



THE DOOR . . .

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**WIDELY
OPEN**

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JOE R. BARNETT

**THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal**

Preface



Curtis Shelburne

The “younger son” in Jesus’ famous parable grabbed his inheritance early, slamming the door in his father’s face. It did not take the prodigal long to waste his wad. Fed up with mud and pigs, but wiser, he remembers his home, his father. As Dr. Joe Barnett reminds us in this issue comprised of his fine essays, when the young man “comes to himself,” he goes home. The door is open. And his father runs to wrap him up in genuine love.

THE DOOR

Was WIDELY OPEN



Curtis Shelburne

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“My son

is here—given up
for dead and
now alive!
Given up for lost
and now
found!”

* The Father
Luke 15 (The Message)

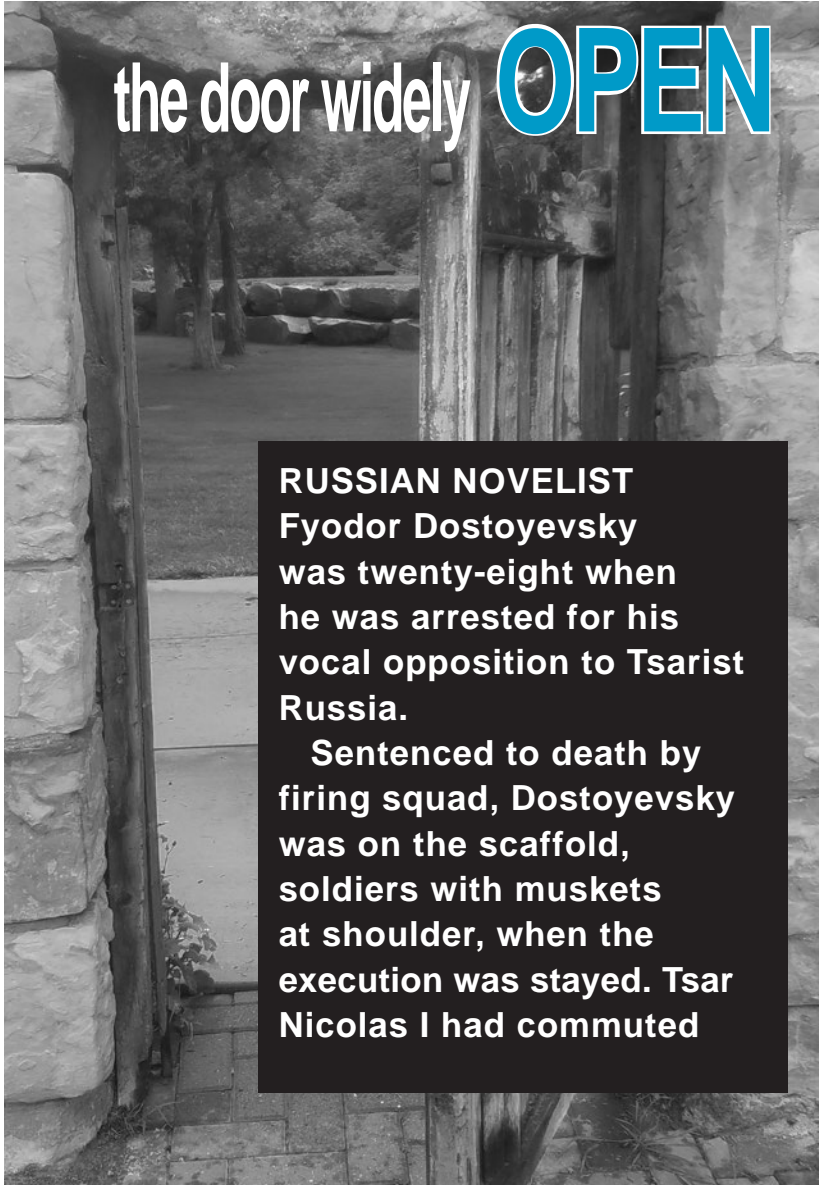
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the door widely OPEN

RUSSIAN NOVELIST Fyodor Dostoyevsky was twenty-eight when he was arrested for his vocal opposition to Tsarist Russia. Sentenced to death by firing squad, Dostoyevsky was on the scaffold, soldiers with muskets at shoulder, when the execution was stayed. Tsar Nicolas I had commuted

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his sentence to ten years of exile, four of them in the prison camp in Omsk, Siberia.

At a way station en route to Omsk, a woman slipped a small New Testament into his hand.

During his exile, "he studied the precious volume from cover to cover, pondered every word; learned much

of it by heart," said his daughter. "Throughout his life, he could never be without his old prison Testament, the faithful friend that had consoled him in the darkest hours of his life. He always took it with him on his travels and kept it in a drawer in his writing-table, within reach of his hand."

The Parable of the Prodigal Son touched

him deeply. That story, above all others, revealed to him the heart of the Father. Even in the dismal environment of Siberian exile, he wrote: "God gives me moments of perfect

"GOD GIVES ME MOMENTS OF PERFECT PEACE; IN SUCH MOMENTS I LOVE AND KNOW THAT I AM LOVED."

peace; in such moments I love and know that I am loved."

The prison was unimaginably depressing. "In the summer it is unbearably hot," he said, and "in the winter unbearably cold. All the boards are rotten. On the ground filth lies an inch thick . . . The small windows are so frozen over . . . the ice on the

panes is three inches thick. We are packed like herrings in a barrel. The atmosphere is intolerable: the prisoners stink like pigs: there are vermin by the bushel: we sleep upon bare boards.”

“THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON ASSURES US THAT THE LOVING FATHER KEEPS THE DOOR WIDELY OPEN.”

No wonder the Parable of the Prodigal Son impressed him: Siberia was his far country; the prison his pig pen. “It was amidst those stern and awful solitudes that he, a homesick and penitent Prodigal, found the road that leads to the Father’s house,” wrote F. W. Boreham.

In all of Dostoyevsky’s books, there are references

to the words of that worn New Testament in which he discovered the Father’s love for his wayward children.

In her book about her father, Aimee Dostoyevsky told how his wife, Anna, knew when he was near death. The children gathered. “Taking our hands in his,” she wrote, “he

had my mother read the Parable of the Prodigal Son.” With faltering voice, she read the story from the faded and tattered Testament that had been his constant comfort and companion.

“My children,” he said, “never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God and never despair of His pardon. I love you dearly,

but my love is nothing compared with the love of God. Even if you should commit some dreadful crime, never despair of God. You are His children; humble yourselves before Him, implore His pardon, and He will rejoice over your repentance, as the father rejoiced over that of the Prodigal Son.”

A few minutes later, at 8:38, he died quietly, holding Anna’s hand.

Author Susan Hill noted the time of his death—8:38—and said, “Perhaps it’s no coincidence that Romans 8:38 says: ‘For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from

the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’”

Ralph Connor, in *Sky Pilot*, tells of a young man who deserted his Christian home in Scotland and beat a path to a far country of sin and shame. As he lay dying an early death due to his debauchery, he read a letter from his mother that had come to him that day. It ended: “And oh! Davie laddie, if ever your heart should turn homeward, remember the door stands widely open.”

That is the touching message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: the loving Father keeps the door widely open, and the angels of God gather to joyfully welcome the prodigal who repents and returns.



you stumbled... now **WHAT?**

MY SONG LEADER and I were perched on the front pew, prepared to lead the congregation in song and sermon after communion, which was being served from the platform seven steps up. Beginning his descent with trays of filled cups, our server tripped and launched into a headfirst dive, zeroing in on

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two petrified parsons and a cluster of die-hard down-fronters.

Nothing damages dignity like taking a tumble. Just ask someone who's doused a half-dozen communicants with grape juice with two thousand pairs of eyes watching.

Stumbles of a more serious sort aren't uncommon among God's chosen: think King David, or the Apostle Peter.

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of David? His character collapsing blunder with Bathsheba? Did that end his story? By no means! There are 150 psalms in your Bible; David wrote half of them. God said of him: "I have found David . . . a man after my

own heart" (Acts 13:22).

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Peter? His weak-kneed, triple denial of Jesus? Did that end his story? By no means! He

"NOTHING DAMAGES DIGNITY LIKE TAKING A TUMBLE. . . . STUMBLES ARE NOT UNCOMMON AMONG GOD'S CHOSEN."

was the keynote speaker on Pentecost, was chosen by God to open the door of the Kingdom to Gentiles, and wrote two of the letters in your New Testament. Peter refused to live out his life in the shadow of shame.

Biblical portraits of its characters are painted just as they were: no stumble, scar, or sin—however distasteful or

disappointing—is air-brushed out. There they are, failing and falling in full view of their peers and all future generations.

But their get-up-and-get-back-on-track deeds are

“SPIRITUAL STUMBLES CAN BE DEVASTATING. BUT STUMBLING IS A STUBBORN FACT OF LIFE. IT HAPPENS.”

there, too. Their flubs are mid-story, not end-story.

Spiritual stumbles can be devastating. But stumbling is a stubborn fact of life. It happens. Have you ever tripped and taken a tumble? Sure you have. You wish like crazy you hadn't done what you did. But you did . . . and now you have to deal with it.

How?

Deal with it like David

did: regret it, repent of it, and confess it.

When David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord,” the immediate response of God’s prophet was, “The Lord has taken away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13). God fast tracks forgiveness of the penitent.

If you need a prayer-starter after a mess-up,

David left this one for you:

“Have mercy on me, O God, / according to your unfailing love; / according to your great compassion / blot out my transgressions. / Wash away all my iniquity / and cleanse me from my sin. . . . / Hide your face from my sins / and blot out all my iniquity” (Psalm 51:1–2, 9).

Deal with your sin like Peter did: face your failure,

repent of it, and devote the rest of your life to uncompromising faith in the Savior.

When many of Jesus’ disciples began deserting him, he asked the twelve, “Do you want to leave, too?” Peter said, “Lord, where would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One from God” (John 6:68–69).

The Lord honors your faith, notwithstanding your failings. Never forget that.

When you trip up, rush back in resolute faith, leaning full weight on this promise of Jesus: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me has everlasting life” (John 6:47).

God has never used anyone who hasn’t stumbled, for “we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2).

Nor has God ever used anyone who, after stumbling, didn’t get up and give it another go.



Curtis Shelburne

When God changed his **MIND**

HEZEKIAH was a good man.
He brought the nation of Judah back to God.
He refurbished the boarded up temple and opened it to worship.
He reestablished the service of the priests and Levites.
He reinstated the celebration of the Passover.
He pulled the plug on idolatry.

“Since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem” (2 Chronicles 30:26).

Of all the kings that descended from David, he was the greatest: “Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses” (2 Kings 18:5–6).

So it was a punch in the gut to him and the nation when his health went south. He was in his prime—only thirty-nine years old when he got sick. God sent Isaiah to him with

this terrifying message: “Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover” (2 Kings 20:1).

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed

“ HEZEKIAH TRUSTED IN THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL. THERE WAS NO ONE LIKE HIM AMONG ALL THE KINGS OF JUDAH.”

and wept. That touched God’s heart, and before Isaiah even got out of the palace court, the Lord told him to make a U-turn and beat it back to Hezekiah’s bedside and tell him He’d changed his mind: “I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. . . . I will add fifteen years to your life” (2 Kings 20:5–6).

God hears prayers and

sees tears. And sometimes he changes his mind.

When the Israelites badgered Aaron to make a god to lead them, Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law tablets.

“GOD DOES NOT ALWAYS INTERVENE AS WE’D LIKE, BUT HE ALWAYS HEARS OUR PRAYERS AND SEES OUR TEARS.”

God told him what his rebellious followers were doing, and said: “Now leave me alone so that my anger may turn against them and that I may destroy them.” Moses begged him not to. “Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. . . . Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had

threatened” (Exodus 32:11–14). Moses entreated, and God relented.

There are times when we think God should intervene, but he doesn’t, or so it seems to us. But he always hears our prayers and always sees our tears.

Have any of your prayers caused God to change his mind? Maybe.

Before Hezekiah got sick, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, was flexing his muscles and threatening to sack Jerusalem. Hezekiah laid the matter before God, and God did a number on the evil king: defended Jerusalem and destroyed Sennacherib. Why? “Because you have prayed to me,” he told Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:21).

It was soon after Sennacherib’s threat that

Hezekiah was waylaid with that terminal illness. Again he prayed, and God responded, saying he would patch him up and tack an extra fifteen years on to his life.

Prayer is powerful. So here’s your Prayer Power Pack for today:

“In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears” (Psalm 18:6).

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:12).

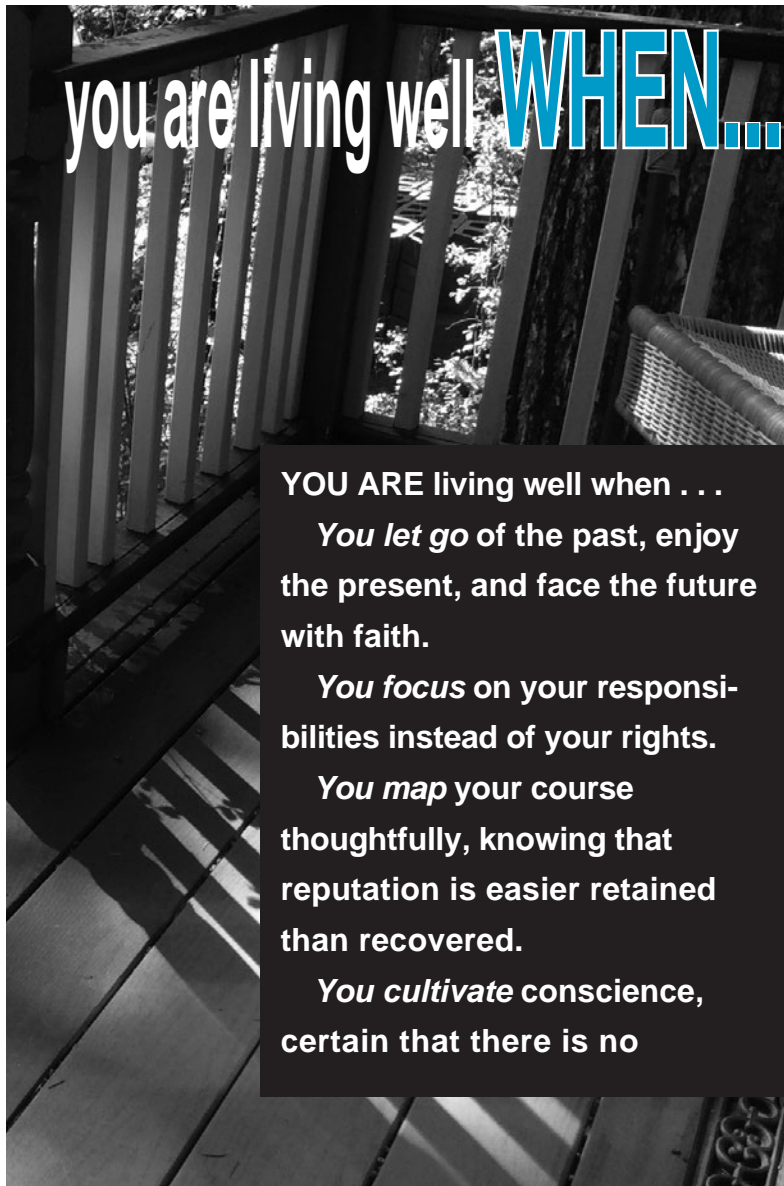
“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. . . . The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:13, 16).

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer” (1 Peter 3:12).

When Hezekiah prayed, God changed his mind and reversed the verdict.

When you pray, God hears. When you weep, God sees. Your prayer might even cause him to change his mind.





you are living well **WHEN...**

YOU ARE living well when . . .

You let go of the past, enjoy the present, and face the future with faith.

You focus on your responsibilities instead of your rights.

You map your course thoughtfully, knowing that reputation is easier retained than recovered.

You cultivate conscience, certain that there is no

right way to do a wrong thing.

You don't do it if you feel a need to hide it.

You "trust in the Lord with all your heart" (Proverbs 3:5).

You remember that nothing big ever results from being little.

You "treat others as you want them to treat you" (Luke 6:31).

You "look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).

You nourish your faith, confident that when you feed faith, fear starves.

You avoid procrastination, aware that you never finish what you never start.

You embrace today as a new beginning, mindful

that yesterday died last night.

You control your emotions, understanding that your mood is not determined by circumstances, but by how you

"YOU ARE LIVING WELL WHEN YOU NOURISH YOUR FAITH, CONFIDENT THAT WHEN YOU FEED FAITH, FEAR STARVES."

react to circumstances.

You realize that something needs to be done that won't be done unless you do it.

You live optimistically, assured that God "is able to do immeasurably more than all [you] ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within [you]" (Ephesians 3:20).

You affirm that God has made you good at

something, and live in confidence “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6).

You comprehend that happiness comes not from

“YOU ARE LIVING WELL WHEN YOU LEARN FROM THE PAST BUT REFUSE TO LET IT DEFINE YOUR FUTURE.”

the goods you have, but from the good you do.

You know that the greatest is not the one who is served, but the one who serves (Matthew 20:26–27).

You cultivate the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

You understand that you can’t change everything you face, but that you can’t change anything until you face it.

You jettison pessimism, realizing that negative thoughts never produce positive results.

You don’t let a failure define you, refusing to allow “I failed” (an event) to become “I’m a failure” (an identity).

You reject the impulse to let your attitudes and actions be dictated by the attitudes and actions of others.

You don’t get so wrapped up in what you are against that no one knows what you are for.

You refuse to poison today by worrying about tomorrow.

You “cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

You learn from the past, but turn thumbs down

on letting it define your future.

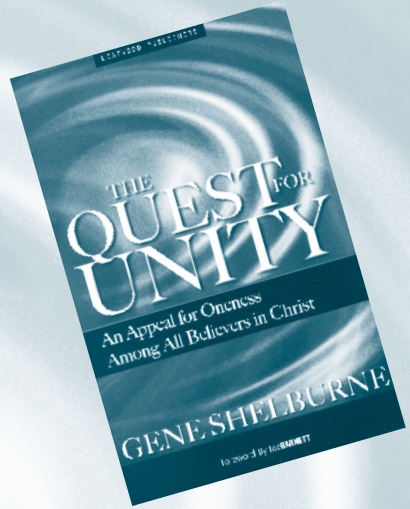
Live well, my friend.



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