**Les Misérables: A Story of God’s Hospitality, Grace, and Redemption**

by Joel S. Woodruff, Ed.D.

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As I watched my son and the other actors sing the final notes of the chorus, the audience rose as one in thunderous applause. Men and women alike wiped away tears of deep emotion. It was one of those rare moments when everyone in the room knew that we had witnessed something exceptional. As a father of one of the performers in Lake Braddock Secondary School’s 2012 musical production of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, I was naturally proud of what the cast had accomplished. But they had gone beyond our proud-parent expectations and created one of the most powerful experiences many of us had had in years. I had to ask, “How is it that this bunch of talented public high school students had been able to inspire the hearts and minds of busy, distracted, suburban moms, dads, kids, grandparents, friends, and neighbors? What was their secret?” Could the young actors’ sincerity and enthusiasm, the powerful musical score, and the inherent message of God’s grace within Hugo’s masterpiece have created the perfect storm to stir up our hearts? If so, is there a lesson in *Les Misérables* for those of us who follow Christ and would like to be more effective in communicating God’s grace to others?

On Christmas Day 2012, Hollywood will be releasing a new film version of the musical, *Les Misérables*, starring Hugh Jackman, Russell Crow, and Anne Hathaway. Whether or not the Hollywood film will have the same success as the Lake Braddock production in its ability to touch the human heart may depend on how true it remains to the themes of God’s loving hospitality, grace, and redemption found in Victor Hugo’s original work. If it does, it may provide followers of Jesus with some opportunities for meaningful conversations at home and around the water cooler at work.

In 1985, when the Royal Shakespeare Company introduced the world to Boublil and Schönberg’s musical, *Les Misérables*, it got less than favorable reviews. Most critics didn’t think it would last a year. Christopher Edwards echoed many when he panned it as being “sentimental and melodramatic.” However, the fans, not the critics, got the last word as the musical went on to become a phenomenon with one of the longest runs in history on the West End and on Broadway. Could it be (continued on page 12)
Have you faced the key moment when God beckons you into an all-out, committed life of discipleship. If not, I suggest you spend some serious time with the Lord in the coming days and seek His will for how you should be living your life. You might be surprised where He leads you!

This issue of Knowing & Doing highlights how some have responded to God’s call—using examples from present day back to the 14th Century—and are living out their faith in powerful ways.

One of our CSLI Fellows, Ashley Storm, movingly writes about God calling her to leave her comfort-filled, secure teaching position to take her teaching skills and be a blessing in a school riddled with enormous challenges.

In David Calhoun’s profile of John Wycliffe we see a devoted reformer challenging corruption in the church and setting the stage for the reformation. His message of grace and his translation of the Bible into common English made a profound impact in his culture and beyond.

Michelle Knott, my wife and also a CSLI Fellow, describes our fulfilling and often hilarious hospitality ministry to people from around the world.

In anticipation of a new film version of Les Misérables, Joel Woodruff shares how this story of transformation continues to move hearts and minds globally. We see the battle between grace and legalism explored in this powerful and timeless story.

Joe Kohm, an agent for professional athletes and student of Lewis’s writings, points us to Lewis’s essay, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” which has prophetic words and warnings for us today.

And we come to the first half of the third installment of Tom Tarrants’ series on “The World, the Flesh, and the Devil”. This thorough look at the temptations of the flesh is a must-read for every believer.

Being a disciple means being transformed more and more into the image of Christ. That’s easy to say, but seeing that transformation actually take place is oftentimes harder. I hope these articles help you as you seek to live out your faith in a powerful way. In between issues of Knowing & Doing, I encourage you to continue to strengthen your walk with God through Discipleship-As-You-Go, our weekly feast of articles and recorded lectures on key discipleship themes delivered by email. You can learn about this and other resources on our website.

Sincerely,

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I was hot and sweaty as I heaved my boots up the giant stones of the Inca Trail. I looked up toward the highest point we would reach on the trail—Dead Woman’s Pass at 12,500 feet. This was the hardest day of the trek—or not, depending on how you looked at it. Tomorrow we had to tackle the killer Gringo Steps descending into the valley. I wasn’t sure which was worse, going up or going down. All I knew was that I was having a ball—celebrating my ten-year anniversary with my husband and accomplishing one of our lifelong dreams, hiking to Machu Picchu in Peru.

On this adventure of a lifetime, I fell in love. But not with Kerry. I was already in love with him, and this anniversary trip gave us much-needed time away to celebrate. But as we joined the twenty or so hikers who were part of our group, I fell in love . . . with our international travel mates. Hailing from Norway, Australia, Switzerland, Wales, England, and the United States, we were an eclectic group, for sure. When we got in our sleeping bags the first night, Kerry and I laughed quietly at how different we seemed from the rest of the crew. We were definitely the elders of the bunch; most of the others were in their twenties, passionately politically liberal, and seemingly amoral in their religious beliefs, if they had any at all. Yet, despite our differences, we felt a tight bond and affinity with them.

Travelers share a common DNA. They are usually sojourners in search of meaning, memories, and adventure. I think of the people I met at the Christian youth hostel in Amsterdam where I worked one summer in college. They were fascinating, open-minded folks who were seeking new experiences, enjoying the differences in others, and often searching for the spiritual significance of life. These, I discovered, were my kind of people.

As the trip to Machu Picchu drew to a close, I felt a burning desire to start a Christian youth hostel. Winding through the streets of Cusco in a cab, I mentioned this idea to Kerry. He smiled. It wasn’t a joke. I was serious. I wanted to open a place on the order of Gladys Aylward’s in China in the 1930s. At her Inn of the Sixth Happiness, she fed and housed travelers and told them about Jesus after supper each evening.

**Change of Plans**

If you live in North Arlington, Virginia, where we live, you know that residential neighborhoods are not zoned for youth hostels. So my passionate proposition was really dead on arrival, and Kerry and I both knew that. He said, “We can’t have a youth hostel, but at least you have hostile youth.”

Not one year later, another exciting opportunity to interact with international travelers—and actually live overseas—presented itself. Here was my chance! My heart raced at the thought. To prepare to move, I began weeding out old medicines from the bathroom cabinet. But then, as quickly as it came, the opportunity changed, and we were staying in the United States . . . in Arlington . . . in our very house with the now winnowed-out bathroom closet.

“Lord, I don't understand!” I opined. “Everything was pointing to moving overseas. Now I’m stuck right back where I started—at home. You know how much I desire to get to know internation—**
In recent months we have been exploring hindrances to discipleship. Our previous issue focused on “the world” and before that on “the devil.” In this issue we turn our attention to Part One of our treatment of “the flesh,” the third member of what has been called “the unholy trinity.” Although the word flesh is fairly common among believers, our understanding of it is often shallow and limited. Frequently it is used as a synonym for sexual lust instead of as the fallen human nature that controls nonbelievers and seeks to control believers. This misunderstanding is a serious problem for those who want to live for Christ; if we don’t understand the flesh rightly, we cannot rightly understand sin and how to deal with it. As J.I. Packer says so clearly, “If you have not learned about sin you cannot understand yourself, your fellow-men, the world you live in or the Christian faith.”

By way of introduction, I note the widespread failure of preachers and teachers to address “the flesh” adequately from the pulpit; it is not a popular topic. An even greater problem is our own reluctance to face the reality of our sin or to hear it mentioned in sermons... In *Four Quartets* T.S. Eliot put his finger on our problem, “humankind cannot bear very much reality.” We like to feel good about ourselves and resist anything that might threaten that illusion. But Jesus didn’t come simply to help us feel good; he came to help us be good, for God is more concerned with our holiness than our happiness. If we ever hope to make progress as disciples of Jesus—to think as he thought, to want what he wants, to feel as he felt, to act as he acted—we must understand and deal with our flesh and the sins it produces. This means being ruthlessly honest with ourselves about ourselves in the light of God’s Word and Spirit and then putting to death the sinful works of the flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit. As we do so, we will grow in the grace and knowledge and likeness of Jesus and glorify God more and more. We will discover that a holy life is a happy life.

**Defining the Problem: What Is “the Flesh”?**

What then does the Bible mean by the word flesh? Answering this question will take some effort on my part and yours, but the benefits are well worth it. What follows has been life changing for many people over the centuries and can be so for you too! In this article we will look at what the Bible means by the term flesh and how the flesh operates. Part 2, in the next issue, will address how to gain victory over the flesh in daily life. (And, yes, it is possible.)

The flesh (sarx in the Greek) is a complex concept in the Bible, and the word is used with a range of meanings. Its meaning in any given instance can be determined only by the context in which it appears. In all of the Old Testament and most places in the New, flesh is not seen as inherently sinful. It can mean, for example, the material of which humans or animals are made (1 Cor. 15:39), the human body (Gal. 4:13), a person (Rom. 3:20), a family (Rom. 4:1), and similarly rooted concepts. In the New Testa-
But Paul also employs sarx in a sense not found in the Old Testament, namely, "man's being and attitude as opposed to and in contradiction to God and God's Spirit." The sarx has sworn its allegiance to another: “By means of the flesh I am enslaved to sin (Ro. 7.25). The sarx of every person from Adam onward, Jesus alone excepted (Ro. 8.3), has been Sin's habitation and slave.”

How, you may wonder, do we get from sarx as the fleshy material from which we are constructed to sarx as sinful fallen human nature? And what does this tell us about ourselves? The story begins in the Garden of Eden. God created Adam not as a spirit like the angels but as a finite being with a body of flesh and blood. Even in his original innocence, Adam was a weak and frail creature in comparison to the eternal God, who is self-sustaining and all-powerful. Adam was a creature composed of flesh in the material sense. But when he rebelled against God, Adam, in his weak and frail flesh, transferred his “allegiance to another.” Thus, in addition to being weak and frail by virtue of his creatureliness, he also became twisted and distorted by virtue of his fallenness. The supremacy of God was displaced by the supremacy of self, a self vulnerable to the influences of the devil and the world. In the famous expression of Augustine, before the fall Adam was able not to sin, but afterward he was unable not to sin. A powerful force had captured Adam’s thoughts and desires, corrupting his nature and rendering him unwilling and unable to freely and gladly focus on the love of God and the good of others. And he could not escape the gravitational pull of his now-fallen nature or sinful flesh.

Richard Lovelace gives keen insight into the roots of the flesh, and we do well to reflect on his words:

Augustine divided the trunk of the flesh into two main branches, pride (self-aggrandizement) and sensuality (self-indulgence), which in their interaction together might be held to generate most other forms of sin. Luther, however, perceived that the main root of the flesh behind pride and sensuality was unbelief; and his analysis takes in some forms of the flesh which are apparently “selfless” and altruistic. In any case, the characteristic bent of the flesh is toward independence from God, his truth and his will, as if man himself were God.3

This reciprocal interaction of pride, sensuality, and unbelief creates within human beings an attitude and disposition of rebellion against God and enthrones the autonomous self as the center of man’s nature. And, like a petri dish, it is a warm, moist breeding ground hospitable to all manner of sins. This is the essence of the flesh. Lovelace goes on to say that “by means of the flesh sin subjugates the whole person.”

J.I. Packer elaborates on the flesh and the sin it nurtures when he says the essence of sin is:

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To Wycliffe we owe more than to any one person . . . our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion.”2

Who was this man to whom we owe so much?

John Wycliffe was born into a wealthy family in Yorkshire, England, circa 1330. At age fifteen he went to Oxford, by then the greatest university in Europe. A few years later, the Black Death killed a third of the population of England, including Thomas Bradwardine, the archbishop of Canterbury. Bradwardine’s book On the Cause of God against the Pelagians, a bold recovery of the Pauline-Augustine doctrine of grace, would greatly shape young Wycliffe’s theology. Wycliffe completed his studies at Oxford, fulfilling his doctoral requirement by giving a series of lectures commenting on the whole Bible! As a teacher he soon became Oxford’s leading philosopher and theologian.

Wycliffe first made his mark as a philosopher, writing in Latin many treatises opposing the spiritual sterility of the skepticism of his day.

Advocate of Church Reform

Wycliffe began the second phase of his life when he became an advocate of church reform and entered the service of the king. Somewhat like Erasmus more than a century later, he attacked the abuses of the church, from the priests to the pope. He insisted that Christ gave the church authority over the spiritual, but not the temporal, realm. He traced the corruption of the church to the time of Constantine, when the emperor was thought to have endowed the papacy with temporal possessions and thus “poured poison into the Church.”3 Wycliffe criticized priests who were . . . so occupied in heart about worldly lordships, and with pleas of business, that no habit of praying, of thoughtfulness on heavenly things, or the sins of their own heart or those of other men, may be kept among them: neither may they be found studying and preaching the gospel, nor visiting and comforting the poor.4

He insisted that the clergy should be stripped of all material, worldly privileges, to restore them to their proper spiritual life and work.

Wycliffe’s help was gladly embraced by the state in its ongoing battle with the church over issues of status, power, and control. In the eyes of the popes of his time, Wycliffe stood for England against Rome and for the state against the church. The Catholic Church was unable to control or silence Wycliffe, because he had powerful supporters in the state, and the church itself was experiencing a time of great internal dissension. The so-called Babylonian Captivity (the relocation of the papacy to Avignon in 1309) was followed by the Great Schism (the division of Western Christendom in 1378 by the creation of two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon). John Wycliffe saw this as a hopeful sign, saying that Christ “hath begun already to help us

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1 David B. Calhoun, “John Wycliffe: ‘The Morning Star of the Reformation’”
2 John Wycliffe: “To Wycliffe we owe more than to any one person . . . our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion.”
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graciously, in that he hath cloven the head of Antichrist, and made the two parts fight against each other.”

Wycliffe lost much of his secular support, notably the protection of John of Gaunt, son of Edward III, who for years had protected him from the wrath of the church. When this nobleman lost his power, and the weakness of the church gave the state greater confidence in its ability to prevail, Wycliffe was no longer needed. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that a Christian leader discovers that “it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes” (Ps. 118:9 NIV). Although Wycliffe now lacked political clout, the people still supported him. “If he is the weakest in power,” they said, “he is the strongest in truth.” In 1382 Wycliffe’s teaching was condemned by a council meeting in London. When the city was shaken by an earthquake, the Catholic officials interpreted it as a sign of God’s approval of their action. Others said, “If Wycliffe has been condemned by the bishops, then they have certainly been condemned by God.”

Wycliffe, the Theologian

When in 1381 John Wycliffe was banished from Oxford, a place he called his greatest love, he took up residence at his parish church in Lutterworth, near Rugby, in Northamptonshire. By this time he had entered the third and most important phase of his life. Going beyond his criticism of the abuses of church power and the conduct of its clergy, he began to attack Roman Catholic doctrine, just as Luther and Calvin later went beyond Erasmus in their theological reform. As a philosopher Wycliffe argued against the spiritual sterility of contemporary skepticism; as a churchman he argued against the worldliness and corruption of the church; as a theologian he argued for the supremacy of the Bible and its message of God’s salvation by grace. It is this later Wycliffe whom we honor as the pioneer of our English language, our English Bible, and our Protestant religion.

Wycliffe preached the same message of God’s grace in Christ that sounded again in the Reformation two hundred years later:

Wycliffe’s preaching is concentrated in these few words from his sermon, “A Short Rule of Life for Priests, Lords, and Laborers”:

Have a remembrance of the goodness of God, how he made you in his own likeness; and how Jesus Christ, both God and man, died so painful a death upon the cross, to buy your soul out of hell, even with his own heart’s blood, and to bring it to the bliss of heaven.

At the end of the day, think about how you have offended God . . . and . . . how graciously God has saved you; not for your desert, but for his own mercy and goodness . . . and pray for grace that you may dwell and end in his true service, and real love, and according to your skill, to teach others to do the same.

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How had the Fellows Program changed me? As I completed Year 1 of the Fellows Program, I struggled to answer the question. I knew that the texts had challenged me, the lectures convicted me, and the people pushed me, but it was hard to put my finger on what had really changed.

During a phone interview for Year 2 of the program, I was finally ready to answer the question.

A New Perspective

A few months into Year 1, all Fellows participate in a day called Urban Plunge, an opportunity to work hands-on with an inner-city ministry. Through this, Fellows learn about urban poverty, have chances to serve and converse with those in need, and walk away with a keen awareness of the impoverished population. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I wasn't expecting to be surprised. The truth is, the poverty didn’t surprise me, the statistics didn’t overwhelm me, and the experience wasn’t all that foreign. In spite of that, God used that day and the reading during that month to change my life entirely.

I cannot recall which text I was reading when God nudged me. But there I was, one weekday evening, reading for the program. As I sat in my room, God confronted me with this idea: if I continued to teach at my current high school, I would only ever make rich people richer. The thought was not mine, for I had been at this wealthy and high-achieving school for five years and hadn’t considered that thought even once. In fact, I had spent nearly all of my short time as a working professional with one goal in mind—comfort. So, as my reading was interrupted by the thought, I did what any normal person would do: I politely ignored it. I’m sad to say that the conviction had to cross my path more than once for me to pick it up and consider it. Yet, as I pursued that conviction, God was clear in not letting me back out of the new life to which he was calling me.

Initially I had no idea what obedience to that prompting would look like. Did it mean becoming a high-school teacher in the inner city? Did it mean stepping out of the great schedule I had received at my current school? Did it mean something in between? In the months to follow, I wavered between pursuing God’s calling fully and passively wondering if I’d heard him incorrectly. In this, I was reminded of the words that John Calvin lived by: prompte et sincere. Promptly and sincerely echoed loudly: both my mind and heart needed a pep talk to pursue the life to which I was being called and to lay down the life from which I was being called away. Promptly and sincerely in this case meant full and immediate obedience, moving forward in fear and on faith, waiting for God to answer.

Through the spring I interviewed at several schools. I entered dilapidated buildings, walked through metal detectors, stepped over dead rats, and answered the question, “Why would you want to come here?” more times than I can remember. To be honest, I wasn’t sure what I had to offer.
apart from a willing spirit and conscience confronted by Christ himself.

**Facing the Prospects**

At the end of it all, God brought me to a school that qualifies for Title 1 federal funding, meaning that more than 40 percent of the students come from at-risk homes, in which they are living at or below the poverty line. Many as well come from the undocumented population of society.

Facing the prospects of the difficult first week of school, I remembered one of the first assignments at the outset of the Fellows Program—writing a letter to ourselves. My letter had included a series of admonishments about putting both feet in and staying fully committed to what God wanted in and through the program. Taking my cues from that experience, I sat down and penned a letter to myself. Like God’s people in Deuteronomy 6, I was in desperate need of reminders about the nature of the task to which God called me. It wouldn’t be enough to live this year with a passive notion that God had once called and moved me; I needed a present reminder that God was still calling and still supplying.

So for several hours, on a rainy September night just before the first day of school, I sat in the same chair where I’d read for hours and hours during the prior year filling up my head and heart with godly wisdom; I penned myself a letter that would be the reminder of what it meant to fully obey Christ in this new location under these new circumstances.

The letter was really a pep talk. A note for the hard days. An exposition of the heart that drove the decision to leave the favorable for the ignored. A reminder of the gentle “follow me” I’d heard from Jesus during that November night when he had called me so specifically away from one life and into another. One week into this new place and I found myself repeating certain lines from the letter over and over again. It shouldn’t have been all that surprising that the very thing God had initiated he had used, but I continued to be surprised and loved through these holy coincidences.

Here are a few excerpts of what God revealed as I sat with my computer on that rainy night:

You followed the prompting to leave what was comfortable, what was enviable, and the place where your reputation was housed to go and see what God was talking about.

You trusted him and you left your old school knowing it wouldn’t be easy, knowing that these days and months might bring you to tears, fully aware that you

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How to Develop and Maintain a Christian Worldview through C.S. Lewis’s Essay: “The Poison of Subjectivism”

by Joseph A. Kohm, Jr.
Founder of Kohm Associates, Inc.

It can be difficult for serious readers of C.S. Lewis to pick out that one favorite book, poem, essay, or letter. Lewis’s writing is magnificent in both its depth and scope. Are you looking for adventure? Try the Chronicles of Narnia or the Space Trilogy. Are you looking for solace? Try A Grief Observed. Do you wonder what he thought of Jane Austen? See a 1952 letter to his friend Bede Griffiths. (Lewis liked her, by the way.)

For me, and I suspect for many people, the writings of C.S. Lewis have become an important supplement in my daily walk with God. Lewis himself knew the importance of reading God’s Word daily and spending time in prayer and reflection. These are hallmarks of the mature believer. Followers of Christ also need to be equipped to navigate and live out their faith in a culture that is increasingly secularized. Many have argued that we are living in a post-Christian era. It is critical, therefore, to develop and maintain a Christian worldview where, with the help of the Holy Spirit, believers put every thought through the independent filter of our Christian faith.

My favorite Lewis piece is the essay, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” which can readily be found in Christian Reflections. I’ve read and reread it dozens of times, and it has done more to shape my worldview than anything else save God’s Word. Though published almost seventy years ago, here Lewis warns us of the “apparently innocent idea . . . that will certainly end our species (and, in my view, damn our souls) if it is not crushed; that fatal supposition that men can create values, that a community can choose its ‘ideology’ as men choose their clothes.”

Today we’ve been told by professional moralists like Dr. Phil and Oprah that we can look within ourselves to find the values necessary to make the right decisions. Good, or God, can be found within each person based on his or her own individual feelings or preferences. But by reading “The Poison of Subjectivism,” believers can understand the fallacy of this thinking and lay a foundation for a solid Christian worldview.

Prophetically, Lewis begins by warning us to beware of those who want to overthrow “traditional judgement of value” in the hope of finding something more “real or solid on which to base a new scheme of values.” Just in the past twenty years there have been seismic shifts within society at large on issues such as marriage, sexuality, and the role of government. Shifts are not limited to secular society; churches and denominations struggle with doctrinal purity while fighting off the influences of relativism, individualism, and pluralism.

Lewis further warns that we can be conditioned to approve what reformers want society to believe is “good.” This can be done through “psychological manipulation of infants, state education and mass propaganda.” Today we can see this happening by the almost irresistible forces of technology, both visual and audible. According to a recent study cited in Charisma magazine, the average seventeen-year-old has spent 63,835 hours either watching movies, videos, and television programs or playing

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video games, compared to only two thousand hours spent with parents. The average person sees three thousand advertisements a day! With so many forces trying to shape and mold our minds and appeal to our senses, it is critical that believers have a Christian worldview. Lewis says in *The Abolition of Man* that “without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.” Reading God’s Word daily, personal prayer time, and interaction and accountability with and from other mature believers is the best way to train our emotions and develop and maintain a Christian worldview.

Those who push back against subjectivism are told that progress is not possible if we maintain a permanent moral standard. To continue with “an immutable moral code is to cut off all progress and acquiesce in stagnation.” As the shadows grow longer over our world, objective observers can see that society is always seeking to remove the nearest restraint, in the name of fairness, freedom, or individual liberty. Once a barrier has been eradicated, the collective forces of popular culture seem to set their sights on the next barrier. Lewis, however, reminds us that “except on the supposition of a changeless standard, progress is impossible.” Or, as he says, if the train station is as mobile as the train, how can the train make any progress toward it? This is why a Christian worldview is critical; it is our independent, immutable measuring stick, without which we can do no measuring.

Where can believers and society at large go to find that changeless, immutable standard on which to base worldview? This question has already been asked and answered. Two thousand years ago, Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). It is a question many are still asking today, including many who claim to believe in and follow Jesus yet live in a way that seems diametrically opposed to what He teaches.

Fortunately Jesus has told us what truth is. In John 14:6 He says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” In the introduction to the Gospel of John we are told that “truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17 (NIV)). Jesus is who we are to base our worldview on. But what does this mean specifically? If society and culture are anchored to a permanent moral standard, isn’t progress impossible? Perhaps the most important lesson from “The Poison of Subjectivism” is that “real moral advances . . . are made from within the existing moral tradition.” Once we understand that Jesus is our standard, our mission is to ensure that our thoughts, views, and beliefs (our worldview) come nearer and nearer to him. This is real progress. It involves more than asking, “What would Jesus do?” It means going deeper by putting on Christ (Gal. 3:27) and letting Him live within and through us (Gal. 2:20) with the help of the Holy Spirit on a moment-by-moment basis.

“The Poison of Subjectivism” is both a challenge and a comfort. It is a challenge in that we are warned about the direction society and individuals will take when

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Les Misérables

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that postmoderners who have been told that they need to fend for themselves in a world without God were captivated by Hugo’s alternative worldview?

Hugo’s book and the musical adaptation portray a very real and broken world in which “les misérables,” the downtrodden of the world, suffer greatly as a result of ignorance, injustice, poverty, and degrading laws and customs. This could describe much of the world as we know it today.

However, as John Morrison writes,

Les Misérables also offers a solution in the redemptive journey of one man who discovers the nature and power of love and forgiveness . . . for Hugo what matters most is the substance of Jean Valjean’s surrender, the passion which comes to define and direct his life, a passion which participates ultimately in The Passion, the Passion of Christ.2

In other words, Les Misérables presents the hope found in the good news of Jesus that can’t be found in pessimistic postmodern philosophy.

Les Mis, as the musical has come to be known, uses the power of the arts—drama, music, and literature—to point people to age-old but now often discounted truths about God, human nature, and the longings of the human heart. C.S. Lewis believed that the arts play an essential role in helping people understand and communicate truth. He writes, “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.”3

In other words, to fully understand a word or concept, we need to have an image that corresponds with it. We often understand truth much better when we get it through an image, a story, or a song. Many who have read Hugo’s novel and seen Boublil and Schönberg’s musical speak of how the two art forms, novel and musical, complement and illuminate each other using the power of the arts to communicate to both the mind and heart.

So what is it about the story and images in Les Misérables that have so mesmerized readers and audiences around the world? Interestingly, when Hugo’s book was first released in 1862, it too, like the modern musical, was dismissed by the critics and predicted to be a literary failure. The Atlantic Monthly wrote, “Its morbid elements are so combined with sentiments abstractly Christian that it is calculated to wield a more pernicious influence than Byron ever exerted.”4

Addison Hart points out:

I believe that the Atlantic Monthly critic stumbled on . . . one key for understanding the perennial appeal of Les Misérables . . . That key is simply the phrase “sentiments abstractly Christian.” . . . If by “sentiment” we mean “a thought prompted by feeling,” then “sentiments abstractly Christian” are a positive good; and it should be encouraging to those of us who are Christians that such “sentiments” are seen to hold appeal for men and women everywhere . . . for which many hearts yearn.5

So what are some of those “sentiments abstractly Christian” for which many in our world yearn as revealed in Hugo’s work? While Hugo discusses many ideas, three biblical themes stand above the rest: the disarming power of hospitality given in the name of Jesus, God’s offer of grace to the undeserving, and the Spirit’s redemp-
tive power as demonstrated through the transformed lives of those who choose to follow Christ.

The backdrop for Les Mis is the French Revolution and the years following—one of the most tempestuous and violent periods in French history. Hugo’s own preface describes this age as having three serious problems, “the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night.” It was a time of unjust laws, social unrest, and great suffering. In the midst of this background of turmoil, human depravity, and the anger of revolution, Hugo weaves his powerful tale of redemption. The story centers around the life of Jean Valjean, a convict sentenced unjustly to nineteen years of hard labor and a lifetime of probation for the crime of stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family.

The musical begins as Jean Valjean is released from prison. As he struggles to reassert his humanness by stating his name, “I am Jean Valjean,” the antagonist, the inspector of the law, Javert, seeks to remind him that he will always be a felon, known only to the state by the number 24601. As Valjean begins his journey, Javert’s words appear to be prophetic as Valjean wanders from place to place, an outcast and pariah in society. None will take him in to provide him with food and shelter from the elements. Valjean’s heart is bitter and hard when in desperation he knocks upon the door of Monseigneur Bienvenue, a humble priest who has risen in the ranks of the clergy to become a bishop. The bishop’s French name, Bienvenue, means “welcome,” and he lives out the reality of his name by opening his door and offering the bedraggled criminal Valjean a meal of bread and wine (symbolic of Jesus’ Last Supper), a meal that nourishes both soul and body. In the musical the bishop sings, “There is wine here to revive you . . . . There is bread to make you strong.

There’s a bed to rest ‘till morning. Rest from pain and rest from wrong.”

The novel’s dialogue at this point is moving. Shocked, Valjean states, “Monsieur Curé, you are good; you don’t despise me. You take me into your house; you light your candles for me, and I haven’t hid from you where I come from, and how miserable I am.”

The bishop, who was sitting near him, touched his hand gently and said,

You need not tell me who you are. This is not my house; it is the house of Christ. It does not ask any comer whether he has a name, but whether he has an affliction. You are suffering; you are hungry and thirsty; be welcome . . . . Your name is my brother.

This act of hospitality by the bishop reflects the love that Jesus has for all who are miserable and suffering. All people are created in the image of God, and no matter how low they have fallen within the social hierarchy of this world, they have dignity and worth and should be recognized and treated with respect. It will be this gift of hospitality that opens the door of Valjean’s heart for even greater things to come. Hospitality, the kind welcoming of the stranger or friend, is the biblical virtue that creates the environment in which hearts can be softened and turned toward the Light.
Awaking early from his comfortable bed, Valjean walks into the kitchen and sees the silver tableware in the cupboard. The temptation is too much for him, and he quietly places the silver in his sack and steals away. When the bishop’s cook discovers that the silver is missing she is distraught. Her suspicions are confirmed when several policemen arrive with the thief in hand. Valjean is quivering in fear, knowing that he’s been caught red-handed. He’s going back to prison. All hope is lost. His freedom has vanished.

Suddenly the compassionate bishop looks at Valjean and (in the novel) says, “Ah, there you are! I’m glad to see you. But! I gave you the candlesticks also, which are silver like the rest, and would bring two hundred francs. Why did you not take them along with your plates?”

In an instant, Valjean is released and is free to go. The priest has absolved him of his crime. Then Bienvenue walks over to the mantel, picks up the candlesticks, and hands them to Valjean. In this pivotal moment of the musical, the bishop tells Valjean of “some higher plan.” He sings, “You must use this precious silver to become an honest man. By the witness of the martyrs, by the Passion and the Blood, God has raised you out of darkness; I have bought your soul for God.”

God’s grace has fully entered the scene as He lovingly stoops down to offer Valjean a new beginning in life through the words and actions of the bishop. Bienvenue has given his silver candlesticks to Valjean, sharing the light of Christ with a broken man, exhorting him to receive this gift and become an honest man. This free offer of grace, at first is too much for Valjean to fathom. He is dumbfounded. Probably because, as Philip Yancey writes, “The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.”

In Valjean’s world, the world of the French Revolution, guillotine not grace comes to mind as the symbol of the age. And in our postmodern world, the lust for more—greed—seems to be the operative word as opposed to grace. And yet, both in the world of Les Misérables and our world today, people yearn and thirst for grace. God’s loving message of grace as expressed through the shed blood of His Son on the cross, so that we might be raised with Him in new life, out of darkness, is the good news. It is the gospel that men, women, and children long to hear.

Upon leaving the presence of the bishop, Valjean stumbles around in a stupor, trying to understand what has just happened to him. He is forced to come to a point of decision: to continue in his hardened, sinful ways, or to surrender to the loving grace of God, accept God’s forgiveness, and devote himself to sharing God’s candlesticks and grace with others.

In the musical he finally falls down in prayer and sings, “Sweet Jesus, what have I done? . . . I feel my shame inside me like a knife. He told me that I have a soul. How does he know? What spirit came to move my life? . . . I stare into the void, to the whirlpool of my sin. I’ll escape now from the world... Another story must begin!” Jean Valjean has been born again.

God has redeemed the hard-hearted criminal Jean Valjean. The word redeemed means “to buy back,” and Valjean’s life has been bought back or purchased by God. He has been the recipient of God’s hospitality.
through the bread and wine served by the priest who acknowledged his dignity and worth as a human being. He has experienced God’s grace, through the light of the candlesticks, as his soul was purchased by the blood of Christ. He has now been raised up, a redeemed follower of Christ. From this point on in Hugo’s story, we see in dramatic fashion the influence, impact, and power of Jean Valjean’s transformed life as he sacrificially shares the light of Christ with others. He will come to the aid of Fantine, whose name means “childlike,” as she is one of the “little ones” whom Christ spoke of who has been abused and led astray by the world. He adopts Fantine’s child Cosette, rescuing her from the evil Thénardiers, a family whose antipathy for God comes out in their selfish greed and disdain for others. Throughout most of the rest of his life, Valjean will also face his accuser, Javert, the symbol of the law, the antithesis of mercy and grace. Eventually Javert himself will be faced with the offer of God’s grace, through the life of Valjean. Rather than surrender to God’s grace, Javert will end his own life in rebellion against the loving, grace-offering God.

At the end of Jean Valjean’s life, we can see that he has learned the truth spoken by another John, that “God is love”; the candlesticks shine brightly around his face as he sings this prayer in the musical: “God on high, hear my prayer. Take me now to thy care. Bring me home. . . . Forgive me all my trespasses and take me to your glory.” Valjean is at peace with God. The music and the words of the song reveal to the audience, if just for an instant, the hope that awaits all who put their trust in Christ.

The final line of the musical, “To love another person is to see the face of God,” reflects the words of Scripture when, upon their reunion, Jacob says to Esau, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

Victor Hugo’s classic Les Misérables, whether experienced through his novel or the musical adaptation, will continue to touch hearts and minds, for deep down within us all is the yearning to know God’s loving hospitality, grace, and redemption. As Jesus’ followers imitate Bienvenue and Jean Valjean and share their grace-filled candlesticks with strangers, more will find hope in this dark world.

Notes

9. Ibid., 32.

RECOMMENDED READING

Les Misérables, by Victor Hugo
This book is widely considered one of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century. The story is historical fiction because it contains factual and historic events.
The truth is that as we open up our home to strangers, Kerry and I are trying to be missionaries, but our children are often the ones most effectively sharing the gospel.

Yes, Vacancy!
(continued from page 3)
al people and share the gospel with them. Why did you put that desire in my heart if I’m going to stay right here?” I was angry and honest and let God know my heart, because, well, He already knows it. I know He can handle my honesty. And if God ever winks, He winked at me just then and said, “Trust me, Michelle.” Not out loud. But He said it. “Trust me.” And so began a most unusual and hilarious and totally divine answer to prayer.

Fast forward to the present. We just changed the sheets (again) to prepare for a young teacher from China who will stay with us for two days. A young man from North Carolina who used to live with us is coming back for a few days. A local high-school girl stayed here last week. Two Protestant missionaries and a Catholic priest were here from France the two weeks before that. A man coming through from Ohio spent one night. A dear friend from North Carolina popped in for a night. A Dutch family of four spent two days sightseeing and sleeping here. Another high-school girl spent a week here. A family from Boston came for a week. And all this has been in the past two months!

Our Christian “youth hostel” is alive and well, and the Lord is not only winking now, but laughing . . . laughing at the creative ways in which He fulfills not only His will, but also the desires of our hearts. It is divine comedy at its best, and I’m still shaking my head in wonder.

“How do people find you?” I get asked quite a lot. “God,” I tell them. It’s true. God leads them to us. But we also do our own outreach. One way is through Couchsurfing.org. Couchsurfing is an online network of individuals around the world who have a desire to travel and meet new people. Through the network, strangers are able to find free lodging with willing hosts. Like Facebook, members have a personal profile where they introduce themselves and describe what sort of a “couch” they have to offer. Then travelers can send a request for a couch (or bed or air mattress, as the case may be), and the host can decide to accept them or not.

When I first suggested we sign up for Couchsurfing, my husband was dead-set against it. “Are you crazy?” were his exact words, as I recall. “We don’t know these people!”

“I know! That’s what makes it so exciting!” I replied with a grin. But I must admit, the first time we actually welcomed couchsurfers into our home, even I had a measure of trepidation. This was unknown territory for all of us. When a young couple from Slovenia arrived with their sweet little one-and-a-half-year-old, however, we realized we had nothing to fear. “This is the first American home we have ever been in,” they announced as they walked through the door. At that moment, we realized what a privilege it was to represent not only America, but also our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now that we have been doing this for several years, we are astounded at how God sends people to us. Sometimes I get three to four requests per week. In addition to couchsurfing, many people refer housing requests to us. Friends of friends of friends end up at our house. Two young women from North Carolina wound up staying here after they sent an e-mail to a young man in Switzerland who had stayed with us.
the year before. But while the word gets out, it really is God who is our booking agent. We know He is guiding the right people to us.

**Reverse Missionaries**

When you invite perfect strangers into your home and provide meals and a warm, family environment, they tend to be appreciative. Some are downright perplexed. As one Dutchman said to me, “This is very strange for us. We don’t do this in Holland!” I laughed and said, “But it’s not strange for us. We do it all the time, and we are so glad you are here. Welcome home.” We find that as people are warmed by our hospitality and grateful to save money on food and lodging, they are often willing to hear our story. They want to know what motivates us to open our home. They listen as we share about our faith in Jesus Christ and how He has changed our lives by His sacrificial death on the cross. We often have wonderful conversations about our mutual faith journeys as we linger over coffee and dessert.

We like to think of ourselves as reverse missionaries: they come to us. But not only do they come here, they come here on vacation. People on vacation have a unique freedom and openness not usually associated with everyday life. Without their work duties, they tend not to be as busy or preoccupied. More relaxed and unhurried, they have time to talk and consider what life is all about. It’s in that downtime—the time spent lingering over a meal or sharing stories in front of the fire or pointing out cities on the world map on the wall—that we often have the best conversations with our guests.

Our hospitality ministry allows us to catapult to a level of intimacy that might take years to achieve in a traditional missionary setting. If we were to go overseas as missionaries (something we have contemplated and may still do one day), it would take time to establish friendships and win people’s trust, until we eventually invited them into our home for a meal and significant conversation. Not at our “youth hostel.” While every situation is different, it usually takes about twenty-four hours for the walls to come down. There’s something about eating cereal together in our pajamas that bonds us together. Usually our guests go sightseeing during the day. And sometimes we join them if our schedule permits, but mostly we try to have a family supper ready when they get home. We hear all their stories, see their souvenirs, laugh and get to know one another over a meal around our dining room table. Once we even sat around the kitchen while one of our guests soaked his swollen toe in a big Tupperware bowl of warm water and Epsom salts!

One of our most surprising gatherings centered around the inauguration of President Obama. We actually tried to rent out our house for the occasion (as many were doing in the Washington, DC, area) and decided to shoot the moon and ask for three thousand dollars for the week. As it turned out, we got a request from a gentleman who said he was surprised we were asking such a low price. A low price? I asked him what price he was referring to. He said, “Three dollars.” I laughed and said, “That’s not what we’re charging . . . but what were you hoping to pay?” He said, “Well, I hadn’t really thought about it, but three dollars sounded good to me!”
A pastor of an inner-city church in Indianapolis, he and his wife stayed with us (we didn’t move out after all), and then we had five more strangers from North Carolina come at the same time. In all, in our house we had eleven people for the 2009 inauguration. Not only did we have an amazing time getting to know one another, we also shared a historic moment in history and all became fast friends. The pastor and his wife spent half a day with us playing piano, singing hymns, sharing stories, and finally praying with our family before they drove back to Indianapolis. As they left, we thanked God for the three-dollar mistake!

Another time, we welcomed a Chinese family that had no religious background. They ended up leaving their twin boys with us without hesitation while they attended a Bible study with a young Chinese woman, who happened to be living with us. We gave them an English copy of The Jesus Storybook Bible, and the father announced that from now on, he would use that every day to help his children learn English.

The year before, a French family came to visit for a few days, and we all bonded immediately despite the language barrier. We shared fondue, homemade French quiche, and chocolate chip cookies, which turned out to be a huge hit! After carving pumpkins together and celebrating a birthday with them, we were all sad to say good-bye. As they put on their shoes to leave, I told them that the most important thing in our life was knowing Jesus—not in a religious way, but in an authentic, personal way. Thanks to God’s provision, we just happened to have a Christian tract in French to share with them. Before they left, Kerry asked if he could pray for them. Our two families gathered in a circle in our front room and held hands while Kerry asked the Lord to bless them. When we opened our eyes, everyone in their family was crying, even the father who had turned to face the window so we wouldn’t see his tears. The Lord had touched their hearts. We have stayed in close touch with them, and we look forward to the day when we will be reunited.

Family Participation

In this unique family ministry, even though our children are young, they play a significant role. They change the sheets with us, help prepare the food, and often make signs to welcome visitors so they don’t feel like strangers. One darling young lady from Vietnam took the bus to our street and then walked up the front steps, lugging her backpack. As she approached our house, I saw her take out her camera and snap pictures of our front door. The kids had covered the door with homemade signs welcoming her “home.” She had tears in her eyes when I opened the door to greet her.

We joke that when our kids grow up, they will either have houseguests all the time, or they will never have a visitor for the rest of their lives. Their childhood is being defined by the internationals streaming through. Our children are homeschooled, and many assume they are completely sheltered from the world. If they only knew. Our kids are exposed to people from other countries, cultures, religions, languages, and worldviews. They have played basketball with Chinese twins. They have gone grocery shopping with Slovenians. Charlie played football to the cheers of French children. In fact, now we prefer to say we global-school our children, because they are exposed to so many cultures through our houseguests and international travel of our own.

We’re often asked, “With all those strangers in your house, how do you know the children will be safe?” The obvious answer
is, we don’t. But how do we know they’ll be safe anytime, anywhere? Of course, we are cognizant of the risks involved in this ministry, but we have felt the Lord guiding us each step of the way. After all, Hebrews 13:2 tells us, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (NIV). The disciples were told to stay with strangers, and Paul couchsurfed his way through Asia. That being said, we always pray before accepting a visitor, and we have said no on occasion because we didn’t feel a peace about someone. Usually we accept only families, thinking that ax murders don’t usually travel with their kids. But, as Kerry notes, “If they did, that would be good cover!” So far, we’ve come out unscathed.

A powerful side benefit of our hospitality is that we are getting on-the-job training in evangelism. Recently we had a family visiting from Vietnam. The father had fought in the Vietnam War. We played NERF gun geography together (shooting guns at a giant map we have in our playroom), and he shot that NERF gun with a precision and intensity I have never seen before! He clearly was familiar with guns. At dinner that night, his daughter mentioned that they were Buddhists, but that all religions taught the same thing. I was thinking of how to respond, but said nothing while I waited for the right time. Later, my eight-year-old son said, “Mom, that lady said that all religions are the same. But they’re not. Why didn’t you say something?”

Wow. Why didn’t I say something? I let an opportunity to spread the truth about Jesus Christ go by. And my own son rightly challenged me on it. Before our Vietnamese guests left, my daughter wrote a small book about God for the young woman. She included drawings about the Bible with the gospel clearly presented. The truth is that as we open up our home to strangers, Kerry and I are trying to be missionaries, but our children are often the ones most effectively sharing the gospel. They are learning how to talk to people from all over the world, to listen to their stories, and, we hope, to share their faith better than their mother does sometimes!

Unexpected Gifts

To say that this ministry is full of unexpected surprises is an understatement. Shirin came from Iran for a few days and ended up staying three months while she awaited her visa. Xiaozhen came from China for two weeks, which turned into two years. We all traveled to China with her to meet her family last year. She got married this summer, and Kerry gave her away at the altar. Ben, Josh, and Jessie all came for summers and left a wonderful, indelible mark on our family. The ministry is never what we expect, but the house is always full of the right people, whom God sends our way.

Last Christmas I realized for the first time how Mary and Joseph were couchsurfers in Bethlehem so long ago. We got an e-mail on December 23 from a young man from China, studying in New York, who asked to come stay with us Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It wasn’t in our plans,
but we eagerly said yes and picked up Jimmy at the metro station.

That night we took him to our Christmas Eve church service. Having never celebrated Christmas in his life, he was fascinated by the children dressed as angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. As Jimmy sang along to the carols, I whispered with surprise, “Do you know these songs?” “No,” he answered, “I’m just reading the words on the screen.” He participated fully and seemed to enjoy himself. Later he joined us and several friends for a Christmas Eve dinner. One friend’s daughter brought twenty-six chicks—hatched for a recent science project. We all played with the chicks, and Jimmy asked, “Is this a Christmas tradition too!?” He had no idea what a crazy family he had landed in!

The next morning he opened his first stocking, his first Christmas presents, and then listened as Kerry shared the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth, his death for us, and resurrection. We wanted Jimmy to know the true, wonderful meaning of Christmas! We went back to church later that morning. During the prayer time, Jimmy prayed out loud for his family in China. He spent the afternoon with us before heading back to school, writing in our guest book that he hoped we could stay in touch for the rest of our lives. We’ve already started on Facebook, and I have a feeling we will see him again.

In fact, I think we will see all our houseguests again. This past summer we travelled as a family to Slovenia, where we stayed with the very first couchsurfers we ever hosted. It was like a family reunion. They actually moved out and stayed with their parents so that we could use their whole apartment. We traveled around the country together, sightseeing, swimming in the Adriatic, eating gelato, and enjoying each other’s company again after more than two years. But the best memory for us was when we were able to share the Gospel with them over a dinner of Slovenian dumplings one evening. The next night, the young man’s parents invited us to dinner at their house. His mother began by saying, “I understand you are interested in God. I want to talk to you about that.” After a wonderful, open, and authentic conversation, we invited her to come stay with us in the United States. She said, “I do want to visit you... and I want to go to your church.” We can’t wait for her to come.

What’s Ahead?

What is ahead for our Christian “youth hostel”? More sheets to change and more meals to cook, we hope! More individuals and families to love. More laughter around the dinner table and shared cross-cultural experiences. More conversations about the meaning of life and eternal things. More lives changed by Jesus through the simple practice of hospitality.

Machu Picchu may be a “million” miles away, but travelers like those we met on the Inca Trail are making their way up our front steps all the time. We don’t have a neon sign out front, but I hope we will always have a vacancy for the strangers and soon-to-be-friends that God sends our way.

Yes, Vacancy!

RECOMMENDED READING

Open Heart, Open Home: The Hospitable Way to Make Others Feel Welcome & Wanted by Karen Mains

In this classic on Christian hospitality, Karen Mains steps far beyond how-to-entertain hints to explore a biblical and spiritual approach to using your home to care for others.
Hindrances to Discipleship: The Flesh
(continued from page 5)

Playing God; and, as a means to this, refusing to allow the Creator to be God as far as you are concerned. Living, not for him, but for yourself; loving and serving and pleasing yourself without reference to the Creator; trying to be as far as possible independent of Him, taking yourself out of His hands, holding Him at arm’s length, keeping the reins of life in your own hands; acting as if you and your pleasure, were the end to which all things else, God included, must be made to function as a means—that is the attitude in which sin essentially consists. Sin is exalting oneself against the Creator, withholding the homage due to Him, and putting yourself in His place as the ultimate standard of reference in all life’s decisions. Augustine analyzed sin as pride (superbia), the mad passion to be superior even to God, and as a state of being bent away from God into a state of self-absorption (homo incurvatus in se).\(^5\)

Like an incurable disease that passes from generation to generation, sin entered into and entrenched itself in Adam through the gateway of his “flesh” and has reigned in Adam and all his descendants to this very day. Thus we find within our hearts “a complex web of thoughts, desires, values and actions that are in opposition to God’s intended pattern for us.”\(^6\) And so, George Eldon Ladd says, the flesh (sarx) “ethically conceived is human nature, man viewed in his entirety apart from God and in contrast with the righteousness and holiness of God. As such, man is not only weak and impotent, he is also sinful and rebellious against God.”\(^7\) A simple way to sum up the flesh is “human nature apart from God and at enmity with him.”

It now becomes clear how misleading it is to think that the flesh is simply another word for sexual lust—a widespread error among believers. This unfortunate reductionism conceals from view the fact that the word encompasses much more, as we have seen. The flesh is the soil, as it were, in which individual sins grow. These sins take a wide variety of forms, physical and mental. Jesus gave us a sample when he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:20–23 ESV; cf. also Gal. 5:19–21). This is not an exhaustive list by any means. And we dare not over look the fact that the flesh can take forms that appear very respectable and religious, as with the Pharisees and religious formalism. Lovelace notes that “there is a great deal of active religiosity in the world and in the Christian Church which is energized by the flesh, and sometimes by the devil as well.”\(^8\)

Over the centuries the church has gained deep insight into the flesh and the main sins that characterize it. These insights have been organized and refined into a schema now known as the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, gluttony, lust, greed, and sloth. Like large branches growing from the trunk of a great tree, each is a major sin that produces its own network of branches, twigs,
Hindrances to Discipleship: The Flesh

I have found (to my regret) that the degrees of shame and disgust which I actually feel at my own sins do not at all correspond to what my reason tells me about their comparative gravity. . . Our emotional reactions to our own behavior are of limited ethical significance.

C.S. Lewis

and leaves. The better we understand these major sins and their offshoots, the better able we will be to see the ecosystem of sin in our own lives and where we need to focus our greatest efforts in their eradication.9

How the Flesh Operates

Let’s move on to consider how the flesh operates in human life. The flesh works chiefly through desire. Unlike Buddhism, biblical faith strongly affirms that desire is a good, God-given capacity that brings blessing and enrichment to life when focused on good and godly ends. The desire to know, love, serve, and glorify God is the summit of all desire, followed by the desire to love and serve one’s neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40) and the desire to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus himself by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). And there are many lesser desires that are also good. Ordering our desires and loves aright is crucial for the abundant life God offers us. However, desire becomes sinful when focused on selfish ends, and it is being constantly influenced in that direction by the devil and the world. It dis-orders our loves and can be highly destructive and produce disastrous results. But though the devil and the world can influence us, they are not the root of our problem. For as James tells us, “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15). Desire in this sense is represented by the Greek word epithymia.

Paul sees epithymia as an expression of the sin which rules man. He sees in it the driving power in man’s flesh (sarx), his sinful being which has turned from God. Epithymia seeks gratification (Gal. 5:16). It urges man to activity. When all is said and done, it expresses the deeply rooted tendency in man to find the focus of his life in himself, to trust himself, and to love himself more than others . . . [T]he desires determine and enslave a man.10

Arousing selfish desire first to be like God and then to become wise was how the devil deceived Adam and Eve into eating the forbidden fruit: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate” (Gen. 3:6, italics added). Stirring up sinful desires in human beings has been a basic tactic of the devil ever since. And he knows just how to temp each of us. As one old saint observed, “The devil is a master fisherman; he baits his hook according to the appetite of the fish.” Summing up, in its enmity toward God, the flesh distorts our desires, thereby deceiving people and driving them into grati-
fying the selfish, sinful impulses, which then dominate and enslave them (Eph. 2:3; 4:22; Col. 3:5; Titus 2:12). The Bible calls this enslavement idolatry; it takes many forms today and is described by the secular word *addiction*.

The primary object of desire, the bait it uses to ensnare people, is pleasure. Again, God is the author of pleasure just as he is of desire. A good that he grants to his creatures to enrich life, it finds its focus in the desire for God himself and communion with him. But pleasure can be twisted, corrupted, and focused upon indulging the sinful desires of the flesh. When this is the case, the New Testament uses the Greek word *hedone*, the root of our English word *hedonistic*. This particular word is always used in a negative sense in the New Testament. The desire for pleasure can easily get out of hand, leading to abuse of good gifts such as food, drink, and sex, to name a few. Pride, greed, anger, and many other serious sins can also dominate life, bringing terrible consequences in their wake. Paul tells us that nonbelievers are slaves to various passions and pleasures (*hedone*) (Titus 3:3). And Jesus warns that some who have received the word of God and appear to be growing spiritually are later “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures (*hedone*) of life” (Luke 8:14) and suffer spiritual ruin.

To summarize, the flesh, fallen human nature, is at enmity with God and is driven by sinful desires that are stimulated by the pursuit of what a person thinks will give him or her pleasure. These desires, often incited by the devil or the world system, promise pleasure and satisfaction but produce idolatry and bondage. This is the heritage of everyone born into the world since Adam and Eve. In the next issue of *Knowing & Doing*, we will look at how to gain freedom from the flesh and victory over sin.

**Notes**

4. Ibid., 91.
8. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 93.

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**Recommended Reading**

*Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Sin. Christians used to hate it, fear it, flee from it, grieve over it . . . but not anymore. In his bestseller, Plantinga gives you a fresh look at the ancient doctrine of sin to help you better recognize and deal with it. Discover how sin corrupts what is good, the relationship to folly and addiction—and the beauty of God’s grace.
John Wycliffe

(continued from page 7)

Wycliffe’s instruction to people seeking salvation anticipated the words of Luther, Calvin, and Knox: “Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation.”

Wycliffe defined the church as the predestined body of the elect. The doctrine of election, going back to Augustine, who found it in the Bible and especially in the writings of the apostle Paul, had been rejected or ignored by the medieval church because it was a threat to the authority of the church and its sacramental system as the only means of salvation. “Neither place nor human election makes a person a member of the church but divine predestination in respect of whoever with perseverance follows Christ in love,” wrote Wycliffe. As these words make clear, Wycliffe accompanied his insistence on the doctrine of predestination with equal emphasis on the necessity for Christians to live according to the Bible’s teaching by following Christ’s teaching and example.

Wycliffe denied the claim that the pope was head of the church and that people were subject to him for their salvation. The only true head of the church was Christ, said Wycliffe. Because popes claimed what belonged only to Christ, Wycliffe described them as “antichrists.” God’s grace, he preached, was available to every person without the need to believe in the claims of any ecclesiastical leader.

Wycliffe rejected the Catholic teaching of transubstantiation of the bread and wine in the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ. He believed that the elements remained what they were before the act of consecration, although “under the form of bread and wine is sacramentally the Body of Christ.” He sought to free people from their common superstitious and magical understanding of the Eucharist, and to show them its spiritual purpose and power. Like the later Reformers, Wycliffe claimed that he was not putting forth new teaching but restating and defending the doctrine of the ancient church against the innovations introduced by the “modern doctors.”

Wycliffe’s Greatest Contribution

Wycliffe’s greatest contribution to church history was his elevation of the Bible to its supreme place and his insistence that it be made available to all Christians in their own language. In his book, The Truth of Holy Scripture, Wycliffe declared that Scripture was divinely inspired in every part and that it was the source of doctrine and the standard of life for all people, from peasants to kings and popes.

By the fourteenth century, a few portions of the Bible had been translated into Old English, but there was no version in the everyday language of most of the English people. John Wycliffe inspired and organized the work of providing such a Bible. There were two “Wyclifflite” translations. The second and far superior was by John Purvey, an Oxford disciple of Wycliffe. Completed about 1395, a decade after Wycliffe’s death from natural causes on New Year’s Eve 1384, it was a translation of a translation, the Latin Vulgate translated into English. Purvey used the dialect of London, like Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales, making Middle
English the dominant form of the language. Wycliffe’s vision and Purvey’s Bible prepared the way for the work of William Tyndale and the translators of the Geneva Bible in the sixteenth century and the King James Version of 1611, as well as the many English translations that have followed.

Wycliffe, Pastor and Preacher

An energetic and effective preacher, John Wycliffe created and encouraged a group of preachers or itinerant evangelists to proclaim the Bible’s message throughout England. Many of these “poor preachers” were common people without a great deal of education. Wycliffe, a great scholar, wrote that “an unlearned man with God’s grace does more for the church than many [college] graduates.”

Wycliffe’s *On the Pastoral Office* expounds his view of what it meant to be a pastor. The book is divided into two parts: “holiness of life” and “wholesomeness of teaching.”

In the second part he sets forth the duties of the pastor-preacher: “to feed his sheep spiritually on the Word of God,” “to purge wisely the sheep of disease, that they may not infect themselves and others as well,” and “to defend his sheep from ravening wolves.” The primary means of accomplishing these tasks is “sowing the Word of God among the sheep” by word and deed.

Go and preach, it is the sublimest work; but imitate not the priests whom we see after the sermon sitting in the ale-house, or at the gaming table . . . After your sermon is ended, visit the sick, the aged, the poor, the blind and the lame and succour them.

The parson in *The Canterbury Tales* was a Lollard. In the general prologue Chaucer introduces him:

There was also riding with us a good man of religion, the poor parson of a small town. He was poor in wealth, perhaps, but rich in thought and holy works. He was also a learned man, a clerk [a scholar or theologian], who preached Christ’s gospel in the most faithful fashion and who taught his parishioners the lessons of devotion. He was gracious, and diligent; in adversity, as he proved many times, he was patient . . . He had a large parish, with the houses set far apart, but neither rain nor thunder would prevent him from visiting his parishioners in times of grief or dearth . . . He gave the best possible example to his flock. Perform before you preach. Good deeds are more fruitful than good words . . . He . . . protected his flock from the wolves of sin and greed that threatened it. He was a true shepherd . . . He wanted to draw people to God with kind words and good deeds . . . He simply taught, and followed, the law of Christ and the gospel of his apostles.

Stand upon the old paths and find from old scriptures the right way which is the good way.

Instead of a tale, the parson preached a sermon, a long one, praying that at the end of their journey God would guide and use him; he also reminded his fellow travelers that “our pilgrimage on earth is an image of the glorious pilgrimage to the celestial city.” He took his text from Jeremiah:
“Stand upon the old paths and find from old scriptures the right way which is the good way.”

The Lollards, without the intellectual support of Oxford and the protection of the ruling class, were forced to work with great caution. Not unlike the early Christians in the Roman Empire, they were heard of only when they came to the notice of the authorities. For more than a hundred years, the bishops sought them out, seizing their fragments of manuscript Bibles, attempting to force them to recant, and burning some of them at the stake. Wycliffe’s preachers persevered, however, in the English Midlands and the Welsh border country, East Anglia and the west of England, and as far afield as Scotland.

Wycliffe’s Reach

Wycliffe’s teaching spread far beyond England and Scotland to central Europe, through the political alliance between England and Bohemia, and influenced scholars and preachers including John Hus. A Bohemian psalter shows a picture of Wycliffe striking the spark, Hus kindling the coals, and Luther brandishing the lighted torch. Erasmus wrote to the pope in 1523, “Once the party of the Wycliffites was overcome by the power of the kings; but it was only overcome and not extinguished.”

An unusual tribute to Wycliffe occurred in 1533, when the Protestant Reformer John Frith was burned at the stake. Shortly before his martyrdom, Frith praised the “sincere life” of John Wycliffe. It is the first recorded use of the word sincere in English to refer to a person. Previously the word was used to describe the purity of physical things—things whole and unadulterated. It was a good word for a later Protestant to use for “the morning star of the Reformation.”

In 1415, more than thirty years after his death, the Council of Constance formally condemned forty-five “errors” of Wycliffe. Thirteen years later, in 1428, his bones were
dug up and burned. The eloquent words of a seventeenth-century writer proved to be true.

_They burned his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighbouring brook running hard by. Thus the brook conveyed his ashes into the Avon, the Avon into the Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas and they into the main ocean. And so the ashes of Wycliffe are symbolic of his doctrine, which is now spread throughout the world._

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**Notes**

5. Ibid., 76.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Ibid., 97.
8. Ibid., 41.
10. Ibid., 25.
12. Ibid., 41.
14. Wycliffe’s example inspires the work of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, founded in 1934. In 2010 there were translations of the entire Bible or some portion of it in 2,500 of the 6,860 languages of the world. The Wycliffe Bible Translators and others are at work translating the Word of God into the remaining languages of the earth. See “A Fellow’s Journey from Washington to Wycliffe,” by Jeanne Thum in _Knowing & Doing_, Fall 2012.
16. Spinka, _Advocates of Reform_, 47.
17. Ibid., 48.
18. Ibid.
20. William Haller’s _The Rise of Puritanism_ (New York: Harper, 1957) begins with a question: Who was the first Puritan? Haller answers that “Chaucer met one on the road to Canterbury and drew his portrait” (3).
22. _The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church_, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 994. With the Lollards, George Wishart found a safe haven during his preaching tours in Scotland of the 1540s; John Knox was active among them in the 1550s. “Lollards” was one of the first names given to British Protestants.

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_All Christian life is to be measured by Scripture; by every word thereof._

*John Wycliffe*
Answering God’s Call in the Public Schools
(continued from page 9)

would be laying one life aside for another . . . Over the calendar year leading up to your new school, your word for the year was “control.” Everything about this decision gives the opportunity for God to have control or for you to keep it like you always have. Give all of this to God and be amazed by what he will do at that school. Jesus loved the poor, the unlovable, and the needy. Read his story and emulate his behavior. The vineyard is ripe and you are in it, so be good fruit. You won’t make it through this year, this school, this situation if you don’t let God do the work. You saw how the last year went, how you labored, how you felt, and how you had to go. Sometimes discomfort is a gift that lets us know that we can’t stay in that place anymore. You probably are hesitant to agree, but that pain prompted you toward God and as your pain increased, God gave you a vision for what he was calling you to in this next year . . . Have you tasted him in the early mornings and long days at your school? You will feel tired. You will feel defeated. But you are not alone at that school. God goes before you. God goes with you. Have full confidence that for what he has called you, he has also prepared you . . . Your heart alone will not be able to take or understand all that will happen this year. You hope that it will be more than you can ask or imagine, but you fear that it will be more than you’re willing to give, more than you’re able to take, and harder than your heart can stand. Trials are how God loves you. Growth is evidence that you’re both in it together. So how did you grow? What do you know now that you didn’t know before? Did you give God the chance to be greater than you asked or imagined him to be? Your year is not your year. It belongs to Christ. Put yourself in positions to trust him and watch him prove himself both worthy and spectacular. Be excited, for he called you here and he is prepared to make himself known at your school.

Keep your heart in this call, your hand in Christ’s, and have an amazing year.

Challenges Aplenty

On the one hand, teenagers are the same everywhere; on the other hand, this new situation proved to be very, very different. My daily conversations turned from college hopes, prom dresses, and new cars to how to handle being homeless while being a student, how to go to college when one is an undocumented minor, and how to push through high school after having your first child and no money to care for him. Most people wouldn’t consider this to be career advancement, but promotions along the career ladder of faith are rarely written on the world’s terms. God brought me to this school with a purpose, and as the difficult days started, this was the reminder that had to be active within me.

The challenge in a school like this was not whether I could have passion and care toward those whom I was called to teach, but whether I could stand the intensity and difficulty of doing so. Every class period took everything I had. Whereas it had been easy to build rapport at my previous school, I spent weeks and months loving and trying to convey my genuine investment in students who tried so hard not to
be known. The school itself had its weaknesses, a resistance to change in some areas, and sometimes a coldness resulting from years of difficult battles.

I recall that the first decoration I added to my room was a simple three-by-five index card on my desk that said: “Matthew 5:41–42. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

Just coming to this school felt like going the second mile to me. Sometimes just arriving seemed like enough obedience to satisfy Christ’s commands. But slowly I came to realize that this journey was about the daily picking up of the cross we had referred to so many times during Year 1. In my head I knew that I was where God had called me to be, but, honestly, my heart had a hard time keeping pace. Most mornings I missed my old comfort, my old way, and, frankly, my old reputation.

A Year-End Perspective

As I write this, this school year has come to a close. I go back now and reread the letter I wrote to myself at the beginning of the year. To read those words raises the hair on my arms. Looking back, I sense a godly confidence that comes from knowing that God knew about all I would come across in this new adventure. He knew I would meet the boy who walked for days with his father and brother to come to America for a better life, the boy with the rare illness who will most likely die within a year, and the kid whose brother had been murdered who ended up in my class after being expelled from another school. There are hundreds of these stories within my school walls, and all of them could break a heart. This year was hard, but the hard and the good seem to be partners that dance together often.

I’ve come to realize that growth for me looks a lot like growth for my students. In a school like mine, our statistics don’t necessarily reflect all the growth that has occurred from September to June. There are lessons that can be learned only in what seems to be the dimmest of places. But God is in those dim and misty crevices and reveals things to us as we follow him on the narrow path. The truth is, I was not sure I could do what he asked me to do by coming to this place, but the larger truth is that I was able because he equipped me for the very place he called me to.

The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.

C.S. Lewis
How to Develop and Maintain a Christian Worldview
(continued from page 11)

theoretical errors remove ordinary checks to evil. Readers will be amazed at Lewis’s foresight as he accurately peers into the future and diagnoses our current condition with laser-like precision. And yet there is also comfort. We are reminded that “what lends divinity to all else, what is the ground of all existence, is not simply a law but also a begetting love, a love begotten . . .” It is here that we find the Source and maintenance of our worldview.

Notes
2. Ibid., 74.
3. Ibid., 81.
6. Ibid., 76.
7. Ibid., 77.
8. Ibid., 80.

Natural Law or Traditional Morality… is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained.

C.S. Lewis

In the legacy of C.S. Lewis, the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ through personal and public life.

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Sonnet for the Aslan House
Meeting Place for Annapolis Fellows

by Vincent Travani
C.S. Lewis Institute Fellow, Annapolis, MD

Listen, brothers. You know well what I will say.
We rose early to tether the day with psalms.
Our eyes still moist from sleep, we sought
Our God, and heard his growing silence.
Now the ropes slacken and the sunlight
Folds its golden hands; again we turn
To wonder if the bonds of friendship
Or the unexpected blossoms from the sidewalk
Had glinted holiness. Listen, men:
Our God breathes. Why can we not find him?
We double over dawn’s railing, straining,
We peer back over evening’s shoulder, hoping,
And all night dream at the murky ceiling.
All throughout our conversational nods
We wait for what we really want to hear,
For what might shatter our doubt. So brothers,
Listen now: As our God lives, he loves you dearly,
And since he loves you, he is everywhere near you.
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This is a great introduction for a small group study on C.S. Lewis’s arguments against unbelief and for faith and is based on the book, C.S. Lewis’s Case for Christ by Dr. Art Lindsley (InterVarsity Press, 2005). The DVD’s present an interview with Dr. Lindsley by Lecsa Donner and the Study Guide provides small-group discussion questions.

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