



HEARING GOD IN LA

ISSUE 3, 2024

The Coastlander

USC'S STUDENT JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

The Coastlander

The Coastlander is an ecumenical student journal of Christian thought at the University of Southern California. We welcome contributors who represent the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions of Christianity and seek to support their intellectual growth and written witness. We hope our journal will start conversations about what it looks like to be a Christian on campus and will be a vehicle for different Christian communities to collaborate. Our mission is to inspire and encourage the Trojan community through essays, poetry, writing, and art that embraces readers of different backgrounds, reflects the ideas of our entire team, and bears witness to our shared Christian experience.

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From the Editors

Dear Readers,

This year, *The Coastlander* and its partners have been fascinated by the power of listening. As we navigate our lives in a bustling city like Los Angeles, we have come to appreciate the profound impact of truly hearing and being heard.

In a year that has felt particularly loud, with crises seemingly lurking around every corner, we suspect that God's voice has likely become increasingly difficult to hear for many Christians in the campus environment. We're no strangers to the fact that the constant noise of our world can easily drown out the whispers of Heaven, making it a challenge to find moments of peace and clarity. Far too often, it seems, we readily exchange open minds for distracted hearts, struggling to discern divine guidance amidst the chaos. With our theme "Hearing God in LA," we aim to discover the myriad of ways in which we can attune ourselves to God's presence, even in the midst of urban commotion.

Our contributors have navigated various topics that reflect the challenges and beauty of seeking God in a noisy world. Through thoughtful explorations of sacred traditions, intellectual essays, and creative storytelling, the works in this issue invite readers to pause, reflect, and listen for God's whisper in their lives. Each piece contributes to a broader conversation about spirituality and faith in an urban setting.

The Coastlander remains a platform for thoughtful engagement and creative expression, aiming to foster a deeper understanding of our faith in contemporary life. As you journey through the pages of this issue, we hope you find inspiration to listen more intently for God's voice, even in the most chaotic moments.

Thank you for your continued support and engagement with *The Coastlander*. We look forward to sharing these reflections with you and hope they encourage you to seek and hear God's presence in new and meaningful ways.

Patrick Connors and Max Burlew
Co-editors, *The Coastlander*

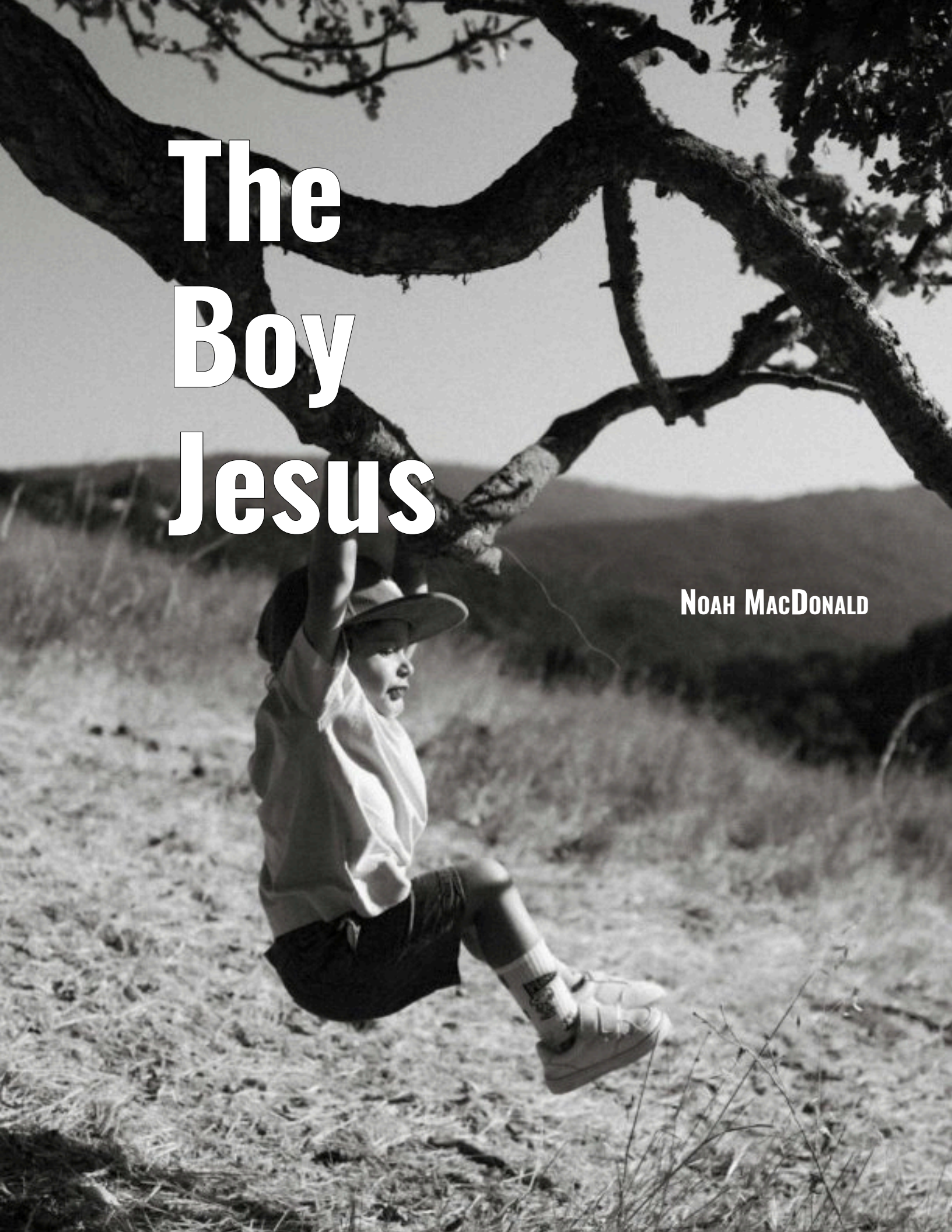
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The Boy Jesus

NOAH MACDONALD



I often think about the boy Jesus.

How soft was His touch, or
How tender was His voice?
What chores did He do at home?
What was His favorite lullaby?

As he laughed with His mom and dad,
Did nature rejoice in the vibrations?
As He pet the donkey at the market,
Did it know that God was in its presence?
As He climbed a tree after Torah lessons,
Did the tree know it would be His demise?

When the boy Jesus studied the scripture,
Did He see His reflection?
When the boy Jesus played with friends,
Did He think one of them would betray Him?
When the boy Jesus scraped His knee,
Did He know that wouldn't be the last time
The Earth would feel the warmth of His blood?

When did Mary tell Him how special He was? At what
moment did He know He was God? How did He feel
knowing that He'd die an awful death? Where did He
learn that He was the answer to God's pain? Why did He
choose to live a sinless life to die for us?

I often think about the boy Jesus
When I read the scriptures,
Pray to Him,
And preach about Him.
I often think about the boy Jesus

And all of His perfection, innocence, and pain.

N.M. James, known as Noah Mac to family and friends, is a writer, actor, and director from South Florida. He is a senior majoring in English (Creative Writing emphasis) and Theatre. In writing work for secular audiences, he aspires to make individuals question their morality, open their minds to differing opinions, and embrace their broken humanity through the lens of biblical principles.



Excellent Sheep

PATRICK G. CONNORS

Modern childhood has become a race toward obtaining the gold medal of a HYP-Ster: a Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Stanford type school. The US News features these at the top of their sacred list each year. If you have been accepted into a HYP-Ster, you have won the race of childhood. However, as I look back on my time at a HYP-Ster (USC), I have been seriously dissatisfied with my experience. Sure, there were a few good parts, but these were countercultural pockets within a system that is overall broken.

The current university system in the United States is broken. Rather than instilling wisdom in students through good teaching solidified by living in community with intellectually curious peers, the university has assumed a consumer model. It “primes the donation pump” and pushes kids into lucrative careers, regardless of whether they are meant to be in them, rather than helping us discover who we truly are and what we are called to do in life.

Professor William Deresiewicz was an English Professor at Yale for a decade. He taught winners of the race of childhood in the promised land of a HYP-Ster. However, he found that when these students “reached the shining destination toward which their entire childhood and adolescence has pointed...many kids find out that they have no idea why they’re there or what they want to do next” (pg 11). This led him to investigate the system that had left his students this way. He recorded his findings in his marvelous book *Excellent Sheep*. The “Stanford Duck syndrome” encapsulates the unhealthy reality of life at elite colleges. On the surface, everyone seems calm, cool, and competent. Like a duck gliding smoothly on water. But a look beneath the water reveals tiny webbed feet desperately paddling to stay afloat. Behind the shiny Instagram posts and accolades, we are struggling. Every year - usually after a student at an elite college commits suicide - national newspapers highlight the college mental health crisis. College students are “feeling pressured, misunderstood, anxious, angry, sad,

and empty...and are responding with eating disorders, cutting, substance abuse, addiction, depression, antisocial behavior, and suicidal thoughts” (pg 50). A brief skim through the anonymous prayer book in the Little Chapel of Silence on our own campus reveals that we are not immune from this crisis. Why is it that these institutions that we have been told our entire life will fulfill us are leading us into a state of such intense misery?

The main poison causing this illness is credentialism: doing things to slap on your resume in order to be accepted into a Blue Chip institution. In high school, the Blue Chips names are HYPSTer undergraduate colleges. If you are one of the lucky few who are admitted, the game of credentialism does not end there. Instead, the goalpost for Blue Chip names moves downfield. Rather than Harvard College, it is now Harvard Law School, Harvard Medical School, or Goldman Sachs. In most high schools, a good portion of your peers are competing in the game of credentialism, but not all. At a prestigious university, everyone is playing. It's how they ended up here.

Hence, the competition, pressure, and insanity increases. As one student put it, “I might be miserable, but were I not miserable, I wouldn't be at Yale” (pg 9).

What is this all for? What is the telos, or ultimate end, of this game of credentialism? Money, power, and prestige. Although these are human temptations that have been around forever, the current system has warped them in a uniquely terrifying way. We have established a society that centers children's lives around preparing for a career that will grant them money,

power, and prestige. It starts from the moment you are born, slowly continues through elementary and middle school, ramps up in high school and continues through college for the rest of your life.

When credentialism kicks up in high school, the commercialization of the student begins. As a high school student you “commodify your experience” (pg 57). From ungodly (and often fabricated) volunteer hours, 800 AP courses, 19 Varsity sports, and curing cancer, you engage in an intense resume arms race with

enemies across the globe trying to impress HYPSTer admissions counselors. In short, you “package yourself for consumption by the admissions office” (pg 57). There is no more childhood nor adolescence. Instead, it is a strictly regimented program of HYPSTer prep.

When you finally arrive at college, this

commercialization continues. It is most evident in grade inflation. Students expect to get an A. And they usually do. Out of a fear of dissatisfying the customer paying nearly half a million dollars over four years, universities appease students. Rather than challenging students to think deeply or differently, professors appease students; they allow for them to do the least amount of work in order to get an A and maintain that sacred 4.0. Students in turn play it safe. Rather than write a paper on a challenging topic they find interesting yet might get a C on, they chose the easy topic that is a guaranteed A.

Within the research model of the university, instruction is seen as a drain on resources. Why would the university pay for great teachers when it can hire

Modern childhood has become a race toward obtaining the gold medal of ... a Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Stanford type school



great researchers who will bring in millions of dollars in grants and boost the school's ranking on the US News list? As a result, "administrators have simply concluded that they need not concern themselves with the quality of undergraduate instruction" (pg 182). In fact, good teaching is "actively discouraged" and seen as the "kiss of death" in terms of tenure (pg 182-183). This leads to the "publish or perish" model of academia in which professors are not incentivized to teach. Instead Professors' "validation and advancement come from research, not teaching." (pg 181).

With few exceptions, most of my classes at USC have sucked. Most professors simply do not care about teaching. They are merely going through the motions required to receive grant money for their research. But even in the few classes that have had good professors (usually in the Religion department), most students do not care to learn. Hence, very few students actually show up. And many of the ones who do are on their MacBooks banging out applications for internships or shopping.

This is a travesty. Education is arguably the most important endeavor for society. True education should leave you with a deeper understanding of life's complexity and mystery. It is supposed to build your mind, not your resume. Education is supposed to allow us to discover who we truly are and what we are called to do, not what career will make us the most money. College is supposed to be the place where adolescents are turned into adults, ready to take on the world and lead it for the next generations. Most of all, college should be the place where we start to answer, "that venerable

pair of questions: what is the good life and how should I live it?" (pg 85).

The current model "that we should take the first four years of young adulthood and devote them to career preparation alone, neglecting every other part of life, is nothing short of obscenity" (pg 87). I have had to fight hard to find good teachers and classes here at USC. "Think about that: you have to fight for what you came for, for what you're paying for. You can get

it, but only if you insist on it. Imagine a hospital that operated on such a basis" (pg 70).

Of course, making money to earn a living and provide for yourself and a family is important. However, making money should not be the main goal for your

career. You need purpose. "Becoming a lawyer isn't a purpose. Becoming a lawyer to defend the rights of workers or to prosecute criminals is" (pg 99). If you are called to be a lawyer, doctor or consultant, by all means go for it. But most students who go into these careers are not. Instead, they go into it for money. As Christ tells us, "what profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mark 8: 36).

A common concern regarding money is for low income students who finally have the opportunity to raise their family out of poverty. Yes, there are a rare few for whom this is the case. But it is very rare. If you are truly poor, you are excluded from the HYP-Ster race from the starting gun. It's expensive to breed kids that have a chance through tutors, test prep programs, travel sports, foreign travel, clubs, private school tuition, and other HYPSTer prep programs. Despite all the recent DEI efforts, HYPSTers

Even in the few classes that
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largely remain boarding schools for rich 18–22 year-olds.

So what do we do with all of this? To start, simply becoming aware that these problems exist and being able to name them is important. After this it's a bit more complicated. At the end of the day, what you must do depends on your specific circumstance.

For me, it is giving up the HYPsters. As Dr. Dere-siewicz said, the US News rankings measure “market position rather than educational quality. Go to a school you connect with, not, as students almost always do, the most prestigious one that lets you in” (pg 201). That is what I did for undergrad. I ran the race toward a HYPster and attended the most prestigious one that let me in (USC).

I am done with this race. For graduate school and beyond, I am done. I do not believe it is possible for me to have a fruitful experience at a HYPster. As one Yale student put it, “it’s hard to build your soul when everyone around you is trying to sell theirs” (pg 192).

Patrick G. Connors is a graduating senior at the University of Southern California (USC)



GLORIA CHANG

BAPTISM AT THE WATER PARK

The Baptists believe baptisms must be done by complete immersion. I'm no Baptist, but I can buy into immersion—

Soak me

head

to

toe,

gasping for air in the drowning of my skin-stained sins.

They say you need a large body of water for immersion.

I ask my mother, on that day where sun struck in pesky angles,

Sunshades and windows down,

the gritty air tasting like highway dust,

Why not the water park?

Take me to the coils of sun bleached plastic slides—

ashy, peeling like my sun-dried ankles. High shrieks amid

roaming pirates with foam swords

holstered with water guns

splashing through pools of refraction and chlorine.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

She anoints me with sunscreen

in circles down my back.

Maybe zinc oxide is

an aroma pleasing to God.

Can you tighten my goggles? I don't

want water getting into them.

Sink me in Rambling River under the red slide.

Will it wash away the glare of my eyes?

I can fall in,

arms

over

chest.

Or lay me down slowly.

I squint hanging to the sun as I submerge.

Water seeps into my eyes.

Or let me get a running start.
Leaping into the air and curling
knees
to
chest
midair
I'll cannonball into the pool and my immersion will
sprinkle everyone.

I can baptize you too at the water park.



Gloria Chang is a graduating Progressive Degree Computer Science student. When the sun is out, she likes sitting on grass and by water, particularly poolsides.



THERE IS NO JESUS WITHOUT MARY

LARRY HARDNETT

If there is one sacramental among the Catholic faithful that stands out in its sheer ubiquity, it is the Rosary. This special prayer provides many Catholics with an avenue of more deeply understanding the mysteries of Jesus' life under the auspices of his blessed mother. But how exactly is this accomplished? St. Louis de Montfort, a great advocate of devotion to the Holy Rosary, characterized the mysteries as "Fifteen shining mirrors which help us to know Jesus and Mary and to know ourselves as well."

The Rosary, therefore, serves as an excellent conduit for self-reflection, spiritual growth, and intimate relationship with God and each other. In a world where the proliferation of technology has allowed us to be more connected than ever there is simultaneously an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. This reality provides an opportunity to explore why the Rosary is so common. One observation that can be made is the startling fact that this prayer has both a devotional character, and a Eucharistic character. Just as Jesus is

present in the Eucharist, he becomes present to us with and through Mary in her Rosary. The method through which this occurs has profound implications not only for our ability to nurture a relationship with the Lord, but also for our interactions with each other with the Rosary as its conduit.

The language of the Eucharist is fundamentally the language of gift. To plumb the depths of this truth through the Rosary, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on their website provides a guide on how to pray and meditate on its mysteries. For each of the mysteries,

Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful, and Glorious, they list various fruits that meditating on each of the decades are meant to produce.

It is these fruits that make explicit how the Rosary manifests its Eucharistic character. In his apostolic letter on the Rosary, *Rosarium Virginis Marie* (RVM), Pope St. John Paul II opined "To recite the Rosary is nothing other than to contemplate with Mary the Face

of Christ.” Knowing this, each decade must in some way point to an aspect of the faithful’s experience with the Eucharist. If we can see the face of Christ in Mary’s Rosary, then in essence we are also seeing the face of our neighbor made in his image. The profound reality of this is reflected in the unity of the faithful achieved through Christ in the reception of communion. No other prayers make such an image possible, and the mysteries of the Rosary bring us even more deeply into the implications they have for us as a connected people.

Firstly, the Sorrowful Mysteries take on a multifaceted character. Father Danaher, a Dominican priest whose order was responsible for wide-spread dissemination

of the Rosary, remarks “Well, to me that appears to be a direct reflection on the Eucharist, because the Eucharist and the cross are one.”

The Eucharist cannot exist without the Cross, and as such the heart of the Cross is imminently present in the heart of the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary as well highlighting its Eucharistic character even further. The mystery of the Crucifixion and death tied to the fruit of sorrow for our sins [is the peak of this Eucharistic expression. The depths of the love of Christ are laid bare on the wood of the cross. Just as in mass, when the cross of Christ is made present on the altar, the Rosary brings about its own kind of Anamnesis, memorialization, of that defining moment of Jesus’ passion. The difference here lies in accompanying Mary and seeing the results of the love of Christ with and through her eyes. In this special participation in Christ’s death, we become able to see what love truly

looks like and what it demands of us. If we are to be one with Jesus through the reception of his Body and Blood then we must be prepared to be like him, love like him, and sacrifice like him. Meditation on this mystery of the Rosary places us right there in a way that almost no other prayer can match.

Joyful Mysteries, in turn, present an image of the faithful’s bodily reception of the Eucharist. In an interview conducted with Father Jonathan Nestico, an asso-

ciate pastor at St. Monica Catholic Community, he explained that they “Remind us of the Incarnation. That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Jesus’ life was exemplified by self-giving love and the power of that divine

If we can see the face of
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neighbor made in his image.

love is nowhere better demonstrated amongst these mysteries than in Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. The visitation is a masterful exemplar of how the Holy Spirit of God changes the fundamental way we interact with him and with each other. Elizabeth and the unborn John recognize Christ in Mary and are spontaneously compelled towards rejoicing. The Mary in her love for her cousin not only receives this greeting but immediately gives it up to the Lord, Magnifying God with her very soul. Jesus, in the gift of himself in the Eucharist empowers us to see him in others and glorify the Lord from the depths of our souls. In the Rosary, the truth of this mystery is made accessible to us which, in turn, will actively spur the ability to live out the greatest commandment of the Lord; to love God, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Following these, the Glorious Mysteries model the powerful after-effects that reception of the Eucharist

can produce. Father Danaher brings particular attention to this point when he quotes St. Thomas Aquinas describing the Eucharist as “Bodily and spiritual refreshment.”

Faith is born in those who taste of the Resurrection, which is why that Glorious Mystery and its fruit embody everything this Eucharistic aspect of the Rosary provides. That refreshment is the trust created when encountering something real and true. The glorified body of Christ is placed into our very hands so that just as St. Thomas the Apostle did, we may touch his hands and feet and side and know with certainty that the one we solemnly cradle is indeed our Lord and our God. Again, Mary shows us the way as we cradle our Rosary, we reverently cradle the Host and mirror her in how she tenderly cradled the infant Jesus in her lap. That gentleness, care, and love extends both to our relationship with the Eucharist, and to our relationships with everyone. In her Rosary, Mary provides us with direct experience of how we are to handle others with faith and charity. She empowers us to take others into our arms and our lives in the same way the reception of Christ Resurrected gives us the strength to continue his mission of love and salvation to the ends of the earth, regardless of what barriers, even potentially death, that appear to be in our way.

Lastly, The Luminous Mysteries take on the most contemplative dimension of all of the mysteries, principally Adoration, or the effects of being in the presence of the Eucharistic Jesus. Father Jonathan, when remarking on the importance of the physical presence of the Eucharist said “It Isn’t just a sign, it tells us that Jesus is still on the earth.”

The fruit bearing the Eucharistic character of this mystery is plain revealed. In the Institution of the Eucharist, with its fruit of Adoration, Jesus instructs our worship of him and fundamentally changes what we are meant to orient everything in our lives around. Just as at the altar he is the head and the center, he is the head and center of the Rosary which points to him un-

der the auspices of his blessed mother. When we take that seriously, and through the Rosary partake in that sacrifice of thanksgiving, we draw ourselves almost as closely to Jesus as we do when we kneel before a monstrance. We experience Christ present in front of us just as truly as Mary did while watching her son perform his great work and minister to every soul who came to him in faith. With such direct sight of the master, we can clearly perceive how he served and in so doing, serve all those in need like him as his disciples.

In the language of gift that typifies the Eucharist, Jesus never ceases to stop giving of everything that he is. In this, he continued to give, even from the cross as he was pouring out his soul for the remission of the sins of the world, resulting in the gift to us of his blessed mother. Elaborating on this mystery in RVM Pope St. John Paul II noted that Mary had a share in her son’s passion and death, making it only natural that one of the chief devotions to her would carry that same share in as much as it relates to her experience of Christ’s life and sacrifice. In this respect, just as there is no Mary without Jesus, there is no Jesus without Mary and the Eucharistic character of the Rosary demonstrates how closely the two are tied together, and in turn illuminate the ties that bind us to each other. With the Rosary, we have in hand our mother, through her the Son, and in him our brother. In the end, few things can be called a greater gift than the love that inspires.

Larry Hardnett is an Art and Design student at Santa Monica College. As a parishioner at St. Monica Catholic Community and member of The Rosary Confraternity, he aims to promote closer, more intimate relationships with Jesus through His blessed mother via writings and stories that are Marian in character.

Afloat

John Bailey

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.²
Heidelberg Catechism

It is so difficult to understand the nature of God's grace when the symbols of it around us fall short of His perfection.

Inevitably,
parents will make mistakes
loved ones will come and go
even nature, one of His crowning creations, will
inevitably
rot and die.

This is what I believe is the hardest part of faith:
the translation of something
incomprehensibly perfect
into the language of the imperfect world around us.

So, it's no surprise that this language of giving yourself up,
both in body and spirit
is sometimes seen as surrender rather than relief;
as a burden on your autonomy rather than a lifting of weight off your soul.

It requires a strong faith to see
the glimpses of perfection in the imperfection
of life on Earth
faith that is so difficult for so many.

But it is so important to keep this faith, because after all, in these worldly relationships,
there are glimpses of what it means to surrender to God's grace;
glimpses of what it truly feels like when you no longer become your own.



It's the feeling
To me, being afloat is the embrace of the story of your soul as a sailboat,
with a wooden hull
bisected by a mast and single white sail.

It's enjoying
the invisible hand of God pushing you forward
like a warm westerly wind.

It's understanding
that sometimes the invisible power of God is just that,
as you bob up and down,
motionless on a sea of uncertainty.

It's accepting
the fact that sometimes His might will push you off the course you have plotted,
for a new opportunity is almost always just over the horizon.

No longer
will you struggle against the tide of worldly truths.

No longer
do you have to worry about what is just over the crest of the next wave.

No longer
will you have to put up the façade of being anything other than a simple vessel for God's glory.

And wherever your sailboat goes,
you remember that you are not your own
that your soul can finally rest.

It's the feeling
you got as a child that no matter how big and scary the world was, your parents could
protect you.

It's the feeling
of being totally and utterly vulnerable as you look into the eyes of someone you love.

It's the feeling
of a friend's unrequited sacrifice, no matter how big or how small.
These are the feelings of being afloat.

John Bailey is a USC student majoring in Finance.



The Playing Fields of Heaven and Earth

ETHAN INMAN

NFL player Matt Overton's Christian upbringing is one that many people can relate to. Growing up in a traditional Catholic home, Overton knew about and believed in Jesus, but carried out his faith more like a set of religious habits than a relationship with Jesus Christ.

College turned out to be a fork in the road of faith for Overton. As he became an adult and began to take ownership over his own life, he fortunately pursued Christian community that would shape and mold his faith into something greater. But interestingly, Overton didn't find Christ through a new church, campus ministry, or even a classmate's testimony. He found Christ on his college football team.

"It wasn't until college when I joined my first Bible study through my team chaplain, Rick Todd, up at Western Washington that I really started to actually learn the Bible and not just have this Bible as like a symbol on the mantle," Overton said.

The concept of a team chaplain is incredibly inter-

esting. Western Washington University is a public, secular university, yet they provide a team chaplain employed by the university to help players prioritize and grow in their Christian faith. This is common across the sport of football. A segment on the TODAY show this past December about Baltimore Ravens' team chaplain Johnny Shelton pointed out that every NFL team has a Christian team chaplain.

As Overton's faith grew and transformed into a walk with God, his Heavenly Father began writing an incredible story of perseverance, trust, and contentment through Overton's career, which would take him to the highest highs and the lowest lows in the football world.

Overton's college career was a far cry from the money-fueled luxury that many modern college football stars experience. He worked at Home Depot to make ends meet, even taking a shift during the Super Bowl, setting his sights on the NFL with only a few dollars and a dream.

“I remember...pushing carts in the parking lot of Home Depot listening to the Super Bowl while [Adam] Vinatieri kicks a game-winner against the [Carolina] Panthers,” Overton said. “My dream was always the NFL and I was in college, uncertain of where I was going to go from there and I didn’t know where long snapping would take me.”

Overton had switched to the position of long snapper in college which is perhaps the least glamorous and most hyper-specialized position in all of sports. Most casual football fans don’t even know the long snapper position exists. Es-

entially, a long snapper’s job is to snap the ball like a center does on a typical football play. However, they do so on special teams plays such as punts and field goals that require a snap to travel a long distance. They’re usually on the field only a few plays a game and most fans don’t notice their existence.

But it’s one of the most grueling and demanding positions in that it requires absolute perfection. One bad snap and you can lose your job. Since it is so specialized, you’re expected to be perfect at it, even during high stress situations. So chasing the NFL dream as a long snapper was extremely difficult. For a while, it didn’t take Overton anywhere.

“It took six years after college to finally make an NFL roster,” Overton recalled.

But when he finally did, he found himself in the perfect position at the perfect time. Overton made the Indianapolis Colts roster in 2012 and found himself

suddenly snapping for Adam Vinatieri, widely considered the greatest kicker of all time. He is also the same kicker Overton heard kick the game winning field goal in the Home Depot parking years prior.

“Walking into that locker room and knowing I’d be working with Vinatieri, the GOAT, it was a lot of pressure,” Overton said. “I would have never imagined be-

ing able to play alongside him for five years and having the success that we had.”

“Early on in my career, football was everything,” Overton said. “I put it in the forefront of my life, it was my dream, it was everything. I

put so much into it, it took me a long time to reach the NFL but once I got there it was like I had to stay there. My identity was in football.”

Overton compared this struggle to what a lot of Christians tend to face as they pursue a career and try to balance it with other priorities.

“I think a lot of [people], whether it’s in sports or your job, you soak that identity in and it gets so instilled in your everyday life that things that are way more important, whether it’s your family or your faith, get pushed aside,” Overton said. “So I struggled throughout my career with that identity.”

But the Colts’ faith based outlook on team culture really changed everything for Overton. The Colts preach faith, family, football. “Those are the three pillars, the cornerstones of the organization,” Overton said.

Overton explained that the Colts preached those three in that order, with faith coming first always. That

The position of long snapper in is perhaps the least glamorous and most hyper-specialized position in all of sports. Most casual football fans don’t even know the position exists.

culture trickled down to many within the organization and Overton was blessed with many different spiritual leaders, including team chaplain Eric Simpson and quarterback Matt Hasselbeck. This made the Colts a special situation for Overton's growth in faith. In 2014, while he was a member of the Colts, Overton took a huge step in his walk with God alongside those two men who walked by his side during the everyday grind of the football season.

"I got baptized in 2014 at PAO (the Pro Athletes Outreach conference) with my peer Matt Hasselbeck; and team pastor Eric Simpson baptized me at that conference," Overton said.

There are no words to sum up Overton's gratitude for God's perfect timing in bringing him to Indianapolis when he did.

"Playing with those guys was such a blessing and God revealed His faithfulness in the process," Overton said.

Like all things in life, Overton's time with the Colts eventually came to an end. In 2017, he was released by Indianapolis. Since then, Overton hasn't found a permanent football home. He has bounced around to many different teams such as the Jacksonville

Jaguars, Tennessee Titans, Los Angeles Chargers, and Dallas Cowboys, never staying long enough to establish any kind of football legacy with those teams like he did in Indy. But Overton, full of faith, has been unfazed by all the uncertainty.

"God will take me where he wants me to be," Overton said. "There's a lot of freedom in not worrying about your status... I get more of a thrill being on a team where I can now use the locker room as a ministry."

Much of this attitude is because he chooses to see the bright side and the opportunities afforded by

bouncing around to different NFL franchises.

"This football thing is so temporary, it's not really that big of a deal," Overton said. "It's not that important, what's important is the relationships, building those men up and leading others to Christ. That's been something that I've really realized over the last five years, and every step of the way, every different team has been such a blessing because now I get to meet these new guys, fellowship with these new guys, my wife gets to do the same thing."

Yeah it's hard, it's hard to go to a new team and new city and move your family around but there's massive blessings in that process."

Now, Overton's football future is in question; he doesn't have a contract for the 2024 season and at 38 years old, he's not exactly in the middle of his athletic prime. But, he's established himself as a spiritual and practical leader for young long snappers and football players of all kinds, everywhere. His advice for young players is simple but massively important.

"Just stay bold," Overton said. "Just stay bold in your walk, don't be ashamed to speak and just walk in the light."

Matt Overton is a great example for those young players of a man

who is never backing down.

Because from the Home Depot parking lot to the NFL Pro Bowl, he knows who to thank for everything he has.

"This football thing is so temporary, it's not really that big of a deal."

Ethan Inman is a junior at USC studying journalism with a minor in cinematic arts. He hopes to pursue a career in sportswriting. He is especially passionate about writing feature stories and glorifying God through athlete testimonies



Dialogue in the Age of AI

JOSEPH WANG

As many modern writers would contend, the state of modern discourse is fragmented. Our culture seems fractured by smartphones, social media, and everything that was promised to make us more connected and intelligent.

And personally, I have felt more stimulated and overwhelmed in this phase of life than in almost any previous one, though perhaps that comes with the process of becoming an adult and experiencing the force that is all of human society.

Dialogue has been a topic of conversation since ancient times. Some of our earliest western texts, from Socrates, are written as dialogues; in *The Republic*, Socrates discusses his topics of justice and politics in a back-and-forth, question-and-answer format with Athenian residents, the brothers of Pato, and other Greek orators. As one commentator would note, Socrates “confined himself to conversations” (Melissa Lane).

In time, the Socratic method became adopted by disciplines as varied as education and psychotherapy.

Phrases such as “Why do you say that?” or “Tell me more about ...” are derived from this approach.

And in recent time, this was even used by computer scientists. One of the first applications of “artificial intelligence” was Eliza, a chatbot designed as a Rogerian psychotherapist. Though based on keyword identification and templated responses—little more than a parrot in practice—it caught the public’s curiosity. Standard phrases again emerged, for example: “Are such questions on your mind often?” Nonetheless, here a computer was not just crunching numbers; it was talking to people, a supposed human feat.

This initial line of research has only exploded in popularity since; the 21st century introduced Siri, Alexa, and now ChatGPT (decidedly a different kind of chatbot, but a conversational agent nonetheless).

In fact, I believe how artificial intelligence handles language and dialogue actually helps illuminate human speech.

The concept of language is a decidedly tricky one to begin with. For a long time, language was viewed as so fundamental to human development that it was assumed to be innate to the human experience; a child raised among wolves should still be able to learn to converse. Yet that is not quite so. Some level of communication may be innate, whether through physical gestures or general sounds, but human languages as we know them, whether English, Latin, or Arabic, are specific, cultural expressions.

Language and conversation, of all domains, seemed the least likely for a machine to master.

In many ways, how today's deep learning models function is related to the human neuron. The first artificial neural network—a group of interconnected nodes that received signals from each other—was designed to mimic the human brain. In this process, the program would “learn,” with the weights of each node being affected by the strength of the signals it was receiving; this was akin to human neuroplasticity, where neurons can continually form new connections, even past childhood.

These days, many modernists and transhumanists try to push the comparison between artificial intelligence and the human brain even further. Reversing the analogy, they claim the human brain is, in fact, a computer. Our consciousness is nothing more than a saved program state; gray matter is just memory.

I would argue, however, that the similarities between the human and the machine stop earlier. Ultimately, while a machine may statistically generate text or answer a question, the very concepts of comprehension and consciousness seem odd in a machine context.

When a toddler first learns to speak, the very act of acquiring language informs their sense of self and the world; for example, learning the word hot becomes experientially associated with fresh muffins but also the oven, and this understanding affects their future actions and preferences. “I like hot food,” they may one day utter. In this example, what would it mean for a machine to

have preferences, let alone empathy or a sense of the divine?

And if language is an expression of the self, then dialogue—between two “selves”—is much more than just functional communication. It has the opportunity to affect another person's state of emotion, consciousness, and entire being.

This kind of dialogue is uniquely human; even

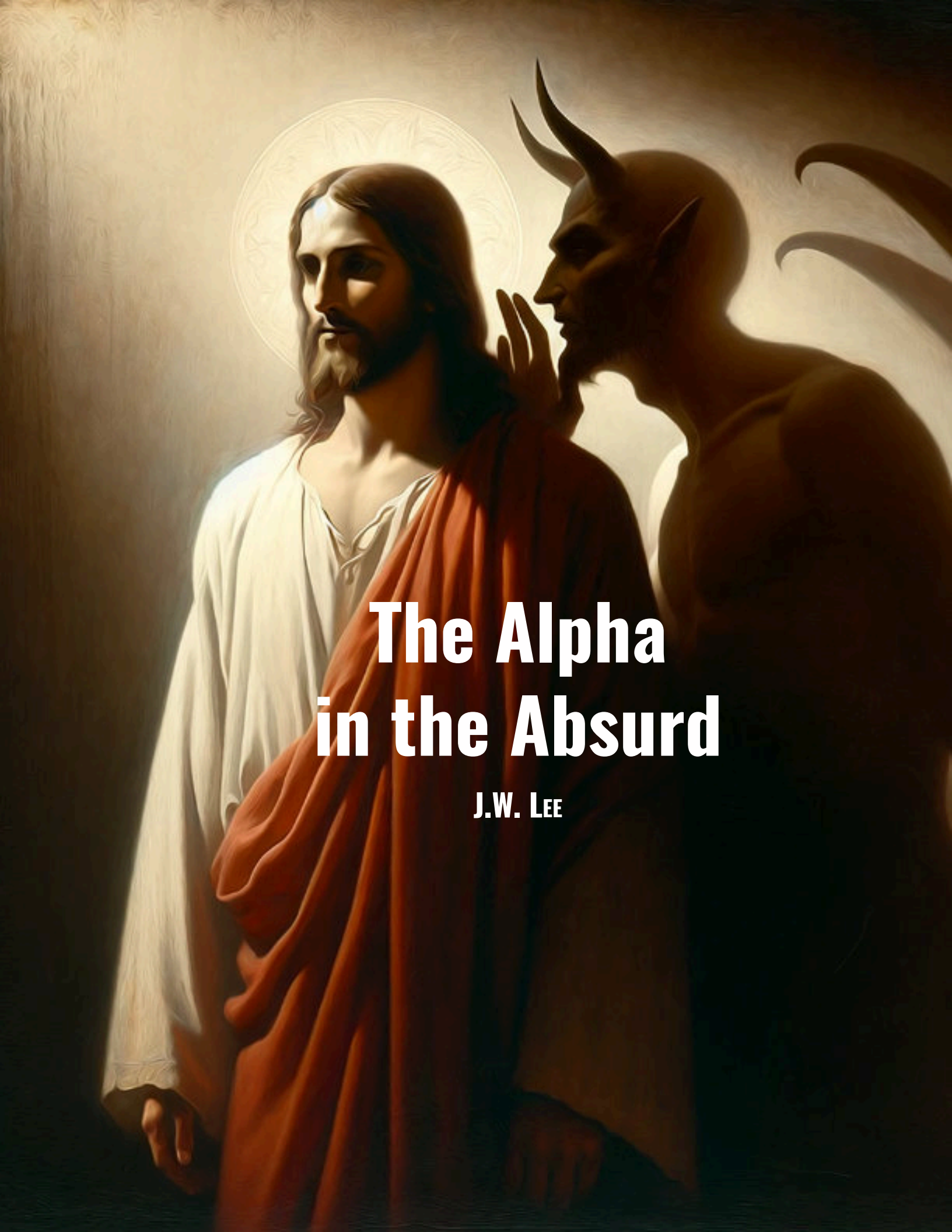
This kind of dialogue is uniquely human; even putting two chatbots in conversation is not akin to the social effects of one person talking to another.

putting two chatbots in conversation is not akin to the social effects of one person talking to another. To be clear, the dialogue here discussed would mean more than just a perfunctory greeting or small talk; what is being considered is patient, curious, compassionate dialogue. Unfortunately, in this type of dialogue the machine only approximates the human. Also unfortunate is that I do not have the time nor space to explore the philosophical or theological perspective, which might offer truer answers.

Perhaps what is best is to again imitate Socrates: drop the pen, and carry on talking.

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The Alpha in the Absurd

J.W. LEE

Dust has tried to make man. We live in a fallen world, and thus we live with absurdities. The cosmos is not absurd, but we have turned absurd.

God made a meaningful world, but we humans have made it absurd for ourselves. In the beginning, the Word, the Wisdom, the Logos, the Logic of God created a good world, a world rooted in the transcendentals, the meaningful qualities of He Who is Truth and Goodness and Beauty and Love. The creation is not the matrix, but it is ruled under laws, like that of physics and biology.

And yet, as we know, Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. It was not so much just the physical rebellion that plunged us into sin, thus absurdity, but the irrational anti-wisdom that we listened to. It was the intent in the bite, that intention rooted in blasphemous anxiety. That lie that God hates us, that He made us to destroy and enslave us in our material bodies against wisdom, that He gave us consciences to deny us the pleasures of the garden. To have listened to this is absurd, as God made us in His Image, His likeness, thus to reflect Wisdom, Knowledge, and Good Enjoyment. We already had what the liar said we didn't.

What is the absurd?

It can mean the absence of meaning, an all-for-nothing. My friends have described this world as absurd, that nothing ultimately matters, that the earth is just a speck of dust in a vast, expanding galaxy. It's true that the earth is small in this cosmos.

It can mean that truth is just a concept. It is to

build one's home on a foundation of sand, or, for the nihilists, to think one is building on a foundation of rock when we don't know what a rock is. It is the classic allegory of the blind people feeling and describing an elephant, and claiming that the leg is the elephant, wait, no, it's the trunk, wait, it's really the ear, no, etc.

It is the classic myth of Sisyphus, who rolls the boulder

to the top of the mountain only for the boulder to roll down, giving partial illustration to Solomon's cry that all is vanity, fleeting like the wind (Ecclesiastes 1:2). History has made progress and regress, thus in a stalemate. One revolution comes, the reactionaries then follow. Human behaviors are not easily explainable, especially in the wake of

One of the reasons why we are in this mess is because we try to toy with Truth, to use it as a whip rather than as a gentle Shepherd's rod.

science.

I think one of the reasons why we are in this mess is because we try to toy with Truth, to use it as a whip rather than as a gentle Shepherd's rod. The Truth, in recent memory in times like the fifties, was seen, correctly, as something we can't change. And yet "truth" was used as a means of slavery, for Truth was not really understood. The normal was seen as Truth, and the normal was not always what God intended. Truth meant sterility, blandness. The idea of Truth is seen as a means of oppression rather than freedom, because people tied the legs of people's imaginations with chains of needless restraint.

For example, there is the suffering of Job, who suffered things he did not understand. Yet the observers, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, thought they knew. And what they said had inklings of truth, that God is just and oftentimes we have sins that we don't admit. But

their replies were still absurd, for they did not know everything and yet claimed to have the eyes of God, in a way. They proposed meaning, and yet they gave long, meaningless replies. In the Name of Truth, they spoke falsely. Even in the Name of Truth, they told perspectives of a God Who is mindlessly Just, a Judge Who is right but has no heart. Their version of Truth had no compassion, no pity for sinners.

As fallen creatures, we're quick to apply meaning where we don't understand. It is the mistake of the college student who thinks "London bridge is falling down" is a proto-socialist work, and that all of the tragedies of the world are a result of capitalism. It is also the mistake of the wealthy man who looks down at the working class and claims that the truth is the poor's suffering comes from a lack of trying. The far right today are a bunch of Bildads, Eliphazes, and Zophars, touting for the return of meaning when often it means just what's convenient for them. It is Shapiro's slander, that Truth doesn't care about feelings. It is the arrogance of Crowder, who screams loudly but says less than a wordless whisper.

And yet it is not all a matter of victimhood. We have our temptations and lusts. I think there is a sense of people claiming absurdity in order to do whatever they want, sophistry in favor of self-indulgence. It is a temper tantrum with a higher vocabulary. It is good to assess how we understand things, but it is evil to call all things a construct, to think all authority is bad, to call for a revolution all day long and in the meantime spinning like a meandering wheel. I remember a friend telling me that a revolution is to get rid of authority, but that is absurd, for a lack of law is itself a law. Not all nihilists are hedonists, but hedonism is oftentimes nihilism.

This narcissistic hedonism is also often, but not always, a response to the abuse of truth. If one is denied the blessings of sweets as a child, they may overindulge as an adult. But a lot of the time, this is not even preceded by an abuse of "truth," but the simple madness

of the pursuit of one's selfish forms of happiness where neither God nor neighbors nor other parts of His creation really exist. The only meaning in this type of absurdity is my own gratification. Even the little kitten right in front of me doesn't really matter; who cares if I kick it?

When a kid kills an ant with a magnifying glass, I assume it's out of almost seeing the ant as a non-entity, a thing for our amusement. Likewise, whenever anyone slips into pornography, it is the madness, the irrationality, of treating my fellow human beings as nothing more than meat, non-human beings who only talk dirty. Whereas within Truth, sex is a sacred blessing and reflection of Triune God, outside Truth sex becomes a desecrated desert, where the union of flesh becomes two automobiles crashing into disaster.

This is the case in David's abuse of Bathsheba. David had all the blessings one can ask for. He was a King from being a Shepherd. He had much victory, protection, and two wives, one who was rather lovely. He carried the Ark of the Covenant. He had a great relationship with God. But what did he do? He turned against this. He turned against the reality of his blessings in search of "more". He looked out of his kingdom and essentially coerced a woman, who was most likely washing according to a Levitical ritual, into sleeping with her.

Not only that, Bathsheba was the wife of someone dear to David, Uriah. Thus David not only assaulted, but he assaulted someone vulnerable who was the beloved of his friend. David was a man who studied the Torah, the Law, day and night, and yet he thought this extramarital and abusive "one night stand" was alright. As long as he wanted it, what did it matter? And David, who knows that God sees all, tries to hide his sin, and does the irrational thing and murders Uriah, who Bathsheba loved, by sending him to war.

David was mad, indeed absurd, for, as Koreans like me say, the front and back don't match. And by mad, I personally mean going straight ahead into something

he should already know was against the Divine Law. Truth becomes relative, and it's more loving to accept one for their views. God becomes a distant yet spoiling Father. There isn't right or wrong. A human is indeed less than nothing because of their skin color, a woman was asking for it as she awakened my desires, a child should be thrown out when we feel like it, and other such lies abound when Truth is thrown out. Lawlessness suddenly becomes known as freedom, when it is really the worst kind of slavery, for a human loses all outlines and spills ink and turns into a splotch. This is the heresy of Jean Paul-Sartre, the hatred and bitterness of Karl Marx, the madness of the Roman Empire, the stench of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. Questions become excuses, inquiries into indulgences.

Absurdity is the twisting of Truth and Love, the result of obscuring Wisdom from our eyes, the misrepresentation of the High Priest of Heaven, to claim that we're the ones to be worshiped rather than the Creator. It is the classic joke of scientists who claim they can make mankind at God's face, but He tells them, fairly, that they must make their own dirt. We think we can make ourselves from the ground up, when we are but dust.

Dust tries to make man. That's absurdity. The root of all absurdity is sin and pride, and sin and pride are rooted in anxiety. It is that old, untreated anxiety and phobia of God, the very thing that makes us run away from Truth. God has formed us from the dust, and yet we creations run to become dust again.

And oftentimes, even when writing this, I wonder if we can really understand meaning. The key question to all of this is "Why?" To return to Job, one of the biggest questions is that grand "Why?" Why does suf-

fering happen to people who haven't attracted bad "karma"? Why do we not understand if there is something meant to be understood? Why do people get harmed for nothing? Why do we roll the boulder up? Why do we even try to find meaning? Why do we build when we know it will erode? And to return to David, his brand of absurdity is in the question "Why not?". Why not just get carried away? Why not just punch my neighbor in the face? Why not say terrible things to the person who made me feel horrible? Why not murder my mugger? Why not sin when there is forgiveness? Why not hate?

God of Job and David understands. He knows our frame on a first hand basis (Psalm 103:14, Hebrews 4:15).

God is Truth and Love.

There is a quote attributed to a man named Paul Claudel: "Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence." I think Jesus did

come to end suffering, but not right now. He came to lay the foundation of ending suffering.

Jesus Christ is Logos, He is the Wisdom, Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Love, Word, Logic of the Father expressed in human form, made known to us by the Holy Spirit (Colossians 1:15). He is the One Who defeated nihilism, for He went through and surpassed the most absurd situation of all. Why do I claim that?

Remember when Pontius Pilate asked the Way, the Truth, and the Life "Quid ist veritas?, What is Truth?" to His face? (John 18:38) That is what I mean.

Jesus Christ is Love, and yet He was treated with scorn. He was treated as a terrible person to the point of being crucified, the worst form of public execution, when He is the Righteousness of God, thus perfect Justice. He is the Wisdom and Truth of God, but was

God has formed us from the dust, and yet we creations run to become dust again.

ridiculed and accused. He is the Life, in Whom we have our being, but we decided to put the One Who we owe our breath to death on the cross (Acts 17:23). He is the King of all Creation, and yet the creation thinks they will judge the King of the Cosmos. He is the Beauty of God, and yet we abused His body and heart.

He is the Messiah for sinners, yet sinners spurned the Messiah. He is the Victorious Son of Eve, the true descendant of Abraham, the real Son of David, the Lamb of the Prophets, the Word of the Psalms, the Hope of Israel, the Divine Son of Man, and yet the Jews ran after traditions of men.

He is the Real Expected Hero of the Truthful Myths, the Face of the Unknown God, the True Telos, the True Dao, the Bread and Water of Life, the Wine of God's Vine, the Firstborn of Creation, and yet the Gentiles ran after their ignorance.

Jesus was buried in the tomb after enduring the absurdities of this existence. And yet, on the third day, the Truth endured the grave. For absurdity is a pseudoscience based on the results of, to paraphrase Hamlet, travelers who didn't come back from that undiscovered country. Jesus Christ trampled absurdity by absurdity, as He trampled death by death. This is the One Who came back, the One Who brings the victory of Truth. When He stepped out of the tomb, He has told the whole of creation that her Creator is not a mindless Judge nor a spoiling Father, but is the loving Judge and attentive Father. God is not dead, but is the most alive Being.

We can only endure if there is hope. We are not made to be meaningless. The reason why we still acknowledge something known as Hope is because we were made for Truth. The reason why we still acknowledge Meaning is because we were made for Love. We do not find meaning in the absurd, but rather the absurd points to the meaning. Jesus Christ, being God, tells us that the Truth understands and that Love knows.

It is not all for nothing, for Everything has walked through nothing and all things.

We only perceive absurdity with our clouded eyes, but in sanctification and love He takes away the splotches from our eyes.

Marriage is not a meaningless institution but one of immense good and benefits.

Food is not the means of survival but a means of communion with God and neighbor.

This is all possible for God has entered into our walk, and He, in human flesh, has endured it all and survived. Job knows his God cares enough to suffer with him, and David understands that he has offended the One Who suffers for him.

This might not have been explained in the best words, but my failures do not negate the meaningfulness of God, He Who becomes our Logos in faith.

I can't give a commentary on the absurdities of life, but I can point to the One Who is the Commentary.

Come, let us reason with each other, as Prophet Isaiah says, and all of it in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, the Conqueror over absurdity (1:18). For absurdity is rooted in sin and thus in pride and anxiety. Jesus Christ has defeated absurdity by conquering over sin, making us humbled by His humility, and told us to not fear.

God has made nameless and unformed dust into man again.

Jang Woo "JW" Lee studies Film and Television Production at USC School of Cinematic Arts, emphasis on writing, directing, editing. When he's not writing, directing, editing, or making sound effects, he's writing poetry, short stories, essays, or stage-plays, or possibly sculpting, drawing, performing, and attempts at cooking. He loves having tea parties, smoking cigars and pipes, going to the theatre and cinema, attempting to read books, and socializing (if you hear a large laugh, it could be him). Theologically he is currently a Lutheran-leaning Anglican, focusing on showing the love of the Triune God in things good, true, and beautiful and the remembrance of Jesus Christ in all things.

Gentle Whispers

MICAH OWENS

My Creator
stands at the front,
The subject of the lecture.
His Teachings will last a lifetime
but I can barely hear His Voice,
as I watch others transform from His mere
Presence
while I sit in the back,
feeling the impostor.

The deadline is approaching
and I have no idea what I'm doing.
I try to pull together the pieces of me
I stuffed beneath the bed.
Stuck like gum under the desk,
I call them water under the bridge
but I still feel the pain
from stitches ripped out too soon
and scars the tender purple
of royalty in a dying kingdom.

I raise my hand,
but the pastor says,
"Please hold all questions until the end."

The devil sits on my shoulder
as I try to read His Word,
branding my sins as scarlet letters
across my heart.
I fall short of His Grace
as I know I should
and find nothing but
dust at the foot of the
cross.

But in the end,
When I have nothing left
Except complete surrender,
He arrives.
He picks me up,
dusts me off,
placing soft hands over my burns,
and carries me across the sand,
whispering,
"You are mine."

And those are the only words I need to hear.



Cyberpunk: God's Favorite Genre

MAX BURLEW

Ask any follower of Christ for an exemplary piece of Christian fiction, and it's likely they'll direct you to what I consider the "Big Three" works of literature: Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis's Narnia series, and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Considering the allegorical richness and profound spiritual themes in each of these classics, it's not too hard to consider them beloved staples of the faith. By way of fantasy and folk-ish genres, then, Christians often find themselves comfortably nestled in worlds where the battle between good and evil is palpable and uncomplicated, and where redemption arcs are as common as the rising sun.

Beyond these beloved genres, however, there exists a genre that rarely finds its way onto the shelves of Christian bookstores or the recommendations of Sunday school teachers: cyberpunk. Compared to the Big Three, the cyberpunk genre's neon-lit dystopias and techno-paranoiac visions appear to be distant from

any semblance of Christian virtue or spiritual depth. Yet, beneath the genre's chrome-plated veneer of cybernetic enhancements and corporate machinations, there lies foundational concepts that, surprisingly, resonate with some of Christianity's most fundamental truths. Specifically, cyberpunk finds itself concerned with topics such as the depravity of humanity, struggles against oppression, and an oftentimes overwhelming search for redemption and transcendence in a materialistic world.

High-Tech, Low-Life

Because cyberpunk worlds take on an aesthetic and mood that seems more dystopian than divine, the notion of human depravity takes on a hauntingly tangible form. Indeed, it's within these dystopian, dark, and rainy cityscapes where one can find a reflection of humanity at its most raw and unfiltered.

The tabletop role-playing game *Cyberpunk Red*, for

example, thrusts players into the chaotic world of the Dark Future, where society teeters on the brink of collapse. In the game's core rulebook, the world is described as such: "The [Megacorporations] raised armies, fought for international domination, and shaped everything around them, while below the glittering towers of the ultra-rich seethed an ever-growing population of destitute, starving people scrambling just to survive" (248). Night City, the game's primary setting, epitomizes this dystopian vision—a cesspool of crime, corruption, and moral ambiguity where the line between right and wrong blurs amidst the glare of neon lights.

The Netflix series *Altered Carbon*, based on the book by Richard Morgan, offers yet another glimpse into a future where humanity's moral compass has lost its bearing. Set in a world where consciousness can be digitized and transferred between bodies, the show explores themes of identity, mortality, and the commodification of human life. In the neon streets of Bay City, characters navigate a society where the pursuit of power and pleasure reign supreme, leaving little room for empathy or compassion.

In comparing these cyberpunk worlds to the Christian concept of human depravity, we can find striking parallels. As Christians, we see this idea actualized in the terms and expression of Original Sin in Genesis 3. That is, the initial fall of humanity – and therefore the tendency to sin – is not something that becomes built into the fabric of our being but rather sets us up as creatures in need of guidance to keep us aligned with God. Philosopher Jonny Thomson explains this as a "Shakespearean tragic element," noting that "free will is what makes us the beloved of God, but it is also our downfall. It is what makes us brilliant, but it is also that which causes all our suffering and misery." Similarly, cyberpunk narratives portray a world in which the pursuit of power and pleasure has eclipsed moral considerations, leading to the degradation of society and the erosion of human dignity.

"Rise Above, We're Gonna Rise Above"

Just as the bleak landscapes of the cyberpunk genre serve as a backdrop for the moral decay of humanity, they also bear witness to the particular resilience of individuals who dare to resist the oppressive forces that seek to subjugate them. Deep in the neon-lit streets and shadowy alleyways of these narratives, we encounter protagonists who, despite facing insurmountable odds, rise up against tyranny in a bid for freedom and justice.

As described before, *Cyberpunk Red* positions players in a world where megacorporations wield unchecked power, exploiting the masses for their own gain. Yet amidst the rampant inequality and oppression, pockets of resistance emerge as ordinary citizens band together to fight for their rights and dignity. The game's core rulebook paints a vivid picture of this struggle, establishing that:

Cyberpunk characters are the heroes of a bad situation, working to make it better (or at least survivable) whenever they can. Whether it takes committing crimes, defying authority, or even outright revolution, the quintessential Cyberpunk Character is a rebel with a cause. (28)

Similarly, in *Altered Carbon*, viewers are introduced to a world where the divide between the haves and have-nots has reached staggering proportions. Yet amidst the opulence of the elite and the squalor of the underclass, whispers of revolution stir as disenfranchised individuals rise up against their oppressors. Led by charismatic leaders and fueled by a burning desire for freedom, these rebels challenge the status quo, daring to defy the powers that seek to keep them in chains.

It is important to note that more often than not, the protagonists of cyberpunk media are regular people pushed into dire circumstances. In the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, a video game based off of the

Cyberpunk Red system and setting, this manifests in the revelation that the protagonist, known as V, has been given a short time to live after inserting a prototype “chip” into his brain. The chip, containing a personality construct of formerly deceased “Rockerboy” punk terrorist Johnny Silverhand (played by a suave Keanu Reeves), begins an irreversible process that will result in V’s memories being overwritten with those of Johnny. A (narratively fortuitous) consequence of this process is V gaining the ability to engage in conversation with the rockerboy, their relationship at first beginning with an extreme tension but later developing into a mutual understanding of each other’s place in the world. In a moment where V is sickest, Johnny suggests restarting his radical war with the megacorporation Arasaka, to which V responds mockingly, “And there it is – the crusade. Get to [Arasaka], smash the System.” Johnny looks past V’s scoffing and begins to explain his motivations:

I saw corps strip farmers of water ... and eventually of land. Saw them transform Night City into a machine fueled by people’s crushed spirits, broken dreams and emptied pockets. Corps’ve long controlled our lives, taken lots... and now they’re after our souls! V, I’ve declared war not because capitalism’s a thorn in my side or outta nostalgia

for an America gone by. This war’s a people’s war against a system that’s spiraled outta our control. It’s a war against the fucking forces of entropy, understand?

Of course, Johnny’s methods are as violent as they are because violence itself is the precedent set by corporations in the time of 2077. The society of 2077 is practically made of crystallized violence, and it appears to Johnny that the only way to achieve meaningful change is through similar scales of violence because every other avenue of change has been sacrificed at the shrine of capital accumulation. While the notion of rebellion and resistance against oppressive forces may evoke discomfort or even fear in some readers, it’s essential to contextualize these themes within the broader framework of Christian doctrine and history.

I would not be surprised if the reader is scared at this point. Is this article really positioning anti-capitalist cyber-terrorist sympathies as an equal to Christian doctrine? No, of course not. However, one may recall the suspected existence of a militaristic aspect of the Messiah to the Jewish people pre-Christ. Specifically, the Florilegium from Quran contains multiple ancient messianic prophecies which make clear that one who destroys a pagan army will, after

Cyberpunk narratives portray a world in which the pursuit of power and pleasure has eclipsed moral considerations, leading to the degradation of society and the erosion of human dignity.

the battle, be recognized as the Messiah and “give you rest from all your enemies.”

In the case of Johnny Silverhand in *Cyberpunk 2077*, his militant stance against the “corpo-rats” is driven by a deep-seated conviction that the current social order perpetuates inequality and exploitation on a massive scale. While his methods may be extreme, his underlying message echoes themes found throughout scripture, where prophets and revolutionaries challenge oppressive regimes and advocate for the rights of the downtrodden. Just as the Jewish people awaited a messianic figure who would bring deliverance from their oppressors, so too do the characters in cyberpunk narratives yearn for a savior who will lead them out of bondage and into freedom.

However, it’s important to note that the comparison between cyberpunk rebellion and biblical prophecy is not without its complexities. While both may share a common goal of liberation, the means by which this liberation is achieved can vary significantly. This is why Johnny Silverhand is very much an antagonist of the Christian norm, whereas V, as a player-controlled character in terms of both in-game action and dialogue, often pleads to find “another way” to resolve the main conflict. As Christians, we are called to embody the principles of love, mercy, and compassion, even in the midst of conflict and struggle. Ultimately, the true measure of our rebellion lies not in the scale of our violence, but in the depth of our commitment to justice and righteousness

Ctrl+Alt+Redeem

It’s true that the surrounding world generates a great deal of stress and concern for characters in cyberpunk media, but internal journeys are just as critical and are oftentimes spurred by that which occurs in the world around them. That is, protagonists are not only forced to grapple with the harsh realities of their dystopian existence but also must embark on a deeply personal journey in search of redemption and/or

transcendence. In the wake of societal collapse and moral decay, these protagonists confront their own inner demons and strive to find meaning and purpose amidst the chaos that surrounds them.

Just as rebellion against oppression serves as a central theme in cyberpunk narratives, so too does the quest for redemption,

transcendence, and a feeling of “leaving your mark” in the world. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, V’s journey is not merely one of survival amidst the chaos of Night City but also a quest for redemption in the face of impending doom. Plagued by the terminal illness brought on by the prototype chip, V grapples with the inevitability of their own mortality while navigating a world consumed by greed, violence, and corruption.

Similarly, *Altered Carbon* directly puts characters in a position to grapple with questions of identity, mortality, and the nature of existence in a world where consciousness can be digitized and transferred between bodies. As protagonist Takeshi Kovacs delves into the mysteries of his own past, he confronts the ghosts of his former selves and wrestles with the consequences of his actions. Through his journey, moreover, Kovacs

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measure of our rebellion
lies not in the scale of our
violence, but in the depth
of our commitment to
justice and righteousness

seeks not only to uncover the truth about his own identity but also to find redemption for his past sins and transgressions.

The search for redemption and transcendence in cyberpunk media, then, serves as a powerful reminder of the human capacity for growth, transformation, and renewal. Even though the paths to salvation may be fraught with obstacles and challenges – and the bleak dystopian possibility that there may be no real end-game or realization to actually achieve – the journey itself is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring hope for a better tomorrow. As Christians, we are called to embrace this journey with humility and grace, recognizing that true redemption comes not from our own efforts but from the unmerited love and forgiveness of a higher power.

Shutting Down

From the chaotic streets of Night City in *Cyberpunk 2077* to the digital frontier of *Altered Carbon*, it is clear that cyberpunk narratives offer a lens through which

we may explore some of Christianity's most fundamental truths. Cyberpunk's themes of humanity's wickedness, rebellion against oppression, the search for salvation, and the longing for transcendence all connect deeply with the Christian narratives of sin, redemption, and ultimate purpose.

Amidst the grim and fearful darkness of cyberpunk worlds, there remains an undeniable glimmer of hope: a belief that even in the most dystopian of societies, the light of redemption still shines, waiting to be discovered by those brave enough to seek it. As Christians, we are called to engage critically with cultural artifacts like the cyberpunk genre, recognizing these pockets of truth amidst the noise of fiction and embracing the opportunity to explore complex themes of morality, justice, and spirituality.

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