

[500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You](#)

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Rienke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Rienke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Rienke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now) that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not

ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Rienke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the “gossip” prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Rienke for causing people like me to see this issue for the first time.

Is There A Biblical “Age of Accountability”?

Recently for Rambling Ever On I dealt with the hot-button issue of “What About Those Who Have Never Heard of Jesus?”

This topic really gets people in Christianity talking because it creates a head-on collision of one obvious fact about the world—that not everyone has heard of Jesus—with a crucial piece of Biblical theology: Jesus is the only way to God. Trying to think through that collision and maintain that God is fair in how he judges people makes for some lively discussion and debate.

You can read that article [here](#).

Yet as a result of my thoughts on that topic a side conversation invariably comes up when I bring it up in public: What about an age of accountability?

This is a fair question. I lean toward believing there are no exceptions to the “Jesus is the only way to God” truth in terms of people from remote villages or really any place where the Gospel is not shared. Yet, if I am inclined to not believe in exceptions in this way, can I believe that a 1-month old baby who has minimal cognitive and moral development would go to Hell if he or she died?

Logic, of course, guides me to believe that a baby or very small child being accountable to God for their sin is perverse. Yet, I have chosen to follow the Bible wherever it leads because it has proven that often human logic can fail us because humans are fallible (for example, it may sound logical that since “God is love” that he would not eternally punish people, but biblically this is not so).

So the question is: does the Bible speak to this? I think in some sense it does. Not nearly as clearly as I would like, but I gave up a long time ago trying to get God to do what I think he should. Yet, I want to look at five passages that I think help guide me to being satisfied that up to a certain age, people are not held accountable for their sin in terms of being judged by God for it.

Isaiah 7:16-17

He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

I have a very specific aim in this article so I will not be dealing with the bigger meaning of this passage. But suffice it to say that it sounds like God is saying that there is a point in this child's life where he is too young to *choose* right from wrong. That sounds, especially in Old Testament vernacular, like choosing to follow God. At the very least it speaks to a developed morality, but I think it's closer to the former. I have heard parents and child experts tell me that children have a concept of right and wrong at a very young age. But the idea of choosing right as in choosing God is something more complex and involves higher order thinking, self-awareness and a developed biblical morality[1. In other words, I can believe a child learns much more quickly that it is bad to touch something when they are told not to, than they can learn that there is a God, that we are sinners and that Jesus died to reconcile us to him.]. The Isaiah verse sounds more like this.

Deuteronomy 1:39

And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it.

This is basically the same as the previous verse except it expands the thought to include all the children of Israel, instead of just one child. This is a crucial point of hermeneutics to me—that just because something was true for one person in the Bible does not mean it is true for all

people everywhere[2. For example, I do not think putting out a fleece to test God as Gideon did is something for all people in the US in 2017 to practice]. But the broader the application of any truth in the Bible, the more easily I can believe it is a truth not confined by time or culture or specific circumstances. This verse speaks to many children who are too young to know good from bad, contrasting how the adult Israelites rejected God and could not enter the Promised Land. Again, this sounds like God didn't hold small children accountable for the sins of their community because they were too young to know better[3. And while I will not add it as its own entry because I am still not sure I agree with it, some interpreters believe the comment in Jonah about the Ninevites not knowing their right hand from their left is about the children without a developed morality that God was showing compassion to. This would go beyond even Israel to a Gentile people, meaning its application lying outside of time and culture would be more likely.]

Romans 9:10b-11a

When [Isaac] married Rebekah, she gave birth to twins. But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God.

Bringing up Romans 9 in the context of any theology discussion is like bringing up Donald Trump on Facebook. Yet the fact that God through Paul here acknowledges here again that these two unborn children had not done good or bad leads me to believe that children are protected from judgment by God while in the womb. To say it one way, they are not "saved" but they are "safe"[4. I realize that if you adhere to some form of Calvinism these verses probably don't support my thesis at all since the thought is that God chose them independently of anything other than His good will. Yet I go a different way—God didn't choose them according to good or bad but

according to His promise, eventually realized in Jesus Christ, and which still leaves room for human choice. But this article is not about this argument and if you'd like more you can [read this](#) or I always recommend Brian Abasciano's book *Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10-18* and Robert Picirilli's *Grace, Faith, Free Will.*].

2 Samuel 12:22-23

David replied, "I fasted and wept while the child was alive, for I said, 'Perhaps the Lord will be gracious to me and let the child live.' But why should I fast when he is dead? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him one day, but he cannot return to me."

David here seems to say that he will one day be reunited the baby Bathsheba lost, presumably in Heaven. The hermeneutical danger here still stands; Just because David says something here doesn't mean it is an eternal truth, or even true at all. Yet, when somewhat obscure Bible passages remain without contradiction in the rest of Scripture and align with basic human logic and our sense of fairness, then I am more inclined to believe they are true for all people everywhere. I have little struggle believing God probably used David here to communicate an important truth about babies that are lost as Bathsheba's was. Wise people I know have used these verses to comfort grieving parents and I think they do so with integrity.

Matthew 19:14

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

I'll be clear again: I do not think passages like these seal the deal on an age of accountability, but that they may support it. I am not 100% positive about what Jesus meant here other than I am sure he is saying that to follow him you have to take on the humility of a child. Yet is he saying something else? Is he wanting these little children to come to him because they have nothing in them to keep from him, that older children and adults do, i.e., sin and rebellion?

I stop short of saying I'm certain he is saying that. But that it is possible. Jesus loved children and it appears without a disclaimer and without commands like "repent" and "believe".

I close by saying that I have a hard time believing there are exceptions to coming to God through Christ for those who are in remote villages where there is no Gospel presence precisely because verses like Acts 17:26-30 appear to preclude those exceptions. They seem to be making the point that "You cannot be excused because of where you live." But small children are different biblically. They go the opposite way—that they can be too young to know right from wrong and to choose to follow God. For that reason, I believe in an age of accountability.

What is that age? I have no idea. I know of some children that began following Christ at the age of 3. I will guess that in cultures with less Christian presence the age is probably higher than in places where children go to a Gospel preaching church three times a week essentially from birth.

But at the end of the day, I think human logic and God's justice in the Bible on the issue are square. And that is enough for me for the moment. I will keep thinking and keep searching on the issue. I hope you will too.

This is the Church

This is the Church

It is the beautiful and broken body of Christ.

It is stumbling, faltering, and flawed. Pray for it.

It is vibrant, triumphant, and redeemed. Rejoice in it.

This is the Church

It is sacred and marred. Righteous and erring. The blood of the Lamb covers it all; redemption soaking the ground beneath its feet.

It is filled with sinners, hypocrites, blasphemers, and liars saved and transformed by the grace and love of the Giver of all good things.

Coarse and ugly, it is a priceless treasure. Loud and inconstant, it is the apple of Jehovah's eye. Timid and afraid, it is the army of the omnipotent LORD of creation.

It is God's reflected light to the world. The hands and feet of the Great I AM. The voice crying out in the wilderness, calling all creation to renewal. It is the bearer of the greatest mandate ever given. It is the prophets, preachers, and teachers proclaiming truth in a world of lies. It is the lovers, nurturers, and healers extending grace and justice to

a world of brokenness. It is the missionaries, Gospel-bringers, and martyrs humbly offering the Bread of Life to the starving.

This is the Church

Christ is its cornerstone. It is loved and cherished, sustained and protected. It is the bride of the Lamb, adorned and exalted. The gates of hell cannot stand against it. It is chosen and set apart. It is buffeted from every side, yet it will never fail. It is eternal and victorious, not by the strength of its hands but by the power of the LORD of hosts.

Reject it at your peril. Mock it at your risk. No weapon formed against it will prosper. All those who rise against it will fall. It is God's holy and established institution on earth, His ambassador to the nations. It is the imperfect representation of the Kingdom of God. It is the hopeful expectation of the perfected union of Heaven and earth. It is to be loved, nurtured, protected, purified, and embraced. It is the bride that is loved with a love so fierce and so overwhelming. A love that did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. A love that emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. A love that humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. A love so amazing, so divine it transcends all human understanding.

That love has called the Church His body.

His love.

His bride.

Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate.

This is the Church

Redeemed

Forgiven

Eternal

Triumphant

Loved

This is the Church

Here Where Dogs Bite and Bees Sting: Part Three

When All Things Are Made New

It has been said God is not doing anything about evil in nature or humankind in any of its forms, therefore, He must be either evil or powerless. God is doing something about all forms of evil. All of history has been His work against evil. First, He'll deal with the troublemakers who started it all. Namely, us. Paul says "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18a). If that is the case, which it is, we are all in lot of trouble "for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

But there is hope for us because although we don't deserve it,

God loves us dearly and will do He anything He can to save us. Paul says, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God fully acknowledged that "the wages of sin is death," but in His stupendous grace, he took the penalty for us. He came down as the God-man Jesus Christ to suffer and die, experiencing disgrace and death in order that we might be able to choose the gift of "eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

The judgment, therefore, will be the final act of God's purging the earth of sinful man. Our path rests on another choice that will literally change our world forever: To accept Jesus' death and resurrection or to reject it. This path of acceptance is simple. Dr. Robert Picirill names four basic things we must accept in order to be saved: 1.) We cannot save ourselves. 2.) We can only be justified by obedience in Jesus Christ. 3.) It is completely free for all. 4.) Justification is through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ (The Book of Romans, 58-60).

This path means a full acknowledgment that God is a completely perfect God and that our disobedience means we deserve His wrath. It means accepting that this God of perfect wrath is also a God of perfect, supreme goodness. We, as Christians, must accept both of these aspects of God. C.S. Lewis made this easy to understand. He was a master at making complex, theological concepts like this easy enough for anyone to understand. He embodied this skill in his famous children's fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his book *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, God is represented by the lion Aslan. Before coming face to face with him, Lucy and her siblings have a conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver concerning this God-figure:

"...said Mrs. Beaver, 'if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you" (The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe, 80).

We can be assured of this: Like Aslan, God is thoroughly good but He is not safe. He is perfectly good, but He is also a God of perfect holy wrath. He is not a feeble, spoiling grandfather figure; He's a perfect Lord. This perfect Lordship means He is all-powerful, all-wise, all-loving, and completely just all at the same time. All of this culminates in His thorough grace. The appearance of this grace is sometimes fearsome to behold. Sometimes it may even appear evil to us. But what may appear so is His way of battling the true evil forces of darkness. Sometimes our finite minds may not see an end of all that we see as evil (whether or not it really is), but our hope must always be in Him. Always. This is true regardless of what happens in this life. Piccirilli says:

"...we cannot always understand God's ways. They are too wonderful for us. We are assured he controls history so as to make mercy available to all in the most opportune way, but we cannot see this in our limited understanding of the changing historical scenes. We have to accept God at His word" (Book of Romans, 236).

While God is in this process of bringing true evil to damnation, He is using it to accomplish His ends. But rest assured it will end. Revelation 21 says that God's plan will culminate in a brand-new heaven and brand-new earth with all of the many imperfections of this universe completely wiped away. In this chapter, John tells us that in this new kingdom tears and death will be completely non-existent. This is coming. I am convinced of it. But if we want to have any chance at all of living in this renewed universe, we must first accept the gift of eternal life through Jesus the Son of God. We must fully accept Him as the Lord and Savior of our

lives. When we do this, our lives are renewed right now in the inner man. But this renewed man will continue in a world that has not yet been renewed. We will continue to get hurt, get old, die, and be tempted to sin. Until that time when all things are made new again, we must persevere with full faith on and in full service of God here where dogs bite and bees sting.

[Here Where Dogs Bite and Bees Sting: Part Two](#)

How the Corruption of Free Will Has Affected Nature

In the [first part](#) of this three-part series, I talked about how we corrupted God's gift of free will by choosing to sin, to turn away from Him. This began the history of the curse of sin. One of the results of the curse of sin is that all of nature is now imperfect. Much to our chagrin, everything is now dying. And as I mentioned in Part One, many of us see this as all God's fault.

C.S. Lewis tells about the death of his mother, a turning point in his early life. He recalls praying for a miraculous resurrection. When none of this took place, he completely rejected that there could possibly be a good God.

An older Lewis conceded that the subject is much more complicated than he had thought as a young man. In *Mere Christianity*, he wondered "...How had I got this idea of just and unjust?...(*Mere Christianity*, 40). What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?" It is this thought that convicted Lewis of the over-simplicity of his atheistic beliefs. A little further on in *Mere Christianity* he says it

is also an oversimplification to say, yes, there is a good God in heaven and that God has made it so everything is all right.

Evil does exist in both man and nature and God obviously doesn't quell all of it. It is not that it is too powerful for God or even that it is equal with Him. It is not like there is not an equal, dualistic battle where good and evil do perpetual battle with one another with evil continually limiting God. The story of Scripture shows that the evil forces of darkness are a much lesser thing which God is in the process of conquering. But Scripture also makes it clear that evil is still exceedingly powerful. And it is this exceedingly powerful thing that has infected both man and nature.

Pain is a Grace

As far as the natural, physical order, I don't think pain and suffering are the main culprits. Pain and suffering may be unpleasant but they aren't evil things in and of themselves. They are indicators that something evil is happening. In fact, when you experience pain you are often experiencing a sort of gift. In *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey describes "The Gift Nobody Wants" first thing. He says, "pain gets bad press...we should see poems, statues and hymns to pain." He says, "Pain is not an afterthought, or God's great goof...it reveals a marvelous design that serves our bodies well." He tells how his close friend Paul Brand, a doctor at a leper clinic, observed firsthand that without being able to feel pain lepers are unable to detect when evil is happening to their bodies and therefore do not know to do something about it. This is the major reason for many of the injuries incurred by leprosy (*Where is God When It Hurts?* 26-31).

And Our Suffering is Not Divine Punishment

The imperfection in nature that instigates the pain is sometimes seen as a punishment from God. Rabbi Harold Kushner

wrote the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* while watching his own son die of a very rare disease. Many of the conclusions found in the book are probably wrong, but he does provide some good insights. For instance, Kushner relates going to the home of a couple who had just lost a child. When he arrived at their home the very first words out of their mouth were, "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur" (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 8). In their opinion, they were only getting from God what they deserved. They believed that God was punishing them for doing what they were supposed to do.

The story of Job and his friends probably came to mind when I was talking about viewing suffering as a punishment for a sin, didn't it? They (the "friends") certainly said a lot of interesting, thought-provoking things, but they were just saying the same wrong things over and over again. They would have us believe that when we hurt, we really are being punished for some sin. That really has nothing to do with it as far as we are concerned. We feel pain at all because we live in an imperfect world. It's as simple as that.

Living Your Faith in This World That Hurts

The trick is not allowing the existence of imperfection of the natural order to play a decisive role in our personal level of faith. That is, our faith in and on God should not lower or become non-existent when something bad or even a bunch of bad somethings takes place in our lives. Job was faithful to God despite a bunch of really bad somethings coming into his life in an apparently brief amount of time. That is not to say he never expressed anger and frustration at what God was doing to him. He did. That is not to say he did not often demand an answer from God. He did that too. His level of faith on God simply did not depend on life being good. Throughout the book, Job makes it very clear that he wasn't a masochist who enjoyed the pain, but he also made it clear that he was fully willing to accept that both good and evil came into the lives of those

who love God.

God, the one friend who knew what He was talking about, made a huge statement of His amazing knowledge and sovereignty in the last three chapters of Job. His words here reveal a God that is very opposite the weak God claimed by so many. One of these individuals is the aforementioned Kushner. I mentioned that Kushner comes to several wrong conclusions in his book. Here's one of them: Toward the end of his book he concludes that God "is limited in what he can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom" (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 134). Yancey comments on this statement by Kushner in *Where is God When It Hurts*: "God's speech at the end of Job is one of the...reasons I cannot agree...Job 38-41 contains as impressive a description of God's power as you'll find anywhere in the Bible." God is not limited by evil, by our free will, by anything. But we are. We are limited by many things. And in our limited understanding, we assume that He really is limited. In so doing we make the God of our hearts and minds a weak God.

The Unpleasant Providence

No, God does not punish us by inflicting disease and hardship upon us but uses these things to reveal His glory. Upon first seeing a blind man, the disciples asked Jesus, who sinned to make this man blind, the man himself or his parents? Jesus replied that neither had sinned but that the man had been born blind so that God's glory could be displayed. He then proceeded to manifest the glory of God by miraculously healing the man. Other people who have experienced bitter providence come to mind.

I think of Carolyn Martin. Carolyn is a friend of my family who was born with severe Cerebral Palsy. Martin spent much of her early life seeking to find meaning out of her lot in life. Despite being a church-going person for most of her life, it

was only as an adult she found the joy in God that gave her true meaning. In her words: "My pain was washed away by God's deep and soothing sea of love for me" (*I Can't Walk So I'll Learn to Dance*, 239). She came to see that God was using her handicap for His glory. She was able to get a college education and to thereafter become a published writer, inspiring others with physical limitations through her story. Her story is a message of God's grace.

I think of Richard Wurmbrand. It was as a religious prisoner under communist guard that pastor Wurmbrand saw the true face of evil. The tortures he endured and witnessed are too horrible to contemplate. He recounted how he heard one of his torturers say, "I thank God, in whom I don't believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart."³³ His story is a story of God's providence. After his final release, Wurmbrand spread his story throughout the world and started *Voice of the Martyrs*. His story has become an inspiration to millions of Christians throughout the world.

And these are just two examples. There are many of them. Many the best of these examples are in God's Word.

But although He is working His plan through, this imperfect world is not ideal to God. All of history is His working toward renewal. In the last part of this series, we will look at that.

Miserable Comforters: What A Grieving Person Probably

Doesn't Need

“Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand[1. C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed, 12].” [C.S. Lewis, after his wife died]

One of many great things about being Josh Crowe’s roommate for a year was that he taught me about music. We bonded over dozens of songs, over countless stories and moments. I can’t hear “Brick” by Ben Folds Five without thinking of Josh and smiling. The look on his face as he told me what the lyrics meant is forever etched into my brain. Thanks to Josh I get how music is the language of the soul.

But there is one song we talked about that means more than the others: a heart-wrenching personal testimony by Caedmon’s Call called “Center Aisle”. The story behind the song, written by Derek Webb, is as honest as it is tragic. It involves the death of his best friend’s teenage sister and how he struggled to write a song for the funeral. “Center Aisle” is the song that he really wanted to write but couldn’t because it would not be appropriate for the service. It is far too dark and raw. So he started writing it on the car ride home. You can read a brief account of Webb’s testimony and hear the song [here](#).

“Center Aisle” echoes several things I have learned over the last 20 years of being a pastor about dealing with grief. While no two people are the same and people indeed grieve differently, there are things about dealing with it that come up often when I talk with those in the depths of it. As with Job calling his friends “miserable comforters” I have

discovered that often people's well-meaning intentions towards the grieving can make it worse. This is an attempt to reflect on what God has taught me from the Bible and from hundreds of conversations that I hope will help us all to minister to grieving people in a more emotionally intelligent way.

Here are a few things a grieving person (probably) does not need:

1. Answers

Tragedy, loss, and mourning should make us comfortable saying, "I don't know." These three words are at times okay in Christianity and even at times the only legitimate response. And sometimes knowing why doesn't help at all. If you read Lamentations, Jeremiah absolutely knows why Jerusalem is being judged and it didn't alleviate his pain.

Job's friends treated Job's grief like a problem to be solved. Bildad in chapter 8 even has the gall to tell Job that his children died because they were sinners. Pain isn't a math problem. It is in many ways as different from math as possible in that it lacks order and logic. It's messy. It brings dissonance. It makes us incoherent. Solutions to pain are often like square pegs to a round hole.

2. Cliches

Pain cuts through the most superficial parts of our faith, in particular how we speak. Grief has a way of making platitudes seem perverse and disgusting. If you have ever read *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis, you will find the exact opposite of "strong faith" cliches. You'll find intense monologues of anger and vicious, struggling doubt—closer to what Job says in chapters 3, 6, 7 and 30, what dozens of Psalms say and what many others in the Bible wrote.

Once on Facebook I asked people what the worse Christian

cliches were and the top two both dealt with grief: “God won’t give you more than you can handle” and “God (or Heaven) just needed another angel” (when someone dies). Quite often words like these grate on the grieving person’s ears.

3. Argument or Correction

Job’s friends actually offered this, as vulgar as it may be. Yet I will guess it is rare in our culture for someone to argue with a grieving person. At least with those who are grieving in ways we commonly think.

So here I will state that I think a possible application for many of us may be the need to *not* debate with people who are grieving in a different sense, due to issues like racial injustice or hostility from the church for their sexual struggles.

On the first one I will not repeat verbatim what I wrote for in the NFL on REO article last week but will allude to the fact that while some racial issues are worthy of discussion and disagreement, some people are hurting and just need to be listened to without judgment or debate.

On the second, it is clear to me that some people are struggling with same-sex attraction and Christians are frequently guilty of preaching from a distance without showing any semblance of compassion, humility or relational engagement. And this rejection in turn creates genuine grief people carry with them constantly. Dr. Michael Oliver, Department Chair of Psychology at Welch College says (while in part quoting Eric L. Johnson), “Through our abrasive speech toward homosexuality, ‘we have assigned it to a dark corner where it cannot shine’...We should call God’s people to listen to brothers and sisters who struggle with SSA[2. Michael Oliver, *Sexuality, Gender and the Church*, 136].” After a person is wounded, it may be time to put down the sword.

4. Theology Without Biblical or Relational Context

Romans 8:28 is a great verse about God working things together for good. But unless a person understands what “good” means in the Bible and unless they properly understand the verses before this passage that talk about longing to be rid of our bodies of sin and suffering and groaning in our prayers because we don’t know how to pray, that verse may not help much. And even with a proper biblical understanding, it may not be what the person needs to hear just a few hours or a couple of days after the tragedy.

In general, unless I know a person quite well I prefer to stay away from trying to Jesus juke their suffering. There are of course exceptions and that is why I use “probably” in my title. If I am close to a person I will know better how to use the Bible to serve them.

I recall a classmate of mine in grad school who lost his teenage daughter unexpectedly. After taking time off to grieve he came back and told the class, “People that didn’t know me wanted to quote the Bible to me. I know the Bible. That’s not what I needed.” That will not be everyone’s response but there is an element of truth in it for a lot of grieving people.

Conversely, a grieving person probably *does* need:

1. Presence

The heart of the issue with all of the above points is that they involve talking without empathizing. Time and time again I have heard people in the deepest levels of hurt tell me they didn’t want an abundance of words, but rather just for someone to be there and cry with them. In “Center Aisle,” Derek Webb wrote this, reflecting on the awkwardness of trying to interact with his best friend at the funeral:

*There aren't words to say
Words aren't remembered
Presence is*

Back in January of 2014 when REO contributor David Lytle's first wife, Bethany, passed away, the guys from REO were talking privately and I mentioned this lyric. Later, when Dave joined the conversation he responded that he agreed with it.

A huge problem in Job isn't just that the friends argued and spoke falsely about God. It's that from Job 4 to 26, they take up nearly half of the conversation. Often, just being there speaks sufficiently.

2. Commitment

When you read Ruth, you find Ruth refusing to abandon Naomi even after her initial grief over losing her husband and sons. Ruth's declaration of commitment to Naomi is so powerful I've heard it read at weddings. I think quite often, after a while, the tragedy that causes a person grief leaves the public consciousness but the griever continues to have bad days and weeks, struggling with pain. And that is where long-term relational commitment is vital.

In an article Dave wrote about life as a widower, he said, "Most importantly, widows and widowers need relationship. This need is especially acute for [them], because this is exactly what has been stolen from them[3. David Lytle, *D6 Family Minsistry Journal*, Vol. 2, Randall House Academic]." Additionally, he told me that in the long run of grief, commitment from people enables them to see you in the daily grind and offer you the words of true encouragement like "Hey, you are doing a great job parenting in these difficult circumstances." That can be like water in the desert of grief.

3. Patience

Sometimes we need to resign ourselves to the fact that grief is just hard and we cannot do very much to alleviate it. I have heard grieving people say that they hate hearing "Sorry for your loss" over and over and getting the constant looks of pity. Those are reasonable reactions to a grieving person yet they still can be met with frustration.

Even after Ruth commits to Naomi, Naomi remains bitter. Commitment didn't take the grief away. I will guess that there were some tough moments in their relationship, and Ruth had to sacrifice greatly by being patient with her mother-in-law. Job's friends did exactly what Job needed for one week (Job 2:11-13) but then lost patience. If you hear a grieving person talk the way C.S. Lewis did in *A Grief Observed*, you may think they are a heretic. Be patient with them.

Of course, all people need to try to process grief in a healthy way and that means eventually getting back to some sense of normalcy, whatever that means in a person's unique circumstances. But the person may need great patience in the meantime.

Paul told us to weep with those who weep. I will never ever try to romanticize grief but if there is one way God does use horrid circumstances for good, it's that he builds intimacy through it, with Him and with each other. The people I'm closest to are the ones who have cried with me. My church in Chicago basically is my family as a result. And it's largely because they have just been there during the nightmarish circumstances I've been through, mourned alongside me and not thrown cliches at my suffering.

May we all have those types of people in our lives and be that type of person to others.

Here Where Dogs Bite and Bees Sting: Part One

And predators eat prey. Tornadoes destroy. Disease wastes and kills. The sun blisters. Hangnails, well, hang. And so on and so forth. Everything that lives is in the process of dying. The imperfection of nature is expressed in a hundred billion ways throughout the universe every day.

A large chunk of humankind has assumed this as all God's fault, an injustice that our supposedly good, all-powerful God is not remedying which therefore makes Him evil and/or a powerless God. There are so many things wrong with that line of thinking.

I think to fully understand it—even remotely—you must look and think closely about some biblical teachings and concepts. This three-part series will look at 1) how the problem began, 2) life with the problem, 3) and how the problem will end. It will not be a thorough look at the issue. Not even close. The subject is way too complex for that and has been the subject of whole books. Rather this is mainly a general overview.

It all started when the free will of man and pride met to create the biggest human moral problem in the universe. Although this article is not specifically looking at the problem it created in the human heart, the human moral problem is where the whole issue started so we will look at that first.

The Corruption of Free Will

So about this thing called free will. Like everything else, God created it to be a good thing. But also like everything else it can be made into a bad thing. C.S. Lewis says "If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad...Why, then, did God give them [us] free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible...makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having" (Mere Christianity, 48).

The big baddie himself, Satan, was good once but may have been the first to warp God's gift of free will. God created and made him the top angel in His kingdom, but this wasn't good enough and he chose rebellion. And then he later convinced Adam and Eve on behalf of humankind to choose to rebel too. And evil has since infected all of mankind.

Evil comes in many guises. It does not always look evil or self-centered. In fact, it can be born of a desire to do something good. Tolkien commented on this very thing. Tolkien was not only one of the greatest Fantasy writers who ever lived, but he was also a very great Christian thinker who was instrumental in converting Lewis, his best friend, to Christ.

Tolkien believed that evil is good in its originally created form. In a letter to a prospective publisher, Tolkien related how he viewed evil: "...frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others—speedily and according to the benefactor's own plans" (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 146). Yes, evil can either look good or as previously mentioned originate in a good source. Throughout his masterpiece, The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien demonstrates his view that at one time the forces of evil were originally intended by their creator to be good. Morgoth, Saruman, Sauron, Gollum—such evil forces were created good but chose to be corrupted. And trolls, orcs, and the Nazgul were originally created good ents, elves, and men, but were corrupted by evil.

Evil is also a force both outside of man and within man. At various times in history, there have been well-meaning individuals who postulated that there is either internal evil which is evil that arises in each of us or there is an evil force outside of us that makes us choose evil. Tolkien said there is both. He demonstrated this dual nature of evil in The Lord of The Rings. Through the ring, Frodo, the ring bearer, is tempted both internally and externally by the dark lord Sauron.

Frodo came to recognize, respect, and at times resist this seductive force as demonstrated in the valley of Minas Morgul in the presence of the witch-king:

"...he felt, more urgent than ever before, the command that he should put on the Ring. But great as the pressure was, he felt no inclination now to yield to it...There was no longer any answer to that command in his own will, dismayed by terror though it was, and he felt only the beating upon him of a great power from outside. It took his hand, and as Frodo watched with his mind, not willing it but in suspense (as if he looked on some story far away), it moved the hand inch by inch towards the chain upon his neck. Then his own will stirred; slowly it forced the hand back..."
(Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, 315-316)

In all its forms, evil is evil. if it is opposite of God's expressed will, that's exactly what it is. It does not matter if any man judges something to be good. Anything that is contradictory to God is evil.

The fact that God gave us entirely free wills to either choose or to reject this evil almost makes it amazing that He was able to have a plan at all. almost. Not really, though. God is divine and all-knowing of the past, present, and future so it's actually not that surprising. In His infinite knowledge, He was able to plan the entire redemptive history of man before creation even got started. The Apostle Paul spoke of a mystery, a hidden wisdom, that God ordained before the world began (1 Corinthians 2:7). The salvation act of Jesus Christ, God the Son who was God the Father, was the planned end result of all of this, but the free wills of man were left free. God knew what would we choose and planned accordingly.

Via God's long plan of salvation, we have been enabled to exert our free will again to begin the process of being returned to our perfect state one day. Frodo was eventually able to exert his free will to the good and thusly destroy the overpowering ring. That kind of exertion of our free will is necessary to begin the process of turning back the damage caused by the original corruption in the Garden of Eden. We'll come back to that in the last part of this series.

For now, all of mankind is burdened with evil. Adam and Eve made their horrible choice and because of it man was cursed. But their bad choice affected more than just humanity. Their error also cursed the rest of creation with imperfection. Adam and Eve eventually died in a world that was increasingly hard to care for, in a land that they had had a hand in corrupting. In the second part of this series we will look at that corruption.

Memories (Part 1)

Memories are indicators, reminding us where we've been, what we've experienced, and the faithfulness of God throughout our lives.

Memories are signposts, pointing us backward for remembrance and reflection so that we can then look forward to God in faith and anticipation.

Memories are not in and of themselves infallible or "stand alone." Truth, fact, and reality are all much more important. At the same time, memories are our recollection and impression of those events and realities.

Some memories seem to always be around, just under the surface, easily recalled. Others pop up out the blue, after not having been remembered or thought of for years.

It would be negligent to fail to point out that there are bad memories, awful memories, that constitute nightmares in our lives. These don't bring joy as do good, positive memories, but sometimes we can still learn from them. We can trust the Lord to heal them and to help us learn from them.

Memories can be faulty or false. My memory of Judy's nurse's cap, for example. The first time I went to see her in Missouri in 1970 after we started dating, I arrived at her house, and her dad took me with him to go pick her up. I used to tell people of seeing her come out of the doctor's office where she worked, so pretty with her nurse's cap on. She reminded me that she was not wearing a cap; I was remembering a picture of her in her nurse's garb on a shelf at home. I had conflated the two things and thus had a faulty memory.

Memories can have great value, even if we don't remember everything. While it's great to remember one's salvation experience – and many do in great detail – it is even more

important to know that today we are relying on Jesus' finished work on the cross, and are believing in and following him. It's not necessary to remember the date and all the circumstances.

God constantly reminded His people of His mighty workings on their behalf in the past and urged them to go back and recall His faithfulness. (Psalm 78 is a lengthy recall of what God had done in the life of Israel, and how the people still didn't obey and follow Him.) Psalm 77:11: "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old." (Psalm 103:2)

So, with those foundational observations, some memories "from my personal storehouse." I've selected them as representative, and for their value as teaching experiences. Over time, I hope to do a couple more of these, that cover the years of my life. I'm convinced that memories can have great value as teachers.

1966 (I think that's the year.) "Who Am I?" Sunday morning service at my home church. I was 16. A group of young women, slightly older than me, was singing one Sunday morning, a beautiful song that was very popular during those years. As they sang "who am I that a King would bleed and die for, who am I that He would pray not my will thine for?," [1. Who Am I: Charles "Rusty Goodman" 1965] tears began to flow, and several of the girls totally lost it. In fact, they couldn't continue. The emotion spread throughout the church, as the Holy Spirit ministered to hearts. I think that some people came to the altar. Our pastor, as this went on for several minutes, realized he couldn't preach the sermon he'd prepared, but deftly and with wisdom, began to exhort and encourage the people. A tremendous memory indeed, one of many times when "God showed up" and blessed His people.

1968 Testimonies of enrolling college freshmen. Again, at my church. Again, a Sunday morning. This time, our pastor had asked those of us going off to college in a few weeks (it was

early August) to briefly share. I – the shy, inhibited one – was first. All I can say is that I poured out my heart, after spending hours going over what I wanted to say, and a Power greater than mine took over, and my testimony (exhortation) touched hearts in a way I couldn't have imagined. It may have been the first time in my life I had ever thought that God might somehow use me in the ministry as a preacher.

1977 First service in Panama that Judy and I led. John 4 the Samaritan woman and the living water Jesus gives. We had five people present – the Cáceres family, father, mother, and three teenaged daughters. I was nervous. My Spanish was not all that good, since we had just finished one year of language school, and had arrived in Panama only two months earlier. We put the chairs in a circle. Judy played the piano and led the singing. That was the small beginning of a church plant in Bethania, Panama City – quite a memory, indeed!

1982 Phillip's epiglottitis. I was on a trip to Panama's interior, about two hours from home. Up in Buenos Aires, there was no electricity and no running water. There was no way to keep in touch with Judy and the three boys. When I got home four days later, there was a sign on the door: "Phillip is in the hospital. Don't worry – he's much better. Come as soon as you can."

I rushed over to Paitilla Hospital to find Phillip in a hospital room under an oxygen tent. Judy explained that after I left on my trip, Phill had started running a high fever, and didn't seem to be breathing well; in fact, he was wheezing. After an entire morning of this, she grew very concerned and had a neighbor take him to the clinic for a 2:00 p.m. appointment. (I had the car.) The clinic was full that afternoon, but the receptionist realized Phillip was very sick and moved him to the front. Dr. Vásquez looked at him and said "I don't want to alarm you, but we need to get him in the hospital. I think he has epiglottitis."

In a matter of minutes, the doctor had diagnosed our son with something rather rare in Panama – an infection of the epiglottis – which led to its swelling and producing thick saliva. Phillip was slowly smothering to death. The doctor immediately started two antibiotics and ordered an oxygen tent to help Phillip's breathing. Unknown to Judy at the time, he spent that first night at the hospital, because of his concern, and to be able to monitor Phillip closely.

God was so merciful, and though I came into the picture "after the fact," my heart is no less grateful to the Lord for sparing our son. Jehovah-Rapha, the Lord our healer.

Memories...we all have them. Let's benefit from them.

Precious Memories how they linger

How they ever flood my soul.

In the stillness of the midnight

Precious sacred scenes unfold. [2. Precious Memories: J.B.F. Wright, 1925]

Why I Still Say "Ask Jesus Into Your Heart" and other similar phrases

"The hardest thing to achieve in the Christian life is balance."

So says my mentor, David Potete. I open with this because I am often very critical of how Christians take complex theology and boil it down to simple platitudes. Yet I also believe

Christians have a tendency to be a tad overly critical at times. So for the sake of keeping my personal pendulum from swinging too far in the critical category I am going to defend some oft-critiqued Christian cliches.

Disclaimer, up front: Any time you quote someone, as I do below in reference to these popular American church phrases, you risk misrepresenting what they say. I have attempted to avoid that by trying to understand the speakers in context. I then find that I do not disagree with the person to any significant level. The only reason I am addressing this is because famous people get quotes attributed to them and those doing the attributing often do not see the issue with as much nuance and balance as the original author.

I aim to help us communicate God's truth as accurately and humbly as possible. So with that in mind, here are three phrases that have come under fire in mainstream Christianity the last few years that I have no problem saying when I preach.

"Asking Jesus into your heart"

Paul Washer: "Then they ask, 'Do you want Jesus to come into your heart?' Does it bother anyone that this formula or language is not found in the New Testament?"

Behind Tony Evans, Washer is probably my favorite famous preacher. I respect his desire to provide searing rebuke to terrible theology. As I have listened to him explain the quote above, I am positive that his biggest issue is that we teach people to pray a superficial prayer as fire insurance against living like a pagan. As he says, we make the decision to follow Christ a flu shot, when in reality it is a lifelong commitment to the Lord of the Universe.

So why do I bring it up? Because people may think that we

should eliminate the expression “asking Jesus into your heart” from our vernacular completely, which I would not agree with. Perhaps Washer would advocate for a complete whitewashing of the phrase, but I am not going to put those words in his mouth.

The reason I am not going to stop saying it is because it truly is not unbiblical. The idea of Christ being in our hearts is stated plainly in verses like Ephesians 3:17 and strongly implied in verses like 2 Corinthians 4:6 and 2 Peter 1:19. And as long as a phrase is biblical in some sense, I would be very slow to denounce it[2. Having said that, there are cases where even true Christian cliches can do more harm than good, as when a person is grieving.]

However, I add that it can be dangerous to present a sinner’s prayer or a phrase like “ask Jesus into your heart” without other soteriology supporting it. Frankly, the Bible gives a variety of seemingly conflicting ways that a person becomes a Christian: by grace through faith, by confessing Jesus as Lord, by repentance, by taking up your cross, by believing the resurrection, etc[2. For a thorough investigation into resolving the tension between all of these phrases, I recommend *Discipleship: The Expression of Saving Faith* by Dr. Robert Picirilli.]. As a pastor I have the advantage of preaching to the same people every week and therefore some weeks I focus on some phrases and other weeks I focus on others. Too much focus on any of them can lead to bad theology at worst or confusion at best. So if one week I focus on the point of decision and praying for forgiveness, the next time I may focus on denying yourself.

As a result, I have no issue using the phrase “Ask Jesus into your heart.”

“Accepting Jesus”

David Platt: “Should it not concern us that the Bible never uses the phrase ‘accept Jesus into your heart’?”

This is extremely similar to the one above. I respect David Platt about as much as I can and I marvel at how he speaks so boldly and humbly at the same time. In trying to understand him in context I feel similarly as with Washer; he’s not complaining as much about the phrase as the philosophy of easy-decision salvation that produces no fruit.

He is even more nuanced than Washer in how he explains that the Bible does have allusions to phrases like “Jesus coming in our hearts” so it is not the exact phraseology as much as that there are more biblical phrases we can use for salvation.

He may be right about that, but in regards to the idea of “accepting” Christ, Jesus used that verb in his parable of the sower so I am not ready to take the verb “accept” totally out of my Gospel presentations. Again, as long as I explain it with other biblical verbs like “repent” and “believe” if I can. In the rare cases where I cannot, I find comfort in the range of Paul’s explanations of salvation in Acts and that the Holy Spirit can compensate for my limitations. I have no doubt the jailer could have been saved in Acts 16 even if Paul didn’t tell him to count the cost of following Jesus.

“Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a relationship”

Matt Walsh: “The phrase ‘it’s a relationship, not a religion’ is almost always used by people who want Christianity without any of the moral duties.”

In fairness, many Christians I know have not gone as far as this but instead have found balance in saying that Christianity is a relationship *and* a religion. I think that is much wiser, and true, yet I still have no issue at times

saying the phrase as I wrote it above.

The reason is that to my audience, often people need to be absolutely clear that Christianity is not rules, rituals or works. Chicago is modern day Athens in how religiously pluralistic it is. And I have reached the conclusion that it is much more likely that people in my neighborhood needs to understand the covenantal basis to salvation in Christianity before they understand what God expects of them. They need to understand that people enter into relationship with God by grace. Some people have so much religious baggage coming in that they need to hear grace preached dozens or even hundreds of times to grasp it.

But I adapt if the situation demands it. If I am talking to a 60-year old Muslim, I am very inclined to say "It's not a religion" but if I am talking to a 19-year old young woman who has been told her whole life that Jesus should be her boyfriend, then I'll probably describe it as a religion. We can err when we approach everyone with the same method.

Some people quote James 1:27 to me and to that I say that the word James used it is not quite like what many people within my reach think of when they hear "religion." The word James used can easily be translated "devotion," which we understand relationally and that is different than "Do X and X or you will not reach God." I have heard adherents of other religions say that they never know if they have done enough to merit God's approval and that is so utterly opposite Biblical Christianity that they desperately need to know the difference. And while I will eventually speak to what it means to be devoted to God so that I feed orphan and widows and avoid worldly pollution, I have no issue saying "Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship" in a sermon.

What do you think? We encourage thoughtful feedback below.

Grace Is

Grace is, according to the Sunday School answer, “unmerited favor.”

The problem with this comes with a misunderstanding of “favor.” We would probably agree that grace is unmerited: underserved, not earned, etc. But favor causes problems.

Favor would be getting a promotion and salary increase at work. Favor would be avoiding the car accident by inches. Favor would be having a healthy baby.

And, while I think these are blessings that God allows because He is gracious, I believe God does not lay aside His graciousness if I’m overlooked for the promotion, if I am involved in a devastating car wreck, or if my son is born with a disability.

I misunderstand God’s favor as “what I want” rather than what He wants. I would never choose the hard road. Ever. Not even once. God chooses if for me because it’s what is best. And the hard road in His will is also His favor.

Think about it in terms of our heroes in the Bible. Was God NOT gracious when Joseph was sold into slavery? Was He NOT gracious when Joseph was wrongly imprisoned? Knowing what God does through these misfortunes of Joseph, I can clearly see His grace; by allowing Joseph to endure these difficulties, God promotes him and saves the Hebrews.

But it’s not as easy for me to proclaim Him as gracious in the midst of one of life’s messy chapters when I don’t know the whole story.

Another problem with how we discuss and define grace is when we contrast it with judgment. God is a God of both. One is not laid aside while He picks up the other. Jesus demonstrates this for us perfectly.

Was it gracious of Jesus to cleanse the temple and throw out the money changers? Would we call it grace when Jesus called the Pharisees "brood of vipers" or "white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23)? Jesus did not take off His attribute of grace so He could wear His judge's robe. Grace involves truth, or it's not grace. If Jesus would have ignored the religious leaders' Jewish elitism and religious hypocrisy, He would not have shown them grace.

As a parent, this makes sense to me. The Bible tells me that God disciplines those He loves as a father disciplines his child (see Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:6). Disciplining my child is an act of grace. Further, to NOT discipline my child is to "hate" him (Proverbs 13:24). If I only show what my kids would call "favor" towards them, the results would be disastrous. Kids' ideas of what is favorable are not always what is best. So my "unfavorable" discipline, food choice, rules, conversations, etc. is for their overall good. It's ungracious to make every choice based on what they would consider favorable.

I have seen a trend in statements such as, "If I am wrong (about this issue), I want to err on the side of grace." Grace is never on the same side as falsehood. Grace is always connected to truth. If it's true that child abuse is wrong, then it's not gracious to ignore it or accept it just in case it's okay. (Of course it's not okay.) If it's true that that having sex with someone who is not my spouse is wrong, then it's not correct to ignore or accept it in the name of grace. Having laws against child abuse and punishment for abusers are gracious acts in that these are correct. Showing grace to an unfaithful spouse could include civil agreements in the dividing of assets in divorce, custodial arrangements, and

forgiveness—but not acceptance and tolerance of the behavior. It would be ungracious to say, “Just sleep with whomever your heart tells you to. Because if I’m wrong about wanting you to be faithful to me, then I would rather err on the side of grace.” Ludicrous!

By His grace I am saved through faith, and not by things I do, or I would certainly boast about how good I am (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is about what He has done, what He does, and what He will do. Grace is unmerited favor, as long as I don’t misunderstand or limit what “favor” actually means.