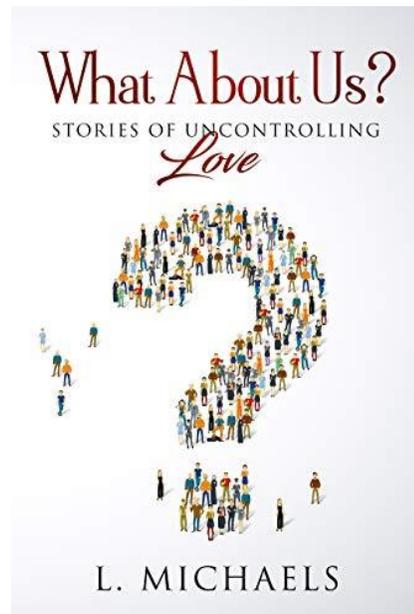


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## “The Lord be With You” Part One: A Philosophy of Presence

By Tim Reddish

Strange as it may sound, I think many Western Christians today are no longer willing to genuinely *believe* in the Jesus-story—assuming they did earlier. Some have simply lost *confidence* in the gospel. The problem is not simply a matter of whether or not one accepts as historical fact that Jesus of Nazareth actually lived; there is little doubt that he did. Nor is it really a question of the veracity of Jesus’ teaching, or the church’s views on the significance of his deeds, death, and resurrection. Rather, it concerns the *relevance* of those matters for today. “Relevance” has a purely utilitarian tone; what *practical* difference does it make? As an academic who values knowledge and wisdom for their own sake, I find this a sad reflection on our times. Perhaps this is only to be expected in a *technological* age. After all, most of us are only concerned with the functionality of our laptops and phones, and have no real interest in the software and hardware—let alone the underlying principles of semiconductor physics. The issue of relevance is a fixed feature of our consumer world, and this frustrates practitioners of education as well as pastors. Add to that the sense of entitlement and immediacy—wanting it all and wanting it now—means that the notions of patience and discipline are inevitably going to be unpopular in our fast-paced, throw-away society.

This matter of relevance (“Why do we *need* God?”) is also closely connected to the comfortable lifestyles of the Western middle classes. Most of us have some sort of social safety net (healthcare,

benefits, pensions, savings, and insurances of various kinds) that was unheard of in previous centuries, let alone in biblical times. And anesthetics and pain-killers protect us from the harsh reality of suffering, at least to a degree. It is only when our routines are invaded by uncertainty and insecurity, to the point that we are no longer feel ‘in control’ of our personal choices and destiny, that the relevance question is revisited. Religious faith is, for some, the last insurance policy—a desperate hope when all else fails. But grasping for relevance in a crisis is hardly ideal, not to mention somewhat hypocritical! Even so, I believe *how* the Christian faith addresses the troubling problem of suffering *does* provide a valid response to the question of relevance.<sup>1</sup> But this reply is not a simplistic cure-all, or a definitive “answer,” or even “proof” of Christianity. For, as dedicated followers of Jesus know from personal experience, faith seeks understanding even in the complex issue of evil and suffering. And that faith provides a firm hope for the journey, one that—when all is said and done along the way—ultimately trusts in resurrection beyond death. That being the case, perhaps it is not surprising most seek hedonistic alternatives for the here and now!

Nevertheless, however comfortable our lifestyles, we all die eventually. It is fair to say that *death* remains *the* taboo subject of Western culture. We even avoid using that word. Death comes too soon or too late for most people. If we are honest, we do not even want to face the issue of our own mortality. And, naturally, the fear of the process of dying lies—often hidden, but still present—in the darkest recesses of our minds. Having said that, the reality of suffering and death provides us with the opportunity to address the basic question of the relevance of life itself.

So, *are* our lives parts of a bigger story, one that might involve life after death? Instead of exploring that possibility, many quickly shut down the enquiry. If there *is* a bigger story it might have implications for our sense of freedom—and that is troubling for some. A prior belief in our personal autonomy and moral independence would be brought into question if there were an overarching metanarrative to history. This, then, is a key feature in the matter of relevance. If there *is* a bigger story, we would be forced to acknowledge there is something Lesslie Newbigin calls “public truth.”<sup>2</sup> In this context it is that the Christian view of history, from creation to the eschaton (and beyond), has universal intent. In other words, it is a narrative that is true or valid for everyone. This narrative should not be understood purely in terms of a sequence of historical incidents, but includes the meaning or significance of those events. For those who believe in God, this means incorporating a *theological* layer of understanding to history. Consequently, while a scientific account of origins (big bang, evolution, chance and necessity)<sup>3</sup> provides a materialistic description of creation, it must be incorporated into a broader theology of nature.<sup>4</sup>

Of equal importance, however, is the question of history’s ultimate destiny. Astronomers tell us that in a few billion years, the sun will become a “red giant” and expand to engulf our planet. This will occur once all the sun’s hydrogen has been converted to helium through nuclear fusion. However, life

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<sup>1</sup> See Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*, InterVarsity (2015); Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?*, Cascade (2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, Eerdmans (1991).

<sup>3</sup> See Reddish, *Science and Christianity: Foundations and Frameworks for Moving Forward in Faith*, Wipf & Stock (2016).

<sup>4</sup> A great deal of thought and debate has already been given to that task.

on Earth will become unviable long before then, because the sun will become hot enough to boil our oceans in about a billion years' time! In light of that fate, one can perhaps see why there is a fascination with science fiction; interstellar travel is our only salvation—should pollution, war, or a giant meteor not finish us off first! We have evolved to a point where we recognize that humankind, as individuals and as a species, is finite.

The Christian brings a crucial dimension to that bleak outlook, however ingenious and creative we may become, namely God and God's engagement with history. The study of 'end matters'—eschatology—is, of necessity, a matter of faith. But it is not a privatized faith; it has universal intent and hence is public truth, even if we do not really know all the details of what the eschaton entails. Sadly, some churches spend far too much time speculating on what is, for the most part, unknowable and seem to promote their views with absolute certainty. Some of those eschatological pronouncements are akin to conspiracy theories; I suggest you ignore them! Nevertheless, it would be a serious miscalculation to dismiss the matter altogether. Clearly a person's view of end matters informs their response to the question of relevance. If you don't believe in life after death, or in a linear storyline to history, it is not that you believe in nothing. It means you are already committed—consciously or subconsciously—to a different narrative.

There is another important feature of relevance and eschatology, namely a deep desire for ultimate *justice*.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that we all want justice for *ourselves*! A crucial theme within Christianity, however, is that in the end God will bring about justice *for all*. What that 'heaven' will actually look like is beyond our imagination, but that should not cause us to belittle that vision. Too often we imagine an afterlife that is serene and beautiful. But that is surely not enough, especially for those whose life experience has been one of a downtrodden and disadvantaged people. Heaven must (at least) entail peace *with justice*; the latter cannot be left undone.

A feature of the Old Testament prophets was their cry for social justice;<sup>6</sup> they spoke "truth to power"—often at a dire personal cost. Jesus followed in that mold. Christians believe that "God's righteous activity is setting to right what is wrong."<sup>7</sup> Given the current state of the world, we may have serious doubts about that claim! Nevertheless, that is a fixed feature of the Christian hope, founded on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—where the Trinitarian God decisively dealt with evil, personally. The resurrection demonstrates that evil will *not* have the last word. It is God's emphatic NO to evil and injustice, and YES to life. Consequently, those who downplay the reality of the resurrection diminish the Christian hope that evil will ultimately be overcome. There is much more to the cross' theological significance, of course, but it is foundational to the issue of relevance of ultimate justice for all.

I have stated that I think part of the mainline church's present problems is that it has lost confidence in the overall Christian narrative, and especially of its eschatology. Some, understandably, ignore end time matters altogether out of fear of being tainted by fanciful forms of eschatology (and thereby ruining one's intellectual credibility). And those who confidently peddle such 'hell-fire'

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<sup>5</sup> Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, Eerdmans (2015), 128-132.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Isa 10:1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, Eerdmans (2015), 132.

scenarios, endeavoring to scare people into ‘heaven,’ tend to paint a very poor picture of the Trinity and can do lasting damage to those seeking forgiveness and wholeness. The Bible strongly discourages speculation concerning the details of the eschaton; we are told it is a mystery that not even Jesus knows!<sup>8</sup> But those churches that are too embarrassed to even mention eschatology are presenting only half of the biblical narrative; it has lost the *hope* of the gospel.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is a capitulation to modernity. Both extremes are unhealthy for the church and the world. And both are not being faithful to the fullness of *God’s* mission, which is our calling and priority for right now.

Returning to the question of relevance, if we scratch at the surface of our lives we will find that we harbor stress, anxiety, fear, regret, bitterness, resentment, angst, and a range of other negative emotions and attitudes that hold us in captivity. We are not always as free as we wish we were on the treadmill of life. It is perhaps no surprise then that our society is the most medicated in the world for depression, mental illness, and the like. Part of the problem is broken relationships and a fractured community and/or family life. We were created for wholesome relationships; a sense of interconnectedness rather than isolated individualism. As the English poet and cleric John Donne (1572-1631) famously said:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.<sup>10</sup>

Part of the remedy is to be in ‘community,’ a network of life-giving, loving relationships of mutual support and encouragement. But that is evidently not enough, because in addition to social brokenness there is a spiritual malaise. The Adam and Eve story tells us, “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’”<sup>11</sup> The intention for both was to be in an intimate relationship with their Maker. When we slow down from our frenetic pace of life long enough to listen in the silence to our deepest longings, the emptiness we sometimes feel is really a *spiritual* void. This is evidence of a deep, latent desire to be loved unconditionally—as we are by God. In St. Augustine’s words, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We have a profound need for acceptance and forgiveness, not just to be a part of community, important though that is, but to know we are each a beloved child of God. Those whose lives have experienced brokenness, sadness, and powerlessness are more open to this message than are society’s ‘winners.’ Mark tells us that Jesus said: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”<sup>12</sup> To those in bondage to all that distorts right relationships, Jesus said: “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”<sup>13</sup> Christians believe

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 13; Matt 24; Luke 21. These chapters are certainly pertinent to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, but to restrict their interpretation just to that event is misleading in terms of the overall biblical narrative.

<sup>9</sup> See Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, HarperOne (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Meditation XVII, in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, published in 1624. Donne wrote this meditation on death when he was seriously ill in 1623.

<sup>11</sup> Gen 2:18.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 2:17. See also Luke 5:32; 19:10; Matt 9:13.

<sup>13</sup> John 8:36.

Jesus' message of forgiveness, freedom, and acceptance lives on. John's conclusion to his gospel includes both a blessing on his followers and their Spirit-filled commissioning:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."<sup>14</sup>

Jesus passes on his authority *to forgive sins* to his church. While the church has—at times—abused that authority in the past, nevertheless, our being sent into the world is not only to teach and baptize but to bring divine forgiveness.<sup>15</sup> That is a key element of being in community with the Trinity as we live out the reign of God together.

These responses to the question of relevance, then, address suffering, death, justice, hope, forgiveness, and unconditional love, and provide relational meaning and purpose to life in the context of *God's* narrative, not one of our own making. Those who are confident that Jesus is irrelevant must—presumably—already be assured of the alternatives, whether they are political, sociological, or philosophical. While the skeptic may have legitimate doubts as to the reality of the reign of God, I find uncritical confidence in the alternatives baffling.

Finally, the traditional liturgy contains the well-known phrase, "The Lord be with you." This is both an affirmation and a declaration; we are called to be aware of God's promised *presence*. While God's Spirit can always surprise us, I suggest that you can only *expect* to experience God's presence if you actually believe God *is* relevant. Not just in terms of the big issues mentioned above, but to everyday life. Perhaps, then, there is a direct correlation between losing confidence in the Jesus-story and a lack of awareness of God's presence. The quest for relevance leads us, in the end, to the nurturing of *faith*. This begins with believing that we truly matter to God, and that we are a part of a story that is much bigger than ourselves.

## “The Lord Be With You” Part Two: A Narrative of Presence

**W**hen I was just finishing my undergraduate degree in physics, I was wrestling with the issue of divine 'guidance.' My embedded theology at the time likened my Christian journey to traveling along predetermined train tracks, and I was being presented with a switch in the track with two possible career paths. Should I pursue a PhD in physics or should I accept a job offer designing reactors in the nuclear power industry? Which one did *God* want me to do? I prayerfully agonized over this choice as if there was only one right answer. The switch in the train track therefore presented a choice between one way which was 'God's will' and one which

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<sup>14</sup> John 20: 21-23.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 28:18-20.

was not. I recall seeking God in prayer and getting no definitive response to my question. It never occurred to me that my question presupposed various theological and philosophical assumptions, not least in terms of God's relationship with time and the notion of predestination! What was I to do? It was then that I believed that God said to me: "You choose!"

Given my rigid theological framework, this seemed a very strange response to my prayer request, yet I was at peace in thinking that this was indeed the voice of God's Spirit. And so I chose to work toward a PhD. Shortly after having made my decision, I remember thinking that this had been a profound spiritual learning experience. In this situation, there wasn't one correct path to follow. Both choices were equally good, and even if one has doubts about the ethics or morality of nuclear power (which one did in the early 1980s after the Three Mile Island incident), God still wants responsible people to work in this industry. In saying, "You choose," God was graciously informing me I had genuine freewill. In other words, not only would God respect my decision, he would be with me whatever I chose. That's quite a lesson!

In hindsight, I could articulate this scenario in a different way. The train-track analogy corresponds to a digital view of decision-making, or 'guidance'; the future is already known to God, hence one track would take me to the destination corresponding to 'God's will,' and the other not. The underlying assumption—erroneously, and perhaps largely based on fear—is that being on the track *God* wants guarantees 'blessing!' In reality, this way of thinking is based on a desire for *certainty*, which is the opposite of journeying in *faith*.<sup>16</sup> I now believe in a very different, open view of God's guidance. It's more analog, rather than digital, and it involves knowing in your core being that '*God is with you*' as you journey toward the Light.

More recently, this notion of 'God being with you' was underscored most vividly when my first wife, Anne, was diagnosed with cancer. What I discovered along our journey of suffering is described extensively elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Thankfully, we were well-supported by our minister, close friends, and our church. Naturally, we all prayed for complete healing as Anne underwent surgery, followed by chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Even so, we did not want to make any big 'claims' that Anne was healed. We were simply content to say, "God is with us," throughout. As long we knew Immanuel ("God with us") *deep within our core being* then, whatever happened, we would be alright. Of course we all certainly hoped and prayed for a miracle, but our faith in God was not dependent upon whether or not God healed Anne.

This attitude, it seems to me, corresponds well with the often-quoted verses: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"<sup>18</sup> I can honestly say that we did experience a profound sense of peace during our ordeal. But, I hastily add, this is not a reflection on us but on God's *graciousness* towards us. Nor did this mean we were stoic, or did not experience times of anxiety, tears, grief, and sadness. We

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<sup>16</sup> See Heb 11:1 and 2 Cor 5:7.

<sup>17</sup> See Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?*, Cascade (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Phil 4:6-8. See also John 14:27, where Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives [i.e., *pax romana*]. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

were human! But even in those times, we still knew God was with us.<sup>19</sup> That deep peace and the fact that it “surpasses all understanding” shows that there is an *irrational* element to having such peace of mind, especially in our circumstances.

But the story does not end there, as Anne’s cancer later returned and spread. What does it mean, in terms of the conversation with God that we call prayer, when that happens? This topic is too vast to address here, either theologically or pastorally, but don’t misconstrue brevity (or inadequate nuance) as being indicative of insufficient wrestling with the complex issue of suffering. We lived with this for six years; that’s ample time to read and reflect! My conclusions might surprise some Christians.

First, it is always appropriate to continue asking God for healing, because it’s always right to ask! But, when Anne’s cancer *spread*, we acknowledged that the signs increasingly pointed to the fact that God was unlikely to heal her and even that she might not live for much longer. When the situation became ‘terminal,’ as it eventually did, our faith cannot be a denial of that fact. That would be inauthentic. After all, we believe that God will not abandon us *even in death*, don’t we?<sup>20</sup>

Second, I calmly pondered the following question: “What if God *couldn’t* heal Anne? What if God was doing all that he could—allowing us to feel his presence, extending Anne’s life, sparing her from excessive suffering, providing quality of life, giving us peace that passes understanding, never leaving us alone—but, in this specific situation, God could not heal Anne?”

This question was asked *not* in ‘unfaith,’ but in light of a *faith-filled* community’s persistent prayer... and the reality of the disease continuing to metastasize. I had no doubt that a loving God would *want* Anne to experience healing and wholeness, so it was not that God *wouldn’t* heal Anne. To question that is to doubt the *character* of God as revealed in Jesus, regardless as to how one understands the nature of divine attributes.

Christians who recoil at the notion of ‘God *cannot...*’ do so because they are firmly committed to the classical view of divine omnipotence, which, put crudely, implies God can do *anything*. When this attribute is linked with God’s omniscience and then wrapped in divine transcendence, we end up with a God who is in absolute ‘control,’ a micromanager. Hence, since God *didn’t* heal Anne, God must *not* have *wanted* to heal Anne. Wow, that’s quite an assertion about God’s character!

I recently was driving along the road and saw a Church sign: “God is in control, so you have nothing to fear.” Is this the kind of control envisaged? When I look at dark side of our earthly experience—of human wickedness, mindless evil, and the untamed power of nature, all of which can have disastrous, far-reaching consequences—and think that God might ‘control’ all of this really *does* fill me with fear. Such a capricious God does not inspire love, devotion, or praise. No wonder we have atheists if that is what Christians profess!

This view of God’s activity within creation is connected with a Greek notion of the divine. It does not begin with the relational Trinity or with the heart of God that is revealed in the teachings and actions of Jesus. What we see in the gospel accounts is that God does not *want* people to suffer or to be in bondage of any kind. That being the case, if we persist in seeking a response to the “why?” question, we must focus our attentions elsewhere. Instead of placing the absence of overt healing in the realm

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<sup>19</sup> I confess I have not always had such peace in other areas of my life!

<sup>20</sup> See Rom 8:38-39.

of ‘lack of faith,’ or in God’s character, I believe we must explore the subtle nature of divine action—God’s continuing relationship with creation. Amongst other things, this means considering what God *can* and *cannot* do and differentiating that from what God *wants* and *does not want* to do (or to be done by us who partner with God to further his kingdom).

Rather than emphasizing “God is in control,” how about focusing on “God is here”?

The theme of divine presence runs throughout the Old Testament narrative.<sup>21</sup> At times the psalmists anguished over God’s apparent silence or absence, and they even wondered whether God had abandoned his covenant people. Job had the same dilemma. Israel’s ultimate sense of forsakenness was experienced in the Babylonian Exile. We must not, however, naïvely expect that God’s presence is to be experienced at the same intensity at all times. We are inclined to think this way when we say that God is omnipresent. The writers of the Old Testament appreciated that God’s vivid presence in theophany (Moses and the burning bush, whirlwinds, clouds, etc.) was most unusual. Moreover, God’s presence was understood to be centered upon the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple.<sup>22</sup> So God’s continual presence was understood to have intensifications at certain times and places, just like our experiences of being ‘in love.’

Now, with that backdrop, consider the notion of divine presence in the New Testament. Jesus, in the words of the Great Commission, says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...and remember, *I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”<sup>23</sup> Jesus also promises the fearful and confused disciples that the Holy Spirit will *abide in* them.<sup>24</sup> Luke portrays a radical change in the Jewish understanding of divine presence at Pentecost, and Peter explains the coming of the Spirit to the common person (as opposed to kings and prophets) as a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy.<sup>25</sup> All this, and more, provides a basis for *expecting* God to be with us as we journey onward in faith.

In a pastoral context, the experiential reality of ‘God being here’ is often referred to as a ‘ministry of presence.’ This should *not* be viewed as minimalistic, in the sense that God’s activity in the world is reduced to merely being manifest through individuals. Such a restricted portrayal of pastoral care is a betrayal of the theological richness associated with the kingdom of God. It represents a lack of faith that God genuinely acts in history, even if we are not quite sure how to articulate precisely *how* God does act within his creation! What we call miracles can—and do—happen. Therefore it is right to pray boldly for them. Nevertheless, a pastoral team’s role in dealing with grieving and hurting parishioners is to vividly *re-present* Jesus to them in their situations. Coming alongside someone in their suffering, and listening and walking with them, is crucial. This is the horizontal aspect of community, but it must also invoke the vertical dimension of communion with a suffering Trinitarian God who experienced the full horrors of the cross.

What I have alluded to above is that it is vitally important for *sufferers* to recognize *for themselves* the presence of God in those who walk with them on their journey—including medical

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<sup>21</sup> See Terrence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering Of God*, (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984), 60-78.

<sup>22</sup> This is one reason why the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was so devastating.

<sup>23</sup> Matt 28:18-20.

<sup>24</sup> John 14: 16-18; see also 20: 21-22.

<sup>25</sup> See Acts 2.

professionals. But it must go a step further, namely, an awareness of God’s Spirit being *within them* as they experience their own dark nights of the soul. Caregivers cannot be there all of the time, so the experience of the profound—even mystical—sense of peace in those alone times is essential, and is a testament to the presence of a covenantal God. Praying with expectation for a heightened intensification or awareness of God’s presence is definitely appropriate in times of suffering. I can certainly say that Anne and I experienced God’s presence—yes, with variations in intensity—on our six-year journey together with cancer, which sadly ended with her dying on January 30<sup>th</sup> 2011.

Without such peace, there is, understandably, a tendency to be fearful in the face of medical reality. But even in that reality, the Christian has grounds for *hope*—not in clinging to the fading hope of a last-minute miracle, but confidence in the resurrected Jesus Christ who walks alongside us. Jesus walked-the-walk *and* talked-the-talk. He carried his own cross, even collapsing under its weight and needing help, as he walked toward his slow and painful death. Our hope arises from the resurrection, without which our faith is meaningless.<sup>26</sup> Jesus, who walks with us personally, knows the route of suffering, and he also knows that death is not the last word.

Since Anne’s death, I have left my successful physics career in academia and studied theology at seminary. I am now happily remarried to a wonderful woman named Mary. This is another indication that God is continually at work bringing good out of evil. I have recently been ordained as a minister and become a pastor. All my life experiences come with me into this exciting new phase of my life. And I am also aware that God continues to be with me on this adventure of faith.

“The Lord be with *you*.”

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<sup>26</sup> See 1 Cor 15.