

FOCUS ON

faith

Essays by Curtis Shelburne

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THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



Curtis Shelburne

“Faith, like sight, is nothing apart from God,” wrote the wise little Quaker lady, Hannah Whitall Smith. “You might as well shut your eyes and look inside and see whether you have sight as to look inside to discover whether you have faith.” But if we trust in God, when we open our eyes to look at the world around us, we find that faith makes all the difference in the scope and depth of our vision. In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne again encourages us to “Focus on Faith,” to put our trust, our hope, in God.

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“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”

The Apostle Paul
Romans 3

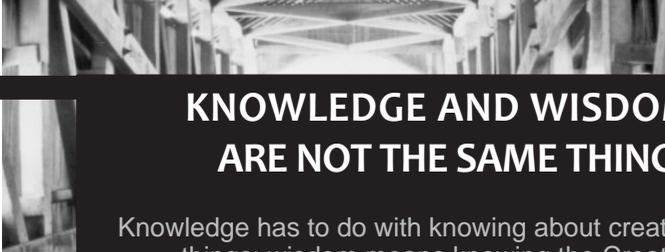


Dear Lord,
We praise you for the gift of your Son, the perfect Lamb who truly “takes away the sin of the world.”

Amen



John Guiley



KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM ARE NOT THE SAME THINGS

Knowledge has to do with knowing about created things; wisdom means knowing the Creator.

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Knowledge and wisdom are not the same things. As has been wisely observed, knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is knowing not to put a tomato in a fruit salad. On a deeper level . . .

Knowledge has to do with knowing about created things; wisdom means knowing the Creator.

Knowledge means knowing facts about the past in order to make a good grade on your history exam; wisdom means learning the lessons of the past to plot a course for the future.

Knowledge knows how to make stuff, lots of it really cool; wisdom means knowing how to use what is made for the best purposes.

Knowledge may think that simply knowing facts equals wisdom; wisdom knows that only the incredibly foolish ever think of themselves as being wise.

Knowledge is tempted to be arrogant, puffed up because of what it knows; wisdom lives in humility knowing that everything it knows is evidence of how very little it knows, even as it is always seeking to learn more.

Knowledge points to glitz and technology and cool engineering tricks to amaze and thumb its nose at the past; wisdom knows that the glut and the glitz of its age (industrial or technological or informational) makes it not one bit truly wiser than ages past.

Knowledge knows stuff—and lots of it; wisdom knows that what is true and real and lasting is rooted forever in the One whose existence

holds this world together, the only One who is constant, unchanging, forever true.

C. S. Lewis is the one, I think, who coined the term “chronological snobbery.” We are so easily—at all times and never more than now—tempted to think that increasing knowledge and information and, especially in our time, amazing technological advances, mean that we are wiser than those in all preceding ages. Really?

Oh, I love technology (and cool gadgets). I love being able to access incredible information at the click of a few keys. But wisdom is not dependent in the least upon technology, and burgeoning levels of information are no evidence at all of any increase in wisdom.

I may be afflicted with chronological snobbery in reverse. I can’t imagine how we can be such fools. Even ancient pagans, foolishly worshipping rocks and carved pieces of wood, were “wise” enough to worship something outside of themselves. How many of us today breathe God’s air, live on his spinning world, “thank” him by doubting, denying, or laughing at his existence, and crown our idiocy by worshipping ourselves?

In our arrogance, we seem to think that everything from our gender, to the multiplication tables, to whether up is up or down is down depend our mood or the latest opinion poll. After all, it’s 2019, and technology and information abound. Are we not wiser than all who’ve come before us?

No, we’re not. I wonder if any society has ever been more foolish. The Apostle Paul pointed to the cross and told the truth that “even the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1:25).





AN IMPORTANT QUESTION: WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

“Who you become while you’re waiting is as important as what you’re waiting for.”

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What are you waiting for? The truth is that most of us spend the vast majority of our lives waiting for something.

Maybe it’s a birthday. A vacation. A holiday. A graduation. A wedding. An anniversary. A retirement.

Maybe it’s when the baby is finally born, or the student loan (good luck waiting that out!) or car or house or business loan is eventually paid off.

You waited—even as you were working all the necessary hours and many more—to achieve that hard-to-reach business goal or rank. You waited—even as you trained, practiced, sweated—to finally earn that coveted professional certification. It took all of the knowledge, skill, and experience you possessed—and more—for you to finally finish that massive multi-year project, but you did.

Maybe what you’re waiting for right now is not warm or fuzzy, not exciting at all, but you’re waiting nonetheless. Waiting for the chemotherapy to be over once and for all. Waiting for the divorce to be final and that corner turned. Waiting to be dismissed from rehab and praying to keep the freedom you’re working so hard to find.

Waiting can be a big part of the adventure on the journey toward a goal. It can be a sweet blessing. Waiting can be the cask in which the draft is aged and infused with layer upon layer of flavorful complexity. It can be precious time, essential time. Waiting can be filled with anxiety as each day, each hour, each moment seems to bring its own ominous question mark. It can be excruciating.

Scripture overflows with examples of waiting and wait-ers. We read the amazing story of the patriarch Joseph and see him waiting in a pit, waiting in a prison, waiting, unbeknownst to himself, to save his family (and many more), bless the whole world, and be a major link in fulfilling God’s promise to us all.

How many long years did David wait before he actually began to reign as king of Israel?

In a rather negative example, we see a surly prophet named Jonah waiting for three interminable days in the belly of an oversized fish and then waiting, scowling, grinning, sweating on the top of a hill, hoping against hope that God might ditch mercy and scorch and destroy a city the Lord seemed determined to save.

Nine months of waiting became for the Virgin Mary precious, invaluable time.

Jesus himself waited for thirty years to begin his primary ministry and, as it began, spent forty days in the wilderness being tested and, I think we can also say, waiting.

Saul of Tarsus was stopped in his tracks on his way to Damascus by Christ and a blinding light. But becoming Paul the apostle also entailed spending three years in Arabia, waiting, learning, being molded by his Lord; the waiting was essential to what he would become and do.

Whenever you find yourself navigating an “in-between” time, a time of waiting, well, you may find that it’s actually priceless time God can use to shape and hone your life into a far richer blessing than it could ever be apart from the waiting.

Pastor and author John Ortberg’s words are wise: “Who you become while you’re waiting is as important as what you’re waiting for.”





THE SPOKES OF A WHEEL ARE NEAREST EACH OTHER AT THE AXLE

Worshippers closest to Christ, even in different
Christian traditions, are also closest to each other.

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My favorite columnist, Charles Krauthammer, passed away in June. When I (very often) miss his wit, wisdom, common sense, and uncommon command of the English language, I pull out his book *Things That Matter*, a compilation of some of his best columns.

One of those was written in 1999 shortly after *Time* magazine had named Albert Einstein as the “Person of the Century.” An “interesting and solid choice,” Krauthammer wrote, albeit a wrong one. “The only possible answer,” he continued, “is Winston Churchill.” Why? “Indispensability.” “Without Churchill, the world today would be unrecognizable—dark, impoverished, tortured.” Yes, it would.

Krauthammer noted that Einstein certainly possessed the “finest mind of the century” and was “deeply humane and philosophical.” He even said, “I would nominate him as the most admirable man of the century.” But indispensable? Churchill, not Einstein.

Krauthammer didn’t jump on into postulations regarding any other categories, but one that particularly interests me was settled long ago. The most influential Christian apologist of the 20th century? C. S. Lewis. An “apologist” in this context is a “defender” who writes to logically defend, make the rational case for, the truth of Christianity.

I wonder how many hundreds of thousands of people have read his classic *Mere Christianity*? And I wonder how many thousands of those have found it to be the catalyst God used to launch their journey into the Christian faith? (Charles Colson of Watergate fame was one of those.)

I’ve long thought that the preface of *Mere Christianity* is itself more than worth the price of the book. In it Lewis makes it clear that he is writing to highlight the beliefs held in common, all through the centuries, by those in the whole Christian “house.” He is not at all intending to discuss the differences of views from any particular room (denomination). And he wisely writes, “Our differences should never be discussed except in the presence of those who have already come to believe that there is one God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son”; otherwise, we drive people away.

Lewis goes on to note that before publication he sent the second section of the book, “What Christians Believe,” to four clergymen from four different Christian groups to be sure he was on track. A minor quibble or two, but yes, they said.

But the really interesting thing he discovered came from responses after publication. Any serious criticism seemed to come from “borderline people” not seriously involved in any Christian tradition. He actually found this rather “consoling,” an indication that it is “at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit . . . And this suggests that at the centre of each there is a something, or a Someone, who against all divergencies of belief, all differences of temperament, . . . speaks with the same voice.”

Are we surprised? A point far out on the spoke of a wheel is farthest from the other spokes. The center point of the whole “wheel” of Christianity is Christ. Those nearest to the axle, whatever “spoke” they’re on, are closest both to their Lord and to each other.



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PANDAS, COMMAS, AND BIBLE TRANSLATION

English majors fuss about comma usage;
early Bible manuscripts had no punctuation at all.

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A useful and delightful aid for anyone who, attempting cogent communication, might like a rule or two about punctuation marks such as apostrophes or commas, Lynne Truss's best-selling *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* really is balm for the souls of English language "sticklers"—English majors, copy editors, writers, etc.—the sorts of folks who, lest the world fall into chaos, hold serious opinions as to whether or not the possessive of a proper noun ending in "s" requires simply an apostrophe or also another "s." Is it Curtis' or Curtis's? (I'm not sure I'm happy about it, but modern usage and rules tend strongly toward the latter; Truss does say, though, that the possessive of "Jesus" is always formed by adding the apostrophe only. Good.)

Even the title of Truss's (note the possessive) book makes me smile. Two pandas adorn the dust jacket. One is on a ladder inserting a comma after "Eats," and the other is walking away, two-leggedly upright, holding a pistol in one paw. You see, the installation, or not, of that comma matters. (And you can count me firmly in the camp of the "Oxford comma"—comma in a series—folks who'd argue that, if a comma after "Eats" is included, an additional comma after "Shoots" is also in order.) If you opt for a comma or commas, the panda in question is a full-bellied criminal on the run after assault with a deadly weapon. If you opt for no commas, he's simply being described as a typical panda.

This sort of thing doesn't just matter to pandas and fussy English majors. *Time* magazine has reported that a court in Maine recently awarded five million dollars to a dairy company's drivers because of "the lack of one

Oxford comma" in a list of their tasks "legally exempt from overtime pay."

Word folks have long found in commas potential for combat. Truss notes the good-natured but real battles between humorist James Thurber and *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross in the 1930s and 40s. Ross loved commas; Thurber eschewed them, opting for a star-spangled "red white and blue." Ross, the boss, would undoubtedly go for "red, white, and blue." Thurber opined that "all those commas make the flag seem rained on. They give it a furled look."

Oh, and here's a note to give one pause. (Why does that make me think of pandas' paws?) The earliest manuscripts of the Bible were written with basically no punctuation at all. The early manuscripts of the New Testament contained no punctuation AND were written in all capital letters. I survived two years of biblical Greek, which I've mostly forgotten, but we rarely messed much with capitals and, since I was never a fraternity member, I'm quite fuzzy on them. Throw me overboard into an ancient Greek manuscript, and I'd be completely at sea.

Everyone's job is more difficult than anyone else thinks, but Bible translators, a much-maligned and misunderstood lot, deserve combat pay and our undying gratitude. As Truss mentions, punctuation placement in English in Isaiah 40:3 determines whether "a voice" is "crying in [the midst of] the wilderness" or pointing toward the wilderness. Highly-educated translators are incredibly proficient at making good, wise, and defensible choices for such options, or letting us know in a footnote that "options exist, and here they are." (See the NIV note on Isaiah 40:3.)

We really needn't worry much about such. I think we can be very sure, and immensely thankful, that we have God's revealed Scripture and that folks whose job it is to worry about translation and thus punctuation, do, on the whole, an amazing job.

But don't try to tell those Maine dairy drivers, or pandas whose character is in question, that comma placement doesn't matter.





FAITH IS THE KEY TO ANY ENDURING FOUNDATION

Time rolls relentlessly on, but faith in God is real and sure, timeless in all times.

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If you know me, any of my three brothers, or, heaven help you, all of us, you know that our grandparents' old place in Robert Lee, Texas, is dear to our hearts.

Granddaddy Key built the house (where I'm presently writing) in 1928, and, long story short, in 1975, after Granddaddy had passed away and, partly to ease our Grandmother's mind as she made the transition to the nursing home just across the creek, my brother Gene bought the place. For seven years, it was occupied by various tenants whose rent helped pay for it, but, truth to tell, were otherwise about as helpful to home upkeep as goathead weeds in the once-pristine lawn.

In 1982, Gene was able to bid the last tenant, "Farewell, and don't let the door hit you in the tail section," and bring in some even less savory sorts—his three brothers. For those first years, we actually did some serious manual labor here, and the place eventually became such a showplace that, after we put carpet down, my younger brother and I became reformed characters and had to quit spitting sunflower seeds on the floor, sweeping up once at the end of the trip (good stewardship of time and effort). If anybody ever vacuums now, I've never caught him at it, but since nobody spits seeds on the floor, there's not a lot of need for persnickety housekeeping.

We love this place that, filled with wonderful memories, has affected our lives far out of proportion to its size and (nonexistent) grandeur. My brother Gene even wrote a great book about it (*The Key Place*, Leafwood Publishers, 2015), filled with the kind of lessons that perhaps a "key" place in your life might hold, too. The book's well worth the read!

Long ago, we got the place in nice enough shape that we love to come here, and (don't read too much into that conjunction) our loving and long-suffering wives are happy for us to come and even happier that they don't ever have to. For (gasp!) thirty-seven years, twice a year all together, we four brothers, all pastors, have been coming. For a number of sweet years before his death, our father, also a pastor, came with us. In short, the blessings we've received at this place can't be bought at any price.

I'm sitting at the old original table at the Key Place this Sunday evening. For maybe the second time in all these decades, I'm here first. The only other time I recall this happening, I walked in to find that some incredibly nasty insects had arrived first, been fruitful and multiplied, and taken up residence. It was like something out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. I engaged the enemy, my brothers later joined the battle, and we won. The post-traumatic stress has become manageable enough that I decided, these years later, to take a chance once more and get here first.

I'm glad I did. I unloaded my truck, sat for a while out near the unlit fire pit which will be wonderfully ablaze tomorrow night, and just breathed in the beauty of a deliciously cool and still autumn evening. The country still smells like the recent rain.

I finally came inside to sit at the old original kitchen table, think about what I might write for this column, and eat a quiet dinner. Of course, Grandmother's corn bread was not available. But the meal I brought chilled from the big city and enjoyed here by myself is a dish I don't suppose this table's ever hosted in its 90 years. I've eaten goat here with Granddaddy and family. But never sushi. Grandmother and Granddaddy would love my being here. I doubt they'd much appreciate the meal.

Time and tastes, years and generations, keep rolling on. But the deep faith in God that was the real foundation undergirding everything my grandparents built here is still real and sure, true and unchanging, timeless in all times.





WHY IS FINDING REAL REST SO DIFFICULT?

Not just our bodies, but also our souls, have a desperate need for real, genuine, and regular rest.

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Why is resting so hard?

One definition, “freedom from activity or labor,” surely makes “rest” sound rather appealing, maybe even like something we should try on occasion.

Just a brief Internet search will result in scads of wise quotations on the benefits of rest. Some sound almost like a sop to Type-A hyperactives who won’t say “Good Morning” unless it fits into their business plan and the utterance is duly scheduled. Charles Spurgeon was not among that group, but he told the truth when he said, “In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less.”

Some quotes are simple and wise: “Rest is not idleness,” wrote John Lubbock, “and to lie sometimes in the grass under trees on a summer’s day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time.”

Someone took a few of those words and, understanding our tendency to actually feel guilty if we ever rest (how incredibly dull, stupid, and full of ourselves we are!) wrote, “All rest is no more idleness than all sex is adultery.”

The research keeps stacking up. Sleep less than six hours a night for a couple of weeks and our performance scores will plummet, our blood sugar levels will rise, our waistline will expand, we will actually begin to show levels of psychosis, and (this one is my own observation) we might even begin to compulsively and irrationally tweet in the middle of the night. Run long enough without rest and someone in your family will be the “barometer” who first begins to reflect the stress and begin to be in “distress.” Count on it.

Oh, and by the way, the Creator of the universe thought rest important enough that he gave us a commandment along that line. Disregard the

truth at the heart of any of those Ten and a price will be paid. The principle at the heart of this one, no matter what pseudo-Bible scholars may say as they quibble about Sabbath, is no different.

Because he loves us, God tells us to take time to rest. Really rest. The kind of rest that means significant time for praying, playing, sleeping, filling up, soul-growing, recreating, thanking, breathing, not producing, just being. Taking time to rest may be one of the most faith-filled God-honoring activities of all as we follow his loving command, believe his promises, stop, and trust him to spin the world for a few hours without our help.

Let’s be honest. More often than not, we have a very hard time finding the kind of discipline it takes to intentionally pursue this kind of rest. Obstacles abound, mostly between our ears, but also many things not bad but just incredibly unbalanced in our lives.

Jobs. Especially the more we confuse what we produce with our value; the way we make a living, with our life.

Phones. The more panic we feel when we’re away from them for five minutes, the more desperately our souls need to be away from them for much more than five minutes.

Electronic “balls and chains” in general. Unplug!

And, oh yes, balls. All shapes and sizes. We’re masters at making even our “fun” with them a grueling amount of stress-filled work.

And have you noticed? We’re so terrible at resting that we often make even our vacations utterly exhausting, about as relaxing as a forced march in wartime.

Unless we’re in complete denial (we may be; addicts always are), the problem is obvious. I can’t prove it, but I suspect it lurks near the heart of much of the soul-distress, the depression, the lack of joy, the loss of purpose, and the fractured relationships littering so many lives. As individuals, families, and a society, we pay a staggering price for our refusal to listen to the One who made us, to take time to truly rest, to let our souls breathe.

We need his grace and power in all things—even and maybe especially to have the real strength and uncommon wisdom it takes to find and fill up on regular times of genuine rest.





“A TRUE FRIEND CONTINUES A FRIEND UNCHANGEABLY”

Our very best and most enduring Friend is
himself the pattern for true friendship.

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If I ever write anything wise—you know, the kind of pithy one-sentence bit of proverb-like wisdom that shows up in quotation books and on Internet “great quotes” sites, I hope I can avoid using any one word in the string that is detrimental to my proverb’s multi-century shelf life.

Sometime over 300 years ago, the Quaker leader and founding father of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, William Penn (1644-1718) wrote these wise words about genuine friendship: “A true friend unbosoms freely, advises justly, assists readily, adventures boldly, takes all patiently, defends courageously, and continues a friend unchangeably.”

That is so good! I wish I’d said it. From the depths of my unbosomed soul, I sincerely believe it. It’s just sort of a shame that, though these sweet words have been conveying an even sweeter truth for several centuries, and the English major in my soul says that the fourth word in is still a perfectly fine word, the third grade boy still alive in my head needs a swat in the tail section and the admonition, “Move on, lad!” lest he overindulge in snickers and mental immaturity.

Some morons just remove the one word from the quote, crippling the sentence. Others remove the word and its modifier and comma. To be fair to Penn, and accurate, they need to insert an ellipsis (formally known as “the three dotty thing”) to show they’ve snipped some words. But doing so, even that honestly,

costs the sentence a little punch, color, and truth.

You see, a true friend is one to whom you can genuinely share your soul, whether unburdening your bosom of a deep sorrow, doubling up to find the “two is better than one” brain power to squeeze the juice out of a prickly or fascinating life question, or allowing a joy to flower more beautifully precisely because joys burst into fullest bloom when shared.

And, yes, indeed, a real friend will tell you the truth in tough love lest the momentary warmth of soft words and falsehood lure you into soul-chilling peril.

A real friend will help you lift a burden that would be crushing to one.

A real friend will ride a real roller coaster with you even if she hates roller coasters. She’ll ride an emotional roller coaster with you for a while but will be wise and loving enough to know when to tell you to get off of it, quit living addicted to drama, and grow up. And love you still.

A real friend’s love and faithfulness lifts you to be better even when you’re going through times that are your worst.

A real friend will be patient in strong kindness, will “have your back” always, will defend you when you deserve it and love you and stand up as your friend even when you don’t. A real friend would rather be ridiculed for remaining true to a friend than be praised by those who change friends like they change shoes.

A real friend shares your joy when you or yours reap public praise, your sorrow when you or yours are stung by public shame, and loves you all just the same in good times and bad.

Come to think of it, is it any surprise that our best Friend and the best pattern for true friendship is the One who once told his disciples, “I have called you friends” (John 15:15) and loved them always? He is still our very best Friend.





WHEN GOD WALKS WITH US IN THE FIERY FURNACE

The most striking part of the story in Daniel 3
may not be found in the obvious miracle.

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One of the finest of many great gifts my mother gave me when I was just a little guy was reading to me. Most of all, she read me Bible stories.

Since I wasn't a declared English major in my youngest days (that came later), and since Mom was smart, she didn't, when I was little, read the stories straight from the King James or any other Bible version; she read them from a couple of really good Bible storybooks. I suspect that she also edited and embellished a bit as she went, at least in places where she found the storybooks a bit inaccurate or lacking.

The best thing about the storybooks (I still have them) was that they had great pictures. I still have those, too. They're tattooed into my brain and, unlike most tattoos, won't go out of style, leaving you with the equivalent of having your high school senior pic, coolness date long since expired, grafted onto your saggy bicep.

One of my favorite stories was from Daniel 3. It was the story of "Three Men in a Furnace." Pictured in the illustration was quite a mighty fire, and pictured in the fire are four fellows, not three. The text of both the Bible and the storybook agreed with the picture. (Read Daniel 3.)

We called them the "three Hebrew children." I don't know why. Children they were not. They were some of most impressive of the Israelites taken captive by the Babylonians. These three—renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (I liked the names)—were from Judah and had been specifically trained for service in the king's court.

I'm not sure how the three felt about their lot, but it could have been worse. Well, right up until the time when it got a lot worse.

King Nebuchadnezzar, suddenly afflicted by the kind of modern-as-tomorrow fit of megalomania that you've probably noticed powerful world leaders still regularly fall prey to, ordered a 90-foot-tall, gold-plated idol to be built. When he struck up the band, all of his people were to bow, nose down in the dirt, or else be tossed into a furnace of fire.

You really should read the story. I'm abbreviating ruthlessly as I just tell you that our three men of faith didn't need more than the one God, would not worship the idol, and, after they courteously and consistently defied the king's order, were thrown into a turbo-charged fire where they were joined by a strikingly glorious fourth figure. They came away unharmed, un-toasted, and highly respected. And ol' King Neb learned an important lesson from the highest King.

Oh, I loved that story of great faith in action and of God's salvation and power. I still do. The outcome is utterly amazing.

But I think that now the most striking part of the story to me is not the obvious miracle but is found in what those three heroes actually said to the king as they affirmed their faith. The "God we serve is able to save us," they said, but "even if he does not, we will not serve your gods."

Even. If. He. Does. Not.

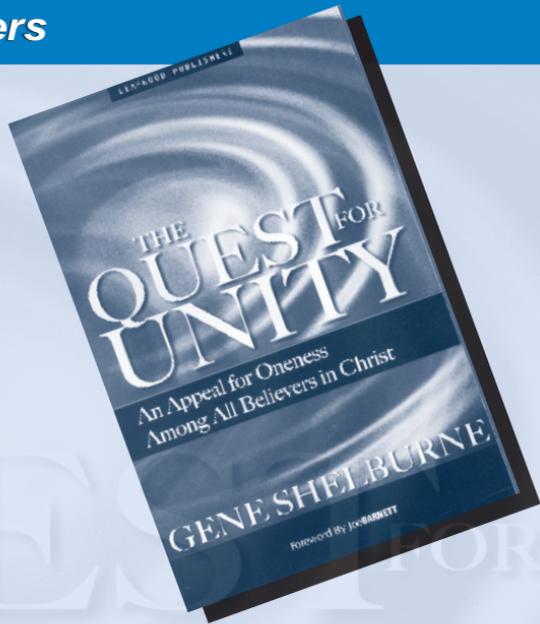
God may give me exactly the answer to my prayer that I want. He may amaze and astound me. But you tell me which takes greater faith: to see the fourth figure present in the fiery furnace in Daniel 3 or to trust that he is walking with you through the fiery trial you face right now "even if" the show-stopping miracle you want seems not to be in God's present plan?

I submit that God's presence in both is very real.



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