



FOCUS ON

# faith

*Essays by Curtis Shelburne*

*Series 5, Volume 7*

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



Curtis Shelburne

**“F**aith never knows where it is being led,” wrote Oswald Chambers, “but it loves and knows the One who is leading.” When the world shifts on its axis, the Creator still leads. When a giant of a problem looms large, our God leads. When we falter and fail, our Savior, in deepest love, leads. In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne again encourages us to trust in our loving Lord to lead, to guide, to walk with us, as we “Focus on Faith.”

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**“N**ow faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

The Epistle to the Hebrews  
Chapter 3



Dear Lord,  
Though we do not see you, we trust you as our Father, and we place all of our hope in you.”

*Amen*



John Guiley



## SOME GOLDEN MOMENTS MUST BE SAVORED—OR LOST

To fully experience such moments, we need hearts still and open to receive what God will give.

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**Some moments in life** are golden. And some of the best of all are precious precisely because they must be savored immediately or forever lost.

Oh, as long as God is our Father, and that's forever, beautifully sweet moments, joyful surprises, and cloud bursts of delight will come again. But never again the same one, for much of their rich sweetness and deep joy sparkles in the diamond-truth that no two of them are exactly alike.

None can be bottled to be uncorked and re-savored, recorded to be played back at a whim, or captured to be freed for the moments you wish to dance the same dance and want that particular joy to be yours once-again, a radiant-in-just-the-same-way partner in the waltz.

You never stepped out onto your front porch to gaze up at the starlit night and looked at exactly the same world. Like a river, it flows new every moment. It won't be truly the same in ten minutes. Or in the space of your next breath. Look quickly! And look often!

You're rocking in an old soft chair, but not alone. You and your little very grand baby are swaddled together in a warm blanket on a lazy afternoon. Raindrop-straight-down sounds are the lullaby, and the babe's whiffling breath is the sweet meter of the moment's melody. Oh, swifter than that tiny living miracle's heartbeat, you'd sign on were it possible to go on gazing sleepily but in utter awe and

purest joy at the lovely face of that precious gift of God, and gently rock . . . rock . . . rock . . . on forever. Only the Giver of all good gifts knows what wonderful joy-flowers you and that precious little one will pluck together, but this particular bloom is fully open right now. And not for long. Thank God for it quickly!

You've sung or played or strummed or bowed the same beautiful song time and again but never in exactly the same way. A grace-note in measure eight, a joy-trill in the "bridge," a bit more tremolo in the "intro," and a new millisecond pause before the "tag" or the "outro"—it's the sweetly-spaced silence that gives the intervening notes richness—and it's an old beautiful song caressing fresh ears and washing open hearts, brand new.

To savor such moments our souls need spaces for rest and not just the counterfeit "relaxation" of loud and manic diversion. Our souls need the sweet salve, the lovely balm, of what our Father calls Sabbath, whatever its date or duration. We need times—sometimes they're just a few breaths' worth—of worthwhile moments, and sometimes, regularly, they need to be hours or days—when we're quiet and still and our hearts and hands are particularly open to receive the sweet and special gifts—golden moments—our Father wants to give.

"Be still, and know that I am God," our Father says. It's wonderfully true eternally. But it's most clearly known in sweet and fleeting moments of deep joy, the kind that can't be captured—only savored, the kind that grow best in rich stillness.





## WHEN YOUR WORLD SEEMS TILTED IN ITS ORBIT

You waked up in a land where the  
ground won't stop shifting.

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**It's very nearly** as weird-feeling as it is heart-rending—a day when you wake up and realize it's just another ordinary day for most of the world around you, but your whole world has tilted in its orbit, shifted on its axis.

For you, almost nothing feels the same, and even the things that do, don't. Their very sameness in this new universe renders them incredibly strange.

You brush your teeth just like you always have. Part your hair in the same place. Take your keys off the same old hook. Just like you did in your old universe. But this morning you feel as if you'd opened your eyes in a universe where two plus two could not possibly still equal four. Is plumb still plumb, level still level? You know it must be, but you wonder how, as you take your first steps in your suddenly off-axis world.

This morning you waked up for the first time in your life in a world where the mother or father who gave you life didn't also wake up. You wonder how many times you'll have to think, "I need to call Dad," before your mind will face that fact that you can't.

How long did it take this morning for you to realize that you were alone in the house? No shower sounds. No smell of coffee. Nobody else's alarm going off. Your spouse really has left. Some of the last words before that were a little loud. But this jarring silence seems louder.

This morning you took your first breath of consciousness in a world where the child who was the light of your life no longer breathes. People say sadly that you lost a child. No! As if you could misplace your own

heart! You didn't "lose" her. Cancer or tragedy or incomprehensible accident seized her, wrenched her out of your arms. But not your heart. Never your heart. It still beats. And you wonder how.

Whatever the grief—and grief is the name of this thing that feels so strange—you waked up this morning in a universe that seems completely tilted.

You managed to get out of bed, but could that really have been you yesterday in the doctor's office? Did she really say that the test results confirm that you have a life-altering disease? Now you're staggering between the uneasy "peace" of at least knowing the reason for your symptoms and the abhorrence of the new label you never wanted, the name of the disease you're told you that you have but right now seems to have you. "Your" symptoms? The disease you "have"? You resent "having" something that's "yours" that you have no option to throw away. The old words are not adequate in this new world where the ground won't stop shifting.

Hear now some words that point to a reality that is rock-solid, foundational, unchangeable, always trustworthy. Grief has a name, but so does Hope. God's "mercies" really are "new every morning," every moment, even in what seems a new and unwelcome universe. The only thing greater than your pain is God's love. "Great is his faithfulness!" It is no accident that those words, deeply true, are found in the tear-stained Bible book named Lamentations (3:22-23).

When your old world "was," when you don't know how you can ever stand in this new world that "is," when you're deeply afraid of what "will be," trust, one moment at a time, in the great "I Am." The God of the universe is your Father. He loves you. That has not changed. It never will.





## SOMETIMES THE MAIN EVENT IS NOT THE MAIN EVENT

The real “main event” is when we choose either to fixate in fear or focus on God in faith.

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**Sometimes the main event** is not the main event.

A couple of times a year (usually), I receive article requests, three at a time, from a great little daily devotional magazine. As with all of their writers, the editors pick two Scripture passages for me and I get to pick the third.

So when I received the request letter a few weeks ago, I wasn't surprised. I opened it, perused the assigned passages, and saw that one was 1 Samuel 17:16-28.

That's a good one! Or, to be entirely accurate, it's cut right from the middle of a really great one. 1 Samuel 17 is the well-known story of David and Goliath. Even in our largely biblically illiterate society (and one wonders how anyone in the world, and especially in western society, can claim to be educated at all and not have some familiarity with the Bible, believe it or not, that has so shaped our literature, history, culture, and life), almost everyone knows something about that “shepherd to giant killer” story.

But I was a bit surprised that the Scripture passage I was assigned didn't encompass the end of the story. If you read this section, you'll see that when it begins, David has just arrived on the scene, and when it ends, the giant is still alive and ranting. Hmm.

I was a bit befuddled until this truth hit me, and I now repeat it: sometimes the main event is not the main event.

Naturally enough, when we read the great story of David and Goliath, we tend to cut right to the chase or, in this case, the swing. The young

son of Jesse swings his sling. The stone flies out, locks on, sinks in; a loud-mouthed giant shuts up and falls down. Cue to cheering! But the key event that actually sets up the sling swing victory comes earlier.

Each morning and evening, like clockwork for forty days, this nine-foot-plus giant with a glandular problem and a boatload of arrogance strides out from the Philistine camp to taunt the Israelites with what seems to be a four-foot-wide mouth. When David arrives, as young and unaccustomed to battle as he is, he sizes up the problem immediately. It's not Goliath and his tree-sized spear. The crux of the matter is that as the giant taunts Israel, he is defying God.

The main event? It's when a full-of-faith shepherd about to turn giant-killer asks who this taunter of God thinks he is. David's answer? Compared to the living God, this giant is less than nobody at all.

Dealing with a giant of a problem? Don't we all at times? When life's frightening giants loom large and threaten to obscure our view, may God give us eyes of faith to recognize Satan's strategy of misdirection. The real “main event” is the choice to fixate in fear on the giant or to ask God to help us focus in faith on him. And then to help us aim. He's already promised a victory. And he does his best work when weak folks trust him for help in defeating giants.



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Thanks to Web Designer and Web Master Terry Grimm, and assistant Charlie Grimm, current issues, searchable archives of decades of issues, Curtis Shelburne's *Focus on Faith* blog, and more resources are available at your fingertips. Just point and click!



## TWO MEN. TWO FAILURES. DIFFERENT TEARS.

Since we fail, too, we do well to consider the very real differences between the men and their tears.

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**Here's a riddle** for you. Care to make a stab at figuring it out?

*Two men, two mouths,  
both tongues betray,  
almost but not quite  
on the same day.  
One fails and weeps,  
shinnies up and up  
and falls putrescently;  
one fails and weeps,  
bows down and down  
and rises taller, finally,  
than before his perfidy.  
Love's victory!  
Who are they?*

I'm neither a poet nor the son of a poet, and not much riddle-writer at all. But onward I hint.

Two men. Two world-class failures. Two very different endings.

When I say "failures," I mean deeds, not men, though a failure one of these men certainly was.

Though in our society, all it takes to be called a "success" is a lot of money—even if you're sad, pathetic, miserable, dishonorable, unfaithful, cowardly, brutish, and completely lacking in every other aspect of life and

character—the first fellow I'm thinking of who fixated on money and had more of it, for a time, than the other individual, is the failure.

Both of these men failed miserably. Both betrayed the same man. One betrayed for money. One betrayed to save his skin. Both betrayals were predicted by the same man betrayed.

You've already cracked the riddle, right? Apostles both. Judas and Peter.

Judas, of course, betrayed his Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Many have postulated that a significant motive may have been his desire to rush the Lord into quickly and powerfully inaugurating an earthly kingdom. I think they're probably right, though the Bible never says that.

Scripture does tell us that the man was a thief, a thief who whined about his concern for the poor. Maybe he did want to rush Jesus to take up the throne—he was not alone among the disciples in looking for an earthly kingdom—but I'm quite sure he also wanted to take his place in that kingdom thirty pieces of silver richer.

When it all goes wrong, Judas tries to cast away his guilt by slinging the silver at the priests' feet. But the guilt covering his hands and heart is gangrenous and won't be flung away. Fatally self-centered even in his sorrow over failure, Judas ends up focused completely on Judas.

And Peter? Ever impetuous, though Jesus has warned him, and that famous rooster is already calibrated and cocked to crow, Peter blubbers and blusters, "I don't even know the man!" He punctuates his denials with sea-salt curses before rushing away and weeping bitterly, wondering in anguish how everything could have gone so wrong.

But though his flesh is weak, Peter's heart—before, during, and after his failure—is the Lord's. When Jesus later asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" they both know the answer. Blood-cleansed, Peter is not centered on Peter; his focus is on his Lord.

Two men fail; two men weep. Since we fail, too, we do well to consider the two very different types of tears.





## WISDOM AND THE TIMES OF OUR LIVES

“There is a right time to do things,  
a right time for everything . . .”

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**According to the wise man** writing in Ecclesiastes 3, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this in *The Message*: “There’s an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth.”

Yes, and the sage continues in those famous words, “There is a time to be born and a time to die, . . . a time to kill and a time to heal, . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance . . .”

It rings true, doesn’t it? Our souls and our experience hear these words and respond, yes.

Life is a patchwork quilt sewn together with swatches of immensely varied “times and seasons.” In our lives we experience incredibly sweet moments, sometimes followed in an eye-blink or two by tastes terribly bitter. Even on the same day, how unusual is it to both shed a tear and liberate a laugh?

Pain and pleasure, darkness and light, tears and laughter. However long the cycles—moments or days or weeks or months or seasons—the human experience is that night-times of weeping and joy-splashed mornings, and everything in between, are the mosaic pieces that make up our lives.

The “wise man” had lived long enough to be wise. Some things just take time. You’ll never get a 100-year-old oak tree by wishing

really hard for it for ten incredibly strenuous minutes. Even a for-their-age-mature pre-teen or teen will likely find it challenging to believe even a well-loved and trusted adult sharing the truth that dark times of sorrow and pain and frustration and fear really do not last forever. It is nonetheless true and wise counsel that we owe them and that one day they’ll also try to share with the next generation even as they face the same challenges when sharing it. The times and seasons and cycles continue, you see.

Wisdom says that it’s good to know that the times and seasons really do change.

Wisdom says that it’s good to take what’s immensely good about the good and incredibly difficult about the bad and learn from both.

Wisdom says that though experience is the best teacher for us all, we needlessly impoverish ourselves if we fail to listen to the experience of those who go before us and have priceless insights.

Wisdom says that genuine truth is truth for all seasons, and it does not change.

Wisdom says that the best way to live wisely into the future is to learn the lessons of the past.

Wisdom says that only the incredibly foolish ever think of themselves as being wise.

Wisdom refuses to be a slave bowing before the supposed wisdom of its own time.

Wisdom knows that the glitz of its age (industrial or technological or informational or . . .) makes it not one bit wiser than ages past.

Wisdom knows that genuine wisdom is rooted forever in the truth of the One whose existence holds this world and universe together, the only One who is constant, unchanging, and true in all times, all seasons.





## “SO, BOB, WOULD YOU HAND ME THAT THINGAMAJIG?”

Sometimes you just need a word and don't have one.

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### Thingamajig. Doohickey. Dillybob. Whatsit.

Those are, of course, all words we use to refer to things for which we are unsure of the actual word, if there is one, for the thingamajig in question.

There. I've written “thingamajig” three times now, and my spell-checker has thus far resisted the impulse (do spell-checkers have impulses?) to squiggle a red line under the word, thereby calling my spelling into question. “Thingamajig” is evidently now a bona fide word for something we don't know the word for. Ditto for doohickey.

Yes, but dillybob and whatsit still get red squiggles. Since I usually write these columns using software which, perhaps like its owner, tends to straddle American and British English spelling a bit—its preference for “anesthesia” or “anaesthesia” is mostly anesthetized, not to say completely anaesthetised (red squiggle just appeared; the “s” did it)—I often double-check the spell-check.

So I just did. Now the gate arm swings up and whatsit strides on past the spell-check check point. Dillybob is still being held at the border, though the *Urban Dictionary* (not, I admit, the highest authority) recognizes its usefulness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* must be dilly-dallying and hasn't given dillybob its official papers yet.

Still, you know what I mean when I use the word. We need words for thingamabobs, whatchamacallits, doodahs, and hoobajoobs. (Sea of red squiggles now, but I'll stake my English degree that these whatsitsname words for things unknown or as yet unnamed exist to answer, rather creatively and with a touch of heart-tickling whimsy, a real need.) The language would be much poorer without them.

We need a word for the crunchy little tidbit left on a corn dog stick when the dog is doggone. And along that line, what about a word for that little smidge of chocolate sticking to an ice cream stick until you lick it off?

What about a word for that disgusting little puff of smelly air that hits you in the face when, after delaying a bit too long, you bag the kitchen trash and then lean over and pull the plastic drawstring tight?

Often you discover that a word really does exist for the whatsit you wondered about. It was a fine moment when author Madeleine L'Engle taught me that dragon droppings are called “fewmets.” It's a shame to accidentally step into something and not know its official name. Now I'm fewmetically safe. (Definite red squiggle.)

And is there a one-word description for a dweeb with a weird sense of humor? I guess so. (See dweeb. Or dork. Or nerd. Maybe doofus.)

I stepped right into that one, but I'm still smiling. Words can sting a little or a lot. But they can also morph wonderfully into delightful whimsy. And they can fly to heights of breathtaking beauty and awe-inspiring mystery.

And, yes, sometimes you just need a word and don't have one. But our heavenly Father knew exactly what this world needed when, out of infinite love, he sent us his Son, the Word.



### **Past Issues—Free!**

We are about to downsize our overflowing stock of past issues of *The Christian Appeal*. Recently we sent bound copies of more than fifty years to several key historical collections. But now we need to clear out our storage area. The issues for decades past will soon be available only digitally on our website. Between now and August 31, 2019, we will send any available past issues in any quantity desired to anyone who requests them. Order them via e-mail ([geneshel@aol.com](mailto:geneshel@aol.com)) or by snail-mail at 2310 Anna Street, Amarillo, TX 79106.





## IN THIS WORLD TROUBLE COMES, BUT “DRAMA” IS OPTIONAL

Embracing drama is a bad choice that  
tempts us all on some level.

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**Some people live life** with their sirens running. They are either creating wrecks, running Code 3 toward emergencies, or chasing ambulances to be sure to have a front-row seat to view the carnage. Right in your living room. If you allow it.

My question is, why would you? Offhand, can you think of any way that a siren wailing in your home or church or business can be conducive to peace, good sense, and harmony?

What I’m talking about, of course, is “drama.”

By virtue (more accurately, by the lack of virtue) of the sin-sick human condition and this fallen world, we will all at times face pain, suffering, trouble, and even tragedy. And, oh, yes, swimming in what is often a sea of selfishness means that we regularly paddle into relational challenges that would be difficult even if we were wise enough never to slop around in them like pigs in mud.

But there’s the key. Sorrows, troubles, difficulties—they come to us all. Jesus said it clearly: “In this world you will have trouble . . .” (John 16:33). But he went on to say, “Don’t be such sick fools that you relish wallowing in it.”

Well, that’s not exactly what he said. What he actually went on to say is, “But be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.” Don’t you agree that being “of good cheer” implies making a choice that rules out romping around in our troubles? Getting our jollies from splashing in the mud as we pull others in to join us?

Trouble is bad enough without drama, and embracing drama as we deal with difficulty is—we might as well admit it—a choice that tempts us all on some level. When we introduce drama, the spotlight’s focus shifts, for at least a while, to us. The more drama we create, the longer we own the stage.

It’s one thing to have to pass on bad news; it’s another to relish being the first to report it. It’s one thing to have to deal with difficulty; it’s another to egg it on, throw fuel on the fire, inject more poison with sharp tongues.

Face it. Some people stoke drama because they’re Satan-inspired to create chaos and destroy harmony. Others just get used to living in drama and become adrenalin junkies never completely happy without a crisis. They become perpetual victims or voyeurs of other victims. To be sure, some of the pain, sickness, difficulty, they deal with is real. But their reaction is over the top and drama is their dysfunctional constant, their abnormal normal, sucking everyone in their path into its vortex.

Our choice? To jump into the drama with them and blow into the whirlwind, or to set wise and real boundaries, distancing ourselves from the drama and those who would suck us into it. If we choose to embrace it, exacerbate it, marry it, tolerate it, or otherwise allow ourselves to be infected by it, our predictable misery will not still the storm.

Whoever said this spoke truth: “Drama does not just walk into our lives. Either we create it, invite it, or associate with it.”

Don’t do it! This loud world has sirens enough.





## “I SEE DEAD PEOPLE,” SAID THE CUTE LITTLE BOY

One day we'll close our eyes and wake to find ourselves  
as fully alive as those who've gone before us.

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### “I see dead people.”

So said the cute little boy in the memorable line and creepy “confession” from the 1999 movie *The Sixth Sense*. I hope you don't find it disturbing when I affirm that I do, too. See dead people, I mean.

For me, it happens pretty often and worries me not at all; in fact, it warms my heart. It gives me real hope. And I find it genuinely encouraging to know that I'll one day join them.

In our small town, it's not that unusual for me, a pastor here for 34 years, to do a “double-take” at a restaurant or store as I think I see a particular person, only to realize that I attended or officiated at their funeral. Oops! A resemblance. A mistaken identity. But no mistake: I miss them.

Most often, it happens at church. As I stand in the pulpit, look out into the sanctuary, and glance across the faces of worshipers I love, it's not uncommon for my mind's eye to “see” among them faces of many dear loved ones and friends, members of our little flock and God's much larger kingdom, who have gone on to be with our Father.

No, it doesn't bother me; quite the opposite.

Yes, for over three decades I've loved and worshiped with this little part of God's much larger family. Not large, we're “mega” only in love. Come to think of it, our little bunch may be a lot like Christ's church universal in that we have more members who have gone on to be with the Lord than we have members who are presently

breathing this earth's air. They've died. “Most people have, you know,” C. S. Lewis, once wrote. Died, that is. Humans who are presently living are in the minority compared to humans who have already passed on. And surely that's also true of God's people of faith, of whom Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25).

So, if loving God's people means to live life with them, walk with them, weep with them, laugh with them, believe with them, and share genuine hope with them for life eternal—why should that hope do anything but come closer to full-flower when they go on to be with the Lord?

“Treasure in heaven.” Jesus once said that sort of lasting treasure is the only kind worth “storing up.” I'm not the first to mention that, the older we get, the more precious that treasure in heaven becomes because our most valuable treasures there have faces.

I spoke recently with two friends who are also pastors, faithful workers who have served God's people in the same local churches for decades. Their experience is the same as mine. They see dead people, too. They look out into the pews, thankful for those who are there, but so very thankful also for those who have gone on but whose influence is still here and who worship now in the presence of the Lord.

We worship. They worship. One eternal day believers will all worship together. One day we'll close our eyes and wake to find that we're finally as fully alive as those who've gone before us, and our time in the shadows is over.



# “For Sentimental Reasons”

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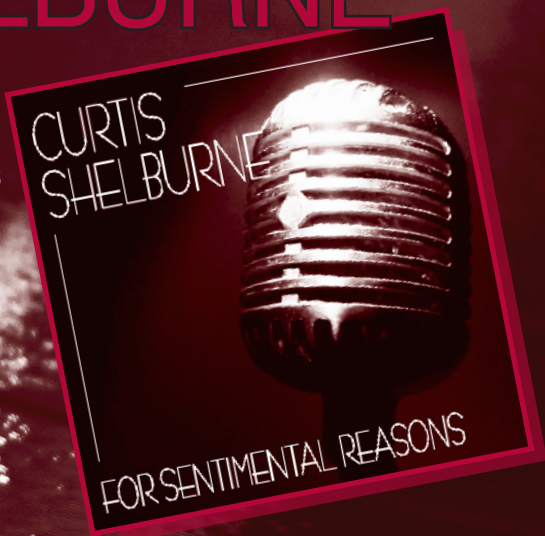
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