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THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF MEANING

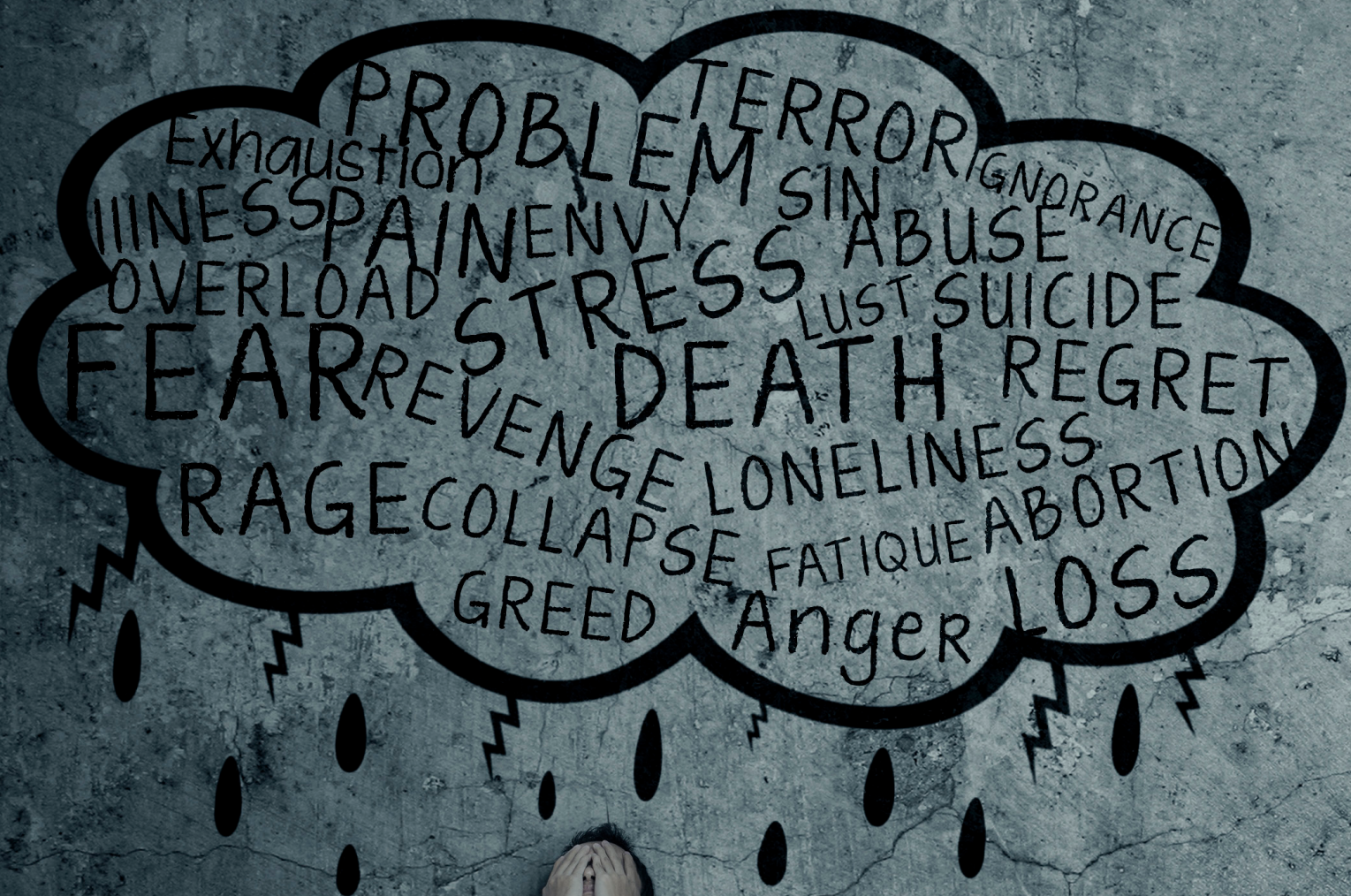
CAMERON MCALLISTER

Living in Dark Times



In *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck writes that “people found happiness in the future according to their present lack.” The resourceful men and women working the unforgiving terrain of the Salinas Valley in Steinbeck’s novel are quite remote from our own experiences today. Closer, I think, is Lancelot Lamar’s predicament in Walker Percy’s novel *Lancelot*: “Then I realized why I drank and smoked. It was a way of dealing with time. What to do with time? A fearful thing: a human body of ten billion cells ready to do any one of ten billion things. But what to do?” Steinbeck’s hardscrabble characters don’t have the luxury of time. Their energies are devoted to the heavy task of survival. Many of us, on the other hand, are sunk in a world of myriad distractions with lots of time on our hands, and, like Lancelot, we often turn to vice to get us through the day.

It’s no exaggeration to say that a mood of deep pessimism haunts our cultural landscape. The reasons for this are somewhat enigmatic. After all, this is a time of unprecedented luxury, convenience, and connection. While we may worry about escalating global conflicts and the violence unfolding in our nation, we can always keep doomscrolling until something more amusing shows up in our feed. So why are we so gloomy about the future? The socio-economic factors are easy to name: crippling student debt, rising inflation, surging real estate prices, looming ecological disasters, a volatile political system, and the ongoing disruption of the AI revolution are all contributing to a generally bleak outlook, especially among younger people.





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But economic hardship, technological disruption, and political polarization are nothing new. In fact, in the past, they often galvanized people to meet their challenges, inspiring greater levels of solidarity, creativity, and resiliency. The scourge of chattel slavery in North America, for instance, was met with heroic efforts from the abolitionists who risked life and limb to bring an end to its horrifying legacy. You might say they found happiness in the future according to their present lack.

Today, however, any present lack seems to launch us into paroxysms of rage and despair. Naturally, many of the challenges that we face are daunting, and some of them are genuinely unique. But do they really exceed those of the past? I mentioned the horrors of chattel slavery. Think also of facing the civilizational threats of two world wars or living in the shadow of a possible nuclear apocalypse during the Cold War years. Examples could easily be multiplied. None of this is meant to trivialize or downplay the unique struggles of our own moment. I simply want to put into perspective the strangeness of today's abiding sense of pessimism. Peer down the corridors of history, and it soon becomes apparent that we have weathered great and grave storms. But today many appear to have lost heart. Pascal once quipped that it takes a "trifle to console us because a trifle upsets us." It seems that for many of us the ceiling of hope has been so drastically lowered that trifles have now become our consolation prizes. The light at the end of the tunnel is no longer salvation, spiritual transformation, or some great cause, be it political or moral, but instead a glass of wine, an amusing reel, something to take the edge off.

When did our hopes become so trivial? Why are we so easily discouraged? Why are we so pessimistic? In short, why have we lost heart? If we want to answer searching questions like these, we need to begin by looking at our dramatically changing social



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landscape: young people are marrying later, having fewer children, going to church less, moving frequently, and falling increasingly out of touch with their neighbors and surrounding communities. It hardly needs to be said that most of these factors aren't limited to young people.

Seen in this light, a unique feature of our age emerges. While we faced serious challenges in the past, many of them seemingly insurmountable, we did so together. Today, we often feel alone in our struggles. This assumption is borne out in our habits rather than our words. After all, *community*, *solidarity*, and *flourishing* are all buzzwords these days. When pressed, most people would readily concede that we need others and that we ought to be serving our neighbors and communities. But the actual shape of our lives tells a different story. My friend Nathan Rittenhouse argues that how we respond to a crisis tells us where our community is. Judging by our personal habits, scores of us believe that our community is online. Call to mind any recent national tragedy or scandal. The ensuing litany of social media responses tells a sad story of lonely people who don't know what to do with their mounting fear and rage. We may give lip service to the notion that we need others, but in practice many of us live as though we're on our own.

For those of us who follow Jesus, we as God's people are called to be salt and light now—not in some more ideal future. We aren't here by accident. Our Lord has not misplaced us. He has us here for a reason. And it is a time of tremendous opportunity. By God's grace, our countless diversions aren't working as well as they used to. People are once again asking timeless questions about why we're here, how we ought to live, and where we're going. With Christ, His Word, and His people, we have all we need to serve those who struggle to find meaning in a time that feels chaotic.



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Though I can't do much more than scratch the surface of such an immense topic, I want to consider the Christian vision of meaning in three ways: (1) meaning as revealed, not made, (2) meaning as shared, not individual, (3) meaning as greater than our own hopes and wishes.

Revealed Meaning

Two men are making their way to Emmaus. Three days ago, their world fell apart and their lives stopped making sense. A man they take to be a stranger joins them and asks, "Why so glum, chum?" They pause on the road and one of them responds, "Have you been living under a rock?" They tell Him of the sad fate of Jesus the Nazarene. This was no routine execution, they tell Him: "We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel."

The stranger offers a bracing response to these heartrending words: "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Beginning with Moses and the prophets, this strange man begins to unveil His divine identity within the Scriptures. Daylight is fading and the two men invite their companion to stay with them, an offer He accepts. Reclining at the table, He gives thanks for the meal and breaks the bread; as He hands it to them, their eyes are opened. They recognize Jesus just before He vanishes.

And then comes one of the more arresting phrases in the Bible: "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" Why would their hearts be burning within them? Surely one reason is that Jesus was restoring to them their story, putting to rights the very cosmic order they believed His crucifixion had undone.



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I keep returning to this haunting scene because we, like those two dejected disciples, are in desperate need of having our story restored to us. Ours is a moment when everything seems to be coming apart. There are various ways of characterizing this catastrophe, the decline of Western civilization chief among them. But there's another way to put it—that the modern story we have been telling ourselves in earnest since the Enlightenment is failing. The story that we are rational men and women in control of our destiny; the story that we are the center of the universe; the story that all limits, including those imposed by human nature itself, are there to be overthrown and conquered.

It's not hard to point to the failures of this modern story. To begin with, any vision of a limitless humanity, no matter how seemingly secular, is simply self-deification. But grand ambitions for the remaking of humanity also go hand in hand with some form of tyranny. As C.S. Lewis has it, humanity's ability to make of itself whatever it desires translates to "the power of some men to make other men what *they* please." For all our grand ambitions, however, the social dissolution of our moment paints a picture as humbling as it is sobering. While tech pioneers in Silicon Valley attempt to chart a course that will take us beyond the current limits of humanity, many people can barely muster the courage to get out of bed in the morning.

Another failing of this modern story is the hard fact of natural limits. In the realm of technology, there's a deep resentment of any limits being imposed on innovation, despite dwindling resources and a growing ecological crisis. Ironically, a common response here is that *more* innovation will "solve the problem" of the disastrous mismatch between the planet's limited resources and the insatiable appetite of modern consumer culture.

From a human standpoint, why is there often a principled resistance to the "givens" of life: birth, family, biology, country?



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If we see ourselves as self-determining gods, all these givens constitute an affront to our sense of self-sufficiency. As one cultural mantra goes, “I’m just me.” It may as well be, “I am that I am.” But these natural limits can be flouted only for so long. The ensuing social breakdown and disintegration on display in our nation are sad testaments to this fact.

But perhaps the most significant way for us to chart the failure of this modern story is to see it for what it is—namely, Christian eschatology transposed onto a secular horizon. For the ancients, there was no question that time was cyclical, a pitiless recurrence of rising and falling peoples, nations, and empires. It was Christianity that gave to the world a vision of humanity moving forward on a spiritual pilgrimage that would culminate in a glorious consummation of history. On an individual level, Christianity offers the promise of transformation leading to glorification and a face-to-face intimacy with the One who made us. Anyone arguing for some utopian vision of humanity saving itself is simply taking the Christian story and replacing God with humanity. That we have proven time and time again to be manifestly unqualified to save ourselves does little to dissuade those who have bought into this story. Point to historical failures, and you’ll simply be told that those were “setbacks.” *We’ll get it right this time.*

We human beings are inveterate poets, always imposing a narrative and symbolic shape on our experiences to make sense of them. But we’re not up to the task of creating our own meaning. In this sense, there’s a danger in focusing too closely on our own efforts at constructing meaning. Like a child repeating a word endlessly until it becomes nothing more than a series of alien noises, our own stories begin to lose their sense when we can’t find an author greater than ourselves.



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Joan Didion's most famous sentence is "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Far from being an inspirational quote, Didion is arguing that the stories we tell ourselves are nothing more than coping mechanisms. As an investigative reporter, she was all too familiar with using the alchemy of the written word to transform chaotic events into "stories" she could sell to magazines. Throughout her essay, she makes it clear that the narrative structures she was working with were artificial, grafted on to tie up the whirlwind of events she was witnessing. Actual life, avers Didion, is more like the storm itself: wild, unwieldy, and chaotic.

Why do Didion's words resonate so deeply, even for those of us who follow Christ? Don't we believe in something called divine providence? Why do so many believers feel in their guts that life, to quote Shakespeare, is indeed "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? One answer is a simple matter of perspective. If we restrict our gaze to what Scripture calls "life under the sun," we see a landscape littered with corpses and ruins. All those cycles the ancients affirmed. One of Blaise Pascal's more cryptic *pensees* is "The motions of grace. The hardness of the heart. External circumstances." In one sense, all is grace. As the apostle Paul has it, in Christ "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). What stops us from seeing this reality? In a word, the hardness of the heart. Sin clouds our judgment and impairs our vision. We're left with external circumstances, seemingly devoid of all sense and order. Life under the sun yields a barren perspective that leaves us parched for a deeper meaning. In this sense, Didion is capturing a very real aspect of human experience, this side of eternity.

The other reason God's people often identify with this sense of meaninglessness is that many have, wittingly or unwittingly, taken on the unenviable task of trying to be the author of their own lives. Like Didion at her typewriter, we try to synthesize all the seemingly disparate elements into a coherent whole. For those



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who are honest, the end result is a growing sense of disorder. To a significant degree, our Enlightenment story is collapsing because we no longer believe in ourselves as authors.

Flying in the face of our autonomous fantasies, Jesus reveals Himself to us, calling us away from our meager hopes and wishes. We can see the basic dynamic in His calling of the disciples. When Jesus said, “Come and follow Me,” these men had to turn their backs on their former lives—a move that mirrors God’s command to Abraham to uproot and embark on a pilgrimage to a promised land. In the Christian story, meaning is neither created nor discovered by us. Rather, it is revealed to us by our Maker.

One of the most powerful acts of divine self-disclosure takes place at the transfiguration. Jesus brings Peter, John, and James along with Him for a time of prayer. When they reach the top of the mountain and Jesus begins to pray, the “appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:29–31).

Not only is this an overwhelming revelation from their Lord. The disciples are incapable of fully understanding what they have seen. Peter in particular lays bare his ignorance by saying, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (v. 33). Specifically, he has failed to understand what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah have been discussing, namely, the circumstances of His “departure.” Peter will soon learn both the depths of his own failure and the depths of his Lord’s mercy.

Full understanding is not a prerequisite for Christian meaning. In fact, it’s impossible. When the living God reveals Himself to us, the experience is necessarily mysterious. Since the word *mystery*



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is frequently put to dubious use by well-meaning folks who want to sound profound when they don't have an answer, let's venture a modest definition that honors the biblical picture. By mystery we refer to something that exceeds our full understanding. In theological terms, the paradigm example is Christ's incarnation. We can utter a phrase like "very God, very man," but no one will ever wrap their mind around the truth to which it points. On that mountain, the three disciples can witness Jesus's transfiguration and His prophetic discourse with Moses and Elijah. But all three men will have to grow into the kind of people who can take to heart what they have witnessed. Christian meaning doesn't require knowledge and expertise, but it does require transformation.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus says nothing new. Instead, He patiently opens the Scriptures for His two despondent listeners, making sense of the necessity of His death before His glorification. Their hearts are burning within them because He is putting their world back together, piece by piece. Like Peter, John, and James—like you and me—they had to grow into the story their Lord had revealed to them. If we answer the call to follow Jesus in the affirmative, we are stepping into the story written by the Author of our salvation, one that grants us an eternal perspective on the world around us.

Shared Meaning

It's hard not to see our age as a Babel moment. After years and years of hyper-individualism, we've arrived at a juncture where everybody speaks their own language and sees their own reality. We may all inhabit the same planet, but our responses to it constitute a riot of interpretations on an epic scale. Though this perverse achievement is aided and abetted by our technology, none of it would be possible if we hadn't surrendered long ago to a vision of humanity at the center of the universe.



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That this fractured state of affairs is inimical to a larger sense of meaning hardly needs saying. The far more vexing question is what to do about it. We have burrowed like badgers into our little digital holes, popping our heads out only to grab a bite to eat or to get our steps in. Andrew Delbanco defines *culture* as the collective effort to stave off the sneaking suspicion that nothing we do means anything in the long run.⁷ This becomes a monumental task when there is no larger story binding us together.

Pentecost is a kind of reverse Babel. Overfamiliarity threatens to dull the wildness of this scene. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem, waiting just as Jesus commanded them. Suddenly something like a violent wind erupts around them. “Tongues of flame” come to rest on each of the disciples, turning them into human torches, or, to use a more biblical image, burning bushes. Wind and fire—two elements that can level cities but also unleash massive amounts of generative power. And the mood here is one of immense power. We may feel that our cultural moment is careening out of control, but, whatever the chaotic energies of our day, they can’t hold a candle to the immense power of God’s Spirit.

The disciples begin to proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection to a crowd who have gathered to see what all the hubbub is about. This crowd represents many different nations, and all these distinct peoples are hearing the message in their own language. Here we have a cosmic vision of unity and diversity. While each language remains distinct, the unifying message of Christ as King is sacrosanct. The unity on display in this event does not melt into uniformity; rather, it gives to us a picture of the glorious tapestry that is Christ’s body. Within this context, differences, far from being sources of conflict and division, are occasions for learning and celebration as all join together to bow the knee to their Maker.



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The meaning of Christ's message is not a private conviction or some arbitrary consumer choice. Rather, Christian meaning is *shared* meaning—a grand, cosmic narrative that binds us together and roots us in a common mission to bring glory to the Author and Perfector of our faith. It is a story that is capacious enough to accommodate every tongue, tribe, and nation. And its author is strong enough to bind us all together for His sake.

Greater Meaning

Jesus uses the phrase “something greater is here” in three distinct ways in Matthew 12. In the first instance, the Pharisees claim that Jesus's disciples are breaking the Sabbath by picking the heads of grain and eating them while they stroll through the fields (vv. 1–2). Not only does Jesus offer a holistic rebuttal that turns on the laws and customs of the temple. He argues, “But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here” (v. 6).

Why would He bring the temple into a discussion about alleged Sabbath violations in a grainfield? If we pause to consider the cosmic significance of the temple, we gain a deeper insight into His words. For ancient Israel, “The temple was the place on earth where you would find yourself in heaven.”⁸ The notion that heaven and earth could overlap at a religious site wasn't unique to Israel. But Jesus's statement seems to imply that something more colossal is taking place in His very presence. That the Pharisees' fixation on the physical temple has become idolatrous is evidenced by their rejection of Christ—the one who came to “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). Ironically, they have also failed to properly honor the very tradition they claim to venerate. The Old Testament abounds in passages that make plain that both the tabernacle and Solomon's temple, though holy places of massive significance, cannot contain Yahweh. Whatever significance



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these religious leaders have attached to sacred spaces and texts pales in comparison to the revelation standing before them. They are here confronted by the awful (in the full sense of that word) meaning of God.

Later in chapter 12, the Pharisees want Jesus to validate His authority with a sign. His curt reply is that an “evil and idolatrous generation” demands signs, but the only sign on display will be that of Jonah: “for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the stomach of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (v. 40). Moving into an eschatological register, Jesus then says that the people of Nineveh will rise up to condemn this generation at the judgment because *they* “repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (v. 41). To this He adds, “The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (42).

The idolatrousness of the Pharisees is obvious. Equally obvious is the fact that the opulence of the temple would overshadow what appears to be an ordinary, uneducated carpenter standing before them. To a lesser degree, most of us are on intimate terms with this kind of obliviousness. It happens every time we ignore the created order or desert the people we love to stare into a screen. The “something greater” of Christian meaning has what scholar William Dyrness refers to as a “hidden character.”⁹ Apart from Christ’s incarnation, the most vivid expression of this hidden character is found in the sacraments. The bread and the cup, the baptismal waters—these ordinary things take on colossal significance in God’s kingdom, but their glory remains veiled to those who stand outside the church.



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Jesus's parables also display this hidden dimension. Perhaps the most provocative statement in this regard arrives in Mark 4:

And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that
"they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven.'" (ESV)

Anyone reading these words has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for our purposes here, I want to emphasize that our human understanding of greatness is deeply flawed and often misleads us into chasing phantoms. The greatness of God's kingdom does not announce itself in the bombastic language of bread and circuses. Instead, it comes to us cloaked in the homely territory of the ordinary—Jesus consecrating the bread and the cup in the upper room, washing His disciples' feet, and going willingly to a lonely death on a Roman instrument of torture. That these things serve as vehicles of divine grace is a testament to their veracity. Human beings simply do not conceive of meaning in these terms. Given our druthers, we invariably opt for the "sexy," the theatrical, the explosive. But Christian meaning is no blockbuster. It is, well, like a mustard seed, "which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all the other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches" (Matt. 13:31–32).



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NOTES

¹ John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (1952; reprt. New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 155.

² Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 123.

³ It goes without saying that this is my paraphrase.

⁴ See Luke 24:13–32. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 59.

⁶ See Didion's essay "The White Album" in *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 11–50.

⁷ Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 23.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 224.

⁹ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 173–77.