

# “To Know God Aright”: Puritans and the Gift of Education

## Part One: Who were the Puritans?

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Historians differ considerably on their usage of the term “Puritan.”

Along with the growing popular appeal of Calvinism among twenty-first century evangelicals is a growing interest in Puritans. What used to denote a joyless legalistic form of Christianity is now often understood to be a gospel-focused, God-centered intensity of faith. As a Christian historian, therefore, I find trying to understand the Puritans a fascinating process. Moreover, as a Christian educator I have come to understand the Puritan philosophy of education to be one of their greatest gifts to posterity. We are all the benefactors of their love of learning.

The Puritans are as difficult for twenty and twenty-first-century scholars to understand as they were for their contemporaries. Some historians have seen the Puritans as radicals who overthrew the traditional structures of monarchy and episcopacy by means of revolution. In this way, they are the forerunners of the American, French and even Communist Revolutions.<sup>[i]</sup> Others have portrayed the Puritan movement and its work ethic as the seedbed for eighteenth and nineteenth-century capitalism.<sup>[ii]</sup> This interpretation is a far cry from Communist revolutionaries. A more common approach to Puritans presents them as overly pious zealots who squelched individual liberties for the dream of a holy society or Calvinist theocracy. Those from this perspective have even coined the

adjective “puritanical” as a synonym for strict, rigid or authoritarian. Still, others believe the Puritans to be the founders of American democracy, the champions of religious liberty, and the reformers of the Church of England. If one word can mean all these things, then how can it mean anything?[\[iii\]](#) If one is to learn something from the Puritan approach to education, one must first understand who he is talking about when he talks about Puritans. This three-part series of essays seeks to define what Puritanism means, and then show how these men and women reformed education first in England and then in New England.

### **What the term meant in the seventeenth-century.**

The problem with all of these competing understandings of Puritanism is that they place seventeenth-century people into modern terms. Rather than being concerned with revolution, capitalism or democracy, the Puritans were concerned with the issues of their time, the chief of which was the reformation of the English Church. The movement grew out of the larger movement of Protestant reforms sweeping Europe in the sixteenth century. England was brought to Protestantism by Henry VIII’s desire to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, led back to Catholicism by his daughter Mary Tudor, and brought to a somewhat peaceful Protestant compromise by Elizabeth I. It was this compromise of Protestant theology and Catholic influences that gave rise to the Puritan movement. In short, Puritans believed that Protestant England was much too Catholic. They opposed the liturgy, feast days, clerical vestments, and the episcopal organizational structure of the Church.

At this point, it is important to point out the original usage of the term. For the most part, “Puritan” was used in a derogatory sense. Elizabeth’s successor James I was particularly antagonistic toward the Puritans as they were particularly disapproving of his insistence on an episcopal

church government. James categorized the Puritans as those who were “trusting the private spirit of Reformation” rather than accepting the authority of the Church.<sup>[iv]</sup> James’ usage of the term, in many ways, gets to the heart of Puritanism—a movement dedicated to the authority of Scripture over against any other considerations. It was a movement that despite its certainty in the doctrine of human depravity believed that the Bible was powerful enough to change any man. It must be read and understood by everyman.

While the Puritans sought reform of the Church, they also sought to reform society. They wanted to eradicate sins that brought England further from its role as a Protestant kingdom, such as Sabbath-breaking, swearing, adultery, and drunkenness. They even outlawed Christmas because of its pagan associations. In their desire to reform the church and society, they were influenced by the model of John Calvin’s Geneva. Eventually, the Puritans had the opportunity to implement their reforms. In England, after the defeat and execution of Charles I at the end of the Civil War in 1649, the Puritans established a short-lived republican government under Oliver Cromwell. In New England starting in 1620, they established colonies built on principles drawn from their belief in the righteousness of God, the wickedness of humanity, and the authority of the Bible.

The Puritans, however, were not a political party or a united group with central leadership. They were loosely organized and many times very diverse in their beliefs. Most were Calvinistic, some were not, many attempted to balance the extremes in various ways. One issue that illustrates this diversity is separation from the Church of England. Many historians reserve the term Puritan only for those that stayed within institutionalized church. Those that separated are labeled Separatists. This distinction, while sometimes helpful, is of little use when discussing Puritanism in New England where they all in a sense separated. Many of those

Separatists who left the Church of England also left England. Since they are known as Puritans in New England, their fellow Separatists will also be seen as Puritans. Separatism, therefore, is a branch of Puritanism. Admittedly, this definition may be broad, but it does provide a framework for a discussion of Puritan reforms in education.

### **Puritans were more educated than average.**

In attempting to define Puritans and discuss Puritan education, the educational background of the Puritans must be taken into consideration. Protestantism in general and Puritanism, in particular, had a special appeal to the literate lay people in towns and cities. In studying Reformation-era Germany and Switzerland, historian Steven Ozment demonstrated successfully that the message of the Reformers appealed primarily to this demographic.[\[v\]](#) Who else would read the tracts and sermons of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin?

Similarly, Puritanism grew among the more literate city and town folk. One historian points out that: "Though Puritanism appealed to men and women of every walk of life, it flourished in towns especially among the 'industrious sort' – those who had succeeded by effort which they attributed to grace."[\[vi\]](#) In less secular and caustic terms, the Puritan message appealed to the successful, the middle class, and the professional people of London and other urban areas. It appealed to the already literate. These men and women regularly read tracts, owned Bibles, and thought their way through lengthy sermons. These were not typical Englishmen of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries; they highly valued education for themselves and their posterity.

When it comes to literacy and education the colonies established by Puritans were also not typical English colonies. They certainly weren't typical of Spanish, French,

or Portuguese colonies. As we will see in Part Three, the literacy rate in New England around the time of the 1776 Revolution was higher than any other place in the world!

**Puritans wanted to radically change their society for the better.**

While Puritanism was born out of dissatisfaction with the Elizabethan Settlement and the reign of James I, it began to prosper during the reign of Charles I. Many scholars have called this time the Puritan Revolution (1641-1660), the time where Puritans came to power in Parliament and used the New Model Army to defeat Charles I, execute him for treason, and establish a Puritan government under Parliament and Oliver Cromwell. War is a time of turmoil, even for those on the winning side. This period was also one of change and new ideas. In this context, the Puritans saw an opportunity for reshaping society, an opportunity to establish a holy republic.

In building a new society, they thought it a priority to reform education. As historian Richard Greaves points out, "No Puritan of any kind could envisage a Holy Commonwealth without a reformed church and piously oriented schools." [\[viii\]](#) While much is known about Puritan attempts to reform the church, their emphasis on education is underappreciated. The Puritan Revolution was a time of new government, new ideas, and new opportunities. The Puritans saw it as a time for educational reform. These ideas on education will be examined in Part Two.

Were the Puritans really puritanical? Is the reputation for joyless and thoughtless authoritarianism zeal deserved? The answer depends much more on the presuppositions of the one answering the question than on the historical record. Certainly, the Puritans had high moral standards and desired to implement their beliefs in society that makes most modern people bristle. Of course, they went too far in outlawing Christmas. The Puritans were, however, a people committed to

one consuming idea—the knowledge and worship of God through the Holy Scriptures. Because of the need to read the Bible, this consuming idea led to the greatest educational reforms the world had yet seen.

Notes:

[\[i\]](#) For an example see the works of Marxist historian Christopher Hill. Especially *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

[\[ii\]](#) For an example of this view see that classic work by Max Webber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930).

[\[iii\]](#) Commenting on contradictory meanings of Puritan, Raymond Stearns writes, “The Puritan was a jealous bigot but he somehow gave us religious freedom; he was a gloomy snob but he gave us democracy; he was a tight-fisted, hard-working Calvinist with a feudal background but he developed the capitalists system!” in Raymond Stearns, “Assessing the New England Mind,” *Church History* 10 (1941): 246.

[\[iv\]](#) King James I, *Meditation upon the Lord’s Prayer* quoted in Keith Durso, *No Armor for the Back: Baptist Prison Writings 1600s-1700s* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 46.

[\[v\]](#) Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to sixteenth-century Germany and Switzerland* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1980).

[\[vi\]](#) Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed, Britain 1603-1714* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 31.

[\[vii\]](#) Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and Educational Thought: Background for Reform* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 6.

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# Challenging Men to David-Jonathan Friendships

In trying to keep up with cultural trends that affect the church, I have heard on more than one occasion that the American church struggles to reach men because our worship services are so geared to women. Notably the music.

What I do not want to do here is to contribute to the issue of men feeling that Christianity, as practiced in the U.S., is not manly enough. And I do believe firmly that men and women are different in many fundamental ways, and that the Bible testifies to this. Being equal does not mean being the same (Genesis 5:2).

But I also want to wonder aloud if sometimes this issue isn't an excuse for why men do not get more involved in the church. The church is far more community-daily, relational discipleship ("as you're going" according to Jesus in Matthew 28:19)—than it is music and atmosphere on Sunday morning.

As such I think Christian men in my culture need something more profound than tweaks to the worship service. They need friendships. And I don't just mean "watch the game on Saturday night" or "play golf together" friendships, though these things could be part of it. I'm talking about the type of friendship that David and Jonathan had in the Old Testament in the Bible.

Here are some of the distinguishing marks of their relationship, as taken from 1 Samuel 18-20.

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***Jonathan and David's friendship was so deep and intimate it was called a Covenant.***

"Covenant" is a word used often in the Bible to describe how God relates to us and in my opinion the best word to describe marriage between one man and one woman. It's a word that conveys serious commitment and deep intimacy, which are phrases that we do not use often to describe male friendships in the U.S. And that is why I do not want to advocate for the feminization of men in Christianity. But the Bible is countercultural and can be uncomfortable, yet very much worth it, to practice. Perhaps women understand this better and it is unbiblical cultural stereotypes of men that prevent us from experiencing biblical covenant with our brothers in the faith.

Regardless, David and Jonathan set the bar high. Men need friendships in the church that makes them as relationally close as possible.

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***Jonathan sacrificed generously for David.***

He gave him his robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt. This was a significant and generous way to honor his best friend. We can do this with gifts, with money and especially with time. Convenience is the enemy of covenant.

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***Jonathan spoke highly of David when he wasn't around***

It is one thing to speak highly of someone when you are around people who also want to speak highly of them. It's another when you defend someone to his enemies. Especially enemies with power, as his father Saul had. Men need relationships of that kind of integrity. I want to know other men have my back



even if it costs them.

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### ***Jonathan verbalized his love to David***

Over and over Jonathan did things like reminding David he was for him during this frightening time and he had David reaffirm his oath to him because he loved David so much.

In my opinion, our culture bends so much towards talk being cheap and “Don’t tell me, show me” that we woefully underestimate the power of words. Words matter.

I grew up in a culture where most men never said “I love you” to each other. When I was at Welch College I can distinctly recall three different guys saying it to me. Each time I was so stunned I don’t even think I said it back. But as I’ve gotten older and less self-conscious about these type of things, I have said it to many men. I don’t say it if I know it will make the other man uncomfortable. And I am definitely not trying to communicate this as some kind of benchmark of maturity. Not every man should be expected to say it. But some way, somehow, even if it’s not those three potent words, Christian men should communicate covenant love to each other. It’s not less than manly to do so.

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### ***Jonathan was willing to risk his life to protect David***

I’m convinced that men are designed by nature to protect women but friendship is a willingness to die for the other person. Jesus said it’s the greatest demonstration of love. Jonathan faced Saul’s wrathful spear for defending David.

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## ***Jonathan grieved with David***

When they realized how serious the hate was that Saul had for David, they embraced and kissed and wept together. I cannot fathom many moments more intimate between two friends in the history of the world. I have always known that your true friends are the ones who will weep with you and have recently learned that few things create intimacy in relationships like grieving together. Kissing is almost always spoken of in family contexts in the Old Testament. That is how close David and Jonathan were.

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Let me close by saying how blessed of God I have been to have men in my adult life like the ones you see in the collage of pictures with the title of this article. I loved being a part of a group of men called "Southtown" my senior year at Welch College. I love being a part of REO today. I've often said of my friend Josh Crowe that filters were abolished long ago and we speak freely to each other and if he has criticism for me I will listen without being defensive (which I can't say is true in other relationships). My friend Yeomans has listened to me bare my soul dozens of times and offered correction and encouragement without judgment and has visited me in Chicago many times, at great personal cost. When my friend Andy and his wife announced to my church they were expecting their first child I ran on stage where he was playing bass and gave him a huge hug, as excited as I've ever been for someone. When my best friend Matt left Chicago a few weeks ago, I cried several times over a few days. And even though he is more of a mentor than a best friend, all of the above points apply strongly to my pastor, David.

All of these men have been Jonathans to me in some way and I have told many of them that I love them. Without any shame. Yet I don't offer any of this from a place of expertise. As I read about Jonathan and David I realize there is so much more

I could be doing for the men in my life.

And as a preacher and a writer, God rarely gives me something he wants to transform in me where he doesn't want me to share with others. So that is my hope today. Be a Jonathan. Be a David. Don't let culture completely dictate how men are supposed to treat each other. May we be countercultural in the ways the Bible teaches.

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## When the Best Seat is the Worst Seat

*Guest post by Jeff Caudill, Executive Pastor at [Cofer's Chapel](#).*

Best seat available. When purchasing seats to the theater, a sporting event, etc. we often are given the option to choose the best seat available. We want to be up close. We want to have the best view of the movie. We want to see the actors and hear the dialogue. We hope to get close to the action. (None of these apply to being at church, but that is a subject for another time.)

However, no one wants the front seat at a funeral. If you are

in the front seat at a funeral, it typically means you are closest relationally to the person who has died. I recently sat in that seat. My dad fell down the stairs at home. He never recovered from his injuries. On July 6, 2018 he made his transition from this life to the next and is now in the presence of Jesus.

Sitting in that seat you have the best view of the deceased in the casket. You can see and hear the soloist best. From that seat, you can see the emotion of the speaker very clearly. Everyone who attends the funeral shares condolences with those seated in the front seat.

My mom sat in that seat throughout the visitation and funeral for my Dad. I sat next to her along with my siblings for the funeral. While sitting there and in the days since I have made some observations:

**1. You are never really prepared to sit in that seat.**

It is still like a nightmare hoping to wake up from. I was not ready for my Dad to go. His eternity in heaven was/is secure. He left us a tremendous heritage. We will live in those truths from now on. But, I was not ready for him to go. A few months prior to his accident he had sent me information about his life insurance, pension, etc. I barely looked at it. I barely looked at it, that is, until the day he passed. I guess my point is life is precious and fragile. We know this but sitting in that seat reminded me of this very fact. This is a reminder to us all. Keep eternity in view and enjoy the life and family God has given you here and now.

**2. People seated in the front seat at a funeral can handle more than they may think.**

I would never have guessed we would have had to endure what we did following my Dad's accident. We had long days and nights in the hospital. We had to discuss things and make decisions

no family should have to discuss or decide. We had to do things while caring for Dad once he came home, under hospice care, I would not wish anyone would have to do for a family member. The physical and emotional stress of it all was deeply draining. We were only able to handle it with God's help. He helped us do things and have conversations we would not have been able to do on our own. As a believer, when you sit in that seat, He sits there with you.

### **3. Those seated in the front seat at a funeral can grow closer to each other.**

This was true for us. Some families fight and have major issues during times of loss. Our family did none of those things. We worked together as we made our way through difficult decisions, funeral planning, going through Dad's things, etc. I know our Christian faith played a major role in us getting along and coming together in the most difficult of times. Family is so important. Love your family now and allow God to bring you even closer through difficult times. Don't allow your own selfishness or bitterness to make an already difficult situation worse.

### **4. Your family, friends, and church are such a tremendous support and help to those who sit in that front seat.**

The prayers along with the tangible gifts of money, gift cards, and food were invaluable. God sustained us through the prayers of His people. I witnessed this to be true! He also used family and friends to meet our needs during those difficult days. I was and am still amazed at everything people did and provided for us. Allow God to use you to help hurting people. Be proactive. You might be amazed at what \$20 or a Kroger gift card will do to help someone in a difficult time during the death of a loved one.

**5. The ones seated in that front seat hear many kind words about the one who passed.**

So many people came by to tell us what a great man Dad was. People talked about how he impacted their lives. They mentioned his godly life, his teaching of the Word, the heritage he left behind, his love for God, His church, the Word, and his support of the pastor. We were so proud to hear all those things. We knew them all to be true. He, however, did not always feel his life made an impact. Like anything, we can take this too far, but I think it is important to also let people know they are making an impact while they are alive. Go ahead and provide genuine compliments when they are deserved. Let people know how much they have impacted your life. Even to those who may struggle to receive compliments, give them anyway. Everyone needs to know their lives and ministries matter. Sure, we should not do what we do for the "applause of men." However, knowing you made a difference is such an encouragement.

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I want the best available seat at an event. I love sitting close to the action. However, I hope it is a long time before I have to sit in the front seat at a funeral again. Sooner or later it happens to us all. We need God's help in those extreme times. He was there for our family. He wants to be there for yours as well.

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# Reform the Line: Finding Purpose in Failure

Whether it's due to upbringing, past influences, or sensibilities developed over the years, I do my best to keep my eyes and ears open to truth that can help shape me into something better. That is not meant to be a pat on the back. From an early age, I have been blessed to learn from much wiser people the importance of examining everything I consume – whether literature, music, or movies. I was taught that everything I take into my mind needs to be filtered through the light of God's truth and grace.

It is that context that sets the stage for so many of my most valuable lessons. I've written about a few of them for *Rambling Ever On* already which you can read [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And while this particular moment of revelation was once again provided by Tolkien and his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, this time it was delivered through the film adaptation by Peter Jackson. To make any sense of this story, I must beg your indulgence for a few minutes as I do my best to provide context, and that will require a bit of storytelling and ground laying on my part. I promise it has to be done for any of this to make sense.

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At the outset of *The Return of the King*, the third movie in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the people of Rohan are going to war against Mordor, the great evil of the world. Their spirits are high after a hard-fought battle at Helm's Deep. They had won the day through courage, determination, and the perfect timing of a wizard. The sun

rose in the east and brought with it new life, new hope, and a complete routing of their enemy. Now, Gondor, their great ally to the southeast, has called for aid, and Rohan answers. The Rohirrim – the great cavalry of the Rohan people – rides to fight in the great war of their time. With them ride Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor and hero of Helm's Deep, along with Legolas Greenleaf and Gimli son of Gloin, elf and dwarf warriors of renown. The odds are not good but with these mighty warriors at their side and a little luck, perhaps they will win the day again.

That is the scene that Peter Jackson's epic conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy presents to the audience. *The Return of the King* further stacks the deck against our heroes. On the eve of battle, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli make the difficult decision to seek another road to Gondor, leaving the Rohirrim to ride to battle alone. It is a huge blow to the morale of the soldiers. Aragorn had given them hope. His presence inspired renewed courage. Just like that, he was gone and with him, their courage. They lose hope and they openly question the wisdom of riding to war.

Théoden, King of Rohan, has lived a long and mostly unfulfilled life. For too long, he was an ineffective leader. For too long, he sat by as his country and his people suffered. After Aragorn departs, one of Théoden's soldiers speaks aloud that which all others are thinking, "He (Aragorn) leaves because there is no hope...We cannot defeat the armies of Mordor." They know they cannot win this fight. It is at this moment of despair, that Théoden truly becomes the king he has always desired to be. He responds with such resolve that it calms the hearts of his soldiers and prepares them for what they must do. "No we cannot. But we will meet them in battle nonetheless." Théoden recognized the hopelessness of their situation, but he recognized something even more important: the absolute rightness of their task. The righteousness of it all. They would ride to war and die in war because it was the



right thing to do.

In what is possibly the crowning cinematic achievement of the film, the Rohirrim arrive at the Fields of Pelennor, outside the walls of Gondor's capital city, Minas Tirith, to find a host of enemy warriors swarming as far as the eye can see. It is a veritable ocean of orcs, trolls, and other creatures of darkness and evil. Théoden calls to his troops. He rallies them with his chant of "Death!" They charge, building speed as they take arrow after arrow, and finally, triumphantly, they break through the line of terrified orcs. They completely turn the tide of the battle. They rally the armies of Gondor. They bring hope and courage to the free peoples of Middle Earth. The orcs flee in fear knowing that they cannot stand against the righteous fury of the Rohirrim. It is a beautiful sight.

It is then that the Rohirrim realize that Mordor is stronger than they realized and another army had been held in reserve: an army of oliphaunts (giant elephants) prepared to lay waste to anyone still on the battlefield. Hope turns sour and despair sets in again.

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It is easy to give up when faced with failure. It is not an uncommon thing to give our best and watch it fall apart in front of our eyes. This inevitably leaves us feeling dejected and discouraged. We have all been there. We have poured our hearts into something so important and so precious, only to see it blow away in the cold winds of failure. I would wager that most of us have experienced this in some form or fashion. Many of us are experiencing it right now.

Life can feel unfair. Things go wrong – many times in ways that leave us broken. Often, it goes bad due to our own failings or flaws, though that is a separate conversation for another day. The failure I am discussing now is a different thing altogether. We can diligently live out our purpose and

calling and still see it crumble at our feet. We can know, without a doubt, that we are doing the right thing and still be crushed by disappointment. We can do the righteous thing and receive suffering, loss, and even death as our reward.

Take the real-life story of Jim Elliot and the Ecuadorian missionaries. On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint were brutally killed by warriors from the Waodani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. This occurred after months of trying to connect with the tribe. In fact, a few days before they were martyred, they had met with a small group from the tribe and were thrilled that God had finally opened this door. They had been led to the Waodani tribe. They knew the risks, as their correspondence and writings would later attest, but they also knew that if this was the will of God, they had only one choice: obey. By any human standard, their mission was a total failure.

Their friends and family were heartbroken when they received news of the attack. Instead of hating the Waodani tribe for what they did, some of the remaining family members, Jim's wife Elizabeth in particular, chose to continue the mission. In place of fear, anger, and hatred, they went back to the Waodani and showed them courage, peace, and the love of Christ. Their ministry, and the memory of what the five young martyrs did change the Waodani people forever.

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That is the lesson *The Rohirrim*, King Théoden, and *The Return of the King* had for me on my most recent viewing. Mordor was too strong and too powerful to defeat. Théoden and his soldiers knew this. They had done the unthinkable and broken the line on their first, desperate charge. For a few brief and glorious moments, they thought they had turned the tide of the battle and won the day. To the east, the line of oliphaunts and the second army from Mordor shattered that dream. Once

again, they were faced with the futility of their task. They rode to Gondor's aid knowing that death would be their only reward. But they rode nonetheless. Théoden, having already found his courage, sees the new army approaching and the fear it inspires in the eyes of his men, and he stands resolute. He quickly rallies his men and they respond as they have been trained to do from their youth. He yells the line that struck me with such force that I quietly gasped. "Reform the line! Reform the line!" The line reforms and the Rohirrim once again charge, courageously, hopelessly into the gaping maw of a much stronger army.

The outcome is irrelevant. They march because it is right. They march because it is the only honorable and noble choice left to them. I doubt we will be faced with such a choice – a life or death decision. But we are faced with difficulties throughout our lives. We serve in thankless and overlooked ministries. We sow the seed and never reap the harvest. Some of us deal with sickness and infirmity. Some of us deal with tragedy, more than it seems fair for one person to bear. We labor and sometimes, it feels in vain. That is our reality. We see this story play out in Scripture repeatedly. Moses not crossing into the Promised land. David not being allowed to build the Temple. Joseph and his continual setbacks and trials. Paul and his thorn in the flesh. All the martyrs throughout the pages of Scripture.

My takeaway from all of this is pretty simple. God does not promise us an easy road. He does not guarantee success, by any earthly definition. His plan is greater than all of that. He requires but one thing: obedience. That is a lesson I need to hear often. I need to see results. I need to see the Lord move in my church in a mighty way, but at times, it feels as if we are dying a slow and prolonged death. All of this even though I am convinced we are doing exactly what the Lord wants us to do. Perhaps it is His good will to let us serve out our days and never see tangible results. Faced with that possibility,

what are our options? Do we seek greener pastures? Do we compromise in hopes that it will benefit us in the long run? Or do we “reform the line” and do exactly what we believe the Lord has for us to do?

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Jim Elliot wrote this prior to his death, and though not as famous as his “He is no fool” quote, this speaks directly to the heart of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ, “Rest in this: it is His business to lead, command, impel, send, call or whatever you want to call it. It is your business to obey, follow, move, respond, or what have you. I may no longer depend on pleasant impulses to bring me before the Lord. I must rather respond to principles I know to be right, whether I feel them to be enjoyable or not.”

Failing is not enjoyable. Suffering is not enjoyable. Sometimes though, it is right and righteous. Sometimes, failure is exactly what is being asked of us. Théoden and the Rohirrim charge the new army and hope rekindles. The good guys win the day as Aragorn arrives at just the right moment with an army all his own. Théoden never sees that victory. In the midst of the battle, Théoden is mortally wounded and as he lies dying in the arms of his beloved niece, he is finally at peace. “I go to my fathers, in whose mighty company I shall not now feel ashamed.” He did what was right, no matter the results. No matter the consequences. That is our calling. That is our purpose. Obey. To do the right thing no matter what. To “reform the line” as many times as it is necessary. This is no fairytale, where heroic deeds are rewarded with victory upon victory. We live in a broken and fallen world where oftentimes, God uses our brokenness and failures for His glory. We fail, but there is beauty and redemption in those failings if they flow from humble and obedient hearts.

As followers of the living God, we too will pass on from this life to the next and if we are faithful and obedient to our

calling, we too will have nothing of which to be ashamed. No matter the earthly successes or failures of our lives, our ultimate reward is waiting for us in the arms of our Savior who will welcome us with the best words imaginable, “Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!”

*“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” – Jim Elliot*

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## **Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting (Part 2)**

Not long after REO was created, while it was still cooling on the window sill, I wrote an article on [Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting](#). It created quite a bit of response. In the vein of much of modern Hollywood, I have written this sequel years later.

The point of it, I will repeat from last time, is to challenge how we think about the Bible. I want to push against our preconceived interpretations that perhaps we have never thought much about, the popular ones that do not often get challenged.

I give two disclaimers, though: First, I am not saying that I

am positive that the alternative interpretations below are correct. Just that, according to some students of Scripture, they may be. And we should think through them in humility and wisdom, aiming to rightly divide the word of truth. Even if it means saying, "I was wrong." Secondly, I am purposely avoiding passages like Philippians 4:13, Jeremiah 29:11 and the "Where two or three are gathered" verse because they are commonly picked on. These, in my experience, are not. Let's look at them.

#### **Exodus 14:14**

**Moses answered the people, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."**

*Traditional Interpretation: When faced with daunting circumstances, we need to be still and let God fight for us.*

*Alternative Interpretation: God may want us to move instead of crying out to him.*

The next verse is absolutely why I believe this:

**Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on."**

I hasten to add that I have heard wise, biblically sound Christian pastors and teachers cite this verse on social media. So maybe I am overthinking it. But at this point, Exodus 14:14 is not a verse I would use to teach people to be still. Psalm 46:10, yes. Instead, I use this pair of verses and their greater context to teach that there is a time to pray but there is also a time to get moving. Prayer is not a substitute for action.

## Matthew 27:46

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

*Traditional Interpretation: God turned his back on Jesus (or abandoned him, or some verb of relational separation) to judge him for the sin of mankind since God cannot look upon sin.*

*Alternative Interpretation: Jesus, using a rabbinic practice of quoting only the first verse of a Psalm to communicate the entire psalm, is telling the audience that God will save him from this horrific circumstance. As Psalm 22 teaches.*

I think "How Deep the Father's Love For Us" has contributed to the understanding of this verse, as it says, "The Father turned his face away." But even without the hymn, I have heard the traditional interpretation over and over in my life. I have always assumed it to be true. Yet read the words of Jeffrey Crabtree in the Randall House Commentary on Matthew:

Was Jesus actually abandoned and calling on God from His sense of that? Or was He primarily saying this for the benefit of His human audience? Some interpreters understand Jesus' question to mean that the Father did in some sense forsake His Son as He hung on the cross as the atonement for the sin of the world (Hendriksen 971; Hagner 33B:844). Others understand Jesus to have been implying, "Read the twenty-second Psalm. It tells you what this crucifixion is about. I may look forsaken (Mt. 27:43) but I am not" (Ps. 22:24). This makes Jesus' quote and question mainly rhetorical...

...It seems probable that Jesus was not forsaken (Ps.

22:24)

even though it appeared to those on the ground that He was and even though He Himself felt forsaken (Evans, Matthew 514). He had suffered forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His

ministry and endured extreme loneliness in the Garden the previous night in prayer. In like manner, on the cross at the time of

His greatest suffering Jesus again felt isolation, only this time the

sense of isolation was the most intense of His entire human experience—because He bore the wrath of God for the sins of the

entire world.

The interpreter will want to consider the implications of the

position he determines to be Scripture's intent. Can the Father and

Son really separate in their beings (Jn. 10:30)? Would such a real

separation agree with Psalm 22:24?[1. Jeffrey Cabtree, *The Randall House Bible Commentary: Matthew*, 466-67]

I find Mr. Crabtree's explanation nuanced and balanced and it causes me to consider it. Yet I add that I am still struggling through this one. And I have not bought the alternative interpretation completely yet. This is not a major doctrinal issue to me but it's still something worth thinking through and wrestling with. Verses like 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 8:3 give me pause in abandoning the traditional interpretation.

**John 3:30**

**“[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.”**

*Traditional Interpretation: We must increase Christ with our*



*lives and be humble.*

*Alternative Interpretation: Christ must increase by the very nature of things no matter what we do or don't do.*

The word "must" works one of two ways, illustrated by the two interpretations above. We can say, "If you want to take English classes, you must register." You control that. But we also say, "What goes up, must come down." You don't control that. You cannot do anything to affect it, start it, stop it or alter it. It's something that happens *by the very nature of things*. The latter definition is what I think John means.

There are several reasons I believe this but here are three: First, it fits with how John the Gospel author used the Greek word "must" (δεῖ) earlier in the same chapter when he said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up."** Based on verses like Acts 2:23 and 4:28, we know that the death of Christ was something God determined should happen and that humans could not prevent it or cause it. It is God's—and Jesus's—nature to save, just as it is gravity's nature to bring objects to the earth.

Secondly, this fits with Jesus in Luke when he said, **"If [my disciples] keep quiet the stones will cry out."** Christ will be worshipped because His nature as God demands it and not because we must do it.

And lastly, the context before John 3:30 leaves the interpretation up in the air, but in the verses after he says, **"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all."** This speaks to Christ nature as above us, which leads me to believe John is explaining why Christ must increase by the very nature of things more than Christ must increase because we must do it.

All of this matters because it helps me understand how Christ

as God is bigger than my worship. He must increase as God in the sense that he must be exalted, praised and magnified. And even if free will beings refuse to do so, there are still billions of created voices doing it around the clock.

### **John 11:33-35**

**When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.**

*Traditional Interpretation: Jesus was saddened by the death of his friend and cried as a result.*

*Alternative Interpretation: Jesus was angry because of the reaction of the people and was overcome with emotional distress.*

I suppose it's possible both are true but at the very least I think this passage needs to be taught as Jesus was angry as much as sad. "Deeply moved" in the verse above is open to interpretation over a range of stressful emotion but it definitely bends to anger in my opinion. And this can be seen in how some prominent translations render it (NLT, HCSB). The people doubted him (vs. 37) and lack of faith often made Jesus angry (Mark 16:14).

### **Revelation 3:16**

**So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.**

*Traditional Interpretation: God wants you to be for him or against him, but not on the fence.*

*Alternative Interpretation: God wants you to be for him and*

*hates lukewarmness.*

This doesn't change the main meaning of the passage, but it is possible that when God refers to hot and cold water he means that both hot and cold have a purpose. Cold water is good to drink and hot water is good for cooking, among other uses for both. So God wants us to be useful. Lukewarm water is good for nothing. It's nasty and worth only spitting out.

Let me conclude by saying that when I did the last article, the discussion in the comment section below was very edifying and I actually adapted my opinion of Proverbs 22:6 as a result. So we strongly encourage feedback and interaction, even respectful disagreement.

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## **Enlightened Woman Leaves Christianity Due to Jesus and the Apostles' Dehumanizing Language**

**Portland, Oregon** – Emily Van Zant has been a churchgoer all her life, until now. She was born and raised attending church “any time the doors were open,” as she puts it. But recently, the more she reads the Bible, the more problems she

has with the tone and rhetoric from some of Christianity's key figures.

"I tried for a long time to ignore the angry and hostile language that many of the Apostles were spewing. My breaking point was when I realized that this problem originated with Jesus. I decided I could no longer align myself with such intolerant and dehumanizing language and ideology. All people are valuable and created with the spark of divinity. Calling them 'a brood of vipers' or 'white-washed tombs' was just a bridge too far for me. Shouldn't we be showing love to everyone, not just those that agree with us?"

Ms. Van Zant joins a growing number of disillusioned ex-Christians who are looking to live out their faith in a more inclusive and tolerant manner. Ms. Van Zant continues:

"I was already struggling with Paul calling Jews "dogs" in Philippians 3:2. But when a good friend of mine pointed out that Jesus called a Canaanite woman a "dog" I knew this sort of intolerance and bigotry was something I could no longer condone. I embarked on a journey of reflection and fact-finding, and I realized this intolerance went deeper than just language. It was foundational to the entire Christian faith. Jesus' entire ministry and message were built on non-inclusivity, intolerance, and self-centeredness. He actually taught that he was the only way to heaven! The level of arrogance it takes to make that claim is mindboggling. That was his path, and I respect him for that, but you can't force your path on anyone else. You aren't allowed to tell other people that their path is wrong. That's not how this works. More and more people are seeing the truth and coming to the realization that the party is over for Jesus and his good time buddies of intolerance."

For the time being, Emily Van Zant is on her own path, seeking knowledge, wisdom, and faith in a number of religions and faiths.

“I will keep looking until I find something that works best for me. And once I do, I will be sure to tell everyone how intolerant and bigoted they are if they disagree with me.”

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## Memories (Part 3)

This section of my personal memories deals in large part (not exclusively) with ministry-related memories rather than personal ones, and covers a period of some 20 years from 1995 until the present. I include it because, number one, these are special memories in my life, and secondly, they testify to the faithfulness and leading of God as Judy and I endeavored to be obedient to our calling as believers, spouses, parents, and missionaries.

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### Russia

We were in the process of completing our fourth term of service in Panama when a phone call came from Brother Eugene Waddell, director of the Foreign (now International) Missions Department. Would Judy and I consider transferring from Panama to Russia? After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, God had opened doors to Russia and all the former Soviet Union countries, and there was the possibility of Free Will Baptists partnering with the Russian Baptist Union, most of whom were very close to us doctrinally. This was the spring of 1995.’’

As we finished up that term and came to the states, with plans to visit Russia with someone from the mission that year, our feeling was that we would be transferring. I picked up some Russian grammar books, a traveler’s course, and other resources, thinking that would help prepare me. By the time we

went in October 1995, I had learned several phrases and lots of individual words.

The trip was unforgettable. We traveled with Jimmy Aldridge (Overseas Secretary with FWB International Mission) and Galen Dunbar (board member). We met Brother Nicolai Sobolev, pastor and leader in the Russian Baptist Union, and what a wonderful host he was! We traveled from Moscow to Chelyabinsk, and then to Yekaterinburg. We attended a conference in Moscow with many Russian pastors and leaders, and a number of expatriates. What a humbling experience to listen to Russian pastors relate their experiences of time spent in prison, torture and isolation. Their faithfulness to our God came through in their testimonies. Through impossible situations, they labored to keep the church alive in Russia.

As a result of that amazing conference, and through an extended season of prayer and reflection, we reluctantly told Brother Waddell that we didn't feel the Lord's leading to go to Russia. At that time, we did not know why God said no. A year or so later, Mike and Cathy Corley were appointed to do what we were asked to do and they did it so much better than we could have!. He knew Russian and could begin ministry without the years of language study. Don't second guess God. His ways are always perfect.

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### **Director of Field Operations**

In not choosing to go to Russia, we opted to return to Panama for a fifth term. That concluded in the middle of 1999, and we moved to Nashville to be near our oldest two sons (Michael was married and Phillip was a senior at Welch), and to enroll David in Bible College. Stateside assignment usually lasted a year or so, and involved visiting churches, speaking in mission conferences, attending associational meetings, and other mission-related opportunities. I was in western Missouri

in an area-wide mission conference when one unusually warm November afternoon I received a call from James Forlines, who had become General Director of the Mission in 1998.

Bro. James told me he was considering me as a possibility for the Foreign Missions (now International Missions) administrative staff. Was I interested and willing to be considered? I could take some time and think and pray, talk it over with Judy, etc. We prayed earnestly, considered the possibilities and implications as to what it would mean for us, and in early January 2000, I called and told Bro. James that if he selected me for the position, I would accept. In mid-January, I became the Director of Field Operations.

It was my role to supervise and coordinate the efforts of our field personnel. I had an office in Nashville, and from there traveled to approximately 20 countries over the next eight years. It was truly a great adventure, a challenge beyond anything I could have imagined. Thanks to the Lord's enablement, I was a part of several initiatives that enabled us as a people to have a greater impact around the world: partnership with Bible Mission International in Central Asia, the creation of the position of Regional Director which served us well for a number of years, although it has now been eliminated, the creation of the Hanna Project, and ongoing efforts with our international Free Will Baptist family. One of my most special memories was going to Bulgaria with Clint Morgan and Tim Awtrey to survey that country as a potential field of service for our mission, and later making that recommendation to our Board. The Board approved opening Bulgaria, and today, nearly 15 years later, God is working there in a mighty way through four missionary couples and a growing number of Bulgarian believers.

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## **The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc**

In 1992 a historic event happened for Free Will Baptists around the world. Panama was host to a consultation that would bring representatives from a number of countries where our missionaries served. Spearheaded by Dr. Melvin Worthington, Executive Secretary of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, USA, the consultation became the catalyst for an international movement.

The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc. was officially organized in 1995 in Brazil. They decided to meet every three years. I missed the 1995 and 1998 meetings in Brazil and Uruguay, respectively, but starting in 2002 (we skipped 2001 because it was so close to the terrorist attacks of 9-11), I attended every meeting through 2010, plus a number of executive committee meetings on off years as a translator-advisor, or as a member of the committee. Bro. Worthington decided to postpone the next session until 2002, and we met near Nashville, Tennessee at Camp Garner Creek. We met in Panama in 2004, France in 2007, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 2010.

We'd basically meet every three years or so for a general assembly. The other years I would help coordinate an executive committee meeting, sometimes as a liaison and sometimes as a member of that committee. Working with men like Gerardo Acevedo (Uruguay), José Manuel Parrón (Spain), Luis Felipe Tijerina (México), and others remains a joy I can't adequately describe and has led to some treasured friendships as well.

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### **Panamá, Part II**

God is truly a God of surprises. I had served as Director of Field Operations at International Missions, truly loved it, and was able to visit around 20 countries during those years.



However, I was having some health issues (turned out to be sleep apnea at the time, and later some more problems), and I also began to sense some unrest in my spirit that perhaps it was time to leave and find a different ministry. The Lord graciously opened doors. I would leave the position of DF0, but stay on with the Mission. The original plan was to stay involved with the International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches and help countries that had received the gospel from Free Will Baptist in the United States develop plans and strategies to begin sending out their own cross-cultural missionaries. At the same time, it was felt that Judy and I should have a field ministry somewhere, so we decided to divide that role between Panama (helping the Bowermans at the seminary) and Uruguay (teaching Bible institute classes). However, by the end of 2008, Eddie's health had deteriorated, and he was going to have to return stateside immediately and go on a liver transplant waiting list. We made a trip to Panama in early January 2009 to meet with Eddie and LaRhonda Bowerman getting a crash course in the operations of the Seminary in Chame. Someone would need to assume leadership of the seminary, and it seemed that the Lord had brought us back to Panama for that hour. We served the next five-plus years in Chame, which turned out to be some of the most rewarding years of ministry. But it was not easy. The daily schedule was exhausting, on call 24/7, readjusting to the heat and humidity of Panama, and responsibilities without number. My undiagnosed health problems also left me extremely tired most of the time. Only God can be credited with giving us strength for each new day.

Judy had some flowers planted around the porch of the dorm where we were living. The beautiful small purple flowers bloomed every morning and then faded away in the heat of the day. Judy said they reminded her of Lamentations 3:23, "They (God's mercies) are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness." It was a reminder every morning when we walked out the door, that God is faithful and His mercy to us is new

and refreshing each day.

Another blessing to us was how God sent us Ariadna and Lazaro Riesgo from Cuba to help us in the seminary! "God sent" is putting it lightly! They came and stepped in immediately relieving us of many of the duties we had.

Also, the churches in Panama were seeing the importance of the seminary and taking ownership. Pastors were willing to dedicate two days a week to teach classes and this was essential. We had students in three different years so it was necessary to have three classes simultaneously. Not only was it a great help to us but the students learned from seasoned pastors. Another benefit was the pastors caught the vision and shared it with their congregations.

It is hard to believe that we're talking about nearly 20 years here. From a middle-aged couple with children still at home to watching those same children grow up, go off to college (all went to Free Will Baptist Bible College, now Welch College), meet their future spouse, get married, and start their own family. Now we're grandparents, several times over, but "greatly blessed, highly favored." As the old saying goes, "how time has flown!"

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## **Bethany**

A highlight of 2014 for us was our trip to Peru to see David, Bethany, and their three children; Isaac, Jude, and Naomi. Peru is a beautiful country, Lima is a fascinating city, and being with the kids was special. We actually had them to ourselves for a few days while David and Bethany went away to have a short vacation and celebrate their 10th anniversary. The next time we saw them was just before Christmas 2014 when they flew in to spend their Christmas break with the Lytles Bethany's family in the Huntsville Alabama area. How could I

ever forget the night Bethany told us she might have cancer? She didn't feel well from the time they arrived, and kept getting worse. Judy and I were to have gone to Panama on January 7 for a special "Passing the Baton" meeting that weekend in which International Missions was turning the work there over entirely to the National church. Because Bethany was feeling so bad, Judy decided not to go and went down to Huntsville, AL with Sheila Sass. I was to go on to Panama, but that very morning David called to say that cancer had spread throughout Bethany's body. I got the message en route to the airport, so I canceled my trip, went down to Alabama that morning straight to the hospital. Bethany went home to be with Jesus the next morning around 2:30.

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## **Epilogue**

I told one of the editors of Rambling Ever On that the Epilogue would be relatively short. We left Panama as missionaries assigned to that field in 2014 and retired from the Mission in June 2015. Growing health concerns led to an MRI which revealed that I have Intracranial Hypotension, a spinal fluid loss, which causes the brain to sag and, in my case, led to severe headaches, especially when preaching, lack of balance which caused me to not be able to walk a straight line, and even speed up, trip, and fall. To that, we could add lethargy, slurred speech, and delayed reactions that at times made it dangerous to drive. God has been merciful, and though it took a while, we've learned that getting horizontal and resting every day has helped tremendously.

Judy and I have both had a number of health issues, mostly minor, and for that we praise the Lord. It's all part of the aging process. Speaking of aging, our pastor at Cofer's Chapel, Allen Pointer, asked us to serve on staff at the church part time and work with the senior adults and to begin a ministry to internationals. God has allowed us to start a

Hispanic ministry, and we now have around 30 Spanish-speaking folks to whom we minister, and whom we're seeking to fully integrate into the life of our church. It's also exciting to get to know our seniors better, especially since we are a part of the group!

At this stage of life, watching our grandkids be born and grow is truly one of life's greatest blessings. We have nine, with another on the way.

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## **The Goodness of Effort**

About a year ago today, the wheels were just about to come off completely. How do I know? Well, for starters, Facebook memories. The date is June 9th, 2017. The picture is of my wife, Kate, her mom, and our newborn daughter Analeigh in front of a bus at the Tokorozawa train station. There are half-smiles painted on their faces because that's...just what you do when you're getting a picture taken. What's not visible, though, are the struggles that we were already enduring. The severe depression, the blindness that had crept into Kate's right eye, the misdiagnosis of her having a parasite. The three girls were getting ready to go to the Haneda airport to fly to the US for two weeks to seek treatment for Kate's vision. The same two weeks that would see the beginning of my three-year-old daughter Audrey's battle against multiple severe illnesses in Japanese hospitals. It would be months later before she would be fully, and even miraculously, recovered.

Our first two years in the greater Tokyo area were mostly defined by something that was completely outside of our control. Or rather, our time was defined by an increasingly

difficult set of circumstances that removed from us the illusion that we were ever in control to begin with. Somehow this knowledge, living through a storm like this, has changed the way that we view life in a profound way. Most of the time it's hard for us to pin down exactly what that is. One element of our new perspective is the simple knowledge that things can change so drastically and so quickly. That our health can decline rapidly and at any moment. These things can shake us, even unnerve us, if thought of outside of the context of a Sovereign God who reigns over it all. Thankfully, we trust in a God who "sits enthroned over the Flood" (Psalm 29:10).

In the past year, especially in the past six months or so, my wife and I have been mulling over the idea of "success." It seems as though, in our culture, the ones who are elevated and admired the most are those select entrepreneurs who not only have big ideas but who also have concepts that somehow see them through to grand fruition. What is their secret to this "success"? What bit of hidden wisdom might be found in their biographies and inspirational thoughts? And these ideas have other, even more implicit questions for our own work: How do I measure success in what I do, or in what I aspire to do, in light of these, what our culture might consider the pinnacle of excellence?

In the introduction to his book "Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work", Tim Keller writes about a short story of J.R.R. Tolkien's called "Leaf by Niggle". In the story, Niggle, a painter, obsesses over one particular painting. In his mind, he sees a beautiful landscape with a tree and very much desires to see it come to life on canvas. Keller writes,

*So he worked on his canvas, 'putting a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there,' but he never got much done. There were two reasons for this. First it was because he was the 'sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He*

*used to spend a long time on a single leaf...’ trying to get the shading and the sheen and the dewdrops on it just right. So no matter how hard he worked, very little actually showed up on the canvas itself. The second reason was his ‘kind heart.’ Niggle was constantly distracted by doing things his neighbors asked him to do for them.*

Later on in the story, Niggle, out on yet another task for a neighbor, gets sick and gets ready to die, his painting far from finished. “‘Oh, dear!’ said poor Niggle, beginning to weep, ‘And it’s not even finished!’” After his death, the painting of the leaf is eventually noticed and put in the town museum, viewed by a few people in the years to follow. “But,” as Keller continues, “the story does not end there.”

*After death Niggle is put on a train toward the mountains of the heavenly afterlife. At one point on his trip, he hears two Voices. One seems to be Justice, the severe voice, which says that Niggle wasted so much time and accomplished so little in life. But the other, gentler voice (‘though it was not soft’), which seems to be Mercy, counters that Niggle has chosen to sacrifice for others, knowing what he was doing. As a reward, when Niggle gets to the outskirts of the heavenly country, something catches his eye. He runs to it—and there it is: ‘Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. ‘It is a gift!’ he said.*

Keller then continues, “The world before death—his old country—had forgotten Niggle almost completely, and there his work had ended unfinished and helpful to only a very few. But in his new country, the permanently real world, he finds that his tree, in full detail and finished, was not just a fancy of

his that had died with him. No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever.”

Finally, Keller writes,

*If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God's calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. 'In the Lord, your labor is not in vain,' writes Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58. He was speaking of Christian ministry, but Tolkien's story shows how this can ultimately be true of all work. Tolkien had readied himself, through Christian truth, for very modest accomplishment in the eyes of the world.*

The story of “Leaf by Niggle” cuts me right to my core. As I was recounting the story to my wife just yesterday, I started to choke back tears. Even now, as I think about it more, the tears yet come. I imagine myself as Niggle, having passed on, yet seeing with new eyes the fulfillment of dreams unrealized. And now, as the kingdom of Christ already begins to break into the present, with new eyes I can already see the great value of sleeping on a rough cot beside the bed of your sick daughter. I can see the restoration of time spent changing diapers or a child's vomit-soaked bed-sheets. I can see the nobility in a fight to the death against a cancer diagnosis. And I can rest in the freedom of the knowledge that even if plans fail and the ship of ambition meets a fiery end on the rocky cliffs, there is inherent goodness in the effort anyway. Though life can often be unpleasant and suffering is always looming around the corner, there is still deep good in cultivating, living, and even enjoying life. Even the simplest things, if done in Christ and for the glory of God, are of deep value and worth.

I've often thought about the great Judgment that is to come, when all of the secrets of men will be brought to light by the omniscient, just Judge, Christ. His grading scale will be based on the heart that was behind the work. Were we producing as a result of being connected to the Vine? And the "last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16). Who will be the first? Most likely not those we have called such, or else this statement isn't striking at all. I like to imagine at times all those who have served in ages past, caring for the sick and the elderly, or sweating away under intense physical labor, or even pushing a broom in a small restaurant in the middle of nowhere. But if they did it with a heart of service to Christ, who is to say that these, forgotten by the world, won't be the first in the kingdom to come? We will all find out together.

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## **Yes, Actually, Marriage Did Solve My Loneliness**

*Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. [1 Samuel 1:17-18]*

Since I was a week away from my 36th birthday when I got married, I frequently read and received advice about singleness and how to deal with it. People told me not to expect marriage to solve issues I had, about everything from lust to loneliness. It is fair to say that marriage has not



solved many of my problems but instead has, as you may expect, taught me how selfish and proud I can be.

Yet I cannot deny that as badly as I struggled emotionally with loneliness the last few years before marriage, that this particular struggle was completely eradicated.

The issues I had didn't happen in a vacuum. It wasn't like I began to consciously think that because I was in my mid-30s that I should be married already. Or that this led me to feel discouraged. Until I was 32, in fact, I was quite content being single and felt no pressure within or from without from people that loved me to get married. Yet I eventually began to experience trials in this area that were beyond my control and at times I did not respond well. And slowly but surely I began to suffer significantly enough with depression and anxiety that for a short time I was actually on a medication called Lexapro. These experiences were the foundation for a theology I've developed on waiting on God, [and how brutally truthful I am willing to be about it.](#)

But marriage changed all of this. My feelings were revolutionized. I have no longer struggled with depression or anxiety even a little bit. To me, it was like the moment in *Return of the King* when Gollum and the One Ring fall into fires of the volcano in Mount Doom. The first time I read those books, it felt like nearly the whole story was consumed in darkness until that moment and then light flooded the pages. The long dark night was finally over. That is what marriage has been like to me. Loneliness was a villain that has been destroyed forever.

There is much about marriage that I love and much that brings joy. And I cannot deny that because I was older when I got married and because I fell so deeply into an abyss before Kayla, that I value the companionship the most. I love it that I have someone to come home to at night. I love it that my wife knows all of my inside jokes and quotes and says them

before I can when she knows I'm about to. I love that someone is there to take care of me when I'm sick, and honestly I love even more that I get to take care of someone when they are sick. I love it that when I preach, there is someone I can find in the audience that I can make eye contact with that understands and loves me like no other and makes me feel calm.

For those who have been victims in marriage—be it abuse or abandonment or something similar—or who are still waiting on it, it is not my aim to discourage. We at REO have written to those circumstances many times. I also do not want to disingenuously paint a picture of what marriage is like. It can be frustrating at times. It can expose the deepest flaws of your soul that you do not want to know about or confront. But if the two people are quick to forgive, as we both have been so far, then the conflict can produce deeper intimacy. And it can be completely overwhelmed most of the time by the joys of companionship.

But the main reason I am writing this is that when people write things like “Don't expect marriage to solve [fill in the blank with whatever],” that often they are correct. But sometimes I do believe we make blanket statements in Christianity that can have exceptions. Yes, I believe my identity should be in Christ and not primarily in my marriage. Yes, I believe that Paul taught we can be content no matter the circumstances. But then I read the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel and how raw and passionate her grief was while childless, and how the news of having a child transformed her emotional state. And I wonder if sometimes God didn't give us the narrative in the Bible to remind us that the more doctrinal sections have exceptions at times. Real life is not always so black and white. I don't know if I could have been content the last few years of my life before marriage. But I know I'm content now that I am married.

Absolute truth is real. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means I do not have to stay dead after I die. Sex outside of

marriage is immoral. Those are absolute. Yet in our social media world of articles that begin with things like “5 reasons you should...” and “Don’t expect this to happen when you ...” I advocate for more nuanced advice. Oftentimes I have read articles and discovered they are based on preferences and experiences and some Bible verses that may or may not be absolute in their applications. I am not telling you that marriage solves loneliness. It may not for you. It did for me. And based on Hannah’s story and God himself declaring it is not good for man to be alone (save the exceptions given by Jesus in places like Matthew 19:12) and other Scriptures, I have zero issue testifying to it.

But as always, REO opens the floor to our readers for discussion and comments. Please feel free to do so below.

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## **You Don’t Know Who Ty Cobb Was?**

A baseball great. Record holder. In the first class of Hall of Fame players inducted in 1936. Lifetime batting average of .366 – the highest of all time. Three times batted over .400 for a season. Possibly the greatest player of the early 1900s.

Violent temper with a reputation for viciousness and thought to be a racist.

Some recent studies seem to indicate that some of the things thought to be true about him may not have been factual. (This

may have been due to an inept and extremely biased biographer.)

Earlier biographers depicted Cobb as extremely violent, sharpening his spikes and endeavoring to slide into other players and cut them. He is said to have attacked blacks and sought to inflict bodily harm on them. Even Ken Burns of the famous video series *Baseball*, presented that picture of Ty Cobb. In the movie "Field of Dreams," the ghost player Shoeless Joe Jackson talks about not inviting Cobb to come to the magical field because "we hated the \_\_\_\_."

More recent studies seem to show that he was not hatefully racist, was respected by teammates and opponents alike and tried to graciously reach out to fans. He was, according to Charles Leershen, in "Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty," an extremely complex man, far from perfect, but not guilty of many of the things alleged in earlier biographies.

Ty Cobb was born in Georgia in 1886, just 21 years after the Civil War ended. He played for the Detroit Tigers, and because of his attitudes and actions, and being a Southerner, he may have created more problems for himself than he should have.

Interestingly enough, Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in 1947, was also born in Georgia, 33 years after Ty Cobb. And recent information would seem to show that Cobb was not against African Americans playing in the major leagues. "The Negro should be accepted wholeheartedly, and not grudgingly," he said. "The Negro has the right to play professional baseball and whose [sic] to say he has not?" And he was proved correct in the years that followed as African Americans reshaped the all-time baseball statistics from that point forward.

Now while I am sure there are those who do, it is likely that most people in China, India, or the heart of Africa would not know who Ty Cobb really was; in fact, he or she would never

have even heard of him. Fame is not only fleeting, it's also limited by time and place. In this case, the real and total truth about Tyrus Raymond Cobb is known only to God.

Historical facts, anecdotes, trivia and the like, are interesting, at least to some people, at certain times, and in at least a few places. They do serve as good attention grabbers, make for memorable illustrations, and help transition us to consider more important things. But only one bit of information and only one Individual makes any real difference.

It's not Ty Cobb who must be known – it's Jesus! Jesus, Name above all names. Jesus, who said of Himself "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the father but by me." Jesus, supernatural birth, sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious, bodily resurrection, all to save people from their sins. Jesus, of whom it was said: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved."

If Ty Cobb remains unknown except for a small group of baseball aficionados and historians, it will make virtually no difference. But if Jesus is not known – and received – there are eternal consequences. He tells us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. His name is to be proclaimed in all the earth.

Last, but certainly not least: we must clearly and accurately communicate the message. If indeed historians have missed the boat on what kind of person Ty Cobb was – intentionally or accidentally – that is sad, to be sure. However to miss the message of Jesus, or to transmit or receive a distorted message, is tragic.

There are still hundreds of millions of people who are not only unreached with the gospel – the only message that can save them, remember – but are still unengaged in the sense

that no believer or group of believers is plotting a strategy to engage them with the gospel. There remain some 1,600 languages and dialects that do not have even a portion of the Bible. Thankfully, major efforts are underway to change that and get the Word to them in their tongue.

Ty Cobb was a great baseball player and a complicated person and while it is interesting to know who he really was and what he accomplished, that knowledge holds temporal importance. The same cannot be said about the most significant person to walk the face of the earth – Jesus Christ. We are to know Him and to make Him known to the uttermost ends of the earth. We should proclaim the Good News about Jesus with clarity, accuracy, and consistency. There is nothing more eternally significant than this.