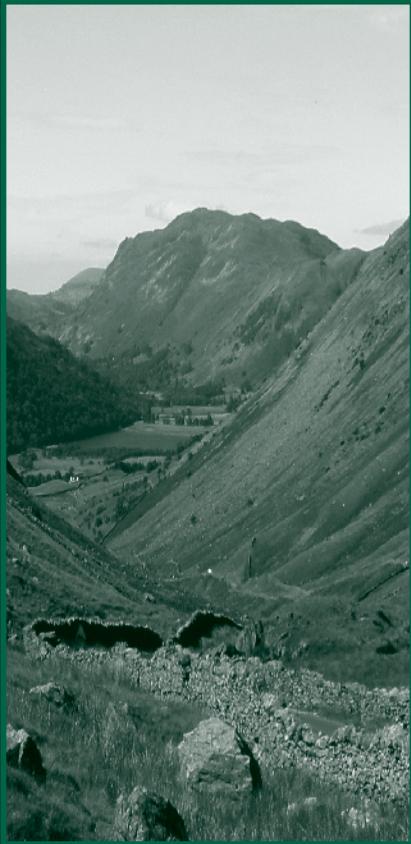


GOD WANTS TO BE  
YOUR FRIEND

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JOE R. BARNETT

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



John Gulley

**“G**race teaches us that God loves because of who God is,” writes author Philip Yancey, “not because of who we are.” Basking in that truth, the Apostle Paul asks, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). In this issue, Dr. Joe Barnett underlines these amazing truths—that God loves us and that God is on our side—and calls us to praise as we ponder the miraculous reality that the God of the universe wants to be our Friend!

## Christ Gave Up All THAT HE HAD



Curtis Shelburne

**H** He gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant. He became like man and appeared in human likeness.”

\* The Apostle Paul  
Philippians 2

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Curtis Shelburne

# God wants to be your **FRIEND**

**GOD WANTS to be your friend. That seems strange in a way because people of different social, educational, or economic levels seldom become close friends. Presidents don't generally pal with peasants. Research scholars don't normally fraternize with grade school dropouts. Seven-figure**

executives don't ordinarily socialize with the homeless. There are refreshing exceptions, but we usually form friendships with those who are like us.

If the bank president and the cleaning person seldom become close friends, it seems unlikely that God, who created the world, owns it, and keeps it ticking

would want to hang out with a gal who can't balance her checkbook or a guy who can't fix a leaky faucet. If well-heeled residents of SoHo shun down-and-out tenants of South Bronx, it seems doubtful that a flawless God would want to hobnob with a shabby sinner.

Doubts notwithstanding, God wants to be your friend.

He knew that would be a stretch, knew we would

find it hard to feel close to someone so superior—and seemingly so far away. So he took an astounding step to bridge the gap. Since we couldn't become like him and go to where he is, he became

**"GOD STEPPED DOWN FROM HIS THRONE, CHANGED INTO HIS WORK CLOTHES, AND MOVED INTO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD."**

like us and came to where we are. He stepped down from his throne, took off his robe, changed into his work clothes, and moved into our neighborhood. Philippians 2:7 tells us "he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like man and appeared in human likeness."

He wanted us to know that he knows how we feel. So he went through everything

we experience: birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood. Just like us.

He got hungry, thirsty, tired, lonely. Just like us.

He walked in our shoes and went nose-to-nose with

**“THE CROSS! THE FINAL BLOW. THE END. WHEN THE LAST NAIL WAS SET, HIS ENEMIES THOUGHT THEY’D DONE HIM IN.”**

the same temptations that we tangle with. Hebrews 4:15 says, “Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are.”

Everyone felt the sincerity of his friendship. Tiny tots and senile seniors. Winners and losers. Top guns and wayward sons. Crooks and cripples.

Prostitutes and puritans.

He was called a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19). And he was that. He was, in fact, the ultimate friend. He said, “The greatest love is shown when a person lays down his

life for his friends” (John 15:13).

And then he did just that—laid down his life for us, his friends. “He humbled himself

and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

The cross! The final blow. The end. When the last nail was set, his enemies thought they’d done him in. It sure seemed that way.

But they were wrong! This was his doing, not theirs. He chose to live—and die—for his friends. For me. For you.

It was his way of saying, “Let’s be friends. Best friends.”

Lloyd Ogilvie, Chaplain of the United States Senate from 1995 to 2003, told about an eight-year-old girl in a Pennsylvania orphanage who had been unimaginably abused. She was understandably distant and defensive. Shunned and bullied, she had no friends, not one.

One of the residents told a supervisor that she’d seen the little girl write a note to someone and hide it in a tree outside the stone wall surrounding the campus.

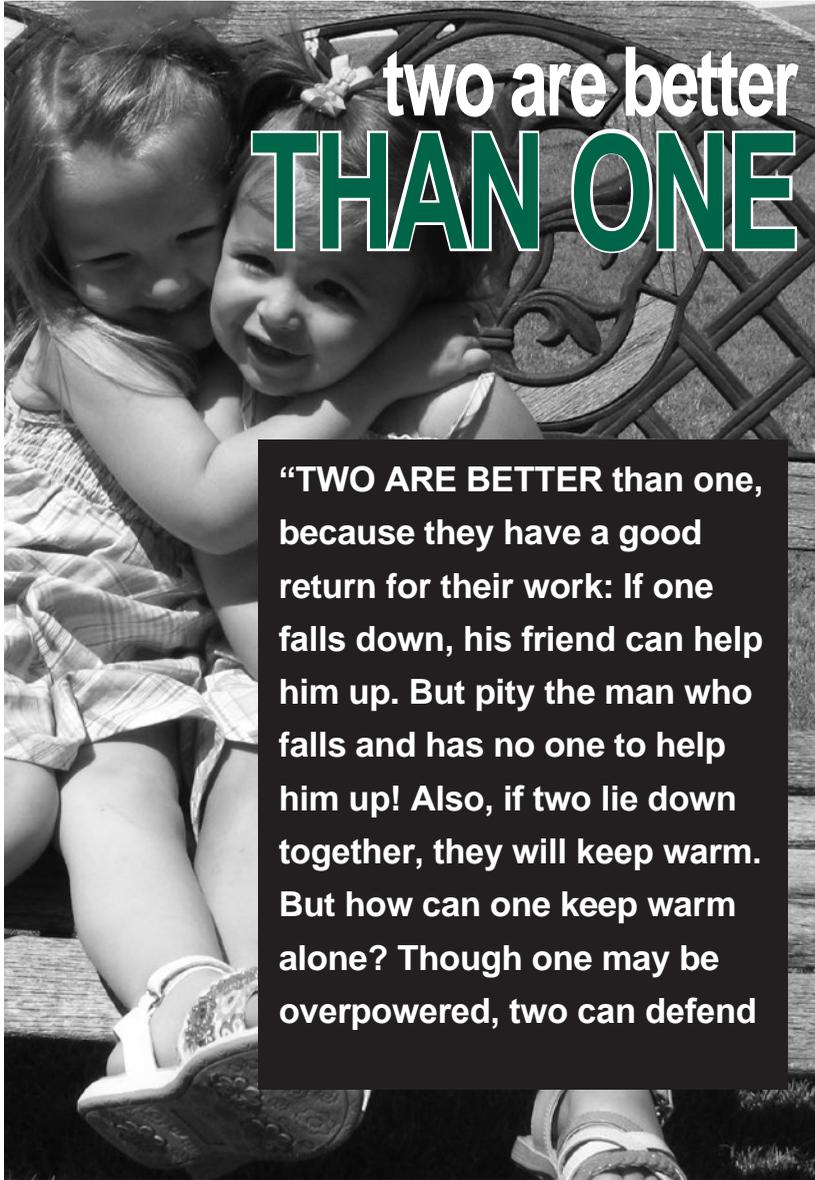
The suspicious supervisor

retrieved it, read it, hung her head and wept. The note, scrawled with a crayon, said: “To whoever finds this, I love you.” She so desperately wanted to connect with someone who would love her that she went outside the walls of the institution and left that note on a tree: “To whoever finds this, I love you.”

The enemies of Jesus took him outside the walls of Jerusalem and nailed him to a tree. A note on that tree has your name on it: “To whoever finds this, I love you.”



John Gulley



# two are better THAN ONE

**“TWO ARE BETTER than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend**

Curtis Shelburne

themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

*The first benefit of companionship is support:* “If one falls down, his friend can help him up.”

At a Special Olympics race—where children with disabilities were competing—a cute kid named Timmy quickly took the lead and was far ahead. He was nearing the finish line when he looked back and saw that his friend had fallen and hurt himself. Timmy stopped. People shouted, “Run, Timmy, run!” He ran alright—back to his friend. He helped him up, brushed off the dirt, and the two jogged together, arms around each other’s shoulders, coming in last.

How can you tell the difference between a

true friend and a so-so acquaintance? That’s easy: get in trouble. A true friend is a person you can call at two in the morning and tell her you need her. She doesn’t ask what the

**“A TRUE FRIEND IS A PERSON YOU CAN CALL AT TWO IN THE MORNING AND TELL HER YOU NEED HER.”**

problem is before deciding whether or not to come. She asks, “Where are you?” while she’s getting dressed.

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). Sooner or later trouble comes to all; it’s included in the price of the ticket to life. We need the support of others—and they need ours.

*The second benefit of companionship is comfort:*

“If two lie down together, they will keep warm.”

Travelers in Palestine often had to spend the night outdoors. From December to February the nights were often wet and cold. A hiker

“ALL OF US SKID THROUGH ICY PATCHES WHERE WE NEED THE WARMTH OF COMFORTING COMPANIONS.”

was fortunate if he traveled with a companion, because, “If two lie down together, they will keep warm.”

In 1957, Sam Rayburn—the longest-tenured Speaker of the House of Representatives—learned late one night that a friend’s teenage daughter had died in an accident. Early the next morning Sam walked through his friend’s front door, went to

the kitchen, and started making breakfast. The surprised father said, “Mr. Speaker, I read that you and Senator Johnson were to have breakfast with the president at the White House this morning.”

“We were supposed to,” Sam said, “but I called the president’s secretary

and told her to tell the president that I have a friend who’s suffered a terrible loss, and I have to be with him; I can’t come to the White House for breakfast.”

It’s a cold world at times. All of us skid through icy patches where we need the warmth of comforting companions.

*The third benefit of companionship is*

*protection:* “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

In Old Testament days, combat was mostly hand-to-hand. Soldiers went into battle with a partner they trusted. The two stood back-to-back, ready to take on an enemy coming from any direction. We all need a friend who has our back.

A cord of three strands may mean that when two stick together, they can do the work of three.

Or it may mean—and probably does—that the Lord joins the twosome: “Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20).

The companionship of supporter and Savior is peak protection.



Curtis Shelburne



# the proximity EFFECT

**SOONER OR LATER  
nearly every church is  
contaminated by contention.  
Like cancer, it infiltrates  
furtively at first and  
goes undetected. But  
eventually, it metastasizes  
and permeates the body,  
resulting in severely  
depleted strength.  
Or death.**

Curtis Shelburne

Paul used a lot of ink exhorting Christians to encourage one another, build each other up, love one another. He was following up on Jesus' instruction: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

Satan's most effective tactic for destroying a church is to infiltrate it with those who are divisive. He chooses intruders carefully: they are often persuasive, charismatic, invariably wearing a mask of love.

And they are toxic!

Don't ever be influenced by destroyers of unity. They are

contagious—a hazard to your spiritual health. "I urge you, brethren," wrote Paul, "note those who cause division . . . and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

**"SATAN'S MOST EFFECTIVE TACTIC FOR DESTROYING A CHURCH IS TO INFILTRATE IT WITH THOSE WHO ARE DIVISIVE."**

If you give a sympathetic ear to the disrupter of unity, you become a partner in the crime of conflict. "Don't invite him in and give him the run of the place. That would just give him a platform to perpetuate his evil way, making you his partner" (2 John 10–11, MSG).

Paul counseled Titus that after trying twice, "have nothing more to do

with a person who causes conflict, because you know that someone like this is twisted and sinful” (Titus 3:10–11).

If you get sucked in by a divisive person, you will

**“THE ENVIRONMENT YOU CHOOSE SCULPTS YOU INTO ITS IMAGE. IT’S BEEN CALLED ‘THE PROXIMITY EFFECT.’”**

be polluted. Don’t bathe in dirty water.

Proverbs 6:16-19 tags seven things that are detestable to God, the final one being a person “who stirs up trouble among brothers.”

*Don’t give a divisive person the keys to your church.*

### **Friends or Foes?**

Now, let’s switch gears and talk, not about church

matters, but about those you hang out with.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, widely considered Germany’s greatest literary figure, said, “Tell me who you spend time with, and I will tell you who you are.”

You may think you’re strong enough to buck the pull of the profligate, but that’s naïve. The apostle Paul said it this way: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals’” (1 Corinthians 15:33, ESV).

The words and actions of those you spend time with influence your disposition, decisions, and direction. It goes both ways: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the

companion of fools will suffer harm” (Proverbs 13:20).

The character of your companions rubs off on you, for good or bad: work behind the perfume counter, and you’ll smell like perfume; work in the fish market, and you’ll smell like fish.

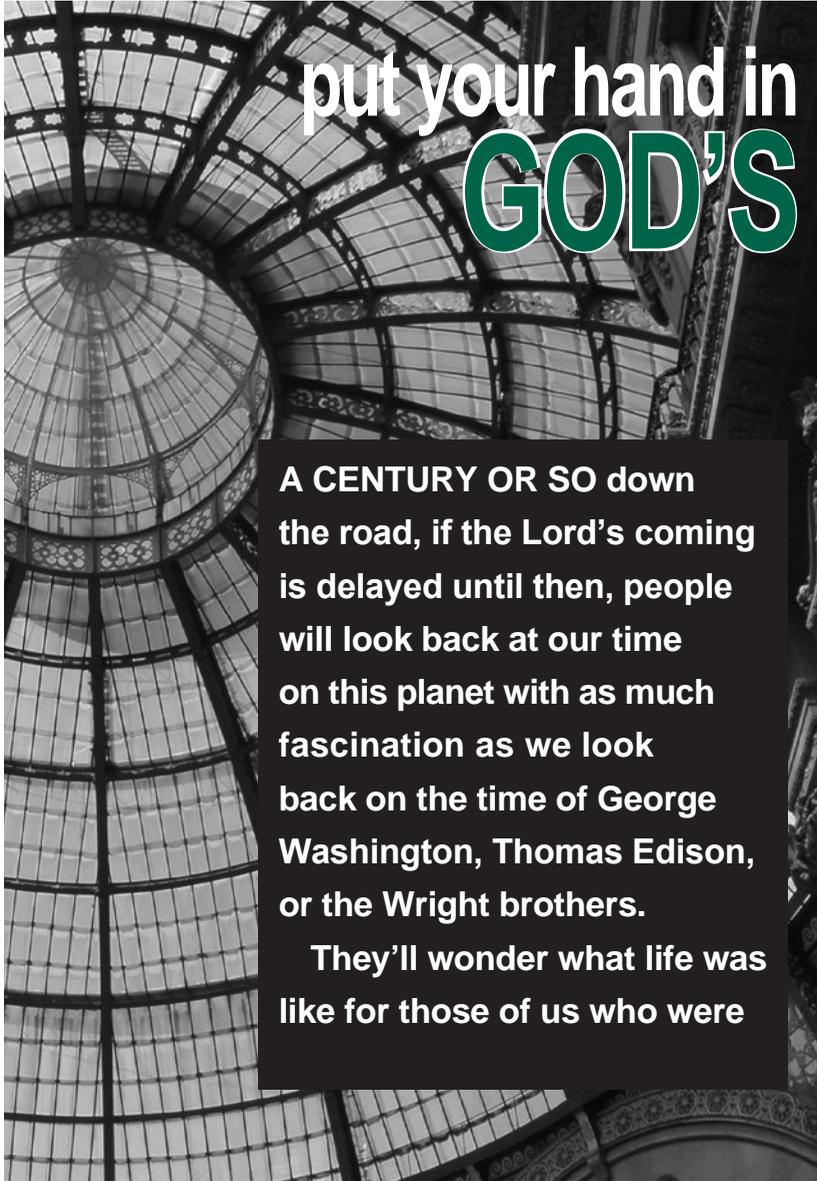
Ask this question about the company you’re keeping: Is this relationship moving me closer to the Lord or further from him?

Nor is it just about personal relationships. You are also influenced by what you read, what you watch, where you go. The environment you choose sculpts you into its image. It’s been called “the proximity effect.”

Choose your company carefully. “Oh, the joys of those who do not follow evil men’s advice, who do not hang around with sinners, scoffing at the things of God” (Psalm 1:1, TLB).



John Gullley



# put your hand in **GOD'S**

**A CENTURY OR SO down the road, if the Lord's coming is delayed until then, people will look back at our time on this planet with as much fascination as we look back on the time of George Washington, Thomas Edison, or the Wright brothers.**

**They'll wonder what life was like for those of us who were**

Curtis Shelburne

alive when John Kennedy was assassinated, Christiaan Barnard performed the first heart transplant, and Neil Armstrong became the first person to plant boots on the moon.

They'll wonder what it was like to ride in a car that required a human driver and to fly the friendly skies in a tube that required a human pilot.

They'll wonder what it was like before robots did the household chores, the refrigerator placed the grocery order, and ocean farming provided a big chunk of the world's food supply.

They'll wonder what it was like before 3D printers were as common and affordable as laptops, enabling ordinary mortals

to sculpt a pair of shoes or a new kidney.

They'll wonder what it was like before the DNA composition of patients was precisely mapped and medical treatment targeted

**"A CENTURY OR SO DOWN THE ROAD, PEOPLE WILL LOOK BACK AT OUR TIME WITH REAL FASCINATION."**

to each individual.

And they'll wonder what it was like in a world where average life expectancy was less than 100 years.

Fascinating!

But those of us living in the here-and-now have a full plate navigating the next twelve months.

So cheers to a new year and another chance to get it right.

It's too late to change

your past but not too late to change your future. At the beginning of a new year, you have 365 blank pages—each to be scripted with God’s guidance: “His mercies begin afresh each day”

**“AT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW YEAR, YOU HAVE 365 BLANK PAGES, EACH TO BE SCULPTED WITH GOD’S GUIDANCE.”**

(Lamentations 3:23, NLT). What plans does he have for you this year? Have you talked to him about that?

Time is beyond your control. You can’t bring it back once it’s gone. And you can’t stop its progress, can’t slow it down or turn it off. All you can do is use it. It’s like money in your pocket—you can spend it however you wish, but you can only spend it once.

With the flip of the last page of last year’s calendar, you buttoned down the end of what was and signaled the beginning of what is to be. You will be creating memories in this new year. Make them good ones.

A lot of things happened in 2018 that you weren’t expecting. The same will be true this year. But that doesn’t mean you

are left alone to helplessly face an uncertain future. “The steps of the godly are directed by the Lord. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will not fall, for the Lord holds them by the hand” (Psalm 37:23–24, NLT).

On Christmas Eve 1939, four months into the gloom of World War II, King George VI calmed jittery Brits in a BBC radio

broadcast. He closed his oration with the preamble to Minnie Louise Haskins’ “The Gate of the Year”:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

*“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”*

And he replied:

*“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better*

*than light and safer than a known way.”*

**So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.**

As the old year dies and the new one is born, surrender the old to history, and seek God’s guidance for the new.

Reach for his hand; put yours in his: “That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

Happy New Year!

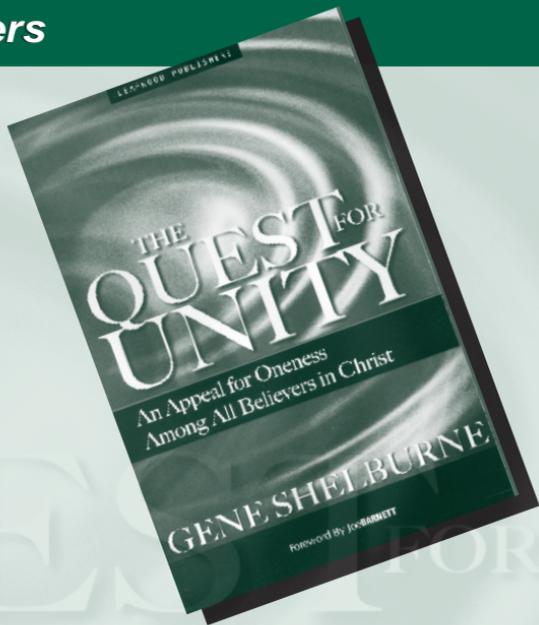


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