Glorious Morning Glories

This is what love looks like.

My husband planted morning glories for me on our back fence because they are my favorite.

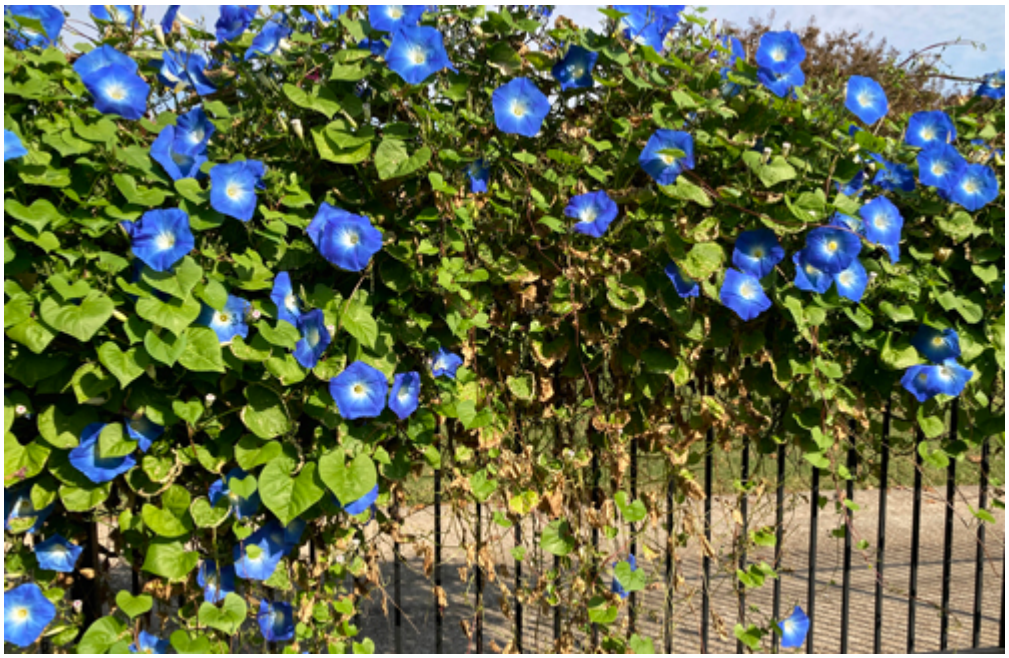


I love that a whole new batch of brand new blooms pops out each morning, day after day of fresh beauty that reminds me of Lamentations 3:23, that God's mercies are "new every morning—great is Your faithfulness!"

This year, we had to wait long into the fall for the flowers. The green foliage was crazy lush and full for months, but there were no gorgeous "blue happies," as I think of them, until late October.

Finally they started exploding daily with beauty and color. Not long afterwards, an unseasonable cold snap hit us, and the green foliage started to wither and dry up.

But the "blue happies" kept popping out!



I had to smile at what was happening on our fence, because it was a powerful illustration of what it's like for me to grow older. The green leaves were getting old and spent and dry and yucky, at the same time that every morning, there were still fresh and new morning glory blooms sprouting out. What a picture of what has become my new life verse, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

> Therefore we do not lose heart, but ***though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day***. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

My body is growing older and weaker, especially ravaged by the lingering effects of polio. Not long ago, I spent almost two years unable to walk at all because of severe arthritis in both hips. (The Lord has restored so very much to me on the other side of two hip replacements!) I'm able to walk and stand without pain these days, for which I give thanks every single day, but the march of time continues and, like everyone else, I'm going downhill physically.

But—the glorious but!—on the inside I get to be fresh and new every day! Just like the "blue happies"! As I walk in faithfulness with the Lord, seeking to abide in Him and allow the beauty and character of Christlikeness to flow into and through me, He keeps bringing renewed energy and joy to my soul. Every day! I love it!

The hope for us as believers, especially older believers, is that we get to be renewed daily with the radiance and vibrancy and joy of Jesus within that keeps getting better and better the older we get!

In fact, the Bible even speaks about our transformation as a special kind of glory: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 says,

> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

I LOVE being transformed, a little bit every day, into the image of Jesus, with ever-increasing glory! I get to be a spiritual morning glory!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/glorious-morning-glories/ on December 15, 2020.

Addressing Anxiety in

Tumultuous Times

Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.{1} While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.



Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.{2} A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.{3} *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*

Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, "As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind."{4}

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: "Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it's happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*"{5} The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as "the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, *we significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, "The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is." As Scripture teaches, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." In this article we'll explore this transformation.

Morphing Your Mind—It's Mostly Up to You!

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that "Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush

and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace."{6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that "Neurons that don't get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma." Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: "If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones."{7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, "As a man thinks in his heart, so he is."{8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain's landscape.{9} This "neuroplasticity [seems to be] God's design for renewing the mind."{10}

And there's nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude

It's no wonder that the concept of "mindfulness" has become a "thing" these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old

survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.{11} "By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm."{12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, "practice doesn't make perfect; it makes permanent."{13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind's ability to "move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state." And the more often we go there, the more "we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are." This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.{14} As Jesus taught his disciples, "Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation."{15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate
our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.

So, what's going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, "The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for

pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting."{16} How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The "fight or flight" area actually shrinks in size.{17} It's a real chill pill!

God keeps "him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You."{18}

Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It's a God-given right to pursue it, according to America's founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—"steal, kill, and destroy"{19} our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, "You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety.* There really is hope."{20} Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we're not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to "work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility]."{21}

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God's help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."{22}

Moreland jokes, "If we're not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn't need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it's] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him."{23} As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That's joy far beyond happiness!

Takeaways & Practical Applications

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: "We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ."{24}

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- “I’ll be in real trouble if…”
- “What if so and so happens next week?”
- “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.”{25}

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows:{26}

Step 1: Relabeling: call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”{27}

Step 2: Reframing: take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

Step 3: Refocusing: Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into "the flow" of something. Focus elsewhere. And don't ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

Step 4: Revaluing: After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a "newly formed neural network" will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.{28} Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.{29}

Notes

1. Senator Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal*, quoted by Richard Doster in Christian Healthcare Newsletter, June 2020, "Can the Church solve the country's worst health problems?"
2. Nick Givas, Fox News, "Prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spike amid coronavirus outbreak, new report finds," posted April 18, 2020. www.foxnews.com/health/prescriptions-anti-anxiety-meds-spike-amid-coronavirus.
3. Amy Hollyfield, "Suicides on the rise amid stay-at-home order, Bay Area medical professionals say," posted May 21, 2020, abc7news.com/suicide-covid-19-coronavirus-rates-during-pandemic-death-by/6201962.
4. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking and Health*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, p. 19 (emphasis mine).
5. Ibid.

6. Leaf, 39.
7. Leaf, 64.
8. Proverbs 23:7.
9. Leaf, 47.
10. Leaf, 65.
11. As with Buddhist meditation practices seeking utter emptiness.
12. Jennifer Wolkin, Mindful.org, "How the Brain Changes When You Meditate," posted September 20, 2015, www.mindful.org/how-the-brain-changes-when-you-meditate.
13. J.P. Moreland, *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices that Brought Peace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 67.
14. Leaf, 82.
15. Matthew 26:41.
16. Ibid. Wolkin
17. Various Authors, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, Volume 191, Issue 1, 30 January 2011, Pages 36-43. Posted Nov. 10, 2010: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S092549271000288X.
18. Isaiah 26:3.
19. John 10:10.
20. *Finding Quiet*, 54-55 (emphasis mine).
21. Ephesians 2:12, Amplified Bible.
22. Philippians 4: 6-7, New Living Translation.
23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
25. Psychologists Edmund Bourne and Lorna Garano, cited by Moreland.
26. Entire section, *Finding Quiet*, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
28. Leaf, 151.
29. Philippians 4:8.

©2020 Probe Ministries

How Can I Make God Answer My Prayers My Way?

How can I get God to give me what I want? That's often at the root of our interest in prayer. If we're honest, that's the question we want answered when we read books on prayer, listen to a message or podcast on prayer, or talk to people known as prayer warriors.

Instead of New Year's Resolutions

Fill in the blank: New Year's _____.

You probably either supplied "Eve" or "Resolutions," right?

Resolutions are intentions that may last days or weeks, but so often they peter out before we even get used to using the new year in our dates. May I suggest that instead of forming resolutions, we spend time asking some powerfully insightful questions that will help us evaluate ourselves truthfully and helpfully?

Here are three questions that many community/accountability groups ask each other regularly (as in, weekly):

What am I doing to feed myself (spiritually)? *How am I spending time in God's word and other sources of spiritual truth and wisdom such as books?*

What am I doing to feed my flesh? *How am I indulging my appetites and desires in ways that glorify myself instead of God?*

What am I doing to feed others? *How am I pointing others to Christ and helping them grow spiritually?*

My pastor at Watermark Community Church-Plano, Kyle Kaigler, is especially good at pointed questions. Every morning, as he thinks back on the previous day, he examines himself in four areas:

Where was I hooked? (caught in a bad habit that controls me)

Where was I cold? (being so self-focused that I failed to be loving and kind to those around me)

Where was I scared? (allowing my fear of man to keep me from saying and doing the things I should be)

Where was I proud? (taking credit for what God did)

(Pastor Tim Keller asks these same questions: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/help-with-prayer-simple-clear-gospel-devotion-from-tim-keller/)

Kyle also offers these questions:

John Piper says that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." So, looking back over the last 12 months:

What are the most God-glorifying occasions over this past year that came from finding satisfaction in Him? *When was I moved to erupt in gratitude and praise for what God did in my life? Were there sweet moments of deep connection with others, or a "lightbulb moment" when He revealed truth to me in a way that zapped lies and wrong beliefs? Were there moments of realizing I was just* immersed *in His goodness?*

What was a distraction to the glory of God? *In what areas of my life is my stubborn affinity for my flesh, getting my way, insisting on staying in my comfort zone, serving like mud that covers up "Christ in me, the hope of glory"? Where did my entrenched habits (such as continually checking my phone) function like a stop sign, keeping God at a distance? How have I tuned Him out so that I miss the ways He wants to nudge me, direct me, lead me through the day?*

Here are some helpful spiritual assessment questions:

What has God been teaching me in His word? We should be recording the things the Holy Spirit is showing us in our time in His word so we can remind ourselves of His lessons and insights. Otherwise we are the guy from James 1 who looks in a mirror and then turns away, thoughtlessly unaware of what he looks like.

How's my time with the Lord?

a. Consistent and meaningful (It's ok to choose this option)
b. Consistent but not so meaningful (I am faithful to go before the Lord but I leave the time unfulfilled)
c. Inconsistent but meaningful (I don't do it very often but when I do, He is faithful to meet me there)
d. Inconsistent and not meaningful (it's just not happening)

(If a or c) **How is God transforming my life?** What is God revealing about Himself and His desire for my life? How is my heart being changed to more faithfully follow where He is leading? What have I surrendered (or still working on surrendering) to Jesus' control? How is my life changing so He is increasing, and I am decreasing?

(If b or d) **What are the barriers to consistent and meaningful time with God?** (Busyness, worldliness, selfishness, sin—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, sinful pride of life)

Am I sharing my story of how Jesus Christ changed my life?

Am I being a good steward of the body God gave me?

Am I being a good steward of the resources He has given me?

And finally, again thanks to Kyle, here are some interesting survey questions for family members:

Spouse survey

1. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a *couple*?
2. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a *family*?
3. What would you consider the key challenges we faced as a family this past year? What about in our marriage?
4. If someone were to ask you, “Describe your current marriage relationship.” What would you say and why?
5. If you could change anything about last year, what would it be and why?
6. Based on the experiences that we have had as a couple and as a family, what have you learned about God and His work in
   our lives?
7. What are 3 trips or activities that you would enjoy doing together this next year?
8. What do I do that really ministers to you and you would love it if I did it more?
9. What are your top fears/concerns for each of our children?

Kid Survey

1. What have been some of the best times you have had with me this past year?
2. If you had to give me some advice on being a better parent, what would it be and why?
3. What are some things that you would like to talk with me about and why?
4. What are some of your fears that you would like me to

pray for you about?
5. What is something that you would like to do with me?
6. How can I help you grow as a Christian?
7. As you consider conversations and time together as a family over the past year, what new things have you learned or understood more about God?

I think these powerful questions, answered thoughtfully and truthfully, will serve us better than any New Years Resolution we've ever made.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/instead-of-new-years-resolutions/ on December 31, 2019.

What Does Trusting God Look Like?

When friends are frozen by fear and anxiety, I often suggest they recite Psalm 56:3 over and over: "When I am afraid, I will trust in You."

But what does it mean to trust God? What does it look like in real life? How do we understand *how* to trust Him?

I recently asked this question on Facebook and was deeply blessed by the wisdom and experience of friends who have learned how to trust God in the refining fires of life in a fallen world.

One scripture reference was cited again and again, probably the best go-to verse on trusting God, Proverbs 3:5-6:

> Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
> And do not lean on your own understanding.
> In all your ways acknowledge Him,
> And He will direct your paths.

Verse 3 is a parallelism, a Hebrew form of idea rhyming, where two ideas are complementary sides of the same coin, so to speak. *Trusting in the Lord with all your heart* means *not leaning on our own understanding.* If we're not leaning on our own understanding, that means leaning on God's understanding—and His character, and His goodness, and His love. *Acknowledging Him in all our ways* means continually orienting ourselves toward Him the way a plant turns to the light. And choosing, DELIBERATELY choosing, to refuse to lean on our own understanding, leaning hard into Him instead.

So trust is a kind of leaning, transferring our weight onto someone or something else.

I get leaning.

30 years ago I started using a cane because my weak polio leg was only going to get weaker. It was amazing how much more instant stability I had. Which is what happens when we lean on God.

So trusting means CHOOSING.

We make one initial choice to lean into God instead of ourselves, especially when life doesn't make sense, and then we continue to practice making that choice over and over.

I think there are three aspects of trusting God: Making the initial choice to trust Him, reminding ourselves of what is true, and continuing to choose to trust.

Choosing to Trust

Trust starts with a definitive, intentional decision to "step over the line" by turning from doing things our way, trusting

in ourselves and our own understanding, to transfer our dependence to God. Here's a word of wisdom concerning not relying on ourselves and our own understanding [read: manipulating]: "Trust is living without scheming."

One wise friend shared, "Trust is the expectation of good based on the character of God. I remind myself in the middle of the muddle: 'This story is not over yet.'"

Have you ever seen scared little children pressing hard into their parents? It's what they do to their mommies and daddies because it's the nature of emotionally healthy children to trust their parents, especially when they're scared.

Pressing hard is a picture of trust.

Trusting happens when we realize, "I am not in control. I release my illusion of control and give the reins over to the Lord."

One friend wrote, "There's usually a point where you have to admit you no longer have the reins. For me, I can recall specific instances where I have said, 'Lord, whatever will bring You the most glory . . . [do it.]' It's like something in the spiritual realm is released when we allow God to be God in our lives."

I love that she used the word "released." That is such a powerful concept. I'm taken to Matthew 11:28-30—"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Releasing the weariness and burden of trying to run our own lives in our own strength onto Jesus is how we enter His rest, which we only get on the other side of trusting.

Along the same lines, trusting God looks like relinquishing worries and anxieties, rolling them over into Jesus' more-

than-capable hands, and then choosing to leave them there. (“No, I’m not going to worry about that, I gave it to Jesus on Tuesday at 3:14 p.m.”)

One of my fellow Bible study leaders shared this gem:

“I learned to swing dance about a year before becoming a believer and one of the ways my partner and I would practice was for me to be blindfolded. I had a tendency to anticipate the moves that he would lead as opposed to letting him lead me and I was unintentionally hijacking his lead—very often. The blind fold made me wait, listen, and not anticipate. He was able to lead me through combinations I would have never been able to imagine (he was a much more experienced dancer than me). In my early walk, as I disciplined myself to walk with the Lord, I would reflect on my experience with dancing blindfolded and it gave me great courage to trust Him through things unseen.”

So trusting means choosing with the heart and mind, “I will follow YOU, Lord!”

One more picture of what trusting God looks like. Several friends responding to my Facebook post invoked the idea of *clinging* to Him, “even when it’s scary and life doesn’t appear to make sense. Knowing that, even in the hard times, He is working to perfect us, to grow us, to give us hope, and to bring glory, through us, to Himself. It means the assurance that He has the big picture of His plan in sight and everything He allows/ordains for me is a piece of that.”

Maybe nobody understands the concept of “clinging” like the tourist who discovered his harness wasn’t attached to the frame of his hang glider. He literally had to hang on to the frame for dear life for his harrowing two-minute flight.



What a picture of trust as clinging!

Trust is a lovely “holy stubbornness” in clinging to God’s goodness and sovereignty no matter how we feel, just as the hang glider stubbornly clung to the frame of his glider.

Reminding Ourselves of What is True

Once we’ve made the choice to trust God, we need to keep on trusting. The way we build our trust is to remind ourselves, over and over and over, of trustworthy truths about God:

- God is good.
- He will never leave us.
- He loves us.
- He is in control.
- He never makes mistakes.
- He can be trusted.

The continual process of trusting God is not only speaking the truth to ourselves, but reminding ourselves of His faithfulness in the past. That’s why it’s good to keep a journal—one friend keeps what she calls her “brag book” about God. I call mine a “God Sightings Book.” We can also build an “altar” (something physical that serves as a reminder of what God did, such as planting a tree).

I love what one friend said: “Trusting God means that I actively, willfully refuse to worry and instead I fix my gaze

on Christ and recite to myself Who Scripture reveals Him to be, His promises, and everything He has already done."

Another friend has been faithfully slogging through a long period of not seeing what God is doing: "Trusting God means trying to keep a posture of 'open hands, eyes up' and a curiosity that has us constantly wondering aloud, 'What are you up to, God? We can't wait to see.'"

I love how she and her husband live out their trust: *OK, Lord, we can trust You or we can freak out and make things happen on our own. That would be stupid. So let's go back to thanking You for the details of how You are proving Yourself faithful day after day. We trust You by NOT taking matters into our own hands. We trust You by continuing to wait.*

Another friend drew on two different ways for her husband and her to make it through a particularly tough challenge: "One was to say out loud and mean it: 'Lord, we choose to trust in You through this.'" They would also repeat 2 Chronicles 20:12—"Lord, we don't know what to do, but our eyes are on You."

Continuing to Choose to Trust

So trust starts out as a choice to lean into God instead of ourselves, and it continues as we remind ourselves of WHAT is true, and that HE is true.

But trust sinks its roots down deep into our hearts and souls as we continue to choose dependence on the Lord instead of ourselves. There has to be an "on-goingness" to real trust, because it's not a one-time decision, but an ongoing position built by continual choices to keep on trusting.

One mama friend was shocked and rocked to learn her baby would be born with Down Syndrome. She wrote,

"Since having [my daughter], God has grown my trust in Him

immensely. For me, trusting God means to really know His heart, His goodness, His love for me and my children, and knowing He has a perfect plan . . . even when He doesn't swoop in and make things easier. Trusting God is a daily relationship talking, listening, and praying with Him. Even when circumstances don't change and life is and will be difficult. Even when you see your child suffer—trusting Him looks like having an eternal focus, not an earthly one.

"Trusting Him looks like your 6-month old having heart surgery and meditating on worship music to remind you of His goodness and love. It's choosing him over and over again no matter if His plan aligns with yours."

I responded to her, "My takeaway from your absolutely precious post is that trust can look like a kind of 'holy stubbornness' of choosing, over and over, to lash ourselves to a good and loving God who has proven His faithfulness over and over. Despite circumstances which only tend to obscure, not define, ultimate reality." I love to see evidences of that "holy stubbornness" in people!

Another friend pointed out that wavering trust can mean going off-track into the weeds of feelings. (Which are valuable as indicators of what's going on in our hearts, but are terrible indicators of truth! Feelings are like the warning lights on the dashboards of our cars, but they make awful compasses…)

"When my trust in God wavers even the least little bit, I have a tendency to lean toward my emotions. Not that emotions aren't valid and valuable, but when they begin to lead my thoughts, it can throw everything haywire. I start believing lies. The only antidote is seeking and speaking His Truth over every feeling—I suppose it's what the Scripture calls "taking every thought captive." I love the vivid language there: I can picture this tall strong person (the statement of Truth) coming up to one of my gone-wild feelings with a pair of handcuffs and shouting, 'You're under arrest!' I'm a visual

person and sometimes this is what grappling in prayer looks like for me."

There is no passivity in trusting God. It's a very active way of choosing to think and remember and maintain our position of dependence on Him. In the book *Surrender to Love,* David Benner writes about teaching a group of non-swimmers how to snorkel. Because they had learned to trust him as a spiritual teacher, and they had learned the spiritual principle of surrender, they were willing to enter the water and let go of the side of the boat. They trusted him when he told them they would float. They trusted him when he told them they could breathe through the snorkel without having to lift their heads out of the water.

Trusting God is like getting out of the boat, donning the snorkel, and trusting that the water will hold you up while you breathe with your face in the water.

It's leaning,

It's clinging.

It's releasing and relinquishing into God's hands.

And, at its core, trusting God is saying, "Thy will be done." Enjoy.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_does_trusting_god_look_like on November 19, 2019.

Scraping Ceilings and Souls: Lessons on Sanctification From a Home Improvement Project

The process of upgrading and repairing Byron Barlowe's home helped him to see how God does the same kind of transformation in the souls of Christ-followers.

My wife and I are living in a suspended state of misery in our own home. It's like camping in a plastic-lined dustbin after a tornado blew furniture and books into random piles. Hidden in every crevice there's a thin fog of whitish dust and snow that won't melt. "How long, O Lord?" This odyssey started as we launched a long-awaited kitchen remodel, which would be stress enough: "Where's that sink they took out with the bulk waste—we need it back until the granite people come to install the new one!" Camping indoors again.

But then we succumbed to the contractor's compelling sell-job on removing popcorn from our ceilings—you know, that lumpy stuff hanging from 20th century ceilings. "They'll get it done and clean it up for you." No sweat, right? Right!

Anyone who's lived through a major renovation or addition can testify to the disturbance. It's an all-encompassing project. "How many more trips to Home Depot?" I'm at the library writing this and will head to the shower at the YMCA. The paint makes it hard to sleep. Finally, we left for vacation. Disruption of routines and an exploded sense of place overwhelms and badgers us.

Yet God is in it. The ordeal is bringing out loads of attitudes and frustrations in me, especially since God seems

to be doing an *attitude renovation* within me simultaneously. Is that dual lesson cruel of God, or spiritually strategic? Do I really grow when things sail smoothly along?

Yes, the promise of a new look and feel gets lost in the temporary tiresomeness of it all. The more you have, the more you pay in so many ways! Yet, what we had was not up to grade. Some of it was poised to cause disaster, like some plumbing in our kitchen. Replacing the working fridge with a cooler one (accidental pun) revealed a faulty valve. It had to be replaced. In the same way, my soul needs a makeover.

Like a master plumber, the Lord needs to hook up the new pipes of grace he has for me. He's renovating my heart. I need to grow into the new creation I already am. New openings for new blessings, old things made new. Getting hung up on my way of seeing issues or settling for an inadequate view of God's goodness calls for a major overhaul. The Lord is committed to make this happen as I somewhat grudgingly lay my life before him in submission—again. It hurts and is a mess, like the unexpected plumbing issue. But like the fridge fix, it makes possible a bounty of unspoiled fruit and prevents a nasty flood!

Back to the originally intended project: the process for the ceiling redux is a multi-step process. It requires the following:

- **scraping**: complete with the roar of compressor to spray water, a sharp scraper, and the old junk that falls to floor (and into everything) like oatmeal or, well, wet popcorn
- "**mud**" to fill holes and fix gouges, a lot like grout for tile or what painters do with picture hanger holes
- **texture** for a new, updated look, smoother than the stuff from the days of puffy hairdos and disco music!
- And **paint** to "top" it off and complete the enjoyable and

more livable change.

Simple processes aside, the disarray and disruption of either kind of renovation cannot be overstated. Every last physical item, habit, and way of life has been overturned, from sleeping to showering, eating to breathing itself. Repeat after me, self: *temporary pain for years of gain*. And isn't that what spiritual growth is like? Is it worth it? This is the operative question each time the Lord convicts us of sin or a character issue. Sanctification—the project of turning us into the real likeness of Christ—promises *eternal* reward and glory! It showcases the goodness and truth of God. Maturity matters, even though its development stinks at efficiency and convenience from a human perspective.

Because negative thought patterns burn into our minds and even have bodily effects, they need to be peeled off, removed. Kind of like the dragon skin of the character Eustace, the unbearably cynical and snooty boy character in C.S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader.* His spiritual blindness and insensitivity had to go but was painful to remove. Sin sticks and separates us from God, goodness and others. Due to its toxic spiritual effects, transformation can't be kept waiting. We, like young Eustace, need to release our sense of entitlement and thanklessness, rid ourselves of a false sense of pleasure and pride. He have to grow new skin. We too must be scraped over, repaired, remade and painted afresh.

What does this spiritual scraping of sanctification look like in more detail? Well, not unlike ceiling refurbishment in so many ways.

Necessary Disruption

First, like those old popcorn ceilings, coverings in my soul simply must be replaced, and not for reasons of fashion. *Scraping ceilings and hearts is inconvenient*—the workers are in our house all day. The Lord does his work while we do our

lives. There is never a “good time” for it. You just have to suck it up and have your life turned around a bit. I have been forced, in no small part by dealing with contractors and suppliers, to wrestle down thoughts like, “People are clueless—I wish they’d smarten up and pay attention.” While there is truth behind those convictions as we all know, people have reasons for distraction and the unredeemed have no choice but to be self-centered and confused. The Lord has been revealing what it means to “value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). When my protective and cynical dragon skin layers are removed, I begin to appreciate how gentle and ordered others’ minds can be. Their skills and especially their ability to roll with messy, changeable situations amazes me. They are better than me at a lot of things. Regardless of my perceptions, God sees them as priceless and since he loves me supremely, so I can afford to regard them as more important than myself.

Healing Takes Time, Repetition

Second, *filling in the holes and cracks means going over the same “ground” again*. It’s detailed work and has to set up and dry before you can move on. This does not feel efficient, yet it ensures that things are permanently restored. Often, the soulish equivalent of this comes in the form of deep fellowship and counseling—filling in the injury done to our souls with solid truth and love. The old becomes new again, the cracked smooth, the damaged healed. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:12).

The Grace of Preparation and Protection

In fact, prepping the house took the most time: taping plastic to the floor, draping furniture and ceiling fans, disconnecting light fixtures and removing air vents. It’s as if the protection of our belongings and dwelling takes precedence over the new look and underlying stuff. Isn’t this

God’s way? As his Spirit renovates our lives, he lines us with protective layers of grace and love, draping us with the encouragement of prayers he evokes on our behalf and the love of fellow Christ-followers.

Renovation Takes Force

Third, just like ceiling overhauls, *retexturing* is yet another wearying pass over the same square footage for the purpose of renewal—*and it has to be forced*. Workers hold a little orange plastic tank attached to a hose that’s hooked up to a compressor, then spray the new coating on the freshly prepared surface. The pneumatic motor kicks into a whining screech that fills the house. Without that push, the spray can’t come out of the nozzle ten feet in the air. Similarly, the Spirit’s regeneration of our souls is noisy, messy, pushy and downright unpleasant. We may tire of reaching up to do our part in spreading newness onto the same surface from which God has removed the old stuff. Our shoulders and hearts get exhausted, sore from holding up our part of the work. The air is a bit nasty to breathe. But if our new life is to be realized, it has to be done, forcibly.

The Stuff of Spiritual Renovation

Just what is such *spiritual newness*? The material used is God’s Word illumined by his Spirit, creating new pathways for our minds, hearts and wills, right down to the bone and marrow of our beliefs. It means filling our minds with “whatever is true . . . honorable . . . right, . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good repute . . . any excellence [and] anything worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8), being “transformed” and “renewed” in our minds (Romans 12:1-2), reckoning (deciding to be so) ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans
6:11). All of these fresh Spirit-pumped coatings can cover our internal overheads with new, living realities. That is, thinking and believing in a life-giving outlook that takes

seriously the promise that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) is the ultimate renewal. Now, the house has a new sky, if you will, and the sun is ready to shine a bit brighter. As we capitulate to the often onerous process of scraping, mudding, and texturing, we experience a brand new covering for ceilings and souls-in-Christ. And now for the *coup de grace*!

New Paint, New Spiritual Robes

Painting is the final stage of this household transformation. Gone are the ugly, useless bits, replaced with the smoothness of shalom—peace-filled blessedness—where defects get filled in and fixed as we submit to the work. Likewise, as we are molded into Christ’s likeness, we put on robes of pure white righteousness (Revelation 19:8; 3:4). So much can be said about the glory of holiness produced in willing saints. Suffice to say that the glory that awaits us outshines even the brightest hues applied to earthly surfaces. Our spiritual man is growing brighter, even as our bodies break down and fade. “We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Many of us have ceilings that overhang us with old, outdated looks. All believers in Christ have rooms—perhaps whole houses—that need reworking. Let the scraping begin. It’s worth it!

Spiritual Warfare – Applying

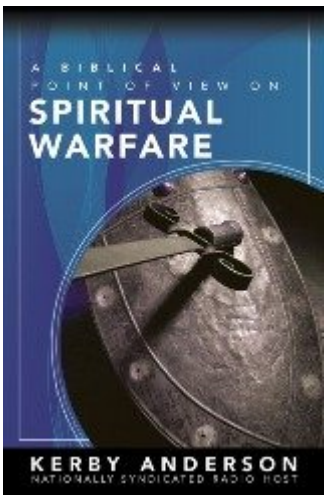
A Biblical Worldview Perspective



Kerby Anderson provides a concise, biblical worldview perspective on the important topic of spiritual warfare. Every Christian needs to understand that our battle is against spiritual forces not against other humans, who need Christ. He gives us practical advice on understanding our spiritual weapons and applying them to take on the forces of Satan in this world.

Spiritual Warfare

Lots of books have been written about spiritual warfare. Most of them share anecdotes and experiences of the authors or the people they to whom they have ministered. In this article I merely want to answer the question, what is a biblical point of view on spiritual warfare? (For more information on this topic, see Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Spiritual Warfare* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).



Spiritual warfare affects everyone. In fact, the day someone becomes a Christian, they are already involved in spiritual warfare. There is no place you can escape from this warfare. There are no “safe zones” or “secure bunkers” where you can hide.

Sadly, many Christians do not even know there is a spiritual war taking place around them. They may even become a spiritual casualty and never understand what has happened to them.

So many Christians have become mortally wounded in the spiritual conflict that takes place around them. They may be so emotionally spent or spiritually dead that they are essentially no longer of any use to God.

Others may have less serious wounds from this spiritual conflict, but are still affected by the battle. They still go about the Christian life but are not as effective as they could be because of the "battle scars" they carry with them.

Jesus never promised that the Christian life would be easy. In fact, He actually warned us of the opposite. He says in John 16:33 that "in this world you will have trouble."

Anyone who takes even a brief look at the history of Christianity knows that is true. Jesus was beaten and crucified. Most of the disciples died martyrs deaths. Millions of Christians were persecuted throughout history.

Christians today suffer persecution in many lands, and all of us wake up to a spiritual battle every day. That is why we need to be prepared for battle.

So where does this battle take place? Actually the Bible teaches that spiritual warfare takes place in various places in heaven and on earth.

First, we should remember that God dwells above in the heavens. Psalm 8:1 says that God has displayed His splendor above the heavens. Psalm 108:4-5 says God's lovingkindness is great above the heavens and that He is exalted above the heavens.

The Bible also talks about the battle in the heavens. When a passage in Scripture talks about heaven, it may be referring

to one of three places: (1) The first heaven is what we would call the atmosphere, (2) The second heaven is where the angels fly and do battle (Revelation 12:4-12; 14:6-7), and (3) the third heaven is also called "Paradise" and is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4:

> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

Spiritual warfare also takes place below the heavens and on earth. This occurs on the face of the earth (Genesis 6:1; Acts 17:26) where Satan prowls like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). And it will also take place in hell and the bottomless pit (Revelation 9:1-2; 20:1-3) and at the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:20; 20:10-15) where final judgment will take place.

Spiritual Battles

Spiritual warfare is the spiritual battle that takes place in the unseen, supernatural dimension. Although it is unseen by humans, we can certainly feel its effects. And we are to battle against spiritual forces in a number of ways.

First, we need to realize that the weapons of this warfare are not human weapons fought in the flesh. Instead, they are spiritual weapons such as truth and righteousness that can tear down strongholds and philosophies that are in opposition to God.

> For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty

> thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Second, the nature of this battle is different from an earthly battle. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul talks about the nature of this spiritual battle: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness of this world, against spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.”

We can also have confidence because God “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13).

Many Christians do not like the warfare imagery in the Bible, but that is how the spiritual life is described. We need to prepare for this spiritual battle even if we would like to ignore the battle for truth and error as well as the battle for life and death that is taking place around us.

Third, the Bible tells us that to prepare for battle. We must wear the right armor and have the right weapons, which include truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, and prayer:

> Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:14-18a).

The Bible also calls upon us to be strong in the Lord. We should be steadfast in our resistance to the Devil. We do this

by putting on the whole armor of God and resisting Satan. Ephesians 6:10-11 says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

The Three Ws

One way to understand the nature of spiritual warfare is to consider the three Ws: our walk, our weapons, and our warfare.

First let’s consider our walk. Paul says, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3). Our war is not an earthly one but a spiritual one. So even though we do walk in the flesh, our warfare is not fleshly.

We should understand that we didn’t start this war but it has been going on long before we came on the scene. For a war to exist, there must be threat from those intend to harm others.

For the battle to be successful, those who are threatened must be willing to stand up and fight. Many wars have been lost because good people refused to fight. And many Christians believe that the reason Satan has been so successful in the world is because either (1) Christians have been unwilling to fight, or (2) Christians have not even been aware that there is a spiritual battle.

The second W is our weapons. Paul also teaches, “for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Corinthians 10:4). One of the most important weapons of our warfare is the Word of God. Paul calls it the “Sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17).

We are also instructed to wear armor before we go into battle (Ephesians 6). We are to gird our loins with truth (vs. 14a).

That means we need to define the truth, defend the truth, and spread the truth. We are also to wear the breastplate of righteousness (vs. 14b). That means we are to rely on the righteousness of Jesus and live holy and righteous lives. We are also to take up the shield of faith (vs. 16). When we have bold faith, we are able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of Satan. And we are to take the helmet of salvation (vs. 17). We need to be assured of our salvation and stand firm in that assurance.

The third W is our warfare. What is the goal of spiritual warfare? Paul says, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We cannot fight this war with physical weapons because our targets are not physical. They are intellectual and spiritual. So we cannot fight them with guns or planes or bombs.

The word “speculations” (which is sometimes translated “imaginations”) refers to the mind. It includes our thoughts and our reflections. So we should challenge the false ideas that Satan has encouraged in the world by countering unbiblical speculations and proclaiming God’s truth.

The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

How does spiritual warfare affect us?

When the New Testament uses the term “world,” most of the time it is a translation from the word *kosmos*. Sometimes it can mean simply the planet earth (John 1:10; Acts 17:24). But when we talk about the influence of the world on our spiritual life and on our souls, we are talking about the worldly system in which we live. This world system involves culture and philosophy that is ultimately in opposition to God. That doesn’t mean that everyone is evil or that the world’s system

is filled with nothing but error. But it does mean that the world can have a negative influence on our souls.

Paul warns not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1). He also warns us not to let our hearts and minds be taken captive to these false ideas: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

The Bible teaches that many temptations come from the world’s system. We read in 1 John 2:15-16, “Do not love the world nor 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 lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

The second influence is the flesh. Like our previous term, the word flesh can have different meanings. Sometimes it merely refers to our body: our flesh and bones (Luke 24:39; Acts 2:26). In this context, however, flesh is a second area of temptation and thus an important instrument of sin. We see this in the fact that we are born with a sin nature (Romans 7:14-24; 8:5-9). It is part of our bodies (Romans 7:25; 1 John 1:8-10) even after we have accepted Jesus Christ. But the good news is that its power over us has been broken (Romans 6:1-14) so that we can have victory over sin (Romans 8:1-4).

A third influence is the Devil. The ruler and mastermind behind the world’s system is Satan. He can use the various distractions of the world’s system to draw us into sin, temptation, and worldliness. We read in 1 John 2:15 that “If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” So the Devil can use the world to turn our affections from God to the world.

Satan can also attack us through our flesh. He can entice our flesh with various temptations. We read in 1 John 2:16 that

“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” He can draw our attention away from God by manipulating the desires of the flesh.

Spiritual Weapons

The weapons of our warfare are spiritual because the battle we are fighting is spiritual. Paul clearly states this in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” This is a spiritual battle that takes place in the heavenly places.

We should also realize that we are not warring against flesh and blood but against a spiritual enemy. So even though we might be tempted to think that people are our real enemy, our real enemy is Satan and his demons. People are merely pawns in the heavenly chess game being played out in our lives and in our world.

Paul tells us that “though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). So what are those weapons? It is interesting that Paul does not give a list to those who he is writing to in the church in Corinth. Therefore, we must assume that they were already aware of what those weapons are based on other letters Paul wrote to the various churches.

One obvious weapon is the weapon of truth. Believers are given insight into both the earthly realm and the heavenly realm because of what has been revealed in Scripture. We know what is behind the forces we wrestle with (Ephesians 6:12).

Another weapon is love. In fact, the Bible links truth with love (“speaking the truth in love” –Ephesians 4:15). Love is

also a very powerful weapon in this spiritual warfare that we encounter. We should not approach people with anger or judgmentalism. But we must understand how important love is in dealing with others (1 Corinthians 13).

A third weapon is faith. Faith is defined as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Notice that faith is a conviction of things that are not seen. This is an important attribute since spiritual warfare is an invisible war. Faith is the recognition of this invisible world and the confidence that God is still in control.

And a very important weapon is prayer. We are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray continually (some translations say to pray without ceasing). We are exhorted to pray about the circumstances we encounter and to use prayer as a weapon in our spiritual battle. When Paul talks about Christians putting on the armor to fight spiritual battles, he says that "with all prayer and petition" we are to "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18).

©2010 Probe Ministries

I've Got a War Room—Now What Do I Do?



Millions of people have seen the summer blockbuster movie *War Room*, many of them challenged to be more intentional about prayer. Some have even cleaned out a closet or a corner to make their own War Room.

But the movie, for all its motivation to experience the power of prayer, did not provide instructions on what and how to pray. Other than eating potato chips in secret!

Prayer is not about sacred words or flowery religious language. Biblical prayer is about talking to God, heart to heart. Here are some suggestions for what to do in the War Room.

Many people have found it helpful to follow the structure of the acronym ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Directing our prayers and thoughts in this particular order aligns the heart with God's heart.

Adoration: This is simply telling God how great He is, focusing on His character and praising Him with words. The book of Psalms is one of the best place to find truths about God and tell Him about it. Several years ago, I went on a treasure hunt as I read through the Bible, drawing a box around every title and name of God I encountered, and writing them down on the blank pages at the back of my Bible. Simply reading some of the titles of God back to Him constitutes adoration. ("You are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! You are the Bright and Morning Star! You are the Ancient of Days! You are the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth!")

Confession: Quietly consider what unconfessed sin you need to bring out in to the light. Confession means to agree with God.

You may not even feel remorseful about it (yet), but it is still important to agree with God that sin is sin and you were wrong. ("Lord, I confess being short-tempered with my family yesterday. I confess yelling at that driver who cut me off in traffic. I confess going all day without once thinking of You. I was wrong. Please forgive me.")

Thanksgiving: Consider the things God has given you, the things He has done for you, just in the past 24 hours, and tell Him "thank You." The discipline of keeping a gratitude journal provides lots of things to give thanks for. The great thing about being mindful of what God is doing so we can give thanks for them, is that it makes us more sensitive to the many ways in which He shows His love and concern for us throughout each day, which kicks up our gratitude meter, which overflows in more and more thanksgiving, which leads to a joyful heart.

Supplication: NOW we get to the part of asking for the things we need or want, or which we would like to see God do in our lives and in the lives of others. It really helps to keep a list of our requests, just like we see in the movie, so we have a record of how and when God answers them.

This is one of the most misunderstood parts of prayer because often, people mistake having faith in the answers they want, with having faith in the God who answers prayer in His time and in His way. It's fine to ask (not demand, and not presume) for what we want, but it's important not to have unrealistic expectations of getting everything we ask for like a spoiled little kid. (This is one of the reasons people lose heart and can lose their faith—they aren't trusting the God who sees the big picture and knows what is good for us and what isn't, they are looking for the answers to their prayers on a timeline usually faster than the one God is on.)

What should we pray for?

Our daily needs (see also: the Lord's prayer, "give us this day our daily bread," Matthew 6:11), financial provision ("your Father knows what you need before you ask Him," Matthew 6:8), relationships ("it is not good for man to be alone," Genesis 2:18), peace in our relationships ("Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you," John 14:27) . . . whatever comes to mind.

But we get a head start when we pray God's word. This is great War Room material! Consider praying for one's spouse (even a future spouse!) or children or friends the great prayers recorded by the apostle Paul.

"Lord I ask that _____ may be filled with the knowledge of Your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that he will walk in a manner worthy of You, to please You in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of You; strengthened with all power, according to Your glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to You, Father, who have qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12)

"I pray that You would grant ____, according to the riches of Your glory, to be strengthened with power through Your Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in his heart through faith; and that he, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that he may be filled up to all the fullness of You." (Ephesians 3:16-19)

Consider praying a Psalm, such as Psalm 1:1-3–

"I pray that _____ would be blessed, that she would not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

I pray her delight would be in the law of the Lord,
And in Your law she would meditate day and night.
I pray she would be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, she would prosper."

Spiritual warfare was one of the elements of the War Room movie, and prayer is how it is battled and won. For the simplest form of it, we can look to how Jesus prayed for His disciples in John 17. He asked His Father:

• To keep His disciples safe from the evil one (v. 15)

• To set them apart in the truth (v. 17)

• For oneness (v. 21). The context was oneness within the Body of Christ, the church, but this is a powerful request to pray for our marriages as well.

I am also intrigued by His prayer in v. 23, "You have loved them just as You have loved Me." Most people have no idea of just how much and how great the Father's love is for us—He loves us the exact same way and the exact same amount as He loves His Son! I love to pray that God will allow my loved one to grasp this truth, which corresponds to the Ephesians 3 prayer above.

Jesus also prayed for Peter before his spectacular, epic failure when he denied his Lord, that his faith would not [completely and utterly] fail, and that after he turned back, that he would strengthen his brothers. Praying for our loved ones' faith not to fail, and for God to redeem and use any lapses and stumbles, is a powerful way to pray for them.

An important part of War Room prayer strategy, just as in physical war, is to remove obstacles to effectiveness. In Mark 11:25, Jesus said, ""Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if

you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions." An important thing to do in anyone's War Room is to examine our hearts for any unforgiveness and deal with it.

Well, I think that's a good start on your War Room! Would you like to add any suggestions? Comment below!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/ive_got_a_war_room–now_what_do_i_do
on Sept. 22, 2015

Bad Blood Reconciled: A Review of Taylor Swift's "Bad Blood"

Probe intern Sarah Withers contrasts Taylor Swift's Bad Blood song to the deep spiritual truths of the gospel of Christ.

Naomi, a young Taylor Swift fan fighting leukemia, adopted Swift's song "Bad Blood" as her theme song during her battle with cancer. In response to her video Naomi uploaded on YouTube, Taylor Swift contributed $50,000 to Naomi's medical bills. Naomi through her heartwarming story was able to transform the song to make it inspiring and hopeful. However, as most know, the song is not about fighting terrible cancer but instead about a broken relationship. Although Swift did not disclose the antagonist, she no longer sees reconciliation as an option. By contrasting Swift's "Bad Blood" with Christ's reconciling blood, Christians are reminded of the transformative power of the gospel to bring healing and hope to broken relationships.

Destructive Power of Bad Blood

“Bad Blood,” through the lyrics and video, paints a picture of the pain that is felt after someone is wronged in a relationship. The antagonist attacking her and “rubbing it in so deep” left Swift with a “a really deep cut.” Many, if not all of us, have felt the pangs of being cut deeply with words and actions in a relationship gone wrong. A quick read through the Psalms reveals victims of broken relationships crying out in pain. The Psalmist laments, “Even my closest friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel before me.”{1}

Not only do broken relationships hurt initially and deeply, but often the pain lingers. Swift captures this experience through the lyrics, “Still got scars in my back from your knives, so don’t think it’s in the past, these kinds of wounds they last and they last.” Again the Psalmist writes, “I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked.”{2} One thing both the Psalms and Swift can agree on is that broken relationships and betrayal are deeply painful.

For Swift, not only is the relationship broken and painful, it is irreconcilable. She notes the hopelessness of the relationship, “I don’t think we can solve them (problems)” and “in time can heal but this won’t.” This is the most upsetting part of the song.

We all have had broken relationships, yet the ones that hurt the most are the ones that turn from feelings of hurt to feelings of hate. We should hate sin and the pain it brings with it, but we are called to love even our enemies. Ephesians 6 says that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the “spiritual forces of evil.”{3} As difficult as it may be, we should guard our heart from future pain without hating the individual who hurt us. Thus, reconciliation should always be the ideal goal and in cases where reconciliation

cannot or does not occur, forgiveness should still reign in our heart.

Healing Power of Christ's Blood

It seems like an impossible request to forgive someone and even move towards reconciliation with someone who betrayed and hurt us. This would be an unimaginable task if it were not for someone who did this for us first. The gospel is the perfect example of reconciliation.

When we sin, whether or not it affects anyone, we sin against God. Our most fundamental problem with sin is not that it hurts other people, but that it separates us from the love of God. Those who do not accept Christ as their savior are outside of the effect of Christ's atoning blood and therefore are not able to experience God's love. However, Paul in Ephesians says "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."{4}

Before we can offer true love and reconciliation to others, we must first receive love and be reconciled to God. The only way to turn our bad blood against God into unity with God is through the power of Christ's redeeming blood on the cross. Colossians states, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."{5} His blood cleanses us so that we are filled with the selfless love towards others that the Scriptures ask of us.{6}

Our Fight against Bad Blood

Even for Christians who have been shown love and forgiveness, we still do not always experience an overflowing of love and forgiveness for those who wrong us. We still struggle with having bad blood towards our enemies. We still feel the pain of the broken relationships even though we are in Christ. As

Christians, we look forward to a day when we will not feel pain, but while we still live in a fallen world, pain and hurt are very much part of our everyday lives.

However, the wrong that causes our pain has been or will be paid for. As Christians, if we are wronged by a believer in Christ, remember that Jesus died for those sins as well as for ours.{7} Yes, we should still lament that even believers sin and cause pain, yet justice was important enough to Christ that He died for those sins.{8} For those who sin against us and remain outside of Christ, their wrongs will be righted at the cost of their own life in eternal wrath. The hope of sharing the gospel is to offer others the redemptive power of Christ which indeed makes the gospel good news!

Looking back to the Psalms, there is a life-giving trend even within the darkness and pain. Even in Psalm 88, which is considered to be one of the darkest Psalms, the psalmist still cries out to God. In our broken relationships with others, true reconciliation must start and end with the grace and justice of God.

God knew we had bad blood and provided a Savior to change our hearts. He still continues to hear our cries of pain and sent the Holy Spirit to continue to protect our hearts from holding on to the bad blood in our relationships.

Notes

1. Psalm 41:9 All verses are from the English Standard Version.
2. Psalm 55:2-3, see also Psalm 69.
3. Ephesians 6:12
4. Ephesians 2:13
5. Colossians 1:19-20
6. Hebrews 9:14
7. Ephesians 1:7
8. This is why I think St. Anselm was on the right track in

Cur Deus Homo, when he argued that Jesus Christ had to become incarnate and die for our sins so that God's justice and grace could be made manifest. If God just ignored our sins, justice would not prevail—thank God He is both just and gracious through Jesus Christ!

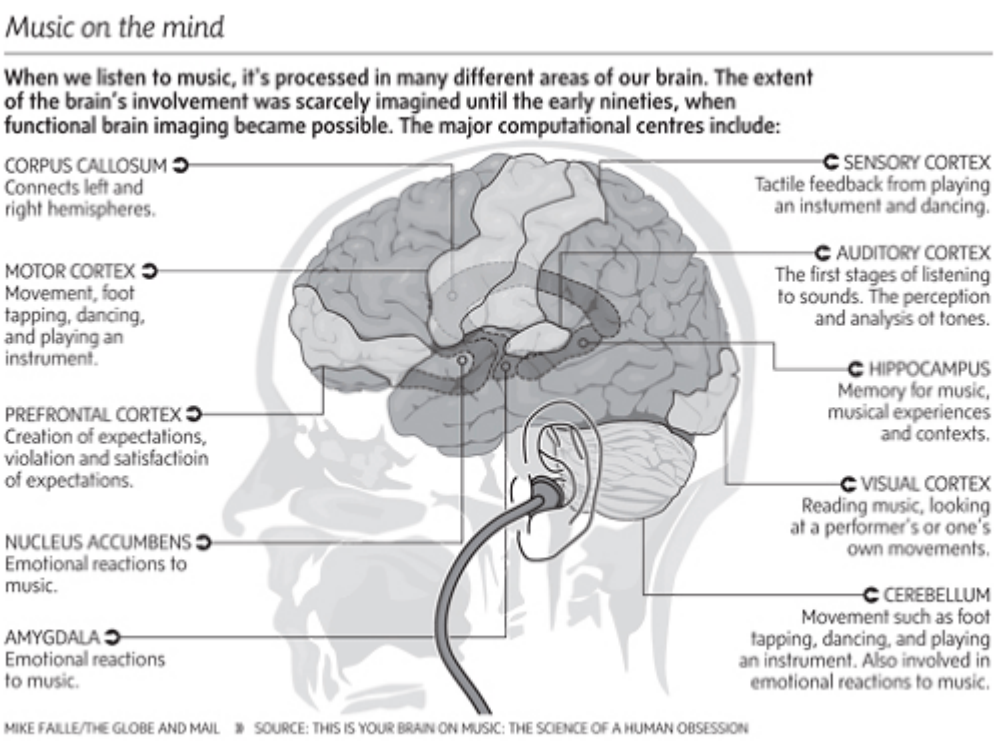
©2015 Probe Ministries

How and Why We Should Biblically Analyze Songs

Probe intern Sarah Withers provides insight about thinking biblically about popular songs.

Numerous scientific studies have revealed that music is linked to relieving pain/stress, releasing endorphins, aiding coordination, increasing concentration, expanding memory, improving language skills, and lowering blood pressure, just to list a few.{1} Unfortunately, not all genres of music offer these benefits, so it would be quite misleading to say that critically analyzing songs can act as a remedy for migraines—however convenient and persuasive that claim might be!

While I may not be able to claim health advantages, powerful benefits can be gleaned for us and others by being aware and graciously critical of songs. I hope that I can provide how and why we should biblically analyze songs and challenge you to be a more thoughtful and gracious critical consumer of all types of music.



How Do We Biblically Analyze a Song?

The most obvious first step to biblically analyzing a song is to actively listen to the lyrics and sometimes even watch the music video. It helps me focus and understand if I pull up the lyrics and read along as I listen. While I listen, I think about how the song makes me feel, what the song got right or wrong in its worldview, what I appreciate about the song, and any questions about possible meanings and interpretations. I also think about if or how I can relate to the song's message. Have I ever experienced, desired, or seen something similar to the song's message? If the answer is no, then maybe I could think about how seeing the songwriter's perspective could help me relate and communicate with someone with very different desires and experiences than my own.

Ultimately we biblically critique a song by shining the light of the biblical truths on it. No secular song gets everything right for the obvious reason that the gospel is not present. For some songs all that is missing is an explicit reference to the gospel, while other songs directly conflict with the

gospel. Yet, for even the more difficult songs, Christians can understand the song's message for the glory of God.

For example, Lana Del Rey's song "Born to Die"{2} provides the message that we should enjoy life because when we die there is nothing left for us. For those in Christ, that song is radically wrong about our purpose and destiny.

However, for those who are outside of Christ, that song paints a rather apt picture of their bleak destiny.{3} So yes, the song is very dark and upsetting, yet when I hear that song I can mourn for those outside of Christ and praise God that the lyrics of that song are not true for me. In that way, that song can incite worship and foster resolve to reach out to unbelievers-something Del Rey probably would never consider possible! That is the transformative power of the gospel, the greatest good news.

However, there are songs that Christians should avoid. Songs that are overly sexualized or demonic in nature may be too difficult to redeem.{4} Also some people are more affected by music than others. If you are not able to redeem the song by countering it with life-giving truths from Scripture and the song continues to bring you down, then you should not listen to it. Christians should pray for wisdom and guidance to know when to listen and engage and when to turn it off.{5}

Why Should We Care?

Since music is so integrated into our daily lives, many of us are consumers of music whether we are intentional about it or not. The American Academy of Pediatrics in 1996 (AAP) found that 14- to 16-year-olds listened to an overage of 40 hours of music per week. For a more conservative number, RAIN (Radio and Internet Newsletter) reported that students "spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day consuming media, 2 hours 19 minutes of which is spent listening to music."{6}

While these studies focus on teens and adolescents, it is fair to say that adults also listen to a fair amount of music, whether it is through headphones at work or the radio in the car. When it comes down to it, music is very much part of our everyday life. For some it can be avoided, but by most, it is accepted and greatly enjoyed.

Musical lyrics are also sticky. It never ceases to amaze me how I can still easily sing along to songs from my childhood the second the second it plays. Yet, when discussing my project of biblically analyzing popular music, a common response is that people often do not listen to the lyrics, but rather just enjoy the melody and beat. The AAP (1996) reported that "in one study 30% of teenagers knew the lyrics to their favorite songs," which would seem to affirm that initial claim.

With those intuitions and findings, it would be easy to undermine this project as interesting but unimportant. However, the same AAP (2009) article cited the Knobloch-Westerwick *et al*. study that "although young listeners might not understand all the details in lyrics, they recognize enough to obtain a general idea of the message they bring."

Moreover, the fact that we do remember song lyrics well after we have stopped listening to them shows that we are aware of the words even if we are not actively thinking about the message. In many respects we have become passive consumers of information and entertainment, especially when it comes to music. It is in light of this passivity that we should strive to be active listeners.

Every song with words carries a message, although some are more obvious and dangerous than others. For example, current artists such as Macklemore, Hozier, Lana Del Rey, and Lady Gaga proclaim more explicit messages and agendas in their songs-something as Christians we should be aware of and ready to critique. The AAP (1996) claimed that "awareness of, and

sensitivity to, the potential impact of music lyrics by consumers, the media, and the music industry is crucial.”

Although the rate and impact of the consumption of songs can be debated, there are still benefits of being aware of and engaging with our culture through songs.

What Are the Benefits?

Well, there are three main benefits to biblically analyzing songs. First, we refine our ability to enjoy music. For many this will be very counterintuitive. People I have talked with have feared that if they are too critical of the music’s message, then they will no longer be able to enjoy it. I will agree, there are some songs that might be ruined by listening critically to the lyrics. However, Christians should likely avoid listening to those songs anyway.

Even with songs we don’t like, we can still enjoy them for their musicality and benefit from some insights, however hard to find. The vast majority of songs are redeemable even though they may counter the gospel. Where God provides the songwriter with common grace insights, there is an opportunity to redeem the song. Remember Lana Del Rey’s song; I am still able to enjoy her powerful use of a darker sound and message, but I am also reminded of the hope I have in the gospel.

If we get to a point where we become cynical and antagonistic towards our music culture, we should remember that God gave us music and culture as a gift. The Psalms are examples of a great variety of songs that were written to offer the expression of truth about God, humanity, and our world. The obvious difference is that the Psalms are God-breathed and inspired—yet there are often truths that can be gleaned even from secular and popular songs. After all, we are all made in God’s image and bear His music-loving traits.

Another benefit of analyzing songs is the ability to learn

about our culture and the people influenced by it. Regardless of whether the lyrics are true, they are believed to be true by the songwriter and often by people in our culture. Part of the appeal of songs is that they are relatable. Relatability makes the song powerful and influential.

We can gain invaluable insight into the thoughts of our culture and younger generations through the lyrics of songs. Many songs provide commentary on our culture's view of alcohol consumption, drug use, violence, relationships, sexuality, freedom, and self-worth. By learning what the songs say about such topics, we can be better equipped to understand where people are coming from.

The final benefit which naturally flows from the previous one is being able to relate and engage with our culture. By engaging with themes in songs, we are ultimately practicing how to engage with people. I was talking with a group of high school students about one of Macklemore's songs called "Starting Over" which is about his relapse as an alcoholic. The song is marked with shame, a deep sense of failure, and loss of identity. Before listening to the song, I encouraged them to listen to the lyrics as if a person was talking with them. With that perspective, students would be less likely to immediately judge him as a failure, and instead would be more likely to empathize and relate as we are all failures and slaves to sin outside of Christ.

By being aware of songs, we can better engage the lies of our culture and counter them with the truths of Scripture.{7} The AAP (1996 & 2009), encourages parents to "become media-literate" which means "watching television with their children and teenagers, discussing the content with them, and initiating the process of selective viewing at an early age." Later in the article, the authors even suggest that parents should look up the lyrics and become familiar with them. Even if you are not a parent, as Christians one way we can help

correct lies of our culture is through conversations about popular music.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” It is our hope and joy that we have been redeemed and my prayer that Christians will show others the light of Christ.

So, the goal of analyzing songs from a Christian perspective is not merely an academic exercise that challenges critical thought, but to move us to action. Peter claimed that Christians were saved so “that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”{8} Ultimately we should be encouraged to talk, relate, empathize, and love others. Through songs we can help others to “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”{9}

Notes

1. Another article that was particularly helpful was from the eMedExpert. However, if you just search “benefits to music” (or the like) and you will be overwhelmed by how many articles develop all the unique benefits to music.
2. The video includes sexual content, brief drug use, and a violent image at the end.
3. I should note however, that the song seems to hold the message of mere extinction at death. As Christians, we believe that souls are immortal which means even the non-believer persists. For those outside of Christ, they will experience death as eternal wrath and destruction. See John 3:36, Roman 6:23, Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, and Revelation 21:8.
4. To address briefly the pushback on the idea that we can or should “redeem culture”: The confusion rests in the nuanced

difference in meaning of the word “redeemed.” I use the word “redeemed” in this context to mean something closer to transformed by truth, not redeemed in the sense God has redeemed believers. Yes, Scriptures never call us to “redeem culture” but God does call us to let the light of truth shine. By engaging culture with the truth of Scriptures, Christians can make aspects of culture honoring to God, thus in that sense redeeming them. For example, pornography falls under the category of “unredeemable,” meaning that there is no way someone could make pornography honoring to God. However, with different aspects of culture this task is possible and I think should be encouraged.

5. See Hebrews 5:14.

6. RAIN cited The Kaiser Family Foundation study for these statistics. The report also broke down how the kids and teens were listening to the music, finding that on average per day they listen to 41 minutes of music on their IPod and similar devices, 32 minutes of music on computers (iTunes and Internet radio), and 32 minutes listening to the radio.

7. See Ephesians 6:17-20 and 2 Corinthians 10:1-6.

8. 1 Peter 2:9.

9. Colossians 2:8

©2015 Probe Ministries