

What people are saying about
Jim McKenzie and *One Generation to the Next*

“I don’t know what I was expecting when I opened *One Generation to the Next*. But I certainly was not expecting to be touched, challenged, and inspired the way this book does. This book isn’t just for the next generation: it’s for me. I don’t know that I’ve ever encountered so much kindness, faithfulness, and clarity condensed into one slender work. I’m glad Jim McKenzie is in the world, and I’m glad his words here are, too.”

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*

“As parents, what greater prayer do we have for our children than to know and follow Jesus? In a time in history in which we do not prioritize cross-generational relationships as we should, this book is a gem. In a way that only an educator, parent, and follower of Jesus could, Jim distills the foundations of a life with Christ into a text that is Biblically sound, approachable, moving, and transformative all at once.”

DR. KATIE WIENS, Executive Director,
Council on Educational Standards and Accountability

“In *One Generation to the Next*, Jim McKenzie shares a vision for faithful devotion to Jesus, free from the cultural and political entanglements common today. Drawing from his own life experience, Jim combines stories and Scripture to offer the next generation sound wisdom and guidance for their own faith journey. And while he has written to teens and young adults, readers of all ages will find encouragement in his words. *One Generation to the Next* is a welcomed guide for all who want to follow Jesus.”

DAVID EATON, CEO of Axis and author of *Smartphone Sanity* and *Engaging Your Teen’s World*

“Like apples of gold in settings of silver, this book serves up a timely offering of Christian thought for prudent living and human flourishing. In a generation of digital natives, young adults are experiencing information overload, often leading to a gap in their ability to filter what is biblically true from what is socially acceptable. This disconnect between their faith journey and cultural trends, impacts their identity in ways that could be more deforming than transforming. In *One Generation to The Next*, Jim McKenzie is a voice of discipleship, sharing pathways for young adults to “not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind,” setting their lived experiences and future hopes on Jesus Christ alone.”

STEVENER GASKIN, JR., Director of Intercultural Arts & Media | Student Engagement, Wheaton College

“In a world where social media and pop culture are trying to raise our kids, I’m so thankful for voices like Jim McKenzie’s. He speaks with the wisdom and compassion of someone who’s spent his life pouring into young people, all the while educating and empowering them to live out the teachings of Jesus with boldness. This book is a field manual for a generation that’s searching for their way and will only find it in Him.”

HAVILAH CUNNINGTON,
Founder of *Truth to Table*

“*One Generation to the Next* is a book that should be read over and over again. Grounded in biblical wisdom, this invaluable resource will offer anyone raising children or working with students the hope necessary to pass on the infinite truths of God’s Word and love. Jim writes with a humility that will draw you in and inspire you to rightly focus your life on passing along the most important things in this life...that which is linked to the next. The need to pass on what truly matters to the next generation may never be greater than it is right now, and this book will guide you on the path to effectively doing so for God’s glory. Read it. Highlight it. Mark in it. And, then do it again. This book may just change your life like it did Jim’s.”

MATT THOMAS, Ed.D., Executive Director,
Baylor’s Center for School Leadership

“Part of why I love this book is because we get much of Jim’s honest, hilarious, inspiring life--Jim the lifeguard, Jim the midnight football player, Jim the Samaritan, Jim the snake-charmer. But at the heart of it is dad-Jim and teacher-Jim, inviting the next generation to join him in following Jesus as the way the truth and the life—in all its fullness. In so doing, Jim gently but courageously cuts through a number of false narratives that creep into our assumptions about what that Jesus-way actually means. I’m a part of Jim’s generation. But I want to join Jim in reading the Bible as our improv script for following Jesus too. And this book has helped me to do exactly that.”

JUSTIN COOK, Director of Learning,
Edvance Christian Schools Association

“Judges 2:10 says, “After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.” How sobering and saddening that the fear and knowledge of God died but one generation after He fulfilled His promise to Israel. And in many ways, we find ourselves similarly situated today; a generation that knows less of God than their parents. But, into this void of understanding comes *One Generation to the Next*, a book that seeks to reverse the pattern so that this generation will become the seedbed for stronger faith in the next. It is a must read for every parent and child!”

NONA JONES, Author of *Killing Comparison*,
and Tech Executive

“Imparting biblical wisdom to our children is a daunting task. Jim McKenzie’s *One Generation to the Next* is a giant leap in the right direction. With his conversational style and engaging personal stories, McKenzie throws his own humanity into every page, engaging the reader at the emotional, academic, and spiritual levels.”

MICHAEL BURROUGHS, Executive Director,
League of Christian Schools

“This is a discipleship book that taught me plenty about what I already know. Jim weaves his own story with insightful biblical teaching that gently corrects and inspires us to better follow Jesus. There are things to *stir up* the reader, but Jim’s life and stories with their humility and sincerity provided a credible voice that helped me to *listen slowly* rather than to dismiss.”

BISHOP RON KUYKENDALL, Ph.D, Executive Chaplain to the
National Director & Chaplain to the Board for the
International Order of St. Luke the Physician

“If in the future you run into author Jim McKenzie and he has a fresh tattoo on his forehead reading “Make Allowances” he will probably recommend that you read this book to discover the story behind it. Beyond that insight, you will also read a book full of personal anecdotes, scriptural reflections, with meaningful connections drawn between the two. In this book, Jim provides fresh perspectives on familiar concepts, encouraging the reader to ‘see anew.’”

GAYLE MONSMA, Executive Director at
The Prairie Centre for Christian Education

“Judges 2:10 mentions a time in the history of Israel when “there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord...” That verse serves as a reminder that we have not been successful as Christian leaders, educators, and parents if we only cultivate the faith in our generation and do not pass on the faith to the generation coming behind us. Jim McKenzie has given us a helpful resource in empowering the next generation with a faith that can sustain them. Jim carefully weaves personal stories, and the stories of others, into the principles and practices he offers in this book. He stays in close proximity to the Scriptures and directs our attention to the mission of Jesus to love the world God loves in a way that promotes peace and justice. *One Generation to the Next* is a call to lead an action-oriented life as we follow Jesus in the ways of God’s goodness. The practices in this book will anchor all of us in the faith like a fixed rope in an underwater cave.”

DEREK VREELAND, pastor and author of *Centering Jesus*

“I love this book! Jim says he wrote *One Generation to the Next* to guide young Christians in their personal faith journeys. But this book is for all of us. Each of his chapters and subchapters can stand on its own as an inspiring meditation. Jim is a gifted writer who skillfully weaves together personal, real-life stories with applications from the Bible and leading scholars. The result is an extremely readable, joyful reflection on what it means to be a Christian in our complex times.”

DR. DAVID HAHN, Executive Director,
Association of Lutheran Secondary Schools



ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT

A GUIDE TO FORMING YOUR FAITH
AND FINDING YOUR WAY

JIM MCKENZIE

DO SOMETHING DESERT

WATCHMEN'S
BEACH

FOREST OF
FORGOTTEN
ONES

CAVE OF DISCONTENT

SHABBAT MOUNTAIN

SEA OF
SHALOM

VALLEY OF
VOCATION

ISLE OF
SMALL
BEGINNINGS

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*For Colby, Casey, Cooper, Carter, and Darcy:
May you set your hope anew on God
and tell of His wondrous works to a new generation.*

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Introduction

As I write this book, my oldest son is entering his senior year of high school at the Christian school where I serve as the headmaster. At the end of this year, he will walk across the graduation stage, where I will shake his hand and give him his diploma. We will momentarily pose for the event photographer, and then he will continue across the stage and back to his seat. After a few more minutes, he will stand to face the audience, turn his tassel, and launch his cap into the air as I pronounce that he and his peers are officially high school graduates.

Outwardly, I will rejoice in my son's accomplishments and the bright future that's ahead of him. Inwardly, I will mourn, reconciling my loss as this season of life comes to an end.

Since he was born, I have always tried my best as his father to offer him love, encouragement, and direction. To make sure he was ready for this day. But, in truth, I wonder, did I do enough? Did I do it right? Few things require more faith in life than that which is required for a parent to let a child go. Even now, as I write those words, I feel a tinge of anxiety nipping at my soul. I can trust God with my own life, but truthfully, it feels harder to do that with my son's life.

From this moment on, the decisions he will make will almost entirely be his own. His college major. His career path. His marriage

plans. His decision to follow Jesus. But because he is wise, he will seek counsel along the way.

So, this book is written to be a guide for him. And for my younger sons and daughter who will also one day grow up and leave home. And for all the other students who have turned their tassels at the graduations I have presided over for twenty years. It's for all the children, teens, and young adults that I've crossed paths with over the last thirty years. And it's for all those I've yet to meet. This book is for you.

In your hero's journey, I hope that I can be a trusted guide.

This book is my attempt to share the lessons I've learned about the Christian faith. But I'm not a theologian. I didn't go to seminary. I don't pastor a church. I'm an educator. I love to teach. This book represents my lesson plans if I were to teach a class entitled, "Following Jesus." My deep hope is that this book encourages you in your own pursuit of Him.

Small Beginnings

God's people have been taken captive. Their city has been destroyed. They were forced to travel hundreds of miles to live in a foreign land under the rule of the Babylonian empire. After seventy years, God delivers them from their oppressors, and they are finally able to return to Jerusalem.

But now they've got the monumental task of rebuilding both their lives and the temple. There are no construction crews to hire, no cranes, and no concrete trucks. There is no Home Depot in town where they can go purchase supplies. This project is going to take eighteen years to complete.

But as they are just getting started, God offers this encouragement: "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices

to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand."¹ God did not hold his delight until the temple was finished eighteen years later, but rather delighted to see the work begin. The moment Zerubbabel picked up the first tool to get started, God smiled.

In whatever season you find yourself at this moment, God delights to see you begin. He's not waiting for you to graduate high school or complete your college degree. He's not waiting until you start a career or launch a new business. He's not waiting for you to find a spouse or birth a child. The moment you write your name on the exam paper or ask that girl out on a first date, God is already delighting in you to see the work begin.

God knew the temple would be built. But He was most excited to see the work get started. In this same way, God already knows the good work that you will accomplish in this lifetime, but He rejoices to see you begin, no matter how small or inconsequential that beginning may seem.

You may be a person of great faith or little faith or no faith at all. But as you begin this journey to build the temple of your Christian faith and explore what it means to follow Jesus in your world, be encouraged, knowing that the Lord rejoices to see this work begin in you.

Each chapter of this book presents a singular idea—a principle or practice—that has served me well in my journey with Jesus. I offer them to you as a guide. I don't know what the future holds, but I know the One who holds the future and I invite you to orient your life around Him. May these pages be a compass that points you to Jesus, our north star.

He is already smiling upon you. Let the journey begin.

¹ Zechariah 4:10



CHAPTER ONE

Seek Shalom

Imagine spending fourteen months putting together a 6000-piece jigsaw puzzle only to discover there is still one missing piece.

During the three months that the entire country was basically shut down during the pandemic, our family passed the time by doing jigsaw puzzles together. We'd set up a small card table in our living room so we could keep the puzzle out and work at it whenever inspiration would strike. Usually, one of us would stop and add a few pieces and, before long, other members of our family would jump in and help. We'd work at it for a while, usually taking a break whenever we hit a wall and couldn't place a new piece after a few minutes. The puzzle would sit there for some time until someone decided to take another run at it, and then we'd all be back around the card table for another go.

We started simple. First, we completed a 200-piece NASA puzzle of the planet Mars (it was a round puzzle, not square, so that was fun.) Next, we upgraded to a 500-piece landscape puzzle of a beautiful photo of a national park. That one took a few weeks to finish, but once it was done, no one wanted to break it apart. There was this enormous sense of accomplishment in completing the puzzle, so we kept it intact but moved it to an empty shelf in another

room so we could start a new puzzle on the designated card table. Given our recent successes, and feeling rather ambitious this time, we bought a 1000-piece puzzle for our next challenge. It featured a photo of hundreds of little Hershey chocolate candies poured out on a table. When we opened the box and dumped the contents onto our puzzle table, we discovered what can only be described as a thousand tiny, identical brown cardboard pieces.

Although a bit discouraged by the seemingly difficult task before us, we immediately chose to step up to the challenge. We gave ourselves a little pep talk, and then we attacked that puzzle with a fervor and dedication to finish what we were starting. But that commitment quickly began to wane as the hours passed with little visible progress. After more than a week, we had yet to even complete the puzzle's rectangular border. A few weeks later, with barely the border complete and 900 loose pieces still floating on the table, the intervals between attempts at the puzzle by a family member were getting longer and longer. After more than a month without any noticeable evidence of progress, it became clear that this puzzle had defeated our family and that our threshold for puzzle pieces was probably going to remain at 500 or fewer. With a sad resentment, we brushed all the broken pieces back into the box and retired it to the top shelf in the back of some closet in the house, where it will wait to be sold at a neighborhood yard sale.

Hershey puzzle – 1, McKenzie family – 0.

Given our sad history with large puzzles, imagine my delight in reading a story about a man who spent fourteen months putting together a massive 6000-piece landscape puzzle. I saw a picture of the puzzle, and it is magnificent. It featured a glorious castle set up on a hill with a blue lake behind it and a mountain range set in the distance. I have such respect for the time and dedication it must have taken over the course of fourteen long months to complete this puzzle. The number of pieces that failed to go together when

he tried to connect them. The frustration when piece after piece wouldn't fit and the elation when finally joining two together.

Imagine getting to the end, placing that final piece of the puzzle, and stepping back to admire your handiwork. And then, and only then, discovering there's a hole in the middle of the puzzle. You're one piece short. That's what happened to Robert Miles. Despite searching for it everywhere – the floor, the lid, under the puzzle itself – the missing piece was nowhere to be found. A 6000-piece puzzle that only has 5999 pieces.² How frustrating!

I know how my fellow puzzle completer must have felt. There are no more pieces, but it's not done. It's incomplete. It's unfinished. There's a hole right there in the middle of the whole darn thing!

We're empathetic to this story of the man and his missing puzzle piece because deep inside of each of us is a shared desire for things to be complete. To be whole. We can't stand the idea that the puzzle doesn't have its last piece. There's a satisfaction, a feeling that all is right, when we place the last piece to complete the puzzle. But until then, the puzzle gnaws at us in all its unfinishedness. It's not right until it's whole.

The Bible has a word that describes this same desire for our humanity. It's the Hebrew word *shalom*. We typically translate this word as peace. But I've come to understand that *shalom* has a much richer meaning.³

The word *shalom* appears in the Old Testament in a few different forms. As *shalom*, a noun, to describe peace or wholeness. It is used as *shalem*, a verb that means to make right or restore. We also see it as *shelem*, a peace offering, and as *shalem*, an adjective

² Adam Proskiw, "Kelowna man spent 14 months assembling massive jigsaw puzzle to find one missing piece," InfoNewsonline, December 6, 2017, <https://info.newsonline.ca/newsitem/kelowna-man-spent-14-months-assembling-massive-jigsaw-puzzle-to-find-one-missing-piece/it48317>.

³ I first encountered the concept of shalom as flourishing while listening to a presentation by Dan Beerens on "Student Flourishing in Christian Schools." I am grateful for his work and his friendship.

meaning loyal or devoted. In the New Testament, it's translated as *eirene*, the Greek noun we read as peace.

But theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that translating *shalom* as “peace” has too many limitations.⁴ Based on the historical and theological context, Wolterstorff believes that a better definition of *shalom* would be the word *flourishing*.

In his book, *Engaging God's World*, Neal Plantinga defines *shalom* as “the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation, in justice, fulfillment, and delight.”

Tim Keller, writing in *Generous Justice*, states that “*shalom* means complete reconciliation, a state of the fullest flourishing in every dimension – physical, emotional, social, and spiritual – because all relationships are right, perfect, and filled with joy.”

A simple definition that encompasses these two ideas and that of Wolterstorff's flourishing is to say that *shalom* is being rightly related to God, creation, others, and self, and finding joy in it.

Shalom, therefore, is a four-piece puzzle.

When our lives are rightly related to God, creation, others, and self, we find the kind of wholeness that we desire.

To find peace with God, with creation, with others, and with self is to find *shalom*.

Shalom, we could say, is a four-*peace* puzzle.

So, what does it look like to seek *shalom*? What does it mean to find peace with God? Let's turn to the Laodiceans for some guidance.

⁴ “Nicolas Wolterstorff: It's Tied Together by Shalom,” Faith & Leadership online, March 1, 2010, <https://faithandleadership.com/nicholas-wolterstorff-its-tied-together-shalom>.

Shalom With God

Have you ever been so disgusted by something you drank that you spit it out of your mouth? I was doing an Amazon search one day for sodas and I discovered some unusual drinks for sale in the United States:

- Bacon Soda
- Ranch Dressing Soda
- Grass Soda
- Pink Pepsi (strawberry & milk flavored)
- Onion Coke

Would you be willing to try any of these? While I'll admit that these drinks sound terrible, I don't think I would immediately spit them out. I just probably wouldn't take a second sip.

But sometimes, something is so disgusting that we spit it out of our mouths, even if it's not the best display of good manners at that moment. An almost involuntary reaction sweeps over us and we spew it out. We can't help ourselves.

Jesus says that this is his response to the church at Laodicea. The church must have left a bad taste in Jesus' mouth if he is willing to spit them out.

John of Patmos had a vision in which he was taken to heaven, and in the book of Revelation, he records all that he sees. In the opening chapters, Jesus tells John to write letters to seven churches, and in Chapter 3, he specifically addresses the church in Laodicea with these words:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Laodicea. This is the message from the one who is the Amen—the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's new creation:

“I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth! You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. So I advise you to buy gold from me—gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see. I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference.

“Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.”

I grew up believing that this biblical text about hot and cold was a metaphor for our spiritual temperature. That to be “hot” meant to be “on fire” and passionate for God, and to be “cold” meant to be “cold-hearted” and far from God. To be “lukewarm” meant to be “meh” and sort of indifferent in my relationship with God. I was taught that Jesus’ central message here – “I wish that you were either hot or cold” – was that it would be better for humans to either be “on fire” for God or be an atheist – “cold and distant” – than to be a lukewarm Christian that was a middle-of-the-road believer.

But what if that’s not what Jesus meant? What if it wasn’t a metaphor about our spiritual temperature and was, in fact, a geographical allusion rooted in the historical context of Laodicea?⁵

⁵ Zach Hoag, “What Lukewarm in Laodicea Really Means,” Bible Gateway Blog, June 28, 2017, <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/06/what-lukewarm-in-laodicea-really-means/>.

Laodicea was in an area of Asia Minor in what is now modern-day Turkey. It was situated between two other cities – Hierapolis to the north and Colossae to the south.

Hierapolis was known for its hot springs, and some even believed the waters had healing powers.

Colossae was home to cold springs, and people traveled there to enjoy their cool and refreshing waters.

But Laodicea had neither hot springs nor cold springs. Their water supply was provided from Colossae by an aqueduct system. This was thousands of years ago, so they didn't have the conveniences of modern plumbing. They didn't have air-tight, water-tight pipes, filtration systems, cooling systems, and sanitized storage tanks to manage their city's water supply. So as the water traveled the six-mile journey from Colossae to Laodicea along the open stone aqueduct system, the water would become warm and often undrinkable because of the contaminants it would acquire along the way.

When Jesus said to the Laodiceans that you are neither hot nor cold, it was in reference to the healing waters of the north and the refreshing waters of the south. Both were good, both were profitable. When Jesus called the Laodiceans lukewarm, he was comparing their faith to the tepid and undrinkable water of their city that residents would often spit from their mouths because of how disgusting it was to their lips.

Jesus chastised them for a Christianity that was as offensive as their water supply.

Why? The answer is found in verse 17:

“You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!’ And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”

Their self-reliance left a bad taste in Jesus' mouth.

We live in a culture in which self-reliance is applauded. We admire the self-made man and woman. We celebrate the stories

of those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps. We cheer for those who set out to make it on their own, who turn down a helping hand, who determine to be the captains of their own ships. In short, we're a self-reliant people and proud of it.

But Jesus says our self-reliance makes us like the lukewarm water. Despite what we may want to believe, according to Jesus, self-reliance doesn't make us strong, it makes us sick.

Our self-reliance robs us of our self-reflection. Jesus criticized the Laodicean church, noting that because of their self-reliance – because of their belief that they “don't need a thing!” – they didn't even realize their true state, “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”

What does it look like to seek shalom with God? It means abandoning our self-reliance and putting our full and complete trust in Jesus.

Jesus plus nothing equals everything.⁶

But, like Laodicea, we want to add to the equation.

Jesus plus my significant other equals everything.

Jesus plus my career goals equals everything.

Jesus plus athletic success equals everything.

Jesus plus my social status equals everything.

Jesus plus making money equals everything.

Jesus plus _____ equals everything.

How do you fill in the blank?

When we rely solely on ourselves, we fail to realize our true condition as wretched and poor and naked and blind. But this is Jesus' promise to the Laodiceans and to us, if we'll commit ourselves fully to Him:

⁶ Havilah Cunnington introduced this equation to our student ministry nearly twenty years ago and I never forgot it.

“So I advise you to buy gold from me—gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see.”

God will provide for us. He will cover our shame. He will give us a clear vision of ourselves and our world.

Shalom is a four-piece puzzle.

Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

Surrender your self-reliance and allow the Lord to be your source and your guide.

Take hold of the first peace.

Shalom With Creation

The second piece of the shalom puzzle is creation.

As the Headmaster of a Christian school, I am the primary speaker in our Monday morning Chapel service for our K-12 students. I have this game I do sometimes with the students that I call “Preschool or Professional?” It’s a contest where students must decide if what they are seeing or hearing was created by a preschool student or a professional.

One time I hosted “Preschool or Professional: Art Edition” in which I showed students a work of art, and they had to determine if it was created by a preschool student or a professional artist. I showed them ten different works of art, and they got every single answer right. (I didn’t say it was a hard game, did I?). Our students had no trouble differentiating between preschool and Picasso. As we looked at some of the most famous paintings in history, it was not difficult to recognize the creative talent that captured the scene on canvas.

King David declared in Psalm 19:1-4,

“The heavens proclaim the glory of God.
The skies display his craftsmanship.
Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make him known.
They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.
Yet their message has gone throughout the earth,
and their words to all the world.”

When we spend time in God’s good creation, we see His handiwork. In the created world, we read His story, written “without a sound or word,” that extends into all the world.

I’ve traveled to several large cities, including Chicago, New York, and London. And I’ll admit, there is something special about these big cities that draws me in. I don’t have the t-shirt, but I heart NY. I do. I love standing in Time Square at night and being surrounded by the LED screens and the Broadway marquees and the high-rise buildings and the bustle of busy streets. Standing there in the middle of it all, I marvel at what mankind has created, yet, at the same time, I feel no deep connection to God or to humanity. It’s a magical moment, but something is missing. I feel oddly alone.

But I’ve also been privileged to explore God’s natural world too.

I’ve ascended to the top of Camelback Mountain and hiked across Devil’s Bridge in Arizona. I’ve swam among the coral reefs of the Florida Keys and Cozumel, Mexico. I’ve stood along the shore of Niagara Falls and paddled the whitewater of a half-dozen rivers in the southeast. I’ve basked at the majesty of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, Calgary, and kayaked among the mangroves of the Caribbean islands. I’ve walked the sandy beaches of the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Great Lakes.

And in each of those moments, I felt a deep communion with God. It was like stepping into a sanctuary and encountering the sacred.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning described it well when she wrote,

“Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pick blackberries.”

There is evidence of heaven all around us in creation, and as Browning reminds us, even the “common bush is afire with God.” It isn’t just in the grandeur of redwood trees or a snow-covered mountain. It’s in the natural world all around us.

We live in the country and my kids love to play outside. It is impossible to get them to keep their shoes on. They love to be barefoot outdoors, and I think it’s because, in some unknown way, children understand what most adults have forgotten – that God is present in His creation, and we are standing on holy ground. Yes, we should take off our shoes.

The rest, Browning notes, choose to enjoy the fruit of creation with no regard for the Creator.

But Paul wrote in Romans 1,

“They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.”

Creation reveals the Creator.

In July 2021, I spent two days on a safari truck in the heart of Kenya's Serengeti National Park. When we first entered the preserve, I was giddy with excitement at seeing so many animals in their natural habitat. When I visit a zoo, I expect to see a couple of zebras or elephants. Perhaps even a lion alone in his enclosure. But there, on safari, I saw herds of zebras and elephants and antelope, hundreds of them together at a time. I was just yards from a family of cheetahs, and I took a selfie with a lion that wasn't trapped behind a glass enclosure. (I'm neither brave nor dumb, so I stayed in the truck for the photo opp.)

Here, in the middle of the Serengeti, there was no sign of human encroachment as far as the eye could see. There were no buildings, no power lines, no highways, no factories, and no piles of garbage. In that moment, I was overcome with a desire to worship God. As I surveyed this landscape, untouched and uncorrupted by human hands, I began to imagine that this is what the Garden must have been like in Genesis before the fall of man and what the Garden City will be like as we read in Revelation 21 and 22. I was witness to a glimpse of the vision for the in-between. At peace in God's good creation.

Shalom.

Paul continues in Romans 1, lamenting that "instead of worshipping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles."

No matter how good the technology gets, AI and virtual reality will never compare to God's created world. The world is better viewed through binoculars than our VR Goggles. We need more time with birds and less time with the bird app (a.k.a. Twitter.) More streams, less streaming.

We were created to live in a spiritual reality, not a virtual reality.

A report from 2016 found that the average cellphone user touches his or her phone 2617 times per day, and Apple found that

iPhone users unlock their phones 80 times per day.⁷ We need to touch the earth and the grass and the butterflies and the ladybugs more and our devices less. We need to unlock our imaginations more than our iPhones.

We weren't made to live on concrete and pavement. We need time outdoors. To breathe fresh uncirculated air. We need to bask in the warm glow of the sun and not just in the blue light of our screens.

Spend time in creation. Take a walk. Sit outside in the cool of the day. Explore your local parks.

Creation reveals the Creator. Seek shalom with God and creation.

Shalom With Others

I loved Show & Tell as a kid. You could bring just about anything you wanted to school and there would be time in the morning meeting to share it with the class. I can remember classmates that would bring toys, stuffed animals, vacation photos, and even the occasional pet hamster or turtle.

I remember in fifth grade bringing my new pocketknife to school and being allowed to open the blade and carefully show it to the rest of the class. (I don't recommend taking a knife to school for Show & Tell these days!)

The pocketknife required no explanation. It spoke for itself, drawing oohs and ahhs from my ten-year-old peers, followed by a flood of questions about where I got it and what kinds of things I would do with it. It was always show first, tell second.

I have found this to be true of our Christian witness as well.

⁷ Julia Naftulin, "Here's how many times we touch our phones every day," Business Insider, July 13, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/dscout-research-people-touch-cell-phones-2617-times-a-day-2016-7>.

If our Gospel only leads us to shalom with God and His creation but does not also prompt us to pursue the flourishing of others, we have failed to absorb the whole of Scripture.

John the Baptist challenged the crowds that gathered for baptism to “prove by the way that you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.” In other words, the evidence of our relationship with God should be demonstrated by the way we live out our relationships with everyone around us.

Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.”

The crowds asked, “What should we do?”

John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.”

Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.”

“What should we do?” asked some soldiers.

John replied, “Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.”⁸

⁸ Luke 3:7-14

We need to be good at Show & Tell. I think that would be John's message if he were delivering it today.

Live it before we lecture it.

Works before witness.

Show and tell.

John goes on to say that "every tree that doesn't bear good fruit will be chopped down" because the ax of God's judgement is ready to sever the roots.

If the fruit isn't good, then judgment happens at the roots. Why? Because there is an organic connection between the roots of the tree and the fruit that it produces.

The fruit reveals the root.

If a farmer finds bad fruit on a fruit tree, it isn't enough to just get rid of the bad fruit. In order to ensure good fruit the next time, the farmer must make changes at the root system.

In this same way, our words and actions reveal what is in our hearts.

If we don't like what we see and hear in our relationship with God or with those around us, it's not enough to simply try to change our behavior. We must start at the root level. We need a change of heart.

The fruit reveals the root.

The crowd present hears these words from John, and they come forward and begin to question him, trying to gain clarity about his true intention, asking, "what should we do?"

Isn't that our nature, too? We hear the challenging words of Scripture, and we immediately want to ask, "Yes, but what are we actually required to do?" We understand the aspiration of the Gospel message, but we also tend to look for an easy way out. Surely it doesn't really mean what it says.

John doesn't tell them to go to church, or pay their tithe, or lead a small group. He doesn't tell them to sing songs or pray harder.

John tells the crowd that if they have two shirts to give one away, and if they have food, they should share it with those who are hungry. The crowd wants to know what it looks like to live in a way that proves they have turned to God, and John gets downright practical in his advice.

Use your more-than-enough to help another's not-enough.

How do we help others to flourish? We give out of our own abundance to meet a need.

We can live generously because we know that if we give it away that God will provide more of what we need.

The corrupt tax collectors come and ask what they should do. John tells them not to collect more taxes than the government requires. Some soldiers come next and ask what they should do. John instructs them to stop extorting money and making false accusations.

The tax collectors were Jews who were tasked to collect taxes from their own people on behalf of the Roman government. These tax collectors were often corrupt, and they would add an extra charge to a Jewish man's tax bill and keep the money to line their own pockets. And the Jewish people had no recourse with the Roman government. That's just how the system worked. There was nothing that could be done about it.

In that day, soldiers could accuse innocent people of false charges and then force them to pay money to clear their name and avoid further punishment. Again, it was an accepted practice and there was little that the Jewish people could do except to pay the charges.

So when the tax collectors and the soldiers approached John and asked, what should we do? John makes it plain: stop cheating and extorting others, even when the system says you can.

Do the right thing even when the wrong thing is acceptable.

John exhorts the crowd to live justly.

Dr. Tony Evans, speaking to the NRB in 2021 said, “we cannot dismiss the Gospel by calling on the content of the Gospel that gets us to heaven while we skip over the scope of the Gospel which ought to change how we relate to one another on earth.”

Show & Tell.

The evidence that we have repented of our sins and turned to God is shalom with neighbor.

Pursue peace with others.

Shalom With Self

When I was in my early twenties, I had genuinely committed to my Christian faith. But, boy was it a struggle. I felt so bad for being such a lousy Christian. I would fall to my knees in my apartment and beg God to help me to do better and to be better. I had placed my faith in Jesus and pledged my allegiance to Him, so why was I failing to live like it?

Becoming a Christian is not just a moment of conversion, but a lifetime of formation.

We see this theme repeated in the New Testament, such as in Colossians 2:6-7, when Paul writes,

“And I rejoice that you are living as you should and that your faith in Christ is strong. And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him.”

Paul is writing to the church of Colossae, to a group of people that he says has a faith in Christ that is strong. But then he goes on to encourage them that just as they accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, they must now continue to follow him.

The moment that we confess Christ as Lord, we become a believer. But it is a lifetime of faithfully following Jesus that truly forms us into Christians, that is, “little Christs.”

Choosing Jesus as Lord is not the end of our faith journey, it is the beginning.

What does this process of maturation, of formation, of following Jesus, look like according to Paul? He continues in Colossians 2:7, “Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him.”

Paul gives us this beautiful metaphor of what it looks like to follow Jesus and it’s a picture of a tree with deep roots. Paul is challenging us to let our roots grow deep down into Jesus and to let our lives be built on him.

When we see a tree with roots that go down deep into a fertile, nutrient-rich soil, we find a tree that is healthy and flourishing on the surface.

When our roots go deep into the soil Jesus, we receive all the things that we need to grow and flourish and bear good fruit.

Paul summarizes this in verse 7, noting that “then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.”

Shalom with self is understanding that our identity is rooted in Jesus.

When we get that right, we will be at peace with ourselves.

When we get that wrong, we will struggle with our identity and who we want to be.

Paul challenges us to be rooted in Jesus, but then follows this encouragement with a warning:

“Don’t let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world...”

In the 21st century, I think an apt description of “these empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense” of which Paul warns is what Dr. Leonard Sweet called “Youniversalism.”

Youniversalism says that we each get to be the center of the universe.

And it is reinforced by the more than 5000 ads and messages that we encounter every day. These form an anti-Gospel self-ology that rather than inviting us to know God, it simply invites us to be God. Our creedal confession transforms from “Jesus is Lord” to “It’s all about me!”

The biggest competing philosophy to Christianity today is not post-modernism or secularism or humanism or socialism or any of the other *-isms* that we learn about in a Biblical Worldview workshop.

No, I believe that the biggest competing philosophy to Christianity today is materialism.

Materialism teaches that we need more junk. We need more stuff because stuff makes us happy. The liturgy and habits of our lives becomes that of shopping and spending. In fact, shopping is now the number one leisure activity of Americans. And these ritualistic habits shape in us a love of money, which the Bible tells us is evil.

Christianity, by contrast, offers a different perspective on the good life. We don’t need more junk, we need more Jesus because our identity is rooted in Him. We don’t need more shopping and spending; we instead need to pursue more serving and sharing. And these new habits will shape in us a love of neighbor, which the Bible says is the second greatest commandment.

Author Paul David Tripp wrote, “I will either get my identity vertically, from who I am in Christ, or I will shop for it horizontally in situations, experiences, and relationships of my daily life.”⁹

⁹ Paul Tripp, “Your Ministry Is Not Your Identity,” Paul Tripp online, July 22, 2013, <https://www.paultripp.com/articles/posts/your-ministry-is-not-your-identity>.

Paul says that we are to put down deep roots in Jesus so that we pursue more of him and are formed by his love and character into a people who serve and share and express his great love to our neighbors.

When we put down deep roots in Jesus, we become anchored in our faith. When the storms come and the winds blow, we remain steadfast because of our deep roots. We may be battered by the empty philosophies or the spiritual powers of this world, but we remain unmovable in our faith. We don't waver.

Paul concludes this idea in Colossians 2:9-10, exhorting us that "for in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ..."

Your identity is rooted in Jesus. Christ completes you.

Os Guinness declared of our present day, "The age of the internet, it is said, is the age of the self and the selfie. The world is full of people full of themselves. In such an age, "I post, therefore, I am."¹⁰

The world tells us that more and more our identity comes from the content that we create, the digital presence we cultivate, and the online persona we are so careful to craft.

In her book, *Positivity*, author Barbara Frederickson, explains that "People who flourish function at extraordinarily high levels – both psychologically and socially. They're not simply people who feel good. Flourishing goes beyond simply happiness or satisfaction with life. Beyond feeling good, they're also doing good—adding value to the world. People who flourish are highly engaged with their families, work, and communities. They're driven by a sense of purpose: they know why they get up in the morning."¹¹

For much of high school and college, I was passionate but without purpose. I was always looking for a cause to champion,

¹⁰Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Westmont: IVP, 2019).

¹¹Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals the 3-to-1 Ratio That Will Change Your Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 17.

something noble to anchor my identity. My senior year of high school was the beginning of the first Gulf War, and I wore a home-made armband with a peace symbol on it to school every day and wrote essays of protest while condemning the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein (or as I called him, “So-Damn Insane.”) In college, I advocated for animal rights, becoming a vegan, refusing to wear leather, and protesting the circus each time that it came to town, marching with my “Cruelty is Not Entertainment!” placard in the parking lot. I shifted to environmentalism next, promoting reduce-reuse-recycle on our campus and covering my car with pro-environment bumper stickers.

We certainly need to be passionate about the things we believe in, but my passions were misguided because I didn’t really care about animals or the environment on a deeply personal level, I just found purpose and identity in being a part of these movements.

But peace with self is understanding that our identity is rooted in Jesus and that Christ completes us.

This leads to a higher level of flourishing and a greater sense of purpose and satisfaction in life.

Nearly fifty now and I’m as passionate as ever. I’m still fighting for the things I believe in, but I’m no longer defined by them. I’ve given my life to the things that matter most while staying grounded in Jesus. I’m happy and content.

That’s shalom.

What Is Your Shalom?

When I run into someone I know out in public, I usually start a conversation with a simple inquiry, “Hey, how’s it going?” Other variations of this are typical too – “How are you?” “How are you doing?” or even the more simplistic, “What’s up?”

In asking this question, we're inquiring about someone else's wellbeing. The common refrain is usually something along the lines of "I'm good" or "Not much, same old same old."

When we ask the question, we're just being courteous, aren't we? We're not really wanting or expecting the person to be open about how life is actually treating them at that moment. Even if things are falling apart, we just give a pat response – "Doing great!" – and keep the conversation moving along.

In the Jewish tradition, they would ask of one another, "What is your shalom?" This question was to inquire about the person's wellbeing by asking if they were flourishing – if they were feeling a sense of wholeness in their relationship with God, creation, others, and self.

Perhaps we could learn something from this ancient tradition by asking this question of ourselves and our family and friends. What is your shalom?

Because when we seek shalom, we find shalom.

When we create peace, we find peace.

When we put the pieces together, we discover the whole.

When we put the peaces together, we find our shalom.