



JUST THINKING VOL 19.1

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Just Thinking: The Triannual Communiqué of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries

Just Thinking is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

Danielle DuRant, *editor*



HAS CHRISTIANITY FAILED YOU?

*Ravi Zacharias sat down with Danielle DuRant to discuss his forthcoming book *Has Christianity Failed You?* (Zondervan: June 2010). This interview appears in the back of this book.*

Taken from *Has Christianity Failed You?* by RAVI

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Danielle DuRant: *You've often said that you have a specific individual in mind—a particular person's unique story and questions—when you write a book. Is this the case with this book?*

Ravi Zacharias: In this particular book, I think some of my own early challenges kept surfacing. My struggle came between fifteen and seventeen. In India, you're forced to be much more mature in your thinking because life hits you in the face, especially as far as religion is concerned. You can't escape it; the conflict between religion and culture underlies everything. You

just take it day by day and don't ask questions. Yet I had questions. I wondered how it was that tens of millions could believe certain things that I found utterly irrational or possibly much more ceremonially driven than intellectually driven.

But now, many decades later, after having practiced apologetics for so long and meeting honest unbelievers who are not necessarily trying to be difficult but have genuine questions, I don't think a day goes by when I don't meet a believer who has struggled with very serious issues. So this book is a response to the honest questions about the intellectual credibility

of the gospel and the pragmatic struggles that emerge when someone does believe. I think this may well be one of the most important books I have written.

DD: *Writing generally comes fairly easily for you, but you've expressed that this book was a difficult one to write. Was this a more personal book than you expected?*

RZ: Yes, it confronted me on two or three levels. First, with my travel—continually being on the road—it's difficult for me to set aside time for the focused attention that a narrow subject such as this requires. But second, I think the range of the struggle in the subjects covered here is very real. Who among us hasn't struggled with unanswered prayer? Also the problem of pain. We wrestle with this every day—not just the intensity of it, but the volume of it. It's all around us. Finally, I interviewed people who had walked away from their belief in God. I think it is crucial that the reader understand this: I'm not dealing with this subject theologically per se; for instance,

the issue of eternal security is not a theme of this book. That requires rigorous theological discussion that looks at both sides of the questions. This book aims at people who have experienced what they feel is God's failure in their lives, people who said they once believed and now don't, or are straddling two worlds, trying to find answers to their questions. The questions asked in this book are real questions, not imaginary. This book is relevant to most people, if they are honest; and because there are faces behind these questions, it was much more difficult to deal objectively with the subject.

If we as Christians don't allow people who are angry with God or feel disappointed in him an honest venue in which to talk and share, I think we may become quick to hide behind words and not come out into the open light.

DD: *Have you ever felt that Christianity has failed you, and have you struggled with some of the points of tension you address in your book?*

RZ: The answer to the sharp edge of the question is No. I don't feel that for a moment, and I do not mean to sound very spiritual—I recognize my own failings and shortcomings before the Lord. The two things I need in my itinerant ministry are a very strong back and a very strong voice—and I have neither of those. I could ask God why he has allowed me to struggle in these two areas that are so necessary for me to fulfill my calling, but you know, in the real drama of existence, they are minor issues. There are many more challenging questions than that. Personally, I don't think I've had a moment of doubt about God since the day I came to know the Lord.

The encounter I had with Christ was so revolutionizing that no matter what arguments fail me, I always go back to what happened on that suicide bed as a young teenager with nobody to help me understand what life is all about. There is no other way to explain what happened in my life than divine intervention. As I look back, I can see how God has used me in both the East and the West.

Of course, I have run into situations where I can see why there are questions. Perhaps I see more of that than the average human being. When I was in my twenties, I was in Vietnam and in Cambodia—places in which people witnessed the elimination of thousands and thousands of people. I remember looking at all of that and wondering, *Where is God in all of this?* Then in the early days of my ministry when I was speaking in Poland and going through Auschwitz, I noticed the silence. Not a word was said as we walked through that place; the only sound was the sound of weeping. I've looked at all that and I think the darkness of sin is daunting to me. So yes, I would have to say that I have asked questions—and still do. To not ask questions would actually be to disengage from reality—but I have never doubted God.

DD: *You seem very familiar with suffering. You've been afforded a perspective through growing up in India and in your travels that many Westerners don't have. Looking back at your own conversion, I think it's fairly unique and special*

that you had such an amazing conversion experience and that it still carries you through to this day.

RZ: And that I think is the clue to finding some answers, and I'll tell you why. In India and in many other areas—for example, in Bangladesh or Pakistan or parts of the Middle East—you will see some pretty raw sights. Many who saw the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* have raised the question, "Is this for real?" People whom I've talked to, who work in that environment, will say, "If anything, it is made more palatable in the movie. The reality is even worse."

One of the most powerful movies ever produced in India is a movie called *Mother India*. Song after song in the movie asks: How do you cope with the poison of living when you have to drink it every day—you don't die immediately, but you are dying a slow death? The Indian culture has learned to cope with the unfairness of life, and the odd thing is that, in spite of it, Indians are the most religious people in the world. Now a psychologist may have a field day with this and question it as a way of coping, along with

all the other imaginary ways we look for help. On the other hand, it is a display of the human proclivity toward the spiritual in the absence of any material answers.

Having said that, before I came to the West, I was under this illusion that I'll have my own salary, my own home, my own car, my own everything—and I'll have no questions about life. The Hindi songs became irrelevant to me. The truth of the matter is that if you read Western poets and listen to the country music artists, it becomes obvious that they are the real philosophers of society. They hide behind the poems and the music and tell it like it is: songs of betrayal, songs of brokenness, songs of loneliness, songs of giving up on life. All of them are the same. And to me this is a clue that what G. K. Chesterton said was right. Ultimately, meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain but from being weary of pleasure. Now if this is true, pain and suffering are not the problem. The problem is finding meaning in a world in which so much is available and yet where true meaning is still so difficult to find.

DD: You write, "God does not disappoint us. We often disappoint him and ourselves." This seems to suggest that our relationship with God is based on our performance rather than his grace. And if God is all-knowing, aren't his expectations of us viewed through his promise that he who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it? In other words, can we disappoint God?

RZ: It's interesting how we attribute emotions to God, whether it's an effect or whether it's an affection that he feels. We can only take God at his word. His analogical use of language is for us to understand God, such as, "How often I have longed to gather you together, but you were not willing. What more could I have done for you that I have not already done?" "If you crucify the Son of God all over again and subject him to public disgrace, no sacrifice for sins is left." Jesus looks on the city of Jerusalem with compassion, and the entire appeal he makes is in the fact he has done so much for them and yet they have responded with so

little appreciation and love. When you look at Old Testament books such as Hosea, Malachi, and Jonah, you see the disproportionate response of his people to the abundance of grace God bestows.

I think that's why even the story of the prodigal son does not have a happy ending. He has come back, all is well, let's have a celebration. But now you've got the older brother, who messes it up. It's sort of one of those good news/bad news situations. The good news is that my son who was lost has come back. The bad news is that the fellow who stayed with me is still messed up.

So I think we must understand God's feelings by analogy. In terms of disappointing God, I do not mean that we therefore catch him by surprise. Rather, he would have to say to us, "What was it that kept you away from me?" The emotions of adoration and appreciation are legitimate emotions for a returning child of God. That's what I think we need to be thinking of. The analogical use is to evoke within us a sense of, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." I think that's

a marvelous use of language—using the one expression to show that God induces in us both fear and release from guilt.

DD: *You're speaking of religion in terms of an inviting and intimate relationship with God rather than a performance. The relationship is essential in this question, is it not?*

RZ: Very well put. If our Christianity comes through as a performance, it is unfortunate because that is really not what is intended. The older I get, the more I learn by observing children—and they don't even have to be your own children in order to make these observations. I may be sitting in a restaurant watching a parent-child interaction and notice the child taking advantage of the parent. Or I may go to a graduation ceremony. When a student is speaking, you can easily identify the parents. They are wearing the biggest smiles in the room. We see ourselves in children and in observing parent-child relationships.

When I was struggling with my studies as a boy, my mother's

delight when I did well was part of my own reward. The thrill of doing well was not just in receiving a good mark but in going home and showing my grade to my mom. Her pleasure in my achievement was the affirmation I needed. So I think my relationship with God is not by any stretch of the imagination a performance for him. It would be like this: the first time you cook a meal for somebody you love, and if you burn it, you get really upset—not because they are going to love you any less for burning the meal but because you wanted to please them and do something to demonstrate that.

DD: *What do you say to the person who cognitively believes God is good and wants to trust him but, based on a past heartache or a present situation, still struggles to experience him as compassionate and trustworthy?*

RZ: These are what I call the rub questions. They are not easy to answer. And these situations are more often the rule than the exception in our experience.

I think about this a lot, and I wonder how much we have been wrongly taught in these matters? Have our expectations for life as a Christian been wrong? In our efforts to be relevant, we have forgotten that some things are going to be irrelevant and unexplainable for us, and it is we who need to become relevant to the truth, not the other way around. We are not God. Imagine trying to force a square peg into a round hole—all you accomplish in the end is to damage the edges of the peg. Sometimes we try to force God to fit our mold for him, to fit our idea of how he should act, and then when he doesn't meet these expectations, we blame him for not meeting our expectations.

I have concluded that the greatest of loves comes at the greatest cost. The greatest of loves will never come cheaply. It takes everything you have to honor that love and everything you have to honor that trust. And the greatest love that any of us could have is our relationship with God.

Look at any athletes who have succeeded. Discipline is an indispensable part of their lives—



unless, of course, they cheat. And when you've got the discipline, you've got the marks on your body to demonstrate it. But we sit down Sunday after Sunday, in the West particularly, to a delicious buffet of programming. Then when the first temptation comes, we are walloped; we are thrashed, and we wonder where God is. God is exactly where we have left him—way behind, reshaped into our image.

Something I heard from a Muslim doctor I met in Pakistan who had come to know Christ comes to my mind often. He told me about the two sentences he heard from a preacher that changed his life: "In surrendering, you win. In dying, you live."

This is the counterperspective. So when you say, "I don't feel God here. I'm afraid to trust him here," realize that there are many days when you don't feel the love you want to feel from your spouse, your children, your family. But you have to be big enough to surrender your own needs and keep loving and "kicking against the goads," as it were.

I believe when it is over, you will discover that perseverance was what it was all about.

DD: *A number of individuals you allude to in your book are angry with God. Listening to you, I'm anticipating your answer, but I wonder if you ever get angry with God? And what do you do with this difficult emotion in relation with him?*

RZ: That's a good question—do I ever get angry with God? I would have to say I am puzzled by him many times. I have to say that several years ago I would fairly quickly have said no, but in the last three to four years, I haven't done well with the virtue of patience. I like to attribute it to this nagging back that gets me down quite often, and I think there's something to that. But outbursts of anger have not been common for me. Silence, retreating into a shell—perhaps that's been my way of dealing with anger. And this may sometimes carry over into my walk with the Lord too. My prayers become much more perfunctory rather than engendering a deep

sense of communicating with God. It's almost like I am saying to God, "You feel I should really be dealing with this. What's the point in my even talking to you?"

But I have to say that many times I have been really puzzled by God. When I look at some of the questions actually raised in the Bible (such as Why do the wicked prosper?), I have some questions for God.

DD: *Given the amazing promises of Scripture and the way the church often proclaims the message that God answers prayer and the desires of our heart if we just have enough faith, it's difficult to not feel disappointed when our prayers aren't answered as we had hoped or in our expected time frame. What advice would you give to the person who once held firm, perhaps even rigid, expectations of God, and now struggles with halfhearted prayers and even resignation?*

RZ: If we were to draw out the really hard questions of this book, this area would be where

probably more people have faltered or have found what they feel is a legitimate gripe against God. It would be easy to dismiss this in the simplistic answers—you know, "God wants you to be patient," and "Between the promise and the performance is the parenthesis." The thing is, the parenthesis sometimes seems terribly protracted, so much so that you never see the performance of the promise.

I find it amazing how Jesus dealt with prayer and how in the critical moments of his own calling, he stepped aside to pray. I find it absolutely fascinating that the biblical writers tell us how he prayed and what he prayed. If they had been manufacturing a persona of Jesus, they would never have told us the things he prayed for because clearly his prayers were often unanswered. His high priestly prayer, if anything, is one of the huge gaps between prayer and performance. The parenthesis seems to be very long. Nearly two thousand years have gone by since he prayed that we would be one, and you can't even find us being one in one church, let alone in all of Christendom.



So it says to me, as Jesus reminded us in the Lord's Prayer, that I need to pray much more about my relationship with God and my understanding of his kingdom than with a wish list in front of me. The thing we may be missing most in our approach to prayer is a clear understanding of what communion with God really means. Such an understanding is able to cover a multitude of unanswered prayers and will give us the confidence of knowing that God is with us and that we can depend on him to sustain us with peace and fulfillment and meaning, even at the end of a dark day or in the midst of a dark night of the soul.

Through prayer, God is preparing the wineskin to receive the new wine of grace. This is the work of God. If we think his desire is only to give us what we ask for, we misunderstand the process of preparing the wineskin.

DD: *You have spoken of this parenthesis, and you speak of*

three tensions in the book that leave many feeling that Christianity has failed them. One such tension is the longing for sexual fulfillment. You write, "If marital consummation is an act of worship, and if the ultimate seduction is false worship, I would dare suggest that those who are longing for a relationship of touch and intimacy—that lesser act of worship which is marriage—seek the greater form of worship until the day they can legitimately participate in sexual love." Why is the single person who is longing for marriage seen as not seeking this greater form of worship because they are also seeking the lesser form, when the married person has also longed for and is now even participating in this lesser form of worship?

RZ: I think this must be viewed from at least three different lenses. The first lens is an understanding of what consummate relationships are and what they're not. I dare say that people who enjoy this intimacy sometimes fall into the trap of enjoying the feeling and ignoring the cost. I have met many women

trapped in a wrong relationship who have told me, as crass as this may sound, that the men who seek them out are more often than not someone who has already experienced sex legitimately and then seeks for it in stolen waters.

But I'll tell you, the moment the human body experiences this kind of relationship, the seduction is to have the experience without having to pay the cost. Yet it is the cost—namely, commitment—that actually preserves the emotional side of the relationship. If there is no commitment, the feeling is merely physical, and the emotion that gives the relationship value ultimately dies. Sex is not just a feeling; it is a commitment, which, when properly expressed, preserves the feeling. If it is improperly expressed, the feeling will die, and the person becomes diminished in the process.

The second lens is an understanding of what marriage is and what marriage offers to you. This may sound shocking,

but marriage is not what it's cracked up to be. In fact, I know many young people who, having observed their parents' marriages, will say they are reluctant to become married themselves. I think that marriage has suffered an awful lot because of all the false images and expectations of marriage placed before us. This may be unpopular to say, but the exhaustion of a professional life drains marriage. You cannot serve two masters. Adrenaline keeps us moving throughout the day as we work, whether it's selling shirts or automobiles or computers. When the adrenaline rush is over and you go home to your spouse and children (if you have any), there is little left in your tank to be able to give your family, and it becomes harder and harder to fulfill the obligations of marriage. And when both partners in a marriage work outside the home, the toll on the marriage is twice as great.

The third lens is an understanding that this longing of sexual fulfillment is a God-planted desire in us. And

with fleeting time it becomes a fleeting hope. The unrequited God-given longing for this kind of relationship is, I believe, and I say this carefully, one of the most difficult crosses to bear. This is not the Calvary you want. You find yourself asking God if there is any way to be spared from the ache of this longing and to receive the companionship you see so many others enjoying. Of course, marriage goes beyond the consummate relationship of the physical side; it means caring, cherishing, and loving. This should be what you are ultimately craving.

To that person I say, as painful and perhaps flippant as it may sound, just as others who face other unmet desires, you have to learn to receive the strength from the Lord to crucify that desire and make Jesus Christ the focus of your desire to be cared for, cherished, and loved—because only he can ultimately meet this desire, even if you are married.

It's a little bit like doing a puzzle. You've got only three pieces missing out of five hundred, but you just can't make it all come together. I just say, as F. W.

Boreham does, that this longing for the legitimate expression of sexual love is one of those painful things that is easier borne by a person who has never experienced it than by the one who daily lives with this sense of loss. In other words, the emotions that are part of this longing cannot be fully understood by one who has not experienced it for whatever reason.

DD: *You've expressed that in any intimate relationship there will be times of distance or even a sense of dryness. So perhaps we ought not to be surprised when we feel this in our relationship with God. What do you do during times of spiritual dryness? Are there particular authors, books, sermons, or disciplines that you turn to when you feel the passion that you long for just isn't there?*

RZ: If there is anybody who has not experienced what you have described, I really want to touch them. It's not only a common thing; it can be a frequent thing. It's like C. S. Lewis's Screwtape telling the junior devil, "Encourage their horror of the Same Old

Thing." I think that's actually what's happened to the West right now. We've heard the gospel so much that we're experiencing the horror of the same old thing. So we buy into nonsensical notions that are actually bizarre while sounding sophisticated. They don't make any sense, but they come with mystical, new terminology, and we are wowed by them. This is why, by the way, I think people church-hop. There are no more unexpected moments at the church they've been going to, and all of a sudden, it's the same old thing—and so they move on to something new.

The human ability to remain firm in our convictions and commitments is very, very limited. That's why I think good reading, good viewing, and good friendships are good places in which to find renewal.

There are so many considerations to the dryness we may experience at any given time. You may not feel well, or you may be tired—all of this takes its toll on you. Sometimes a lack of discipline or a lack of perseverance may well be because of lack of sleep.

It could be your mind, your body, is tired, and you need a vacation.

You may have become stagnant because your reading material is not helping your growth process. Reading a variety of authors is a good way to light a new spark within you. I love reading biographies. I love reading authors whose language is outstanding because they quicken the imagination by just the right turn of phrase. Sometimes all it takes is one phrase to turn your life around.

You have to have variety in your devotional life, in your relational life, in your church life. And it is important to remain balanced—to keep physically healthy, to keep your viewing life enchanted so that you're looking at the right things. That's one advantage I have in my life: I'm in new places so often that I experience an enormous array of God's diversity.

DD: *You seem to enjoy a warm and trusting relationship with God—it is evident when you speak in open forums and as you write.*

I wonder, then, even though you had a difficult relationship with your father, you don't seem to struggle with relating to God as an angry or a distant father. Is that true?

RZ: No, I don't because I don't see anybody as totally reflective of God. Nobody. And I think the moment I put that load on them, I do them a disservice—and especially my father. Because I'm sure if my children were to look for a perfect father, I haven't been that either.

Maybe I focus more on my direct relationship with my heavenly Father than on an indirect relationship. What does it really matter what my father was like if my heavenly Father has shown me who he is? I don't want to be overly critical, but I think we have made nearly everything so scientific in the West that we push so much into a paradigm that is beyond reason. Of course, we would all like our earthly fathers to perfectly reflect God, but very few of us are privileged to experience this in that relationship.

I didn't see my father as either reflecting or not reflecting God. I know my heavenly Father. In fact, I would say I miss my dad in these days. I wish he could have met our children and seen how God has blessed our lives and our ministry. Sometimes in our relationships we push expectations beyond reason. If we've had a warm and loving relationship with our fathers, we should be thankful for it. If we haven't, we have to look beyond that relationship, or we will end up broken—and I don't think that's what God wants from us.

DD: *You've raised many significant points today—that we must carefully examine our expectations of God and our disappointments, not denying them but bringing them to God and asking him to show us where we may be thinking improperly, and that we must come to him in prayer rather than turn our backs on our relationship, asking him to show us more of himself and his love for us.*

RZ: There are two important implications, Danielle. Blaming our poor relationship with our heavenly Father on our poor relationships with our earthly fathers is similar to saying that Christianity has failed us because of what we see or experience in the church. This is a false extrapolation. Yes, the church is flawed; yes, it is broken. But if you think of the twelve men whom Jesus chose—my word! Certainly an insightful Divine Being could have picked better disciples than he did. And out of these less-than-perfect disciples, he took perhaps the least promising—Peter—and gave him the key spot. Then he took a terrorist—Paul—and made him the penman for one-third of the New Testament. So I think we take a great risk if we base our decision about ultimate matters only on what we can see.

Second and very important, one of the chapters in this book is a response to Robert Price and his view of the irrationality and untenability of the Christian faith. This is not a face-value response, but I want the reader to understand this: Examine any other worldview, and you'll find an important

difference between it and the Christian faith. In the Christian faith, we may ask the questions, in fact, encourage questions, and while we may not always have comprehensive answers, we have very meaningful answers. In any other worldview, not only do they not have meaningful answers, they cannot even justify their questions.

This is not to say that Christianity is the best of some horrible options. No! I think the questions of morality, meaning, love, destiny, values, sexuality, marriage, friendship, and word over feeling are most meaningfully answered in the Judeo-Christian worldview. I am more convinced of this than I was at the moment I first committed my life to Christ. So examine Christianity against all other alternatives, and I believe with my whole heart that you will find that Christianity has not failed you.

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MINING THE GAPS



By Margaret Manning

I had never even considered that life wouldn't be exactly what I hoped it would be. Indeed, all that I had been taught about how God worked, what God valued, and how to pray according to God's will seemed a lock-shut formula for the fulfillment of my every expectation and goal.

Cognitive dissonance, the study of psychology tells us, is the internal tension that results when our experience doesn't match our beliefs and values. It is that sense of unease when we encounter something that contradicts what we have held to be true. We often experience this tension in the course of academic training as we learn new ideas.

But perhaps dissonance is felt most acutely when it occurs in the realm of faith commitments. How does one reconcile the belief that marriage is a lifetime covenant instituted by God with a spouse who chooses to leave the marriage? How does one maintain the belief that prayer is

essential and that God answers prayer with a lifetime of seemingly unanswered requests? How does one reconcile personal or the global experience of suffering with a view of a good and loving God? These are simply a few examples of the dissonance that can occur when what we experience differs greatly from what we believe.

Many years ago, the *idea* of cognitive dissonance became a reality for me with an innocent birthday greeting. While a student at seminary, I saw a friend of mine admiring the beautiful view on a marvelous spring day in New England. Our campus was set on the top of a hill—the highest hill in that particular area—overlooking

the bucolic expanse of quaint towns dotting the landscape below. It was her birthday, and given the beauty of the day, I assumed she would be in a celebratory mood. Yet, when I wished her a happy birthday, she was clearly very troubled and near tears. I asked her what was wrong and she choked out the words: "I'm 42, I'm not married, and it is not likely that I'll ever have my own children." She went on to tell me that she had prayed and believed that God desired for her to marry and have children. She had possibilities for marriage in the past, but nothing ever materialized. Now, when she looked out on the next years of her life she saw a bleak horizon. Then, she said words I've never forgotten: "I have to let go of my dream of children, and my birthday simply reminds me of the death of this dream."

Every fiber in her being told her that she should be, indeed, would be a mother. All of the Christian communities she had belonged to reinforced this expectation of finding a husband and having children. And yet, each birthday sounded a death-knell to her

hopes and dreams. I encountered her when I was a young, 26-year-old seminary student. I had never even considered that life wouldn't be exactly what I hoped it would be. Indeed, all that I had been taught about how God worked, what God valued, and how to pray according to God's will seemed a lock-shut formula for the fulfillment of my every expectation and goal. Yet, with my friend's admission, I wondered if there might be a gap between what I expected for my life, what I believed God would do for me, and my life experience. My friend prompted in me a deep experience of dissonance.

Sadly, over the years of ministry I have heard her story repeated again and again with ever-changing details of loss and dissonance. Fortunately, there are always those who share stories of life exceeding their expectations as well! And of course, I've known many who have offered quick answers of resolution in order to dispense with dissonance. Those who have never experienced (or noticed) cognitive dissonance as a reality in their own lives are generally quick to offer all kinds of explanations

for those who don't find it quite as easy to reconcile the gaps between beliefs and experience: *We have drifted away from our moral center. We have not studied the Scripture enough, or prayed enough. We have not understood right doctrine.* And surely there are times when all of these explanations may be true.

But I am often unsettled from my own tendency to explain dissonance away when I look at the experience of John the Baptist. The Gospels portray John as the last of the great prophets—with all the intensity and moral outrage of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Malachi. The courageous cousin of Jesus preached repentance resolutely, and no one would describe him as lacking confidence in his proclamation. In preparation for Jesus's earthly ministry, he baptized his cousin in the Jordan River. He stood against the immorality and hypocrisy of those who were religious and political leaders calling all to repentance. John was resolute in his ministry as the forerunner to the Messiah even as his own disciples came undone and complained that the crowds who once clamored to see him

were now flocking to Jesus. John remained steadfast in his identity and calling: "You yourselves bear me witness, that I have said, 'I am not the Messiah,' but 'I have been sent before him'" (John 3:26-28).

Yet knowing all of this background creates a dramatic contrast once John was imprisoned. His steely resolve was shaken. Both Matthew and Luke's Gospels record his experience of dissonance: "Now when John in prison heard of the works of Jesus, he sent word by his disciples, and said to him, 'Are you the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?'" (Matthew 11:3; Luke 7:20) Here was John experiencing a gap between what he believed about Jesus and his own life's reality. If Jesus is the Messiah, John must have wondered, why am I sitting in this jail? For in all of John's training and understanding, the Messiah John proclaimed would "thoroughly clear his threshing floor" and "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). John believed that the Messiah was coming to rid Israel—and indeed, the world—of evil. Yet in John's day-to-day existence in his cold prison



cell, evil had seemingly won the day. “Are you the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?”

In the end, Jesus does not rescue John from prison. John would be beheaded and Jesus would mourn his loss (Matthew 14:13). In the assurances Jesus gives as evidence that he is indeed the Messiah, none of them save John from prison. He is healing the blind and cleansing the lepers. He is preaching the gospel to the poor. John would not see the deliverance he long expected.

John’s dissonance poignantly illuminates our own gaps between what we believe and what we experience. The gap between what we, like John, believe about the nature and ministry of the Messiah and our own experience

often creates unbearable dissonance. Yet the suffering that results from the gaps, according to author Scott Cairns, “can become illuminating moments in which we see our lives in the context of a terrifying, abysmal emptiness, moments when all of our comfortable assumptions are shown to be false, or misleading, or at least incomplete.”¹ Our own experience of dissonance illuminates a Jesus who is free from our comfortable assumptions and free from our expectations.

Jesus acknowledged that his ministry would be disruptive, and even be misunderstood. In responding to John’s doubts, Jesus said, “Blessed is the one who keeps from stumbling over me” (Matthew 11:6). Surely, the gaps between what we believe

and what we experience often cause us to stumble and fall. Yet, as Cairns suggests, might *mining* those dissonant gaps also reveal new paths of discovery? John would have to grapple with this new vision of the Messiah while still in prison. And perhaps, John would experience new insight as he pondered Jesus’s words that “the dead are raised up.” The Messiah would save him, but not in the way he expected. *Blessed is the one who keeps from stumbling over me.*

The gaps we experience are unavoidable, but these same discomfiting gaps can be mined to yield an unforeseen bounty. As we dive deeply into the “abysmal emptiness” of our unfulfilled expectations, we have the opportunity to find the treasure of new insight and

understanding. The beauty of a more faithful devotion—not without experiences of cognitive dissonance—awaits us if we are willing to let go of our comfortable assumptions and dive deep to mine for what is most precious and most valuable: treasures that are only found in the deepest places of dissonance. And in fact, this is what God has promised: “And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness—secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, the one who calls you by name” (Isaiah 45:3).

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¹ Scott Cairns, *The End of Suffering* (Brewster MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), 8.



OF PARABLES AND ENCOUNTERING THE PARADIGMS: UNEXPECTED

By Danielle DuRant

Nearly one-third of Jesus's teaching recorded in the Gospels is expressed through parables—stories crafted in such a way as to set its audience in the action in order to reveal one's true motives and emotions. Jesus's parables compel us to reexamine our paradigms of goodness, justice, and love by inviting us first to examine our hearts.

You've probably seen the commercial. A businessman sits at a child-size table across from two young girls. He offers one girl a pony and she is excited when he presents her with a plastic one from his pocket. He offers the other girl a pony too—and from across the room marches in a live pony. "Wow!" the young recipient exclaims as she pets her beautiful, extravagant gift. The first girl is stunned. Finally, she remarks demurely, "Well, you didn't say I could have a real one." "Well, you didn't ask," comes the businessman's terse reply.

The commercial obviously intends to provoke a response in its viewers and it succeeds. We feel sadness and loss on behalf of the little girl who only received a plastic pony, and like her, we are equally astounded and befuddled by the businessman's action. We feel indignation at this begrudging man who flaunts favoritism and tells the first girl that she didn't receive a real pony because she didn't ask when the second girl didn't ask for one either.

Most of us are drawn into this scene without even questioning

whose perspective we share—after all, we would probably say that we aim to be compassionate human beings and feel indignant when we witness such blatant injustice! Furthermore, we expect those around us to share similar values; when they don't, we are often surprised and even angered. But what if we stop to listen to the girl who received the real pony? Perhaps she might say in her childlike naiveté and amazement, "I don't understand why you're so upset. *I got* what I always wanted: a real pony!" Notice, then, that our emotions and response will depend on which character we identify with and whose perspective we share.

Clever as the advertisement is I would suggest to you that its storyline is borrowed right from the Bible, from the common literary form known as a *parable*. The Greek word *parabole* means "comparison." In his parables, Jesus often uses the simile "the kingdom of God (or heaven) is like," comparing God's rule to a mustard seed, treasure, pearl, or some visible object. Yet a parable is more than a comparison or a memorable illustration. Rather, it

is a story crafted in such a way as to set its audience in the action in order to reveal one's true motives and emotions. Indeed, Jesus empathetically states in Mark 4:9-12 that its purpose is revelation and judgment: "He who has ears, let him hear," while those outside God's kingdom are "ever hearing but never understanding." One biblical scholar comments, "[Jesus's] parables are designed to test rather than illuminate, and to test, not the intelligence, but the spiritual responsiveness of his hearers." ¹ James echoes this perspective and Jesus's words when he writes, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:23-24).

We witness the psalmist David coming face to face with this mirror in 2 Samuel 12. In the previous chapter we read of David's sin with Bathsheba and his order to have her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. Then chapter 12 ominously begins, "The LORD sent Nathan to David" (verse 1). Nathan is appointed to confront David, but how does

he do this? Surely, all he needed to do was to quote the sixth and seventh commandments, "You shall not murder" and "You shall not commit adultery," and David would stand accused. David does, after all, *know* God's law, for as king it is his responsibility to rule according to it.

Yet instead, Nathan tells him a parable: a rich man owned a large number of livestock while a poor man had only one lamb that "was like a daughter to him" (verse 3). When a traveler came to visit, the rich man took the poor man's ewe and killed it instead of one of the many that he owned. David is caught up in this story and becomes indignant, telling Nathan that this man must be sentenced to death. The shepherd so completely identifies with the deep emotions and plight of the poor man with his only ewe that he is quick to share his pain and pronounce judgment on the guilty. Not until Nathan declares, "You are the man!" (verse 7) does David realize that he is actually the one being accused of taking and killing. David does not expect such an outcome—he believes he could never do what the rich man did—but the story subtly invites him to consider

this despicable character and his own selfish actions. His mind may be able to compartmentalize God's commandments but his heart is unable to keep this story at a safe distance. The parable unveils David's emotions and motives: his shepherd-worthy sense of compassion and protective instincts, as well his impulsive surrender to lust, betrayal, and murderous deceit.

A Disquiet Spirit

Nearly one-third of Jesus's teaching recorded in the Gospels is expressed through parables. Certainly this focus is significant, for Jesus "knew what was in a man," who was "ever seeing but never perceiving." ² Though we may know God's law, we are quick to see the speck in another's eyes before the log in our own. ³ Jesus's parables compel us to reexamine our paradigms of goodness, justice, and love by inviting us first to examine our hearts. They bid us to sit with their characters and consider their perspectives so that, in time, we might also recognize our own hidden motives and difficult emotions. Yet like

the older brother seething at the welcome of the prodigal that he cannot receive his father's love, we may be so caught up in one perspective that we are unable to comprehend God's.

Recently, a friend was going through a difficult time, so I prayed for God to reveal his love and faithfulness to her in a tangible way. And in the course of a week or so, some of the things I prayed for came to be. I was humbled and thankful for God's gracious response but strangely, my spirit became restless and uneasy. Soon I found myself growing angry. I mused, I've labored for years in prayer about this request that I've not seen an answer to, and God, I pray for my friend—and in one week you give *it* to *her*! I recalled the commercial with the two girls and the pony, and suddenly I thought I knew what the first girl must have felt.

As the hours passed I went outside to mow the lawn and slowly, beneath the din of the mower and my disquiet, came another sense of *déjà vu*: of a parable I hadn't read in months. It is the parable of the workers in the vineyard in

Matthew 20. Jesus has just told his disciples that "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (19:30). Then he says, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard" (20:1-2).

You may recall the story. The landowner goes out again in the third hour and "saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right'" (verses 3-4). If the landowner is a just man, the laborers would assume that their pay would be a day's wage (a denarius) minus three hours. The landowner then went out about the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and finally the eleventh hour "and found still others standing around," so he brought them in to work for him.

At the end of the day each worker is paid, Jesus says, "beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first. The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a



denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day'" (verses 9-12).

Notice that the landowner could have avoided conflict with the first laborers if he had paid them first or each group in secret. Yet, seemingly like the businessman who flaunts favoritism in the commercial, he allows each worker to observe what the other receives. Understandably, the first workers are angry, for as the parable says, "they *expected* to receive more" (verse 10, emphasis added). They had worked hard all day, yet seemingly all for naught if some could show up at the last hour and receive the same wage. Who of us has not shared such emotions, whether in a similar workplace scenario or with a friend who receives what we want and still await?

Of course, under different circumstances, we may readily identify with the joy and gratitude of the eleventh-hour laborers who receive far more than they could ever expect. When we reflect upon our great salvation, God's intervention in a difficult time, his many gifts, or his tender mercy and presence, we may marvel at our place in his kingdom. So again, our emotions and response to this parable depend on which worker's perspective we share.

Yet what about the landowner? Unless we are one or know one, we may be apt to view him from the different laborers' points of view—unfair, gracious, or extremely generous—without really examining his character. But at one level, we must first ask, does he fit the paradigm of a wise businessman? After all, he *overpays* most of the laborers he hires when it would be expected that he pay them only for the hours worked. (If he were unjust, as many were with much power and few laws at this time, the laborers would hope at least to receive something.) Additionally, he himself goes out to seek laborers for his vineyard—and not once, but on five separate

occasions and even in the heat of the day. ⁴ The landowner has a foreman; clearly, he could send him out to contract this work. And when the first laborers accuse him of unfairness, a man of his stature could have easily dismissed or punished them. Instead, he listens to their complaint and then encourages them to reconsider their perspective: "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ... I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (verses 13-15). So though perhaps at first glance he appears to be like the businessman in the commercial who lacks regard for some, the landowner's curious actions invite us to study his character further.

A Stunning Invitation

Biblical scholar Kenneth E. Bailey, who spent forty years teaching in the Middle East, compares a parable to "a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence." ⁵ Building upon this

analogy, I would suggest that Jesus's parables bid us to step deeper into the house and become acquainted with its many rooms—until we encounter the unexpected. Yes, we may know the anger of the first-hour laborers or again, of the older brother of the prodigal son, and be tempted to stew with them in their workshop. Certainly, we may want to rejoice with the late laborers and the prodigal welcomed by his father and feast in their kitchen.

But if we turn our gaze from them and open our ears, we may realize that we are actually being beckoned by another into a grander room. Look! Listen! Could it be the landowner himself, who against all expectations of his position, comes out to seek us? The one so moved with compassion to go out at the eleventh hour to find the few who persisted in standing all day, even as each passing hour diminished their hopes of finding work? Could it be the master of the house, the father himself, inviting us to join him at his table? Who is he? For, "He does not simply offer more than can be reasonably expected from someone who has been offended; no, he completely

gives himself away without reserve.... This is not the picture of a remarkable father. This is the portrayal of God, whose goodness, love, forgiveness, care, joy, and compassion have no limits at all.”⁶

So the writer concludes, “Jesus presents God’s generosity by using all the imagery that his culture provides, while constantly transforming it.”⁷

In an interview for his book *Has Christianity Failed You?*, Ravi Zacharias suggests, “Sometimes we try to force God to fit our mold for him, to fit our idea of how he should act, and then when he doesn’t meet these expectations, we blame him for not meeting our expectations.” Yet as we take up residence in his word and take time to sit with him, we may discover that we have no paradigms to explain such a great God—and find ourselves welcomed in a room we may not have noticed before.

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¹ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, repr. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 148.

² John 2:25b, Mark 4: 12.

³ See Matthew 7:3.

⁴ I am indebted to Kenneth E. Bailey for this insight. See his *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 358-359.

⁵ Bailey, 280.

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd., 1994), 130-131.

⁷ Nouwen, 131.

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