



FOCUS ON

# faith

*Essays by Curtis Shelburne*

*Series 5, Volume 3*

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



John Gulley

**“G**ratitude,” writes author and pastor John Ortberg, “is the ability to experience life as a gift. It liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation.” Of all people, surely those who have given their lives to Christ, realizing how continually all good gifts and life itself come from his hands, should be most grateful. In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne shares more essays designed to help us, in deep gratitude, turn our eyes toward Jesus and “Focus on Faith.”

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**“L**et the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

The Apostle Paul  
*Colossians 3*



Dear Lord,  
As you reign in our hearts, may your sweet peace be ever-present and abiding, and may our souls be filled with thanksgiving.

*Amen*



John Gulley



## “GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES”

From his own sickbed, a great poet urges God's people to trust the Lord always.

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**“O most gracious God,”** wrote the eloquent sufferer, “on this sickbed I feel under your correction, and I taste of humiliation, but let me taste of consolation, too.”

John Donne, poet and priest, so wrote in one of his “devotions” in 1623. In *Christianity Today* some seventeen years ago, author Philip Yancey shared a brief edited, somewhat modernized, excerpt of Donne’s *Devotions*.

As Yancey explains, Donne had fallen seriously ill. Not unreasonably, he assumed he had contracted the bubonic plague, the scourge filling graves with masses of people during those dark days. The “Black Death” had made its presence unmistakable. London’s church bells tolled “dolefully,” and Donne wrote his famous poem, “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” reminding his readers that the loss of anyone is a loss to us all. So, don’t ask “for whom the bell tolls,” he penned, “it tolls for thee.”

In the “devotions” (as Yancey shares them), Donne writes of all the blessings God has given.

“Nature reaches out her hand and offers corn, and wine, and oil, and milk; but it was you [God] who filled the hand of nature with such bounty.”

Donne thanks God for the blessings that come from fruitful labor, and he acknowledges that, no matter how hard and well the laborer has worked, it is God who guides and “gives the increase.”

He thanks the Lord for friends who “reach out their hands to support

us,” even when he acknowledges, “but your hand supports the hand we lean on.”

I’m continually amazed at how suffering is used by some as Exhibit A against God, at the very same time as others, passing “through the fire,” eventually come out with faith strengthened and “tempered.”

On his sickbed, Donne writes, “Once this scourge has persuaded us that we are nothing of ourselves, may it also persuade us that you are all things unto us.”

In striking contrast to the verbal drizzle of those who promise health and wealth to the faithful, or to those whose “faith” is in consumer religion as long as it “meets their [most shallow] needs,” Donne reminds us that when God’s own Son on the cross “cried out, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ you reached out your hand [Lord,] not to heal his sad soul, but to receive his holy soul.” And Jesus surrendered his soul to his Father in trust.

Donne would recover. His sickness was not the plague. But before he knew the certainty of the outcome, he was certain of his hope: “Whether you will bid my soul to stay in this body for some time, or meet you this day in paradise, I ask not.”

But he wrote his confidence: “I can have no greater proof of your mercy than to die in you and by that death be united in him who died for me.”

Obedying the Apostle Paul’s admonition to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18) is not even a little easy. But if our lives show that our faith is in God—not in luck or our own power or circumstances—we will learn that easy lives and blessed lives are not the same thing. And it is not just our own faith and lives that will be strengthened, affirmed, and blessed by that trust.





## THE HOLIDAYS HAVE ROLLED AROUND FOR ONE MORE YEAR

Time moves at the same speed for us all, but don't tell that to a four-year-old awaiting Christmas.

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**A fine old gentleman** and member of the first church I served “solo” was pushing 80 years old pretty hard when he pointed his amazing mane of thick white hair in my direction and intoned, “Curtis, at this point in my life, it seems like Christmases roll around about once a week.” At 60, and with a head full of gray hair (not all white just yet), I’m beginning to see what he meant.

For a four-year-old, waiting a fourth of his life for Santa to come back seems like waiting for an eternity. For a 60-year-old, well, the holidays seem to roll around a lot more often, and I can well understand that, for an 80-year-old, they may seem to fly by like telephone poles past a car window.

But this 60-year-old still looks forward to them.

I like the holiday foods. I rarely get tired of turkey, and I almost never get tired of dressing loaded up with giblet gravy and cranberry sauce. (I love my wife’s family, but you have to watch those folks. A day or two after Thanksgiving, they get tired of turkey you can chew, somebody cranks up the food processor, and what’s left of the turkey-bird becomes turkey salad which no turkey would recognize as kin. That’s okay, but I like turkey better before it hits the fan.)

And Christmas foods? Ah, what’s not to like? I cooked for most of the holiday one year and made a Christmas meal I think Charles Dickens would have approved of complete with a stuffed goose, a plum pudding, and loads of trimmings. And cheesecake, too, which

doesn’t figure much into a Dickens Christmas, but always figures into mine. Chase dinner with a good hot cup of Earl Grey tea, a nice fire, a comfortable chair, and a great old movie or a better old book, and, well, I love it!

It’s great to be with family again for a few days—even if your family has grown, the house hasn’t, and you’re stacked at night like firewood. And speaking of wood, most family trees have a few nuts, but even us nuts like to be with folks from the same tree for a couple of days. It’s even better on those occasions when just about everyone arrives healthy and you have a fair chance of making it through the long weekend without the uncommonly prevalent common cold or a 24-hour stomach virus (that you’d swear lasts for a month) exploding through the family like a four-alarm fire at a fireworks factory. We’ve tried it that way. Healthy is much better.

Our family clusters over jigsaw puzzles (nothing less than 1,000 pieces, thanks) or spars over Scrabble (in a family filled with English majors, Scrabble opinions are deeply held and obscure words are precious, prized, prevalent, and must be proven). Little kids romp and wrestle and drive their parents crazy. Teenagers sit around and watch movies and finally go stir-crazy.

But I’m thankful for families, for food, for fun, and for the Giver of all good gifts who has so graciously given these. Yes, the holidays seem to be rolling around more quickly than ever, but I’m glad they still come.





## TURKEY, TOFURKEY, AND NO PARDON FOR THE WHITE HOUSE TURKEY

Thanksgiving is all about being grateful for God's good gifts; turkeys are among those good gifts.

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**After much deliberation** and serious soul-searching, I've come to a conclusion. If I'm ever elected president of these United States and Thanksgiving rolls around, I'm not pardoning the turkey.

I'm sorry if that flies in the face of tradition, but if it's ever up to me, that bird's a goner. If you disagree, fine. Pray all you want for a "stay of execution." My prayer will simply be that the white meat be as juicy and tender as the dark meat and that it not be overcooked.

As I write, our nation has been embroiled in a poultry scandal. A major supplier of eggs (chicken eggs, not turkey eggs) has come under fire for alleged cruelty to chickens.

I'm all for kindness to animals of all sorts. I don't even like the idea of anybody pulling the wings off of flies, though, with apologies to frogs and users of medical maggots, and admitting there'd likely be some negative ecological consequences, I'd be quite happy if they'd all die (flies, that is). "Suffer not a fly to live" is my motto. But I don't see any reason to be mean even to a fly before splattering its innards across a flyswatter.

On up the scale, I'd say chickens are even more deserving of kindness. Down with cruelty to cluckers! They should be free to lay their eggs in peace and tranquility. I'd like to think I'm eating an egg laid by a contented bird. Or a leg from a clucker that was happy as a clam before it went the way chickens were created to go.

But I wonder if I could be forgiven (probably not these days) for wondering how much actually registers in a chicken's very small

brain. When I was a kid visiting my grandparents at Robert Lee, Texas, I remember Granddaddy walking out the back door of the house and into the "pen." He deftly chased down a chicken, caught it by the neck, made a wish (maybe), twirled it the way he might have cranked the engine on a Model-T Ford, and off flopped the bird's head.

What happened next surprised me. The now-headless, brainless bird began to run wildly all around the pen. For chickens, at least for a little while, brains are evidently optional accessories.

I learned a good bit watching Granddaddy that day. I was a city kid. We bought chickens at the grocery store; we didn't catch them behind our house and personally dispatch them before they hit the frying pan.

Recently, some PETA folks (all city-bred, I'd wager) wanted the folks in Turkey, Texas, where my wife was raised, to renounce real turkey on Thanksgiving and rename the town Tofurkey for a week. It didn't happen. Folks from Turkey use their brains. They know what turkey is for, and they know that tofu ain't turkey. So, no Tofurkey.

Thanksgiving is all about being grateful to God for his good gifts. Turkeys are among his good gifts, and my gratitude for them reaches its highest point at the moment I'm eating them and thereby ensuring that many, many more will be produced than if we declared them off-limits and gorged ourselves on tofu.

So, no pardon for turkeys during the Shelburne administration. No tofu, either. We're supposed to be thankful "in all circumstances," but I think eating tofu at Thanksgiving would make gratitude at the meal a great deal more challenging.



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## LAUGHTER IS GOD'S GIFT TUCKED INTO WARM HEARTS

It is no accident that tyrants, bureaucrats, and Pharisees are terrified of the power of this amazing gift.

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**Laughter.** It is both healing salve for our souls and the most potent weapon against “pious puffery.”

Laughter’s very existence ranks as one of the highest tributes to the Creator’s skill and a delightful glimpse into the character of the Divine.

What kind of God do we have? One who delights in creating flightless birds like ostriches even as he makes squirrels that can fly. We have a God who sends his Son to poke fun at the pious who point out specks of sawdust in folks’ eyes while looking around 2 x 4s in their own. He laughs at those who scrupulously wash the outside of their plates but leave remnants of last week’s dinner sprouting mold inside those same dishes.

What an amazing blessing when at the very moments we begin to take ourselves too seriously—always proof that we’re not taking God seriously enough—our Creator sends some good-hearted soul into a dour committee meeting or to a cheerless table. God sneaks in some joy, tucking it into a warm human heart and springing it on us by surprise.

Wonder of wonders, just one good chuckle, the precursor of a tsunami of laughter, suddenly washes across our souls, and what moments before was a corpse-like meeting or lifeless meal desperately in need of burial, suddenly lives.

Eyes were glazing over. Backs were bending under a weight of pomposity. Grace was in danger of literally being ruled out. Then out

of a healthy heart, a laugh erupts and the previously flat-lined EKG of the meeting peaks up into a mountain range of life and mirth. Against all odds and often even against propriety—since laughter was on no one’s agenda (except perhaps God’s)—breath returns, scales drop from eyes, and something like vision, and maybe even hope, bursts onto the scene, defying all of the best bureaucratic and sanctimonious attempts to keep real life and joy locked outside.

It is no accident that tyrants, bureaucrats, and Pharisees are utterly terrified of joy. Its shining spire, laughter, is the visible tip of an iceberg that, ironically, melts good hearts even as it plunges sanctimonious souls (sanctimony is a very heavy thing) down to a watery grave.

When I slip into taking life too seriously and even the dog ducks when she sees me coming, I like to spend time with 1) kids, and 2) authors who are truly good at thinking and at laughing all at the same time.

Author G. K. Chesterton had a world-class laugh and a universe-class pen. No one has ever turned a phrase like the rotund “apostle of common sense.” I just read a piece by Ron Ratliff recalling an incident when Chesterton was having trouble getting into a horse-drawn cab. The cabbie suggested that he try turning sideways. Chesterton responded, “I no longer have a sideways.” I’m told that he distrusted cold, hard, thin people. Me, too.

When life is getting hard and cold and pitched sideways, God’s gift of laughter, straight from our Father’s heart of joy, lifts it right-side up.





## “SHORT WORDS ARE BEST” AND THREE ARE BEST OF ALL

How could we not feel the life of the best  
three words pulsing all around us?

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“Short words are best,” asserted Winston Churchill, “and the old words when short are best of all.”

So may I suggest three—very short and very old—which when lined up and strung together are the best three that could possibly be: GOD IS LOVE.

These words are chiseled into the rock, woven into the fabric, of the universe. More than that, if anything could be more, they are living and implanted by the Author of life into its every cell, resonating in every breath and heartbeat. How could we not feel the life of those three short words pulsing all around us? Ah, perhaps in part because they are so much around us that we live in them and swim in them like fish enlivened by but largely oblivious to the very thing that gives them life.

God is love.

Note that in this short, old, and every morning new, equational sentence, the verb, the multiplier, and the fulcrum is IS, to BE. Yes, eternally. And, yes, of course, the “great I AM” will always be and will always be exactly what God always is, love.

Those three words mean that as long as our Father wills the universe to be, the stars to twinkle, the worlds to spin—if packed in every grain of sand on every sea-washed beach were a million years and all of those mini-mega-grains were stretched across creation at attention in single sand-soldier file—the dance of the cosmos,

the symphony of space, and the music of the spheres, will still play on because God is GOD, and God always IS, and God will always be LOVE.

The order of the short word-cars on this magnificent train matters immensely. “God is love” is a breathtaking stream flowing with the life of the Creator and wash-singing, joy-splashing, over every rock and crevasse of the universe. “Love is god” is an idolatrous sludge defiling its worshipers and leaving a black trail of death, desolation, and the tears of despairing children in its sad and slimy wake. The first sings with the life of the Creator; the latter stagnates and festers in the stench of death-ridden darkness.

And, yes, in a fallen, sin-sick, and sadly twisted world, darkness is real and too often seems utterly pervasive. But no eclipse is forever. The sun’s corona glows around the blackness, impatient to blaze again unfettered, and we have the promise of Eden’s Creator that one day unending joy will again be the watchword of the universe. The first Adam fell, and we see the wreckage and the pain, but Adam’s word is not the last.

Why not? Because of the three short words that find their fruition, culmination, and crowning glory in the one Word who “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Does it sometimes, even often, seem unbearably dark? One Word “shines in the darkness” and will banish it forever, all because of the three short words: God is love.



## MEMORIES, THE FEED STORE, AND THE “AROMA OF CHRIST”

God loves the fragrance that surrounds  
lives being saved by Christ.

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**They say that our memories** and our sense of smell are intricately and inextricably connected. I’ve always found that to be true.

This morning I happened into our local feed store to pick up a bag of bird seed for the doves and quail I keep out in my “bird house,” an aviary I built out in our back yard. If there is an inconsistency in my taking care of those doves and, in season, shooting and eating others, well, I’ve had no trouble making peace with that.

Anyway, I walked into the feed store and was instantly transported back to Robert Lee, Texas, and the Key Feed Store, the business my uncle and, later, my cousin ran there. Granddaddy raised and trucked sheep and cattle; the feed store was also a big part of his daily life.

One whiff of that good sweet-smelling substantial air, and the memories washed over me. Cowboys and coffee, equally strong. Ranchers buying feed but also chewing and whittling, catching up on news of neighbors and friends. Ace Reid “Cowpokes” cartoons tacked to the wall. Pallets of feed sacks stacked way higher than my young head. Trucks to be unloaded. Cousins who knew a whole lot more about how to do that than my little brother and I did but who were willing to be helped and thus contribute to our education. Creaking wood floors. Checker board red and white painted Purina squares. A gas fire to back up to. A dog on the porch. And pickups lining the curb. Yes, one whiff and it all came back.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 2:14-16), he painted word pictures playing on the memory of

Roman victory processions. The triumphant general would lead his soldiers and their captives parading through streets lined by cheering crowds. Sweet-smelling spices were burned in the streets, and the smells and the sounds and the sights of victory filled the air—and wafted into everyone’s memories.

God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” and has all he needs to feed them. Maybe Heaven’s throne room doesn’t boast the sweet smell of feed, though I’ll bet our Creator likes that smell, too. But Paul says God loves the fragrance, the aroma, that surrounds the lives of those being saved by Christ. Every whiff reminds the Father of his Son.



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## “IT’S A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD”

And in the air is the “exquisite fragrance” of Christ’s love, presence, and indwelling.

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**Well, as Mr. Rogers** used to remind us so well, “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood . . . It’s a neighborly day in this beautywood . . .”

Aye, and so it is!

It’s cold and clear, still and beautiful. An inch or so of white stuff blankets the ground. The sun is shining, blazing and brilliant crystal. And as the cloud blanket that had tucked us in has pulled away from the chin of my part of the world, the temperature has dropped into the single digits.

Though I fussed yet again this year about the price of firewood (partly embarrassed, I think, that as an able-bodied guy I’ve not been able to just get out this year and cut my own; my chain saw may soon rust), I’m glad I got it bought, loaded and stacked last week and ready to go! And, not intending to disparage other folks’ addresses, I’m so glad I don’t live in a place where fireplaces are purely decorative. Mine’s going strong.

But I keep stepping outside onto the porch. Cold, crisp air is the very best sort for breathing. It reminds you that you’re alive. And if there’s a smell that makes a person happier to be alive than the sweet aroma of burning New Mexico piñon, I don’t know what it would be.

The folks I bought my oak firewood from ease the pain of the purchase (a little) by sacking up ends and pieces of piñon (for kindling) and tossing them into the bargain. What a fragrance!

But that’s the wrong word! “Fragrance” implies frou-frou (“fru fru,”

if you’re Portuguese). Forgive my grammar, but the aroma of piñon ain’t dainty; it’s strong and sturdy and bold. It makes you want to go out and cut three or four cords of wood, eat three stacks of pancakes, and then go out and saw through and stack about six more. Cords, that is. I try to pace myself on piñon sniffing lest I gain thirty pounds or be tempted to strain a muscle while I’m under its influence.

I’m told that smell is closely tied to memory, and I believe it. For me, piñon has a Thanksgiving and Christmas sort of smell.

Snow’s on the ground. A fire’s laid in the hearth. I get to sing for a Thanksgiving banquet tomorrow. Christmas singing—my favorite kind—is just a heartbeat or two away. And I’m smelling piñon.

This is good.

I’m reminded of the Apostle Paul’s sweet phrase, “the aroma of Christ.” And I love the way Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases the apostle’s words in 2 Corinthians 2.

We’re told that wherever Christ’s people go, God brings the “knowledge of Christ” and “people breathe in the exquisite fragrance.” It’s because of Christ’s presence that “we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation.”

Contrary to popular belief, it is what is evil and doomed to perish in this world that gives off the smell of death. What Christ brings, the apostle says, is “an aroma redolent with life.”

Better even than piñon!





## WHIFFLE SNIFFLES, A LITTLE LAD, AND A THANKSGIVING TALE

A grandfather. A grandson. A rocking chair.  
And a sweet memory from a fine Thanksgiving.

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**It wasn't much of a tale**, the story I told a tearful little tired-out almost-two-year-old as I rocked him to sleep for a nap on the Friday after Thanksgiving.

A little nap and a little sleep were what little Garrett's parents and grandparents had in mind for my wee grandson, though he didn't think much of the idea. Mom and Dad are quite capable of getting the job done, but I don't get a chance to rock this little guy nearly as often as I would like, so, although I could have wished that the lad was somewhat quieter and less tear-stained at the hand-off, the rocking chair beckoned and I asked for the task.

Since he was crying already, I figured the worst thing that could happen would be continued or ramped-up crying. And I like rocking.

Come to think of it, one of my sweetest memories from last Christmas was holding that same sweet munchkin (smaller but in the same tired-out and teary condition) as we both rocked to sleep in the glow of the lights from the Christmas tree. I was soon 90% asleep and almost faded out before he did. When PawPaws rock little grandpeople to sleep, that's always a real possibility.

So . . . I launched into a story about Gar-Bear's tree house. (We often call Garrett "Gar-Bear," "Gar" rhyming with "Bear.")

It seems that in Garrett's yard was a beautiful tree with its spreading leaf-draped branches open so wide that it was crying out, "Gar-Bear, put a tree house in me!"

Sniffle! Pause. Yowl! Sniffle! Howl! [Breath.]

"[Breath]" seemed like a good time for me to describe the hammer and nails, the wood, and the tools used in building Gar-Bear's tree house, so I did, and as we got started building the floor, howls and yowls tapered off a bit.

Sniffle! Sniffle! [Breath.]

From the "in the air" ground floor, we moved on up to the walls, complete with some nice windows (not much point in a tree house you can't see out of), a roof, and a railed observation deck [Sniffle! Pause . . .] with a working non-toy telescope.

A whiffle sniffle just as I was beginning to describe how Gar-Bear's tree house can morph into a ship at sea, a castle on the moor, and more fine things. But then . . .

Silence. Gentle breaths with an occasional tiny post-storm mini-shudder. Then complete calm and "all is well" as our rocking chair rounded the outer banks and sailed into the land of Nod.

In future stories, I'm pretty sure that Gar-Bear's tree house will indeed become a vessel at sea. We'll see. (Possibly crewed by Garrett and eight or more cousins.) Or it might be fun to have the tree talk and give suggestions to the little builder about the magic house being built in its branches.

But writing this story about that story and my sleeping grandson is making this grandfather sleepy again. I love the way the little guy settled down in my lap. I think I'll take a page out of his book and plot a course toward my pillow and my Father's arms, in deep gratitude for some sweet rest following a really sweet Thanksgiving.

Who knows? My Father may tell me a story while I'm snuggled down into his warm embrace.



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