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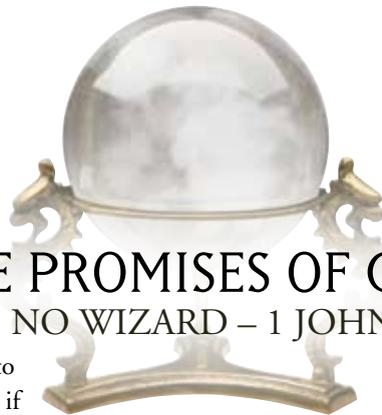
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THE PROMISES OF GOD GOD IS NO WIZARD – 1 JOHN 5:14-15

“So we’d like you to keep your promise to us, if you please, sir,” said Dorothy to the great and powerful Wizard of Oz. “Not so fast! Not so fast!” boomed the Wizard. “I’ll have to give the matter a little thought. Go away and come back tomorrow!” Dorothy, the cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man agreed: “If you were really great and powerful, you’d keep your promises!” The riled Wizard went on the offensive: “Do you presume to criticize the Great Oz? You ungrateful creatures!” As devotees of Frank Baum’s children’s classic know all too well, Dorothy’s tiny Toto proceeded at this point to pull back the curtain and expose the “great and powerful Oz” for what he really was: “I’m a very good man. I’m just a very bad Wizard.”

Aren’t you glad that your requests aren’t directed to a good man who is a very bad wizard? The cowardly Lion’s courage, the Tin Man’s heart, and the Scarecrow’s brain were finally delivered (in a manner of speaking). But it takes far more than a fake Wizard to meet the deep needs of the human heart. It takes a God who is truly great and powerful, who keeps his promises, and who reveals himself personally instead of through smoke and wizardry. Through Jesus Christ, God issues an invitation for us to turn to him as a heavenly Father who stands ready to hear our prayers and meet our needs.

The Apostle John concludes his first epistle by summarizing the confidence that every believer has in approaching God: If we ask things of God consistent with his

will, he hears us. And if he hears us—whatever we ask that is consistent with his will—we know that we have it from him. That relationship is a far cry from wizards, gods, and good men who promise much but are powerless to deliver.

God is no wizard. He is the loving, sovereign Lord of all creation, who knows your needs and longs to meet them for your good and his glory. Today would be a good day to refresh your faith in his responsiveness to you.

God’s Promise to You:

“I delight in responding to you when you call upon me.”

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THE LOVER OF MY SOUL

Father, I give thanks to You because You are the lover of my soul; You pursue me and desire an intimate relationship with me; You lift me from the morass and put my feet on high places; You care so much for me that You take great measures to bring me back to You when I stray. Your love is causeless, measureless and ceaseless; Your righteousness overcomes my guilt; Your holiness informs all of Your purposes; Your compassion reaches out to the lowly and downtrodden; Your mercy and grace extend far beyond my sin. May I delight in You, draw nearer to You, hold fast to You and remain faithful to You. I know that my soul cannot flourish in disobedience and opposition to Your loving intentions for my life. When I am tempted to wander from You, may I recall Your character and remember Your many blessings.

A teaching letter to encourage believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart



"YOU HAVE MADE US FOR YOURSELF, O LORD"

THE TEMPORAL AND THE ETERNAL (PART 10)

Wrestling with the Tough Questions

I had a terrifying experience when I was 19 years old. I had a whole weekend planned, a big weekend; but for various reasons, the whole thing fell apart, and I found myself alone in my fraternity house. The break from my frenetic activity forced me to focus on the big questions of life. Where am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? I was terrified, because I had no answers. And, having no answers, I endeavored to be sure that I would never be without something to do again. Like so many others of our time, this became my way of avoiding the fundamental issues of life.

It reminds me of filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen. Both of their earlier films focused on the fundamental questions of life, of love, of God and of death – painful questions for them. Bergman went through one film after another, exploring the apparent meaninglessness of life without God. *The Seventh Seal* is a tremendous example of this, in which a medieval knight plays a game of chess with Death and loses. But a turning point came after 1968 and *The Hour of the Wolf*, when Bergman seemed to no longer wrestle with those questions. His films became psychological instead of metaphysical, because a person can only wrestle with life's hard questions out of a context of unbelief for so long. Eventually, it becomes too painful, even unlivable.

Woody Allen was indirectly mentored by Bergman, and followed the same path. Initially, he dealt with love and death (he even made a film with this name), with the issues of purpose and meaning in life. Then, after 1989's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the metaphysically-oriented films ceased, and the films became primarily psychological.

You can only live without hope for so long before you'll have to manufacture some kind of a false optimism in order to go on. You cannot live

for long without some kind of hope, even if it's not founded in reality, because it is a necessity for life. The worth of that hope, though, will become more obvious the closer to the end you are.

Forever Young

In his 1973 book, *The Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut – who was turning 50 and wrestling with the issue of his own mortality – put one of his characters through something quite unusual.

At the end of the novel, Vonnegut shows up in his own novel, driving a Plymouth Duster that he's rented from Avis. From inside his Duster, he gets the character Kilgore Trout's attention. Then he says: "Mr. Trout, you have nothing to fear. I bring you tidings of great joy. I'm a novelist, and I created you for use in my books."

Trout asks if he's crazy. Vonnegut says he is not, and then "shatter[s] his power to doubt [him]," by transporting Trout to "the Taj Majal, and then to Venice and then to Dar es Salaam and then to the surface of the Sun where the flames could not consume him - and then back to Midland City again." Trout crashes to his knees.

Vonnegut tells his character:

"I'm approaching my 50th birthday, Mr. Trout. I'm cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoy freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I'm going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career. You are the only one I am telling. For the others, tonight will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout. You are free. You are free."

The shaking Trout rises to his feet. Vonnegut promises him a Nobel Peace Prize and offers to answer any questions he has. Finally, Vonnegut wishes his character, "Bon Voyage," and dematerializes. As he disappears, he hears Trout calling in his father's voice, "Make me young, make me

young, make me young! And those are the last words of the novel.

Now stop and think how you might feel if you discovered you had just been used by some novelist; and that was the only purpose for your life. You'd fall into despair. In fact, the worldview that Vonnegut communicates by his writings is one in which life is utterly absurd. In another of his books, *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut claimed that the pyramids, the Great Wall of China, all of those great symbols of civilization, were little signs left by aliens in the past, so that the next alien that came by could read them. From space, all these things together would say, "Greetings." What an absurd theory of earth's history!

The contrast between this and the truth couldn't be more startling. **God also enters into his creation. The author does come. However, instead of telling us we were created for someone's entertainment, he says, "I created you for intimacy with myself, and I want you to experience true reality."** Entering into our world, he became one of us; and in solidarity with the human condition, he now identifies with our experiences. He says he wants to be with us, not for a few days, but forever. He wants intimacy with us forever.

There are several ways we can determine value and significance. One measure is longevity. If something is only beneficial for a period of time, it may be good but not that good. The fact that the work of Shakespeare – or the Bible, for that matter – has survived as long as it has (and remains good) proves something about the worth of Shakespeare and the Bible. The question of longevity can also help with worldviews. There is something innate in us that causes us to want to believe in something that lasts.

This is why Kilgore Trout cries out, "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" We all want to be young forever. This is part of the Good News: Scripture tells us we will be. Our resurrected bodies will not age. We will not die or get sick or experience death again. God says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). That's the reality that we embrace. That is

what gives us hope. That is what puts this small, fleeting planet within a much broader and more meaningful context.

Contrast Vonnegut's dismal ending with a believer's fictional account of the end. In the final chapter of his book, *The Last Battle*, C. S. Lewis tells of a conversation between Aslan (the Lion character who sang the mythical world of Narnia into being) and the children who helped him save a Narnia-gone-bad. The land "is itself destroyed while saving all that is good (beast and man) and transporting them to Aslan's land, a country like Narnia in every detail yet infinitely better in every way."

Aslan turned to them and said:

"You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."

Lucy said,

"We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

The end of Narnia is a reflection of what the end will be like for us. Lewis' portrayal demonstrates a hope, a radically different paradigm than is demonstrated by the hopeless, broken figure of Kilgore Trout.

In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, author Daniel Boorstin comments on the inconsistent and extravagant expectations of contemporary Americans:

"We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. . . . We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to a 'church of our choice' and yet feel its guiding power over us, to revere God and to be God. Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer."

Many of us enjoy more luxuries and options than kings in earlier times could have conceived. Yet our trinkets and toys, gadgets and gewgaws have not satisfied us, but have left us more restless than ever. This should come as no surprise to followers of Jesus who have come to understand Augustine's words: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

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A teaching letter of

