

Under the
WINGS
of **GOD**



Twenty Biblical
Reflections for a Deeper Faith

Cornelius Plantinga

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Introduction

Christians have long practiced certain spiritual disciplines to help strengthen their godliness. They practice prayer, fasting, solitude, silence, good works, and study of Scripture.

We may add meditation or reflection on Scripture. The person who practices this discipline mulls over a passage of Scripture, considers it, dwells on it. You might say they chew on it like a cud, pressing out its juices and swallowing them. Simply put, they want God’s Word to feed them.

The twenty reflections in this book are meant to help. Some of them may help us see into a text more deeply. We want to avoid superficial readings of texts that give us misleading notions of what the text is saying to us. I’m thinking, for example, of Mark 4:25, in which Jesus says, “For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (NRSV). On a surface reading, Jesus appears to endorse a familiar fact—namely, that the rich tend to get richer and the poor tend to get poorer. But Jesus had in

mind something else entirely, and I invite you to read “Spiritual Momentum” (chap. 16) in the collection to ponder it.

Or, consider the title piece, “Under the Wings of God” (chap. 1). It reflects on Psalm 91, which is extravagant in its promises to believers, saying that if you make the Lord your refuge, then “no harm will overtake you” (91:10 NIV). A surface reading of the text suggests that believers will never be harmed—neither by accidents, nor disease, nor the treachery of a spouse, nor anything at all. And that’s plainly false. Believers suffer from harm every day. And yet, there *is* a reliable promise here, one we may deduce when we consider the bigger, broader teachings of Scripture. So, one of the main benefits of reflecting on Scripture is that it enables us to move past superficial readings of it and find the deeper meanings pulled up by serious thought. In this way, all the reflections in the book are conducted “under the wings of God.”

Another good reason to reflect on Scripture is that doing so sharpens our loves and hates, aiming them at their proper objects. In Romans 12:9 Paul writes, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (NIV). Hating what’s evil and loving what’s good is the heart of true religion, said America’s greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards.¹ You learn to hate all devilry—all lying, cheating, idolatry, assault, injustice, ingratitude, adultery, and cruelty. And you tend to act in accordance with your hatred. On the other hand, you learn to love all godliness—faith, hope, compassion, kindness, humility, patience, impartiality. You learn to love God. And you tend to act in accordance with your love. In sharpening our loves and hates, several of the reflections in this collection may help.

“God Just in Case” (chap. 8), for example, hones our hatred of idolatry, and “Clothe Yourselves with Patience” (chap. 6) hones our love of patience, a surprisingly strong virtue.

Finally, reflection on Scripture helps us see how to live as good citizens of the kingdom of God. This is the obvious implication of getting our loves and hates appropriately sharpened. So, for example, “On the Receiving End” (chap. 10) invites us to be like infants in simply receiving God’s love and living off it. No need for suspicion or skepticism here. God’s loving presence is an unequivocal good, and our thriving on it the key to a successful Christian life.

I hope that you find something nourishing among these reflections. If you do, I will have fulfilled my purpose.

But one note: each reflection begins with a proposed reading from Scripture. Don’t ignore them. The reflections won’t nourish you much if you remain unfamiliar with these readings. Dive into them. Ponder them. Think them over. If you do, what I have to offer will then make a lot more sense.



1

Under the Wings of God

Reading: Psalm 91 (NIV)

He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge. (Psalm 91:4)

Many adults can recall a certain childhood feeling that has now pretty much faded away. It's a child-like feeling of security in the nest. It's a sense that you are protected, sheltered, perfectly safe. It's the feeling that somebody else is in charge—somebody big and strong and experienced. In properly functioning homes, children often have this feeling. Adults do not, and they miss it.

Years ago, on the old *Candid Camera* TV program, someone interviewed a beefy truck driver—a man of about fifty. They

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asked him what age he would be if he could be any age he wanted. There was a silence for a while as the trucker thought it over. What was he thinking? Was he hankering for age sixty-five and retirement so he could trade his Kenworth four-and-a-quarter semitrailer down to a John Deere riding lawnmower? Or was he yearning for age eighteen and the chance to go back and take some turn he had missed?

The trucker thought it over. Suppose he could be any age he wanted. Finally, he turned to the interviewer and said that if it were up to him, he'd like to be three. Three? Why *three*? the interviewer wanted to know. "Well," said the trucker, "when you're three you don't have any responsibilities."

When I first heard the interview, I thought the man was trying to be cute. But I now think he said something wistful. What he knew was that when you are a child, and if your family is running the right way, your burdens are usually small. You can go to bed without worrying about termites in your house beams. You don't wonder whether the tingling in your leg is a symptom of some exotic nerve disease. You don't wrestle half the night with a tax deduction you claimed, wondering whether some federal person might find it a little too creative. No, you squirm deliciously in your bed, comforted by the murmur of adult conversations elsewhere in the house. You hover wonderfully at the edge of slumber. Then you let go and fall away.

You dare to do this, not only because you expect that in the morning you're going to wake up, but also because you are sleeping under your parents' wing. If parents take proper care of you, you can give yourself up to sleep, because somebody else is in charge. Somebody big and strong and experienced. As far

as a child knows, parents stay up all night, checking doors and windows, adjusting temperature controls, driving away marauders. They never go off duty. If a shadow falls over the house, or demons begin to stir, parents will handle it. That's one reason children sleep so well. Their nest is sheltered, and they love it just as they should.



I think children might be alarmed to discover how much adults crave this same sense of security. Adults need to be sheltered too. Some of us have been betrayed. Some of us have grown old and are not happy about it. Some are deeply disappointed that their lives have not turned out as they had hoped. Others have been staggered by a report that has just come back from a pathology lab. Still others are unspeakably ignored by people they treasure. Some are simply high-tension human beings, strung tight as piano wire.

To all such folk the psalmist speaks a word of comfort. It's one of the great themes of the Scriptures: *God is our shelter*. "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge" (91:4).

The image here is that of an eagle, or maybe a hen. In any case, it's a picture of a bird that senses danger and then protectively spreads its wings over its young. An expert on birds once told me that this move is very common. A bird senses the approach of a predator, or the threat of something falling from above, and instinctively spreads out its wings like a canopy. Then the fledglings scuttle underneath for shelter. The move is

so instinctive that an adult bird will spread those wings even when no fledglings are around!

And the psalmist—who has almost surely seen this lovely thing happen—thinks of God. “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” The point is that God is our shelter when the winds begin to howl. The point is that under God’s wings we are defended, protected, perfectly safe. The point is that someone else is in charge. Someone big and strong and experienced. Someone who never goes off duty.



In one of his books, John Timmer tells of his experience as a boy in the Netherlands at the start of World War II. German troops had invaded a few days before, but nobody knew just what to expect. Then, on the second Sunday of May 1940, as the Timmer family was sitting around the dinner table in their home in Haarlem, suddenly they heard an air-raid siren and then the droning of German bombers.

Of course, everybody was scared out of their minds. “Let’s go stand in the hall,” John’s father said. “They say it’s the safest place in the house.” In the hall John’s father said, “Why don’t we pray? There’s nothing else we can do.”

John Timmer writes that he has long ago forgotten the exact wording of his father’s prayer—all except for one phrase. Somewhere in that prayer, Mr. Timmer, who was praying for God to protect his family from Hitler’s Luftwaffe, said, “O God, in the shadow of your wings we take refuge.”¹

God spreading wings over us is a picture that all the Jewish and Christian generations have memorized and cherished, in part because the phrase invites us to recover our childhood feeling of security in the nest. Or to discover it for the first time if we are working away from a terrorized childhood.

It's a special feeling, and only a pretty numb Christian would fail to be touched by it.



Still, if you are thinking, one disturbing little question is pricking you. How *true* is the picture of a sheltering God? How secure *are* we in the nest? I wonder whether in 1940 on the second Sunday of May some other Dutch family begged God to spread wings over their house. I wonder whether the bombs of the German air force pierced those wings and blew that house and its people to rubble.

You read Psalm 91, and you begin to wonder. It offers such comprehensive coverage. “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge. . . . You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday” (91:4–6).

Really? I need not fear any of these things? I can sleep in a dangerous neighborhood with my windows open? I will not fear the terror of the night? My child's temperature soars and his white blood count plummets: I will not fear the pestilence that stalks in darkness? My spouse develops fever, weakness, and pounding headaches: I will not fear the plague that destroys

at midday? Really? Is there a level of faith that can honestly say such things even after all allowance has been made for the fact that Psalm 91 is God's Word in poetry?

Let's face the truth. Faith in the sheltering wings of God does not remove physical danger or the need for precaution against it. We cannot ignore Middle East tourist advisories, or feed wild animals on our camping trips, or jump a hot motorcycle over a row of parked cars and trust God to keep us safe. We cannot smoke cigarettes like the Marlboro man and then claim the promises of Psalm 91 as our protection against lung cancer. A person who did these things would be a foolish believer and a foolish reader of Psalm 91.

Remarkably, in Matthew's Gospel, Satan quotes Psalm 91 to Jesus in the temptation at the pinnacle of the temple (Matt. 4:5-7). "Throw yourself down," says Satan. After all, it says right in Psalm 91:11-12 that God will give his angels charge over you. And Jesus replies that it is not right to put God to the test. It seems that God's protection is good only for certain events and that restrictions may apply. Jesus was teaching us that we may not act like a fool and then count on God to bail us out. God may do it—and some of us recall times when we acted like fools and God bailed us out. But we may not *count* on it.

And then, of course, some believers get hurt, terribly hurt, by no folly of their own. Suppose a drunk driver smashes into your family car. Suppose an I-beam falls in on you in a storm.

Or suppose you are a devout middle-aged Christian woman, and one August you start not to feel very well. So you visit your primary care physician, who sends you for tests, and then for a visit with a specialist, who orders more tests. When the test

results come back, one of your doctors says, “Ma’am, I’m sorry to say that you had better get your affairs in order.” He says more, far more, about treatments and research and making you as comfortable as possible—on and on with all kinds of stuff that is well-meant. But you have grown deaf. All you can think is that you are forty-six years old, and you are going to die before your parents do and before your oldest child gets married.

Whatever happened to the wings of God? Can you get brain cancer under those wings? Get molested by a family member? Get knifed by some emotionless teenager in a New York subway? Can you find, suddenly one summer, that your own seventeen-year-old has become a stranger and that everything in your family seems to be cascading out of control?

Where are those wings?



I think that what troubles us is not so much the sheer fact that believers suffer along with everybody else. If the children of God were always saved from floods like Noah and his family; if every time somebody pointed a gun at a Christian, the gun just turned to salami; if we really had a money-back guarantee against hatred, disease, and the acts of terrorists, then of course we wouldn’t have to worry about church growth, would we! Our churches would fill with people attracted to the faith for its benefit plan. We *already* have people becoming Christians because they want to get rich or get happy. What would happen to people’s integrity if becoming a believer really did

give you blanket protection against poverty, accident, and the wages of sin?

No, it's not the fact that we must take our share of the world's suffering that surprises us. Not that. Our experience and the rest of Scripture have taught us to *expect* hardship. *What worries us is that Psalm 91 tells us not to worry.* It says, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you" (91:7). This is advertising that sounds too good to be true. In fact, the psalmist says, "If . . . you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you" (91:9–10). And the statement troubles us. No harm at all? What about Paul? What about Stephen? What about our Lord himself? He wanted to gather the citizens of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks. And one day the soldiers took him outside the city and nailed his wings to a cross.

So, what is going on in Psalm 91? How can its extravagant promises be God's Word to us?



What Psalm 91 does is express *one*—one of the loveliest, one of the most treasured—but just *one* of the moods of faith. It's a mood of exuberant confidence in the sheltering providence of God. Probably the psalmist has been protected by God in some dangerous incident, and he is celebrating.

On other days, and in other moods—in other and darker seasons of his life—this same psalmist might have called to God out of despair and a sense of abandonment. Remember that when our Lord was crucified, when our Lord shouted at our

God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he was quoting one of the Psalms (Ps. 22:1). Despair or astonishment at what can happen to us under God’s providence—that too is natural and biblical.

Psalm 91 says no harm shall befall us. Other psalms and the rest of Scripture testify to God’s presence in the midst of real evil. Weighing these two scriptural witnesses together, we may conclude that Psalm 91’s teaching is that no *final* evil shall befall us. We all know that we can believe in God with all our heart and yet have our heart broken by the loss of a child or the treachery of a spouse or the menace of a fatal disease. We know that: every one of us knows that. And yet, generation after generation of saints has known something else too and has spoken of it. In the mystery of faith, we find a hand on us in the darkness, a voice that calls our name, and the sheer certainty that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God—not for this life and not for the life to come. We may be scarred and shaken, but we are also loved.

We are like fledglings who scuttle under the wings of their parent. The forces of evil beat on those wings with everything they have. The pitchforks of the evil one, falling tree limbs in the storm, rain and hail—everything beats on those wings. When it is finished, when evil has done its worst, those wings are all bloodied and busted and hanging at wrong angles. And, to tell you the truth, in all the commotion we get roughed up quite a lot.

But no final evil can get to us because those wings have never folded. They are spread out on the cross to be wounded for our transgressions and bruised by our iniquities. And when

the feathers quit flying, we peep out and discover that we have been in the only place that has not been leveled. Yes, we have been bumped and bruised and hurt. Sometimes badly hurt. But the other choice was death. I mean that the other choice was to break out of the embrace of God. The truth is that, if we had not stayed under those wings—if we had not stayed in the shadow of the cross—we could never have felt the body shudders and heard the groans of the one who loved us so much that those wings stayed out there no matter what came whistling in. This is the one who protects us from final evil, now and in the life to come—in which it is safe at last for God to fold those wings.

“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” It’s not a simple truth, but it is the truth. And we ought to take it to heart this very day.

Prayer

*O God, spread your wings over us.
Protect us, we pray, in Jesus’s name. Amen.*



2

God on the Loose

Reading: Mark 5:1–20 (NIV)

When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. (Mark 5:15)

This is a story that's about as rugged as the gospel gets. There's so much violence here. The man with the demons breaks his chains and smashes his handcuffs. He howls and bruises himself with stones. He runs at Jesus and shouts at him and pleads with him. He pleads with Jesus not to torture him. Maybe he thinks Jesus is going to draw out his demons one at a time, and this poor man swears to God it will hurt too much.

An exorcism has to be quick, you know. It's like taking an adhesive bandage off your arm. You don't want to dawdle over an exorcism.

And Jesus doesn't dawdle. He throws all the demons out of this shrieking man at once, and the demons enter a herd of swine and run them right down into a lake.

What a story this is! You know, Mark has his own way of telling us about Jesus. When Mark gets his Gospel going, what he really wants to say is that in Jesus Christ God is on the loose. God is on the loose, and we're never safe from God's liberating power. It's as if Mark says to us: "Friends, believe the good news. In Jesus Christ, God is *after* you."

In his Gospel, Mark is telling us what the human problem is, and he's telling us how Jesus is the answer to it. Our problem is not that we keep banging our heads on the glass ceiling as we try to go home to God. Oh no. Just the opposite. As Professor Donald Juell remarks, the heavens get torn open during Jesus's baptism (Mark 1:10) not so that we can get at God, but so that God can get at *us*.¹ God wants to get at us because we're fugitives. We're runaways. We're like Cain or Jonah or the prodigal son.

And now, says Mark, because the heavens have been ripped open, God has gotten out. God is coming after us in the person of Jesus. Jesus brings God a lot closer to people than they want, and when Jesus does this, he frightens them. Jesus in Mark 5 isn't a gentle Savior who gathers kindergarteners onto his lap. This is a rough Savior who battles demons in a graveyard. This is a Savior who starts two thousand hogs on a death march. This is a Savior with fire in his eye.

You might say Jesus was his mother's son. Mary was a fierce woman, you know. Such a fierce virgin she was! You remember that she's the young girl who sings that song in Luke 1 about how God scatters the proud and brings down the mighty from their thrones. This is the God who sends rich people away when they plead for food. C. S. Lewis once wrote that Mary has in her "a terrible gladness" over all the calamities that come to people when they've moved over to the wrong side of God.²

Jesus was his mother's son. Sometimes he's tender, but sometimes he goes after people. He goes after demons too, and it upsets them. In Mark 5 they *know who Jesus is*. It's almost a kind of professional privilege among supernatural beings that they know each other. The demons know who Jesus is without an introduction, and they fear him and plead with him. I think we understand. I think we understand that evil has something to fear from God, and therefore something to fear from Jesus.

The demoniac is afraid of Jesus, and the demons are afraid of Jesus, because he brings God much too close. Even the townspeople fear Jesus, and in such an unexpected way.

Here they have this pathetic man who lives in their cemetery. They have this horribly sick man who's crawling with demons. He's out in the cemetery howling among the tombs, and it's awful what he does out there. But that's not what frightens people. Everybody thinks *that's* normal. A man rattles around in a graveyard all night, shrieking and mutilating himself, and people shrug. What are you gonna do? they say. Hey, that's the way these demoniacs are.

What frightens people is that Jesus heals him. What frightens people is that Jesus gets him all dressed up and calmed down.

It's when the Lord of life raises up a man who lives with the dead—*that's* what frightens people. To these people resurrection is a terrifying event.

“When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid” (5:15).

They were afraid.

Sanity scares them. The power of God scares them. Resurrection scares the daylights out of them. So, they tell Jesus to leave. They beg Jesus to get out of town. These people want nothing to do with God, and especially not when God is on the loose.

Why? Because they're used to their crazy demoniac just as he was. A cleaned-up demoniac doesn't look normal to them.

But, as Donald Juel says, these people also get stuck on the one question that sticks in all of us when we read the story. People always have one question here. What about those pigs? Why would Jesus have anything to do with stampeding those pigs? Why does the Savior choose such a nonecological method of demon disposal?

You know, a lot of preachers steer clear of this story in Mark, and the reason is that they don't know what to say about this part of the story, and I don't quite know either.



But let me say at least a little.

One thing to understand is that in Mark's biblical world pigs are unclean. In fact, everything here is unclean. The Gerasene territory is unclean because it's full of Gentiles. The graveyard

is unclean because it's full of corpses. The demoniac is unclean because he's full of demons. And Jesus is willing to *become* unclean to save this hopeless man who is thrashing around in the cemetery. Jesus is a wilderness Savior who gets his hands dirty when he works.

And, yes, two thousand pigs become a casualty of the healing process. I guess the point is that demons have to go *somewhere*. Demons are parasites, after all. They can't just float free. They've got to attach somewhere. So, Jesus negotiates with the demons, and what follows is the death march of the swine.

Maybe the idea is that the unclean spirits will drown right along with their unclean hosts. If so, then the march of the pigs is like the march of Pharaoh and all his hosts into the Red Sea. It's something to grieve, but also something to celebrate.



But of course, the Gerasenes don't feel like celebrating. They want to know why two thousand animals have to die to save one crazy man. They want to know how they're going to make a living now after their livestock have drowned. And that's a question the story never addresses.

But isn't it interesting that nobody gets excited about the redemption of the demoniac? Even now, nobody gets excited by his redemption. People just get excited about the pigs. Jesus sets a man free from a legion of demons. Everybody says, "But what about the pigs?" Jesus blesses a suffering man with a wonderful relief—you might say with a wonderful housecleaning. And everybody says, "But what about the pigs?" The grace of God

liberates a human spirit, and everybody wants to talk about property loss and ecology.



At minimum this strange story tells us that God's interests sometimes differ from ours and that God uses emergency methods for redemption. And, frankly, we're not so comfortable about some of these methods. We're not so comfortable with God on the loose. At the center of this story is miraculous healing, and it upsets us. Exorcism disturbs us. We think exorcism belongs in the movies.

For one thing, dramatic signs of the power of God are wide open to abuse. Faith healing and exorcism can easily become the tools of spiritual imperialists who want to mess with other people's lives, so we get shy about them. But, for another thing, these supernatural ministries have an eerie feel to them. I, for one, don't like that very well. I like a good, solid Christian ministry that won't move around on me. I like the borders of reality to stay put, so we all know what's natural and what's supernatural, and then for things to stay more on the natural side of the border. I think a lot of Christians are inclined to be like that.

Think of this: if you ever laid hands on somebody who then got healed, I think you'd be scared to death. As Professor Juel remarks, you'd grab the first physician you could find and say, "Talk to me about germs and antibiotics and imbalances in brain chemistry."

When we discover that a faith healer is a fake, are we disappointed? I don't think so. I think we're relieved. We like the lines

of reality to stay put. We like God to stay in heaven where he belongs. We'd like our demoniacs to stay out in the graveyard where *they* belong. And we don't really want Jesus to go around stirring them up.

My point is that we aren't any more comfortable with God on the loose than any of the Gerasenes were.

Juel once had a seminary student who visited a seriously sick woman. This woman was so sick and so old, and so sick of being old and sick, that she wanted to die. She wanted the Lord to take her home. So, the student asked her a few questions on his visit: "Do you believe in God your Savior?" "Yes," she said. "Do you believe that God could take you to himself and reach gently for you when he did it?" "Oh, yes," said the woman, "I believe that." "Well," said the seminarian, "have you ever had people pray with you about this, and go ahead and ask God to take you?" "No," she said, "I haven't done that." "OK," said the student, "would you like me to pray for you?" "Yes," said the woman, "I would like that a lot."

So the student prayed a prayer that went something like this: "O God, Mrs. Tiffany has suffered a long time now, and she's your daughter and she believes in you. Please take her to yourself soon, so that she may be at peace with Christ."

The woman died on the spot, and the student was so spooked that he never mentioned his prayer to anybody for three years. He hadn't meant it to come to *that!* He hadn't expected God to *act!* It was only a prayer!³

“When [the Gerasenes] came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.” They were afraid because if exorcism can happen, miracles can happen. If miracles can happen, resurrection can happen. And if resurrection can happen, anything can happen.

The Jesus of our baptism, the Jesus we stand up to confess—this Jesus is God on the loose. He’s a beautiful Savior, but he’s also big trouble. He’s the mediator of all creation, but he’s also the Savior who brawls with demons in graveyards.

Jesus Christ is God on the loose. We’re never safe from his approach. The love of God is strong and true, but it’s also out to kill our old self and raise up our new self, and this means pain. We can’t rise until we die. And so, God slays in order to save. People sometimes talk as if meeting God would be like meeting a friend for coffee, or taking a walk in a garden with somebody who looks pleasant and friendly. People think that meeting God would be like meeting Mr. Rogers.

The truth is that meeting God would be more like getting electrocuted. God slays in order to save, and the desire to meet God is therefore a death wish. Our addictions have to die. Our pride and envy have to die. Our terrible despair has to die. All that drags us down has to die. Only then can we arise, dress up in the virtues of Christ, and step out into the sunshine like Jesus walking out of his tomb.

————— **Prayer** —————

*O Lord, Jesus Christ, God on the loose,
have your way with me today,
and with all your followers. Amen.*

—————



3

With All Your Mind

Reading: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Matthew 22:34–40 (NRSV)

[Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your . . . mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

In one of his speeches, Howard Lowry tells of a time he attended a rehearsal of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in Princeton.¹ The conductor was trying to get the choir to sing the main chorale a certain way. (If you imagine the hymn “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” you’ll have the music.) The conductor kept rehearsing the choir, and they kept trying, but they weren’t giving him the sound he wanted.

So he called a halt and said something like this: “Look, your singing is skilled and it’s full of talent, but it’s not right for this

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Pray the Lord My Mind to Keep,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 42, no. 9 (August 10, 1998): 50–52, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/august10/8t9050.html>.

music. The really good singing of music like this is congregational singing. You've got to sing this chorale more simply and deeply." And then the conductor told some of his boyhood memories of going to church in Germany and the way people sang there. Finally, he said to the choir, "Now sing this chorale as if you were back in my childhood church."

So they sang again. They sang with simple depth, with deep simplicity. Of course, they didn't sound exactly like a congregation. They probably couldn't have sounded like that if they had tried. The reason, of course, is that they brought all their musical understanding to the singing of the chorale and so sang it with an educated simplicity, with a second simplicity, with a simplicity that lay *beyond* complexity.

We all know about second simplicity. According to a famous story, the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked to sum up the thousands of pages of his dense theology in one sentence. He paused. Then he said, "Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so."

Well, it's one thing for a child to recite these words, and quite another for Karl Barth to say them. It's one thing to fool around at a piano by plunking out the notes of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" with your index finger. It's another thing to hear that tune as a reprise just after a fine pianist has played Mozart's variations on it. As a reprise the tune seems loaded.

Second simplicities lie beyond complexities and incorporate them.

And so it is with loving God. A child can do it. In some ways a child can become our teacher in doing it. But there are also adult ways to love God, and these take some time to learn. Adults learn to love God thoughtfully. Adults learn to love God with all the powers of a mature mind. Adults bring to God a love that has all the law and the prophets compacted in it.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” says our Lord (Matt. 22:37). In other words, you shall love God with everything you have and everything you are. Everything. Every longing, every endowment, each of your intellectual gifts, any athletic ability or computer skill or musical talent, all capacity for delight, every good thing that has your fingerprints on it—take all this, says Jesus, and refer it to God. Take your longing, and long for God; take your creaturely riches, and endow God; take your eye for beauty, and appreciate God. With your heart and soul and mind, with all your needs and splendors, make a full turn toward God.

That’s the great commandment, and Deuteronomy and Matthew give it to us in two versions. Have you ever noticed the difference? In Matthew’s Gospel a lawyer asks Jesus what may have been a trick question, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (22:36), and Jesus replies by quoting famous words from Deuteronomy 6:5, words that were on the lips of pious Jews morning and evening, words as familiar as “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*”—not with all your

might (that’s Deuteronomy), but with all your *mind* (that’s Jesus in Matthew).

Here’s a change worth a little gasp. What if a four-year-old prayed one night, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my brain to keep”? You would notice.

“Love God with all your mind,” says our Lord. Take it as a charter for a thoughtful Christian life. Take it as a charter for a Christian getting educated. What’s the project for Christians engaged in these pursuits? What’s the big idea within them? The simple answer is that we’re trying to become better lovers. We want to love God with all our mind. Of course, we want to offer our hearts and souls to God. But we are also intellectual beings, and Jesus Christ calls us to intellectual love; he calls us to mindful love.

“Love with all your mind.” The command sounds simple, but it requires from us a second simplicity, a simplicity that incorporates a good deal of complexity.

So what does the command mean?



To love God intellectually is to become a student of God—a student who really takes an interest in God. Have you ever noticed that a fair number of Christians are not particularly interested in God? Some of them are ministers. These are people who don’t ask about God, don’t talk about God, and maybe don’t even think about God unless they really have to. Their interest in God seems merely professional.

Isn’t this strange? Shouldn’t we be somewhat *preoccupied*

with God? Isn't that what lovers do? They get preoccupied with their beloved. They notice things about the one they love.

And isn't there quite a lot to notice about God? Isn't God remarkable, after all—so surprisingly fierce, so surprisingly tender? You know, the Scriptures give us a portrait of God we would never have guessed. Sometimes the portrait makes us squirm. Think of some of the biblical images for God. In the Bible, God is lion and lamb, church and home, fire and water. God is not only a leopard, an eagle, and a bear, but also a moth; not only a parent, but also a child; not only a king and a warrior, but also a barber and a whistler.

Think of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The creeds give us a symmetrical doctrine of the Trinity—one God in three coequal persons. You would never guess from this tactful portrait that in Scripture the triune God is, so to speak, a bachelor father, his single son, and their agent. That's God.



Loving God with all one's mind means taking an interest in God and in the peculiarities of God. It means letting God be *God*. This is mere courtesy toward God, and you can't have love without it. The idea is that God gets to write God's own autobiography. The idea is that God gets to write God's own drama of life with us, including God's own character description. Our calling is not to rewrite the script but to find our role there and fill it.

Mindful love of God means other things too. Catholic philosophers Dietrich von Hildebrand and Alice von Hildebrand

once observed that lovers give their beloved a good-sized benefit of the doubt.² So, if our beloved acts well, we look upon the action as typical. If our beloved acts badly, we look upon the action as an aberration. To love somebody is to give that person a big line of moral and spiritual credit.

So it is with our love of God. God does not act badly, and if we really thought God did, then we ought to give up our religion. But it sometimes *looks* as if God acts badly. It looks as if God goes off duty while traffickers enslave women and children. It looks as if God blesses a lot of the wrong people and ignores a lot of the right ones. It looks for all the world as if God has a lot of explaining to do. That's what Job thought, and Job is in the Bible.

How do you love God when, for a while, you can't make any sense out of God? This is a question that is a lot bigger than I am, but I think we must trust Jesus Christ. Even before his crucifixion Jesus suffered a lot more than most of us, and *he* says we ought to love God with everything we have. *He* clears the way to love God with a second simplicity. Doesn't God deserve at least the same benefit of the doubt that we give to anyone we love? It's a matter of faithfulness. It's a matter of intellectual humility. It's a matter of mere loyalty.

"Love the Lord your God with all your mind." It means giving God the benefit of the doubt because we know the limits of our understanding.



Further, loving God with all our mind means taking an interest not only in God, and in the peculiarities of God, but also in

the works of God. I'm thinking of creation in all its strength and majesty; creation in all its stupendous variety; creation in all its unguessable particularity. I'm thinking of humanity itself, in all its multicultural riches. It turns out that God loves not only humankind, but also human kinds, and it's our delight to love what God loves.

To respect creation is to show love for its creator. How do you respect creation? You give it room to be itself. You let it unfold before your watchful eye. You search it and know it with the preoccupation of a lover. Then you tell the truth about the actual state of creation, including not only its bird songs, but also its terrible carnivorousness; including not only the way purple and coral impatiens thicken into great mounds of color in a cool northern September, but also the way lions in Kenya beard themselves with the blood of fawns. You tell the truth even when you have to tell it about us—human creatures who look so much like God, and act so little like God, and have fallen so far from God.

To hear in the world both the song of God and the groaning of all creation, to prize what is lovely and to suffer over what is corrupt, to ponder these things and to struggle to understand them and God's redeeming ways with them—these are ways of loving God with all our mind. Becoming a real student of God and of the works of God is an act of flagrant intellectual obedience because it is an act of flagrant intellectual love.



Let me add a word about where all this love must lead. Intellectual love must lead us out into the lives and habitats of other

human beings in order to do them some good. Even that—doing people some good—sounds simpler than it is, of course. It’s another of those second simplicities. Isaiah tells us right away in his first chapter that we must *learn* to do good (Isa. 1:17), suggesting that good in a fouled-up world is often elusive and ambiguous. The point is that we need to study lest we unwittingly do a half-cooked good, a dangerous good, a ruthless good. We need to study first and do good second.

But when we actually do it, then once more God’s kingdom comes, and God’s will is done. Once more we become effective lovers of God. Once more we take a creature’s role in the big project of building God’s shalom.

So “love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Let this command defeat every anti-intellectualism. What a sin this is, and how much of the Christian church happily commits it! Anti-intellectualism is anti-Christian. Never give in to it. Never concede anything to it. Never quit fighting against it. Anti-intellectualism is the sin of lazy people or of fearful people who content themselves with first simplicities and who resist the pain it takes to grow beyond them.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Let this command also defeat every selfish intellectualism, every worldly intellectualism, every idolatrous intellectualism. Let it remind us that the life of the mind has nothing to do with carving a niche for ourselves, or making a name for ourselves, or conquering some area of study as if it were an enemy. The life of the mind is an act of love, an act of reverence. It’s an act in which we get pulled out of our nervous little egoisms and combined into a kingdom project so much bigger than any of us, so much

grander than all of us, that we cannot help getting stretched by this move.

Intellectual love of God means, for most of us, that we will deliberately read some things that make us ponder God's world. We will deliberately attend events that stretch us a little. When we are with our friends, we will sometimes lay aside the chatter and gossip that so easily creeps into conversation, and we'll talk about more serious things—about who God is, what justice demands, what it would be like in the world if just for one day people kept the Ten Commandments.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Whether we are nine years old or ninety, whether students or lifelong students, our job is to love God with everything we have, including with the trillion-cell wonder that is the human brain.

At the end of the day, mindful love of God is a matter of mere obedience to Jesus, who told us to do it.

Prayer

Great and loving God, you are rich with possibilities and achievements beyond human comprehension. But if I love you with all of my mind, you will reveal at least some of them, thereby enriching me for Jesus's sake. Amen.
