

*Finding*  
SHELTER  
*An Autumn Companion*

Russell J. Levenson Jr.



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A version of this book was previously published as *Autumn Leaves* by Insight Press.

Church Publishing  
19 East 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
[www.churchpublishing.org](http://www.churchpublishing.org)

Cover art: *Falling Graces* by Russell J. Levenson Jr.  
Cover design by Jennifer Kopec, 2Pug Design

Photos on pages vii, 1, 25, 37, 61, 118, 128, courtesy of David Bolin and the Communications Department of St. Martin's Episcopal Church; used by permission.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Levenson, Russell J., author.

Title: Finding shelter : an autumn companion / Russell J. Levenson Jr.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019047401 (print) | LCCN 2019047402 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640652699 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640652705 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Autumn--Prayers and devotions. | Episcopal Church--Prayers and devotions.

Classification: LCC BV135.A98 L48 2020 (print) | LCC BV135.A98 (ebook) | DDC 242/.2--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019047401>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019047402>

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# Look Up

He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

—Genesis 15:5–6

One of the things about the shift from hot and humid summers (at least where I now live in Houston) to cooler, breezier falls, is that at night the stars and planets are more easily visible. I am no astronomer, but in more than five decades of life I have spent a great deal of time outside at night looking at the stars—Orion’s belt, Draco the Dragon, the Big and Little Dippers, the risings and settings of the moon, Venus, Mars. With a decent telescope, I have been able to spot the rings of Saturn, and the moons and great dark spot of Jupiter. There is much to see in looking up to the heavens—expanse is a good way to put it—an expanse that may make you feel rather small and insignificant.



It would be hard to write any set of reflections about God's dealings with us and leave out this crucial interchange between Abram and God.<sup>6</sup> You probably know the story. God has called Abram to leave home and seek a promised land. Abram goes on nothing but a promise of God—a promise that if he goes, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Whether that appealed to Abram's ego, or he just downright thought it best to go—because God was evidently setting the stage for something really big—we do not know. We do know that he went.

There were challenges along the way. There were dangers. By the time we get to this passage Abram is getting fearful. God must have sensed that fear and says, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Genesis 15:1).

You think that would be enough, but Abram presses it with God, because at this point he has no children . . . no one, should Abram die, to pass on this legacy God has promised. At this point, you can almost see God shaking his divine head, putting an arm around good old Abram and saying, “Come outside with me. Look up at the stars. I created those, Abram—all of them. There are so many you cannot even count them. And if I can do that, I can do anything.” It was almost as if God was playing coach to the fearful quarterback when the team is down and the fourth quarter is almost over. “Trust me now, Abram,” God is saying. Abram, we are told “believed,” and that belief God credited to him as righteousness.

So we can see now why this passage is so important—it really is a kind of touchstone of what it means to be a righteous person. Most of us tend to equate “righteousness” with being right all the time. Are any of us right all the time? Are you? I find I am wrong most of the time—and occasionally, somewhat right—but even then I question my motives.

The Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond (d. 1897) once wrote, “Sin is a power in our life: let us fairly understand that it can only be met by another power.” I will write about this more

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6 God has yet to rename Abram in this passage; this occurs in Genesis 17.

as our autumn journey continues, but for now let us agree with Drummond. We usually know when we do not have it right and we often feel powerless to overcome our unrighteousness—so we need another power, outside of ourselves, to rescue us. We are not made holy and righteous because we try harder; we are made holy and righteous when we turn, “believe” (as Abram did) in God, trust in God—with our lives. In a word, being “righteous” is not so much about being right as it is about being right with God.

This is a crucial pill to swallow because our human tendency is to try harder, when what God is saying is “Trust in Me.” If you are having a bit of trouble with that, take a moment tonight and if the sky is clear where you are, go outside . . . see the handiwork of God. If God can do that, think what he can do in you, with you, through you—let God whisper to you as to Abram, “Look up.”

— *A New Leaf* —

Of course one of the purposes of our faith is to empower us to live godly lives—lives that bespeak of the Holy Spirit of God working in and through us. Sadly, we too often think that’s our work to do, when what we are called to do first and foremost is give our lives to God and let God work in and through us. It really turns our human tendencies upside down, does it not? Perhaps it is time to focus not so much on being right, as on being right with God. How to do that? Look up, and believe, believe in God.

### A Prayer

From deepest woe I cry to Thee;  
Lord, hear me, I implore Thee!  
Bend down Thy gracious ear to me;  
I lay my sins before Thee.  
If Thou rememberest every sin,  
if nought but just reward we win,  
could we abide Thy presence?

Thou grantest pardon through Thy love;  
Thy grace alone availeth.  
Our works could ne'er our guilt remove;  
yea, e'en the best life faileth.  
For none may boast themselves of aught,  
but must confess Thy grace that wrought  
whate'er in them is worthy.

And thus my hope is in the Lord,  
and not in my own merit;  
I rest upon His faithful word  
to them of contrite spirit.  
That He is merciful and just,  
here is my comfort and my trust;  
His help I wait with patience.<sup>7</sup>  
*Amen.*

—Martin Luther, d. 1546

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7 Martin Luther (d. 1546), translated by Catherine Winkworth (d. 1878). From *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1985), #151.



# Tending to the Garden

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.  
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your might.

—Deuteronomy 6:4–5

Are you a gardener? I am a bit of an amateur. My wife is leagues beyond my capabilities, but I do have a particular few items in our yard to which I tend. At summer's end, things need to be done to tend to the garden.

For instance, I grow peppers, but we had a lot of rain this summer, and too much rain does not make for healthy pepper plants. In years past, I have merely cut them back for the following year's growth. This year, I just pulled out the unhealthy plants and tossed them away. There were other plants in the yard that—as annuals—had come to their natural end



and they too needed to be uprooted and tossed. To make the garden flourish in the next season of its life, some things simply needed to be rooted out.

Idolatry, the worship or devotion of one's life to anything that would supplant God, is one thing that is most consistently condemned throughout the Judeo-Christian story. This passage from Deuteronomy is somewhat of God's "one-liner" about his rightful place in the hearts of his children. Written about 1400 BCE, after the Exodus from Egypt and before entrance into the Promised Land, most of the book is simply a long reminder of Moses to the Israelites about all that God has done for them, all God is doing for them, and all God wants to do for them. In return, they should constantly be on guard about allowing anything or anyone to take God's place.

Now we sometimes see that as a negative. God is occasionally described as a "jealous God," desiring no competition for His rightful place in our lives.<sup>14</sup> But is God jealous for His sake or for our own? The testimony of scripture would be that God is not trying to squelch us by restricting our worship and devotion to Him, and Him alone—but really trying to benefit us. Why? Because putting anything in God's place drives us away from God and what He wants for us.

Blaise Pascal, a famous French mathematician and philosopher, put it like this: "What is it, then, that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself."<sup>15</sup>

If we try to stuff anything but God into that God-shaped hole in our lives, we find ourselves discontented and dissatisfied. A

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<sup>14</sup> See Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 4:24.

<sup>15</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 75.

passion for God is diluted with other things, and so the fullness of God cannot be experienced. But if we pour into Pascal's "God-shaped hole" God, our lives begin to take on an order that results in spiritual health, the fruit of abandoning idolatry.

C. S. Lewis speaks to this as well. "God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way . . . God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there."<sup>16</sup>

Notice the brief title of this meditation, "Tending to the Garden." The likelihood is that all of us struggle with idolatry—and I suspect Pascal, Lewis, and good old Moses did as well. So, it is less of a once-and-for-all kind of practice, and more of a once, and again, and again. This fall, I had to get out there in my garden and uproot some things for the sake of a healthier garden. When it comes to tending the soul that is your garden, what might need rooting out? Tend to your garden.

— *A New Leaf* —

Moses put it out there, "Love God with all of your heart . . . soul and strength." Our Jewish friends call this the great Shema. It serves as a centerpiece of their morning and evening worship. Moses did not cut any corners—Love God with all, means all—and it

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16 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 50.

does not mean some or most. Use a moment or two to acknowledge what might be getting in the way of that “all,” and then ask God to help you root it out—better yet, ask God to do the work. He is the better gardener!

### A Prayer

O Lord, let me not henceforth desire health or life, except to spend them for You, with You, and in You. You alone know what is good for me; do, therefore, what seems best to You. Give to me, or take from me; . . . and may [I] equally adore all that comes to me from You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

—Blaise Pascal, d. 1662

# Angst or Thanks?

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

—1 Peter 5:7

It is natural, I think, when things do not go our way or spin completely out of our control to get anxious and worrisome. It is interesting that one of the Bible passages most often read on Thanksgiving Day comes from Jesus's words in Matthew,

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? . . . So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” (Matthew 6:25–27, 34)

I suppose one reason this lesson is often used on our national holy day of thanks is that it recalls for us a choice made by those who celebrated the first Thanksgiving. Most of us will remember the story of what our forebears did in 1621. A small group of Puritans set out on the *Mayflower* for Virginia. On their way, they had already endured tremendously high seas and hardship, and

were eventually blown off course only to land in Cape Cod. The winter ahead of them was horrendous, and by spring only fifty of the original 102 people survived. Many began to discuss that perhaps they should give up hope and go back to the Old World. Their hearty spirits prevailed and they decided instead to stay on and plant corn and barley.

When the anniversary of their landing arrived, discussion arose as to how it should be recognized. Some proposed a day of mourning, when attention would be focused on those who died in the previous year and whose remains were now laying in unmarked graves far away from their original home. But then others suggested something much more profound—a “thanks-giving” for the fifty who survived, the good harvest of their first year’s work and befriending the native Americans who could have received them with savagery rather than welcome. It was as if the pilgrims were echoing their understanding from the gospel lesson this morning. Rather than focusing on what they did not have, they chose to focus on what they had been given by God. Instead of worrying about the things that did not seem to go their way, they chose instead to turn their worry to gratitude.

The apostle Peter suggested something similar in the face of an opportunity to crumble into despair. The books of 1 and 2 Peter are written by the apostle upon whom Jesus chose to build the church.<sup>91</sup> But Peter’s epistles are written in the 60s CE; the second book was written in the late days of that decade, shortly before his execution. At this time in the life of the infant church, the Roman Empire under Emperor Nero had taken persecution to new heights. There was much to bring the heart fear in those dark times, yet Peter encouraged the followers of Jesus Christ scattered throughout portions of Rome to keep their eyes and hearts focused not on the present perils, but on the eternal hope offered in Christ.

Jesus’s word about worry was couched not as a suggestion—it is more of a command, “*Do not worry.*” Worry creeps in when there

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91 Matthew 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–29; Luke 9:18–20.

is some internal fear that ultimately God is going to pull out the proverbial carpet from under us. But Peter offers an antidote to that worry, “*Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.*”

Peter knew his readers had two choices—to give way to the growing scourge of persecution or to trust in God’s love. We have that choice as well when worry raises its ugly head in our own lives. Thomas Merton wrote, “Anxiety usually comes from strain, and strain is caused by too complete a dependence on ourselves, on our own devices, our own plans, our own idea of what we are able to do.”

Turning from anxiety, fear, and worry to God is merely an act of faith, of trust. It is not so much about getting control over a situation, but instead turning that control over to God—that too can be a fearful thing, but it really is the only way to assuage the disquiet within us.

So, as those early pilgrims did, may November’s Thanksgiving be an invitation to you to turn your angst into thanks and find your way to easing your worries—because He does care for you, He does indeed.

### — A New Leaf —

George Müller was a minister and evangelist who lived a long full life—taking on and mending the suffering of much of his world by caring for and tending to orphaned children. He once wrote, “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety.”<sup>92</sup> Can I invite you to put it out there? About what are you anxious today? Lay this before our Lord—tell Him your troubles—let His love soothe your angst away and in its place create a grateful heart.

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92 Müller was born in Germany and died in Bristol, England in 1898.

### A Prayer

Now thank we all our God,  
with heart, and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things hath done,  
in whom His world rejoices;  
Who from our mothers' arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love,  
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God  
through all our life be near us!  
with ever-joyful hearts  
and blessed peace to cheer us;  
and keep us in His grace,  
and guide us when perplexed,  
and free us from all ills  
in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God  
the Father now be given,  
the Son, and Him who reigns  
with them in highest heaven,  
eternal, Triune God,  
Whom earth and Heaven adore;  
for thus it was, is now,  
and shall be, evermore.<sup>93</sup>  
*Amen.*

—Martin Rinckart, d. 1649

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93 Martin Rinckart (d. 1649). From *The Hymnal 1982*, #396. Martin Rinckart was a Lutheran Clergyman who served in Eilenburg, Germany. In 1636, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years War, Martin Rinckart is said to have buried 5,000 parishioners in a year, an average of 15 a day. It was in the midst of this war, death and economic disaster that he sat down and wrote a table grace for his children, which has been adapted as the beautiful prayer into a hymn often sung in churches on Thanksgiving Day.