

Essays on Love, Longings,
Success and Consequences

Wharf and Bearings

IV

Ralph C. Ennis

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Introduction to WB Series

As land dwelling beings, when we are at sea, two thoughts are always in mind—even if in the back of our minds. Where's the wharf—a safe place to dock? What's my bearing—which direction am I going and will it in time get me to a safe wharf?

We all need safe places. Fundamentally, life is filled with uncertainties. Sometimes we feel in control or at minimal risk of danger, but that is always only temporary. Our common human experience inevitably involves risks of the unknown. And through death, not to be feared, we journey to an eternal wharf in Jesus.

We all need a bearing that will get us where we want to go while preserving the ability to plot a course to a safe place. We can play far from this wharf, but we desire home.

Wharf and Bearings Series, a collection of essays, poems and a short story, is intended to present a journey—my journey. I share it with the hope that it will give some guidance as you seek your bearings and wharf throughout your life.

At no time are these essays to be considered exhaustive, they are pathways I have taken to find wharf and bearings for me. And collectively, they represent “philosophical peace” for me.



I dedicate this series to my wife of 40 years (in 2013), our four children and their spouses and our 13+ grandchildren and the generations to follow! Here's an overview of the series:

Wharf and Bearings ONE:
Hope and Beholding the Triune God

Wharf and Bearings TWO:
Spirituality and the Triune God

Wharf and Bearings THREE:
Knowing, Beauty, Ethics and Reality

Wharf and Bearings FOUR:
Love, Longings, Success and Consequences

Wharf and Bearings FIVE:
Poems from the Soul

Wharf and Bearing SIX:
Oneness in Marriage

Wharf and Bearings SEVEN:
The Mind, Decisions and Artificial Intelligence

Wharf and Bearing EIGHT:
World View and Culture

Wharf and Bearing NINE:
Gospel Implications

Wharf and Bearing TEN:
Our Times and Futures

*"... we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power,
and the wonders He has done ..."
Psalm 78:4 -6*

On the Nature of Love

CS Lewis grappled with the nature of love along the lines of giving and receiving. In “The Four Loves,” he wrote about affection, friendship, romance and unconditional love.

I am exploring the nature of love along a few different lines of thought:

1. Human attachment and affection
2. Unconditional and jealous love
3. Meanings of sexual passion and sealing
4. Love as an ethical choice and commitment
5. Love fulfilled and deprived

Human Attachment and Affection

As babies we first encounter “Mom” in the womb. Physical attachment is a given in that environment—we are attached bodies. But affection is not a given.

The miracle of affection is part of the human experience. We have the innate ability to experience affections. And hopefully we experience our first affection through receiving a deep sense of affection from our mothers.

Unconditional and Jealous Love

Unconditional love is a paradox. Is one-way love true love? Yes, in that the one party can have all the affections for another without any reciprocity. However, the nature of love is relational. It is best experienced in relationship verse all alone. In that manner of speaking, love can never be unconditional. Its first condition is an attachment between two.

What then is the nature of that attachment but a jealous love. Jealousy is perceived as mostly harmful in today’s culture. However, as the Name of Jehovah God is Jealous (Exodus 34:14), we as Christian must give a second love at this powerful emotion.

Ungodly jealousy is over possessive and destructive. It is a jealousy *of* a person. The Scriptures call us to put off jealousy as an evidence of fleshly living (Galatians 5:20).

Godly (or divine) jealousy is something quite different. We are called to be jealous *for* others (2 Corinthians 11:2). And in being jealous for someone we delight in them, we possess them with a sense of ownership that brings out their true selves, and we protect and provide for them. (A godly jealousy and betrayal is played out in Ezekiel 16.)

Meaning of Sexual Passion and Sealing

Undoubtedly sexual passion is the grand marketing play of our day. Sex hooks our attention. Sex sells!

Nonetheless, our modern culture has little discussion of the symbolic meaning of sexuality. The Biblical notion of symbolic meaning of sex is an interplay of relationship of “other” with jealous love.

Obviously sexual experience can be had alone, between two or more people of different or the same sex or with animals. However, sexuality played out with Biblical symbolic meanings is between “others,” a man and a woman, in a lifetime monogamous covenantal relationship wrapped in jealous love and sealed with words and signs before communities of believers. This type of relationship symbolizes the relationship that God offers us. He is “other” to us. In His jealous love, He offers us a covenantal relationship that extends into eternity. And He seals us with His Holy Spirit until that day in eternity when Christ our Bridegroom and the bride the church unite.

Love is an ethical choice and commitment

Love is about ethics. To cease from loving, i.e. to abandon, is a withdrawal of personhood from another. And hate is love’s antithesis. Both abandonment and hatred can be seen through the lens of consequences as ethical decisions. We decide to love with our minds our hearts and our imagined outcomes. And that choice is a commitment across a time period. The nature of love requires a time commitment—a continuation of love. Some choices are one-time events. Love is not like that. It is a commitment to continual loving.

Love fulfilled and deprived

When love is continuously fulfilled, we experience a deep sense of completeness. When deprived, if only briefly, we are left alone with ourselves and with the knowledge that we are unloved and the question of our lovability. Are we truly lovable or are we so flawed that no one should love us—we don’t deserve the love we desire.

The unique power of the Gospel of Jesus is that we are offered undeserved love!

Written May 2013

Self-Love: A Biblical View

From Discipleship Journal, Issue Twelve 1982

Issues: Is it right to feel good about myself? Self-image, self-worth, self-love - what does it all mean? Or should it mean anything at all to us, since we are supposed to deny ourselves? What should it mean to those who truly dislike themselves?

Can you look in a mirror and honestly love the person you see there? Can you explain to someone else who you really are and how much you are worth? If you can, you seem to be in the minority.

Some estimates indicate that ninety percent of Americans lack a healthy self-image. James Dobson, in *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women*, cites lack of self-esteem as the number one problem among wives surveyed.

Three important concepts

In seeking a solution, we need to thoroughly examine self-image, self-worth, and self-love.

Self-image is a person's view of himself. In Romans 12:3 we are admonished to have a proper self-image: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Do not be either haughty or self-debasing in your estimation of yourself. Know yourself accurately.

Self-worth is the value one places on himself. One person may place proper value on himself and therefore treat himself and others with love, while another may despairingly abuse himself after giving up hope of possessing any value. We must believe and understand our God-given value.

Self-love is one's love of himself. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving yourself is biblical. Self-love is not arrogance and should not be disdained. We should learn to love ourselves.

These three concepts have an interdependent relationship with one another. Your view of yourself - your self-image - influences the value you place on yourself; and the value you place on yourself directly influences the degree that you love yourself.

How should we view ourselves? How should we value ourselves? The answers to these questions are prerequisites to learning to love ourselves.

How should we view ourselves?

Each of us must assimilate two aspects of our nature into our self-image.

The first of these is our *being*, or our *intrinsic* nature. God has created all of us with many uniform characteristics of being. In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." We are not God, but we are made in his image. God is a person, and is eternal. We too are persons, and have eternal destinies.

Our intrinsic nature also includes a reflection of God's moral character. He is a God of love, truth, holiness, and justice. Though blemished by sin, we still partially manifest the moral image of God. We can, in his likeness, manifest love, understand and communicate truth, distinguish holiness, and strive for justice.

The second aspect of our nature we must consider is our *doing*, or our *functional* nature. God said,
Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1:28)

He also commanded,

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)

God has given each of us diverse abilities in order that we may obey these commands to be fruitful, increase, fill, subdue, rule and make disciples. Each individual is created differently. Through years of experience and through God's gracious leading, we distinguish our abilities and develop them in a fashion that glorifies him.

We must accept our limited abilities. God is all knowing; we know just a little. He is all-powerful; we have little power. He is present everywhere; our presence is limited by time and space. He is sovereign; we have only the authority that he gives us. He created things out of nothing; we create expressions of our personalities, intellect, feelings, and imaginations out of a limited framework - ourselves and the world in which we live. God can meet all needs - spiritual, emotional, mental, physical; though naturally talented and spiritually gifted, we can meet only a limited scope of needs.

Every person has a wonderful yet sin-blemished nature of *being* and *doing*. This nature can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit as we believe in Christ, for "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone. The new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) We are wonderfully made and *wonderfully re-created* in Christ.

We should enjoy and express our God-given nature. In Psalm 139:14, David says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made Your works are wonderful. I know that full well."

Let us also know this "full well."

How should we value ourselves?

How should we value our being (our intrinsic nature) and our doing (our functional nature)?

Our materialistic culture values a person for his actions rather than his being. An engineer is worth \$30,000 a year for his work. A student is worthy of honor if he makes straight A's. Women are esteemed more highly if they have executive jobs. Good professional athletes are paid lavish salaries and idealized as heroes.

We often value lightly, however, the garbage collector, the "D" student, the housewife, and many others.

Lets add two terms to our discussion - *intrinsic worth* and *functional worth*. Intrinsic worth is a measure of a person's worth for what he *is* - his being, his inborn and reborn intrinsic nature. Functional worth is measure of a person's worth for what he *does* - his functions, his actions.

To illustrate these concepts, let's consider two people. John is thirty-five. He is a researcher for a chemical firm and is financially secure. He is happily married and has two wonderful children. As a church elder, he ministers extensively. He is a success by most standards.

Linda is also thirty-five. But she is deformed from birth; her arms and legs misshapen and non-functional. She is also blind, deaf, and mute. Her intellectual ability ranks her far below average. Her parents, who are divorced, never visit her. She is often sick for months. Until she dies, Linda will remain in a hospital as an unloved financial burden on society.

What is John's functional worth as compared with Linda's? John has great functional worth to his society, his family, his church and himself, while Linda has little to contribute. If John bases his love for himself on what he does, then he has good reason to love himself. Linda, however, will detest herself if she evaluates only her performance.

But John and Linda are more than their actions. They share the same intrinsic nature and value to God. Let's explore why.

God values each individual as a person created in his image.

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Matthew 6:26)

How much more valuable is a man than a sheep? (Matthew 12:12)

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

(2 Peter 3:10-13)

These three passages teach us that God values us more than birds, more than sheep, and more than the present physical universe - which he will destroy, but out of which he will preserve his children eternally.

So then, to what are we equal in value? "You were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). That price is our value to God. And that magnificent and sacrificial payment was the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ! God did not sacrifice his chief angel for us, or even all of his angels. He did not relinquish real estate or spend gold. To demonstrate his love for us, he gave his beloved Son to pay the price to redeem mankind. This is our great value! We can have none greater!

We should therefore have a lofty evaluation of our worth - but many of us do not.

Many of us dislike ourselves

Remember the words of Isaiah:

Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?" Does your work say,

"He has no hands?" Woe to him who says to his father, "What have you begotten?" or to his mother, "What have you brought to birth?" (45:9-10)

Nevertheless, many of us do dislike ourselves. We may dislike our physical appearance or intellectual limits, or our background and lack of opportunities. Or we may loathe our personality. How has this occurred?

As our self-image and self-worth are undermined, our self-love either deteriorates or never develops. Since our society often teaches that we can say nothing absolute about our worth, and that man happened only by chance, exists only as a speck, and can be obliterated in an instant it should come as no surprise that so many people have an improper self-love.

Other factors also enter in. We may value ourselves for our function in society rather than for our intrinsic nature, yet ideas of functional worth are unequal and varied. A doctor or business executive may be highly valued, but manual laborers or farmers may receive little esteem. On another level, a fetus may be deemed worthless and may be aborted as an unwanted inconvenience (this has happened millions of times in just the last few years), while another baby is born and brings joy into a couple's life.

Why are people valued so differently? Is it wrong to be a farmer or a manual laborer? Absolutely not. But it is wrong to compare ourselves with others: "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12)

Not all comparing is harmful. A doctor must compare his degree of proficiency with that of his colleagues so he will know when to refer a case to another physician. Such comparisons are necessary to evaluate our competency in certain areas.

However, a problem of distorted self-worth arises *when we compare our functions* (our doings or actions) *with those of others to establish our worth*. Such comparison will lead us to one of two conclusions: We will feel either superior or inferior to the other person. Either conclusion is wrong. All of us have equal intrinsic value.

The two distortions of self-worth - feelings of prideful superiority or debasing inferiority - may manifest themselves in numerous symptoms. We may relate to authority improperly. Some act rebelliously to draw attention to themselves or to prove themselves. Others over-submit and become men-pleasers in order to be esteemed by others. All of these are wrong.

We may seek attention through manipulation, such as pretending to be sick, mad, happy, or concerned. These self-gratifying techniques may serve to satisfy our wishes, but their effects are only temporary.

Some seek attention through unbiblical sexual relations. Still others have mannerisms such as loud laughing or constant joking, which they have found effective in getting attention.

We may lead improperly. Authoritarian leaders often put others down in order to build themselves up. The overprotective leader shields his followers for fear their failure will make them lose face. Or a leader may abdicate his responsibilities, wishing simply to preserve a past record.

Still another symptom is an unhealthy view of our capacity to achieve. Some never try a new sport, a new language, a new job, or a new adventure, simply because they fear failure and the supposed subsequent loss of face. Others are characterized by overconfident ambition. Never admitting limitations, they pridefully press on, sometimes to the detriment of themselves or others.

The inferior-feeling, insecure person may quickly recognize his self-debasing symptoms. The superior-feeling, overconfident person, however, does not often see his problem as quickly. Pride covers his eyes. He is overconfident in the area of self-love, though his self-love is distorted and ill founded. God often has to use hard and humbling circumstances to convince this person of his need for a proper self-image, self-worth and self-love.

These symptoms we have discussed are often motivated by a legitimate desire for self-worth, though other root problems - ignorance, willful rebellion, and bondage to sin - can also motivate them. But nothing can free us from these feelings as long as we persist in comparing ourselves with others. We need not compare. We are not superior or inferior in value. None of us can have higher value than others. Christ died for all.

Learning to love ourselves

There is hope for those of us who mildly dislike or even intensely hate ourselves. We can all learn to love ourselves. God has given five biblical steps to guide us in this pursuit.

First, we need to ask God to forgive our sin of self-degradation or shameful haughtiness stemming from comparison. God has promised us forgiveness (1 John 1:9). We need to be forgiven, and we must begin with forgiveness.

Second, we must rely on the Holy Spirit to produce change. Spiritual growth does not come through human effort, but is the result of God's power working in us. We rely on him by praying that he will enable us to properly view, value and love ourselves and by believing he will answer our prayer.

Third, God commands us to renew our minds. In Romans 12:2, Paul said, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will." The world values a man for what he does. God values men for who they are. We must not be conformed to the world's thinking but rather be transformed.

This can be done by replacing our erroneous thoughts about ourselves with God's thoughts about us. We need to study, memorize and meditate on such passages as Genesis 1-3, Ephesians 1-3, Psalm 139 and John 3:16. Then we will learn who we are as creatures in God's image, sinners in Adam's image, and saints being transformed into Christ's image.

Our minds must be renewed by believing God values us and loves us as he values and loves his Son. We must not disdain that which God loves.

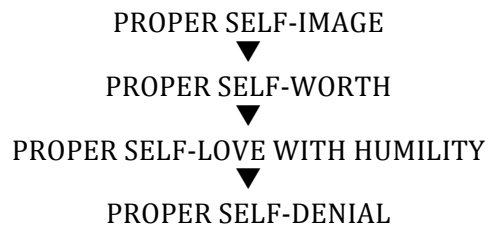
Fourth, our comparing must cease - now! Since our worth is based on the price God paid for us, we cannot increase our value through comparing. We do not need to compare, so we are free to stop. Practically, when we recognize we are comparing, we must immediately stop and pray. Thank God for the way he has made us and values us with our differences. We must not continue to compare. It is not wise.

And fifth, we need to be patient. The distorted assessment of ourselves did not occur quickly, and may not leave quickly. Improper patterns of evaluating ourselves based on erroneous perspectives may have begun in early childhood; the habit of comparing may seem innate by now. So we must persevere in doing the above biblical steps. God is faithful to help us overcome any temptations (1 Corinthians 10:13). "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up!" (Galatians 6:9) Be patient!

Balancing self-love and self-denial

Self-love is not a guise for self-indulgence. Jesus calls us to a life of self-denial as well as self-love. Jesus loved himself, for God is love - and yet, "being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8)

Self-love is loving oneself in humility before God. It is not self-indulgence or serving oneself. Rather, self-love gives us a basis by which we can sacrificially love and serve others with humility. If we love ourselves, we have no legitimate need to compare ourselves with others, to covet others, to put down others, or to compete with others for glory.



An accurate self-image is seeing yourself as God sees you - as a creature, a sinner and a saint.

A proper self-worth is believing God values you and has bought you at an incalculable price to himself - the death of his Son.

A true self-love reflects an understanding of love and acceptance of God's perspective of your image and value, and of his love for you.

This self-love is humble and serving. It is not arrogant or self-indulgent.

May we all endeavor to truly love ourselves!

On Human Longings and Aversions

The reality that humans “long” for more is a given. Some do it with a sense of contentment in the presence, but even they can imagine more desirable “more.”

And we made for more! The hope of heaven is deeply implanted within us. We see the disparity between the human condition and the anticipation of all humanity arriving at a place of creative harmony where love, truth and other longings are fully met while still drawing us into more.

And we are averse to that which threatens the fulfillment of our longings. Often the urge to avoid these aversions can be stronger than the desire for attaining our longings.

Sometimes our longing can get the better of us. We can seek to fulfill them by legitimate or illegitimate means. When we take short cuts to fulfilling our longings the short or long term consequences of illegitimate means usually catch up with us and can result in great pains.

Below are some of our longings. There is no hierarchy intended in this listing. Such hierarchies can crumble under the shifting morality of each individual. That is, selflessness can overdrive an agenda of hierarchical needs. Furthermore, different cultures prize different longings above others.

PLEASURES WITH PAINS

We long for stimulations of pleasure and pains. These innate sensations let us know we are alive and not alone. We eschew boredom through excitements and adventures that bring us pleasures and pains. We are adrenalin junkies.

We are averse to pain in general. But we are more averse to boredom. To be without sensory stimulus of pleasure or pain we are relegated to the undesirable state as a zombie. Sometimes short-term pain can lead to pleasures. This trade off of an aversion for a longing is often demonstrated in sports. The path way to our longings may be through pain in our exercise routines.

EMPOWERMENT AND OPPORTUNITY

We want power. We want power and appropriate opportunities to us that power. Power to build if at all possible. Or the power to defend what we already possess. However, the power to destroy has a certain appeal to human longings. In destroying we proclaim, to ourselves and others, our own self-worth.

Powerlessness is to be avoided as much as possible. The powerlessness of poverty is an example of what most of humanity is averse to.

GOODNESS AND JUSTICE

We long for goodness. We want the world to be a good place for all to live in. We desire justice—justice with mercy—to reign. We hope that violence and poverty will end. We want a good world to grow up in and pass onto future generations. And we want goodness to reign in our own souls. We want to be good people with clear a conscience. And we want to be people of courage who will stand in the face of evils and destruction.

We are averse to evil people who seek the destruction of others. Overt injustice riles our souls—especially when it occurs to those we love and are close to.

INFORMATION AND TRUTH

We long for truth to come to light. Truth, an accurate telling of reality, is a much aligned concept in our day and time. However, we still long for it. As a modern culture this longing is embedded in the pursuit and distribution of knowledge. We live in an information era. It is abundant and readily available over the Internet. And we are addicted to being in the loop of information. That loop is also the longing for an accurate perception of reality—for truth.

We are averse to misinformation, outright lies and deception. We react when others seek to manipulate us with untruth statements. Sometimes those reactions can be vehement expressions of betrayal and anger.

SPACE AND PLACE

We all long for space. If nothing else we look up to see the uncontained sky and feel our souls refreshed by the awareness that space provided places beyond ourselves.

We seek places where we feel at home. Not all spaces are places of home. As a child, home is dear to us—a place of safety. As a teenage we are emerging from home and being a journey to establish our own home. As an elder we see home as a place of memories and gatherings.

Our aversion to lack of space increases as our containment increases and claustrophobia sets in. Many of us panic when space collapses around us. And our aversion to having no home seems fluid but we having no home is to some degree a state of alienation.

TRUST AND AUTHENTICITY

Furthermore, we long to be known—to be selectively know. We want others who we can trust to know our secrets. Such exposure is a healing to our souls.

FREEDOM AND BONDING

The longing for freedom has driven adolescent rebellion and bloody political revolts. We long to be free—truly free. However, the freedom we long for including a sense of bonding to others with appropriate boundaries.

We do not want is to be abandoned—totally alone—or in bondage or slavery. We are highly averse to such extreme states of being.

AUTHORITY AND GLORY

We play in a world of authority and glory. Without authority social chaos would reign—and little to no glory would be assigned. We long to have dominion, authority, over someone or something. And we long to be glorified by others for our position and our work. We want recognition and rewards to dignify who we are and what we do.

What we don't want is negative consequences for our actions and resultant shame. We will hide and do all manner of avoidance behaviors to escape the clutches of public and private shame. Adam and Eve did the same—they hid and blamed.

PRECIOUSNESS AND POSSESSIVENESS

If we are precious to another—our mothers, fathers, spouse, etc.—then we are affirmed as valuable to someone and to ourselves. We long to be precious to someone. That preciousness comes with a

sense of possessiveness. If a child is precious to his or her parents, there is the parallel dynamic of possession at play. “My child” is a possessive statement.

However, we are averse to over-possessiveness that stifles the development of our humanity. If we proclaim someone to be precious to us, but we are over-possessive of them, then they do not feel preciousness but rather control. Furthermore, we are averse to being non-precious—to have no values, no dignity. We deeply want to be of value to someone.

SURVIVING AND THRIVING

We hope to survive and thrive but neither are givens in this world. And our definitions of these hopes vary from age to age and culture to culture and across economic status. A basic level of survival for some may be thriving for others. And one definition of thriving may be another’s imagination of bare survival.

What we are averse to is not surviving—or rather feeling we are on a sliding trajectory that leads from thriving to surviving to death. In general, we want thriving life—until we see death’s door and realize the fight to live is near over and we embrace the transition before us.

IDENTITIES AND ALLEGIANCES

We seek to embrace our desired identities. We want to be somebody of importance, if only to ourselves. Our identities are many and are often formed through allegiances to family, nation, school, work, etc. And as believers in Christ, we have an allegiance to Jesus and are children of the Most High God.

Our desired identities, our aversions, can be powerful. We may not want to become like our fathers or mothers or some other person or identifiable role. And we may give much energy to the avoidance of that aversion.

MEANINGS AND PURPOSES

Why am I here? Where and I going? How can I be useful? What does it all meaning? These longing captive our energies throughout life.

What we fear is no meaning, no direction and no usefulness. The loss of meaning during significant losses in our lives, e.g. spouse, marriage, job, child, can throw us for a tailspin. We try to avoid these tailspins but some still find us. In those moments, days and years of uncertain meanings, direction and usefulness, we have an opportunity to reassess our lives. To align our hearts and actions with what we truly value—after we’ve reassessed our values.

DYNAMIC AND SUSTAINABLE HARMONY

We want harmony within ourselves. Such harmony comes with love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control—the fruit of the Spirit of God at work in our lives. We want that harmony, not for a moment or two, but we want sustainable harmony. However, we long for a harmony that is dynamic, not stagnant and dying. We long for the growth and life that is dynamic, sustainable and harmonious.

And we seek to avoid or minimize the times in life when chaos rules in our inner worlds and the world around us. From wars to dreaded diseases, we live in a world that offers no promise of true harmony. And our souls rage at this dilemma.

LOVE AND BEAUTY

Our deepest longing involve love and beauty. We wish to be loved for who we are and we long to be beautiful at a soul level if not also at a physical level. If all the money spent world-wide on various forms of beautification and expressions of love were immediately extracted from the global economy, the magnitude of this reduction would alter the trajectory of the fiscal markets!

Moreover, in general we perceive that true, sustainable world peace can only come as people love one another.

But we are averse to the ugliness of hate. We see little benefit in hate, and yet anger is all around us. Ugliness has its purpose—it expresses the regions of our souls that we see as ugly. These regions need an expression to be validated and hopefully resolved over time.

PRESEVATION ACROSS TIME AND ETERNITY

We long to exist—to be preserved across our life-times and into eternity. And we long to leave successive generations in this world as we pass into inevitable death and uncertainty. As believers in Christ, our hope—our confident expectation for the future—is only in the righteousness and sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God. And in that hope we will be preserved across time and eternity.

SUMMARY THOUGHT

To me only the jealous love of God expressed in this redemptive works on the cross can provide a pathway to the fulfillment of our human longings. Or in an abstract manner we could say that we long for creative harmony of jealous space and only a connected relationship with our Creative and the Lover of our souls will satisfy those longings!

The above is not intended to be a complete and indisputable list of longing. Rather it is offered as a guide to ponder our longings and ask one question. “Where is God in the midst of our longing?”

Are we left to ourselves to seek out and fulfill our longings. Or is God engaged with us at the level of our personal longings? For sure, the Triune God has not left us alone. He is engaged. So the question then becomes how do we manage our longings without such personal control as to act as though He is not engaged. We are simply in need of trusting Him! Do we long for that trust?

Written July 2013

The Struggle for Identity and Power

Identity is a power struggle. We all seek to be someone. We grapple with this pursue all the days of our lives. Another form of this question is “Whose are we?” Possessiveness and identity go hand in hand—and that is a power game.

Thus, we attach ourselves with names. We have a name identity—a family name and an individual name. The act of naming is one of the first acts done to us at our birth.

The naming continues. We are often called to citizens of a nation, to be an employee of a company, to be an alumni of a school, to be an adherent of a religion, etc.

With each name comes a labeling of traits that often contain both truth and contradictions. For instance, as USA citizens we are people who cherish freedom. However, the complexity of that identity involves a national heritage of slavery. This apparent contradiction does not curtail us from our desired identity.

An identity contains a range of power. For some their identity may have little power—such is often the plight of a low-level employee. For others, their name alone carried an implied power—the name “United States President” implies an authority to employ great power.

In all our efforts to form identity and assert power, the Gospel of Jesus calls us to a new place. Our identity is form in whose we are. We are children of the Most High God. And our power resides in the will and purposes of our Father—the Almighty God of the Universe. Living into that identity with the power of the Holy Spirit is a life long journey. A journey into the One who alone can define us—for He alone is self-defined.

Written May 2013

Success, Significance and Meaning

King Solomon was on a journey. He unquestionably was of man of great success. He amassed great wealth. Few people have had as much gold and silver at their disposal for the pursuit of personal pleasure. But he concluded in the book of Ecclesiastes that such success was meaningless.

Solomon was also a man of who did many significant acts of compassion and wisdom for his people. From his first prayer to God as the anointed future king, he sought to rule wisely and compassionately. That too he concluded was meaningless.

Here's a man who pursued the full extent of pleasure and concluded that it was better to hang around funerals than parties because sooner or later you're going to die. He completed great projects: homes, gardens, parks, reservoirs, and the temple. He had many wives and concubines (which wasn't too wise and was disobedience to God's command). He had most of what we moderns would consider success and significance yet he concluded that it was meaningless.

Meaning in life is understood only through an integrated world view which transcends this temporal world. We come naked. We leave naked. And memories of our existence fade within a few generations or sooner. Therein is the dilemma. One can be successful and significant and yet fail to grasp a deep sense of meaning in life.

In parts of the Evangelical world we have even made the issue more complicated. Directly or indirectly we have been told that only two things last forever—people and the Word of God. If we labor in the Scriptures and minister to people, then we're significant. Thus we've espoused that societal work is less significant than church work. We also tend to call all societal work secular work—secular as in godless. If we accepted this premise, we would also have to conclude that Jesus was meaningless for the first 30 years of His life! I don't think so.

Solomon's book is a guidepost for all in search of meaning. After emotionally involving us in his pursuit and confusing us with conflicting statements of what is meaningful, he resolves the whole issue in two verses. "Now all has been heard: here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." Eccl. 12:13, 14

What a way to drop a grenade into a stagnant pond and run! That's the end of the book. No more explanation after 12 chapters of being drawn into his confusing journey which spanned decades. So we're left with two verses by which to understand how to embrace the life of meaning. Let's give it a shot.

We need to focus on two main principles: Worship (fearing God) and Faithfulness (keeping his commandments). We need to cultivate a life of worship in all we do from carpentry to preaching as Jesus did. And we need to faithfully day by day live out the ways of God—love, mercy, truth, justice, holiness, etc. Simple, yet profound. This invites God into every thing in our lives. That's how Solomon wanted to leave us.

Yet this is just the beginning of this profound conclusion. The last verse moves us into eternity. No discussion of meaning can exclude eternity. One can pursue meaning in this life, but if it doesn't also extend into the life beyond, then it's meaningless in light of eternity.

Our great hope of meaning lies in God's judgment of "every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." At first glance judgment and hope just don't seem to go together, but they do. Consider the consequences of no judgment. If all that we do has no consequences in eternity, then let's eat, drink, be merry and die tomorrow. Nothing we do will last in eternity. Nothing we do will last on a planet with a dying sun and the short memories of people and shifting of power.

This judgment is not the great white throne judgment, but rather the judgment spoken of in 2 Corinthians 5: 10. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." This is hope of meaning. The substance of our work—building, painting, cars, computers, universities, pots and pans, diapers—all will perish. But the judgment of ALL our work will have consequences in eternity.

It is with this world view that Paul can write to slaves to work for their masters as unto the Lord. For truly the Lord will judge them and give eternal consequences which makes all of life meaningful in this life.

As a carpenter, a parent, a businessman, a student, a highway worker, a stockbroker, an artist or a minister, we all have equal access to a life of full meaning through a life of faithful worship in all we do, think and are.

So we can agree with a full heart of meaning, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." Colossians 3:23,24.

Written 1997

Failures to Avoid

In the art of leadership, leaders must determine where they are (starting point) and where they aim to go (vision, mission, goals, etc.). However, to assume a straight path to those imagined endpoints is often unwise. We must also attempt to avoid the obstacles and show stoppers in our paths.

Obstacles are many. Some can be side-stepped while others seem unavoidable. Some are foreseen; some are not. However, show stoppers are often foreseen and avoidable. It behooves a good leader to identify show stoppers and make proper adjustment to avoid these disasters.

Show stoppers can occur at many levels. In this essay I will address a few on the individual, church and national levels.

Why do individuals fail? In one word: character. We all have character issues. However, the failure to admit these and aggressively deal with them in real time can lead to “stopping of the show.” A list of character issues can be exhausting. I would suggest that four are preeminent on any list—pride, lust, greed and idolatry.

Pride is a deep self-reliance, an indomitable self-righteousness and self-assurance. Pride cannot say, “I’m sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me.” Pride-filled people cannot see others as important as themselves. Proud hearts may give to others, but receiving is very difficult. Gifts received imply a lack of self-reliance. Humility that affirms total dependence and total depravity is a pathway into the heart of God’s mercy and grace—and away from pride.

Lust of bodies, sexual appetites without boundaries in behaviors or in the heart, can eat the soul of a man or a woman. History is riddled with people who succumbed to lust. And the fall out around them is horrific. Respect of bodies is the best counter to the power of lust. This respect is empowered by the Holy Spirit. As we see bodies as created in the image of God, we can respect them. This respect sets proper behavioral boundaries and instigates an honor response to sexual beauty.

Greed is the inability to define “Enough” as that which God has provided now. Greed is tricky. We are called to initiate for betterment—to do good to all in this world. Thus, we are left with the paradox of discontent and contentment. In the now contentment should reign supreme. For the future we are encouraged to moan, seek and ask—such discontentment arranges our heart to that which God is calling us into. When the dynamic of greed overtakes the heart, we seek control and we envy the possessions of others. When a proper discontent-content dynamic reigns within, we are filled with a confident peace (not necessarily a tranquil peace) while engaged in change for the good of all.

Idolatry is a supreme show stopper. It ultimately seeks to supplant the Living God from His throne and insert something or someone else that is more manageable. Idols in our culture are many. The idols of wealth (capitalism), knowledge (education and scientific exploration), right to pleasure (hedonism) and self-rule (democracy) erode the soul from the true God Who alone is worthy of worship. However, it is difficult to call out our idols in ourselves or others. Idolatry seems antiquated. Humanity is above such trivial notions as the stone statue gods of old. However, what we worship, what we count most precious—those are our idols. Or else we worship the precious King of Kings and Lord of Lords through the surrender of our hearts, minds, bodies, possessions, plans and relationships to Him. We surrender all to Him for He is worthy and trustworthy.

Pride, lust, greed and idolatry are all potential show stoppers for individuals. Humility, respect, a discontent-contentment dynamic and surrender are character qualities that can protect us from these ravenous urges. We simply cannot attain this character on our own—it would be pride to think we can. The pursuit of these qualities will lead us into the heart of the Triune God and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Why do churches fail? Revelations 2 and 3 give us many reasons of which the churches of Asia Minor were in danger.

In brief, the show stoppers from this passage includes:

- Deception ... false beliefs
- Disobedience ... rebellion toward God ... giving into temptations
- Disillusionment ... ceasing to persevere when hope appears to be lost
- Demonic influence ... Satanic attacks
- Deadness of the heart ... a dullness toward God
- Blindspots of the heart
 - Blindspot of relying on past reputation
 - Blindspot of self-righteousness
 - Blindspot of spiritual poverty
 - Blindspot of not embracing our shame
 - Blindspot of not embracing God's riches

Churches must assess their health regularly. The above show stoppers are real. A shell-church may continue to exist with them, but Revelation warns that their “lampstand” may be removed (Rev. 2:5). Such warnings are to be heeded.

Why do nations fail? This question is always difficult to address. Many nations have failed throughout history. And history doesn't always give a clear answer to the question of why.

The Prophet Ezekiel was God's herald to the nations. He wrote of various accusations by God against the nations. (See Ezekiel 3-13.) These were show stoppers in that, left unaddressed, God's judgment followed. Below are some of those accusations.

Regarding Character

- Pride ... 7:20,24
- Complacent
- Jealous
- Angry ... hating
- Shameless
- Improper trust in self, beauty and trade

Regarding Truth

- Law ... rebellious ... 3:27; 5:6,7; 12:2
- Own standards ... 7:27
- Imagination ... godless ... 13:2,17

Visions ... false ... 12:23-26; 13:3
Disobedience

Regarding Justice

Unjust ... 9:9; 11:2,6

Violent ... bloodshed ... 7:23; 8:17; 9:9; 12:19

Regarding Others

Leadership ... foolish & wicked ... 13:10

Children ... Sacrificing them

Spiritual-sexuality ... perverse, prostitution
and adultery (lustful and unfaithful)

Regarding God

Worship ... idolatrous ... 5:11; 6:9;

7:3,4,8,9,20; 8:3,10-12,14,16

Spiritual-sexuality ... perverse prostitution

Relationship ... desertion

As leaders, influencers and followers, we are all prudent to avoid show stoppers at all levels. Most of these are avoidable with proper attention. And the pathway around them leads us into the ways and purposes of God—and ultimately into the heart of the Triune God.

Written 2001; edited 2013

Questions for Reviewing My Life

Each of us asks ourselves the question, "How am I doing?" We ask it in many forms. For me the below few questions are key questions in this journey.

FOUNDATIONAL

1. Have I received the Spirit and love that God has offered me through Jesus?
2. Have I in purity pursued the One Who is the Jealous Lover of my soul?
3. Have I authentically sought to grow in God grace and into the likeness of Christ?
4. Has my depth of intimacy with God increased significantly over the past year?
5. Has my understanding and appreciation of God's transcendence increased over the past year?

MARRIAGE, FAMILY and FRIENDS

1. Have I loved, led and provided for the wife God has given me?
2. Have I love, lead and taught the children God has given us?
3. Have I passed on faith, hope and love in Jesus to our grandchildren?
4. Have I loved and sought good for our extended families and friends?

LIFE WORK

1. Have I been faithful in the little and major ways that God has directed me into?
2. Have I employed the spiritual gifts that God has given me?
3. Have I stewarded the humanity that God has graciously given me?
4. Have I fulfilled the ministry calling that God has given me?

Obviously, many more questions are relevant in reviewing one's life. These are a few that have benefitted me on my journey.

Written July 2013

Resources to Explore

CONNECT BIBLE STUDIES

GOD: Connecting with His Outrageous Love
IDENTITY: Becoming Who God Says I Am
SOUL: Embracing My Sexuality and Emotions
RELATIONSHIPS: Bringing Jesus into My World
LIFE: Thriving a Complex World
FREEDOM: Breaking the Power of Shame

IMAGE-BASED

The New Me
Searching the Ordinary for Meanings
Grapplings: Why Do People Suffer So Much?

BOOKS

The Shame Exchange: Trading Shame for God's Mercy and Freedom
Worth a Thousand Words: The Power of Images to Transform Hearts

INVENTORIES

Breakthru: Discovering My Spiritual Gifts
Breakthru: Discovering My Primary Roles

For the above resources see:

www.ralphennis.com

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Ralph and Jennifer Ennis have served with The Navigators since 1975. They have ministered at Princeton University, Richmond Community, Glen Eyrie Leadership Development Institute, The CoMission in Russia, and in Raleigh, NC. In 2006 Jennifer co-founded JourneyMates, a ministry to help people grow in intimacy with the Triune God through Scripture, silence and solitude.

Unless otherwise noted, the essays of the WB Series have been written by Ralph. However, each work was crafted in the context our marriage relationship and with the editorial benefit of Jen's perspectives and unique abilities.

In 2018 Ralph and Jennifer celebrated 45 years of marriage. They have four married children and 15 grandchildren.



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