

PERSPECTIVE

MARCH 2017

LET US NOT GROW WEARY

Pastoral Reflections
on Patience

CONTENTS



ARTICLE 1

*“Let Us Not Grow Weary”:
Pastoral Reflections on Patience*
by Aaron Menikoff



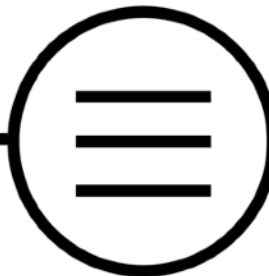
BOOK HIGHLIGHT 4

God: Is He Out There?
by Mez McConnell
Recommended by Liz Freemon



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 5

*Understanding Scripture: An Overview of
the Bible’s Origin, Reliability, and Meaning*
Edited by: Grudem, Collins, and Schreiner
Recommended by B.J. King



FIGHTER VERSE DEVOTIONAL 6

Lamentations 3:21-23
by Brad Thayer



NEW MEMBERS 7

Phil Craig & Ting Ting Xiao, Beining Xiao,
Todd & Danielle Sheets, Uthaipon (Tao)
Tantipongpipat

“Let us Not Grow Weary” Pastoral Reflections on Patience

As I looked out over the congregation on a recent Sunday evening, I marveled at what the Lord had done. We’d returned to sing, pray, listen to God’s Word, and celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Such a gathering is nothing in the eyes of the world, but I knew better. Trophies of God’s grace stood before me as I gave the benediction. God saved some from the pit of drug and alcohol abuse. Others he rescued from loneliness. A few he transplanted from other nations and languages. All he redeemed through the blood of his own Son. As one family, united around one gospel, we rejoiced in what our Triune God accomplished.

I arrived at a struggling church in 2008. Mount Vernon Baptist had recently endured a long season without a pastor before calling a man who stayed less than three years. Instability had become the new normal. In the absence of a unified vision, the church tried a little of everything to get people to come and stay. Nothing seemed to work, and the church declined. You could smell fatigue. People wanted change and growth. Everybody had an idea: a recreation ministry, an age-graded choir program, a peppy youth pastor, and more humor in the pulpit—these were just a few of the ideas kindly offered to me upon my arrival.

I only saw one way forward: preach as well as I could and wait as long as I could. Or, as Mark Dever so helpfully put it, a faithful pastor needs to be willing to *teach and pray, love and stay*.¹ Admittedly, it’s not all I did! I visited homebound members, transitioned the church to elders, and disciplined younger men. But nothing changed overnight. I had to be patient.

Patience is a Spirit-given mark of every true believer. We must wait, even when it’s difficult.

GOD TENDS TO WORK SLOWLY

Can you imagine being a fly on the wall during the six days of creation? With a word he hung stars in the sky and set time in motion. He gave seas their boundaries and populated the earth with elephants, palm trees, and people. The speed with which God worked staggers the mind.

God rarely works so fast today. His redemptive plan unfolds slowly. Just look at the life of Joseph, who spent two years in prison (Gen. 41:1), or Israel, who labored 400 years in Egypt (Acts 7:6). There are times when God is quiet, even when his children suffer (Psa. 28:1; Isa. 42:14). The Hall of Saints in Hebrews 11 is a sobering reminder that God’s timetable is not ours. Though full of faith, these believers failed to “receive what was promised” (Heb. 11:39). Their reward is in heaven.

This is how God tends to work, then and now. We are called to trust God is good and sovereign, even when everything around us unravels. A wife is afflicted with cancer. A promotion never comes. A child is confined to a wheelchair. A church never grows. God does not promise earthly success, but even when it does come, it’s usually after an extended time of toil. The NFL running back doesn’t make it to the big game without years in the gym. The professor doesn’t stand up to teach without years in the library. The pastor doesn’t see growth without years on his knees.

This is how God typically works, and it requires patience.

TEMPTED TO GIVE UP

In 2008, I felt ready to pastor. I’d spent the previous 12 years preparing for pastoral ministry. I’d been part of two church revitalizations and had a good idea, both from Scripture and my own experience, of where the church needed to go. However, a couple years into it, I wasn’t sure if I was the man to get it there.

People slowly started leaving the church. We never faced a mass exodus, more like a steady trickle. Criticisms piled up. Some thought the sermons were too long. Others thought the service lacked joy. A few wanted a larger, more dynamic youth ministry. The prospect of meaningful membership rubbed a handful the wrong way. One person thought I talked too much about the cross. Of course, I’d been in ministry long enough to know a good leader won’t make everyone happy.

Nonetheless, I began to wonder if I had what it takes to move this particular church in the right direction. Was my “skill set” sufficient to bring the needed change to a Bible-belt congregation? Yes, God builds his church; he “gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). I knew this intellectually, but my heart didn’t keep up. In my sinful pride I thought if I could just pastor better, things would turn around faster. I was tempted to give up.

Pastors aren't the only people who struggle this way. Marriages go through valleys. Friendships endure droughts. There are times when you do all the right things at work only to see every project fail. Those who labor in a fallen world are always pricked by thorns (Gen. 3:18). Patience is not optional.

In those early days of ministry, Jesus' parable of the mustard seed served me well. He said the Kingdom of God is like "the smallest of all the seeds on earth," yet the one that grows "larger than all the garden plants" (Mark 4:30-32). In other words, success isn't always visible. When it comes to his Kingdom, God's work is always present but often hard to see.

I knew from this parable that Jesus' ministry wouldn't be what anyone expected—the cross before the crown. But I also realized his words applied to my quandary. It takes years for a tiny mustard seed to grow into the plant that dwarfs all others. Why did I assume I would see fruit in this life? God blesses some churches with quick, radical, and amazing growth. But he tends to work slowly, like a mustard seed growing in rich soil.

THROUGH THE MOUTHS OF DRAGONS

As Christians we have to wait, even though it's painful. Paul suffered "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, [and] hunger." But Paul suffered well. How? With patience (2 Cor. 6:5-6).

We will all carry our cross (Matt. 9:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Not all crosses weigh the same, but each one hurts. The pain, however great, must be endured with patience. It's easy to be discouraged when life is harder than you want it to be, obstacles are taller than you'd prefer, and growth is slower than you expected.

Waiting is part of God's design. It's his redemptive plan unfolding over time. Each moment we face a trial, God reminds us of our need for patience. Spurgeon's words may not be comforting, but they are true:

Do you think you are going to be carried to heaven on a feather bed? Have you got a notion in your heads that the road to paradise is all a lawn, the grass smoothly mown, still waters and green pastures ever and anon to cheer you? You have just got to clear your heads of that deceitful fancy. The way to heaven is up hill and down hill; up hill with difficulty, down hill with trials. It is through fire and through water, through flood and through flame, by the lions and by

the leopards. Through the very mouths of dragons is the path to paradise.²

LET US NOT GROW WEARY

God, in his kindness, gave me a little peek into the future that Sunday night at Mount Vernon. It took nearly a decade, but I see the mustard seed growing. A vibrant sprout is bursting forth from the gospel-rich ground. God has produced in us a degree of love and unity, peace and joy that I could only have dreamed of years ago. The cross must always be carried, but there are seasons when the Lord lightens it. There are moments when he gives a sense of just how big that mustard plant is going to get. I'm thankful for that.

Are you patient?

Have you learned to wait as you struggle through singleness, marriage, parenting, widowhood, or criticism? Are you able to endure "the very mouths of dragons" as you make your way along "the path to paradise"?

Patience is a gift. It's a fruit of the Spirit, which means it's a gift from the Spirit. And yet, as always, we must learn to live and walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). How can we grow in patience?

- Remember how patient God is. Before you even begin to attack the impatience in your heart, consider just how long-suffering our God is. It is because of God's patience Jesus has not yet returned. He longs for many more to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9, 15). God allows sinful rebellion to exist because he is not done gathering his redeemed to himself. If he can be so patient with us, can't we grow in being patient in whatever trial we face?
- Repent of bitterness. It's hard to be patient when we are bitter because God's timetable is not ours. We tend to think life should be easier than it is. This is why Spurgeon preached: "clear your heads of that deceitful fancy." If you've grown bitter toward God, confess your sin. Pray something like this, "Lord, forgive me for expecting you to do more than save me and prepare me for heaven. Forgive me for demanding more than I need and getting mad at you for not giving me what I want."
- Expect to wait. Expectations matter. If you walk around assuming God is going to alleviate your suffering, change your spouse, or prosper your church, you've carelessly adopted a version of the prosperity gospel. Who knows, God may bless you in these ways. He may lighten your burden tomorrow! But he may

not. It's helpful to remember God tends to work slowly. Regardless of what he does in the here and now, we won't see the finished product until Jesus returns. "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:25).

- ✦ Find fuel for patience in the power of the gospel. "May you be strengthened with all power," Paul wrote, "according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy" (Col. 1:11). In other words: no gospel, no patience. Practice is not the path to patience. The cross is. We won't grow in patience unless our lives have been redeemed and transformed by the cross of Christ.
- ✦ Keep at it. "Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Gal. 6:9). Impatience is giving up. There is freedom for pastors to leave their churches for new ones; God moves his servants around as he sees fit. And yet I wonder, overall, would our churches be healthier if pastors stayed longer? What about your life? If you are tempted to give up, heed Paul's counsel. Don't grow weary of doing good. Keep at it. Pursue your spouse. Flee ungodliness. Whatever you know God has called you to, pursue it with patience, remembering your reward is in heaven, too.

~Aaron Menikoff

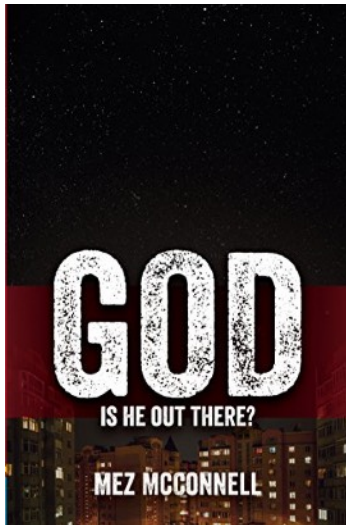
¹ "A Conversation about Church Revitalization with Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman." 9 Marks Website (23 July 2015). Found at <https://9marks.org/article/a-conversation-about-church-revitalization-with-mark-dever-and-jonathan-leeman/>. Accessed 15 February, 2017.

² C. H. Spurgeon, "Holy Violence," in *The New Park Street Pulpit*. Sermon 252. Delivered May 15, 1859. The Spurgeon Archive. Found at <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0252.php>. Accessed 16 February 2017.

God: Is He Out There?

Written by Mez McConnell

Bookstall Price \$10



Life is full of questions, some inconsequential, some difficult, and some so important that the way we answer them defines who we are. One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is, “Is God out there?”. Mez McConnell’s short book is the first in a 9Marks series intended to help us think through some of these big questions. How we answer every other question is affected by whether or not God exists. And if He does exist, how do we know him? How should we live? How does Jesus factor into God’s plan for me?

In this book we follow along as Jack, an ordinary man, discovers answers to the questions that have been keeping him up at night. Each chapter unfolds a new case for the existence of God, based on the Bible; and talks through Jack’s questions, hesitations, and responses as an unbeliever. We begin by learning that God has proven himself through his creation and through the Bible. We discover many attributes of God, and how we are separated from him because of sin. We finally learn, alongside Jack, that we must repent of our sin and believe the good news of Jesus in order to be saved.

I would recommend this book to anyone trying to figure out if God even exists, and if he does, who he is. It is intended for a Christian and non-Christian to read and discuss together; and there are helpful questions throughout to spark conversations around each topic. This clear explanation tells us what God says about himself in the Bible and what that has to do with you.

– RECOMMENDED BY LIZ FREEMON

Excerpts from the Book

1

“[W]e know deep down inside that God exists, it’s just that we choose to ignore Him and live life in our own way and on our own terms.”

–If God Exists, Then What’s Wrong With Our World?, p. 62

2

“[O]ur greatest need as human beings is to be found righteous in God’s sight, to be declared not guilty. The Bible uses the word ‘justified’—when God declares us righteous in His sight, and not guilty. Therefore when we put our faith in Jesus we’re relying on Jesus alone to provide us with a righteous verdict from God the Judge, instead of a guilty one.”

–If All This Is True, Now What?, p. 78

3

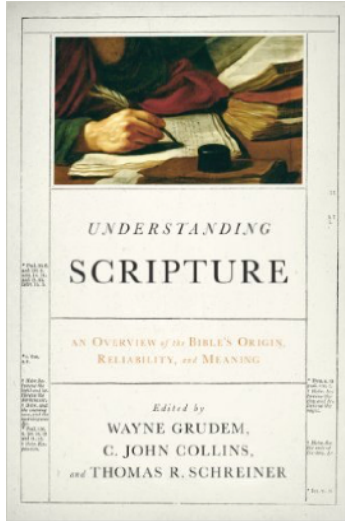
“We can’t be righteous in our own strength, by the things we do or don’t do. If God is ever going to count us righteous, it’s not going to be on the basis of our good behavior – it’s going to need to be on the basis of somebody else’s record. That’s where faith in Jesus comes in.”

–If All This Is True, Now What?, p. 78

Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning

Edited by Grudem, Collins, and Schreiner

Bookstall Price \$11



If you've been around Mount Vernon for any time, you know we talk *a lot* about the Bible. From Sunday school classes on *How to Study the Bible* to expository sermons on books of the Bible—we are laser-focused on the Bible's role in the lives of church members. Why do we do that? What makes the Bible so special?

Understanding Scripture is a series of essays from leading Christian scholars and pastors providing *An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning*. These are written to give everyday Christians answers to

everyday questions about the Bible. There are sections on reading and interpreting the Bible, the reliability of biblical manuscripts and archaeology, and understanding the basics of biblical Greek and Hebrew. These are the same types of studies being done in academic institutions, but authors intend this book for use in churches. They take care to write to a level that can be understood by Christians engaged in the study of God's word. Because they are broken into essays, the book also provides an easy reference guide for various questions on biblical interpretation.

This book is a useful guide for teachers and Christians who want to equip themselves to know the scriptures. If you are looking for an apologetic resource for non-Christian friends, I would recommend *Why Trust the Bible?* by Greg Gilbert instead. It is written specifically for that purpose, and presents many of the same explanations as *Understanding Scripture*. This book is great for equipping believers to know and trust the Bible for themselves. Even if you don't struggle to trust the Bible yourself, this book will be a helpful resource in discipling and evangelistic relationships.

Biblical literacy is a necessary part of Christian life in America today. Our culture is skeptical of all claims to ultimate authority, and neighbors will challenge us when we claim that God is the Creator and King of the world, and the Bible is his inspired word. *Understanding Scripture* will help prepare you to face those challenges.

— RECOMMENDED BY B.J. KING

Excerpts from
the Book

1

"Interpretation is also an art, mastered not by rigid adherence to procedures but by long practice conducted under tutors. Interpretation is also a spiritual task. To read the Bible is not to dissect a lifeless text that only contains marks on a page. As people read Scripture, Scripture reads them, questions them, reveals their thoughts (Heb 4:12)—and it leads to a Person, not just truths."

—Daniel Doriani, "Interpreting the Bible" p. 12

2

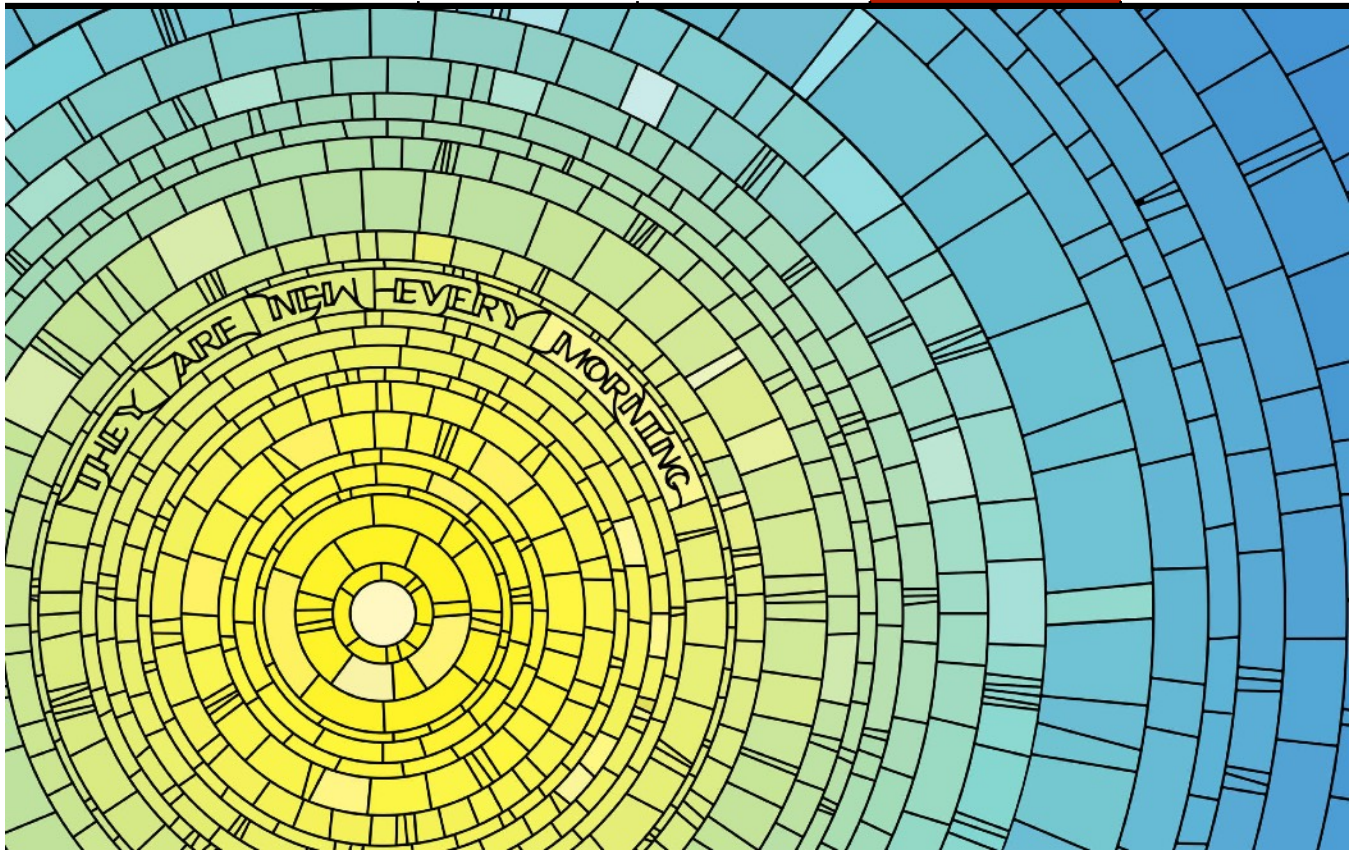
"[W]hen we seek to enjoy communion with the Lord—and not to be led astray by the ambiguities of religious experience—we read the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, God's words and God's deeds reveal God himself for our knowledge and our enjoyment. Of course, it is possible to read the Bible without enjoying communion with God. We must seek to understand the Bible's meaning, and we must pause to contemplate what we understand and, by the Spirit, to feel and express the appropriate response of the heart."

—John Piper, "Reading the Bible in Prayer and Communion with God" p. 48

3

"In the final analysis, no cardinal doctrine, no essential truth, is affected by any viable variant in the surviving New Testament manuscripts. For example, the deity of Christ, his resurrection, his virginal conception, justification by faith, and the Trinity are not put in jeopardy because of any textual variation. Confidence can therefore be placed in the providence of God in preserving the Scriptures."

—Daniel B. Wallace, "The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts" p. 111



But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
-Lamentations 3:21-23

Lamentations is probably not on your list of top 5 books to read for encouragement. After all, the book is called LAMENTations. It is full of crying out to God because of his judgment that came upon Jerusalem and God's people for their unfaithfulness to the covenant. God's beloved people and city were being overrun by the idolatrous Babylonians. Thus, there was *much* to lament.

The author (mostly likely Jeremiah) comes to a place of near hopeless in 3:1-18. He rehearsed his condition to the Lord. He asked the Lord to “remember [his] affliction, [his] wormwood and gall” (v.19). It was something that he could not get his mind off of; his “soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within him” (v.20).

Christian, does your suffering make you feel like you've been sucker-punched in the gut? Are you “bowed down” in agony from all you're going through. Does it feel as

though you're gasping for air? Is your hopeless condition the only thing you can recall?

Read verse 21 again – “*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.*” In moments of hopelessness, you have two choices: meditate on the conditions of your trial or meditate on the character of your God. Jeremiah knew the starting point for his hope was not to think of how conditions could be better but how great the Lord's love is.

“*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*” (vv.22-23). The Lord's steadfast love and mercies will endure in and through your trial. So whatever you're going through, recall how nothing can extinguish his faithfulness.

Do you struggle to know where to begin? Go first to the cross and resurrection. Satan, death, and sin all tried to extinguish God's love and mercy at the cross. All seemed hopeless when Jesus took his last breath. But when he rose from the dead in three days, he proved that the Lord's steadfast love and mercy was new that Easter, that Resurrection morning. He was faithful to do what he said. So there is hope; it is sure and certain for it is grounded in God's very own character.

– BRAD THAYER

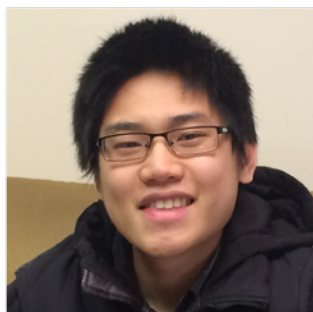
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(Aden, Paige, Gideon,
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