

A Path To Wholeness

A PATH TO
WHOLENESS
A Lenten Companion

Russell J. Levenson Jr.



Copyright © 2020 by Russell J. Levenson Jr.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

A version of this book was previously published as *Provoking Thoughts* by Insight Press.

Church Publishing
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
www.churchpublishing.org

Cover artwork by Russell J. Levenson Jr.: *Sun Rising*, oil on canvas.
Cover design by Jennifer Kopec, 2Pug Design
Typeset by Denise Hoff

A record of this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN-13: 978-1-64065-317-7 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 978-1-64065-318-4 (ebook)

With gratitude
A Path to Wholeness
Is dedicated to
My mentors
My wife
My children and grandchildren
But above all to
My Lord and Savior Jesus
Who does, and will,
Make whole the lives of
His sheep

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Meditations</i>	
1 • Seeing Death	1
2 • Sinning Business	4
3 • Do Over	7
4 • Forgive Us Our Sins . . .	10
5 • . . . As We Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us	13
6 • . . . As We Forgive Ourselves	16
7 • The Burnt-Over Place	18
8 • The Waiting Game	20
9 • Being Sure of What We Do Not See	23
10 • A Time for Everything	26
11 • Time Will Tell	29
12 • Taste and See	33
13 • Look at the Birds	36
14 • Pure Religion	39
15 • God's Tattoo	42
16 • Abundant Life	45
17 • Reality Check	48
18 • Serving Marvelously	51
19 • The One Who's Got Your Back	54
20 • Who Is on Your Throne?	57
21 • One Worth Worshipping	61
22 • Help!	64
23 • Ouch	67

24 • Yea, Thou Art with Me	70
25 • Trusting the Engineer	74
26 • Law and Grace	78
27 • Be Holy	82
28 • Bearing Fruit	85
29 • Living Sacrifices	88
30 • Godsequence	92
31 • Unforbidden Fruit	96
32 • Tilling the Soil	100
33 • To Pray	103
34 • God-Breathed	107
35 • In Holy Splendor	111
36 • Let the Service Begin	114
37 • Serious Business	118
38 • Whom Will You Serve?	121
39 • Blessed Is the King	124
40 • Dealing with the Cover-Up	127
41 • The Black Bean	131
42 • Doubt-Proof	134
43 • Something New	139
44 • The Two Sides of the Cross	143
45 • Save Us	146
46 • The Way . . . Out	150
<i>Afterword</i>	155
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	161
<i>Scriptural Index</i>	165
<i>Index of Authors Cited</i>	167

Preface: Before We Begin . . .

“Follow me . . .”

—Matthew 4:19

Augustine wrote that his heart was restless until it found its rest in God. C.S. Lewis once spoke of the human heart as having a “God-shaped hole” that remained incomplete until God filled it. Lord George Carey wrote, “We are living in a fragmented society whose most serious dislocation is between the human and the divine.”¹

The ache of the human heart has always been to be made whole. The thrust of the Christian hope is that we come to that wholeness in a personal relationship with God, through Christ. This book is intentionally written to open one more avenue toward deepening, strengthening, and—for some—maybe birthing such a relationship. It is crafted as a Lenten companion, beginning with Ash Wednesday and carrying us through Easter Day with one additional meditation—but one does not have to limit its use to Lent. All of us need times of reflection and renewal, and they are not necessarily synced to a particular season or time of the year.

A few caveats before we begin. Obviously, as with any writer’s work, I offer an understanding of God and God’s redemptive work in Christ through my own lens. That lens is molded by a firm commitment to the authority of Holy Scripture; the traditions of the church; dozens of mentors, teachers, and writers; and finally, through my years of service as an ordained priest. I write from the perspective of one who believes in the central truths of Christianity, so it will be clear that some things are assumed in my writing, particularly that the reader will either have an ongoing relationship with God or is, at the very least, interested in having one.

1 George Carey, *I Believe* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 20.

The reader will also find that I make use of the wisdom of others and of stories to help build each meditation. I also write from a tradition that has historically referred to the Divine predominantly in masculine metaphors, rather than feminine or neuter. When Jesus referred to God, it was primarily as our “heavenly Father”; out of my own reverence, I tend to follow his lead. I do not necessarily believe that God is simply a “great, big man” in the heavens; at times, I refer to God using feminine and androgynous metaphors.

Lastly, let me offer a few words about the structure of the book. Each meditation is introduced by a title, a scripture I have selected, the meditation itself, an occasional photograph, “Another Step . . . ,” which is a question to consider in light of the meditation, and a prayer either from the church’s tradition or my own hand.

Living in Texas, I have many opportunities to use shotguns. When I was a teenager, I was somewhat of a marksman. The difference between a shotgun and a rifle is the shotgun gives you a greater chance of hitting the target because of the widespread of buckshot. The rifle aims one bullet at the bull’s-eye.

I have taken a shotgun approach. I am assuming my readers will come from different places. Some of these meditations may appeal and some may not; some will apply and others will not. While there may be sections of meditations that seem to fit together, for the most part they do not build on each other. Take each meditation as it is intended and prepared: with the hope that some aspect of it will help in making the connection between your need and the provision of God in Christ.

I like the words Jesus used to inaugurate His relationship with each disciple, “Follow me.” Not a command. An invitation. They did not have to follow, but they were lovingly invited to do so. It is my profound hope that some piece of this work will invite you to follow as well.

A Prayer

Almighty God,
By Whose spoken Word,
All things came into being;
Speak to us now,
That we may be inspired by your Holy Spirit,
And drawn to follow and proclaim
Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Savior.

—RJL+²

2 RJL+ denotes a prayer written by Russell J. Levenson Jr.

Seeing Death

Remember how short my time is—for what vanity
you have created all mortals! Who can live and never
see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?

—Psalm 89:47–48

In the mid-1600s, the “Black Death” or “Black Plague” wiped out nearly one-third of the population of Europe and the British Isles. What once felt like ancient history has found new light as the world has grappled with COVID-19. The cause of the Plague was a source of great speculation. One theory was it came from the thick blankets of soot and ash that filled the London skyline. People began to carry flower petals in their pockets thinking that might ward off the disease. Groups of victims who were still able to stand were taken to outside treatment centers. While holding hands, they would walk in circles around rose gardens, breathing in the freshness of the blooming flowers and singing what we all learned as a nursery rhyme:

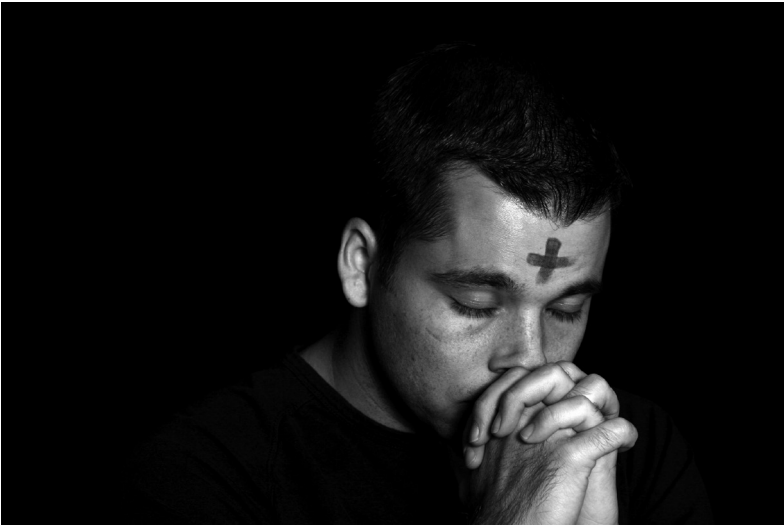
*Ring around the rosie,
A pocket full of posies.
Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.*

But they were wrong; people continued to “fall down” until the real cause of the sickness was determined: flea bites from diseased rats.

Death is a hard thing to ponder, but it is a good thing to ponder. It is not unique to our age that people try to postpone or avoid death. Charlatans were selling life-lengthening tonic water almost as soon as bottles could be crafted. Hernando De Soto was not the

first to seek the mythical “fountain of youth.” Today, all we have to do is turn on late-night television to find pills, herbs, formulas, weight-loss programs, and exercise machines that claim to take the years away. Plastic surgery in the Western world has grown into a veritable industry. Thinking that any of these offers or procedures will protect us from death is no different from placing posies in our pockets. The truth is we all fall down.

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”—these are the most familiar words spoken during the Ash Wednesday services in several Christian traditions.¹ It would be quite depressing if that were all there was to the message, but the gift of death is a reminder of the gift of life itself, of the need to make the most of life while we live it, of the need to live life as it should be lived.



We are all “terminally ill.” None of us can escape the power of what the Psalmist calls *Sheol*—the grave. If we know there is a finish line toward which we are all running whether we like it or not, then should it not drive us to make the very most and best of our lives? By “most,” I mean should we not learn to feed ourselves with those things that will bless us in every way—physically,

¹ Genesis 2:7.

emotionally, mentally, spiritually? By “best,” should we not seek to live moral, ethical lives? Lives of peace and harmony with God, with our neighbor, with ourselves?

Many see death as an enemy to be avoided. Perhaps it can be a companion along life’s journey to remind us to make the most and the best of it.

— *Another Step . . .* —

If there was one phrase by which you would like to be remembered, what would it be?

A Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God,
Out of the dust of the earth you created us,
Male and female you fashioned in your image.
Keep us ever mindful of the fragility of life,
And of its precious nature, of its glorious gift.
In your mercy forgive my moments of ingratitude,
Strengthen my resolve to open my life to your
Leading, to your power, to your presence,
That as my earthly days begin to fade with each
 passing moment,
I may not fear, but instead rest in
The blessed assurance of everlasting life with you,
And all the saints in light.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Sinning Business

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

—Romans 3:22–23

“I am a sinner.” It’s out; now you know.

I hate admitting it and, even worse, saying it aloud. But it is a truth I cannot deny. I suppose if the Apostle Paul could admit it in his letter to the Romans, I should be willing to do the same.

Over the years, I have presided at many religious services that began by dawn’s early light. Between the time I woke and the time I found myself kneeling for the confession during those services, there was hardly a chance to get to any sinning business. Yet, even though I have spent the majority of my adult life in religious life, I find that every time I kneel, my sin is staring me in the face. And I realize that behind every confession the culprit is me!

I would like to think I am not too self-centered, but I do struggle to not overfeed the one in the mirror. Perhaps we all do. When we look at our photos, don’t we look at ourselves first?

“How did I turn out?”

“Why did I wear that shirt?”

“I should have worn sunglasses.”

After that, perhaps our eyes turn to our loved ones, our children, or the friend with whom we traveled. We are naturally drawn to ourselves, and that is not all bad. We are to love ourselves, Jesus said, but, at the same time he also told us to deny ourselves when our “selves” get in the way of loving God or our neighbor.²

² Luke 9:23; 10:27.

Life would be so much easier if all we had to do was carry out the “loving self” bit and let the rest alone. Too much self leads to one road and one road alone: sin in all of its forms. The overindulgent love of self is the thing the serpent said to the first humans “Eat and you will be like God.”³ The temptation was not to be the first in history to taste a Granny Smith, but the desire to “be like God.” The appeal was to “put yourself on the throne and forget about God ruling your lives.” How did it turn out? Read today’s paper or watch the evening news and you can see what happens when we try to run things. Suddenly, taking on the role of God seems to be way above our pay grade.

Thus, we must still work on giving the “self” over to God in Christ more and more. Christians believe that is the only path to wholeness. It is why Jesus often described the whole journey of Christianity as starting with a kind of new birth. He called it being “born again.”⁴ For the fullness of God’s presence to begin in me, “I” have to die and be “born anew.” Please do not let those words alarm you. Use whatever metaphor works for you: “converted,” “seeing the light,” “renewed,” or “awakened.”

John Mason wrote, “They that deny themselves for Christ shall enjoy themselves in Christ.”⁵ The point is to deny ourselves and find our true selves, to allow the self to die and commence the life God wants for us. And that is a miracle to behold indeed. Perhaps it is time to get in touch with ourselves and see how much it might be getting in the way of the Godself that needs to be born in us.

— *Another Step . . .* —

What is the first selfish trait that is interfering in your relationship with God and others? Ask God to help you release it into His loving and redemptive care.

3 Genesis 3:5.

4 John 3:3.

5 Martin H. Manser, comp. *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 335.

A Prayer

Lord Jesus, here I am, this mixed up tent of broken poles and torn fabric; this vessel with cracks and chips; this all-too-human and frail child of your own creation. And yet I have abused Your gift of life, taken advantage of the freedom You have awarded me, betrayed Your mercy once again. I have sinned, my heavenly Savior—in thought and word and deed, against You, my neighbor and myself. I have sinned deliberately, and I have sinned in ignorance; I have both chosen my sin and fallen into it. And now the burden of my wrong choices and the weight of their guilt is too much. Forgive me, dear Lord; forgive me and make me new. Empty me of all things impure and unholy, and fill me afresh with Your Holy Spirit that all broken places may be restored, and all sin be wiped away. Forgive me, O Lord, forgive me and make me new. *Amen.*

—RJT+

Do Over

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

—John 3:3

When I was a kid, before the age of hyper-competitive children’s sports, it was not uncommon to call for a “do over” on the ball field. What that meant in T-ball was that when the batter might have tapped the ball without intending to hit it, it was not to be counted against him as an attempt to smack it out of the park. He got to do it over. I rarely smacked it out of the park, but I was always grateful for a “do over”—a chance to give it another try without having my past mistakes counting against me.

In a well-known scene from John’s gospel, Jesus met with a major religious leader named Nicodemus, who was a good and godly man. He knew his scriptures, practiced his religion, and was not afraid to spar with someone like Jesus. He was also spiritually hungry. All his attention to the rules of religion did not scratch his deeper spiritual itch. Jesus hit the nail on the head: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Jesus wanted Nicodemus to see that his eyes and heart were focused on the Law and not the Lawgiver. Jesus told Nicodemus he needed a “do over.”

He needed not just greater understanding, but new eyes, a new mind, a new heart, and a new self, which required a kind of internal, global shift in the tectonic plates of his being. He needed to be born again, as some biblical translations put it.

As I wrote in the previous meditation, don’t let those two words frighten you. If you think on it long enough, who wouldn’t want

a “do over” in some area of life? The husband who has betrayed his wife? The employee who has stolen, or the employer who has treated workers harshly? The mother who has spent more time disciplining her children than loving and accepting them? The teenager caught in a web of alcohol or drug addiction? The criminal who acted in haste and without forethought? The friend who has neglected?

The opportunity for a “do over” is not limited to one event, but to our entire way of seeing things, and perhaps, even our entire life. The invitation Jesus issues to Nicodemus, and to each of us, is that new life finds its origin—its birthplace, if you will—not in religion, but in relationship. True religion is an expression of our relationship to God. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus teaches that “all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life” (John 6:40). John Newton once said, “Christianity is not a system of doctrine but a new creature.”

We all know we cannot change the past, but what Jesus always offers us is the opportunity to start afresh. The invitation to be born anew is more powerful than the simple permission for a “do over.” It is the opportunity to have a whole new life—a life grounded not in stifling expectations of perfection, but in giving room for another try with God as our companion along the way.

— *Another Step . . .* —

What area of your life, past mistake, sin, or relationship would you like to do over? Can you offer that into the care of Christ who offers you new birth? Can you accept that gift?

A Prayer

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

—William Reed Huntingdon, d. 1909⁶

6 Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 56.

Forgive Us Our Sins . . .

“. . . forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

—Matthew 6:12

When we ponder things like death and how we live our lives, it is not long before the issue of forgiveness rises to the surface.

For Jesus’s earliest followers, to sin was to “miss the mark,” much like an archer might fail to hit the bull’s-eye. Sometimes an archer hits it dead on, but that is the exception and not the rule. We modern archers know we miss the mark most of the time. Many of our lives are peppered with the dark grains of sin. How then can forgiveness become more than a word?

From time to time I read of someone who boldly proclaims that the concept of a need for forgiveness is outdated. The modern mantra of “live as you please” taken to the extreme means there is no right and wrong, as long as you are happy with your life. But the longer we live, we find it is not hard to begin to feel what can only be described as a burden of guilt. In an interview with the BBC shortly before her death, well-known secular humanist Marghanita Laski said, “What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me.”⁷

John Claypool wrote, “You cannot ignore sin just because it is distasteful. Disposing of guilt by evasion is a way of dealing with it, but an utterly disastrous one; you might as well gather up the termites you find in the living room and deal with them by

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World* (New York: InterVarsity, 1995), 48.

turning them loose in your basement!”⁸ How then do we begin to wrestle with forgiveness?

Christians affirm a kind of universal forgiveness offered in the death of Jesus Christ. It is hard to understand and even embrace for several reasons. Once we have gotten past the naïve belief that when we hurt others it really does not matter and there is no need for their forgiveness, then it is a human tendency to try to “pay up” for our mistakes. That is why in the Lord’s Prayer, the request “forgive us” is sometimes accompanied by the word debt. A debt is something that has to be paid. But who pays it?

Perhaps one of the real misunderstandings about Christianity is that our acceptance by God is based on balancing some kind of great ledger. If the good marks outweigh the bad, then you pass the test (bull’s-eye!), but if the bad outweigh the good, the trap door opens and down you go (you miss the mark). That kind of Christianity is not based on who you are, but on what you do. And if God’s love depends on what we do, then we are no doubt already behind the curve. But if it is based on who we are, then there may just be a chance—if we understand who we are. And who are we?

In the last meditation we saw where Jesus brought it all home for Nicodemus with some words well known to Christians and non-Christians alike: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16–17). All of that love, life, non-condemnation, and promise of salvation business sounds more like a God who is offering forgiveness, does it not?

So where do we take our sins? I take them to the Cross of Jesus Christ. On the Cross, Jesus was willing to absorb all the evil, sin, and guilt of the world; he was willing to take them on himself. Theologians call this “substitutionary atonement,” meaning the atonement that might be paid through any other form is

8 John Claypool, *The Light Within You: Looking at Life Through New Eyes* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 186.

transferred, substituted by a stand-in: Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus's first cousin, John the Baptist, called him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Perhaps the place to begin understanding forgiveness is to give up some old misconceptions about it: that we somehow pay the price for our own sins, that forgiveness is unnecessary, or that God is more like a celestial accountant than a heavenly parent. I will unpack this more in the pages to come, but for now, let go of the Divine Accountant and let the Loving God take hold of you.

— *Another Step . . .* —

When you read or hear the word "guilt," what first comes to mind? And the word "forgiveness"?

A Prayer

O My Lord, since it seems you are determined to save me, I ask that you may do so quickly.
And since you have decided to dwell within me,
I ask that you clean your house, wiping away all grime of sin.

—Teresa of Avila, d. 1582