uses periods of trial as refiner's fire to purify the hearts of the Church, both individually and collectively. A people with pure hearts more aptly enjoy and steward the blessings which arrive in season for His greater glory.

## Praise Awaits You

With this grand purpose in mind, the Christian ought to face times of difficulty first and foremost with an attitude of hope and joyful expectation for the deliverance of God. This attitude is reflected in the very first verse of Psalm 65, where David writes, “Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion.”<sup>6</sup> The image is of God's people waiting for his triumphant arrival into their midst.

The first point we notice is that there is no instant gratification involved in God's blessing. The people wait for the arrival of the Lord. The Patriarch Abraham was chosen by God as a special instrument to receive his blessing, and through him to bless all the nations of the earth. However, Abraham had to wait to receive this gift, and in fact, the final fulfillment would not occur until Jesus died on the cross some 2,000 years later.<sup>7</sup> To emphasize Abraham's faith in trusting God's

1 Transformation NOW. Bill Johnson Teaching Official. (See ritual performed at 2:12:00)

2 Isaiah 40:4 NIV.

3 John 16:33 NIV.

4 Lewis, C. S. (2021). *The Screwtape Letters*. Monee, IL: Valde Books.

5 Romans 8:28 NIV.

6 Psalm 65 NIV.

7 Parrot, A. (2021, March 13). Abraham. Encyclopedia Britannica.

seemingly preposterous promises, Tim Keller summarizes their series of encounters as follows:

God says, “I’m going to send you out.”

And Abraham says, “Where?”

And God says, “I’ll tell you later, right now just go.”

And then He says, “I will give you a land.”

And Abraham says, “Where?”

And God says, “I’ll tell you later. Just wander.”

And then He says, “I’ll give you a child.”

And Abraham says, “How?”

And God says, “I’ll tell you later. Just wait.”

And then finally God sends a child, and he says, “Abraham, kill your child.”

And Abraham says, “Why?”

And God says, “I’ll tell you later. Walk up the mountain.”<sup>8</sup>

As Tim Keller notes, Abraham had many character flaws and blundered at various times in his life. However, at a sequence of key moments, he maintained faith and patient hope in God, enabling him to “live a big life.”<sup>8</sup>

Do you want to live a big life for God? If so, are you willing to wait for God as Abraham did? Do you have the faith, the patience, and the longsuffering to trust God’s

promises? Sometimes it takes moments of adversity or despair to purify in us the character that God desires. As C.S. Lewis writes, “[The devil’s] cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do...[God’s]...will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”<sup>9</sup> It is the low points that put character to the test and reveal where true affections lie.

In essence, this image of the dejected, seemingly God-forsaken individual looking upon a world without sight of the Father is the story of Jesus. Jesus, although He was God, experienced a world devoid of God while He hung upon the cross. In that desperate moment he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>10</sup> Yet He still obeyed. In faithful and humble servitude He waited upon the Lord. Three days later, after what must have felt like an eternity, the Lord answered.

From Abraham in Genesis through Jesus all the way to Revelation, we see people who wait upon the Lord, just as David’s exhortation in Psalm 65:1. Yet we can learn one more valuable lesson from the Psalmist. From the context, we can infer that the land of Israel is experiencing a year of unusual fruitfulness--a spiritually wet season rather than dry. As Matthew Henry remarks, the psalm was “probably penned upon occasion either of a more than ordinarily plentiful harvest or of a seasonable rain after long

drought.” The Israelites had made it through a poor harvest; how did they respond? Did they sit back in their Lazyboy armchairs and flip to ESPN? Did they throw parties for themselves and enjoy the fruits of their labor? If not leveraging the opportunity to relax, maybe they did something more reasonable and began preparing for the next harvest. Maybe the help they received from God in the drought had set them on the right footing, allowing them to proceed on their own. No, they did none of those things. They instead waited for God’s arrival in Zion. They chose to honor the Giver rather than the gifts themselves.

In times of drought, it is the duty of the Christian to continue to faithfully honor and serve God. Yet even in seasons of harvest, the Christian must never avert his eyes from the One who provides “every good and perfect gift.”<sup>11</sup> Neither period is a chance to slack off on the lessons and duties of the other; rather, the Christian must remain persistent through both, fixing his eyes on Jesus. Psalm 65 gives beneficial teaching for both the harvest and the dry spell: the Christian must wait upon the Lord. The world may change, seasons may come or go, oceans may rise or fall, but God is the same through it all. God’s calling is to secure our hope to His unchanging nature and promise.

### The Promise of Salvation

What is God’s promise, or the blessing he foretold? Verse three gives a succinct answer: “When we were overwhelmed by sins,

8 Keller, T. (1996, November). Abraham and the Torch. Daring to Draw Near.

9 Lewis, C. S. (1995). *The Screwtape Letters*. Bantam Books.

10 Matthew 27:46 NIV. (See also Psalm 22:1.)

11 James 1:17 NIV.



you forgave our transgressions.”<sup>12</sup> Its early appearance in the chapter speaks volumes of its importance. This is the central message of the Gospel, spelled out hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth to fulfill it. We see the foreknowledge of God, who planned for the salvation of humankind before we even admitted we needed it.

Meditating on the very fact of salvation should give the Christian utmost joy and hope. In verse 4, the Psalmist expounds upon some of the benefits to those who find themselves in the courts of their Maker. “Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.”<sup>13</sup> A deep contemplation of the greatness of salvation has marked the saints for centuries. Hear the thrill in the famous words penned by Isaac Watson some 300 years ago:

*When I survey the wond’rous  
Cross*

*On which the Prince of Glory  
dy’d,*

*My richest Gain I count but Loss,*

*And pour Contempt on all my  
Pride.<sup>14</sup>*

An understanding of God’s love demonstrated in salvation is essential during the dry season. In times of trouble, the Christian must lift his eyes up from the mire to see God working through the pain. Yet being grounded in the Gospel, or good news, is just as essential in the harvest

as in the drought. It is in the fruitful times of life when the Christian is tempted to forget God, or to think that he or she doesn’t need God – which is pride. Just as Isaac Watson observed, surveying that wondrous cross – filled with salvation and hope – cleanses the soul from pride, for there is nothing in the cross that humankind deserved or earned. Are you in a dry season? Don’t forget God. Is everything in your world going well? Don’t forget God.

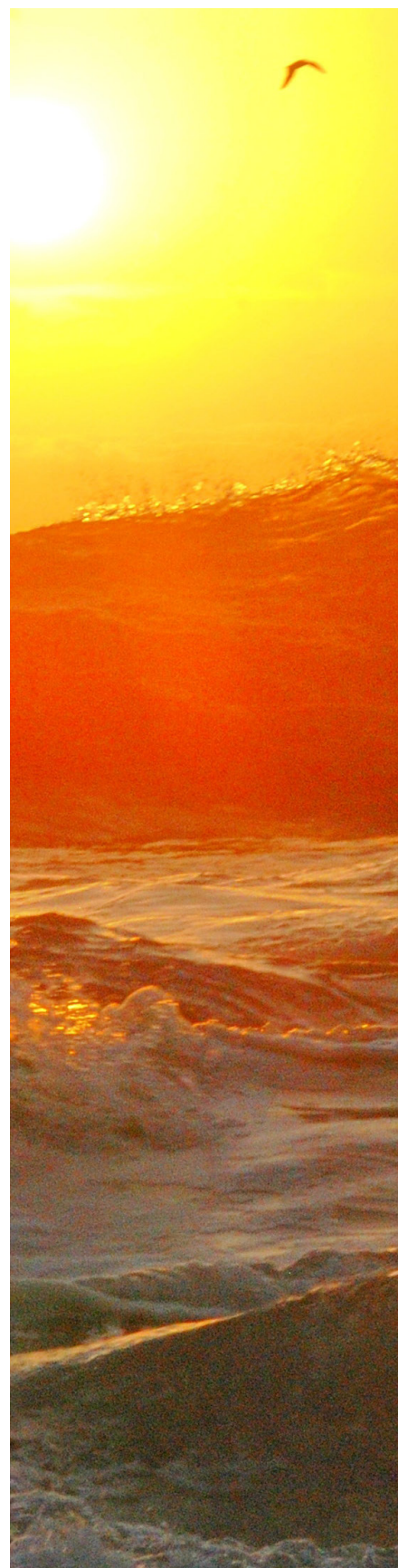
In addition to positive admonishment, scripture provides a warning against forgetting the Gospel, since the very centrality of the Gospel message remains under constant attack. If the Devil can’t make us lose hope in waiting for God, he will surely attempt to distract us from that primary message of hope. This might manifest itself in the form of activities that are clearly unbiblical, but it also could take on subtler forms. Paul instructs the Corinthian church that they should not be surprised to find the weeds of falsehood attempting to uproot Biblical Christianity, “for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”<sup>15</sup> Satan can surreptitiously shift the focus from God and the Gospel to other seemingly good things – even the blessings of God mentioned in the remainder of the psalm. This might be the reason David begins the psalm with an emphasis on salvation. The Gospel elevates the spiritual above the physical by focusing primarily on forgiveness from sins. All other blessings are supportive, but not central.

12 Psalm 65: 3 NIV.

13 Psalm 65:4 NIV.

14 Watts, I., & Mason, L. (2012, November 1). When I survey the wondrous cross. Sovereign Grace Music.

15 2 Corinthians 11:14 NIV.



## The Future Hope

God saves His people so that He might give them “a hope and a future.”<sup>16</sup> This hope sustains through difficult seasons and guards against complacency on the mountaintops, for all earthly blessings pale in comparison to the hope of Heaven. In fact, these blessings exist to prepare God’s people for a new Heavenly kingdom--even the blessing of trials as refiner’s fire. Yet Christians can glory in the fact that God will provide everything necessary to bring them home.

Verse 5 says, “You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.”<sup>17</sup> The original Greek word translated as “awesome” in this verse can be interpreted in two different ways. Strong’s Concordance defines the

first as “to morally revere.”<sup>18</sup> These are deeds of power that inspire awe and wonder: miracles, stories of life transformation, the work of God’s Spirit, generosity spurred by God’s blessing, the maturing of Christians, and the demonstration of the fruits of the Spirit. I have a friend who, over the past several years, has begun to bear fruit in areas of his life that used to be barren. Patience has grown where there used to be irritability, love has supplanted anger, and gentleness has replaced a storm-weathered harshness. The influence of God’s Holy Spirit on the character and attitude of His people can, in my opinion, be one of the most profound displays of God’s “awesome deeds” one can find.<sup>19</sup>

Yet there is another, less palatable meaning of the word “awesome.”

The KJV translates this word as

“terrible.”<sup>20</sup> Matthew Henry remarks, “This may be understood of the rebukes which God in his providence sometimes gives to his own people; he often answers them by terrible things, for the awakening and quickening of them, but always in righteousness.”<sup>21</sup> God will bring those He saves to a place of perfection, and sometimes this requires sending challenging trials that build character and faith in Him. “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”<sup>22</sup> As this verse notes, these trials are derived from love, not from wrath or a desire to inflict punishment. On the same note of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, I have another acquaintance that struggles with patience. It takes no great amount of time around this individual to notice the (almost comical) number of events he experiences that try his patience: traffic

16 Jeremiah 29:11 NIV.

17 Psalm 65:5 NIV.

18 Strong, J. (2021). H3372 - Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (niv), Blue Letter Bible.

19 Psalm 65:5 NIV.

20 Psalm 65:5 KJV.

21 Henry, M. (1996, March 01). Commentary on Psalms 65 by Matthew Henry.

22 Hebrews 12:6 KJV.



jams, long lines at the DMV—the list goes on. I can't help but think that God is providing ample opportunities for him to develop the character He desires.

This life, and every blessing received in it, are meant to prepare for this future hope. All earthly blessings will fade away, which is why Jesus commands: “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”<sup>23</sup> This life is a training ground to prepare the character we want to take into the next. Although we often think in terms of temporal, His blessings are spiritual and eternal. This is His upside down kingdom.

What's the point? Psalm 65 provides a vision of God's entire dealings with Christian individuals. “Praise awaits” as God's people prayerfully look toward His divine rescue plan. He sends Jesus, who dies on the cross to save humanity from their wrongdoing. “When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.”<sup>24</sup> Now the psalm moves on to discuss sanctification, or the process by which a Christian is transformed into the image of His Son, Jesus. He surely does want to bless you by answering you with “awesome deeds.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, He will bring the Christian into glory--spotless, without wrinkle or blemish. They will see His face, and they “will be like Him.”<sup>26</sup> “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of

things has passed away.”<sup>27</sup> There will be no lack, no want, for everything will be satisfied in Him. As Psalm 65 closes:

*You visit the earth and water it,*

*You greatly enrich it;*

*The river of God is full of water;*

*You provide their grain,*

*For so You have prepared it.*

*You water its ridges abundantly,*

*You settle its furrows;*

*You make it soft with showers,*

*You bless its growth.*

*You crown the year with Your goodness,*

*And Your paths drip with abundance.*

*They drop on the pastures of the wilderness,*

*And the little hills rejoice on every side.*

*The pastures are clothed with flocks;*

*The valleys also are covered with grain;*

*They shout for joy, they also sing.*<sup>28</sup>

To know that God “crown[s] the year with [His] goodness” is powerful sustenance in the time of lack.<sup>29</sup> In

this season of coronavirus, political polarization, and social upheaval, it can be difficult to imagine God “greatly enrich[ing]” or “bless[ing] the growth”<sup>30</sup> of anything. Maybe you have lost hope. Maybe your prayers reflect a diminished view of God's power or sovereignty. In challenging times such as these, the Christian must not lose hope in the “awesome deeds” He will perform. In times of trial, Psalm 65 exhorts us to do three things: to maintain the centrality of His salvation story from sin, to wait in expectation for His deliverance, and to muster hope for the future. In this way, the Christian can wait with patience and expectation and be prepared to take advantage of the coming fruitful season.

The very fact that Psalm 65 is a story of salvation is the reason it holds so much weight, both in times of plenty and of trial. God wants to bless you, but not in the way you expect. His salvation is working through patience and trial to deliver and restore a right relationship with Him. When the harvest does come, don't forget that every blessing comes from Him. No matter the season, God's work continues, for He will crown the year with His goodness and answer us with awesome deeds.

**Matthew Turner**

23 Matthew 6:20 NIV.

24 Psalm 65:3 NIV.

25 Psalm 65:5 ESV.

26 1 John 3:2 NIV.

27 Revelation 21:4 NIV.

28 Psalm 65:9-13 KJV.

29 Psalm 65:11 NKJV.

30 Psalm 65:9-10 NKJV.

# DISSONANT HARMONY

The beauty of music is that it speaks to everyone. Regardless of what cultural background we share or what music theory we have memorized, a song is a message that anyone can enjoy. Throughout history, from Miriam’s song to David’s Psalms, from Gregorian chants to contemporary mixtapes, music has been an avenue through which the thoughts and experiences of humanity are relayed. Music is, as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow stated, “the universal language of all mankind.” As a means of expression, music also serves as a reflection of humankind. The figures, dichotomies, and conventions present in musical compositions paint auditory pictures and allegories of those that exist in the broader human journey. An ascending sequence in a song might symbolize positivity and optimism, while a rumbling of low-register notes could signify ominousness or despair.

Among the most pervasive of these dichotomies lies the conflict of consonance and dissonance. Every harmonic chord and melodic interval can be classified as having either a consonant or dissonant attribute. In the context of tonal harmony, intervals that are consonant are often considered pleasing to the ear, whereas dissonant chords are considered less pleasant on their own and must therefore be followed by a more consonant harmony. When used skillfully, however, dissonant harmonies have a beauty and purpose all their own, as they are used to create tension and anticipation within a piece; the absence of these dissonant harmonies would result in the overall composition seeming flat, underdeveloped and substantially less meaningful. Dissonance is not merely a random cacophony of frequencies but an essential part of a narrative, an intentional means of communication strategically placed in a song by a composer or performer that makes an eventual resolution viable and worthwhile.

As is the case with most art forms, many of the concepts and terminology used in music

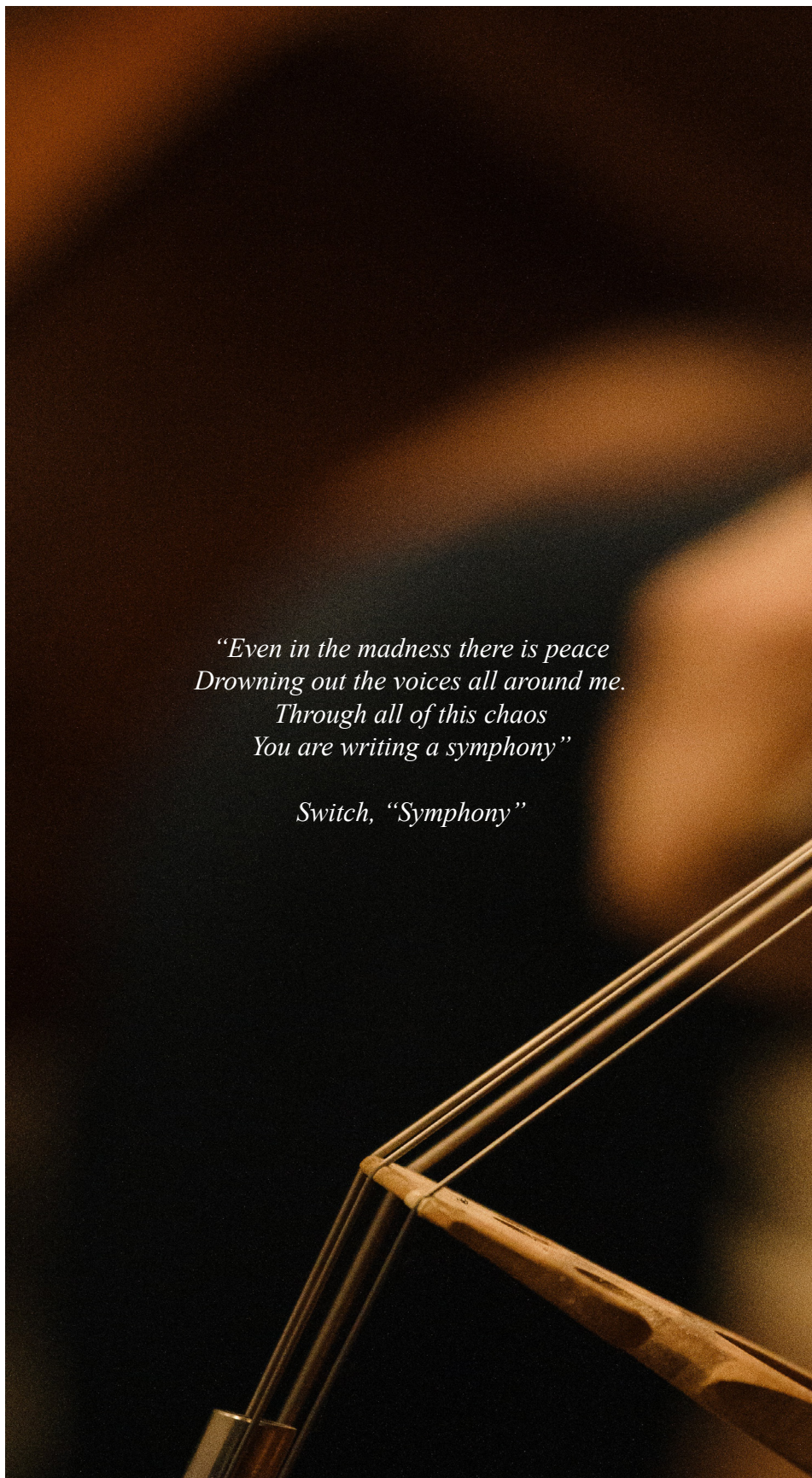
have significance and applications in real-world situations and events outside of the art form itself. However, outside of the realm of music theory, the term “dissonant harmony” seems like a veritable oxymoron; how could anything be both discordant and harmonious at the same time? We crave harmony in many respects; we often enjoy when everything is going swimmingly in our lives but dread when tempestuous circumstances arise. The majority of the narratives that we create and consume are based on the polarization of good and bad, the disagreeable and the favorable, and on the premise that these two principles are incompatibly at odds with one another. But what if we were to adopt a less antithetical view of our environment in this regard, not seeing things as black or white but in hues of superposed favorability, where a negative circumstance could be viewed as positive in some aspect?

One could argue that, as Christians, this is the stance that the Bible advises us to take in regard to the circumstances we encounter. If God is the master orchestrator of our lives, then the dissonance that we perceive in life is in actuality a device designed and implemented by Him for a predetermined purpose. Although we seldom understand the purpose of a storm in the midst of it, we are called to have faith and take courage until all is revealed. Scripture undoubtedly provides us with patterns for this kind of adamant faith. For instance, the book of Job provides a notable Biblical exemplar of a Christian mindset toward a prolonged period of suffering. The protagonist of this story is a rich, righteous man, who over the course of the narrative becomes the primary victim of a series of catastrophes, including the decimation of his assets, destruction of his house, deaths of his children, infection from a painful disease, and incessant taunting by his companions. No matter what circumstances beset him, Job takes solace in the fact that the God who oversees his afflictions will also administer their resolution; he utters the impassioned words “Though He slay me, yet

will I hope in Him.”<sup>1</sup> Job’s unwavering faith and patience ultimately pay off. After a humbling discourse with his sovereign God toward the end of the book, Job is blessed well beyond the abundance that he had before his trials. The author of the New Testament book of James notes that Job was “blessed because He endured.”<sup>2</sup> Trust in God’s plan will act as a buoy and compass through any situation we encounter; if the situation is good, it is from God; if it is not so, then no matter how terrible or insensible it appears at the moment, God will eventually resolve the discord with a love and care that does not allow us to be broken beyond repair. God’s omnipresent nature dictates that He is not only found when things are going well, but that He is also present in the places and circumstances in which we would least expect to find Him. We can assert, in the famous words of hymnist Horatio Spafford, that “It is well.”

Outside of Job’s story, the themes of resolved dissonance and faith amid trial are reprised in countless narratives throughout the Biblical canon. In Genesis, God called Abraham to sacrifice his only begotten child, without providing an apparent reason at first, as a test of the father’s trust in Him. Hebrews 11 later revealed that the key to the patriarch’s obedience through this test was a raw, living, active faith.<sup>3</sup> In Exodus, the children of Israel, having recently been rescued from the horrors of Egyptian slavery, faced dilemma after dilemma in the wilderness, yet witnessed God bring a powerful resolution to each and every trial throughout this and the next four books, until the nation finally reached their Promised Land in the book of Joshua. The New Testament presents

1 Job 13:15 NIV.  
 2 James 5:11 NASB.  
 3 Hebrews 11:17.



*“Even in the madness there is peace  
 Drowning out the voices all around me.  
 Through all of this chaos  
 You are writing a symphony”*

*Switch, “Symphony”*

the ultimate standard of Jesus, whose death held his followers in suspense, but resolved into a triumphant resurrection and the beginning of a campaign that “turned the world upside down”<sup>4</sup> – the inception of a movement we now call Christianity.

Those who adhered to this creed also exhibited faith amid opposition; the apostle Paul became a master of embracing every dissonance in his life, writing that he had “learned to be content in whatever circumstances” through Christ, who gave him strength.<sup>5</sup>

This is the type of faith that God longs for us to have. We know that “weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning;”<sup>6</sup> yet there can also be joy in the mourning. There can be comfort amid the chaos, peace amongst the pieces. Not a superficial, ephemeral happiness that presents itself on the surface of our problems, but a deep, bedrock-level assurance that It is well. There is always beauty in dissonance, strength in uncertainty, power in weakness. The key to finding it is to expand our perspective by shifting the locus of our focus from the tree to the forest, from the finite to the Infinite, from the uncertain to the Omniscient, and from the furnace to the One who stands with us in the fire.

But what if the dissonance that we feel is not a result of our external circumstances, but of an internal cyclone of anxious thoughts and negativity? The same principles of faith and trust apply. In Western music theory, it is noted that dissonance is also accompanied by voice leading: the idea that each dissonant chord contains a note that is a member of the main

melody of the song. By placing special emphasis on these particular notes, a performer can provide a sort of roadmap for a listener to navigate and make sense of the overall contour of the piece by focusing attention on a single line of notes. Likewise, the dissonant thoughts and feelings that we experience can all be navigated by paying attention to the one Voice that truly matters: that of our Creator and Friend. We can take comfort in knowing that when the dissonance of our internal thoughts becomes too much to bear on our own, there exists a God that promises “perfect peace” to every restless mind that decides to focus on Him.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes, the only way to find peace in the pieces is by taking time away from the raucousness. Just as important as the notes in a song are the rests and pauses that come in between them. Rhythm is what differentiates song from noise. Take time to rest. Refocus. Find a better rhythm. Listen to God’s voice. Find Him in the day-to-day. Tuning in to what truly matters is the only way to resolve the dissonance for ourselves.

Dissonance is an extensive topic. It does not solely apply to individual intervals between notes and chords; rather, individual discordances can combine and accumulate to create dissonant cadences and result in entire phrases that have a dissonant quality. The internal and individual discordances that we perceive are both symptoms of and factors contributing to a vaster, collective dissonance at play. We are not isolated soloists, but integrated members of the larger orchestra that is the human race. Like a contagion, the dissonance we harbor manifests itself

4 Acts 17:6 ESV.  
5 Philippians 4:11-13 NASB.  
6 Psalm 30:5 NKJV.  
7 Isaiah 26:3 ESV.





not only in our own performances, but also spreads throughout our collaborations and relationships with our fellow human beings.

It is often said that there is “strength in diversity,” but what does this really mean? Is this idiomatic strength truly achievable? It seems that historically, diversity has far more notably been a source of contention rather than a harbinger of unity. Is a perfect union realistically attainable, or is it merely a figment of imagination, birthed from a naïve optimism? Is there any discoverable peace in the pieces of the shattered glass mirror that is our fragmented modern ideology?

If the omnipotent God is able to transform individual dissonance and turn it for good, He can achieve and orchestrate this on a larger scope as well. The canonical twelve disciples form a fitting case study for this operation. Each follower of Christ had a different background. Their differing opinions and worldviews often clashed in spectacular fashion at various points throughout Jesus’s ministry. This included disputes over who was to be the greatest, as recorded in Luke 9 and 22. The road to harmony was by no means a smooth one, but over time, in the presence of the Prince of Peace, the disciples were able to find peace among themselves. By the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the group was of “one accord,”<sup>8</sup> ready to accept the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and become Christ’s unified army. The twelve disciples were a microcosm for a new paradigm of unity that Christ’s followers through

the centuries have been called to adopt.

Ever since the writing of Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, the church has been metaphorized as a “body” wherein each member serves a specific purpose. Organs within the human corpus are not identical, but each one serves a unique purpose in the overall physiology of the system. If we are the different parts of the human system, Christ is the head and the interstitium that holds everything together, for in Him “all things consist.”<sup>9</sup> He is our peace, who has made us one.<sup>10</sup> The collective Church has many denominations, but they share a common faith in the living God. Paul gives a list in Ephesians of the things that we all must focus on to preserve the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>11</sup>

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the theological disagreements in the Church prove to be minutiae as long as we recognize, first and foremost, that Christ is our Head, and that He is not divided.<sup>13</sup>

Outside of the body, there is also much potential for unity. We are told to “pursue peace with all people” in Hebrews.<sup>14</sup> For us to condescend or discriminate against others without acknowledging our own past and/or current dissonances and innate depravity is delusional at best, and at worst downright hypocritical, detrimental,

8 Acts 1:14 ESV.

9 Colossians 1:17 NKJV.

10 Ephesians 2:14.

11 Ephesians 4:3 NASB.

12 Ephesians 4:4-6.

13 1 Corinthians 1:13.

14 Hebrews 12:14 NKJV.

and antithetical to Christ's teachings.

Although everyone may not be in the same boat, we all face similar storms; and even though we may not resonate with each other on every frequency, there is a medley of underlying tones that unite us all. One prominent commonality is the human condition, the fact that we are all sinners in need of grace, which supersedes any societal hierarchies in which we find ourselves. As followers of a God who shows no partiality, it is our duty to convey His love and grace to all, both within and outside our church spheres, loving humanity like the One who gave Himself to save it. We are instructed to "walk circumspectly" toward our fellow human beings outside the church.<sup>15</sup> An appropriate Christian attitude toward God's creation requires an open mind and a robust willingness to be perceptive of and attentive to God's voice and image beyond the confines of normalcy in which we far too often attempt to place Him.

Moreover, God created all of humanity in His image; although no single human or human culture is a perfect representation of God's character, we all mirror unique, incomplete pixels that combine to reflect a more complete picture of our Creator.<sup>16</sup> Unity does not mandate uniformity.<sup>17</sup> In the sage words of Solomon, "a cord of three strands is not quickly broken."<sup>18</sup> There is strength to be drawn from a diverse pool of perspectives.

Nevertheless, the creation of this pool is by no means a call to naïve acceptance of every baseless idea thrown at us. Genetic diversity is essential for a population to thrive but can also be the

source of harmful mutations that bring about the demise of its members. Due to sin, not everyone created by God is born of Him. Just like in tonal music theory, where there are rules for creating dissonance that prevent a classical song from sounding like a senseless jumble of notes, there are definite truths and guidelines outlined by God in His Word that dictate which ideas are of Him, and which are not. Evaluation on the basis of these principles (not our own) is what allows us to "walk circumspectly" in light of any idea we encounter.

The question remains: why does God allow ideas to persist which are inharmonious with His character? Jesus addresses this subject in the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13. He conveys the picture of a wheat field in which an enemy has discreetly planted weeds. Both the wheat and the weeds are allowed to grow together until the harvest time, when the grain is gathered and the weeds are destroyed. Likewise, both those that are for and against Christ will need to reach maturity before all is resolved in a grand finale at the end of time. A dissonant phrase in tonal music would make little sense were it abruptly cut off in the middle of a measure; it must be followed to its completion and resolution in order to form a purposeful part of the piece as a whole.

Harmony is within reach amidst any dissonance – both on an individual scale as well as on a much larger, interpersonal one. The discord we perceive in life is often not entirely negative; there is a certain mystery, unique wonder, and inherent beauty about the unresolved, the suspension

between what now is and what is yet to be. Many of the most captivating movies and novels secure our attention and investment by building tension and increasing dissonance up to a climax where readers or viewers are on the edges of their seats, enthralled by the escalating storyline and in eager anticipation of a sensible-- or perhaps surprising--resolution.

There is beauty in dissonance. The chaos can be good. And if it isn't, it will be. God will resolve all at the end. Until then, we can enjoy the music, and play our part in the grand symphony that He is orchestrating.

**Jared Scott**

15 Ephesians 5:15 NKJV.

16 Tabitha Morales, "Summer Connect 2020 Week 8: Understanding Others - Tabitha Morales," Youtube Video.

17 Christine Emba, "What Is Unity?" Youtube Video.

18 Ecclesiastes 4:12 NASB.



# ON DOCTRINAL COMPLACENCY

In the preface to his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis compares Christianity to a large hall opening into many rooms, each representing certain doctrines and beliefs that divide Christians into our various branches and denominations. Stepping into the hall means accepting the basic belief in the Gospel--that Christ died for our sins that we may gain eternal life with God. But halls are built to house coats and boots, not people. Lewis writes:

It is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others may feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at... When you get into your room you will find that the long wait has done you some kind of good which you would not have had otherwise. But you must regard it as waiting, not as camping. You must keep on praying for light: and, of course, even in the hall,

you must begin trying to obey the rules which are common to the whole house. And above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and panelling. In plain language, the question should never be: 'Do I like that kind of service?' but 'Are these doctrines true: Is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?'<sup>1</sup>

Christ did not sit the disciples down and explain every iota of reality to them; rather, he said, "Come, follow me."<sup>2</sup> Our first concern is entering the hall at all. Coming to faith in Christ is the beginning of a new life, but we must choose a room in which to live that new life. I do not think this much is too controversial, but I will take it a step further than just denominational issues. Lewis treats rooms as denominations, as creeds--that one on the left holds the Lutherans, that one to the right holds the Catholics, the one down the hall Calvinists, and so on. These denominations all evolved due to differences in doctrine and

dogma, or of practices of the Church, or from yet other reasons. These are often doctrines of theology--that is, denominations are often divided by different beliefs about God rather than about how we should live in light of Him--but they have not always been.

Lewis' point boils down to this: don't passively sit on the fence. He is talking about choosing a communion, but I think his point extends into our lives more broadly. Beyond differences of theology, there are practical concerns and issues in our lives where we cannot sit on the fence. The issues du jour that are so divisive in politics and culture are important. For example, whether abortion is wrong and should be banned, wrong and should be permitted anyway, or not inherently wrong at all is not as important to our faith as the central tenets of Christianity, but it is an important question. In the case of abortion, if it is wrong then we have a duty to oppose it, but if it is not wrong then we may be damaging our witness by hounding its proponents unjustly.<sup>3</sup> If nothing else, we are called to live righteously, and thinking wrongly will lead to failing in that call.

So far, so good. We certainly have no shortage of people espousing their

1 *Mere Christianity*, 10-11.

2 Matthew 4:19, NIV.

3 And we should always remember that we are called to love those who wrong us. How much more must we love those who do wrong, but not to us? In the case where abortion is wrong, we are still acting wrongly if we oppose it in an un-Christian manner, with vitriole and bile instead of compassion and love.

firmly held views on either side of issues like abortion, creationism, or how religion should interact with the state. But we also have a great many Christians who are complacent in their lack of commitment to any side. To be clear, I am not talking about people who are looking into it and have not yet been convinced of either position, or about people who know they need to but have not made it a priority yet, but only about those people who feel comfortable not having made up their mind. “I don’t know” and “I don’t care to know” are very different statements, and we should extirpate the latter from our minds. I am not saying we need to drop everything and read and think as much as we can on every issue of faith and politics that comes to mind until we have made a decision--and it is okay to not know what is right. For many topics, especially those of high theology, it may be impossible to know precisely what the correct view is short of direct revelation. Having decided this is the case--that the ultimately true view is not currently knowable--for a given issue is different from refraining from deciding anything at all. This is especially true of matters where choosing a side implies action, like how deciding abortion is wrong should mean working to limit it. But deciding a question is unresolvable is also different from pursuing the best of the imperfect views we can muster. The thing to remember is that it is not okay to stand idle, resting content in not having taken a side. Choosing not to choose is what must be unacceptable; choosing to make a home in the hall must be untenable.

Apathy is not the only motivation behind this choice to abstain from our intellectual duty. For many issues today, a prominent concern for young Christians is how society will view

them for their beliefs. I know quite a few people who refuse to commit to a belief even if they incline towards it because they do not want to fall out of favor with polite company. However, the truth remains the truth no matter how its bearers are treated. The early Christians, martyred for their faith, knew this. Have we forgotten it? Or do we hold pride and image above righteousness? If the world is wrong and will attack us for espousing or even just believing the truth, it does not follow that we should stop seeking the truth; we should not only seek it, but proclaim it all the louder where we find it, that others may learn it as well.

As a final note, made particularly acute given that many of these more ‘minor’ issues that I am more concerned with here are the focus of particularly vitriolic rhetoric, we must remember that our highest commands as Christians are to love God and to love our neighbors. When anyone walks away from a conversation with a Christian and thinks the Christian hates them because of their views, or their actions, or their identity, or anything else, one of two failures has occurred. Either the Christian really does hate them, in which case they have manifestly failed to live up to their calling, or the Christian has miscommunicated, in which case they need to improve their ability to communicate their views and the Gospel. To wrap a bow on the subject, Lewis continues: “When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.”

**Eric Wooten**

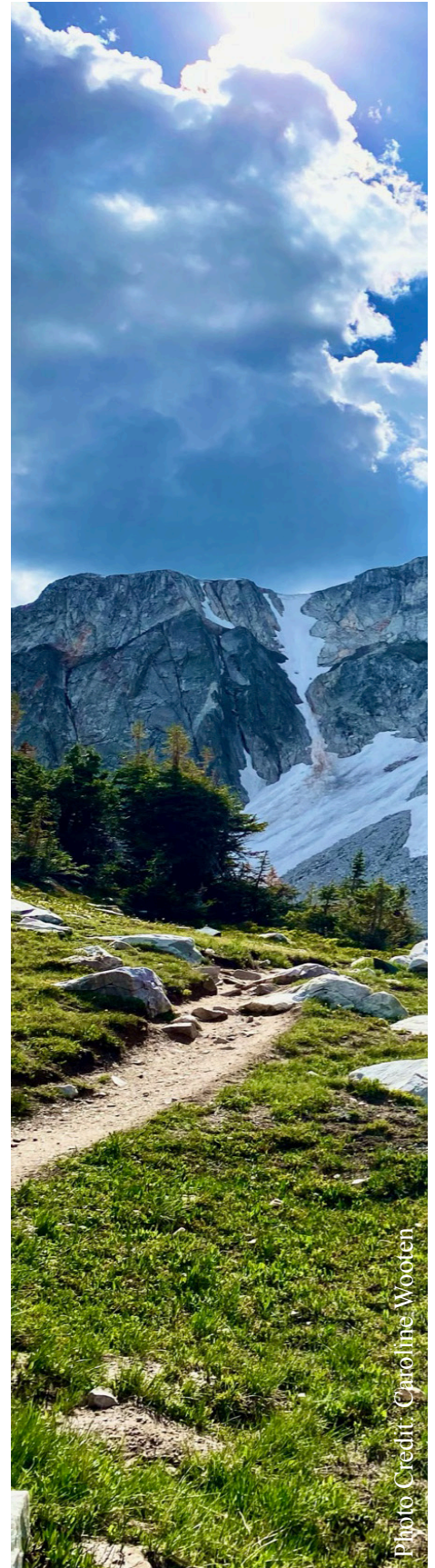


Photo Credit: Caroline Wooten

# ON THE VALUE OF APOLOGETICS

The word apologetics comes from the Greek *apologos*, which simply means words of defense.<sup>1</sup> This is why you might read *The Apology of Socrates* in a philosophy class, but nowadays apologetics sees special use when limited from any formal defense of a subject to specifically “a branch of theology devoted to the defense of the divine origin and authority of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> This is the sense most Christians will be familiar with--the use of argument to support Christianity. Very often I see apologetics brought up as a tool of evangelistic ministry, and so it is, but I wonder whether we exaggerate its usefulness as a sword and discount its role as a shield in our panoply.

This requires a bit of elaboration, and perhaps a bit of refinement from that provocative proposal. There are two main purposes of developing an argument: to convince opponents of your view and to increase your own confidence in that view. There is also a similar purpose to reviewing the opponents’ arguments in order to see their weakness and thereby bolster your confidence in your own conclusions. Apologetics can be used in either way: as a sword for arguing against atheism or other religions and therefore as a form of evangelism, or as a shield to rebut attacks on our faith from others and doubts of our faith from ourselves. The apologetics-as-evangelism usage

gets all the attention, which I don’t begrudge per se; all of God’s tools for the expansion of his Kingdom are glorious. Yet in my own experience, evangelistic apologetics acts as more of a club or a jet of air than a sword--it is better at knocking others off their guard than at piercing through to their hearts. And Christians are made in the heart, not the mind only. Convincing anyone merely that there is a God is of course good and a necessary first step, but even convincing them that the further beliefs of Christianity are true on its own is but a first step. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.”<sup>3</sup> God does not want us to merely intellectually acknowledge his existence and continue to live our lives, He wants us to run to Him and to love Him as He loves us. Evangelistic apologetics is a tremendous tool for cracking open people’s intellectual armor in order to let the Word of God in, but the real fruit comes from God working in their hearts. This is why big debates between atheists and apologists are usually more about the audience than the debaters. Additionally, we must not overrate the persuasiveness of the common arguments for God’s existence, or character, etc, because they are not unrejectable or incontrovertible; if this were the case, the only non-Christians who had heard them would be the ones

without regard for logic and argument altogether, which is not at all what we see. Logical consistency on its own does not determine reality, it only illuminates a plausible explanation.

But just as evangelistic apologetics can enable people to lower their guard to Christ, defensive apologetics can raise our walls against the assaults of our intellectual enemies. As an illustration, *Mere Christianity* is a good book to hand to your agnostic friend curious about Christianity, but it is also especially useful for that new Christian whose belief is centered in the heart but not yet concretely founded in the mind. For most of us, there are two potentially conflicting operations at work within us: what our heart yearns to be true, and what our mind believes to be true. This does not mean that the person with doubts or intellectual reservations does not really believe, rather that our belief usually comes before we are intellectually certain of everything we are coming to accept. This is not inherently a problem; if anyone thinks it is, ask whether we accept the value of a mathematical proof laid out by our professor before we have fully grasped it. Our faith in God is like that--we begin to see how it all works together, and we are willing to accept on faith and authority the rest that we do not *at the moment* understand. Even so, it is tremendously strengthening to come

1 Online Etymology Dictionary: Apologetic.  
 2 Merriam Webster Dictionary: Apologetics.  
 3 James 2:19 NIV.



Photo Credit: Caroline Wooten

of our minds and hearts. A proper understanding of God, as much as we can understand Him through what He has revealed of Himself, is beneficial for this since we can then more readily chide the straying heart or hand. An ignorant general may lead his troops to victory, but the wise and practiced leader has a great advantage over him. However, ultimately, God is the only one who can triumph in leading us through sanctification. Perhaps the analogy is better stated as this: that the well-informed private has a better chance of accomplishing the mission than the one operating only as each order is given.

I believe it is telling that our word for reasonable argument about our faith originally means a defense. Apologetics is important for helping bring others to Christ, but Christians should invest in it just as much for our own strengthening and benefit as for converting others.

**Eric Wooten**

# CAN A CHRISTIAN SUPPORT A WAR?

There can be no question that war is terrible. The reports of it alone are enough to tell us this, even for those of us--like myself--who have never ventured into battle. Much more revealing are the testimonies of those who have fought, as seen in words attributed to General Sherman of the Civil War: "I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell."<sup>1</sup> Yes, war is terrible, but that alone does not make it intolerable.

I am not writing to defend particular wars or actions in wars from any particular country's point of view, nor to justify them practically by what benefits they promise. My aim is to show that a Christian can in good conscience participate in war--even to the killing of the enemy. I am also assuming a Christian perspective on the topic--the reality of the Gospel and God as the Bible proclaims him are taken as underlying fact, not as points of debate. To parallel the words of C.S. Lewis, I am not arguing that any war is certainly right, I am only arguing that it is not certainly wrong.

War may at times be necessary. I do not mean here necessary for the sake of the continued improvement of the

economy, or for the sake of vengeance, but for the security of the nation. And wars waged in response to an act of war by a belligerent enemy are not categorically fought merely for revenge, no more than all court cases are about revenge. Indeed, a criminal case seeking to lock the offender in prison can be more about protecting the victim from further harm than about punishing the offender for their crime. Even those of us who do believe in retributive justice where the motive is to punish the offender believe that justice can be done in this way without being mere revenge.

In Romans, Saint Paul commands "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."<sup>2</sup> This is the right principle to have as regards war in addition to the interpersonal context in which Paul wrote it. Diplomacy ought to be tried before troops are deployed, but in the end the only thing capable of stopping an enemy determined to use force is force of our own. I do not believe that war is inherently unavoidable, like some typhoon that will roll onto land regardless of how much we desire otherwise, but diplomacy is like dancing: it takes two. And there's the rub. Diplomacy only works when both sides are willing to negotiate. The instant one side or the other backs away, or refuses to even join the table,

war will occur, and the defender has no choice if it would preserve itself at all.

But isn't a major part of Christ's message not to respond to evil with evil? To turn the other cheek? It is. But I do not believe our Lord's words to totally prohibit violence. Certainly they limit it, and call us to lay aside our wrath, but it is not obvious to me that they amount to a total ban. Does anyone seriously interpret this and similar statements to mean that we cannot intervene by force when we stand between a presumptive murderer and their intended victim? In a world where God saw fit to grant free will to humanity, force is the only means available to prevent an implacable individual from visiting worse violence on others. Talking the murderer down is better and should be tried if circumstances allow, and they should be disarmed instead of killed or injured if possible, but they can nevertheless be justly killed. A lesser response is preferable on principle, but only preferable in practice if it offers similar assurance of stopping the perpetrator.

Most modern translations of the Ten Commandments dictate: "You shall not murder;"<sup>3</sup> they do not say: "You shall not kill." I am not a philologist to argue on my own expertise whether the Hebrew is more accurately rendered as "murder" or "kill," but it seems fair to me

1 Sherman, this version in Grossman's *On Killing*.

2 Romans 12:18 NIV.

3 Deuteronomy 5:17 NIV.

that this is a proper choice considering the fact that other statements in the Law of Moses prescribe the death penalty. God could not with one word forbid all killing and with another specifically command it. Should New Testament authority be called for, C.S. Lewis points out that a similar distinction of wording applies there as well: “There are two Greek words: the ordinary word to kill and the word to murder. When Christ quotes that commandment He uses the murder one in all three accounts: Matthew, Mark, and Luke.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond formulations of the Sixth Commandment, in his letter to the Romans Paul says “But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”<sup>2</sup> Murder is unjust killing. Judicial killings and self-defense, or the defense of others from imminent harm are the most familiar examples of just killing--those and the killing done by soldiers in war.

But perhaps there is still some gulf to bridge between arguing that some killing can be morally permissible and arguing that this includes war. In the Old Testament, God himself commanded the Israelites to wage war on the various peoples of Canaan. Indeed, He instructed them to wage total war to destroy the Canaanites, not simply to force their leaders into submission and surrender. In light of God commanding war, it is plain that war is not unconditionally wrong; God cannot simultaneously order sin and be perfect. Yet just because God can ordain a just war does not mean that man can without His direct ordainment.

We should be very dubious of anyone who claims divine authority today in advocating for war. Furthermore, God does reserve some prerogatives to himself, like vengeance and judgement: “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”<sup>3</sup> Why should war not fall into that camp? It is not enough here to argue that wars have historically done much good, or prevented much harm--although they have, just as they have done much evil--since good ends can be achieved by sinful means as well as by holy ones, and their righteous result does not excuse or justify the route taken to get there. There have been several points where a pacifist could disagree with me so far and be entirely reasonable to do so, but this is perhaps the biggest sticking point, and I do not have a sure reply to this objection. In the end, I look to my conscience, which tells me that there is no command to sit idly by while others are brutalized or killed, and which instead compels me to intervene in some way. I am not satisfied by indirect action that does not equally resolve the crimes. I look to the Bible giving the government a legitimate authority of the sword, and do not see that the duty to protect its citizens only extends to protecting them from criminals among themselves. If anything, I see a higher duty to protect its citizens from outside aggressors, just like I have a higher natural duty to help my parents than strangers on the street.

How then should the Christian soldier prosecute war? We must remember that war cannot be fought in hatred. Christ summarized the whole of the Law and the Prophets under two commands: “Love the Lord your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>4</sup> Fighting someone does not require hating them. Paradoxically, I do not believe it even requires you to wish their harm, although it certainly may entail harming them. In war we will be killing, but we must not be hating; a right goal and a right heart and a right means are all essential. For my part, I also return again and again to a line from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, spoken by Faramir, a captain of Gondor: “War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend.”<sup>5</sup>

**Eric Wooten**

1 *Mere Christianity*, pp. 100-101.

2 Romans 13:4 NIV.

3 Romans 12:18 NIV.

4 Matthew 22:37,39 NIV.

5 *The Two Towers*, 314.

# RUNNING “TOWARDS” GOD

A little while ago my Bible study started a series on Jonah. One of the intro questions our leader asked was this: “What does it look like to you to run from God?” For most of us, the answer to that question will not look like boarding a boat to sail as far as possible from Nineveh, but like Jonah, we all either have run or continue to run from God’s calls to us.

When I thought about my own response to the question, I was surprised that the first thing that came to mind was a quote from the Lord of the Rings movies (and the reader will have to indulge me for a little while in my love for that series). The ent Treebeard is taking Pippin and Merry away from the enemy stronghold of Isengard, but Pippin stops and asks they be taken by a Southern route much closer to the fortress. He justifies the request saying that “the closer we are to danger, the further we are from harm.” This makes little sense to Treebeard, as it probably does to you at first glance, but there is a logic behind it. The whole idea of the quest of the Ring is, after all, preposterous: ‘Let’s send a small group of strangers of variable survival ability into the heart of our enemy’s domain, first averting his scouts and then dodging his armies and then bypassing his strongholds to get there, and finally hope they have the willpower to destroy the Ring--whose defining trait is corrupting people’s wills!’ But the quest does succeed in the end, despite its ridiculousness. True, Frodo does lack the will to destroy the Ring

when he gets to the Sammath Naur, but he manages to get to Mount Doom precisely because Sauron could not conceive that anyone would take that course of action. In movie-Pippin’s mind, skirting Isengard would be safer because Saruman would be looking at the distant paths leading away from his stronghold, not under his nose. Both of these strategies work because they play on the minds of their opponents, and this is why that line of Pippin’s came to mind--when I run from God, I do so by playing on my own notions and desires in a vain attempt to counterfeit them.

I am certainly not using something about God against Him when I do this; I am trying to satisfy my yearning for Him without actually going to Him. Put another way, I flee from God by running towards him. This isn’t the only way I run from him, but it is the most insidious, since it would seem to be a good thing. I do run towards him, but at an angle. Perhaps it would be better to say I run tangent to him instead of directly away. Because really running towards God would mean talking to Him, and praying and worshipping and trying to grow deeper in my relationship with Him, but my running towards Him is talking about Him--talking about prayer and worship and proper doctrine. All of these things are worthy in and of themselves, although their importance is easily overstated. It is useful to think about prayer and how to do it; it is useful to think about how to worship so that you

feel worshipful, and it is important to believe in sound doctrine. But these things are not more important than pursuing Christ first and foremost. The problem starts when we treat tools in our relationship with Christ as ends in themselves--losing sight of their ultimate purpose. The point of worship is not to sing songs because they sound nice, but to glorify God and pour ourselves out to him. The songs can sound nice, but they only ought to insofar as that helps us worship.

This pattern can be seen in a more worldly example as well: cleaning my room is all well and good, especially if my room is quite messy and in need of a good cleaning, but it is wrong to clean my room as a way to procrastinate doing the lab or pset I have due tomorrow. I ought to be doing the more important thing, and I am perverting cleaning by using it against its proper purpose, which is simply to give me a clean room. Similarly, when I delve into apologetics or theological issues, I am often doing so not only for their sake, but also because I am trying to use them to sate my soul’s yearning for God without actually heeding His summons. By spending time in the vicinity of God, I hope I will manage to convince myself that I have spent time in the presence of God; all too often, I succeed. My desire to follow His call is satisfied, but I am no closer to Him. This is why I called this method of fleeing Him my most insidious: it disguises itself as a righteous thing,

but would lead me further and further from any actual communion with God.

Apologetics is good in itself, even for the firm believer. Intellectual doubts should not be casually shrugged aside, but an overfocus on justifying God's existence or actions leaves us out in the cold from God Himself. I could tell you all about my friend Carl for hours, but five minute's conversation will show his personality better than all my stories and descriptions. And so it is with God: we must pursue Him, not just facts about Him. What good is it simply to convince myself beyond all doubt that He is real, if I do not also know Him and pursue Christ as my Redeemer? "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!"<sup>1</sup> Belief in God means nothing for me unless I take the next step and place my faith in Him for my salvation. I do not further myself in sanctification by studying replies to the problem of pain; I do it by giving myself over to Christ and gradually reforming my heart and mind to match His.

The reasons we want to run from God are varied in their specifics, but are all united by one trait: God calls us to do that which we do not want to do, and to lay down that which we do. This is why we must have our hearts remade in the likeness of Christ, that our desires will begin to match His. But there is no instant, total transformation, and the process is horribly uncomfortable and painful at the start. I suspect--certainly my own experience suggests--it does not get much easier as we go along, forcibly shedding each successive sinful desire, like a snake leaving behind its crusty old skin in a heap. Of course, we cannot do this alone; Christ is really the one doing all the work. Like Eustace's time as a dragon in Narnia,

on our own all we can do is shed our skins, only to see them still covering us, gleaming back when we look in the mirror. On our own, we will remain snakes forever, but with Christ, we can be restored to our proper persons. This is much what I do when I "run towards" God--I am putting ointment on my wounds instead of sewing them up; I am taking a painkiller instead of going in for my root canal. I know I have things I will have to leave behind, and I do not want to drop them. But I also know they are ultimately dead weight, and that much better things are in store for me if I can just muster the energy and will to let God take them from me. Running towards God, straight towards Him, requires us to leave behind our own dead weight of desire. It will hurt for a while, but eventually I will sing in gladness and freedom and wonder how I ever thought that garbage could be worth clinging on to at all.

**Eric Wooten**

1 James 2:19 ESV.

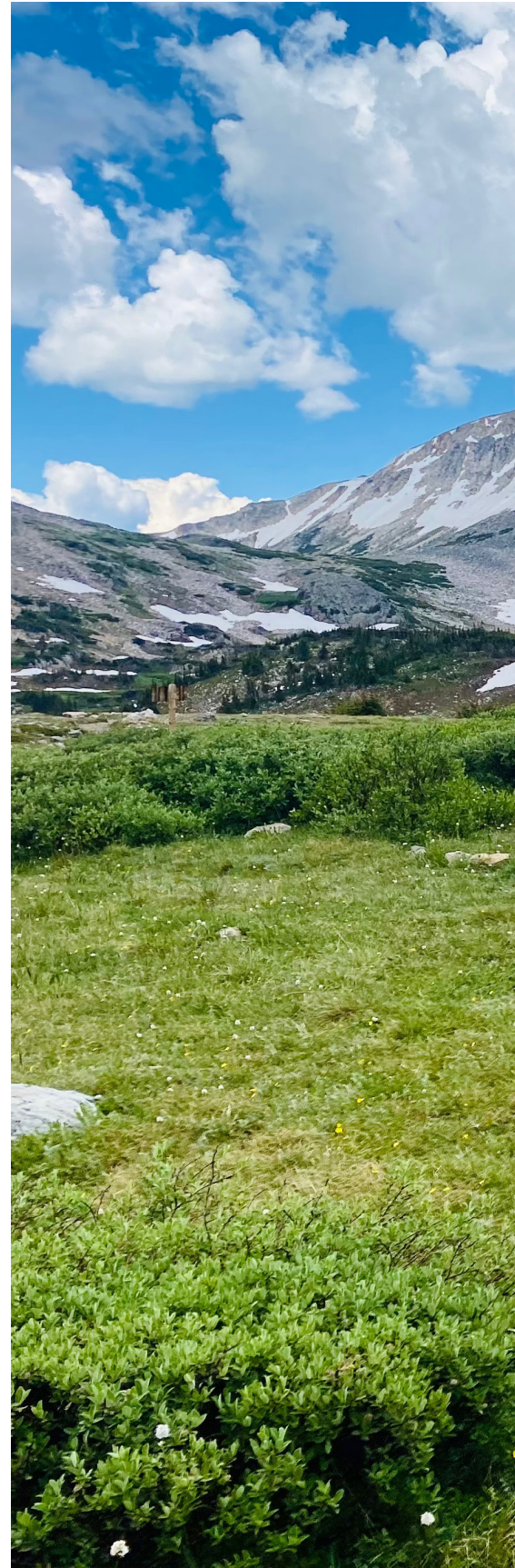




Photo Credit: Caroline Wooten



# PSALM 40

*I waited patiently for the Lord;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
He drew me up from the pit of destruction,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.*

*He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear,  
and put their trust in the Lord.  
Blessed is the one who makes  
the Lord her trust,  
who does not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after a lie!  
You have multiplied, O Lord my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you!  
I will proclaim and tell of them,  
yet they are more than can be told.*

*In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,  
but you have given me an open ear.  
Burnt offering and sin offering  
you have not required.  
Then I said, "Behold, I have come;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me:  
I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."*

*I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation;  
behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.  
I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart;  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;  
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.*

*As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me;  
your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me!*

*For evils have encompassed me beyond number;  
my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see;  
they are more than the hairs of my head;  
my heart fails me.*

*Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me!*

*O Lord, make haste to help me!*

*Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether  
who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who delight in my hurt!*

*Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"*

*But may all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you;  
may those who love your salvation  
say continually, "Great is the Lord!"*

*As for me, I am poor and needy,  
but the Lord takes thought for me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
do not delay, O my God!*

Two years ago, we read Psalm 40 aloud at the Augustine Collective—now Veritas—conference. This past winter, I finished memorizing it.

In the Omni Parker House, we said together: "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation [...] I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart." We said it before God and among a sea of witnesses.

Imagine if it were true – if we never hid who we know our God to be from those around us.

I invite you to find this passage a source comfort and conviction. Our God: inclines to us, makes our steps secure, puts a new song in our mouth, multiplies His wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us, does not delight in sacrifice or offering but gives us an open ear nonetheless, is faithful and full of steadfast love, does not restrain His mercy from us, provides salvation, and is our help and our deliverer.

May we be able to find ourselves in this passage as the one who waits patiently for the Lord, makes Him our trust, does not turn to the proud, proclaims and tells of all who God is, delights to do His will, has His law within our hearts, does not hide or conceal who He is from the great congregation, turns to the Lord for deliverance, rejoices and is glad in Him, loves His salvation, says continually "great is the Lord!", and turns to God in all things.

I encourage you to go back and read Psalm 40 aloud as many times as you need.

**Elena Gonzalez**

Mens  
et  
Manus  
*et*  
*Spiritus*

