

BITS *of* HEAVEN

A Summer Companion

Russell J. Levenson Jr.



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Idling

"In the beginning . . . God . . ."

—Genesis 1:1

Who or what is God to you?

Atheism, unbelief in God, is really rather uncommon in our day. There is wide belief in God, lived out in innumerable religious faiths. Among Christian tradition, there are thousands of denominations in the United States alone. There are perhaps some who hold absolutely no faith in God, or "a" god, whatsoever, but I find that to be the rare exception, not the norm. Evidence that humans have believed in a divine being since our earliest days on planet earth is on the rise, not the decline. Recent archeological findings reveal Neanderthal burial sites that clearly show that at the time of death, there was care and attention paid to the deceased. Burial sites included floral arrangements and careful placement of the body in a fetal position, leaving little doubt that, even way back then and there, a "faith" existed in something, and likely some One, beyond the grave.

One of the prevailing concerns from the beginning of our faith is that we put nothing else before God—that there is one God in actuality, but also that there should be only one God for all humankind. Only God was to sit on God's throne.

The first of the great Ten Commandments is crystal clear that "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Putting something other than God in God's place is called idolatry. The problem with idolatry is that when God is not God, we begin to

lose touch with him, the reason for our creation, and our reason for being.

Be still for just a moment or two and ask yourself if there are any competing “gods” in your life. It could be something as simple as your hobby or your work. Maybe it is a habit or a particular relationship. Many people have made their children an idol. Parents and grandparents hang all kinds of baggage around the necks of their offspring—putting pressure on them to achieve success in a particular vocation; to marry or befriend the right people; to sign on for the right branch of the military or get into the right university; to pledge the right fraternity or sorority and so on. Can you imagine the pressure this puts on young ones? And of course, it really is not about their success; it is about idolatry.

Sometimes we think sitting in traffic, our engine idling, is a waste of time. Is it, though? Living in Houston, Texas, I spend a lot of time in traffic. I have begun, more and more, to turn off the radio. When I see a traffic jam up ahead, I usually take a deep breath and try to relax before the crunch. When the car starts idling, I take some time to think, to pray, to look around. I usually begin to see things I have never before noticed. A new store on a familiar corner; a restaurant that has been there for years that I have never tried; perhaps a friend walking by who may need a ride or may even be in distress.

Just the other day, I saw a poor young girl on the side of the road holding a sign, “Single mom, out of work, please help.” Tears were running down her face. I do not always notice, but I did this time. Fortunately, I had some food and the number of an agency in a bag on my backseat, something I keep for precisely these kinds of situations. I hopped out of my car and handed both to her. She thanked me. I got back in my car, prayed, and thought about her the rest of the day. I would not have seen her if I were not idling. Sometimes we miss a lot by not running on idle.

Idling is not always a bad thing; in fact, it usually is not. Sit still for the next few moments. While idling, think and ponder your possible idols. Think on the reality that idol worship separates you from God. Augustine once penned to God Almighty, “Thus does

the world forget You, its Creator, and fall in love with what You have created instead of with You.” It’s sad when we do that, don’t you think?

Better to idle a bit, consider the idols, and turn back to the Creator of all things, the Creator of you . . . for in the beginning, God; nothing else, just God.

— A Bit of Heaven —

Who or what is god to you? If it is God, give thanks! If you find someone or something competing for the title, consider what you can do to rid your life of idolatry so you can fall more in love with the One who created you, rather than the things He has created.

A Prayer

Let me rest easy, dear Lord
Sitting idly by,
Let me rest easy, dear Lord
Opening my heart’s eye,
Let me rest easy, dear Lord
Learning to worship you alone,
Let me rest easy, dear Lord
Receiving you, my eternal home.
*Amen.*¹

¹ Prayers without a citation are written by the author.

Which Way to Go

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread.

—Psalm 1:1a

Are you on the right path?

As I wrote earlier, for many years I was an avid scuba diver. (I did get much better after my “out of air” incident!) When each of my children turned sixteen, I gave them scuba lessons, and each time I reenrolled and went back through the classes with them. I also joined them on their first open water dives. Most of those dives were rather easy, shallow, and fun; but a few were more dangerous, even risky.

One such dive was into a deep water spring in central Florida. Though our little group was made up of experienced divers, and though we had a dive master along, we were asked to circle up so that we could clearly learn the risks involved with this particular dive. It was deep, nearly one hundred feet. At about fifty feet, it would require that we push our way through a strong current coming out of the spring into an underwater cave. Once in the cave, we could descend the next fifty feet or so, but there was a point beyond which we were not to go. We were shown a map of the dive; we were given clear guidelines. We were given the opportunity to withdraw our participation. My son and I did not, and because we followed the instructions, the dive itself ended up being safe and memorable.

This is the first of two meditations on Psalm 1. Though the

author and date of its writing are unknown, the psalm sets a fairly clear stage as to which way to go. In this part, we are told that the man or woman who steers clear of dangerous places is blessed. That seems pretty simple, but as you and I both know, we do not always go where we should. In the same way our dive instructor mapped telling us where we could and could not safely go, this psalm holds up a spiritual map, making it clear that steering clear of the path of the wicked is the avenue toward a blessed life.

One of the unique qualities of the Jewish faith and the Christian faith is a belief that the birthplace of righteousness is being in a “right relationship” with God. For instance, Abram was considered righteous, not because of something he did, but because he believed in the promises of God—he trusted in God. We might say “he got right with God” (see Genesis, chapter 15), and of course, throughout the New Testament epistles, we can find numerous references to living this right relationship as a path to wholeness in this world, and eternal life in the next. Having that right relationship, however, does not give us a free pass to live as we want. There are things we can do, paths we can walk, that damage that relationship and in some cases, even break it. Our Lord never stops loving us, but our Lord does not turn a blind eye toward wickedness. Of those who live outside the boundaries of the safety net of Psalm 1:4–5, we are told they “are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.”

No question about it, we all draw outside the lines at times. There is only One who walked the earth who could include the word “perfect” on his résumé. But how marvelous that God holds up maps so we know which way to go. When we make a wrong turn, the map is still there to get us back on the right road. When it comes to this kind of righteousness—won’t you dive in?

— *A Bit of Heaven* —

Read through Psalm 1. Where does it speak directly to you today? To a specific area of your life? Your relationships? Your habits or work? Are you on the right path? Can you let this roadmap help guide you to a more blessed life?

A Prayer

Lord, you have given us your word as a light to shine on our path. Inspire us to meditate on that word, and follow its teaching, that we may find in it the light which shines more and more until it is perfect day; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

—Jerome, d. 420¹⁴

14 Counsell, *2,000 Years of Prayer*, 30.

Serious Business

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

—Philippians 4:4

Can you give way to joy?

When was your last good, deep-down moment of joy? In the preface, I recalled C. S. Lewis's teaching that moments when we seem to let our self go—dance, laughter, frivolity—seemed somehow “out of place” here in our day-to-day lives, because, as Lewis suggested, this is not their regular place, they are but a moment's escape—a *bit of heaven* if you will—in the lives we lead.

I do not know about you, but I find my greatest moments of joy when I have lost myself completely in something else. Sometimes that happens on vacation with my loved ones, perhaps at a concert or good movie, other times after a great meal or in the arms of my wife. When one finds joy in these kinds of moments, what is happening is that the self is lost, and is giving way to something or someone else.

Paul found pure joy in giving himself to Jesus Christ. Philippians is often called the “joyful letter” because Paul uses some form of the word *joy* more in this one letter than he does in all his other letters combined. And yet, some might think this strange, because Paul wrote this particular letter from prison around the year 60 CE. In the previous few years, this committed apostle had been whipped, beaten, and rejected by his own friends and religious community. As he wrote these words, “rejoice,” he faced a verdict on his life. Eventually, Paul’s judges would sentence him to

beheading during the persecution of Nero. Yet in the midst of all this, facing all that was to come, Paul was not angry or bitter. No, he said, “Rejoice.” “Rejoice.”

Why? If we read on, we see Paul unpacking this a bit more:

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:12–13)

Paul found the source of his joy to be Christ. The witness of our faith testifies that the surest path to real joy is to give one’s life to Christ. Leon Bloy once wrote, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Samuel Moor Shoemaker wrote, “The surest mark of a Christian is not faith, or even love, but joy.” Mother Teresa was fond of saying, “A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love.” And E. Stanley Jones confessed, “When I met Christ, I felt that I had swallowed sunshine!”

We should not confuse joy with giddiness or even happiness, as these are temporary conditions. One can slip from happiness into sadness in a moment’s notice. But joy—joy transcends such temporary satisfactions.

Being joyful does not always mean one has a smile on face and in heart . . . but joy is a light quality that is the fruit of a faithful, committed, ongoing relationship with the One who is bigger than the world through which you and I travel. Joy is birthed by being born anew in Christ, and it cannot be swallowed, bought, achieved, won, or captured. It is a noble and satisfying fruit, which really has an everlasting quality.

What does that mean for you and me? It means, friends, God always has the last word. It means that if we are honest enough to bring ourselves to Him, and our needs to Him, whatever those needs may be, God will be honest enough to reveal Himself back

to you. It means when you fall into the mud, if you are willing to let Him, God will not leave you wallowing in it. He will help you get up out of whatever mess you find yourself in—if you are just willing to let God have who you are.

There is a great little playlet by Eugene O'Neill entitled *Lazarus Laughed*. The play takes up in the moments after Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the grave (see John 11:1–44). It seems that once the bindings fall off of good old Lazarus, he begins at first to giggle, and giggles turn to chuckles, chuckles turn to laughter, and laughter turns to uncontrollable belly laughter! Lazarus, having faced death square in the face, having made it to the other side, having been brought back to life here, is no longer afraid. He knows that if he lets Jesus have all that he is, nothing, not even death, can defeat him.

The laughter continues throughout the play, and like most laughter, it is contagious. It begins to turn others to Jesus to the point where his laughter begins to upset the ordered world of the pious Jewish leaders and stoic Roman leaders. When the authorities begin to get upset and threaten Lazarus with imprisonment, he only laughs harder. When they threaten torture, he laughs all the more; finally, the Roman Emperor Tiberius demands his execution, and even then, Lazarus meets death, once again, with laughter. The play ends with the uproarious laughter of Lazarus as he is burned at the stake.

The story, of course, is not to say that pain, suffering, and loss do not matter—but what it does say is that they, when handed over to the transforming power of God, do not ultimately matter; and that is the source for true, authentic joy.

Paul knew that his neck was likely to be greeted with the cold metal of the executioner's axe, and yet he found, even in that—joy, a gift of God that buoys us here, but carries us and greets us in life eternal.

As Lewis wrote, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”⁶¹ Indeed. Rejoice in the Lord; and again, I say, rejoice. Amen to that.

61 Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, 228.

— *A Bit of Heaven* —

To experience joy, one must give way to Jesus Christ. Fearing that anything is beyond God's power and control robs us of the freedom that comes from releasing all things—even ourselves—into His loving care. Can you give way to joy?

A Prayer

Grant to us, O Lord, the royalty of inward happiness, and the serenity which comes from living close to thee. Daily renew in us the sense of joy, and let the eternal Spirit of the Father dwell in our souls and bodies, filling every corner of our hearts with light and grace; so that, bearing about with us the infection of good courage, we may be diffusers of life, and may meet all ills and cross accidents with gallant and high-hearted happiness, giving thee thanks always for all things. *Amen.*

—Robert Louis Stevenson, d. 1894