Hindrances to Discipleship: The World

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In the previous issue of Knowing & Doing, we began a series on the three major hindrances to following Jesus Christ: the world, the flesh, and the devil. In that issue, we focused on the devil, his revolt against God, his resistance to God’s kingdom, and his schemes against believers. In this issue we will seek to understand the world system, its origin and nature, and how the devil works through it to enslave and destroy God’s people and thwart His kingdom.

What Is “the World”?

What does the New Testament mean by the word world? There are three Greek words translated as “world.” Oikoumene usually means the inhabited world, especially the Greco-Roman world. Aeon means an “age” and is sometimes also rendered “world.” But the most significant word used is kosmos, which originally meant “order or arrangement” and can refer to the created order or to the inhabited world or to the world in revolt against God, depending on context. It is this latter, more sinister, use that we are especially concerned with here.

In the Bible, the world in this negative sense represents the “stage of history” upon which human life has been lived since Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God. Their tragic revolt unleashed a cascade of terrible effects on human life. We know the story of how they forfeited God’s Spirit, became curved in on themselves, and lost the happiness of Eden. We also know that everyone born into the world since has inherited their corrupted, self-centered nature, a nature that is dead to God and enslaved in sin. It is this fallen nature that has shaped human societies, expressing our rebellion against God on the corporate level.

The depths to which such societies can descend are seen in God’s assessment of the world that developed after the fall: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). But even when societies do not fall to such levels of depravity, at the most fundamental level fallen human beings are alienated from the true God and dominated by sin, the devil, and his minions. Thus, in a very real sense, “the world represents the systematic expression of human sin in human cultures.”

With penetrating insight, Richard Lovelace elaborates on this world system:
Dear Friends,

Have you ever prayed, “Lord, I surrender everything to You. I am willing to be used by You in whatever way You see fit. Help me, through Your Holy Spirit, to be faithful to Your call”?

In my experience, God is faithful to answer such a prayer when spoken with honesty and conviction. Dramatic life changes occur. Many people who have an intellectual commitment to Christ but have never surrendered their entire beings to Him find that “letting go” of their selfish desires opens the door to a richer understanding of God, one that can never be fulfilled by head knowledge alone.

For regular Knowing & Doing readers, this is a message that comes through loud and clear. In this issue, Jeanne Thum, one of our Fellows, writes about her journey of faith and trust that led her to Papua New Guinea to serve with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Jana Harmon, from C.S. Lewis Institute — Atlanta, writes about C.S. Lewis’s struggle to reconcile pain and suffering with a loving God, and how surrendering to God—even in the midst of something we don’t understand—is the real path to meaning.

Tom Tarrants continues his series on “The World, the Flesh, and Devil” with a powerful piece on the dangers of being captivated by the world. David Calhoun writes about how one faithful woman—Monica, mother of Augustine of Hippo—changed history by her faithfulness to God through constant prayer for and mentoring of her wayward son. Augustine’s story is a dramatic example of God’s amazing work of transformation.

From a Puritan perspective, Tom Schwanda lays out the importance of balancing reading the Scriptures with meditating on the Scriptures. Today few of us take the time to do this.

We pray that all the articles in this issue will encourage you and strengthen you in your walk with Christ.

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Sincerely,

Kerry A. Knott
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If you could do any job, what would it be?” asked Art Lindsley as part of my vocational analysis as a C.S. Lewis Institute Fellow in March, 2006.

“Well, the job I seem most suited for is chief operating officer. The organization that I have always loved is Wycliffe Bible Translators. The Bible has greatly impacted my life, and I can’t imagine being a Christian without one in my native language. So my dream job would be chief operating officer of Wycliffe.”

Trying another method to draw out my preferences, Art asked, “If you were given a million dollars and could do anything, what would you do?”

“Well, I like to work,” I replied. “I have no driving personal dreams. So I would seek to be COO of Wycliffe. But then I wouldn’t have to raise my financial support!” I may have exasperated Art a bit in the moment. But six years later, I can foresee that my “dream” could possibly become a reality—without my intentionally seeking it out.

Eager for Cross-Cultural Ministry

I headed into missions work right after college. Feeling drawn to the most challenging unreached people, Muslims, I studied Arabic, took a Modern Islamic Thought class, and flew off to London to do outreach. But after nine months overseas full of frustration over ineffective strategies, I came home with my hopes dashed, the way forward unclear.

Having college friends in the Washington, D.C., area, I moved there and found work with an international organization. Throughout my twenties, I envisioned myself returning to Christian ministry. A “short-termer” mentality hooked in: this job will just tie me over until . . . But into my thirties, God didn’t seem to be leading me anywhere, so I settled in.

In 1997 I said yes when a friend asked me to help organize an event for “emerging urban leaders,” folks in their twenties working in inner-city ministries. This introduced me to some of the challenging needs of my own locale. For a year I attended and worked with a small dysfunctional but sweet church in NE Washington that ministered to its surrounding community. Realizing the congregation wasn’t good for me long-term, I moved on to a church on Capitol Hill that had a vision to reach out to the neighborhood to their east and south. Going all out, I bought a house in a poor section on eastern Capitol Hill and began to lead a Bible study for neighborhood high school girls. During that time I also taught a class on white privilege and race.

Professionally Languishing?

Professionally, I tried for years to get a job with an urban ministry. I saw the potential benefits of my administrative and management skills combined with my cross-cultural experience. But I got nowhere, not even one job interview. I wondered if God was listening, if He cared. I wanted His direction. I wanted to “do good to those in need.” Instead I had little vision for my work, carrying out responsibilities I didn’t care much about. My challenges were mostly outside of work, where I kept taking cross-cultural risks.

I thought about what people saw on my résumé: administrative and finance experience. I had been repeatedly promoted in a large nonprofit because I had well-suited business skills. (continued on page 19)
Isaac Ambrose (1604–1664) was a moderate English Puritan minister living in Lancashire, England. Unfortunately little has been written on Ambrose; he has much to teach the church. Educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, as a young man he served as one of the king’s preachers—a select group of four itinerants originally charged with preaching the Reformation doctrines of grace in Lancashire. After briefly serving two smaller congregations, around 1640, Ambrose became the pastor of St. Johns Church, Preston. In 1657 he moved to a more obscure location farther north in Garstang. Ambrose specifically states his need for a less stressful parish due to the challenges of Roman Catholicism as well as the superstition prevalent in the region.

Supporting the effort to develop Presbyterianism in this region of northwest England, he served as one of the moderators of the annual meetings. Through various committees he also sought to provide relief to those suffering financial hardship resulting from the local battles of the English Civil War. As a nonconforming minister of the Church of England, Ambrose was eventually ejected from his pulpit by the Act of Uniformity of 1662.

Ambrose was a well-respected devotional author, best known both then and now for his massive work, *Looking unto Jesus*. He also wrote a significant work on sanctification titled *Media: The Middle Things, In Reference to the First and Last Things: or, The Means, Duties, Ordinances, both Secret, Private and Public, for Continuance and Increase of a Godly Life, (Once Begun,) Till We Come to Heaven.* Media, first published in 1650, was enlarged and revised in 1652, followed by a third expanded edition in 1657.

**Understanding the Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Duties**

The Puritans typically approached spiritual disciplines by dividing them into three categories: secret, private, and public. Secret duties refers to the individual’s personal spiritual practices and reflect Jesus’ command to withdraw to a place of privacy to practice one’s piety (Matt. 6:6). A private context refers to a small group, such as family or friends gathered in one’s house. The word public describes the larger gatherings in church buildings for worship or other spiritual exercises. While Ambrose himself actively cultivated all three categories, we here focus on his exhortation regarding the secret discipline of meditation on Scripture.

According to Ambrose spiritual duties are any practices that awaken, strengthen, or deepen a person’s relationship with the triune God. Ambrose provides a compelling metaphor of spiritual disciplines when he asserts that:

...the saints look upon duties (the Word, Sacraments, Prayers, etc.) as bridges to give them a passage to God, as boats to carry them into the bosom of Christ, as means to bring them into more intimate communion with their heavenly Father, and therefore are they so much taken with them.
Spiritual disciplines have the ability to create a reciprocal relationship that is marked by a growing intimacy based upon both gratitude and love for God.

Ambrose cautions his readers that there is nothing unique about these practices, and great care must be exercised so as not to use them to bargain with God. He also reminds us that spiritual practices cannot save a person. Yet Ambrose stresses that spiritual duties can be a source of delight and joy, bringing us into God’s presence. Further, practicing them brings believers a portion of heaven, as if “their hearts [were] sweetly refreshed.” In other words, spiritual practices can both confirm the reality of God’s presence and provide a foretaste of heaven’s joy because we have been joined with Christ.

Ambrose’s descriptive language on the effect of cultivating spiritual disciplines must not be ignored. Finding “hearts sweetly refreshed” reveals a critical dimension of Puritan piety; while their focus was always on the intellect, they never excluded the affective dimension of the soul. In reality, the Puritans challenge contemporary Christians with the much-needed balance between head and heart.

On the one hand, some Christians today are overly cognitive in their faith, giving little attention to how Scripture, worship, or spiritual practices might affect them. Ignoring the transformative power of these spiritual means is unwise; they are intended as reminders of God’s presence and desire to be in communion with us. There is an equal danger at the opposite extreme; some people today are so intentional about seeking experiences that they display little sensitivity to the origin of that experience.

The Puritans were spiritually alert and discerning to recognize that the Holy Spirit was not the only One who was present in the spiritual realm. They understood the need to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1 NIV). It is interesting to note that Ambrose devoted a full book to this topic, titled *War with Devils*.

This intentional combination of integrating the head and the heart did not originate with the Puritans; it has a long history within Christian spirituality. The writings of many Puritans reveal a deep appreciation for Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). Bernard, a key founder of the Cistercian (“school of love”) movement, was a favorite writer of John Calvin. Ambrose quotes directly from Bernard’s method of employing both the intellect and the will (often synonymous with the affections) when he asserts, “holy contemplation has two forms of ecstasy, one in the intellect, the other in the will; one of enlightenment, the other of fervor.” In summary, Ambrose declares that the foundations for “our meditation are in this method: to begin in the understanding and to end in the affections.”

This integrated approach of balancing the intellectual with the affective reflects the experimental or experiential piety of Puritanism. J.I. Packer maintains, “Puritanism was essentially an experimental faith, a religion of ‘heart-work’, a sustained practice of seeking the face of God.” The writings of Isaac Ambrose breathe with the inspired pulse of a person who has experienced the love and joy of God. He urges his readers to “labor so to know Christ, as to have a practical and experimental knowledge of Christ in his influences, and not merely a notional [mental] one.” The Puritans stressed this message repeatedly, (continued on page 21)
PROFILE IN FAITH

“Servant of the Servants of God”

Monica

by David B. Calhoun

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Augustine wrote his Confessions when he was about forty-three years old, after he had become bishop of Hippo (in modern-day Algeria). In that autobiographical account he tells the story of his first thirty-three years—his birth, childhood, rebellious youth, ambition, travel to Rome and Milan, conversion, his mother’s joining him in Italy, their time together in Cassiciacum, their return journey south to North Africa, and his mother’s death en route at Ostia on the Tiber. Peter Brown writes, “What Augustine remembered in the Confessions was his inner life; and this inner life is dominated by one figure—his mother.”

Augustine wrote Confessions some ten years after the death of his mother, and “time can soften and beautify.” In Augustine’s case, it undoubtedly did; there are hints of the strains they experienced from time to time, largely because of the son’s rejection of Christianity and the mother’s unrelenting persistence in prayer and advice. Their relationship was intensely human, “reflecting some of the deepest emotions of life, not superficial nor artificial.” By the time Augustine wrote about his mother, however, he briefly mentioned their tense times and mostly remembered the good—and there was much good to remember. In the Confessions, Augustine explained that he did not include “innumerable things” that God had done for him, but he did speak often of his mother. In his description of her, we see a saint in the biblical meaning of the word. B.B. Warfield has written, Augustine’s “mother . . . was one of nature’s noblewomen, whose naturally fine disposition had been further beautified by grace.”

Her name, Monica, probably had Berber origins. The Berbers were the earliest known inhabitants of the western Mediterranean coast of Africa. As for many coastal Berbers, her culture was Latin. She was born into a believing household and brought up in the teachings and practice of the second-century African church. From her childhood she developed within her own family something of a “saintly” reputation. But on one occasion at least she almost lost it. The story lived on, and, perhaps like all good stories, improved with the telling. Augustine includes it in his Confessions.

As a young girl Monica developed a taste for wine (she would take a few sips from the family cask and on occasion drank furtively) but quit when a jealous slave girl in the household accused her of being a “boozer.” A sentence in the Confessions indicates that Monica did not give up drinking entirely: “Her spirit was not obsessed by excessive drinking, and no love of wine stimulated her into opposing the truth” (6,2). By the time Augustine wrote about his mother, however, he briefly mentioned their tense times and mostly remembered the good—and there was much good to remember. In the Confessions, Augustine explained that he did not include “innumerable things” that God had done for him, but he did speak often of his mother. In his description of her, we see a saint in the biblical meaning of the word. B.B. Warfield has written, Augustine’s “mother . . . was one of nature’s noblewomen, whose naturally fine disposition had been further beautified by grace.”

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Monica married Patricius, a person of some standing but little money in the small town in which they lived, probably no better or worse than most of his contemporaries. He was proud of his gifted son and was prepared to sacrifice to enable him to have a good education. Augustine records his father’s satisfaction when one day at the public baths he saw that the boy was showing “signs of virility” (2,6)—a development that would cause Augustine no end of trouble. Describing a time when he was
about thirty years old, he wrote, “I thought I would become very miserable if I were deprived of the embraces of a woman” (6,20). Patricius was not a Christian. He was often kind, although he had a quick temper. He was unfaithful to his wife, but Monica loved him and put up with his failings. Augustine wrote that “she rendered obedient service to him, for in this matter she was being obedient to your [God’s] authority” (1,17). Later he wrote that Monica “tried to win him for you, speaking to him of you by her virtues through which you made her beautiful, so that her husband loved, respected and admired her” (9,19). Before Patricius died, Monica’s quiet witness bore good fruit, and he came to Christ. Augustine says little about his father in the Confessions, although in Book 9 he acknowledges Patricius not only as his earthly father but as a brother in Christ in the church and fellow citizen “in the eternal Jerusalem” (9,37).9

Monica’s mother-in-law, who lived with them, was hostile to her until Monica won her over “by her respectful manner and by persistence in patience and gentleness” (9,20). Monica, Augustine wrote, whenever she could “reconciled dissident and quarrelling people” (9,21). Moreover, she was, he said to God, “a servant of your servants: any of them who knew her found much to praise in her, held her in honour and loved her; for they felt your presence in her heart” (9,22).

Monica was probably twenty-three when Augustine was born, her first of several children. “She was already a Christian in the noblest sense,” wrote Handley Moule, “strong in the power of spiritual holiness, and ardently prayerful” for the salvation of her children.10 She suffered greatly when she saw Augustine wandering away from God. During his rebellious years, Augustine said that God was not silent but spoke to him through his mother. “Then whose words were they but yours which you were chanting in my ears through my mother, your faithful servant?” (2,7). Monica witnessed to her wayward son and prayed for him and wept for him “more than mothers weep when lamenting their dead children” (3,19). Nine years before Augustine’s conversion, Monica received the famous consolation from a bishop, wearied with her entreaties for him to reason with her son, “Go . . . it cannot be that the son of these tears should perish.” She took those words “as if they had sounded from heaven” (3,21).

Monica was distraught when Augustine planned to leave Carthage for Rome. She feared that away from her influence and the restraints of home, he would be lost to her and to God. To escape he deceived her. “I lied to my mother—to such a mother—and I gave her the slip.” “By her flood of tears,” Augustine wrote, “what was she begging of you, my God, but that you would not allow me to sail? Yet in your deep counsel you heard the central point of her longing” (5,15). God did not answer Monica’s prayer—that Augustine not go to Rome—so that he could answer her prayer that her son would come to Christ.

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The problem of pain is inescapable, its effects profound. No one can deny it. Many use it as a way to remove God from reality. It fuels the flame of doubt and sometimes undermines the believer’s faith. It empowers the atheist’s argument. To be a follower of Christ and to live in the world, one must determinedly, intentionally face the issues and difficulties that lie inherent and obvious in the problem of pain.

C.S. Lewis, a frontline witness to evil in the world, was not immune from personal pain. As a boy, he experienced the death of his mother followed by the emotional abandonment of his father. As a young man, he directly encountered the ugliness of war. As a brilliant Oxford don, he suffered rejection from academic colleagues. As an older man who finally discovered young love, he endured the painful loss of his wife. In 1940, at age forty-two, Lewis penned *The Problem of Pain* accompanied by a humble, written admission. Fully realizing that he might be underestimating the reality of serious pain, he was compelled to intellectually address the issue, for he understood its profound implications toward belief, or disbelief, in God. After all, Lewis reminds us early on in this writing, it was the problem of evil that foundationally motivated his prior atheism.

The *Problem of Pain* seeks to understand how a loving, good, and powerful God can possibly coexist with the pain and suffering pervasive in the world and in our lives. Indeed, the problem of pain could not exist without the reality of a good and loving and powerful God. Without a transcendent creator God who ultimately defines good and evil, there are no grounds upon which to substantiate the difference between the two, much less the effect of either. Lewis states that “pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.”

The innate relationship between the existence of God and pain must be rightly understood if we are honestly to confront the difficult issues that lie therein. Without such an understanding, faith is at risk of crumbling.

Theodicy, derived from the Greek words for “deity” and “justice,” “refers to the attempt to justify the goodness of God in the face of the manifold evil present in the world.” It begs the question, if God is good and powerful, why does God allow bad things to happen? It speaks to the heart of the issue—the very nature of God, who He is, and who we are in relationship to Him. Lewis asserts “the problem of pain, in its simplest form”: “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.”

According to Peter Kreeft and basic rhetorical analysis, the veracity of an argument is based upon the soundness of its individual terms, the integrity of each premise or statement, and its overall logic. On its face, this argument against God appears to have power and logic on its side. The terms, premises, and reasoning appear robust and convincing. God is good and powerful. He
desires good things for His creatures. But pain and suffering remain, and we are not happy, but miserable.

Confronting this dilemma, Lewis takes issue with our popular understanding of the terms good, loving, and powerful, and what it means to be happy. For it is there, along with our vigorous desire for and understanding of free will, that Lewis makes his case for defeating the apparent contradiction in the problem of pain. Since God is indeed loving, good, and powerful in light of the reality of pain and suffering, it is “abundantly clear” that our conception of those attributes “needs correction.” Lewis assures us that proper understanding of the terms bring the co-existence of God with pain and suffering into alignment “without contradiction.”

He also challenges our discernment of what exactly makes us happy, what satisfies us. When these notions are rightly understood, the argument is emptied of its persuasive power.

As Christians, we believe that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and that “nothing is impossible” for Him (Luke 1:37). Yet Lewis reminds us that God is constrained by two realities. First, God cannot do what is intrinsically impossible or what Lewis terms “nonsense.” The law of noncontradiction—a basic law of logic—applies even to God. God cannot grant free will to humanity and not grant free will at the same time and in the same way. Holding God to a standard of applying two mutually exclusive alternatives is essentially meaningless.

Second, God allows us as human beings to be free agents with free choices. We cannot desire freedom to choose and yet hold God responsible for not preventing our choosing of evil. Either we have freedom or we do not. Either we choose or we do not. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot blame God for our evil actions when we freely chose them. We cannot excuse ourselves and accuse God when freedom was truly granted to us. Our understanding of what it means for God to be all-powerful must be viewed within this informed reality. We must not “think things possible which are really impossible.” In other words, we cannot have our cake and eat it too.

This perspective does not, in any way, compromise God’s sovereignty or power. Granting free will to humanity, to love self more than God or to love God more than self, is the ultimate power by which a Creator can grant freedom to His creation. The natural, fixed order of the universe provides a stable framework in which freedom, and the possibility of pain and suffering as well as love, is viable. Lewis soberly reminds us that if the possibility of suffering is excluded, life itself is excluded. God, in His omnipotent power, allows us the greatest amount of freedom to choose for or against Him and our fellow man. Pain is a consequence inherent in this sovereign design. Without this freedom, the full extent of goodness, joy, or love cannot be authentically known.

As believers, we also believe in a God who is completely and (continued on page 29)
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(continued from page 1)

is the total system of corporate flesh operating on earth under Satanic control, with all its incentives of reward and restraint of loss, its characteristic patterns of behavior, its anti-Christian structures, methods, goals and ideologies. It is substantially identical with Babylon and with Augustine’s City of Man. It involves many forms and agencies of evil which are hard to discern and to contend against on the basis of an individualistic view of sin. Included are dehumanizing social, economic and political systems; business operations and foreign policy based on local interest at the expense of general human welfare and culturally pervasive institutionalized sins such as racism. ³

The Bible describes such a world as “godless,” that is, lacking reverence and awe for the true God. It takes only a moment’s reflection to see evidence of this all around us today. The five major institutions of society—the family, education, economics, religion, and government—are organized and operate without any consideration of the existence of the true God and His righteous will. (Religion may seem to be an exception. But any religion that does not profess the God of the Bible as revealed in Jesus Christ is operating in spiritual blindness and error. And even much so-called Christianity, including our own, is often moribund, nominal, or riddled with pagan superstition.) Godlessness is evident in most newspapers, magazines, television programs, movies, and other forms of communication, advertisement, and entertainment. They pursue their purposes as if the God of heaven and earth did not exist. This powerful, negative environment presses upon people from all directions to shape and mold how they think, feel, and act.

Underlying the many and varied expressions of this godless world system is a profound idolatry that blinds the minds and enslaves the wills of fallen people. It is first of all an “idolatry of self,” because we are curved in on ourselves and seek our own desires above the will of God and the good of others. However, this takes tangible form in a manner suited to the tastes, inclinations, and passions of the individual and may range from the crude to the highly sophisticated. As with Adam, pride and covetousness feed this idolatry:

The two dominant characteristics of “this world” are pride, born of man’s failure to accept his creaturely estate and his dependence on the Creator, which leads him to act as though he were the lord and giver of life; and covetousness, which causes him to desire and possess all that is attractive to his physical senses (1 Jn. 2:16). And, as man tends in effect to worship what he covets, such covetousness is idolatry (Col. 3:5). ⁴

It is this pride and covetousness and the idolatry it generates that the devil exploits (along with the flesh) to keep people blind to “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). And it is precisely because of this blindness that they worship what is created instead of the One who created it. The result is that the world, in spite of its original goodness and great natural beauty, has become a grim place, “red in tooth and claw,” where, as Thomas Hobbes said, life for most people who have ever lived has been “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” ⁶
The world is therefore a battleground in which a war rages between God and the devil, seen in the struggle between good and evil, truth and error, life and death. And the devil and his forces work relentlessly and skillfully to seduce and ensnare people with the godless values of this fallen world. We cannot escape being in this world, but we can and must avoid being of it.

Good News

Although the people of the world are spiritually blind, enslaved to sin and hostile to God, He still loves them. Indeed, so deeply does He love them that He sent His only Son to atone for their sins and reconcile them and the entire creation to Himself. This began unfolding with the coming of Jesus into the world. He proclaimed, “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Signs of the kingdom’s arrival abounded through Him: the sick were healed; the blind received sight; the crippled were made whole; the dead were raised to life; those who were possessed by demons were set free; and good news was preached to the poor. This signaled that God’s long-awaited invasion of this world had begun; the darkness was being rolled back, and the liberation of the devil’s captives was now in progress. It was a time of crisis and decision. People must forsake their sins and turn to Jesus in confident trust of rescue. What would it profit someone to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul? Let people come under the reign of Christ and become soldiers in the army of their rightful King. Denying self-centeredness, taking up their cross and following Jesus in their homes, workplaces, and communities, they would help liberate others and spread His kingdom far and wide.

Jesus began with twelve disciples, and from there the numbers grew. When the Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost, multitudes were swept into the kingdom, as the church spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to Rome and to the ends of the earth. As long as the followers of Jesus continued to give themselves to Him in wholehearted devotion and obedience, they gained increasing freedom from the worldly beliefs, values, and behaviors that characterized their former life. And they became salt and light to the world around them.

But whenever they began to drift from that devotion and commitment, the love of the world would regain lost ground in their hearts. Tragically, this happened to a key leader on Paul’s apostolic team, which included Mark, Luke, Timothy, and Silas, among others. When Paul was awaiting execution in Rome and needed him the most, we read that “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me” (2 Tim. 4:10; see also Col. 4:14; Philem. 24). Love of this present world is a perennial temptation for every believer. If a member of Paul’s team, which included the writers of two of the Gospels, could be seduced by worldliness, we must not think we are immune.

About thirty years later, Jesus strongly rebuked the church of Laodicea for its worldliness,

I know . . . you are neither cold nor hot.
Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm and neither hot

Over the centuries the church has waxed and waned, at times being zealous in love for Christ and expanding, at other times being seduced by love of this world, leading to spiritual stagnation and at times outright moral decadence.
nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.
For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and
I need nothing, not realizing that you are
wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.
(Rev. 3:15–17)

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Where Is the Church Today?

Anyone born into a fallen world, with a
fallen nature and fallen parents, will assimil-
ate worldly ways of thinking and behaving.
When you submerge a clean white sponge
into a pail of dirty water, it comes back with
a dark, dirty residue. So it is with us and
the world. And when we come to trust in
Christ, it is inevitable that we will bring
a certain amount of this unrecognized
worldly baggage with us, and thus into the
church. And every day we are at risk of ac-
cumulating more.

In 2011 Barna Research reported that
“less than one out of every five self-iden-
tified Christians (18%) claims to be totally
committed to investing in their own spiritual
development.”

In 1979 church historian Richard
Lovelace observed that “much of the Chris-
tian community today is deeply penetrated
by worldly patterns of thinking, motivation
and behavior, and thus its spiritual life is
deadened and its witness rendered ineffec-
tual.” Since then things have only gotten
worse. More recently George Gallup, com-
menting on the Gallup organization’s
decades-long research on the American
church, said,

We find there is very little difference in ethi-
cal behavior between churchgoers and those
who are not active religiously . . . The levels
of lying, cheating, and stealing are remark-
ably similar in both groups. Eight out of ten
Americans consider themselves Christians,
yet only about half of them could identify the
person who gave the Sermon on the Mount,
and fewer still could recall five of the Ten
Commandments. Only two in ten said they
would be willing to suffer for their faith.8

In 2011 Barna Research reported that
“less than one out of every five self-iden-
tified Christians (18%) claims to be totally
committed to investing in their own spiritual
development.”

Commenting on the evangelical church
in 1994, theologian David Wells said,

The stream of historic orthodoxy that once
watered the evangelical soul is now dammed
by a worldliness that many fail to recognize
as worldliness because of the cultural inno-
cence with which it presents itself . . . It may
be that Christian faith, which has made many
easy alliances with modern culture in the past
few decades, is also living in a fool’s paradise,
comforting itself about all the things God is
doing . . . while it is losing its character, if not
its soul.10

Today there is good evidence that what
Wells suspected is correct. To cite just two
examples, in 2008 Pew Research reported
that 47 percent of evangelicals believe the
pluralist idea that “many religions can lead
to eternal life,”11 something that would
have been unthinkable fifty years ago. In
a 2008 report, Barna Research found that
the combined divorce rate of evangelical
and nonevangelical Christians was 32 per-
cent versus 33 percent for the population
at large.12 Many other examples could be
given, but space prevents it. Jerry Bridges
sums up well what is happening in the
American church:
Jesus, who unties such apparent extremes of character into such an integrated and balanced whole, demands an extreme response from every one of us. He forces our hand at every turn in the story. This man who throws open the gates of his kingdom to everyone, then warns the most devout insiders that their standing in the kingdom is in jeopardy without fruitfulness, is forever closing down our options. This man who can be weakened by a touch in a crowd on his way to bring a little girl back from the dead is a man you dare not tear your eyes from. (And we haven’t even yet witnessed the true depths of his restraint or the heights of his power.)

Tim Keller
deadly snare. In the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23; Mark 4:1–9, 13–20; Luke 8:4–15), for instance, Jesus speaks of four responses people can make to the word of God.

In the first hearer, there is no understanding of the word, which allows the devil to snatch away the word before it can make an impact.

In the second, the word is received with joy, and the hearer believes for a while. But because he has no root in himself, when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word he immediately falls away. This person's religion rests on feelings, lacks adequate understanding and commitment, and doesn't penetrate the heart. Thus it is only temporary. America is awash in this feel-good religion. It offers the benefits of salvation without repentance, commitment, or the possibility of suffering; it offers what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”

It begins with a bang of excitement but soon ends with a whimper.

In the third hearer, also common today, “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matt. 13:22). The parallel passages in Mark and Luke add: “the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19) and the “pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14). This person appears to be growing in response to the word of God and bearing at least some fruit. But then the word is smothered out by money, pleasures, the cares of the world, and other desires. (What is included in the latter two causes is unspecified, perhaps because there are so many possibilities, including unbridled pursuit of success, achievement, power, or fame.) This hearer is a graphic example of the seductive power of money, pleasures, the worries of life, and other worldly desires and their corrupting effects on hearts. How easy it is amid the narcissism, hedonism, and materialism of contemporary culture to be drawn away from wholehearted devotion to Christ! And how easy it is to rationalize our embrace of the world by clever arguments and subtle movements of the soul that blunt the conscience and quench the Spirit.

The deceitfulness of wealth is a good example to explore further. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His disciples (and thus you and me) very pointedly not to lay up treasures on earth. Instead we are to lay them up in heaven, because where one’s treasure is, there one's heart will be also (Matt. 6:21). It is impossible to give our hearts to two masters; we cannot serve God and mammon (Matt. 6:22–24). However, most believers pass right over this, assuming that it doesn't apply to them, since they are not as wealthy as Bill Gates or Warren Buffett. They don't have a million dollars or even a hundred thousand. But this is to miss the point. We may love money without having it (Judas), just as we may have money without loving it (Abraham, Job). The issue is not what we have but what we love, and whatever we love, our hearts will cling to. If we love money and material possessions, they will become idols that displace God in our hearts and destroy our souls.

The fourth hearer in this parable is held up as the true convert and faithful disciple, the model for us to emulate. This disciple hears, understands, and accepts the word of God (Matt. 13:23; Mark 4:20); this disciple holds “it fast in an honest and good heart,” bearing “fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). His or her obedient response to God’s word is the fruit of faith and love and demonstrates saving grace.

Additional insight into worldliness comes from the apostle John. Worldliness was a concern in congregations with
which he was familiar in Asia Minor. John warned them,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

His first point is very direct and sobering: those who love the world no longer have the love of God dwelling in them. As Matthew Henry observed, “The more the love of the world prevails the more the love of God dwindles and decays.” Love of the world drives out love for God. This, of course, is exactly what we just read from Jesus and James. John also gives insight into the nature of worldliness. The Greek word translated “desires” (“cravings” in the NIV) of the flesh here denotes desires that are morally corrupt. They are aroused through the desires of the eyes, things we see, and produce covetousness. And they stimulate pride, leading to pretentious display of our possessions.

Gaining Freedom from the World

The dangers and snares we have been considering are the fruit of living for this world not the world to come, living for time not for eternity. We are looking through the wrong end of the telescope. J.I. Packer says,

Today, by and large, Christians no longer live for heaven and therefore no longer understand, let alone practice, detachment from the world. Does the world around us seek pleasure, profit and privilege? So do we. We have no readiness or strength to renounce these objectives, for we have recast Christianity into a mold that stresses happiness above holiness, blessings here above blessedness hereafter, health and wealth as God’s best blessings and death not as thankworthy deliverance from the miseries of a sinful world but as the supreme disaster and a constant challenge to faith in God’s goodness. Is our Christianity out of shape? Yes, it is, and the basic reason is that we have lost the New Testament’s two-world perspective that views the next life as more important than this one and understands life here as essentially preparation and training for the life hereafter. And we shall continue to be out of shape until this proper otherworldliness is recovered.

How do we proceed? C.S. Lewis said, “You and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness.” A vital step for Americans would be to give careful attention to what the apostle Paul urged upon the believers in Rome as the only proper response to God’s grace:

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remake you so that your whole attitude of mind

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is changed. Thus you will prove in practice that the will of God is good, acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1–2 PHILLIPS).

Clearly some in the Roman church were infected with values, attitudes, and behaviors of the world. Paul urged them to give themselves wholeheartedly to God and stop allowing the world to shape their lives. Through radical abandonment to God they could be transformed by the process of the renewing of their minds, then begin to understand God’s will and live in obedience to Him and experience genuine transformation. The Message further clarifies verse 2: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out” (Rom. 12:2).

Such wholehearted commitment to God is precisely where most believers in the American church fail—including the evangelical church. We have had it too easy for too long and have become soft and self-indulgent. As Jerry Bridges observed more than thirty years ago, “Quite possibly there is no greater conformity to the world among evangelical Christians today than the way in which we, instead of presenting our bodies as holy sacrifices, pamper and indulge them in defiance of our better judgment and our Christian purpose in life.”

One reason we do this is because wholehearted commitment is costly (and often excused as optional, if not ignored altogether). As Chesterton once said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried.”

Recent research confirms this:

Only about 3% of all self-identified Christians in America have come to the final stops on the transformational journey—the place where they have surrendered control of their life to God, submitted to His will for their life, and devoted themselves to loving and serving God and other people.

We consider ourselves right with God even as lack of commitment and worldliness continue to encumber our lives. We have a religion of convenience like that which Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle confronted in his time: “There is a common, worldly kind of Christianity in this day, which many have, and think they have enough—a cheap Christianity which offends nobody, and requires no sacrifice—which costs nothing, and is worth nothing.” Until we make a total surrender and commitment to God, consecrating all we know of ourselves to all we know of God at the time, we are only deceiving ourselves. We are harboring an enemy in our hearts, an enemy that will quietly erode our love for the Father and Jesus and quench the work of the Holy Spirit and leave us in the grip of worldliness. And unless we renew our commitment again and again over the years as we mature, we are also deceiving ourselves. Eventually, like the seed sown among the thorns, we will discover that the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, the pleasures of life and other things have smothered out the word of God, leaving our souls barren and our lives fruitless.

Once we have made that surrender to God, the Holy Spirit will be able to enlighten, teach and guide us in the way of holiness.

Once we have made that surrender to God, the Holy Spirit will be able to enlighten, teach and guide us in the way of holiness.
If we ask the Spirit to search our hearts and reveal it, some forms of worldliness should begin to come clear. Honest self-examination is essential in this process. We should ask ourselves questions: What do we love? What does our mind dwell on when it is free? How do we spend our time and money? (This often reveals what our hearts are attached to.) Do our answers point more to this world or the next? This is just the beginning; we will need to examine ourselves periodically throughout our lives. For not only do we need to be freed from existing unrecognized worldliness, we must remain alert to new forms of seduction day by day.

As we seek to eradicate worldliness from our lives, we must guard against the perennial temptation of excessive asceticism. This is actually another form of worldliness, which denigrates the good world God has made. It fails to appreciate that the good things God has provided for us to enjoy, such as food, sex, material possessions, and pleasures, are not evil; they become a problem only when our own fallen hearts misuse and idolize them.

The Importance of the Church

Paul addressed Romans 12:1–2 not to an isolated individual but to an entire church. Obviously, it was not a perfect church, but it was a good church. This underscores at least two important points. First, even good churches have deficiencies, and their members will have varying degrees of worldliness. More important, we cannot mature in Christ and overcome worldliness unless we are part of a healthy congregation. For it is chiefly in His church that the Lord has provided the medicine our souls so desperately need. And we receive it through faithful preaching and teaching of God’s word, sharing life with likeminded believers, prayer, worship, and communion (Acts 2:42). In a good church the glory of God and of Jesus Christ will be the dominant concern of leadership and will influence worship, preaching, teaching, discipling, counseling, outreach, and missions. In such a church we will be taught to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” and to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1–2). We will be challenged with “the expulsive power of a new affection,” in which our love for Jesus dislodges love of the world in its varied forms. We will learn of a world more glorious and desirable than the one we are called to forsake. We will be reminded that we are passing through this world as strangers and aliens who brought nothing into it and will take nothing out. And we will hear God’s call to be stewards not owners of the blessings of this life—achievements, possessions, power, fame, influence, opportunities—and use them to glorify Him and fulfill His purposes in the world.

When we are fully engaged members of the body of Christ, in a good local church, grace will flow into our lives and help us increase in faith, hope, and love for God and others. In such a community, the Holy Spirit will increasingly enlighten us to the snares of the world, the lust of the flesh, and the schemes of the devil. And He will also empower us by the Holy Spirit to cast off the works of darkness and grow in love for Christ, obedience to His Word, transformation into His likeness, and mission to the world.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted Scripture references in this article are from the English Standard Version.
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Varsity, 1996), 1249.

5. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam.”


7. Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 94.

8. George Gallup, cited in Erwin Lutzer, Pastor to Pastor (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 76.


16. Ibid.


27. Even the best church cannot supply everything we need at a given time. Thus we will sometimes need supplementary resources, such as good books, recorded sermons, teachings, seminars, etc.

Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is… We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.

C.S. Lewis
God seemed to say, “Go with that.” I was increasingly disappointed, even angry. “So this is it? Does this say that I have no people skills, no ministry gifting, so I just do boring financial work that doesn’t really help people? Is this all I’m going to end up doing in life?”

As I enrolled in accounting classes, more doors opened for me professionally. I became chief financial officer of a nonprofit medical clinic even though I had never worked in an accounting department. My attitude also shifted profoundly. I saw that helping nonprofits run effectively, with financial soundness and integrity, can free them up to pursue their missions. Most nonprofits are desperate for good financial people. I was glad to be able to bring that gift to the table. I realized that if my job responsibilities were broader and more challenging, finance work wasn’t so boring after all.

I applied to the CSLI Fellows Program in April 2005, thinking I was going to be in Washington, D.C., for many years. But then in 2006, I met a couple at church who were Bible translators in Papua New Guinea. I told them how I’d supported Wycliffe for years and always thought about working for them. But now that I was into finance, I didn’t know what I could do or how it would ever work. They quickly explained the need for finance staff in Papua New Guinea and eagerly took my contact information. They emailed me six months later, telling me their CFO had had a stroke. “Would you consider coming here?”

**Open Doors**

After telling God that I really didn’t want to have to raise my financial support, He reminded me of the many ways He had provided for me over the years. I couldn’t contest that. “Okay. I’ll begin to move forward with this and see if you open doors.” Within one year, I was in Papua New Guinea.

Since then, life has been an incredible experience. I thought I was coming to work in a nonprofit but discovered that Wycliffe runs a center of operations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Amazingly, I was given oversight of the finances of a town of ministry workers, complete with five planes and two helicopters, a school, grocery store, clinic, hardware store, print shop, and utility services (power, water, roads, and trash removal). Because of the weak infrastructure of the country and the remoteness of most of the eight hundred language groups, Wycliffe found this the best way to support Bible translation here. I’ve also learned that “stone age” is actually a description of a way of life and not always a pejorative term.

Although I originally could fathom committing for only two years, I’m now going on four and a half. I am set to go on furlough in August and return to Papua New Guinea in January, 2013 for two more years. What keeps me here? It has been the most challenging professional experience of my
life. I could never have gotten such a job in the States, with a paid salary and serious competition. I was definitely underqualified. But I had enough of the right experience and skills to make it work. I’ve been able to see real change as a result of my efforts and much growth in my management and leadership skills. And I have enjoyed working with others motivated by the same cause and learning more about the Bible translation movement worldwide.

Lessons Learned?

People ask me what I’ve learned spiritually since arriving in Papua New Guinea. I have a hard time answering. It’s not facts about God or me. It’s more of a strengthening inside, a deepening trust and commitment to God. I’ve had so many new opportunities and challenges. For four months it seemed I was bringing up hard truths to people every other day. I learned that I don’t have to know exactly what to say or do. I just need to move forward, trusting God to walk with me.

God was listening to me when I was wandering in the desert trying to get into an inner-city ministry. I see God’s hand, holding me back, as a kind hand. He knew that I am much happier in large organizations. He knew my heart for Bible translation. I am very grateful to Him for leading me here. He knew that my skills were needed here, and I could have a big impact. Although my social world has definitely shrunk living in a small town in one of the remotest places on earth, I have come alive professionally.

Before going to Papua New Guinea, I spent two years in the CSLI Fellows Program going deeper with Christ and getting to know a great group of women. They supported me through the application and leaving process. They have prayed, given toward my financial support, emailed, and regularly sent care packages. Behind me, as cheerleaders, I feel I have a peer group of professional women who are sincerely seeking God. That makes a big difference.

I have seen God be faithful to me as I’ve taken many risks. I still get scared at times. I can be an Israelite, doubting God after all the evidence of His care. I’ve learned more in the past five years about how much I need people to support me in order to survive. Sometimes I’d rather just be independent. But I know that would be a much less fulfilling and God-honoring life. So I keep walking in faith, eager to see what surprise is around the next corner.

It is not so much of our time and so much of our attention that God demands…it is our selves.

C.S. Lewis
knowing that people could easily receive speculative head knowledge of Jesus without their hearts being touched or transformed. Ambrose was interested in changed hearts, beginning with himself. He and his fellow Puritans recognized that this sort of transformation was dependent on God’s inner working through the Holy Spirit in the human heart.

Ambrose also emphasizes the importance of God’s inward teaching when he declares, “Man may teach the brains, but God only teaches the heart; the knowledge which man teaches is a swimming knowledge; but the knowledge which God teaches is a soaking knowledge.” This does not limit the importance of knowledge or the human effort that is motivated by God’s initiative of grace; it rather emphasizes the critical dimension of depending on the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the cultivation of the spiritual life.

Further, the Puritans, like their earlier Reformed guides such as Calvin, always sought to connect the Word with the Spirit. One can trace this theme throughout the history of the church. When the church has been careful to maintain a healthy balance, a vibrant spirituality has flourished. But when either the Word or the Spirit was elevated to the exclusion of the other, aberrant theology and piety was the result. Ambrose consistently reminds readers that the witness of God’s Spirit always is agreeable to Scripture.

So it is not surprising that Ambrose asserts that the accumulation of knowledge, even that of biblical knowledge, is of limited value unless it is applied to one’s life. This principle guides both his personal method for meditation on Scripture and his instruction to others in reading and praying Scripture. This is clearly evident in the structure of Looking unto Jesus. As he approaches each new section of his examination of Christ’s life, he begins with a detailed exegesis of the appropriate biblical texts. Only then does he seek to apply it to his readers’ lives. Ambrose consistently follows this pattern, first studying the objective truth of Scripture and then stirring up the affections to apply it to the heart, so that he and his readers might experience the subjective nature of those same passages. Summarizing the purpose of spiritual disciplines, Ambrose declares,

*Study therefore, and study more, but be sure your study and your knowledge is practical rather than speculative; do not merely beat your brains to learn the history of Christ’s death, but the efficacy, virtue, and merit of it; know what you know in reference to yourself.*

Being a good Reformed theologian, Ambrose recognized that the human brokenness due to sin distorts a person’s ability to perform properly these spiritual practices. Indeed even our best efforts are frequently distorted and mixed with sin. Significantly, a central theological principle in Ambrose’s understanding of spiritual duties was a person’s union with Christ. The Puritans frequently called this spiritual marriage. Union was seen both as the beginning of the Christian life through conversion and justification and something into which a person would continually deepen and grow throughout life until one reached heaven. Ambrose captures the depth of spiritual intimacy. This continual desire hungers for Christ’s refining love to purge and create an ever-greater awareness of Christ’s indwell-

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*Prayer—praying especially for the minister who preaches, for our fellow Christians that they might be strengthened in faith, and ourselves that we might be blessed in hearing God’s word.*
The Spiritual Discipline of Meditation

All the troubles of life come upon us because we refuse to sit quietly for a while each day in our rooms.

Blaise Pascal

The more receptive we are, the more likely Scripture will be able to dwell within our hearts.

joy and declares that if we are married to our bridegroom Christ, He will purge and perfect our spiritual practices and present them whole to God. Ambrose asserts the same comforting truth with greater clarity: “for Christ perfects, perfumes, and presents our duties to his heavenly Father.” This understanding of Christ’s role and participation within the human practice of spiritual disciplines underscores the significant role of Christ’s ascension in Ambrose’s theology.

Preparation for Reading and Meditating on Scripture

The Puritans understood the great importance of preparing themselves for the spiritual disciplines. Isaac Ambrose recognized that there were ways by which his listeners could improve their ability to hear Scripture more effectively and fully: (1) prayer—praying especially for the minister who preaches, for our fellow Christians that they might be strengthened in faith, and ourselves that we might be blessed in hearing God’s word; (2) meditation—recognizing that we come into Christ’s presence as we hear the Word and considering the nature of our motivation for hearing the Scripture; (3) examination—to discern the frame and receptivity of our hearts and allow the Holy Spirit to deal with our sins; (4) cleansing of the heart—from sin and worldly cares; and (5) the right disposition of our hearts—to be soft and flexible, humble, honest, full of faith, and teachable.

Ambrose offers additional guidelines for the actual hearing of Scripture, counseling us to (1) set ourselves in God’s presence while listening to Scripture, (2) diligently attend to Scripture, (3) seek to understand what we read or hear, (4) be submissive to Scripture, (5) apply the Scripture to our hearts and lives, (5) allow Scripture to stir up our affections for the proper response, and (6) above all delight in God’s word. A review of these principles confirms that...
Ambrose stressed both the intellectual truth and the affective experience of Scripture.

Ambrose next provides instruction for how we should respond to Scripture after it has been heard: (1) carefully remember and keep what we heard or read, (2) meditate and seriously think over what we have heard, (3) repeat and continue to reflect upon the message we heard or read, (4) put into practice what we heard, and (5) pray for a blessing from the Scripture and allow that memory to be turned into prayer. Ambrose’s teaching on preparation illustrates the thoroughness that marked the Puritans.

While Ambrose’s threefold suggestions of preparation may seem overly ambitious for our contemporary culture, they do challenge us with the critical question: how can we be most alert and receptive to the Holy Spirit’s desire to communicate God’s word to our heads and hearts? The more receptive we are, the more likely Scripture will be able to dwell within our hearts.

Guidance on Meditation on Scripture

The following example of Ambrose’s meditation on the Holy Spirit will illustrate his approach and use of Scripture. He first reviews several Old Testament passages that speak of the prophecy of the Spirit’s coming (i.e., Isa. 32:15; Zech. 12:10; Joel 2:28–29). Ambrose uses the Joel passage to create a bridge to Peter’s sermon citation in Acts 2:17–18. Ambrose then reminds his readers of Jesus’ promise of the Spirit as His replacement, here quoting John 14:16–17; 15:26; 16:7; Luke 24:49. Next Ambrose returns to Acts 2:4 and exeges this Pentecost text more fully. There is more, but I trust this demonstrates how Ambrose lays down the biblical portion in meditation.

After Ambrose has considered the biblical teaching on an aspect of Christ’s life, he invites his readers to look at Jesus in that specific aspect of His ministry. Ambrose identifies nine ways of looking: knowing, considering, desiring, hoping, believing, loving, enjoying, calling, and conforming to that aspect of Jesus’ life. In the context of “enjoying Jesus,” the following quotation reveals Ambrose’s method for stirring up the affections and applying this to one’s life:

How should it heighten my joys and fill me with joy unspeakable, and full of glory, when I do consider that Christ has sent down his Holy Spirit into my heart? . . . O what comfort is this! I know that the Spirit of Christ is my intimate? That my soul is the temple and receptacle, the house and dwelling of the Spirit of God? . . . Christ in his bodily presence went away, but Christ in his Spirit continues still . . . O my soul was it not an encouragement to the disciples in a storm, that Christ was with them, whom the winds and waves obeyed? Cheer up now, for if the Spirit is in you, Christ is with you . . . O my soul! Remember this in all your troubles; there can be no human want or danger whatsoever,
The Spiritual Discipline of Meditation

wherein the improvement of this indwelling of the Spirit may not refresh you.\textsuperscript{13}

Ambrose frequently employs the use of soliloquy such as “O my soul” to preach to himself and further apply the biblical truth to his own heart.

Benefits of Meditation

According to Ambrose there are five benefits from the practice of meditation. First, meditation and its close relative contemplation provide a person with new understanding and love of Jesus. Ambrose recognizes a specific difference between meditation and contemplation; simply stated, contemplation is a more prolonged and deeper experience of meditation that is especially dependent on love and gratitude to God.

Ambrose maintains that by looking at Jesus we grow in both increased knowledge and deeper appreciation of His mysteries of grace. Clearly this type of meditative knowledge is practical and experiential. Additionally, as someone meditates upon Christ as the Bridegroom of the soul, that person will experience a “flaming, burning love to Christ.” Jesus reciprocates and offers sincere and inward love of Himself to the hearts of His devoted followers. Ambrose wants his readers to realize that the more they meditate upon the biblical passages on Christ, the more they will know the transformative knowledge of Scripture and the experiential depth of belonging to Christ.

A second benefit of meditation, especially meditation on the nature and promise of heaven, is strength to combat suffering and protection from temptations. Ambrose alerts his readers that “looking on Jesus will strengthen patience under the cross of Christ.”\textsuperscript{15} Further, heavenly mindedness has the potential to reduce the fears of worldly anxiety. Third, those who intentionally meditate on Jesus will deepen their intimacy of union with Christ or spiritual marriage with Him. He also offers specific suggestions of how to maintain heavenly conversations, including advantageous reading and meditating on Scripture, prayer, and avoidance of formality when performing spiritual practices. Because the Holy Spirit is the person who primarily guides individuals, Ambrose significantly challenges his listeners to become more attentive to the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit within their lives.

Fourth, meditation and contemplation have the potential to transform believers into Christ’s likeness. Contemplation is a looking, beholding, and gazing upon an object in a sustained loving and grateful manner. When this is directed toward Jesus, a person is changed more and more into Christ’s likeness. Ambrose frequently quotes Saint Paul’s declaration in 2 Corinthians 3:18 on the transformative nature of God’s glory. The final outcome of gazing on Jesus is that the sight of Jesus’ glory will make us more like Christ.

Fifth, heavenly meditation yields a growing sense of enjoyment and delight in God and Jesus. Every opportunity for meditation that gazes upon Jesus as our heavenly bridegroom provides an initial foretaste of the heavenly joy as well as an expectation of that consummation with Christ in heaven. Closely connected with this enjoyment of God is the awareness that meditation creates a deepening experience of admiration.

Readers who examine the primary sources of the Puritans’ teaching on the spiritual life will typically discover a different perspective that is engaging, offering wise and practical guidance for cultivating our devotion to God and service to our neighbors.
and adoration of our triune God. Once again we recognize the reciprocal nature of our relationship with Jesus in spiritual marriage; as He communicates His joy and delight to us, we respond with heartfelt worship and celebration.

Conclusion

Unfortunately some people today view the Puritans as odd curiosities of an earlier century. However, readers who examine the primary sources of the Puritans’ teaching on the spiritual life will typically discover a different perspective that is engaging, offering wise and practical guidance for cultivating our devotion to God and service to our neighbors. Isaac Ambrose clearly challenges us to take Scripture seriously and not to neglect the importance of meditation and contemplation on God’s word. More specifically, I would assert that Ambrose’s greatest insight for us is to integrate and maintain the critical balance between the objective and subjective nature of reading and meditating on Scripture. As previously stated, this requires a balanced interaction between the word and the Holy Spirit. An immediate benefit of this intentional commitment to both the intellect and affective nature is to create a more biblical theology of experience that avoids the all-too-common contemporary expressions of fragmentation and compartmentalization. Therefore, Ambrose reminds readers, “If the Spirit of Christ comes along with the Word, it will rouse hearts, raise spirits, work wonders.”

Notes


2. I have modernized and standardized all seventeenth-century spellings.

3. Isaac Ambrose, Media (1657), t.p. and 42.

4. Ibid., 33, cf. 27.

5. Ibid., 34.

6. Ibid., 222.


8. Isaac Ambrose, Looking unto Jesus (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1986), 125, cf. 27, 42. Since Looking unto Jesus has been republished by Sprinkle, I am using this version rather than the original 1658 edition.

9. Ibid., 619.

10. Ambrose, Media (1657), 235 (incorrectly numbered 237–236).

11. Ibid., 39.

12. Ibid., 377–93.


14. Ibid., 35.

15. Ibid., 40.

16. Ibid., 433.

When you meditate imagine that Jesus Christ in person is about to talk to you about the most important thing in the world. Give him your complete attention.

F. Fenelon
“Servant of the Servants of God”  
(continued from page 7)

After accusing Augustine of “deception and cruelty,” Monica turned again to pray for him (5,15). And soon she followed him to Milan, where he had gone to further his career in rhetoric. There she found him “in a dangerous state of depression” because he “had lost all hope that truth could be found” (6,1). But Monica was confident that she would live to see her son come to faith in Christ.

With Augustine in Milan was the woman (we don’t know her name) he had lived with faithfully for fifteen years and their son, Adeodatus, unwanted but then deeply loved. Monica and Augustine’s friends insisted that she be sent back to Carthage so that Augustine could marry a proper wife of social standing. The parting was exquisitely painful on both sides. Augustine wrote that “his heart was cut and wounded, and left a trail of blood” (6,25). Monica worked hard to find a wife for Augustine—one of sufficient income and from a good family. It all came to nothing. Monica and Augustine acted within the cultural expectations of the time—but it is disappointing that Monica’s lifelong Christian experience and Augustine’s spiritual pilgrimage, soon to lead to Christian conversion, did not produce a different, and more compassionate, result.

In Milan, Augustine came under the power and influence of the great preacher Ambrose, at first because of “the charm of his language” (5,23). Monica loved Ambrose, Augustine wrote, “as an angel of God when she knew that it was through him that I had been brought to that state of hesitancy and wavering” (6,1). Ambrose praised Monica. “When he saw me,” Augustine wrote, “he often broke out in praise of her, congratulating me on having such a mother” (6,2).

Augustine was converted in Milan in AD 386, when, moved by a child’s words “pick up and read, pick up and read,” he opened Paul’s letter to the Romans and found by God’s grace the very text that he needed: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, in its lusts” (8,29). At the age of thirty-two, Augustine was saved by God’s grace; “late have I loved you,” he wrote (10,38). Monica’s prayers were answered. It was her “faith, hope, and love” that served “as signs and instruments by which God guided Augustine to his destiny.”

After his conversion, Augustine went to a country villa at Cassiciacum, near Lake Como, where he enjoyed the loveliness of God’s “evergreen paradise” (9,5). With him was a group of friends and Monica, who, wrote Augustine, “stayed close by us in the clothing of a woman but with a virile faith, an older woman’s serenity, a mother’s love and a Christian devotion” (9,8). At Cassiciacum, during the months between his conversion and baptism, Augustine wrote his first books, as he, with his friends and mother, explored the nature of wisdom, the mystery of the Trinity, and the question of evil. Monica is always referred to in these writings as “mother,” representing, as she did, the teachings of the Christian church. Although some have questioned Monica’s contribution to the discussions, she was, wrote Handley Moule, a woman “who might have shone at any period for intellectual gifts.” At the end of The Happy Life, one of his books from this time, Augustine wrote that his mother recalled one of the hymns of Ambrose (all of which
she greatly loved), “Help, O Trinity, those that pray,” and he added: “Indeed, this is undoubtedly the happy life, that is, the perfect life which we must assume that we can attain soon by a well-founded faith, a joyful hope, and an ardent love.”

Augustine, his mother, and some others, including his son and brother, left northern Italy to return to Africa. Their journey was interrupted when the threat of war forced them to remain in Italy at the seaport of Ostia. The narrative portion of the Confessions culminates and practically ends with the remarkable conversation Augustine had with his mother at Ostia, in which “they fairly scaled heaven together in their ardent aspirations.” Standing at a window that overlooked the garden in the courtyard of the house where they were staying, they talked about heaven.

"Forgetting the past and reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13), we were searching together in the presence of the truth which is you yourself. We asked what quality of life the eternal life of the saints will have, a life which “neither eye has seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9). But with the mouth of the heart wide open, we drank in the waters flowing from your spring on high, “the spring of life,” which is with you. Sprinkled with this dew to the limit of our capacity, our minds attempted in some degree to reflect on so great a reality. (9,23)

A few days later Monica died. Augustine was devastated. He wrote, “Now that I had lost the immense support she gave, my soul was wounded, and my life as it were torn to pieces” (9,30). He held back his tears, feeling that he should not weep for Monica, as he had for friends who had died, because his mother had died in God’s grace and so now lived without want. He went to the baths (supposed to ease the mind by washing away anxiety) but found that the water did not help. That night in bed he remembered a psalm-based hymn written by Ambrose—“Creator of all things. You rule the heavens. You clothe the day with light and night with the grace of sleep.” The tears that he had been holding back streamed down, and he let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for his heart. His grieving heart found rest in God and through God in “a bed of tears shed for an earthly love.”

Many times in his Confessions Augustine thanked God for his mother and praised her Christian character. She was:

...liberal in almsgiving, obedient and helpful in serving your saints, letting no day pass without making an oblation at your altar, twice a day at morning and at evening coming to your Church with unfailing regularity, taking no part in vain gossip and old wives’ chatter, but wanting to hear you in your words [in the Bible] and to speak to you in her prayers. (5,17)

But Monica’s piety, Augustine came to understand, was not the result of inherent goodness or successful striving; it was God’s gift—received, not achieved.
would write so much) that made Monica the Christian she was.

Monica, “this most celebrated of Christian mothers,” writes Bishop Moule, is known as the mother of the great Augustine; it is equally true, however, that Augustine should be remembered as the son of Monica. He wrote that she “brought me to birth both in her body so that I was born into the light of time, and in her heart so that I was born into the light of eternity” (9,17).

Notes


4. She also became a saint in the Catholic sense, with her own day in the church’s calendar, at first May 4, fittingly enough the day before the church observed the feast of Augustine’s conversion. In recent years her feast day was moved to August 27, when Monica is remembered as the patron of Christian mothers.


6. In the oldest manuscript of the Confessions, the spelling is Monnica.


8. By Book 9 of the Confessions, Augustine had come to a more balanced and realistic view of both parents. He realized that he was the ungrateful son of an overly possessive mother and a too-worldly father, but he had come to know and love them both.


11. Moule, “Monnica, St.,” 933.


14. Part of the inscription over her tomb was found in 1945 by some boys playing by a church in Ostia.


With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life.

*C.S. Lewis*
C.S. Lewis on the Problem of Pain
(continued on page 9)

utterly good; He is all-loving. It is argued that if God was loving and good, there would not be pain in the world, that He would not allow evil to perpetuate and invade our lives. Yet suffering is an inescapable reality. Jesus affirmed this in John 16:33, saying that we would have trouble in this world. In light of this fact, we recognize humanity’s free contribution to suffering. What’s more, as Lewis instructs, we must take another look at our understanding of what it means for God to be good. He insists that God’s idea of goodness is different from ours, vastly better, higher, greater—although not wholly different altogether.

Our popular conception of love and goodness has more to do with kindness, tolerance, and “a desire to see others . . . happy.”

We tend to see God’s love as more like a kind, doting grandfather who likes to see his grandchildren contented than as a father who genuinely loves and desires to see the best character developed in the child through discipline. Lewis insists that love in its truest, deepest sense is “more stern and splendid than mere kindness.”

A loving father will take endless trouble to foster growth in his child, will discipline to make him more lovable rather than leave him to follow his own natural impulses, will be “pleased with little, but demands all.”

God is an intensely interested, loving, all-consuming fire who deeply loves the objects of His love—us. His goodness demands that He make us more lovable. Lewis, again, reminds us:

We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest ‘well pleased’. To ask that God’s love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because

He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable.

For God knows that we are most contented when we find that our desire and our love are for Him, not for ourselves. God gives love because He knows we need it. If God chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed. He loves and needs us for our sake, not His own. “When we want to be something other than the thing God wants us to be, we must be wanting what, in fact, will not make us happy.”

“Whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want.”

His goodness and love are ever altruistic, desiring the good of His creation, of us.

But this begs the question, aren’t I already good, already lovable? Lewis exposes our self-deception. We no longer see ourselves as sinners, but sin’s reality surfaces through our own sense of personal guilt, which we tend to transfer toward corporate responsibility or try to reduce over time. Both strategies are vain attempts to prevent personal culpability. Or we attempt to lower our moral and ethical standards, to reduce them to mere kindness, yet we recognize a higher moral standard exists across time and cultures. This recognition of an ultimate standard in God compels us to either admit our sinfulness and surrender to Him or reject Him. Regardless, we cannot blame our sinfulness and its consequent evils upon God. We are either the perpetrators of sin or the victim of others’ sin against us. Sin, then, becomes the ultimate horror to both God and man.

God created good. Man chose against God, against good, and introduced evil into the world through his rebellion.
the world through his rebellion. God did not create evil but knew that the offering of free will in His created beings allowed for the possibility of pain and suffering. Man, as Lewis summarizes, “spoiled himself,” and “good, to us in our present [fallen] state, must therefore mean primarily remedial or corrective good.” Subsequently men, not God, have precipitated the vast majority of pain and suffering in the world. Wicked and hurt people hurt one another. The remedy to this pain is self-surrender of the will to God, which in itself can be painful. Dying to one’s own will, day after day, is the constant, ongoing corrective that is required to break our rebellious sinfulness. When we are self-satisfied with our own soul, we will not surrender our will. Sin, according to Lewis, is masked evil. Pain unmasks the evil and exposes the sin for what it is. “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

We all have some sense of justice. We all want evil to be punished, to be recognized for what it is, especially in others. Yet we deceive ourselves into thinking that all is well with us. Pain reveals the reality of our own evil and gives us a choice to either resist and rebel against the ultimate standard bearer or recognize our sin, repent, and surrender to Him. “Pain shatters the illusion that all is well . . . that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and enough for us.” Pain takes away our false sense of happiness, draws our attention to God and our need for Him. Even in “good, decent people,” the illusion of self-sufficiency must be shattered. And, like a good and loving Father, God is willing to accept whatever surrender and sacrifice we have to offer. Our desires must be changed from pleasing self to pleasing God, which in the end produces our greatest happiness. We must lose ourselves to find ourselves, truly satisfied, in God.

Lewis does not dismiss the fact that pain is pain and it hurts. But he reminds us that the supreme act of self-surrender was found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ knows pain and suffering, intimately, personally, profoundly. His loving sacrifice was for the redemption of us, the sinners whom He loves. His followers are similarly called to lives of submission, to “walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6 NIV). Pain reminds us of our humility and utter dependence upon God, upon our true source of goodness, strength, and happiness in Christ. When pain is withdrawn, we tend to forget God and return toward self-sufficiency and sin. Pain does its work on those whose hearts are willing to receive, to grow, to love in greater and more godly ways—to surrender self to God.

Pain, then, in and of itself is not completely bad or evil. It can come from the hand of a good, loving, and powerful God who desires the best for His creation, who genu-
We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.

C.S. Lewis

inely allows for us to be free agents who make free choices. The possibility and reality of pain and suffering is palpable and at times devastating to both victim and perpetrator. Regardless, pain can and does serve redemptive purposes in the lives of those who turn toward God. In light of this, our constant prayer to our loving, good, and powerful Father in heaven should be that of the psalmist: “Deal with your servant according to your love” (Ps. 119:124 NIV).

Yes, God is completely good. Yes, God is completely powerful. Yes, pain and suffering exists.

The existence of pain does not negate the presence of an omnipotent, loving God. When understood in the fullness of its context, we realize that it is the very presence of God that provides meaning and hope amid the pain. Christ was the ultimate, innocent bearer of unjust suffering. In the face of abject pain, self-sacrificial love, goodness, and power are met on the cross.

Notes

3. Lewis, Problem of Pain, 16.
5. Lewis, Problem of Pain, 32.
6. Ibid., 27.
7. Ibid., 18.
8. Ibid., 19.
9. Ibid., 25.
10. Ibid., 31.
11. Ibid., 32.
12. Ibid., 39.
13. Ibid., 40–41.
14. Ibid., 46.
15. Ibid., 46–47.
16. Ibid., 85.
17. Ibid., 91.
18. Ibid., 94.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Problem of Pain, C.S. Lewis
Why must humanity suffer? In this elegant and thoughtful work, C. S. Lewis questions the pain and suffering that occur everyday and how this contrasts with the notion of a God that is both omnipotent and good.
EFFECTIVE PRAYER

How do I focus when I’m distracted with so much to do?
How do I pray longer than five minutes? How do I ask when I’ve tried it before and it doesn’t work?

NOVEMBER 9TH - 10TH
at McLean Presbyterian Church

Discipleship as you go

C.S. Lewis Institute weekly resources in audio, video, and print to encourage discipleship “as you go.” A new theme every month.

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