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Clarion

A CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE | TO ENCOURAGE, EDUCATE, ENGAGE, AND UNITE

Flavius Josephus
William den Hollander

Paul Timeline
Eric Kampen

Wigs & Figs
Jake Torenvliet

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What's Inside

With Pentecost recently commemorated in our churches, we can be ever so thankful for the Holy Spirit's work among us—and in so many ways. When we engage in church discipline as Jan DeGelder writes about in *Governing the Church*, we pray for the Spirit to bless us with a godly approach and the recipient with a receptive heart. When we experience the pain of withheld blessings as Rick Ludwig's book review highlights, we seek the comfort and guidance which Christ's Spirit and Word provide. When we look at the amazing design of creation and how it is all held together by God's power as Rob Schouten relates in reflecting on Psalm 148, we can't help but think of the Holy Spirit as the Lord and Giver of life. Thank God for sending his Spirit!

We dig into some history in this issue with Will den Hollander's introduction to Flavius Josephus and why we should care about him. Eric Kampen walks us through a timeline of the apostle Paul's life and its relevance for understanding God's grace in Paul's life and also the context of some of Paul's letters.

Jake Torenvliet reflects adroitly on how naturally good we are at hiding shame but how much better it is to entrust our shame to Christ who has already nailed it to the cross. The variety of ways in which we desperately need our Saviour is brought out by Andrew Douma's gut-wrenching piece on persecution of Christians in Nigeria. Let us pray for our suffering brethren. Jason VanVliet's editorial also helps us—in the midst of all life's struggles—to lift up our eyes to our Bridegroom Jesus and the great wedding feast he's preparing for us. What a day that will be!

Don't miss the opinions of two letter writers, Wes Bredehof's book review on a novel, and a couple of fresh songs from our poets. May your reading be edifying!

Peter Holtvlüwer

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Many Wars but One Wedding

Wars and rumours of wars multiply. People seek peace but struggle to find it. I type these words during a two-week ceasefire in the war between Iran and the USA-Israel coalition. But by the time you read these words, who knows what things will be like in the Middle East or, for that matter, around the globe?

Added to that, deadly conflicts continue to rage between Russia and the Ukraine, Israel and Lebanon, Sudan and South Sudan, and elsewhere. As the souls under the altar cry out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long?" (Rev 6:9).

When wars multiply, our thoughts naturally turn toward "the last days." End-time discussions have their own specialized vocabulary: pre-, post-, and a-millennialism, Armageddon, tribulation, rapture, seals, trumpets, and bowls. It's easy to get caught up in, or totally confused by, all the debates. Where do we find a secure anchor for our anxious souls?

TWO UNIQUE PERSONS

Let's fast forward to the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22. Three times the Lord Jesus announces, with earnest love, "I am coming . . . soon!" (vv. 7, 12, 20). Three times the church responds, yes, Lord "Come!" (twice in v. 17 and once in v. 20). Two very special—yes, even unique—people are speaking to each other.

The first person is *the* Alpha and *the* Omega, *the* first and *the* last, *the* beginning and *the* end. He is *the* root and *the* descendant of David. He is *the* Lamb (Rev 22:1, 3). He is our *one and only* Mediator (1 Tim 2:5), very God of very God and yet at the same time true and righteous man (Nicene Creed; LD 5–6). There is, quite literally, no one else like him!

The second person, who responds to the Lord Jesus, is the church. Note that in Revelation 21:9 the church appears as a person; she is called "the wife of the Lamb." As you might expect, our glorious King has *one* wife. She is the "*one*, holy, catholic and apostolic church," as we confess in the Nicene Creed.

Isn't this remarkable? Here we come to *the last* of all last things, the grand finale of Holy Writ. What do we hear? Complex eschatological timelines or frameworks? No, we reverently listen in on a sacred conversation between the Lord Jesus and his precious betrothed Bride. What are they talking about? Well, of course, it's their upcoming wedding feast!

GETTING READY FOR A WEDDING!

The excitement in Revelation 22 is palpable. The time of the betrothal draws to a close. "I am coming *soon*," says the Bridegroom. Echoing her husband's enthusiasm, the bride, too, can hardly wait: "Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" After all, a wedding is a most joyful event.

But what's the point? Simply put, this final, inspired, pre-marital conversation gives us precisely the focus that we need in these last and increasingly violent days. Setting aside all rhetoric and bravado, wars are terrifying. Some of God's people live in countries where cruise missiles reduce apartments to rubble and deadly drones incinerate local factories. Understandably, they are deeply concerned for their own safety, and perhaps more so for the lives of their loved ones and little ones. To human experience, wars and weddings are like black and white, polar opposites.

But according to God's Word, even as the second seal is opened, thereby decreasing peace and increasing warfare (Rev 6:4), our Bridegroom, the opener of those seals (Rev 5:5), is still steadily lining up everything toward our wedding day (Rev 19:6–9). No global conflict will delay our marital bliss, not even by an hour!

Here in Canada we are not dodging attack drones, at least not yet. But economic pressures ramp up and trade agreements struggle to survive. We ought not to love mammon (money), but we still need to use it every day. Understandably, we may become concerned about financial stability, especially for our loved ones and little ones.

But Revelation reminds us that even when trade is disrupted, cargo gets stuck in port, and merchants "weep and mourn" (Rev 18:11–19), our Bridegroom is not dissuaded for a moment. He's still getting ready for his wedding and, as the wife of the Lamb, so should we. Let us rejoice, for our marriage feast is coming!

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Creation Exists by God's Word Alone

A reflection on Psalm 148, creation, and ordered reality

Stand outside on a clear night and look up. The constellations appear along the same paths night after night, year after year. The planets follow their appointed paths so reliably that astronomers can predict their positions *centuries* in advance.

Turn your attention earthward: seeds sprout in their season, tides rise and fall, birds navigate thousands of miles to return to the same nesting grounds. Enzymes catalyze the same reactions in your body that they did yesterday and will tomorrow.

We call this "nature," and we're so accustomed to its reliability that we rarely pause to ask: *Why does the world behave this way at all?* Psalm 148 gives us the answer, and it's more wonderful than we might expect.

COSMIC SUMMONS TO PRAISE

Psalm 148 addresses the whole world not as a collection of disconnected objects, but as a structured and responsive order that exists under God's authority. Heaven and earth, angels and stars, weather and mountains, animals and rulers are all summoned to praise the Lord together.

The shape of the psalm is instructive. It begins with conscious heavenly creatures—angels and the hosts of heaven—called to praise the Lord from above (vv. 1–2). It ends with conscious earthly worshippers—God's redeemed people—drawn near to him in praise (v. 14). Between these two bookends, the entire created order is summoned. Creation is framed, from beginning to end, by intelligent worship.

But notice this: the psalmist doesn't merely invite creation to praise. He commands it, as if creation can hear and respond. And in a sense, it does. Not with words, but with obedience—by being what God made it to be and doing what God commands it to do.

THE WORD THAT MAKES AND KEEPS

At the theological heart of this summons to worship stand verses 5 and 6:

> "Let them praise the name of the LORD!
> For he commanded and they were created.
> And he established them forever and ever;
> he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away."

These verses explain why creation can be addressed at all. The world exists, continues, and functions under the Word of God.

First, consider the *origin* of all things: "He commanded and they were created." The universe is not self-made or eternal. It exists because God spoke it into being.

Second, consider the *continuance* of all things: "He established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away." Creation doesn't just begin under God's Word—it remains under it. This decree is not merely an initial act of creation but an ongoing determination, a binding order that governs how creation exists and behaves. God's decree establishes boundaries, patterns, and regularities that the created order does not overstep. The world continues to be what it is and to do what it does because God's Word continues to hold it in place.

Think about what this means. When you plant a garden and seeds sprout, you're witnessing God's decree in action. When engineers calculate the load a bridge can bear, they're relying on regularities that God established. When a refrigeration mechanic calculates the horsepower needed to cool a system, he's depending on thermodynamic laws that God sustains. When astronomers predict an eclipse decades in advance, they're trusting that God's ordinances for the heavenly bodies will not pass away.

WHAT WE CALL "NATURAL LAWS"

The sustained regularity of the created order is what gives us what we commonly call "natural laws." But here's the crucial point: these laws are not independent principles floating free in the universe. They're not self-explanatory features of reality that just happen to be there. They are the enduring expression of God's decree.

The psalm makes this vivid. The sun and moon keep their appointed paths. Oceans remain within their bounds. Fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy winds—all of them "do his word" (v. 8). Even what seems chaotic and untamed operates under divine command.

Psalm 148 teaches us that the world is already doing what it was made to do. It stands, endures, and functions under God's decree.

When water at sea level boils at 100 degrees Celsius, when planets orbit according to gravitational laws, when DNA replicates with stunning precision, this is not nature governing itself. This is God's Word remaining in force. The reliability of cause and effect, the stability of physical processes, the very intelligibility of the world—all of it rests on the fact that God's decree "does not pass away."

Creation praises God, not primarily by speaking, but by faithfully functioning according to the order he has given. A star that burns according to the physics God ordained is a star that obeys its Creator. An oak tree that grows from an acorn is fulfilling its creaturely calling. This is their worship—constant, reliable, built into the fabric of their existence.

THE POVERTY OF NATURALISM

This vision stands in direct contradiction to a view that is widespread in our culture: naturalism, or the belief that nature is all there is, that the universe is self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Naturalism assumes that the order of the world simply is—that natural laws need no further explanation beyond themselves. Regularities exist, and that's the end of the story. Science describes the patterns, and many insist we should ask no deeper questions.

But Psalm 148 exposes a problem: order itself cries out for explanation. Why does the world exhibit patterns at all? Why do those patterns persist? Why is the universe intelligible to our minds? Why can we do science?

Naturalism can describe the regularities. It can map the patterns with impressive precision. But it cannot tell you why such patterns exist in the first place, why they hold steady over time, or why human minds can grasp them. These are not scientific questions—they're questions about the very foundations that make science possible.

The biblical answer is this: the world is ordered because it is governed. It is intelligible because it is spoken into being by a rational God. It is stable because God's decree remains in force. The universe makes sense because it is the expression of divine wisdom and will.

To treat the natural order as self-explanatory is not scientific neutrality. It is the suppression of the most basic truth about reality—that creation exists under command, that every law of nature is a word from God that does not pass away.

FROM CREATION TO REDEMPTION

But notice where Psalm 148 goes. It doesn't end with impersonal forces obeying divine decrees. It moves deliberately toward human praise. Kings and peoples, young men and maidens, old and young together are summoned (vv. 11–12). And then the psalm climaxes with God's own people, those whom he has raised up and brought near to himself (v. 14).

Creation's lawful order finds its goal in conscious, grateful worship. The same Word that structured the universe, that keeps the stars in their courses and the seasons in their rhythm, also speaks redemptively. It calls a people to himself.

The New Testament reveals the full wonder: Jesus Christ is the eternal Word through whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together (John 1:3; Col 1:17). In him, the Word that structured creation takes on flesh. In him, the disorder brought by sin is healed. Through him, creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay (Rom 8:21).

LIVING UNDER THE WORD

What difference does this make for us?

It means that when we study the world—whether in a laboratory, a forest, or a classroom—we're not studying impersonal matter obeying impersonal laws. We're tracing the thoughts of God, observing the outworking of his faithful Word. Science becomes an act of listening.

It means that when we work with the created order—whether we're welding steel, mixing concrete, diagnosing an engine problem, or balancing a business ledger—we're depending on regularities that God established and sustains. The carpenter who understands wood grain, the electrician who works with current and resistance, the farmer who rotates crops, the baker who knows how yeast and heat transform dough—all of them are working with God's faithful decrees. Their skill is a form of practical wisdom about the order God built into his world.

Every reliable pattern we depend on in our daily work, every moment when things hold together as they should, every bit of beauty we encounter in nature—all of it points beyond itself to the One whose Word does not pass away.

Psalm 148 teaches us that the world is already doing what it was made to do. It stands, endures, and functions under God's decree. Human worship does not add meaning to a meaningless universe; it simply brings our lives into harmony with the meaning that is already there.

Praise the LORD!

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FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS:

Witness to the World of the New Testament

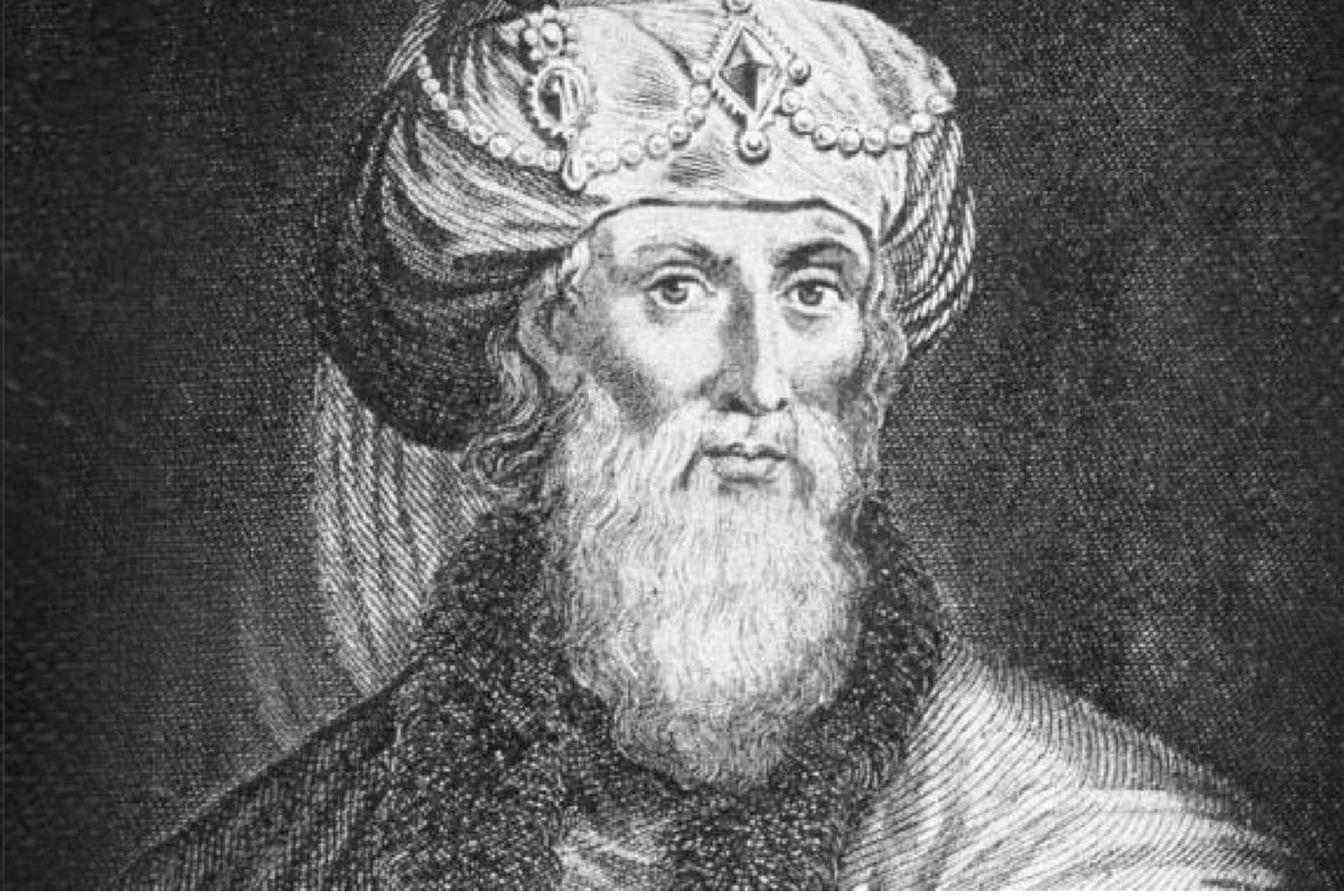
WILLIAM DEN HOLLANDER

If you visit the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (we would love to have you!) and sit in on my students' presentations or read the papers they write for me, you'll probably encounter a somewhat obscure ancient historian with surprising regularity. My students quickly become acquainted with my longstanding fascination with the first century Jew, Flavius Josephus, and suspect that the best way to my heart (and a better grade) is to name drop him as frequently as possible. And so, Josephus appears in papers, footnotes, PowerPoint slides, and anywhere else they can think of inserting him. Don't tell them, but it generally works.

My own story with Josephus starts in a third-year undergraduate Greek translation course at York University. The course was entitled "Greek Historians," and it was up to the professor to choose what to translate. Well, my professor, Steve Mason, was none other than the foremost expert on Josephus, and he unsurprisingly chose to translate excerpts of Josephus's writings over the course of the semester. It was love at first sight. Over the years that followed, I had the privilege of studying under Steve for both my master's and doctoral degrees. Predictably, the object of my studies was none other than Flavius Josephus.

Since then, it's been my pleasure to introduce more people to this fascinating historical figure. That's what I'd like to do in this article, not just for the sake of historical interest or to indulge myself, but because I'm convinced that for those who love the Scriptures and desire to grow in their understanding, especially of the New Testament, the writings of Josephus are worth reading and his life is worth studying, and all the more so in light of a very recent book to which I'll introduce you along the way. I hope that becomes plain from what follows here. So, without further ado, let me tell you about my favourite ancient historian.

For those who love the Scriptures and desire to grow in their understanding, especially of the New Testament, the writings of Josephus are worth reading.



FROM YOSEF BEN MATTITYAHU TO FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

Josephus was born in the city of Jerusalem just a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus, during the first year of the reign of the emperor Gaius (a.k.a. Caligula). That is, he was born sometime between March 18 of AD 37 and March 17 of AD 38. His mother, we're told, was of royal descent, tracing her ancestry to the legendary Maccabean rulers of the second and first centuries BC, and his father was a priest. His name at that time was Yosef ben Mattityahu.

His illustrious heritage was complemented by a precocious childhood. Josephus tells us in his autobiography (*Life*) that he so excelled in his studies that the chief priests and leading men of Jerusalem beat a path to his door, seeking his wisdom on legal matters. At age sixteen he sought to grow further in knowledge and understanding, so he spent time in what he calls the main "philosophical schools" of the Jewish community: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.

After that, Yosef became a devotee for three years of a man named Bannus, who lived in the desert, wore strange clothing, scavenged for food, and washed frequently for purification (sound like someone else you know?). At age nineteen Yosef entered public life in Jerusalem, no doubt also taking his place in the regular rotation of priestly temple service.

When he was twenty-six years old, Yosef was delegated to travel to Rome to petition for the release of some priests who were being held there, awaiting judgment from the emperor Nero. After surviving shipwreck on the Adriatic Sea, Yosef managed to accomplish his mission by connecting with Nero's wife, Poppaea Sabina, through a Jewish mime actor named Aliturus. His appeal to Poppaea was successful and the imperial lady arranged for the freedom of the priests.

Upon his return to Judea in AD 66, Yosef was confronted with the early stages of a revolt against Roman rule, which, he tells us, he zealously but unsuccessfully tried to suppress. As one of the local aristocrats, Yosef was called to take the lead in Galilee. His mission was either to organize the local resistance himself or to convince the rebels to lay down their weapons, depending on which of his accounts you read (the earlier *Jewish War* or later *Life*). It may, in fact, have been both. Local elites under Roman rule found themselves in the challenging dilemma of seeking to please both their Roman overlords and their countrymen.

JEWISH GENERAL BECOMES ROMAN PRISONER

But Yosef's time as a military leader was brief. The future emperors Vespasian and his son Titus, then only generals, arrived on the coast at Ptolemais in the spring of AD 67 in full force: three legions, twenty-three auxiliary cohorts, six cavalry units, and a significant number of allied troops, a total of some 60,000 soldiers. Yosef soon found himself besieged in the fortress of Jotapata in Galilee, which the Romans took after forty-seven days.

In the ensuing chaos, Yosef managed to evade capture, taking cover in a cave underneath the city with some forty others. He reports how he attempted unsuccessfully to convince his companions to surrender to the Romans. In the end, they all agreed to choose death over capture. Rather than killing themselves, they cast lots and killed each other, one at a time. As it happened (or was it by clever mathematics?), Yosef and one other were the last to remain standing. The Jewish general managed to persuade his companion that life was worthwhile even without freedom and so they gave themselves up to the Romans.

While Vespasian intended to execute his prisoner anyway, his son Titus managed to convince him to spare Yosef's life, although he still intended to send the Jewish general to Emperor Nero for trial. Upon hearing these plans, the prisoner-of-war requested a private interview with the Roman general. At that point Yosef allegedly predicted that both Vespasian and Titus would eventually become emperors themselves, even though they weren't members of the Julio-Claudian family from which the previous emperors had come. This intriguing "prophecy" earned him the right to stay, and so Yosef remained a prisoner in the Roman camp.

After Nero's suicide in the summer of 68, the empire was plunged into chaos and various generals jockeyed for the imperial throne. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius all ruled only a brief time before meeting violent ends, and finally Vespasian himself was acclaimed emperor in July of AD 69. Yosef's prediction was confirmed and he was released from his chains. For the remainder of the revolt, he stayed in the Roman army camp, a free man, and assisted Titus as interpreter, interrogator, and guide. And so, he was also present at the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, which ended with the destruction of the temple where he had served as priest.

JOSEPHUS, ROMAN CITIZEN

Rather than staying in his homeland after the Romans' successful suppression of the revolt, Yosef chose to accompany Titus back to Rome. There he received citizenship—and with it his new name, (Titus) Flavius Josephus. He was also given (temporary) accommodations, and some financial support to set him on his feet.

It was in the capital of the empire, then, that the former priest and general became an historian. Over the next thirty-odd years, he wrote voraciously: a 7-volume account of the Jewish revolt (The Jewish War); a 20-volume history of his people from the creation of the world up until the outbreak of the revolt (The Jewish Antiquities), basically a re-written Bible; an autobiography (Life), added as an appendix to his Antiquities; and a 2-volume apologetic work, defending Jews and Judaism against their detractors (Against Apion).

As far as we know, he never again left Rome but continued to live there throughout the reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and the last of the Flavian emperors, Vespasian's second son Domitian. Josephus likely died sometime around the year 100.[1]

WITNESS TO THE WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

This brief introduction to the life of Josephus, as he is best known, should make clear already the tremendous value his writings hold for the study of the New Testament (and beyond). In his book *Josephus and the New Testament*, my doctoral supervisor, Steve Mason, wrote, "if his writings had not survived, Bible dictionaries would all be pocketbook size, and textbooks on the background of the New Testament would have little to tell us."[2]

We've already seen how Josephus provides us with first-hand knowledge of groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees (the Essenes don't appear in the New Testament). He also tells us stories about historical figures familiar to readers of the New Testament, such as Pontius Pilate, Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus, Caiaphas, Agrippa I, and Agrippa II, to mention a few. His account of the death of John the Baptist not only fits well with the gospel narratives but also supplies additional information in giving the location of his execution, namely the desert fortress of Machaerus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.116–119).[3] He writes of the stoning of James, "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ" and writer of the letter that bears his name, at the instigation of the high priest Ananus (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.200).

[1] If you're interested in reading about much of this in greater detail, see William den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian* (Brill, 2014); William den Hollander, "The Emperors Vespasian and Titus in Josephus's Writings," in *The Oxford Handbook of Josephus*, ed. Kenneth W. Atkinson (Oxford, 2026), 195–206.

[2] Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 2002), 2.

[3] I compared Josephus's account with the gospels in an article honouring Dr. G.H. Visscher on his retirement: "Josephus, John the Baptist, and Justification," *Unio Cum Christo* 10 (2024), 44–59.

What's more, the insight Josephus gives us into the circumstances that led to the revolt against the Romans sheds light on various passages in the New Testament. For example, he describes multiple occasions where Roman rulers came into conflict with the Jews, whether because of deliberate insensitivity toward or simple ignorance of their strong religious convictions, or some combination of the two.

On one occasion, Josephus writes, shortly after Pontius Pilate's appointment as prefect in AD 26, he brought Roman troops into Jerusalem under the cover of darkness with military standards that bore the bust of the emperor. Large crowds of Jews, some of whom were in town to celebrate Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and Sukkot (the Feast of Booths), followed Pilate all the way to his palace in Caesarea on the coast, where they begged him to reconsider keeping what they saw as blasphemous images in their holy city. They were willing to offer up their lives. Thankfully Pilate ordered the withdrawal of the military standards and crisis was averted.

On another occasion, around the year AD 39, the emperor Gaius ordered the Syrian governor Petronius to set up a statue of the emperor in the temple of Jerusalem. Unsurprisingly, this also met with mass protests from the Jews. It was only the intervention of King Agrippa I, a friend of the emperor, and the wise counsel of Petronius that prevented Gaius from pushing forward his inflammatory plan—that and the fact that he was assassinated the following year, preventing any future disaster!

Episodes like these explain tensions between Romans and Jews that we see in some of the Gospel stories. For example, when the scribes and chief priests asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" (Luke 20:22), they were not doing so innocently. They were trying to catch him on the horns of a dilemma, either committing treason against Rome or alienating the people.

As for the crucifixion, it was the cry of the crowds, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend" (John 19:12), that prompted Pilate to deliver Jesus up to be crucified. The crowds knew well how to exploit the power of Rome and the shaky local peace.

INSIGHT INTO FALSE MESSIAHS

Perhaps most enlightening is the evidence Josephus gives for Jewish messianic hopes and dreams of freedom from the Romans. To be sure, there were many who were content under Roman rule, making the most of it or even thriving. But there were others who fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus that before the temple was destroyed, "false christs [messiahs] and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect" (Mark 13:22). Thus Josephus writes, "For deceitful people and rogues, in a show of divine inspiration busying themselves with revolutionary matters and upheavals, were persuading the mob to be possessed, and leading them out into the desert so that God would there show them signs of freedom" (*War* 2.259–263; cf. *Antiquities* 20.169–172). These were the kinds of false messiahs mentioned by Gamaliel in his speech to the Jewish council, men like Theudas and his four hundred followers, Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:36–37), and the Egyptian who led four thousand Assassins into the desert to revolt from Roman rule (Acts 21:38).

With all this, though, I don't want to give the impression that Josephus's value is as a fact checker, or a mine for background data. His writings have too often been treated that way, as though we can simply extract information from his narratives to confirm some historical detail we find in the New Testament. The reality is that Josephus wrote for his own purposes, with his own agenda. What's more, our concern for historical accuracy was not his. He thought nothing of offering up contradictory accounts of events even in his own life, as we saw above with the differences between his *Jewish War* and *Life* about his role in Galilee at the outbreak of the revolt. Nor did he expect his audience to be bothered by things like chronological discrepancies in the story of his youth.

When reading, then, we need to evaluate what he writes against what we know from other sources of evidence, like other ancient writings, including the New Testament itself, or archeology. And where we have none of that, which is often the case, we need to acknowledge that we're at Josephus's mercy and can't ultimately know if what he tells us reflects what actually happened.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEMPLE'S DESTRUCTION

But his writings aren't just worth reading for those places where they corroborate or substantiate parts of the New Testament. They're worth reading as the sophisticated communication of a first-century Jew intimately involved in the functioning of the temple and the leadership of his people, seeking to live in a complicated world and especially to make sense of the destruction of the temple, which he understood to be the special place of God's holy presence.

In that light, it's striking that Josephus's explanation for the temple's destruction resonates with that of Jesus. In Josephus's view, the temple was destroyed because of the sins of his people. God was ultimately responsible, not the Romans. Even so, before his cleansing of the temple, Jesus prophesied, "For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, *because you did not know the time of your visitation*" (Luke 19:43–44).

As for what Josephus actually wrote, that's lost to the sands of time. That's long been the scholarly consensus. I've taught my students as much over the last six years.

While Jesus grounds the destruction specifically in the people's rejection of him as Messiah, he shares the conviction with Josephus that temple destruction was a sign of God's judgment for sin. That's not surprising. Both Josephus and Jesus were shaped by what God had said long ago about the covenant curses that would come on his people if they failed to obey him (Deut 28:15–68), including the besieging and destruction of their towns.[4] Josephus is then an extremely valuable witness to the first century Jewish world into which the gospel came and in which the church was established and increased.

JOSEPHUS AND JESUS

Until now I've neglected probably the most well-known passage in Josephus's writings, what is often called the *Testimonium Flavianum* (TF). After describing another conflict between Pilate and the Jews, this time because he took money from the temple treasury to finance the building of an aqueduct for Jerusalem, Josephus writes:

> And in this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man, for he was a doer of miraculous deeds, a teacher of men who receive truth with pleasure. And he led many from among the Jews and many from among the Greeks. He was the Christ. And, when Pilate had condemned him to the cross at the accusation of the first men among us, those who at first loved him did not cease to do so, for he appeared to them alive again on the third day given that the divine prophets had spoken such things and thousands of other wonderful things about him. And up till now the tribe of the Christians, who were named from him, has not disappeared (*Jewish Antiquities* 18:63–64).

It won't surprise you to know that a lot of ink has been spilled over this passage. As you can imagine, the major question to be asked is, did Josephus really write this? More specifically, did he really write that Jesus was the Christ?

The fact that Josephus's writings were preserved entirely by Christian scribes has caused many scholars to suspect that while Josephus may have originally written *something* about Jesus, probably brief and neutral at best, Christian scribes seized the opportunity to expand on what he had written. They wanted to make Josephus a witness not just to the existence but the Messianic identity of Jesus. As for what Josephus actually wrote, that's lost to the sands of time. That's long been the scholarly consensus. I've taught my students as much over the last six years.

Not anymore. It's rare when a single book shakes up the academic world, but Thomas Schmidt has done that with *Josephus and Jesus: New Evidence for the One Called Christ* (2025). In this full-length investigation of the authenticity of the TF, published by no less than the Oxford University Press, Schmidt argues, convincingly in my view, that what we have in the manuscripts of Josephus's writings is essentially what he originally wrote. Schmidt draws on ancient manuscripts of Josephus's writings in other languages, that is, early translations from the Greek, to argue that all that is missing in the Greek is a few words that are there in the Latin and Syriac: "He was *thought/believed to be* the Christ." That changes a lot! What's more, Schmidt makes the point that modern translations have sometimes contributed to the problem. Rather than, "for he appeared to them alive again on the third day," Schmidt suggests, "on the third day *it seemed to them* that he was alive again." Suddenly, it doesn't seem so strange to imagine the non-Christian Josephus writing this about Jesus.

There's one more argument against the authenticity of this passage to tackle. That's the accusation that its language is not really characteristic of Josephus. Some of the vocabulary used is not found elsewhere in his writings. Scholars argued, therefore, that he couldn't have written it. Schmidt, however, approaches this challenge with greater precision than has been done before by applying a technique called stylometry to the passage. Stylometry marshals the power of computers to analyze an author's vocabulary and style mathematically to discover its unique fingerprint, recognizing that each author has his own way of writing. Well, after some serious number crunching, Schmidt demonstrates that the unique words in the TF occur at exactly the frequency we would expect from Josephus's other writings and that the passage is full of very characteristic

[4] For further exploration of the similarities and differences between Josephus and Jesus on the destruction of the temple, see William den Hollander, "Josephus, Jesus, and the Fall of Jerusalem: On Doing History with Scripture," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 71 (2015), 1–9.

Josephan words and even phrases. In short, Schmidt concludes that this passage has Josephus's fingerprints all over it.

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT?

As if that wasn't exciting enough, this new book tackles another significant question, namely, how then did Josephus come to know these details he reports about Jesus? As he investigated this passage carefully, Schmidt found himself going down a rabbit hole. He wondered what relationships Josephus may have had with "the first men among us" whom he mentions were responsible for the accusations against Jesus.

In the second half of the book, then, Schmidt carefully investigates Josephus's social network during his time in Jerusalem and uncovers the fact that Josephus had close connections to prominent figures connected to the deaths of both Jesus and his brother James. Especially noteworthy is Josephus's commander at the outbreak of the war, the high priest Ananus II, who was the one who ordered the stoning of James. Moreover, he was the son of Ananus I, also called Annas, the former high priest who was responsible for the first interrogation of Jesus (John 18:13–24). Schmidt makes the compelling case that, given Jewish laws about Passover celebrations, which called for the gathering of families "according to the house of their fathers" and "according to [their] clan" (Ex 12:3, 21; Lev 25:49), Ananus II might well have been at his father's house at the time of Jesus's trial. Thus, Schmidt concludes, "if it is not certain that Ananus II was at some portion of the trial of Jesus, it is certainly very likely" (192).

And so, when Josephus writes about Jesus, Schmidt suggests that he may be drawing not on sympathetic reports given by followers of Jesus or mere rumours, but on first hand evidence from those who were present the very night Jesus was condemned to death. This is the argument that lies behind the subtitle for the book: "New Evidence for the One Called Christ." Schmidt is not suggesting, of course, that the TF is newly discovered. Rather, he is arguing that we need to consider it, for the first time, as *eyewitness* evidence for the details it shares about Jesus. It's no wonder, then, that his book has been welcomed especially by Christian apologists, who are using it to defend the reliability of the gospel accounts.

But can this claim be upheld? As exciting as it is to imagine Josephus's private conversations with men like Ananus II about the life, the death, and (reports of) the resurrection of Jesus, the reality is that what we have in the TF is *not* their eyewitness testimony. The two parts of Schmidt's book are, in some sense, working against each other. If Josephus' fingerprints are all over his testimony about Jesus, how can we hope to get *behind* his writing to the primary sources for his information? Even if Josephus did talk to Ananus the son of Ananus, or Ishmael the son of Phiabi, or Simon the son of Gamaliel, or anyone else who happened to be present at the trial of Jesus, we simply don't have a record of those conversations. All we have in the TF is *Josephus's* commentary on Jesus, written in AD 93 during the reign of the emperor Domitian for an audience of interested readers in the city of Rome. That's a very different thing—not unimportant, to be sure, but perhaps not the "new evidence" that Schmidt claims it to be.

JOSEPHUS AND THE CHURCH

I hope it's clear by now how fascinating Josephus's writings should be for readers of the New Testament. It also shouldn't surprise us that Josephus's writings have been highly valued by the church from the beginning. I've mentioned already how it was Christian scribes who copied them and it's their manuscripts that survived. But it goes much further than that. The fourth century church father Jerome, best known for translating the Bible into Latin, the so-called Vulgate, included a chapter on Josephus in his catalogue on *Christian* literature. The fifth century monk and writer Cassiodorus also included Josephus in his list of *church* writers like Eusebius and Rufinus. Perhaps most strikingly, a Syriac translation of Josephus's *Jewish War* was incorporated into the Syriac Vulgate (*Peshitta*) as "the fifth book of the Maccabees." In this case his writing was literally canonized.

In medieval manuscripts, some drawings of Josephus depict him in the same distinctive way as the church fathers are rendered, even though he was a Jewish priest and not a Christian. Others portray him as one of the Old Testament prophets, who were frequently pictured holding an open book with their fingers resting on a "Christ-prophecy." You might see, for example, the prophet Isaiah pointing

When the Pilgrims sailed to North America to escape religious oppression in the seventeenth century, often tucked away among their meager earthly possessions was William Whiston's English translation of Josephus's writings, right alongside their family Bible and John Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress.

to Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." In Josephus's case, the "Christ-prophecy" to which he was pointing was the TF. It's no wonder then that a modern scholar has called him "the fifth evangelist."

But it's not only ancient history. In Calvin's sixteenth century Geneva, where close attention was paid to the observance of Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, Josephus's writings made it onto a list of approved reading for that day, together with the Bible, of course. And when the Pilgrims sailed to North America to escape religious oppression in the seventeenth century, often tucked away among their meager earthly possessions was William Whiston's English translation of Josephus's writings, right alongside their family Bible and John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*.

There's an amusing passage in Rudyard Kipling's *Captains Courageous* (1897) that draws these two together in a description of life on the fishing schooner *We're Here*:

> They never worked on Sundays, but shaved, and washed themselves if it were fine, and Pennsylvania sang hymns. Once or twice he suggested that, if it was not an impertinence, he thought he could preach a little. Uncle Salters nearly jumped down his throat at the mere notion, reminding him that he was not a preacher and mustn't think of such things. "We'd hev him rememberin' Johnstown next," Salters explained, "an' what would happen then?" So they compromised on his reading aloud from a book called "Josephus." It was an old leather-bound volume, smelling of a hundred voyages, very solid and very like the Bible, but enlivened with accounts of battles and sieges; and they read it nearly from cover to cover.

It's been my experience that a previous generation of (Canadian) Reformed church members similarly had in their generally-limited personal libraries a copy of the same eighteenth century English translation by Whiston, often shelved among their theological books. In fact, I've been collecting copies over the years as the next generation(s) have declined to show them interest. There's still time to reverse that trend! So, *tolle lege:* take up and read!

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PAUL: A Timeline of His Life

ERIC KAMPEN

The Lord Jesus chose the Apostle Paul to be a key instrument in spreading the gospel. He is first mentioned in connection with the stoning of Stephen at the beginning of Acts 8. He then fades to the background for the rest of the chapter, only to reappear in Acts 9, which records how he encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus. He again fades to the background for three chapters, only to reappear in Chapter 13. From that point on, everything mentioned in the Book of Acts involves him. Further, most of the letters in the New Testament were written by Paul.

While we have a lot of information about the Apostle Paul, what is easily missed is how short a time he was active in bringing the gospel to the nations. We can better understand this by laying out a timeline of his life, highlighting key events, including when he wrote his letters to the churches. This merits attention not so that we may praise Paul for being so productive, but to see how much the Lord accomplished through him in his time and continues to accomplish through his writings to this day. This article, therefore, will lay out a timeline for Paul's life and consider the benefits of having such a timeline. To avoid being overwhelmed with dates, his life will be divided into five stages. First, we consider what we know about Paul's life before his conversion.

LIFE BEFORE CONVERSION (? –AD 34)

We are never told when Paul was born but we do know he was born in the city of Tarsus, in Cilicia, near the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea in what today is the country of Turkey. His parents were from the tribe of Benjamin and named him Saul. He became known as Paul after his conversion. For simplicity's sake, we will use that name throughout this article.

At least one of his parents must have been a Roman citizen, for Paul had Roman citizenship. In his defense before the Sanhedrin, he said he was the son of a Pharisee. Paul himself was also a Pharisee, educated by Gamaliel in Jerusalem. He could very well have been present in Jerusalem when our Lord was crucified which, by traditional dating, took place in AD 33.

The first time Paul is mentioned by name is when Stephen was executed by stoning. If, by traditional dating, we put our Lord's death and resurrection in AD 33, the stoning of Stephen probably took place in AD 34. It appears that not long after the death of Stephen, Saul set out to Damascus to arrest any Christians he could find. This takes us to the second stage of his life, from his conversion to the start of his mission work.

FROM CONVERSION TO MISSION (AD 34–47)

Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus is well known. The zealous persecutor was changed into a zealous preacher, proving that Jesus was the Christ.

The account in Acts 9 tells us that Paul spent many days in Damascus before going back to Jerusalem. According to his letter to the Galatians, this period spanned approximately three years and not all of it was spent in Damascus. He left Damascus and spent an unspecified amount of time in Arabia before returning to Damascus. Because of a plot to kill him, he fled Damascus, escaping by being let down in a basket through a window in the wall (2 Cor 11:32–33; Gal 1:17).

He then visited Jerusalem, where the disciples were hesitant to trust him. With the help of Barnabas, he met Peter and James, the Lord's brother. His preaching soon caused an uproar in Jerusalem, and he was sent off to Tarsus, his hometown. He remained there for the next seven or eight years.

Around AD 45, Barnabas invited him to come to Antioch, where the church had begun to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. In AD 46, he again visited Jerusalem, bringing gifts from the church at Antioch to the church at Jerusalem, which was suffering because of famine.

At this point it is good to highlight that more than a dozen years have passed since Paul's conversion. The Lord had told him he would bring the gospel to the Gentiles, but Paul's first encounter with Gentiles happened in Antioch, some twelve years later. This is surprising. The dramatic conversion experience gave the impression of urgency for Paul to begin his task. While he began to preach Jesus as the Christ among the Jews, the church was not ready to accept him, nor were the Jews, who were perplexed by his turnaround. When he ended up in Tarsus, it appeared as if he was being shuffled off to a corner somewhere to stay out of trouble. Paul had been called, but he was not yet ready for his task of preaching the gospel to the nations. That finally began around AD 47, when Paul was sent out by the church at Antioch for the work of mission.

Paul's life at a glance:

1

LIFE BEFORE CONVERSION

- Born in Tarsus (Cilicia)
- Educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel
- Pharisee & persecutor of Christians
- AD 34: Present at Stephen's stoning
- Journey to Damascus to arrest Christians

? – AD 34

2

CONVERSION TO MISSION

- Damascus Road encounter with Christ (Acts 9)
- Arabia → Damascus (~3 years)
- Escape from Damascus in basket
- Jerusalem visit: meets Peter & James
- Sent to Tarsus (~7–8 years)
- AD 45: Barnabas calls him to Antioch
- AD 46: Relief visit to Jerusalem
- AD 47: Official missionary sending

AD 34 – 47

PAUL'S MISSION JOURNEYS (AD 47–57)

We read in Acts 13:2–4 how the Holy Spirit directed the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Paul. On their first trip, they went to Cyprus and then an area in what today is south-central Turkey. Their first audience was always the Jews, as they would visit the local synagogue. When the Jews rejected the message, they would speak to the Gentiles and many Gentiles believed.

At the end of this trip of about 18 months, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in about AD 49. In Acts 15, we read about a dispute as to whether the Gentile believers should be circumcised and keep the other ceremonial laws. This led to a meeting with the apostles and the elders of the church at Jerusalem.

Soon after returning to Antioch, Paul went on his second missionary journey, which would cover the years 49–52. Paul and Barnabas parted company over the question as to whether John Mark should accompany them. Paul set out with Silas and was soon joined by Timothy. This second trip had Paul cross into Greece. He spent 18 months in Corinth and during his stay there he wrote his first letters, addressed to the church at Thessalonica. After his stay in Corinth, he travelled back to Antioch. It appears that during this time, he also made a brief visit to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1).

Paul then set out on his third missionary journey, which would cover the years 52–57. Three of those years he spent in Ephesus. Acts 19 and 20 relate events regarding Paul's interaction with the church at Ephesus. During his stay there he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians. It appears that he made a brief visit to Corinth during this time as well. He then set out to visit the churches that had been established during his previous journey, with the church at Corinth as his final destination.

While visiting the churches on the way to Corinth, he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, as well as his letter to the Galatians. While spending the winter in Corinth, he wrote his letter to the Romans. From there, Paul set out to go to Jerusalem, visiting some of the churches along the way. He arrived in Jerusalem in AD 57. This sets the stage for the next phase of his life, his imprisonment.

PAUL THE PRISONER (AD 57–62)

The book of Acts devotes nearly as much space to Paul's missionary journeys (chapters 13–21) as it does to his time as a prisoner (chapters 22–28). His time as prisoner, though, is about half as long as his time as missionary. Of his five years as prisoner, about half of those were spent in Caesarea. His trip to Rome took about six months. In Acts 28 we read that Paul was under house arrest in Rome for two years. Paul made good use of his time, testifying to kings and rulers, such as Felix, Festus, and King Agrippa. During his time of house arrest in Rome, he also wrote letters to the Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

THE FINAL YEARS

The last we hear of Paul is how "he welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30–31). As readers, we'd like to know how Paul's life ended, but we are not told in Scripture and there is no consensus among historians as to what happened. We can assume that since he appealed to Caesar, he would have had a hearing, thereby bringing the gospel to the highest authority in the Roman Empire.

We don't know if he was released, although it is a common assumption. If so, it is possible that he had the opportunity to fulfill his desire to visit Spain (Rom 15:24, 28). It appears that during his time in Rome, either during his two years under house arrest or after he was released, he wrote his first letter to Timothy and a letter to Titus. The last letter he wrote would be his second letter to Timothy. In that letter he writes about the time of his departure

3

MISSION JOURNEYS

- First Journey (47–49)
  Cyprus & South-Central Turkey
- Second Journey (49–52)
  Greece • Corinth (18 mos.)

Letters written:
1–2 Thessalonians

- Third Journey (52–57)
  Ephesus (3 years) → Corinth

Letters written:
1 Cor. • 2 Cor. • Gal. • Rom.

- AD 57: Jerusalem

AD 47 – 57

4

PAUL AS PRISONER

- AD 57–62
- Caesarea imprisonment (~2 years)
- Testifies before Felix • Festus • Agrippa
- Voyage to Rome (~6 months)
- Rome: House arrest (2 years)

PRISON LETTERS:

- Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon

AD 57 – 62

5

THE FINAL YEARS

- AD 62–68?
- Possible release?
- Possible Spain mission? (Rom 15:24, 28)

FINAL LETTERS:

- 1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy (last known letter)
- AD 68?: Traditionally believed martyred in Rome

AD 62 – 68?

having come and having fought the good fight and having finished the race (2 Timothy 4:6–7). Although it hasn't been proven as a fact, it is commonly understood that Paul died a martyr's death in Rome no later than AD 68.

SO WHAT?

We now come to the question of "so what?" Indeed, what benefit is there in this chronology of the life of Paul?

First, it is a reminder of the power of God in the way he changed a persecutor of the church into his chosen instrument to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. It truly is a most amazing conversion story. It underlines that calling is a matter of grace, not merit.

Second, we can learn from the long span of time between Paul's calling and the start of his missionary labours. The dramatic conversion experience might give the impression that Paul would get started right away. In a way he did, preaching in Arabia, Jerusalem, Tarsus, and Antioch, but his call to go to the nations did not come into effect until some twelve years after his conversion. It gives personal context to his exhortation in 1 Timothy 5:22 not to be hasty in the laying on hands. He had to wait for his time to be concretely sent out. This point is reflected in Article 7 of the Church Order that "No one who has recently come to the confession of the Reformed religion shall be declared eligible for call within the churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and has been carefully examined." It took some years for Paul to gain the confidence and trust of the believers. It took time to prepare him for his task.

Third, a timeline gives a sense of when Paul wrote his various letters, which gives a helpful context for understanding why various matters were raised and addressed. Paul's letters are not abstract treatises, but they address concrete situations. The timeline also brings out how soon after planting churches he wrote letters to give further instruction and exhortation.

Fourth, Paul's many years in prison show how the Lord will use all kinds of circumstances to spread his gospel. Paul had been told he would speak to kings and rulers, and the Lord used Paul's imprisonment to make that a reality. His imprisonment led to an audience with the most powerful ruler of the day, the Roman Ceasar.

Fifth, and perhaps most significant, Paul's active mission work spanned barely a decade. He travelled extensively in what today are the countries of Turkey and Greece but never seemed to stay long in one place. About half of his time was spent in the cities of Corinth and Ephesus. While many responded to his preaching, we never read of huge numbers of converts as we find in the time period just after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

Paul was a church planter (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). His work was just the beginning of the gospel going to the nations. This is reinforced by the conclusion of the book of Acts, which does not give an account of his death but of Paul actively preaching the gospel. It leaves us with the impression that Paul's task is ongoing to this very day. It is ongoing through the letters he wrote.

When we consider the relatively short period of Paul's active mission work, we can see how it was foundational for God's plan. Paul's lasting impact would come through the letters he wrote to the churches he planted. Through his writings Paul is still preaching the gospel and it continues to go out to the end of the earth.

Paul once wrote, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7). The timeline of his life brings this out and makes us marvel at what God accomplished through Paul in his lifetime and is continuing to accomplish to this day.

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Wigs & Figs:
Shame and the Gospel

JAKE TORENVLIET

Every so often, a legal case captures public attention beyond the local or even national stage. Recently, one such case in the United Kingdom gained international interest. The particulars of the case were important to the British public, but not much to me. My curiosity was captured instead by a photograph accompanying the news article. In the picture stood a young British barrister outside the courthouse in full regalia: robes, collar, and a carefully powdered wig. It was a striking picture, a collision of modern legal drama with tradition and formality.

It was the wig that was especially striking. In Canada and the United States, lawyers have their own traditions and attire, but none includes a wig. The sight of a barrister in full regalia as electric vehicles hum down our streets, drones survey the skyline, and court proceedings are at times conducted via video calls was jarring. I found myself asking, "Why the wig?"

The short answer is rather dull: tradition. The tradition shares something with the classic Geneva gown worn by some preachers. In both cases, the aim is to emphasize the office rather than the individual. The uniform—wig included—is meant to signal impartiality, continuity, and submission to something greater than the person who wears it.

The longer answer is much more interesting. Wigs first came into use in 17th century France—think of the world of Louis XIV and the courts depicted in *The Three Musketeers*. Wig use began as a way to conceal baldness, not just the common male pattern baldness that affects roughly half of men by midlife, but patchy hair loss caused especially by syphilis, a sexually transmitted infection that often produced visible lesions and thinning hair. Among the upper classes, where such diseases were not uncommon, elaborate wigs and white powdered makeup provided a convenient disguise. What began as concealment soon became fashion. What hid shame was recast as status. Over time, the covering itself came to symbolize refinement. For all the dignity the wig now claims, its early use was rooted in hiding the visible consequences of sin.

OUR COVERINGS FOR SHAME

At one level this might seem ridiculous. Why would a person attempt to manage symptoms and appearances of a serious disease rather than address the condition itself? Yet, when we turn to the opening pages of Scripture, we find the same impulse in fallen human hearts. To be sure, it doesn't mention wigs, but it does mention figs, or more specifically, fig leaves.

After Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths" (Gen 3:7).

No one in the Bible ever accuses sin of being logical. Sin, by its nature, is self-destructive. At the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, there was a kinetic art installation titled *Can't Help Myself*. It featured a large industrial robotic arm endlessly trying to mop up a pool of red hydraulic fluid, a fluid that looked like blood and was leaking from the arm itself. The arm needed the fluid to function—it was its lifeblood. Day after day, year after year, it squeegeed the fluid back into its reservoir, but more continued to leak as it was replenished. It was a picture of futility, a picture of slow, self-inflicted destruction.[1]

This pathetic robotic display is a profound rebuke of our foolish attempts to manage sin in our own way and wisdom. After their rebellion, Adam and Eve's first instinct was to hide. They covered themselves with fig leaves and disappeared among the trees. Why? Because for the first time they felt exposed, vulnerable, and ashamed before one another, but more importantly before the God who once walked with them in perfect fellowship. Now, being in his holy presence felt unbearable. Sin didn't just

[1] "Can't Help Myself by Sun Yuan & Peng Yu," YouTube Short, uploaded by This Week in New York, March 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/SBGf_3dEjvw

break their relationship with God; it distorted their view of him. Instead of running toward him, they ran away.

SOPHISTICATED FIG LEAVES

We do the same, don't we? We carry shame because of our own sin. We carry shame because of sin done to us. We wrestle with insecurity and inadequacy. We live with the quiet fear that someone will discover the truth: we're imposters and we don't know what we are doing. Of course, we're far too "refined" for literal fig leaves, and wigs are no longer in fashion outside of a British barrister's office. So how do we hide? How do we try to reclaim what feels as though it is slowly leaking away?

Maybe we throw ourselves into work, convincing ourselves that productivity will compensate for what we lack. Maybe we curate our social media presence, presenting a carefully edited version of life that keeps the cracks out of view. Maybe we immerse ourselves in projects, ministries, or charitable commitments, ensuring there's never an opportunity for others to see behind our guard. Or maybe we cling to a form of works righteousness, piling up fig leaf after fig leaf, wig after wig of good deeds, hoping they will prove our worth and finally silence the shame.

We come to church, concealing ourselves in countless ways, from each other and from God. We manage impressions. We deflect. We keep conversations shallow. Anything to avoid being fully known.

But underneath it all, the shame remains. The hydraulic fluid keeps seeping out even as we mop it up. The condition goes untreated. No wig, fig, or jig we dance for others can deal with the deeper reality that the wound of sin has not been healed. Coverings may hide the evidence for a time from other people, but never from God. This impulse to cover and conceal is as old as Eden, and it will persist until the end of the age.

SCRIPTURE SPEAKS: NAKED BEFORE GOD

Scripture wastes no time exposing the futility of our hiding. Genesis tells us that when Adam and Eve heard the Lord God walking in the garden, they hid among the trees. But the trees were never the problem. God called out, "Where are you?" not because he lacked information, but because they were already exposed. Their fig leaves fooled no one. History's first attempt to manage shame collapsed the moment God spoke (Gen 3:8–11).

The rest of Scripture presses the point. In Psalm 139:1–12, David confesses that the Lord has searched him and known him. God knows when he sits and when he rises. Even before a word is on his tongue, the Lord knows it completely. "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" David asks. "Or where shall I flee from your presence?" The implied answer is: nowhere.

The author of Hebrews removes any lingering illusion: no creature is hidden from his sight. All are naked and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Heb 4:13). The language is deliberate. Naked. Exposed. The very condition Adam tried to cover.

THE GOSPEL ANSWER TO OUR SHAME

Who will deliver us from our figs and wigs? Paul cries out in Romans 7:24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" And he answers his own question in verse 25: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

But how does God deliver? How does the gospel address our shame and our endless attempts at self-covering? In Genesis 3, the God who was betrayed does not abandon his creatures. We often rush past the darkest moment in human history, eager to move on. And it's understandable. We notice the curse. We remain for a moment on the promise in Genesis 3:15. But we may easily overlook the quiet act of mercy at the chapter's end. It really is the key that unlocks the *how* of verse 15's promise. Moses writes: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them."

Pause there.

Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together. God made garments of skins. Their covering was flimsy, self-made, and ultimately useless. His came at the cost of blood. The text doesn't linger on the details, but the implication is unmistakable: before they leave the garden, before the long ache of exile begins, blood is shed to clothe sinners.

How will the seed of the woman crush the serpent's head? How will Adam's shame finally be removed? Not by better leaves.

From the very beginning, God's answer to shame is not concealment, but sacrifice. Not self-made covering but provided—imputed—righteousness.

Not by more dignified wigs. Not by frantic attempts to mop up the mess. From the very beginning, God's answer to shame is not concealment, but sacrifice. Not self-made covering but provided—imputed—righteousness.

In our Protestant church tradition, we're not accustomed to seeing crucifixes. Near my home is Saint Joseph's Hospital—a Roman Catholic hospital. Walking through its corridors, you see crucifixes

in nearly every hallway. Yet there is a notable peculiarity in each one. Even Roman Catholics, with their eagerness to display Christ on this instrument of torture, don't go to the truest length. Jesus is always depicted with a strategically placed covering: a loin cloth.

CHRIST THE SHAME-BEARER

In the opening pages of his book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the Word,* historian Tom Holland describes the horror, spectacle, and shame of crucifixion: "Exposed to public view like slabs of meat hung from a market stall, troublesome slaves were nailed to crosses . . . To be hung *naked*, long in agony, swelling with ugly welts on shoulders and chest, helpless to beat away the clamorous birds; such a fate, Roman intellectuals agreed, was the worst imaginable. Execution needed to be public. Nothing spoke more eloquently of a failed revolt than hundreds of corpse-hung crosses lining a highway or massed before a rebellious city. Even in peacetime, executioners made a spectacle of their victims, suspending them in a variety of inventive ways: one upside down, another with a stake through the genitals, another attached by the arms to a yoke. The exposure of the crucified was so foul that many felt tainted merely by witnessing it. Everything about the practice of nailing a man to a cross—a 'crux'—was repellent. Why, the very word is harsh on our ears."[2]

Jesus of Nazareth, Saviour of sinners, Lamb of God, the second Adam, hung on a cross. No evening shadows could conceal him. No garden foliage could cover him. He couldn't run. Christ's body was fixed in place with nails, utterly exposed. He wore no wig, no fig-leaf covering, only a crown of thorns. God did not need to ask, "Where are you?" But Jesus did ask, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

There Christ hung publicly—naked, bloody, ridiculed, abandoned by men, and forsaken by the Father. He bore the wrath of God for Adam's sin, for your sin, for my sin. He took all our shame, all our guilt, all our feeble attempts at concealment, and he gave himself for us.

CLOTHED IN CHRIST

Philip Bliss's hymn *Man of Sorrows* captures the moment in its haunting lyrics and melody:

> Man of sorrows what a name
> for the Son of God, who came
> ruined sinners to reclaim:
> Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
>
> Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
> in my place condemned he stood,
> sealed my pardon with his blood:
> Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
>
> Guilty, helpless, lost were we;
> blameless Lamb of God was he,
> sacrificed to set us free:
> Hallelujah, what a Saviour![3]

Jesus Christ not only bore our shame; he removed it. Before God, we are no longer condemned (Rom 8:1). Through Christ's righteousness, we are clothed in garments of salvation (Isa 61:10; Rev 19:8), justified and adopted as his children (Rom 5:9–11; Gal 4:4–7). The gospel assures us that we no longer need to hide from God or from his presence; our shame has been nailed to the cross.

But the gospel also speaks to our shame before others. Our worth isn't measured by our bank accounts, our reputation, or our accomplishments. Our comfort and security are found in Christ alone. We belong, body and soul, to our faithful Saviour (1 Cor 6:19–20; Col 3:3–4). He sees us fully, knows us completely, and loves us perfectly. There is no valley too deep, shadow too dark, mistake too great, insecurity too persistent for the love of Christ to cover.

In Christ, we need not shrink from conversation, hesitate to lead, or fear being fully known by others. If Christ is for us, who can be against us? Who can bring any charge against us? Who will deliver us from our wigs and figs? Paul's answer still rings true: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Step into the light. He has provided the perfect covering for your sin, the perfect remedy for your shame. His name is Jesus! Clothed in him, nothing can shame you, nothing can condemn you, nothing can separate you from the love that sees you, knows you, and calls you his own.

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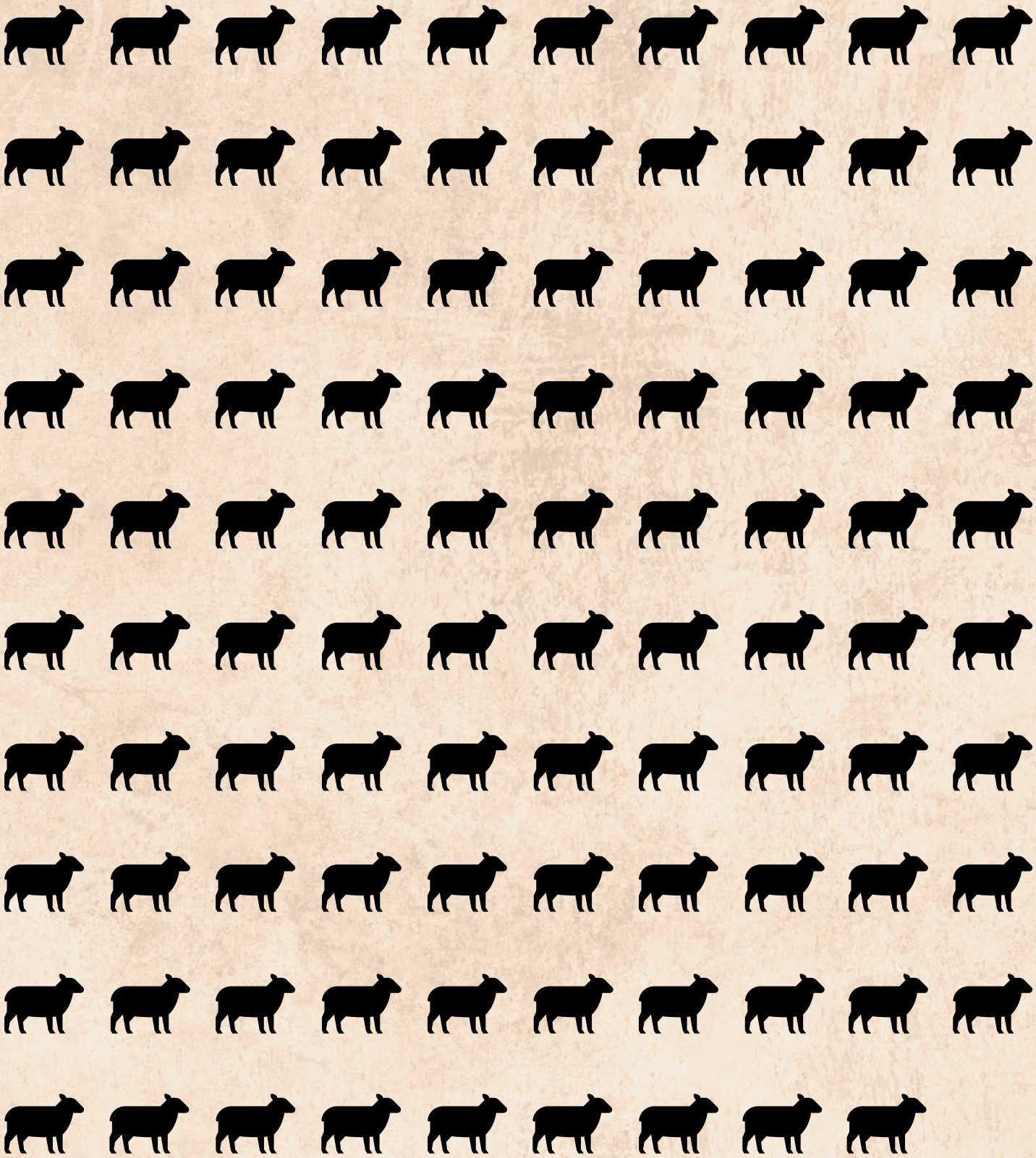
[2] Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the Word* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 2.

[3] Bliss, Philip P. 1875. "Man of Sorrows! What a Name." In *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 352. (2018).



Am I my brother's keeper?

JAN DEGELDER

We have noticed before that the Canadian Reformed Church Order is actually a relatively small document. What we have agreed upon as necessary to regulate our cooperation and to affirm our commitment to mutual accountability as federated churches is quite limited. And, in most cases, it is not very detailed. The Church Order does not cover every possible scenario. Many practical matters are left to the freedom of the local churches. Only two sections are somewhat of an exception to that rule. These stipulate matters in more detail than the rest.

The first such section is covered in Articles 3, 4, and 5. This section regulates the way to enter office, in particular (with some additional stipulations in Articles 7–9) the office of minister of the Word. The reason is that protecting faithfulness in the preaching and teaching of the church is a high priority. Since the Bible frequently warns against false teaching and preaching, the leadership of those who are called to teach and preach is crucial for the church. That's why we confess that "practicing the pure preaching of the gospel" is the first mark of a true and faithful church of Christ.[1]

The second topic that has led to fairly detailed stipulations is church discipline, in Articles 66–72. Dealing with persistent sin is critical for the church of Jesus Christ, which is to be a holy congregation and assembly of true believers.[2] This is so important that we confess "exercising church discipline for correcting and punishing sins" to be the third mark of a true church that governs itself according to God's Word.[3]

These two sections of the Church Order correspond to what we confess in Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism as the two "keys of the kingdom of heaven." Preaching and church discipline are the two keys to Christ's kingdom which underlines the significance of these two sections of the Church Order. In this column I'll be looking at the matter of church discipline in more detail.

BE HOLY FOR I AM HOLY

In applying discipline, the church defends the holiness of the church as a reflection of God's holiness. This conviction, that the church is to be holy, comes directly from the Bible. In his first letter, the apostle Peter calls the church a holy priesthood, a holy nation (1 Pet 2:5 & 9). For this reason, our creeds and confessions consistently refer to the church as "holy." It is set apart from the world and fully dedicated to the Lord and his service.

This sets high standards for those who belong to the church. To them the apostle Peter says: "as he who called you is holy, you also

[1] Belgic Confession Art. 29

[2] Belgic Confession Art. 27

[3] Belgic Confession Art. 29

“So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

be holy in all your conduct” (1 Pet 1:15). The flipside of that urgent call is the call to resist and remove from the church the destructive power of evil. This is just as urgent. The apostle Paul encourages the Corinthian congregation, “Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor 5:13).

All of this does not deny that sin is still a problem in the life of every believer (1 John 1:8). Every moment we live only by God’s forgiving mercy and undeserved love in Jesus Christ. Indeed, “there, but for the grace of God, go I” is a saying true for us all.

This does not imply that the church should shy away from applying discipline when a church member allows himself to be dominated by sin, while rejecting the call of God’s Word to repent. But it does mean that we can only apply church discipline with a humble attitude, driven by deep concern for the spiritual well-being of our brother or sister. Article 66 of the Church Order stresses that “discipline is of a spiritual nature.” Discipline always comes with an urgent call to repent, driven by desire for the sinner’s salvation. This makes clear that there is a strong connection between church discipline and pastoral care.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF

It is important to remember that church discipline, though a responsibility of the elders of the church, must always be rooted in active participation of the members of the congregation. It is true that formal, judicial steps can only be taken by the consistory. But discipline is not just a consistory matter. Eventually their role might become important, but that’s not where it starts. Article 67 makes this very clear: private admonitions must come *before* consistory involvement. And if, by God’s grace, private admonitions result in repentance of the sinner, the consistory should not even hear about it.

I think we all know this, but it is good to stress this and dig a bit deeper here. Why have so much emphasis on what Article 67 calls “private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses?” We know where this expression

comes from. It is what is referred to as "the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15–17" (Art 66). But then, one can apply this rule in different ways. For instance, I can visit and confront a brother to find that he refuses to listen. Then I take my two witnesses only to receive the same response, and in the end I hand it over to the elders. I might then think: *Now it's their problem, and no longer my business.* But that does not sound right, does it? Why not?

Let's remind ourselves of the basic biblical ground for Jesus's instruction in Matthew 18. We are all familiar with Jesus's summary of God's law: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself." This goes back all the way to the Lord's instructions in Leviticus 19, especially verses 17 and 18. We have to ask ourselves: Does this love drive me when I set out to apply Jesus's rule in Matthew 18?

After all, confronting and admonishing a brother or sister can be an intimidating challenge. Here the context in Matthew 18 is helpful. The urgency of going after your brother who is in the deadly grip of sin and reaching out to him with compassion (vv. 15–17) is emphasized by the passage just before: the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 12–14). Jesus points at the deep love and heartfelt concern that drives the search for the one out of the hundred that goes astray. And then he adds: "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." This is Jesus's focus: how can you not do whatever you can to save the sinner? The one who is stuck in sin is like that one lost sheep, heading for destruction.[4]

ONGOING INVOLVEMENT

When your brother or sister refuses to listen and repent, you may go home disappointed, but it's not the end. On the contrary, you double your effort. You pray and go again. And, in line with Jesus's instructions, if there is still no evidence of repentance, you choose witnesses to join you. This is not only to verify the facts. When they witness a clear hardening in sin, they will become fellow admonishers, intensifying the call to break with evil and seek God's forgiveness.

This echoes the words of the catechism, that those in the grip of sin "are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner."[5] Such private admonitions do not lead to official steps. As mentioned earlier, official church discipline is the responsibility of the consistory. But even after a matter has to be reported to the elders because the private admonitions remained fruitless, the congregation continues to be part of the process.

To begin with, the work of the elders is not a reason for the original admonishers to drop the matter. And, although the consistory will need time for its own pastoral visits and admonitions without going public, that might change. If the sinner defiantly continues to harden himself in sin, eventually the consistory will inform the whole congregation about this, and not just the first admonishers. This process is described in Article 68 and is guided by the Forms for Excommunication which the churches have adopted for that purpose.[6]

It's good to give these steps some more attention, but that's for a next article. At the moment we are focusing on the role the members of the congregation have in this process. Article 68 makes very clear that when the consistory informs the congregation of a member living in unrepentant sin, it does so with the aim of mobilizing the congregation, to engage all the members in prayer and admonition. This is big and important. After the public announcement by the consistory, no member of the congregation can say: "'trying to seek and save this lost sheep is none of my business." On the contrary, as Article 68 puts it, "an excommunication may not take place without the cooperation of the congregation."

In our "I can do whatever I want, leave me alone" culture, applying discipline in this way is difficult. But God's Word stresses how essential it is. Just read Hebrews 10:26–31.

So then, am I my brother's keeper? Yes, I am. And so are you.

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[4] See also James 5:19–20

[5] Heidelberg Catechism, LD 31, Q&A 85

[6] *Book of Praise*, 2014, 611–615

PRAYERS FOR NIGERIA

It is probably no coincidence that after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Acts 3, the cost of following Jesus is immediately shown in subsequent chapters. Peter and John are arrested in chapter 4; in chapter 5 all the apostles are imprisoned, beaten, released, and ordered not to preach; in chapter 6 Stephen is arrested, and in chapter 7 he is martyred.

Looking at these events from a human perspective, one may think this was only about rulers not wanting a group of rebels to persuade the crowds to believe that the judicial system had failed when it crucified an innocent man. However, Ephesians 6 says that the struggle going on here is far more than that of flesh and blood. Indeed, a mere four chapters after the outpouring of the Spirit the cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil responded by inciting men to kill a faithful follower of Christ. It is quickly evident that the inevitable result of Christians living in an evil world is that you will be called to endure persecution.

Except *we* aren't really, are we? In my lifetime, Christians in the West have not been persecuted in the way that the Bible tells us Christians will be. One may point to examples of legislation that various nations have passed which curtail free speech and redefine the gospel message as no longer "good news," but now "hate speech." Yet, have we ever gone to bed knowing the family two doors down from us were recently butchered in the middle of the night, simply because the Spirit of God lived in their hearts and was evident in their lives? Have we ever gone to worship on Sunday and had to look past blood stained pews and door trim, the result of violent attacks that occurred just weeks earlier during worship? Would we even go to worship if we thought it wasn't "safe" to do so?

The extreme contrast in levels of persecution within the world is something that Western Christians will sometime wrestle with. It's something I wrestle with—why them, Lord, and not me? These nations are already afflicted with poverty and disease. "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth" (Ps 58:11).

Nigeria is a stark example of persecution and deep struggle for the faith. Our brothers and sisters who live in Nigeria need our prayers. According to OpenDoors.org, "Nigerian Christians suffer significant and severe persecution—to such a degree that Nigeria has been the most violent place in the world for followers of Christ."[1]

We are only 5 months into 2026 and yet the violent acts against Nigerian saints is staggering. Consider just a few examples from this year:

- On February 12, 51 people were abducted and six killed in coordinated assaults on four villages in Kaduna State, Nigeria. The violence is concentrated in the predominantly Christian southern districts of the state.[2]
- On March 29, during Palm Sunday celebrations, spiritual forces of evil entered an isolated community in Ungwan Rukuba and killed 30 of the Christian residents.[3]

[1] https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/nigeria/

[2] https://www.barnabasaid.org/gb/news/another-51-christians-killed-in-new-attacks-in-nigeria-s-plateau-state/

[3] https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/stories/Palm-Sunday-Attack-Shakes-Nigerian-Community/

- In the early hours of April 14, approximately 100 armed men invaded the villages of Zike and Kimakpa, indiscriminately shot Christians, and set their homes on fire.[4]
- On April 26, militants in the central Nigerian city of Kachia ambushed a school bus of girls and abducted nine of them. One was killed while trying to run away. The first names of those abducted include Happy, Favour, Patience, and Peace. The girl who was killed while trying to escape was named Purity.[5]

Here are six specific ways that the saints can lift up our Nigerian brothers and sisters in prayer:[6]

1. Extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to attack Christian communities with devastating force. Pray for God's supernatural protection over vulnerable believers, especially families forced to flee and leave everything behind (Ps 91:11–12).
2. More than two million Christians live in International Displacement Camps (IDC). They have limited access to water, food, healthcare, and education. Pray for improved living conditions, reliable aid, and hope that sustains them (Matt 25:35).
3. Many Nigerian children carry visible and invisible scars from persecution and loss. Pray for comfort in their affliction, opportunities to pursue education, and strength to carry on with life (2 Cor 1:3–4).
4. Pray for pastors and church leaders. Pastors continue to be primary targets of persecution. Let's pray for their courage, wisdom, safety, and strength as they shepherd their flocks through darkness (1 Pet 5:2–4).
5. Many women and children have endured abduction, forced marriage, violence, and devastating loss. Pray for the healing of their emotional and spiritual wounds and for grace to forgive (Col 3:13).
6. Despite intense suffering, the church in Nigeria stands strong. Pray that the believers' witness would draw many to Christ and that the Church would flourish there (Acts 14:21–22).

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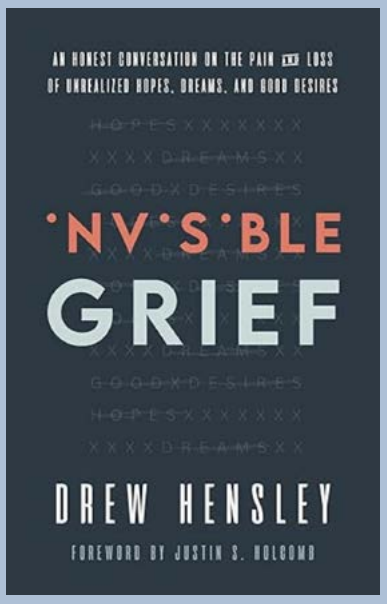
[4] https://persecution.org/2025/04/16/54-christians-killed-following-palm-sunday-service/

[5] https://persecution.org/2026/04/28/gunmen-abduct-christian-schoolgirls-kill-1-in-nigeria/

[6] Adapted from an April 26 email from Global Christian Relief



Unwasted Time

Invisible Grief: An honest conversation on the pain and loss of unrealized hopes, dreams, and good desires, by Drew Hensley, Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2026. Paperback, 193 pages, $20.95 CDN.

A trite but common warning to young children grappling for what they want with their peers is, *"You get what you get, and you don't get upset."* That is reasonable advice when discerning who should get the red or blue popsicle, but it falls short with adults struggling with not getting what are good and godly desires that others have and they do not.

Whether it is personal health, physical abilities, a marriage partner, children, a particular vocation, etc., we don't always get what we want. Drew Hensley identifies this pain as an *invisible grief.* It is invisible because it is not based on a perceptible loss of something you had, but a pain endured over something you have never received. It may be unseen by others because they don't know the deeper desire of your heart as you work daily to cope without it and be okay. It may even be imperceptible to yourself because you do not allow yourself to lament over what God has not given you for fear of showing a lack of faith and possibly committing an offense.

Hensley, a pastor and church planter, shares his and others' stories in a concerted effort to validate our grief over what has not been received, to reclaim these seasons of lament as valuable time in the life of God's children.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF GRIEF

I have to admit that I don't love books where people tell all and share their own therapy journey. I often feel disconnected or fatigued from their navel gazing. Hensley does a good job though in what he calls "engaging in a conversation" with the reader. He shares the journey of infertility he experienced with his wife Laura and connects the dots with the stories of others he has met throughout his pastoral ministry struggling over what they have asked for and not received from God. Interwoven throughout, he crafts an understanding of invisible grief, how it is similar and different from grief over losses, and how it is crucial to express it in the life of a Christian.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section identifies the common responses from within and without in respect to this type of grief and how we need to lay down those things before we can move forward. This includes stopping running from it, debunking the lies we tell ourselves, and truly addressing the question, "Does God really care about me?" He naturally follows this with a number of chapters on what we need to pick up instead, including a better understanding of grief, how God uses it and redeems it in our walk with him, and where we are headed in all of this. The final chapters provide guidance in moving forward with an emphasis on the community of grievers, how we are shaped and sharpened to help each other bear our burdens and encourage each other along the way.

This book is easy to read, filled with scriptural supports, and avoids platitudes. Hensley is convicted to share boldly what he has learned and experienced from God's Word and his own journey: not to waste the times and seasons of lament and struggle because he has discovered that God has used and continues to use these seasons to shape and sanctify him. This fresh perspective does not compel him to rise above invisible grief, but to identify it, experience it, and bring it to God—full-throated yet fully reliant on his loving care and purposes.

If you or someone you know is fighting with or running from invisible grief, this book may help as the first step in stopping and sitting with God and truly seeing that he understands, he cares, and he has not forgotten you. C

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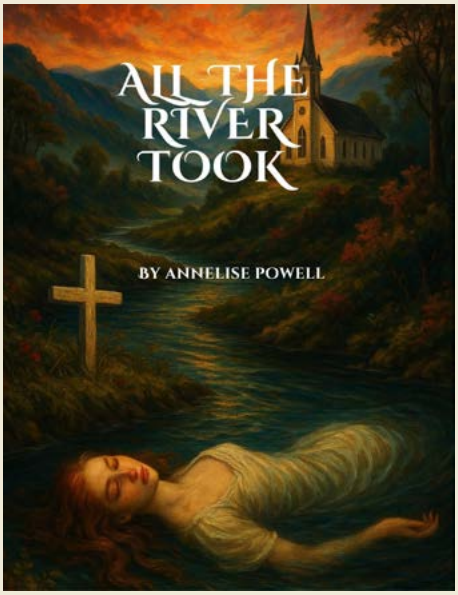

An Appalachian Story of Coercive Control

All the River Took, Annelise Powell. Published by the author, 2025. Softcover, 413 pages, $23.30 CDN.

In my research about the author of this novel, I discovered that she wrote another book, *Hooked: The Psychology of Page Turners*. I wasn't surprised, because she is a master at it. This novel secured my interest early on and didn't let go until the end.

The story is set in a small Appalachian town of Gideon's Rest. The town harbours deep secrets connected to the local church, a powerful community institution. The church holds a hard line, controlling and spiritually abusing its members. It takes the death of a 15-year-old girl and the investigative efforts of a sheriff and a photographer to start unravelling the truth.

Christian fiction is often predictably formulaic. *All the River Took* defies stereotypes. It offers realistic character development and mysterious plot twists. Wrapped in a Southern Gothic style which effectively captures the Appalachian mood, Annelise Powell's novel avoids coming across as preachy. Yet it still manages to highlight the troubling problem of abuse in high-control churches. It does this without falling into the traps of sensationalism or gratuitous details.

I wasn't able to find much information about the author. The author's note at the end of the book tells us that she is a church-going and church-loving Christian. She's experienced churches like the one described in the book. Aside from that, her author page on Amazon says she's an Australian writer currently living in the USA. Regardless, I enjoyed the novel and I think you will too, especially if you're a fan of the Southern Gothic genre and care about issues of spiritual abuse.

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Dear Editor,

As a life-long member of the Canadian Reformed Churches, I wish to heartily thank Rev. E. Kampen for his article entitled "A Church's History: Hindrance or Help?" (Vol 75.6). It was very refreshing to read that our federation's heritage does not hinder the gospel message.

I believe the proof is in the pudding, so to speak. In many CanRC congregations you can see people of obviously different ethnicities. The gospel message transcends ethnicity and is applicable and beneficial to people of all nations. Many of these people may well say that yes, they noticed "Dutch habits", but it was the truth of the gospel that drew them in and kept them in. The origin of our federation may be in the Netherlands, but that does not make us more or less Reformed Christians.

I especially agree with Rev. Kampen's comment that our heritage includes the singing of Psalms and the Genevan melodies. This aspect of our liturgy is what has given the Canadian Reformed and indeed many other Reformed federations a unique character.

So, I am truly puzzled as to why there is such a strong movement away from our heritage and character. Why the need to replace our "Dutch habits" with more ecumenical language and habits? Do some believe that newcomers would be offended by these, or dislike the Genevan melodies? Their use across the world would prove that to be untrue.

Some of us would dearly love to see a resurgence of loyalty to singing from our *Book of Praise* in our church life, choir performances, Christian schools, and in our personal lives. This would not, as Rev. Kampen states, suffocate the ecumenical and catholic aspects that serve and increase the church. It would strengthen our knowledge of Scripture on which these Psalms are based.

Let us not bow down to pressure to change "with the times." God willing, this attachment to heritage would extend to future Synods in respect to their decision-making.

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Dear Editor,

In response to the Letter to the Editor from br. Aubrey Vandergaag in a recent issue of *Clarion* (Vol 75.6), I would like to correct the impression given that General Synod (GS) 2025 decided to endorse the reprimand of the Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise (SCBP) of the 1960s which was given by Blessings consistory in their overture to GS 2025.

I just read through the entire decision in Art. 115 of the Acts of Synod, and while the above-mentioned comments of Blessings consistory were mentioned in summary in the Observations, they are not mentioned again in the Considerations, and consequently they are not mentioned either in the Recommendations. In other words, the issue of the SCBP of the 60s choosing exclusive use of Genevan Psalm tunes, despite direction or advice given by GS 1962 and GS 1965, played no role in the GS 2025 decision to allow local consistories to choose alternate non-Genevan Psalm melodies for use in worship services.

Personally, I am very happy that the *Book of Praise* continues to make use of Genevan tunes for all 150 Psalm versifications. In this way, the posthumous legacy of brothers such as Rev. G. VanDooren and M.M. DeGroot is still being honoured some 50 years after the publication of the first complete Anglo-Genevan Psalter using all of the original 500-year-old tunes from Calvin's Geneva.

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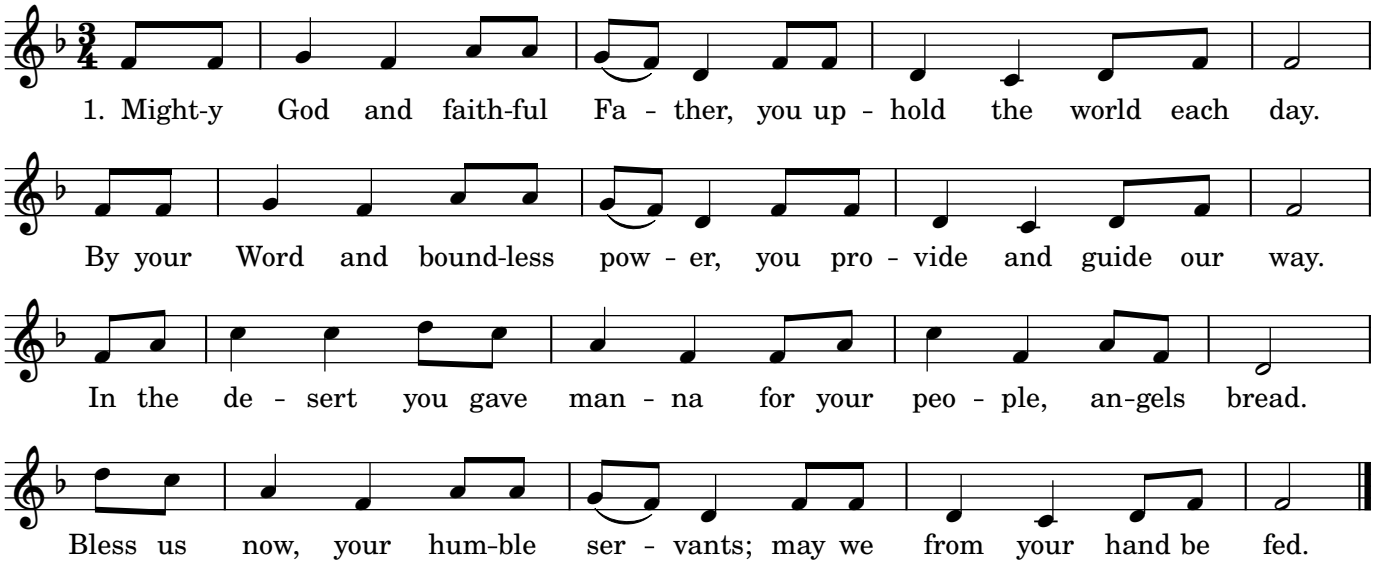
A Prayer Before Meals

The Sacred Harp — Philadelphia, 1844



2. Lord, we thank you for your blessings,
for the gifts your hands provide.
You, the Source of every goodness,
keep us ever at your side.
Grant that we may use with wisdom
all the bounty you outpour,
living lives of grateful service,
hon'ring you forevermore.

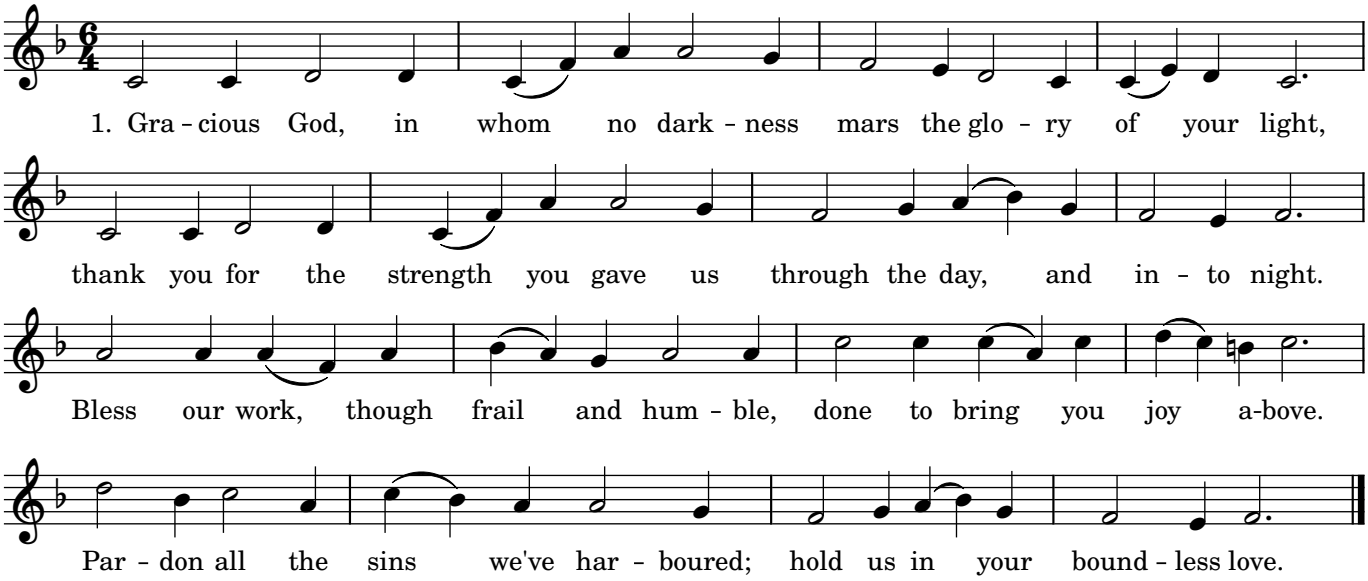
3. May we set our lives before you
in devotion, pure and good.
Teach us, Lord, to seek the riches
of your Word, the lasting food.
By Christ's blood, O gracious Father,
life eternal you prepare.
Nourish us with living water,
'til we meet Christ in the air. Amen

Text: George van Popta, 2025.
Based on prayer no. 7, "A Prayer Before Meals."
Book of Praise (2014), p. 639.

An Evening Prayer

Blaenwern

William Penfro Rowlands, 1905



2. Since you willed that we should labour
through the day and rest at night,
grant us calm and sweet refreshment
till the morning brings its light.
Send your angels to protect us,
let your face upon us shine.
All our burdens, cares, and worries
we surrender—they are thine.

3. Rule our hearts, direct our sleeping,
keep us pure throughout the night.
Guard and shield us from temptation,
and from Satan's dreadful might.
Humbly we confess before you
all our sins, O gracious Lord.
Hide our faults within your mercy
like the darkness veils the world.

4. Comfort, Lord, the weak and weary,
heal the broken, calm their fears.
Lift the lowly, touch the hurting,
wipe away their pain and tears.
Thank you, Lord, for love unending,
faithful, strong, and ever near.
This we pray through Christ our Saviour,
held within your mercy dear.

George van Popta, 2024
Based on prayer no. 12, *An Evening Prayer*
Book of Praise (2014), p. 641.

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