

Lent 2023 · Sojourn East

Specks & Planks

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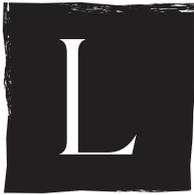
Specks & Planks

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Introduction

BY KEVIN JAMISON



Lent arrives in the middle of winter, when the grass is brown and the trees are bare.

This is fitting, because we usher in the season with Ash Wednesday, our annual liturgical reminder of death; and end with Good Friday, when we meditate upon the harrowing death of our Lord. The six weeks between the two have traditionally been set aside as a time of repentance and fasting. In a society that idolizes youth and dismisses sin as a relic of humanity's "unenlightened" past, it's easy to see why Lent has fallen out of favor in the West. Yet this is precisely why we need this

season. We need to be reminded of our finitude and fallenness because they are both unavoidable realities of life in a fallen world.

The observance of Lent is often marked by a giving up of bad habits and guilty pleasures. While this practice can be helpful in focusing our attention upon God, Lent is about more than self-denial and asceticism. It is a time for us to grow in honesty with God and honesty with ourselves. It is a season in which we work to see and name our sins as "sin" and to put our trust more fully in our Savior. This is difficult work. In a culture that is addicted to outrage, it is tempting to focus on the problems

out in the world. Lent calls us to reflect upon our own sin so that we might grow more fully into the image and likeness of Christ.

In his poem “Ash Wednesday”, the late T.S. Eliot writes,

“Suffer us not to
mock ourselves with
falsehood
Teach us to care and
not to care.”

These words have echoed in my mind for over a decade. As human beings, we all have an incredible capacity for self-deception. Self-deception turns into self-mockery when we point our finger at others but refuse to engage in the difficult work of self-examination.

In Luke 6, Jesus asks,

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

This Lenten devotional is an invitation to self-examination. It is a guide for reflecting on your own spiritual blindspots and the various ways self-righteousness manifests itself in your life. It is neither easy nor enjoyable to reflect on your sin, but it is an essential part of our continued growth into the image of Christ. Even more, it is an opportunity to deepen our experience of the love of Christ who gave Himself for our sins so that we might become beloved sons and daughters of God. It is only by His grace that we can engage in this work. &

Editor’s Note: There are 6 essays in this guide, with discussion questions and a place for journaling responses after each one. Since there are 6 weeks in Lent, it is our intention for you to read one essay per week. However, you can work through it at any pace you prefer. Use the essays as a launch point to examine the passages of scripture highlighted on your own, and your responses to the discussion questions as prayers of confession you can present to God.

QR Code: Listen to our Lent 2023 playlist by scanning the QR code >



"Nine Kinds of Blindness"

BY PAUL PASTOR, BOWER LODGE

The one where your eyes do not work to see anything.

The one where your eyes do not work to see everything.

The one where your eyes work,
but you cannot see what you have never seen before.

The one where your eyes work,
but you cannot see what is inconvenient.

The one where your eyes work,
but someone is keeping you from using them.

The one where your eyes work, but you are angry.

The one where your eyes work, but you are afraid.

The one where your eyes work, but there is no light.

The one where your eyes work, but there is
nothing but light.



BLINDED BY

Darkness

BY SAM YONG

WHAT IS YOUR VERY FIRST MEMORY? I don't imagine this question as one posed in passing to a mere acquaintance. It requires the fusion of nostalgia, ambivalence, and vulnerability. It evokes a bittersweet sentiment, confronting us with the origins of who we are in the best and worst ways. It's the sort of question that is present among close friends discussing the deeper things in life, or that one admirer poses to another during a long drive. Reflect on it too long, and you may find yourself laboring over the details: separating fact from what we've seen as adults in our parents' old scrapbooks, discerning what our young hearts felt. Your answer may end up being more emotional than historical.

It took me some time to realize that the reason I struggled to recall my first memory was because, at the time, I was blind. An accident at the age of two left me with bandages over my eyes, permanently losing vision in one of them.



But I remember how I felt on a warm summer day, being guided down a sidewalk. Although I couldn't see, I remember feeling strangely safe. There was a maternal hand squeezing mine, and I knew that the place I called home was just around the corner. Occasional jabs of insecurity welled up in my stomach when a noisy car passed by, or when a neighbor's dog barked, but all in all, I knew I was protected. Then I remember the feeling of ecstasy. I tilted my head up and saw a flash of red as the sun shone through my bandages. The first words I remember saying as a child were a jubilant proclamation to my guide: "I can see the sun!"

I am extremely fortunate that in my story, complete blindness is just a memory. For many, it's a daily obstacle to be overcome, and most do it with more bravery than I could ever muster. Since my recovery, I've only

had to interact with total blindness as an idea, a close call, a "what if?"

The accident was not without its post-traumatic consequences. To this day, most of my anxiety centers around the fear of blindness; on my worst days, I feel like a defenseless child, fighting to retain what vision I have left. Instead of focusing on what I can see, I fixate upon what I can't. What is to my right that might be a threat? What am I missing?

When I began writing this story, recalling these events incited a looming uneasiness. The uneasiness seemed to intensify as I explored the spiritual parallels and metaphors that a state of blindness offers. It did not take long to realize that blindness is a part of all of us. While the phrase "turning a blind eye" has always had a very literal connotation for me, it is an idiom that all of us are confronted with.



As individuals, our blind eye might be directed toward our deepest insecurities. You might have a defensive reaction to someone inquiring about your drinking habits, because you know that the line separating moderation and dependency has blurred.

You might feel a tightness in your stomach whenever someone talks about the benefits of financial budgeting, because you know that if you were to look closely at your bank statements, you'd find an ugly truth staring back at you. You may even avoid a loved one who is about to move away, knowing that the time you spend with them will force you to face the reality of their departure. Or your blind eye might be turned toward someone else's behavior: a friend's indirect cry for help, a family member's slowly destructive behavior.

As a society, our blind eye has served only to exacerbate our most prevalent dilemmas. Whether it be each side's unquestioned allegiance to political movements, a lack of agency in resisting the corrosion of materialism, or simply allowing the loudest voices in the media to do our thinking for us, we've all participated and suffered from the convenient proclivity of choosing what not to see.

The season of Lent is meant to crack open hard hearts. However, when the vase finally shatters, clear and simple answers don't just spill out. Instead, what we find in the shards of self-awareness, deep in the wake of our sinful state, are questions that beget more questions. As we approach God in blind vulnerability, we cannot help but ask, "How did I go so long ignoring my transgressions?"

Amidst all of his accolades, David is confronted by Nathan - first with a parable about a rich man who has many sheep and lambs but who takes the only lamb of a poor man. As David is angered by the injustice, Nathan asks for him to discern what price the rich man should pay for his transgressions. David goes as far as stating that the rich man deserves to die.

And then he hears the words that prove he has been blinded by his adultery and manipulation: "You are that man!"

What else might I be missing? Why was I so willing to harm myself and others by ignoring what was right in front of me?"

The exposure of sin, the hurricane of self-awareness, the dreadful sting of sudden light in the darkness; it would surely consume us without the safeguard of grace.

I've always been an imaginative processor. If you are too, you can observe with me the splendor of David's castle as he and Nathan sat down to talk, surrounded by memorabilia of battles won, by silver platters and ancestral armor, soothed by incense and warmed by fine linens, plans for the future conquering of nations spread across tables, bestowed with the seal of a young ruler.

It's a sad truth,
but in our blindness,
we judge most severely
those who remind us of
our own shortcomings.

We say to our neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is a plank in our own. But as the Lord leads us to repentance, we can only find comfort in the divine, freeing admittance that David attained through the exposure of prophecy: "I have sinned against the Lord."

I have sinned against the Lord. I am no more superior to my neighbor than one person is to another on a sinking vessel. The exposing flame of God's heart equalizes us all and burns away the self-imposed moral hierarchies that we use to elevate ourselves.

As we submit to the light, and respond to Christ's invitation to surrender our shadows, we often find that the scales over our eyes were not as glamorous as we once assumed, and that the sun that shone through our bandages illuminates a world of untold beauty.

If we're honest, shame is the adhesive that keeps scales and bandages firmly secured to our eyes. There's a medical phenomenon known as cross-modal neuroplasticity. When your brain is deprived of input from one of your senses, the others are more aware

and attuned to compensate for the deficit. In a similar way, when we live in blindness, the voices of condemnation become louder. To compensate for our lack of vision, our ears take in every message of condemnation that exposing our weaknesses will lead to our destruction.

But one of the greatest tools to reset our senses and step out of willful blindness is reflection and repentance. This may be a crude generalization, but there's not one of us in the West that naturally has time to do this, to really pursue it, to know it and to feel it. And so, we're forced to steal time away from our careers and hobbies. We're compelled to squeeze time out of our fleeting days, and to reject the non-essential for the willing pursuit of the painful and the slow.

This is why we set aside the season of Lent, to focus on the uncomfortable truth that we are finite, and that we have sin in need of exposure by the light of Christ.

On the other side of this exposure is freedom, joy, and a kingdom full of wonders that are pleasing to the eye, and consoling to the heart.

In the coming weeks, we will focus on just a few of the commonplace sins that often live under the surface of our willful blindness. These things may have been birthed in good intention, but can often lead us astray when they go unchecked. But for now, as we begin this journey together, I want you to meekly regard the first crack in the vase, the first gap in the bandage, remembering that repentance is necessary in the life of every believer. &

How does it feel to enter into a season of repentance? Are you resistant, or do you welcome it?

Why is it easier to focus on everyone else's faults but our own? What would it look like (in your thoughts and actions) for you to make the shift from prioritizing specks in others to logs in your own eyes?

What in your life acts as a mirror to see yourself more clearly? A relationship where you are truly known? An activity that humbles you? A book or film that connects to your story?

BLINDED BY

Greedy

BY AMY SIMPSON

“Elon Musk Takes Control of Twitter in \$44 Billion Deal”

“Prince Harry and Meghan Buy \$14.7 Million California Home after Royal Exit”

“FTX’s Sam Bankman-Fried Released on \$250 Million Bond”

“Kanye West Claims He Lost \$2 Billion in One Day after Adidas Ended Yeezy Deal”

“Donald Trump’s Net Worth Goes From \$2.4 to \$3 Billion Since Leaving Office”

EVEN IF YOU DON’T PAY ATTENTION TO THE NEWS THESE DAYS

(which I can hardly blame you), the narratives represented in these headlines over the past year probably made their way into your internet scrolling at some point. These stories catch our attention because of the sheer size of the numbers, combined with the larger-than-life personalities that seem to relish in constant attention. The dollar amounts seem more like the result of my children’s imagination than actual money. The people seem more like cartoons than human beings.

Now, I am not a financial planner, politician, business owner, or stock trader - so I have no credentials to discuss the economics of these numbers. All I know is my own internal lack of sympathy for their trials, my own disgust at their affluence. *THESE people have a problem*, I think as I look around at everything I lack. *If only they knew what REAL life was like*. Too small of a house. Kids that constantly grow out of shoes. The car that needs new tires. The mailbox filled with bills. The neighbor who gets his lawn professionally manicured, while I struggle to find the time to maintain mine.

I'm sure you've heard it said that Americans are some of the wealthiest people in the history of the world.

We account for 31% of the global net worth (and 4.25% of Earth's population). I'm also sure you've heard that money can't buy you happiness. But I'm not sure this information alone is enough to guilt or convince us into living content lives. Along with my heartless posture for the multi-millionaires of the world, there is something else - my envy for their ease.

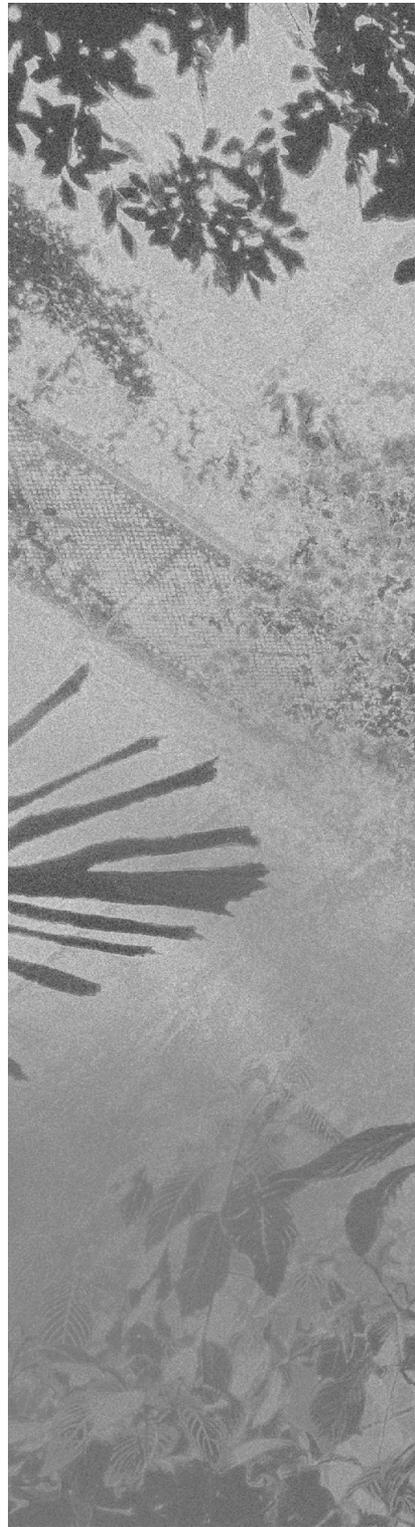
Greed is defined as having "an excessive desire for more of something than is needed." *Excessive compared to who?* I wonder as I read the headlines and scan the pictures I took in the slums of Africa, where I was considered wealthy simply because I was carrying a camera.

You can feel the guilt of a lie, the rage of blinding anger, the shame of lust. But greed seems to be on very few of our radars. It truly is the hidden sin. No one thinks they have a problem, when they compare themselves to others, yet greed has been a part of all of our stories from the beginning.

A basic reading of The Fall in Genesis 3 tells us that Eve's sinful desire was to "be like God, knowing good and evil." She eats the fruit from the tree that God instructed them not to, so in simple terms - both her and Adam disobeyed God's word. Maybe you've always taken this at face value and never pressed into the mystery of what is happening here. After all, despite its origin, the existence of sin is ever-present in our broken world.

Looking at the story from the narrative of all of scripture gives us a more complex interpretation of what is happening here. Since creation and even now, God has been inviting humanity to trust his plan for developing knowledge of good and evil through the wisdom only he can bring forth. He does this through a relationship with him over time. He's never been interested in intentionally hiding this knowledge out of protection that we may become like gods, but he desires it to be formed as we trust, listen, and follow him. We see Jesus submitting to this plan in his humanity, and he asks the same of us.

"The Tree of Good and Evil is about shortcutting that process," said writer Josh Nadeau. "It's about taking those ideas of knowledge and morality and authority and doing it our own way. It's the rejection of God's ways, the rejection of the relationship with God, and the declaration that we will be calling the shots - we will be dictating from here on out, what is good and what is evil."





While money didn't exist in the garden, we can see Eve's desire to acquire a certain type of wealth that would take her out from under the dependence of God and gain a false sense of control over her life.

We know this temptation all too well. With every trial that comes our way, the endurance, character, and hope that are promised to be produced in suffering feel overrated in moments of pain.

Our desire for money holds the same type of power. It allows us to be blind to our need for God, to shortcut the ways God may be refining us through our dependence on him. When asked how money has power, Tim Keller shared, "It keeps you from asking questions about your life - how you spend your money and how you make your money." We don't have to ask. We don't have to think.

We laugh over a commonly shared experience of walking into Target and accidentally spending \$200 when we originally went in for a gallon of milk. We hope our spouse doesn't notice the influx of Amazon Prime packages that are sitting on our doorstep. While these might not always be examples of excess, it highlights the fact that when it comes to money, we avoid the questions.

Eve's sin proves that greed doesn't always have to be about money. In her article, "Are You Fighting the New Greed?" Christine Hoover theorized that our relationship with social media brings about a greed that is defined by desiring excessive attention for accolades, invitations to certain social circles, or relationships with those we covet intimacy from. As I pondered her idea (originally published in

2015), I was able to draw connections to our current influencer culture, that often prioritizes immediately turning our trials into teaching moments, our accomplishments into how-to advice, our perspectives into prescriptives, and our opinions into optimized images to be shared with one finger tap. To have influence isn't a bad desire - but much of this is at the expense of our growth, shortchanging God's ultimate plan for our becoming by entertaining the noise of the crowd.

In the middle of Jesus' teaching on wealth in Matthew 6 (mostly on possessions, but he does briefly confront the act of using spiritual disciplines to gain notoriety), he calls the eye the "lamp of the body." He's suggesting that our eyes are often distracted by all the things we want to accumulate, and that eventually money becomes our greatest master. When our eyes are unhealthy - when they reject the light that is offered in trusting the provision and plans of God and settle for the security of material gain - our entire body is filled with darkness.

How do we let light illuminate every part of our being? First, we have to be willing to move the topic of money out of the shadows.

In some ways, we are always talking about it - when we discuss what neighborhood we're hoping to move to or where we're sending our kids to school or what we do for fun. But in many ways we don't talk about our relationship with money (or social media, to use Hoover's example), even to our closest friends, in an effort to identify where greed might be taking root in our hearts.

There are many reasons as to why, but psychologists have proven that the more money you have, the less you converse about it. On a practical level, this makes sense. If you have to track every dollar you spend in order to make sure you can afford basic essentials, you're probably discussing your budget with those who are affected by the boundaries of it. But it should also serve as a warning to those of us

who find ourselves rarely, if ever, examining how we make and spend our money.

Spiritually, we have to be willing to see God's provision as good for us and submit to his plan for growth, accepting the invitation we were first given in the garden to walk with God. It may go against our addiction to efficiency.

It may not gain us the status we desire. It may feel like anxiety or loss as we wrestle with how God defines security in light of the coming kingdom. But it is better than anything else we could gain on our own.

Oftentimes, we functionally follow the words of Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, when he suggested that, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good... Greed captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind." In other words, we live in a world that encourages us to manufacture our own self-improvement by setting our sights on the accumulation of wealth, knowledge, and influence.

This is where the call of Christ becomes countercultural. Pastor Eugene Peterson wrote in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* that, "There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness." But our desire for immediacy displaces our gaze.

Will we pluck the fruit of control, or will we be satisfied by the riches we have in Christ? &

How - if ever - have you known that you are living in greed? If you've never identified it before, what could the warning signs be?

The problem with our culture is that it equates our value and worth with how much money we have. How can Christians live countercultural to this idea?

One of the ways to combat greed is through generosity - with our money, time, possessions, status. In what ways is God calling you to increase your generosity, as you seek to grow in your faith?

BLINDED BY

Approval

BY BEN MAST

WHEN OUR KIDS WERE LITTLE we often read Max Lucado's short book *You Are Special*, which tells the story of Wemmicks, small wooden puppets who offer their approval or disapproval through stickers they place on each other. They paste gold stars on other Wemmicks who are talented, attractive, or special in some way. Wemmicks who are ugly, make mistakes, or who are otherwise broken get gray dots instead. The story centers around Punchinello, a Wemmick who has no gold stars, and is covered with gray dots. No other Wemmicks think Punchinello is special, which leaves him discouraged and lonely. As the story moves along Punchinello encounters another Wemmick who has no stars (just like him) but also no gray dots (unlike him). She is like no one Punchinello has ever met. Not only do the gray dots not stick to her; she is also unfazed by her lack of gold stars. The gold stars do not stick to her either.

When Punchinello asks her how this could be, she tells him to visit Eli the Woodcarver. Punchinello hesitantly goes to find Eli, uncertain of what he'll find. He assumes Eli will see him as ugly and broken, just like everyone else. Instead he experiences something remarkable - Eli tells Punchinello that he doesn't need to worry about the stars and dots because he is indeed special just the way Eli made him. From that point on, dots and stars no longer stick to Punchinello because Eli has shared the truth of who he is and why he is special. The opinions of the other Wemmicks grow less important to him because his value and worth no longer depended upon earning gold stars and avoiding gray dots.

When you think of the Pharisees in the scriptures, what image comes to mind? Most of the time, we imagine legalistic, calloused men who gave little thought to those beneath them. And while that description may still be accurate, in John 12 we learn what drives their feelings of righteous superiority, and it isn't too unlike the Wemmicks. The Pharisees had grown accustomed to receiving gold stars.

They loved the approval of people, which they received because they could follow the religious laws better than anyone else. They had more religious power, at least in a worldly sense, than anyone else. They proudly displayed their gold stars and didn't want to give them up.

We often see the Pharisees as those who loved religion and religious power, but didn't believe in Jesus and his message. But, notice it wasn't that they didn't believe. In fact, some did. The passage in John 12 says that many of the leaders believed Jesus but were unwilling to openly acknowledge this because they were too concerned with the response of the people. They feared being shunned from the faith community. As the passage says, "they loved human praise more than the praise of God." Jesus is right there with them and has performed the miracle of making a blind man see again. They see the miracle. They believe. But they won't admit it because they fear losing the approval of people around them. They loved gold stars and feared the gray dots.

But if we take an honest look at our own lives, we see we aren't that different. Even when we have experienced the goodness of God and the saving grace of Jesus, we are often reluctant to share it or acknowledge it before others. Just like the Pharisees, we want the approval of people. We fear being shut out, laughed at, or written off. We know that we need the approval of God more than the approval of other people, just like Punchinello needed Eli.

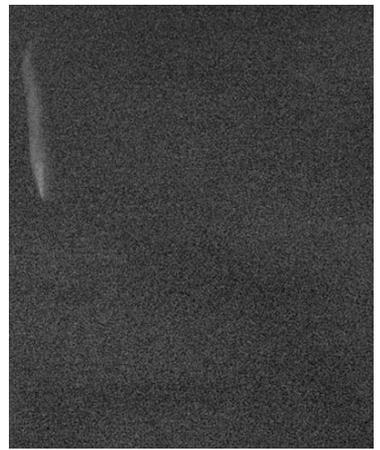
We often respond to this reminder with a reaction claiming we only need God's approval, and that his view of us is all that matters. At some level this is true - that God is enough now, in the past, and for eternity. We shouldn't care what people think of us, only what God thinks of us, right? But it isn't so simple as needing God and nobody else. We are created as social beings. We need other people. We need their love and approval. Life is confusing. Life is uncertain. We sojourn best together.

But people have limitations. People disappoint. They cannot give us all that we need (and we cannot give them all that they need). People are also seeking the same approval and

validation that we seek, and perhaps they are seeking this for themselves more than they seek to offer it to us. In today's world, we even seek approval from people we've never even met. Other times we seek it from people who are no longer around to offer it or who will never give it, no matter what we do or how hard we try. Sometimes we give everything for gold stars and receive gray dots instead.

We know from experience that constantly seeking the approval of others isn't the best life God has called us to. However, this doesn't mean we don't need people, or their love, or their investment in who we are and who we are becoming. We wrestle with the tension that God both calls us to seek our life in him and graciously gives us other people. We love God with our whole lives. We love our neighbors as ourselves. These are not at odds with one another when expressed fully and rightly.

Yet, we are like the Pharisees when we become more concerned with validation from others than our experience of being loved by and approved by God.



We live in fear of
rejection, loneliness,
and even the terrifying thought
that others might not think
highly of us.

We operate on conditional approval
with one another. You are worthwhile if you are
smart, attractive, and successful. We are worthwhile
if we do and say the right things.
But, what if you've screwed things up?

What if you can't seem to get things right? What if you don't have the ability you used to? Perhaps your actions damaged or even ended relationships that really mattered to you. We can fight for approval our whole lives, but eventually we come up short.

What if, like Punchinello, we didn't have to fight for approval? How can we keep our focus on God's approval more than the approval of other people?

It isn't enough to tell yourself that you shouldn't care what people think. After all, God created us as social creatures and called us to love one another in community. We have to replace our preoccupation with what other people think with something better.

In this Lenten season consider how you might focus on how Jesus earned the approval you seek from the Father and gave it to you.

You don't need to earn it. It's a gift of grace. If we become more concerned with receiving God's approval that relies on Christ's finished work we might finally experience the freedom that Christ earned for us. But if we hold to the approval of others, we remain blind to the freedom that Christ offers. Sure, we need other people and their

influence in our lives, but we also need to keep their approval at a healthy distance. Pharisees desperately sought the good opinion of the people around them. They were more interested in maintaining their power than they were seeking the kingdom of God. Imagine how they might have responded if they took

the words of Jesus to heart - that the meek, the poor in spirit, and the merciful know the way of his kingdom. Humility and brokenness are the way of the kingdom, not grabbing and clawing for power and prestige. Instead of finding life and approval, they were white washed tombs.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they wanted to be seen. It seems no accident then that Jesus calls his followers then and now to do their good in secret, whether prayer, fasting, giving to those in need, lest we receive our reward from the praise of the people around us. Instead, we should do these things in secret, before God.

We need to learn to seek the audience of the one who smiles at us, nods in approval, and rejoices over us. Not because we are inherently awesome, talented, or entertaining. In fact, we aren't, and deep down we know it. We are broken, fallen, selfish, and limited. But, the good news is that the conditions of God's approval have been met in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As you take this journey in self-examination, offer your prayers, fasting, and giving in private, seeking only the approval of your Father, rather than to impress other people. Ask God to make you into a person that gold stars and gray dots won't stick to, and ask him to help you see for the first time, without being blinded by needing the approval of others. &

When it comes to the tension of seeking our identity in God and living in relationship with others, where do you find yourself? Do you tend toward either extreme - declaring that all you need is God's approval to distance yourself from others? Or do you constantly seek the approval of others, forgetting your identity as a child of God?

Chances are you know what you are tempted to find your identity in - it's usually in the gifts you've been given, the things people are quick to notice about you. But it's harder to identify when those are speaking louder than God's words about who you are. How do you (or how could you) discern when the volume needs to be turned down on external voices? Are there any warning signs in your life?

How might you anchor yourself to rest in God's approval of you? What is a daily or weekly rhythm you could establish to remind yourself of God's love for you?

BLINDED BY

Fear Fear

BY AMANDA PHILLIPS

A FEW YEARS AGO IN LATE FALL, my husband and I were blessed to welcome our first child into our lives after several years of infertility. Her presence ushered us to honor and praise the Lord, but I, specifically, felt an even more subtle, hidden invitation to an old friend. On those first few nights in the hospital, I felt terror. Dread. My heart beat out of my chest, keeping me from sleep. The shadows around me thickened, making me more aware of my loneliness. I felt vulnerable, worried, and overrun with a panic I couldn't explain.

This remained true even when we returned to our home. Our daughter was born with a few medical conditions, considered noteworthy but easily handled outside of the hospital. While this was true to some extent, it felt like there was no break from the invitations to fear. She could not eat by normal methods, her airway was constricted, her digestion painful, her cries stretched every night through the dark hours, driving her parents into true madness. Many fraught weeks went on like this, and then the pandemic began. For me, the fear began to steal away any happiness, most relationships, comfort, ability, and belief. No amount of logic or reasoning seemed to reduce the anxious pull at my heart, mind, and body.

When we can recognize it, doesn't that sound just like how fear operates? We cannot demonize fear entirely, as it is an adaptive asset in most human situations. Hear a noise in the dark? Run. Remember that important deadline? Get it together. But in my experience, fear can grow rapidly, going from helpful to harmful without our noticing. And then it can subtly steal things we hold dear.

FEAR.

It is a safety measure, but it is also restricting.

It is a tool, but it is also threatening.

It is an influencer, but it can also be a decisionmaker.

It so easily invites us to slide along the spectrum

to a place where nothing in our lives is possible without it.

FEAR.

Think of how many times these words come to your mind or mouth.

"I'm worried about..."

"I'm scared of..."

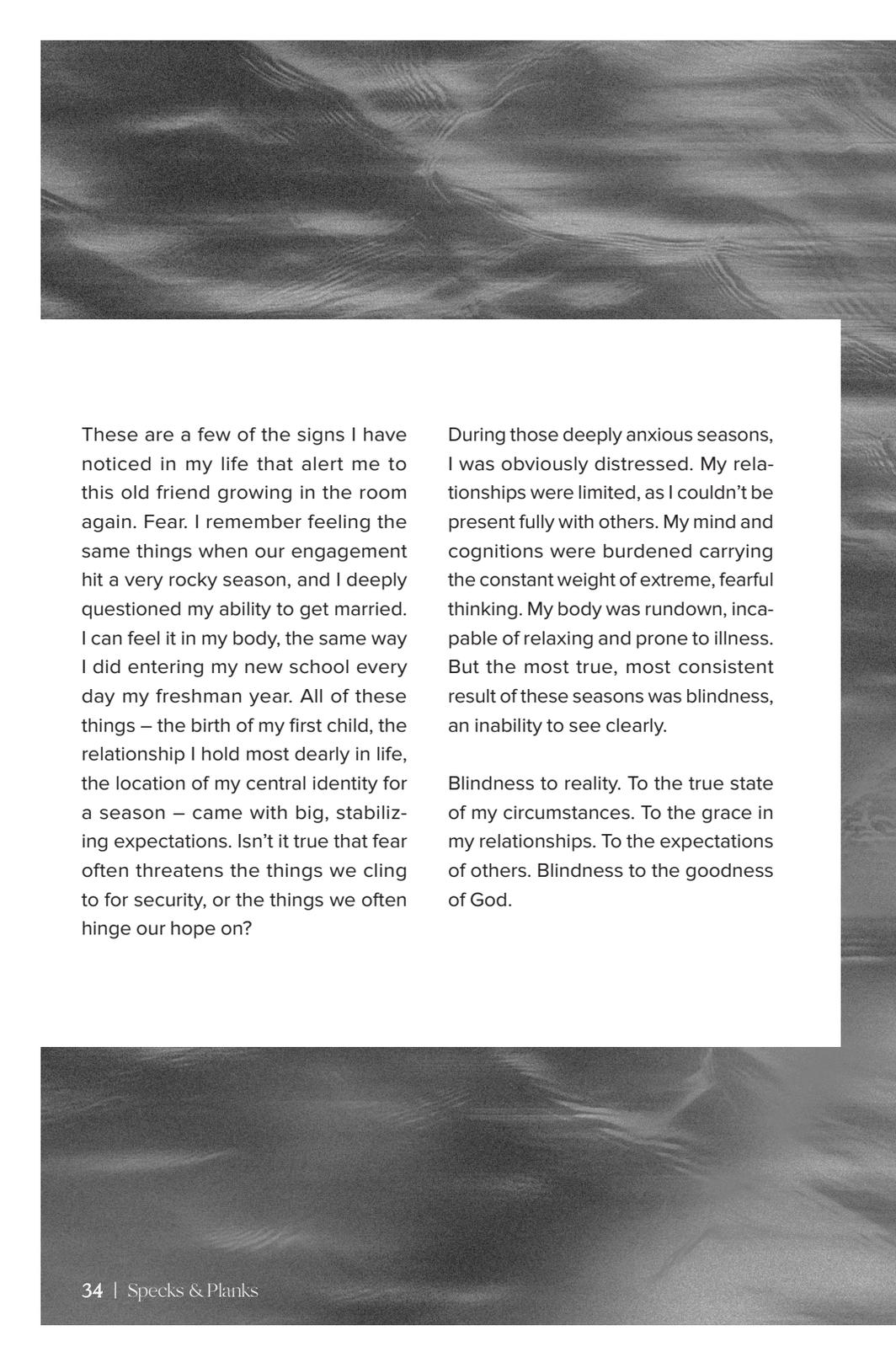
"I'd hate to..."

"I'm nervous."

"I'd never."

"I dread it."

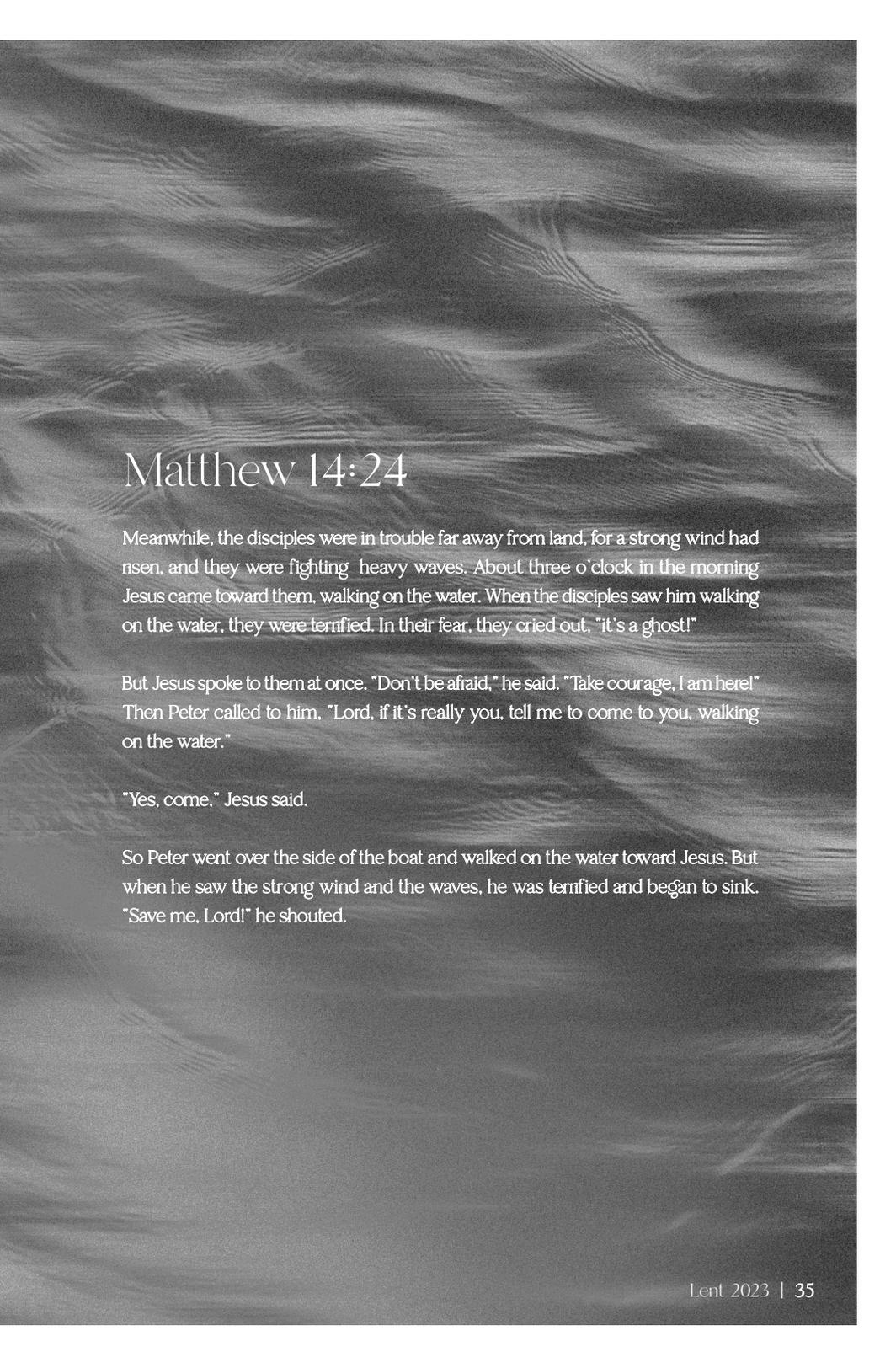
Think how often your body reacts with shoulders tensing, fists clenching, your head spinning, your stomach churning, your chest heaving.



These are a few of the signs I have noticed in my life that alert me to this old friend growing in the room again. Fear. I remember feeling the same things when our engagement hit a very rocky season, and I deeply questioned my ability to get married. I can feel it in my body, the same way I did entering my new school every day my freshman year. All of these things – the birth of my first child, the relationship I hold most dearly in life, the location of my central identity for a season – came with big, stabilizing expectations. Isn't it true that fear often threatens the things we cling to for security, or the things we often hinge our hope on?

During those deeply anxious seasons, I was obviously distressed. My relationships were limited, as I couldn't be present fully with others. My mind and cognitions were burdened carrying the constant weight of extreme, fearful thinking. My body was rundown, incapable of relaxing and prone to illness. But the most true, most consistent result of these seasons was blindness, an inability to see clearly.

Blindness to reality. To the true state of my circumstances. To the grace in my relationships. To the expectations of others. Blindness to the goodness of God.



Matthew 14:24

Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "it's a ghost!"

But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage, I am here!" Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

"Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

As Peter stepped out of the boat, do you think the waters gave him a moment of stillness? In my experience on boats, I cannot imagine choosing to step out of their haven when I am constantly being knocked off my feet by incoming waves. I imagine that he enjoyed a moment of stillness on top of the dark water, completely in awe

of the power of God shared with him. Clearly though, as he walked toward Christ, he was distracted by his threatening surroundings. He was knocked off his feet. This element of creation he'd previously mastered, began to terrify and threaten him. He lost the ability to see clearly the Truth.

Fear can really skew my ability to see, arguably the most precious sense. It casts a unique shadow, a strong lens onto all the situations in my life. It biases all the data I have access to. It limits my ability to see the full variety and complexity God has graciously given me in my life.

As scientists have discovered the impact of trauma on humans in recent years, many studies have been done to determine how a high level of fear affects an individuals' quality of life. Specifically, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk and his colleagues, observed trauma victims brain activity while in a fMRI machine, reading to them their narratives of the most fear-provoking events over a speaker. Through the machine's images, scientists have learned that in a state of fear, the left brain (verbal and reasoning) begins to shut down, as the right brain (the emotion center) overacts. The whole brain, meant to work together to interpret all of life for us, does not operate properly when we are fearful. It makes sense then, why we struggle to reason logically, to see fully, when fear defines how we operate.

I remember a specific phone conversation several years ago, during a season of intense anxiety, when someone moved by the Holy Spirit, wisely said to me, "this has happened to you before, Amanda. This is how Satan gets a hold of you. He makes you terrified." I remember, almost physically, feeling chains drop from me, my eyes open wider, and, for the first time, I could see my season with clarity.

In *The Inner Voice of Love*, Henry Nouwen says to himself and others,



You will not be able to meet Jesus in your body while your body remains full of doubts and fears. Jesus came to free you from these bonds and to create in you a space where you can be with him. He wants you to live in the freedom of the children of God. Do not despair, thinking that you cannot change yourself after so many years. Simply enter into the presence of Jesus as you are and ask him to give you a fearless heart where he can be with you. You cannot make yourself different. Jesus came to give you a new heart, a new spirit, a new mind, and a new body. Let him transform you by his love and so enable you to receive his affection in your whole being."

When the postpartum hormones stabilized and sleep returned, I felt capable of much more in my life. Joy in relationships, confidence, energy and clear thought. Fear's hold was loosening. As a parent though, fear will always play a role in my relationship with my child. Fear about her illnesses, socialization, development, and salvation to name a few. But if fear governs our relationship? How blinding it will be for me and my children.

It feels incorrect then, or immature to suggest that one can conquer a basic emotion. Or that our view will never again be clouded by our fears, our circumstances, or our misfiring neurotransmitters. Rather than seeking to restrict ourselves drastically, could we instead embrace a curious view of ourselves? Often in my therapy practice, I encourage clients to imagine fear is creature exterior; can we observe how fear influences us? Can we play around with his sway on us

this season? Just like a friend, fear can have positive effects on us. It can also swerve outside its lane and govern us. Fear is helpful when it stays inside its boundary as a tool, rather than suffocating every area of our lives. Fear has been a consistent presence in my life, and I expect it will continue, but I hope it does so scaled to its appropriate size and influence. I hope, like a friend, I can recognize it instead of personifying it.

As a church, could we recognize that fear may be easily recognized and other times overpower us, like the dark, terrifying waves Peter experienced? As we cry, like Peter "Save me, Lord," let us praise Him for his power to sustain us, while we also have compassion on ourselves for falling victim to the same old waves again. Let us recognize fear, the friend, and appropriately limit its influence in our lives. &

How often are your decisions - at work, with others, when you feel the pressure to perform, when you are faced with disappointment - influenced by fear? Are you able to notice it, or has it become your ordinary state of being?

How many of your relationships are limited by your fears of rejection, weakness, or failure? What about your relationship with God? Does fear build a ceiling for your faith?

Consider what it might look like to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus in the midst of fear. Does the promise of Jesus giving you a new heart, a new spirit, a new mind, and a new body bring you encouragement? What might you pray for in his presence to see him more clearly in times of fear?

BLINDED BY

Ambition

BY TROY HARVEY

LIKE MANY OF YOU, I LOVE MOVIES AND TRAVELING. And I love combining the two. A few weeks ago, my wife Abby and I had some time to kill before our flight home from Denver. So we bought tickets to see *Tar*—the buzzy Oscar-nominated movie starring Cate Blanchett as Lydia Tar, a ruthlessly ambitious composer at the height of her career, conducting the Berlin Philharmonic and teaching classes at Julliard.

We gradually learn that Lydia is a psychopathic serial abuser. Her sins are exposed and she falls from her position at the top of the classical music pyramid. Reeling and broken, she returns to her humble childhood bedroom in an NYC outer borough. The bedroom is a shrine to music; her spiritual foundation. Wearing one of her youth performance medals, she pops a Leonard Bernstein tape with a hand-written label into the VHS player, and tears stream down her face as she relives the earliest memories of her musical journey.

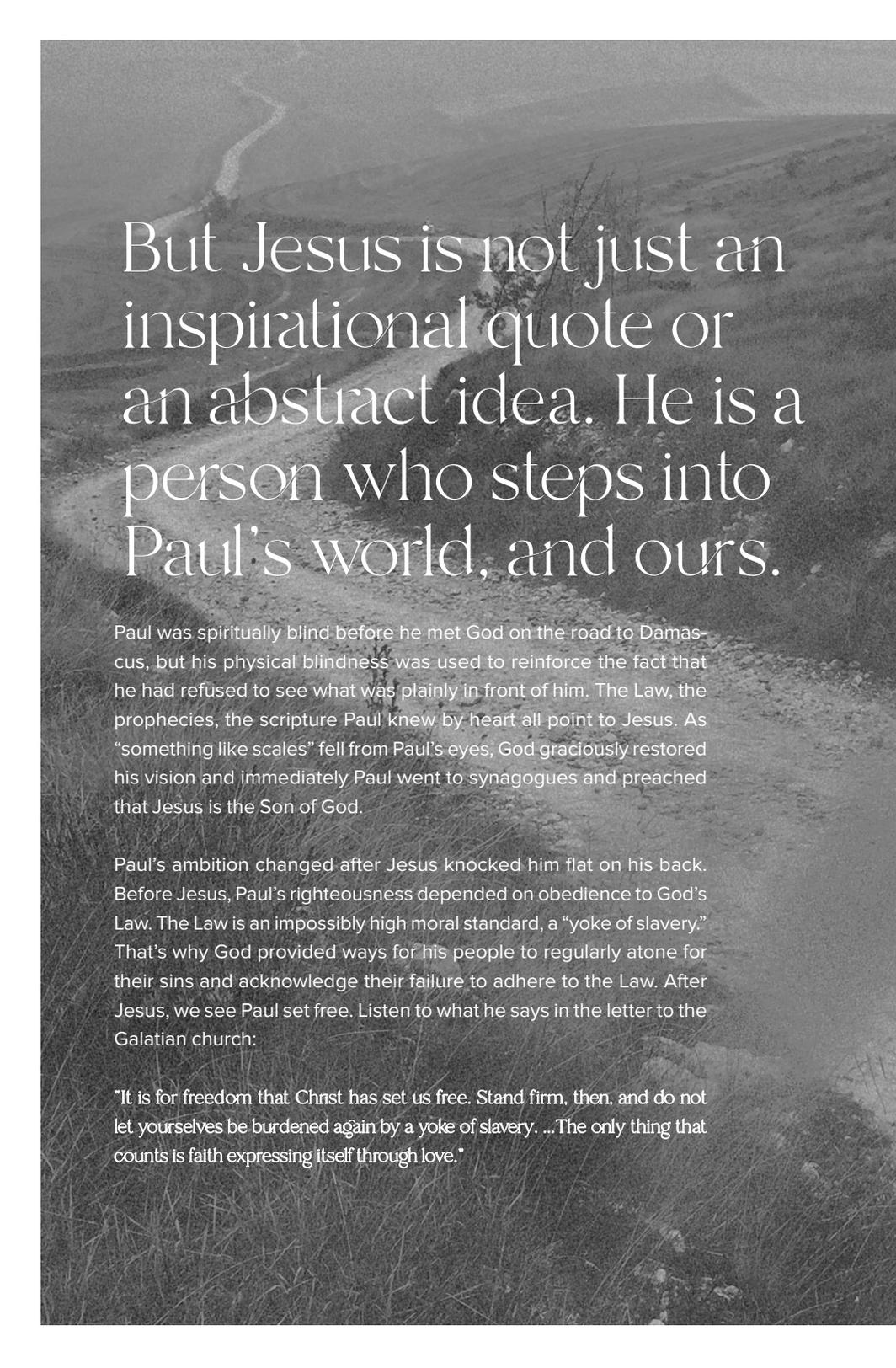
At the end of the film we see Lydia humbled, relegated to teaching children in a third world country, but continuing to do what she loves. Completely against her will, her life is wrecked; and her ambition is redirected to serving and teaching children. It took a return to her roots, to the days she was first awakened to a love for music, to help her connect with a purpose despite the destruction she had caused.

Lydia Tar's story reminds me of Paul from the Bible. On the road to Damascus, Paul is at the top of his game. He was a well-educated, affluent Roman citizen, respected by the religious elite in his role as a Pharisee. He used his status to persecute those who were following Jesus' teachings. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul describes his ambition and achievements as a Pharisee and explains his reasons for confidence in himself: "as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." But Jesus radically intervenes in Paul's life as a powerful flash of light that knocks him to the ground and blinds him.

As he is surrounded by his friends and colleagues telling the unbelievable story of how he was blinded by some supernatural being claiming to be Jesus of Nazareth, a fearful but obedient follower of Jesus, Ananias, knocks on the door, puts his hands on Paul and says:

"Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Like Paul, we are blinded by ambition and often miss the point of Jesus' message. We boast in our achievements. We grow accustomed, and therefore numb, to our day-to-day lives. Most of us choose our careers out of a sincere love for the field we are in, but over time our tasks grow mundane, or the path of success set before us seems too tempting. We may not be persecutors or abusers, but we grow blind to the call God has placed on our life, settling into the American dream or cheap recognition that never lasts as long as we'd like it to.



But Jesus is not just an inspirational quote or an abstract idea. He is a person who steps into Paul's world, and ours.

Paul was spiritually blind before he met God on the road to Damascus, but his physical blindness was used to reinforce the fact that he had refused to see what was plainly in front of him. The Law, the prophecies, the scripture Paul knew by heart all point to Jesus. As "something like scales" fell from Paul's eyes, God graciously restored his vision and immediately Paul went to synagogues and preached that Jesus is the Son of God.

Paul's ambition changed after Jesus knocked him flat on his back. Before Jesus, Paul's righteousness depended on obedience to God's Law. The Law is an impossibly high moral standard, a "yoke of slavery." That's why God provided ways for his people to regularly atone for their sins and acknowledge their failure to adhere to the Law. After Jesus, we see Paul set free. Listen to what he says in the letter to the Galatian church:

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ...The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."



What is Paul's new ambition? Faith in the risen Christ, Jesus. And how is that faith expressed? Radical, self-sacrificial love. Our sinful hearts look for ways to reconstruct the Law and atone for our sin through achievement. Maybe for you, that's through performative social media, where the steady drip of likes and views will prove your worth. Or maybe it's believing the lies we're told that voting for some candidate will somehow usher in the perfect government that will solve all the problems in our country. And our neighbors that see the world differently or vote for different candidates should be ridiculed and de-humanized.

For me it's a law I've crafted in my heart that's much smaller and localized to my family and my identity as a father. A lie driven by fear. If I protect my kids from the world and give them the right kind of education then I will be a righteous person. Over and over I make bad parenting decisions. I get angry with my kids and my wife when I feel like I'm losing control. The weight of these failures builds and the pressure of this performance is unbearable. Thankfully, God's mercies are new every morning. The good news of Jesus gives me the power to humble myself, repent to my family, and trust God to rescue my children.

Our sinful hearts look for ways to atone for our sin. We craft a yoke of slavery for ourselves, lock our neck in place and crank it down. But Jesus comes to us and says "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Through faith in Jesus our ambition is redirected to loving God, loving our neighbors, loving our family and living in true freedom that is a light to the world. 📖

Though the details might not be the same, we see parallels between Paul and our stories as our desire for power is confronted with Christ's humility. Has your own ambition ever led you to use, neglect or take advantage of other people for your own gain? While it may not have literally blinded you, what darkness did you experience as a result?

Many of our desires start as noble pursuits that, over time, end up going astray. Think about your hopes and dreams - for your family, career, friendships. How do you know when they've shifted from a God-given call to an attempt to control? How might you bring them back under his authority?

As you think through your life's accomplishments, would you be willing to pray that "whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ"? If not, what do you find yourself tempted to hold on to?



BLINDED BY

Light

BY JENNA KLEISER

DID YOU KNOW THAT MANY WONDERFUL THINGS HAPPEN THE MOMENT THE MORNING LIGHT CATCHES YOUR NAKED EYE?

The light at sunrise is more than just the beautiful hallmark of a new day; it's the stuff of life. As the sun reaches over the horizon, light receptors in our eyes and on our skin joyfully capture the information stored in the colors of the rapidly changing light spectrum. This information sets off a cascade of hormones and brain-energizing chemicals that make us feel focused, happy, and ready to start our day.

As we buzz through our morning routines, the morning light has already been at work setting our bodies' internal clocks with precision in order to organize and coordinate all the cellular tasks that need to be performed throughout the rest of the day. Humans are not unique in this, of course, as plants and animals possess light receptors that connect their beings and functions with the common grace of light as well. Without it, no living thing could exist. Light is life.

Given the nature and purpose of light, it's no wonder that Jesus introduces himself in the gospels as the "light of the world" (John 8:12). When Jesus spoke light into existence at creation and divided the light from the darkness, he made a way for us to experience physical life on the earth.

Similarly, Jesus made a way for us to experience spiritual life by his coming to earth embodied as the only light that could divide us from the darkness of our sin-soaked condition. Apart from Jesus, there could be neither life, nor life eternal. He is both our creator and our deliverer.

One intriguing thing about
Jesus as **creator** and
Jesus as **deliverer** is this:

in both cases,
he chose not to abolish darkness;
he chose to use it.

The Genesis account of creation tells us that before the earth was formed, "darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). This means that darkness is not a created thing. Darkness isn't a thing at all—it is the absence of a thing. Darkness exists only in the absence of light.

When God called creation good, that included the darkness of night. From a purely biological perspective, darkness is as important as light. Similarly to what occurs with morning light, darkness has profound effects on our physical bodies. After four hours of sleeping in complete darkness, the brain signals a rush of hormones to release and go to work killing damaged cells and cleaning up dead ones, regulating inflammation, overseeing metabolism, and building muscle. In essence, these hormones are potent life-sustainers. They help reverse the damage our bodies endure during the day. In this way, the darkness we experience at night allows us to properly receive the light of each new day.

Darkness readies us for life.

Despite what we know about our own biology and the earth's natural cycles, most days, it doesn't feel like dark and light are equals. We tend to see darkness as a villain that steals our productivity and joy. Light is the hero that restores them. One look at our world will reveal which is winning this cosmic war. From the light bulb to Daylight Savings, we've found a staggering amount of ways to chase away the darkness.

It's not just us; the very first Christians struggled with this on a spiritual level. After the church at Corinth was infiltrated by a group of false apostles, Paul wrote a second letter to them in an attempt to redirect their spiritual vision. These false apostles were eloquent speakers and skilled debaters who professed Christ (10:17) while preaching a different gospel (11:4). They exhibited power and prestige and criticized Paul for his humility and weaknesses (10:10). Under their influ-

ence, the Corinthians began to value victorious living, spiritual power, and religious success over the Christ-exemplified virtues of humility, sacrifice, and meekness. Paul rightly identifies these false apostles as servants of Satan, whom he says masquerades as "an angel of light" (11:13-14).

The Corinthian church was blinded by light. Under such flashy influences, they began to believe that power, signs, and wonders are the hallmarks

of Christianity and so believing, they became quick to identify with Christ as exalted, but struggled to identify with him as crucified. Paul takes great pains to counter this subtle triumphalism with the message of the true gospel: death leads to life (4:10-12).

Our modern world is shockingly similar to this ancient one. Our prosperity makes escaping the reality of the darkness around us and within us as easy as flicking on a light switch. Got problems? Just cover them with money or escape them with endless entertainment or work or vices.

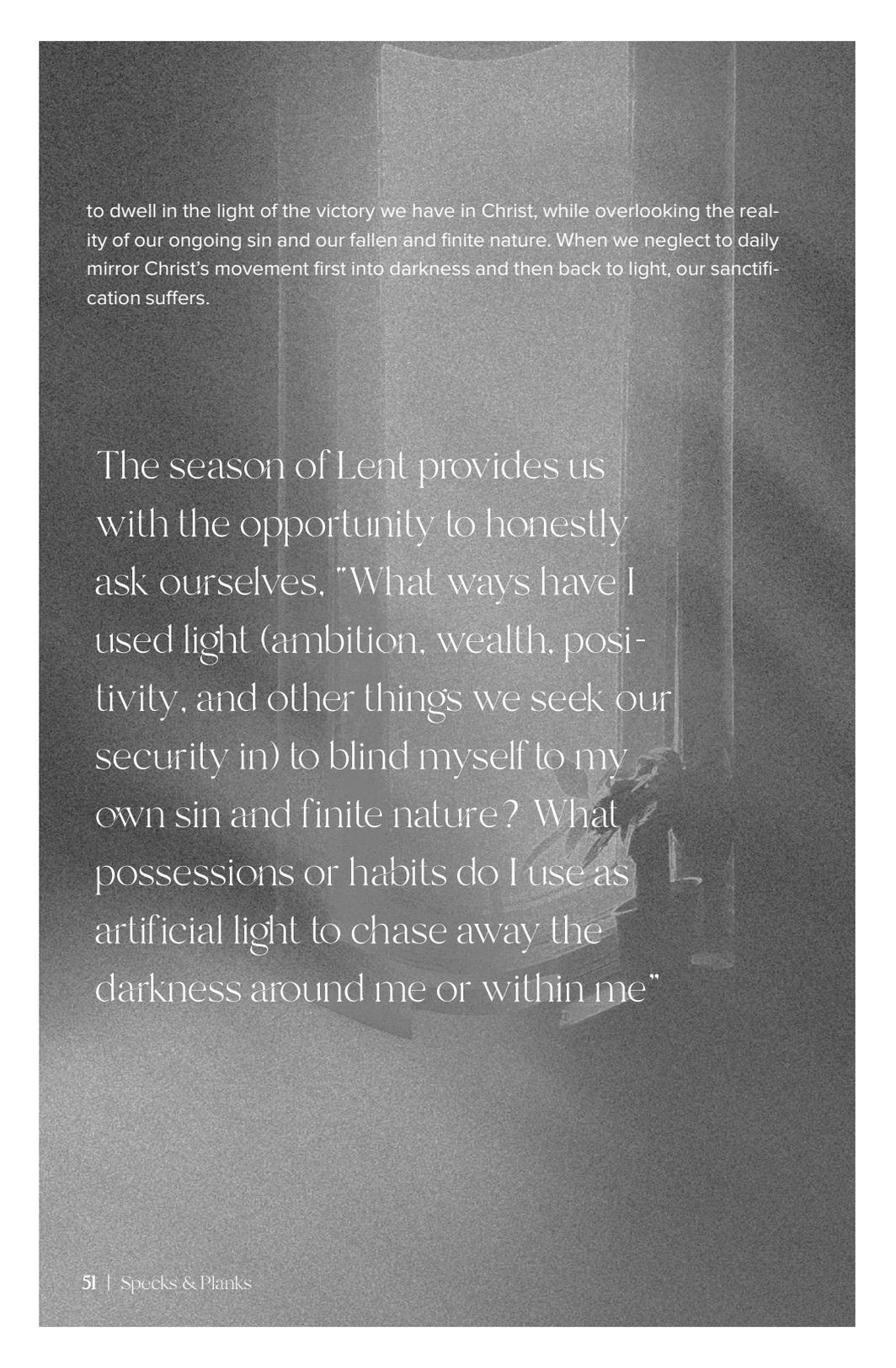
As the Corinthian church learned, even good things can become seriously and dangerously distorted if they are viewed not as they are (light and dark), but as we want them to be (light only). The convenient flicker of artificial light comes at great cost to both body and soul.

We as Christians possess a heightened awareness of the interplay between light and darkness because it's an essential part of our spiritual story. Just as physical darkness is the absence of light, spiritual darkness is the absence of Christ. The darkness

of Genesis 1 was the backdrop Jesus used to call forth light, and similarly, the darkness of our sin is the backdrop Jesus used in his life, death, and resurrection to “shine in our hearts, to give [us] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God...” (2 Cor. 4:6). Jesus uses darkness to reveal our need for light, and to ready us for life.

While our coming to Jesus Christ is a movement out of darkness into light, his coming to us was a movement from light into darkness. This extraordinary movement is what we call to remembrance on Good Friday: the death of Christ that was both terrible and good. Shortly after, on Easter Sunday, we celebrate the power of Christ who raised himself from the grave—the movement from darkness back to light that gives us life and life eternal.

Though we recognize that identifying with the fullness of Christ's death and resurrection is necessary for salvation, if we are honest, many of us effectively live our spiritual lives identifying with the light of the resurrection over the holy darkness of his death. We live with a sort of subtle triumphalism that bleeds into our every day, tempting us



to dwell in the light of the victory we have in Christ, while overlooking the reality of our ongoing sin and our fallen and finite nature. When we neglect to daily mirror Christ's movement first into darkness and then back to light, our sanctification suffers.

The season of Lent provides us with the opportunity to honestly ask ourselves, "What ways have I used light (ambition, wealth, positivity, and other things we seek our security in) to blind myself to my own sin and finite nature? What possessions or habits do I use as artificial light to chase away the darkness around me or within me?"

Jesus has chosen not to abolish darkness—yet. Instead, he became it and he overcame it (2 Cor 5:21). Though we identify with both Christ’s death and resurrection, while we remain on earth we are somewhere in the middle of this becoming and overcoming. We exist in the in-between of the “already, not yet,” where we already possess every spiritual blessing in Christ, but will not experience the fullness of these blessings yet. This looks like rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn. It looks like honoring seasons and holding suffering, humility, obedience, joy, freedom, and victory together in outstretched arms. It means understanding that in order to experience new life, light, and hope, we first have to experience death, darkness, and despair: and this is both terrible and good. Nature demonstrates this beautiful balance as it holds dawn and dusk rightfully in their places, bowing to each other in a cosmic dance that leads to fullness of life.

One day soon our eyes will open to a forever light—the light of God’s glory that floods all of heaven. In the radiance of his light and in the perfection of his Kingdom, darkness will be no more. Until that day, may we see with naked eyes the purpose and power of God, who delights to send forth both evening and morning for the good of our bodies—and our souls. &

What ways have you used light (ambition, wealth, positivity, approval, and the many other things we seek our security in) to blind yourself to your own sin? What possessions or habits do you use as artificial light to chase away the darkness around or within you?

Have you experienced similarities between the Corinthian church that Paul wrote to, and your own personal experience with church? How do we wrongly elevate prosperity and prestige while minimizing humility and weakness in communities of faith? How has this shaped you? What part might you play in helping restore the Church to the fullness of the gospel, declaring Jesus' death AND resurrection?

When you hold an “already, not yet” view of the kingdom - that it is already here, and that it will be made new again - what brokenness do you observe? What do you long to see restored? How might that lead you to shine light in dark spaces?

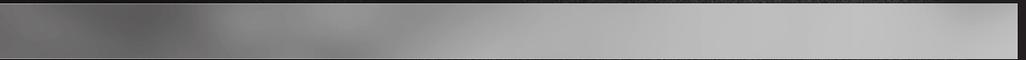
Mimid (Gray Catbird)

BY TIMOTHY KLEISER

When all had hushed, when every sob was spent
and every song was sung, when everything
that needed saying had been said, and they
were left to linger on their own, they wore
the quiet like a coat and laid themselves
among the beechnuts, down beside the swollen
spot of earth that held their infant child.

And there, within that silent stillness, came
a kitten's desperate mewing or a child's
distant wailing, they thought, before they saw
the source: a slate-gray bird with blackened coif,
its undertail like dried-up blood, had broken
its brooding silence from a nearby weeping
beech to erupt in feathered utterance.

Then, suddenly, in one annihilating
plunge, it dropped like a stone through leaf and limb,
a blurry streak of slate and blood that pitched
before it hit the ground then, winging westward,
swept across their infant's grave—as if what
they lost would be regained at last by just
a song; as if to bring them news of God.



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Sam Yong has been leading worship at Sojourn East since 2018. He enjoys long walks around Crescent Hill spent listening to authors like Tim Keller, Ray Bradbury, and N.T. Wright. Sam loves to spend his summers planning visits to Colorado, and his winters perfecting the nuanced art of mood lighting in his apartment and office.

Amy Simpson started attending Sojourn over 11 years ago, meeting her husband, Eric, in the atrium on the very first Sunday she walked through the door. They have four boys (Adler, Everett, Whitaker, and Reeve). She finds joy in serving the church, asking questions, watching baseball, and reading a thought-provoking book.

Ben Mast has been attending Sojourn since 2002 with his wife Kristin. They have three children (Caleb, Molly, and Ella). Ben is a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Louisville. He spends his free time on the three R's: reading, writing, and running.

Amanda Phillips came to Sojourn East in 2021 because of her work with Sojourn Kids. Her family happily tagged along; she's married to David Phillips, and mother to Sloane (3) and Clark (1), who have all found their special niches at Sojourn. She is also a therapist and loves working with people with depression, anxiety, and relational conflict in her practice. You can most often find her in the kitchen, trying to create a new baked good, or attempting to read five books at the same time.

Troy and Abby Harvey joined Sojourn in 2006. They have three children active in sports and music at CAL—Anna (15), Celia (13), and Noble (11). Troy is a software engineer and donut connoisseur. Email him at troyharvey@gmail.com. He would love to argue with you about the supernatural elements in Tar and the meaning of the ending.

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Timothy Kleiser has been a member of the Sojourn East family for ten years, along with his wife, Jenna, and their daughter, Everly. He teaches philosophy and literature at Boyce College and writes about ways that the "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it.



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