LEAVING AFGHANISTAN: 
WHAT THE U.S. TROOP PULLOUT MEANS 
FOR CHRISTIANS, AID WORKERS, 
AND AFGHANS 
P.38
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JONATHAN T. PENNINGTON

In a world where “small” isn’t always celebrated, Jonathan T. Pennington’s Small Preaching offers preachers 25 words of wisdom that will help shape their preaching for the better.

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Meeting so many former gang members who are now trying to get others out of gangs. Some are pastors. Some work with nonprofits. They could leave the area for an easier life, but they choose to stay here to help—whether or not barriers remain.”

—Correspondent Sharon Dierberger, whose report from Minneapolis is on p. 46.

WORLD SPECIAL REPORT

WHAT’S SUPRISED YOU AS YOU’VE COVERED EVENTS IN MINNEAPOLIS THIS YEAR?

4
Sophia Lee wrote that “Trump was clear about his anti-immigration stance.” But President Donald Trump was saying essentially the same thing as President Joe Biden’s southern border coordinator, Roberta Jacobson: “The way to come to the United States is through legal pathways.”

The defection of Iranian chess players to the West may be a bitter pill to swallow for the Iranian government because many believe the game originated in Persia.

Your outstanding article about the Georgia voting law revealed Major League Baseball’s hypocrisy. The MLB should get out of politics and just “Play ball!”

Thank you, Joel Belz, for your testimony. Oh, that those who follow you at WORLD will know the same Savior and share the same passion. May God allow you to continue. We need you.

The review of Sound of Metal made me reflect on how hard it is to find and have (really) quiet time.

Susan Olasky’s article summarized so well the difficulty of navigating a culture divided by politics that is so quick to jump to conclusions but slow to empathize and seek true healing.

Kickboxer Amy Bream is currently 29 years old (“A hop of faith,” May 22, p. 66).
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If you benefit from WORLD’s journalism, please consider a gift to help support it.

It won’t surprise you to hear that it is becoming increasingly difficult for news organizations to survive on the traditional revenue streams of advertising and subscriptions. Very few news organizations work that way these days.

If you’ve been following my Notes here for long, you know WORLD has never worked that way. We’ve always relied on our readers—and now, more and more, on our listeners and viewers—to support what we do. And you always have.

Still, we try to make our requests not feel like we’re hitting you over the head with them. We limit our major appeals to twice per year, at the end of the calendar year, and here at the end of our June 30 fiscal year.

These aren’t the only times we ask. We’re just concluding a small campaign seeking new donors (a shout-out here to those of you who became first-time WORLD Movers in May: thanks!) and plan to do another one like it in November. And we always make targeted appeals in April for our donor-funded World Journalism Institute and in August for WORLD Watch, our daily video news program for students.

We ask because we can’t do what we do without your help.

We wouldn’t have it any other way. Given our commitment to journalistic independence, the best business model is this: Those we serve directly support the work. No huge foundation, or deep-pocketed activists, but rather tens of thousands of you. Advertising is part of the model, but deliberately not in any position to influence coverage or, worse, to collaborate on content—which, shockingly, is becoming the norm.

Very simply, we serve readers like you by providing the best Biblically objective journalism we can. Then, you support that journalism.

We are grateful for our calling to serve you this way. And we’re grateful for your calling to support our calling. As I mentioned in the previous issue, we already have big plans for the coming fiscal year. There’s a lot we’d like to do—a lot we need to do—for which we haven’t made plans. Not yet.

Would you make a donation to support WORLD’s work before June 30—to give us what we need to pursue our calling to serve you with sound reporting from a Biblical perspective? Visit wng.org/donate to contribute today.
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Healthy souls

“Hope Medical Center has been a great blessing in Quinindé because it is a space where we can comprehensively look at the person. The vast majority of patients arrive seeking solutions for their physical health problems, but we take this opportunity to reflect on their spiritual state. We see how God opens doors to share His Word through medical care, knowing that only in Christ can we find abundant life.”

DR. YENY AGILA DE PINOS
QUININDE, ECUADOR

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In the United States, the biggest scam is not the one that comes in the mail

I have learned to be wary and sometimes even rude in my response to the special offers that flood my mailbox, the internet, and the phone line. But when a purportedly personalized letter from President Joe Biden arrived, it didn’t even cross my mind that there might be something nefarious and slippery going on.

“I am pleased to inform you,” the letter (dated April 23) said, “that because of the American Rescue Plan a direct payment of $2,800 was issued to you by direct deposit.”

This is legitimate, I thought. After all, the news media had been full for several days about the administration’s zeal to fill the checkbooks of millions of Americans with hundreds of billions of dollars in government support. I didn’t like the program—not at all. Nor were Carol and I in what might be called a “needy” category. But if my rejecting the payment meant that the next family down the street would get our $2,800 and be free to spend it on whatever they wanted, well, that didn’t seem right either.

There was at least one other issue. The letter from the White House said plainly: “If you haven’t received your payment within 7 days of receiving this letter, please check the status of the payment by visiting the IRS website or calling the IRS phone number listed at the bottom of this letter.” It had already been 11 days—and no money had found its way to my account.

Then an already complex scenario turned a bit knotty. I was talking with one of my married daughters. “Dad,” she said, “this sounds like a scam to me. Didn’t you say they asked you to call an 800 number? I hope you didn’t give them any bank account numbers!”

I hadn’t. But Alice is a savvy observer in such matters, so I dropped what I was doing and retrieved the White House “letter” to double check my first impressions. This time through, every word and phrase carried a slightly different nuance. What if, I wondered, this was a subtle trap?

In the end, however—at least as of this writing in mid-May—the Biden letter seems to be genuine in its intent. Its senders meant to send me $2,800. Their system just wasn’t quite up to their promise. But there was apparently no crime involved.

Meanwhile, the real crime or ethical breach may be the one that’s taken place right out in the open. The scam we may live with the longest is the anything-but-quiet transfer of hundreds of billions of dollars from a virtually unknown source into the bank accounts of accepting citizens like ourselves. With our massive level of national debt, where do those dollars come from?

This started sometime last year when former President Donald Trump authorized the first two “stimulus” packages to counter the sobering economic effects of COVID-19—the $2.2 trillion CARES Act and then its $900 billion December follow-up. The effort accelerated when new president Joseph Biden, trying to make good on his campaign promises, added his support to the $1.9 trillion “American Rescue Plan.”

When it comes to this kind of spending, the political label doesn’t seem to matter. Republican or Democrat—who’s going to say, “Stop! You can’t put that money in my account! It’s phony money!”
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“The word I have hidden in my heart…” Psalm 119:11
N APRIL, CONSUMER PRICES on goods and services saw the sharpest monthly rise in more than 12 years: 0.8 percent from March. That’s an increase of 4.2 percent from a year earlier.

Americans are already feeling the effects at the gas pump, the used car lot, the home improvement store, and in the housing market. The news also stoked fears that inflation might set back an economy still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysts pointed to a number of triggers driving inflation, all related to the pandemic in some way: exorbitant government relief spending that began in the last months...
of the Trump presidency and that carried over into the Biden administration, economic shutdowns, supply chain disruptions, and government stay-at-home orders.

“We have too much money because we’ve printed it like mad to finance the government’s extravagance—and also we have too few goods because the economy hasn’t completely recovered,” Jerry Bowyer, chief economist at Vidant Financial, said.

Other events also exacerbated shortages: the Suez Canal blockage, the failure of Texas’ power grid, and the cyberattack on Colonial Pipeline.

Last March as shutdowns ensued, sawmills cut staff and in some cases halted production. Meanwhile, home renovation and construction surged. Now understaffed lumber companies are struggling to catch up to the backlog: Lumber prices rose 124 percent in 2021, evidenced in hardware stores and in rising prices for new home construction.

Rental car companies sold off parts of their fleets early in the pandemic. Now that Americans are traveling again, they’re struggling to rebuild their inventory and are thus selling off less. That’s only one factor contributing to the prices of used vehicles jumping 21 percent in a year. Shutdowns of microchip factories across the globe also stymied automobile manufacturing.

The price of food has already risen 3.8 percent over last year and seems poised to go up. Driving up costs is that businesses have posted “Help Wanted” signs to little avail (see “Help wanted but hard to find,” p. 67). Some companies raised wages to attract more employees, and they usually pass along those extra costs to customers.

Congress is largely to blame, according to Ryan Burge, an associate professor of politics at Eastern Illinois University. Under the Trump administration’s CARES Act, the federal government added $600 a week to state unemployment benefit checks, later cutting that amount down to $300 per week. In some cases, individuals can make more through unemployment than accepting a minimum wage job. Those benefits won’t expire until September.

“They overshot and gave people too much money. They assumed the economy was going to take longer to reopen,” Burge said. Congress could consider a proposal like the one Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., suggested: give people a chunk of money now if they go back to work.

The Labor Department’s report on inflation took economists by surprise: They had predicted an increase in inflation of around 3.6 percent.

“We have too much money because we’ve printed it like mad.”

“This is one data point,” Richard Clarida, vice chair of the Federal Reserve, said. The central bank wants to see inflation at around the 2 percent range and expects to hit that benchmark later this year.

Fed governor Lael Brainard acknowledged in a May 11 speech that “employment and inflation are far from our goals,” but added, “if past experience is any guide, production will rise to meet the level of goods demand before too long.”

Fed officials have no current plans to raise interest rates.

“I think the Fed has been engaging in a lot of rhetoric which lets themselves off the hook,” Bowyer said. He said the pandemic created “temporary distorting effects.” Worth watching is whether Congress and the Fed continue to pump money into circulation and exacerbate inflation even when supply issues abate.

“[President Donald] Trump spent and borrowed a lot. The sense is [President Joe] Biden is going to do that even worse,” Bowyer said.

As inflation rises, Burge predicted Biden’s chances to make headway on other pricey legislation will decrease.

“The hope is that this will start resolving itself in the next three to five months,” Burge said. “If the next report is worse than this, then we’ve got a problem.”
THE TOTAL OUTSTANDING CREDIT CARD DEBT for Americans as of April 2021. Americans reduced their outstanding credit card debt 14.5 percent between February 2020 and February 2021, an Equifax spokesman told The Wall Street Journal. Stimulus checks and reduced spending have allowed U.S. consumers to pay down credit card debt, but other outstanding debt has increased in the last year.

$753 BILLION

THE TOTAL OUTSTANDING CREDIT CARD DEBT for Americans as of April 2021.
Cheney out, Stefanik in
House Republicans elect Elise Stefanik as conference chair after removing Liz Cheney

EP. ELISE STEFANIK, R-N.Y., TOOK OVER as the No. 3 Republican in the U.S. House in a secret ballot vote behind closed doors on May 14. She won her congressional seat in 2015 running as a moderate and initially parted ways with President Donald Trump on several issues. But she came to his defense during his first impeachment trial and—unlike her predecessor as House conference chair, Rep. Liz Cheney—has spoken in support of Trump’s claim that he lost the 2020 election due to voter fraud. Both Trump and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., endorsed Stefanik for the leadership position. Two days before, House Republicans used a voice vote to remove Cheney as conference chair. GOP lawmakers said Cheney’s view of Trump was not the problem, instead citing the divisions caused by her public disagreements with other party leaders about the president.

DISPATCHES

Human Race

DECLINED
California’s Department of Finance announced on May 7 the state’s population fell by more than 182,000 people last year, a drop of 0.46 percent. Only a week earlier, the U.S. Census Bureau said the state had grown so slowly in the past decade compared with others that it was losing a congressional seat for the first time. State officials blame the declining birthrate, reductions in immigration under President Donald Trump, and increased deaths from the pandemic. They predict that next year California will again see a slight annual population increase. For the past several decades, the state has seen more people move out of the state than move in, but immigration and births previously offset those losses.

DIAGNOSED
After successfully curbing COVID-19 last year, Taiwan recorded more than 1,300 domestic cases in one week in mid-May due to an outbreak connected to airline workers, doubling its total number of COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began. In Thailand, the government recorded 35 deaths on May 18—the highest since the pandemic began—and another 29 the next day. The country stood as another success story with only about 7,000 infections last year. Other countries, including Mongolia, Malaysia, and Singapore, have recorded similar jumps in cases and deaths. As a result, several of those countries instituted shutdowns and social distancing measures most of the world observed a year ago.

INDICTED
A federal grand jury indicted Derek Chauvin and three other former Minneapolis police officers on civil rights charges, the Justice Department announced on May 7. The charges allege Chauvin violated George Floyd’s right to be free from unreasonable seizure and force when he restrained Floyd as he struggled to breathe. Floyd’s May 2020 death sparked nationwide protests against police. Ex-officers J. Kueng and Tou Thao are accused of failing to intervene. They and Thomas Lane are also charged with failing to give Floyd medical help.
“God gave us these children. ... When the Almighty does something, He knows why.”

ADJUDANT KADER ARBY, a Malian man whose wife, Halima Cissé, 25, gave birth to nine babies by cesarean section on May 4, according to the BBC. All nine babies, five girls and four boys, survived.

“Next time I’ll try 2+2=4.”

Spanish politician FRANCISCO JOSÉ CONTRERAS, commenting on social media after Twitter banned his account for 12 hours. The ban came after Contreras tweeted, in response to a news story about a “pregnant man” giving birth, “That’s a lie. A man cannot get pregnant. A man has neither uterus nor ovaries.”

“They’d trust Peloton as a cult but not the Catholic Church as a religion.”

CASPER TER KUILE, a researcher on modern spirituality, describing the devotion of Peloton enthusiasts who ride internet-connected stationary bikes and draw inspiration from group exercise leaders. The Washington Post reported a backlash in the Peloton community against users who openly express Christian beliefs.

“Let’s also recognize that we cannot legislate hate out of our people’s hearts and minds.”


“When I arrived here, he was at the morgue and his internal organs were taken out.”

CHAW SU, the wife of Burmese poet Khet Thi, whom she found dead at a hospital a day after soldiers and police loyal to the ruling junta took him into custody for questioning. Khet Thi’s works had inspired resistance to the military, which took control of Myanmar in a coup in February.
1 KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

ON MAY 7, A SHERPA GUIDE NAMED KAMI RITA became the first person to summit Mount Everest 25 times. Rita, 51, made his 25th successful summit during an expedition of Sherpas to fix ropes along the route up the 29,032-foot peak in preparation for climbing season. Native to the mountainous regions of Nepal, Sherpas are a Tibetan people group known for their endurance at high elevations and often serving as guides for foreign mountain climbers. Rita, whose father also served as a mountain guide, first reached the top of Mount Everest in 1994 and has worked every year since helping other climbers summit the dangerous peak. He resisted family pressure to quit the job even after a 2015 avalanche on Everest killed 19 people. Rita has also climbed other peaks, including K2, Cho Oyu, Manaslu, and Lhotse. During the brief May climbing season this year, 43 teams led by roughly 400 Nepalese guides were expected to make an attempt to summit the mountain.

2 BORDERLINE CRIME A Belgian farmer accidentally altered the border of Belgium and France after moving a boundary stone to make way for his tractor. A history enthusiast walking the national border between France and Belgium was the first to notice that one of the stones marking the boundary between the countries since 1819 had been displaced by more than 7 feet—making France smaller and Belgium larger. Officials with the Belgian government said they’ve asked the farmer to return the stone to its proper place. Failing that, the long-dormant Franco-Belgian border commission will have to resolve the dispute. “We should be able to avoid a new border war,” neighboring French Mayor Aurélie Welonek told La Voix du Nord.

3 GREAT CANAL CAPER Police in Leicester, U.K., arrested a narrowboat pilot after he led officers on a slow 8-mile chase down a canal. According to police, officers learned the pilot of the boat was wanted for an assault in a different part of the city days before. An officer spotted the boat as it left a lock on the Grand Union Canal on April 28 and gave chase. With the canal boat reaching speeds of 4 mph, the unnamed officer pursued on his bicycle until the wanted pilot stepped out of the craft at the next lock. “For 15 years I’ve been trying to tick off a water-based pursuit in landlocked Leicester and today I’ve ticked it off,” the officer said on the Leicester City Police’s Twitter account.

4 CONFRONTING REALITY Vladislav Ivanov can finally leave the Chinese reality television show on which he’s been cloistered for three months. The Russian national who speaks fluent Mandarin joined the crew of a Beijing-based reality show originally as a Chinese teacher. But before filming began, show producers made him a contestant. The show featured musicians competing against others to get a place in a Chinese boy band. Ivanov said he changed his mind early in the process but his contract forced him to stay. On the show, the 27-year-old pleaded with TV viewers to vote him off and allow him to leave, but instead Chinese viewers pushed him to the final round. Ivanov was finally allowed to depart the show on April 24.
TRUSTING HIS INSTINCT Jesse Larrios walked from Los Angeles to San Francisco wearing a bear costume. The 33-year-old set out from LA on April 12 with a teddy bear costume but without a plan. “It was an impulsive decision for sure. I didn’t plan it out,” Larrios told Reuters during his 400-mile walk. Larrios’ costume consisted of an oversized teddy bear head, a bear body costume to match, and sneakers. Once local media discovered his story and began publicizing it, Larrios began a GoFundMe page to solicit donations for charity. By May 5, he had raised over $17,000. Larrios said he would allow contributors to decide what charity he’d donate to.

CHECKED CHILD A 9-year-old boy who took a ride on a baggage handling conveyor belt at a Minnesota airport survived the trip without injury. Authorities at the Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport say the boy was part of a 20-person group checking their bags in ahead of a flight. “There was a lot of confusion because there were so many people in the group,” airport spokesman Pat Hogan said. Members of the group alerted airport police, who were able to track the boy down on the conveyor belt five minutes later.

MELT TO ORDER After getting access to his mother’s Amazon.com account, a 4-year-old in New York City managed to purchase 51 cases of frozen SpongeBob Popsicles. The order cost Noah Bryant’s mother Jennifer $2,618.85—a sum the NYU social work student and mother of three could not afford. When Amazon refused to accept a return on the 918 SpongeBob Popsicles, one of Bryant’s fellow students created a GoFundMe fundraiser to help the family. By May 7, internet users had contributed nearly $13,000. Bryant says she’ll set aside the excess money for Noah’s education.

MULTIPLES OF “NO” A bride in Uttar Pradesh, India, was prepared to marry her groom in an arranged marriage—that is, until she realized the man couldn’t answer basic math questions. Before the marriage ceremony scheduled for May 1, the unnamed woman grew suspicious of the groom’s educational back-
The hoarding instinct

When does preparedness turn into something sinful?

When Russian hackers paralyzed the Colonial Pipeline, America got a preview of what might be in store. Panic buying drained gas pumps from D.C. to Florida: a real-life drama of the inflation many analysts predict. Supply-chain disruption could lead to other shortages: sugar, meat, grains. Think the fuel crisis was bad? Just wait for the tuna crisis, the cornflake crisis, and the pasta crisis!

Such news triggers an impulse to hurry to Walmart and buy them out of Kleenex. After all, if inflation hits the roof, money won’t be worth beans and the smart move would be to invest in nonperishables—like beans. After collecting an amount sufficient for you, go ahead and buy more because if you need it, others will need it too, and when they can’t get it, you might be able to trade it for something they have, and it’s a win-win. You’d be helping your neighbor! (By shortchanging her of something she couldn’t get earlier because you bought it all.)

A year ago in March, we all tsk-tsked at people walking out of grocery stores with carts loaded with toilet paper. But if some prophet had whispered in my ear that essential paper products were about to become very scarce, would I have been tempted to do the same? Maybe just a couple of 48-roll packs instead of a pallet-load, but still—didn’t I have a duty to my family? Everyone else could take care of themselves.

Prepping for emergencies is prudent. But when does it cross into outright hoarding?

In Langdon Gilkey’s memoir _Shantung Compound_, published in 1966, the author describes his two years in an internment camp in Northern China during World War II. Japanese guards did not starve or beat Gilkey and his fellow expatriates, who were civilians. But food was scarce and conditions cramped.

The camp was a former missionary station, now run-down and stripped of anything useful. At first, Gilkey was impressed by the ingenuity of his fellows in making do and sharing labor. But in time the warts began to show. Two incidents in particular showed him how intractable human nature could be when looking after itself.

As head of the housing committee, he was responsible for assigning people to living quarters. He soon discovered that, through an oversight, 11 single men were crammed into one room while nine occupied another of similar size. The solution seemed obvious, but when Gilkey asked the nine to make room for one more, they all, to a man, refused to give up any of their space. Gilkey, who had assumed that humans were basically fair-minded, was sincerely flummoxed.

The second incident threatened the entire camp. One miserable January day the gates opened to admit donkey carts piled with care packages from the American Red Cross. To half-starved inmates—most of whom were British with Americans, other Europeans, and Asians mixed in—this bounty of Spam and jam came straight from heaven. After calculating 1,550 packages against 1,450 recipients, the Japanese warden declared that every individual would receive one package, with an additional half going to each of the 200 Americans. The Americans cried foul: The goods came from their Red Cross. Ergo, it was theirs to distribute as they saw fit. When word from Tokyo finally broke the impasse, the Americans got less than the original plan had allotted them.

“These conflicts ... made me think a great deal more deeply about men and their life in community, and about the kinds of beings they really were”—neither as rational nor as fair as Gilkey had supposed. And in the competition for scarce resources, missionaries were no more altruistic than mechanics, only more subtle in rationalizing.

When the hoarding urge strikes, I think about that. I remind myself that we survived double-digit inflation in the 1970s, and that blowing my nose on handkerchiefs rather than tissue only costs a little extra laundering. Most of all, that God who sees every sparrow fall won’t forget me. Closed fists can’t give, but neither can they receive.
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ETAPHORICALLY, “UNDERGROUND RAILROAD” refers to the route along which U.S. slaves escaped from the antebellum South with the help of “conductors” like Harriet Tubman. But in Amazon’s new series *The Underground Railroad*, the metaphor becomes a literal subterranean transit system—complete with locomotives, loading platforms, and dining cars. The series follows an escaped slave’s journey to freedom along this railroad, using her story as a metaphor for the journey African Americans have taken through this country’s history.

Barry Jenkins, who won an Academy Award for his work on *Moonlight* (2016),
adapted Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel for this 10-part series. Newcomer Thuso Mbedu plays Cora, a slave in Georgia for whom life on the plantation becomes increasingly intolerable. She gains passage on the mysterious underground railroad, which promises to bring her to freedom.

The Underground Railroad slips into magical realism when Cora embarks on this fantastical subway. The setting remains antebellum America, but Cora’s journey takes her through a world that’s outside of time, and her story becomes a fable illuminating the dangers African Americans have faced. The eugenics movement, the Ku Klux Klan, race riots—Cora experiences them all on her journey away from slavery. As Cora boards the train, the station master says, “Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll see the true face of America.” What Cora sees is brutality, injustice, and terror.

A cognitive dissonance exists in The Underground Railroad because Jenkins tells this desperate story with beauty and hope through his aesthetic choices, especially his use of light. Jenkins shows us a world that’s dark, luminescent, elegant, debased, dazzling, sinister, lovely, and terrible all at the same time. Some of the middle episodes drag—despair can get boring—but each episode is gorgeous to behold.

However, the series leads viewers into extreme discomfort as it portrays the horrors of slavery. Christians need to grapple with this reality, but many would do well to skip this particular story because of its frequent racial slurs and graphic violence. The first episode, showing the brutal whipping and burning of a slave, is especially stomach-churning, and the series includes brief yet disturbing sexual content. (Except for a short scene of breastfeeding, nudity is only implied. Amazon has rated the series for ages 18 and up.)

The screenplay portrays America as irredeemable, and it holds no hope for racial reconciliation. Perhaps it doesn’t want it. Instead, the only way forward is for African Americans to tell their stories to one another. At the beginning of the series, Cora can’t speak for herself, but by the end, she finds the strength to “tell her truth.” Even so, it’s hard to see how she’s saved, either physically or spiritually.

More disturbing than the dismissal of American virtue is the show’s view of Christianity. Throughout the series, villains use the Bible. A plantation owner quotes Paul’s injunction for slaves to obey their masters. A vicious woman who hates Cora reads the Psalms aloud to her. Is this a critique of those who misuse Christianity to justify evil, or a critique of Christianity itself? In this series, white Christians are either cowardly or dangerous cultists. Toward the end, Cora finds herself sitting in a black church, but people only discuss civic issues, and the space is conspicuously devoid of crosses.

Faithful Christians, both black and white, led in the historical abolitionist movement, so their erasure from this fable indicates the creators believe religion can’t solve the problems of racial injustice facing America. But Christianity, with its acknowledgment we live in a good but fallen world, makes sense of Jenkins’ vision of a land both beautiful and terrible. The central theme of telling our story so we can move forward pales in comparison to the change brought by the gospel of Jesus when faithfully told.
In The Bad Batch, which premiered May 4 on Disney+, Lucasfilm continues to fill the space around its blockbuster Star Wars movies.

The animated series takes place at the same time as the 2005 movie Revenge of the Sith. (The first episode, 75 minutes long, tries to get new fans up to speed, but viewers who haven’t seen Episodes I–VI of the Star Wars franchise will probably feel lost.) The newly formed evil Galactic Empire is rising, but a group of clone soldiers who should be loyal, the Bad Batch, go rogue, refusing to submit to the despotic regime.

Early episodes of The Bad Batch feature many “misfits form a team” tropes—celebrating differences, working together, trusting each other—but don’t expect a lighthearted romp from this gritty animated series (rated TV-PG for cartoon violence). The series wrestles with the appropriateness of governmental power and warns against sliding toward totalitarianism. In one episode we see the state coercing citizens into giving up their liberty for supposed security. In another we see ordinary people persuaded to participate in an atrocity—a scene reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

So far, the series offers a compelling defense of conservative principles: People should rely on their families and communities rather than massive bureaucratic government that doesn’t have their best interests at heart. Disney+ will add new episodes every Friday until the middle of August.
UP IN THE AIR

In Stowaway, an oxygen shortage puts a life-or-death quandary before a group of astronauts

by Bob Brown

HIS MAY SOUND BAD, but remember it’s only a movie: As I watched Stowaway, I was hoping one of the characters would die. And it didn’t matter to me which one.

Stowaway (streaming on Netflix and rated TV-MA for language) tells the story of a crew of three traveling by spaceship to a colony on Mars. To their shock, they find Michael Adams (Shamier Anderson), an injured launch support engineer, apparently unconscious behind a panel. They’re concerned his presence might not be accidental.

The crew also realizes the ship’s occupants will soon exhaust the small amount of oxygen available. All four will die of carbon dioxide asphyxiation before they reach the red planet, still two years away.

Unless one of them dies within 10 days.

Adding to the tension is the specter of race hanging over the capsule like a radioactive cloud: Michael is the only black person on board. While ethnicity never comes up in dialogue, it’s painful to watch the crew write Michael off so casually. He’s the source of the problem, they reason, so he’s expendable. No matter that the stowaway seems not to have a mean bone in his body.

“Look, we were chosen to be here,” Cmdr. Barnett (Toni Collette) tells mission biologist David Kim (Daniel Dae Kim) and doctor Zoe Levenson (Anna Kendrick). They consider Michael “a danger to the crew and mission.” How often have African American people been told their lives don’t count? The film is clearly making a statement.

To varying degrees, all four struggle with fear and guilt. But the fact is that for three to reach Mars alive, it will take the sacrifice of one life.

Or a miraculous rescue.

Mission control is working on a solution. David ponders repurposing the algae samples he brought to provide extra oxygen, but doing so will destroy years of his research, past and future. An oxygen tank located on an exterior part of the ship might be accessible by a dangerous spacewalk.

Zoe recounts an incident from her youth when she tried to save a drowning man in the ocean. When she too began to drown and had given up hope, out of nowhere a boater came to the rescue. And such was I dreading from Stowaway—a deus ex Hollywood ending trumpeting science’s claim to have all the answers. It doesn’t. Viewers deserve a dose of reality.

No spoilers forthcoming, but I can commend the film for not impairing the story with sensuality, graphic violence, or—with one exception—misuses of God’s name. (The characters drop several other expletives.)

Whichever type of movie ending you hope for, Christians rejoice in a Savior who, at the cross, united ultimate sacrifice with miraculous rescue.
ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

The European premiere of One Night in Miami was the first dramatic depiction of Muhammad Ali after his death.

BOX OFFICE TOP 10

WEEND OF MAY 14-16, ACCORDING TO BOX OFFICE MOJO. QUANTITY OF SEXUAL (S), VIOLENT (V), AND FOUL-LANGUAGE (L) CONTENT ON A 0-10 SCALE, WITH 10 HIGH, FROM KIDS-IN-MIND.COM

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*REVIEWED BY WORLD

HISTORICAL FICTION

One Night in Miami's verbal boxing match

by Marty VanDriel

FOUR OF THE MOST FAMOUS black men in America spend an evening together in the middle of the turbulent civil rights movement. What would they say, and how would they influence each other? Playwright Kemp Powers imagines the answers to these questions in his play One Night in Miami, and director Regina King brings the story to the screen in the Amazon film of the same name.

Cassius Clay (Eli Goree) has just defeated Sonny Liston in a dramatic 1964 boxing match. Clay dances, taunts, and beams as he pommels Liston physically and psychologically. “I am the greatest!” shouts the new heavyweight champion. Ringside spectators Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben-Adir), football great Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge), and singer Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom Jr.) hustle back to Malcolm X's hotel room for what Brown and Cooke hope will be a wild victory party.

Malcolm X has something much more subdued in mind: no big crowd, no alcohol, no girls—just the four of them and a lot of talk. Director King worked hard to keep the movie from looking too much like a play, so the “action” moves from hotel room to a parking lot to a liquor store to the hotel roof. The acting is good, but there's no disguising the film's roots on the stage. King portrays what real conversations between these four might have been like—with plenty of vulgar and coarse language and occasional blasphemy, which gets the film an R rating.

The movie offers a sympathetic depiction of Malcolm X as a family man who passionately pleads with Cooke, Clay, and Brown to use their fame and prominence to help bring about racial equality. Not surprisingly, it does not deal with some of the ugly teachings of the Nation of Islam, which the real-life Malcolm X promoted vigorously from the early 1950s until he left the group in 1964. The Nation of Islam claimed that white people are devils, black people are superior to whites, and marriage between people of different races is wrong. The real Malcolm X once called Martin Luther King Jr. a “chump” and criticized the nonviolent strategy of the mainstream civil rights movement.

Playwright Powers hints that Malcolm X's urgings influenced how his three companions used their fame for the civil rights cause. On The Tonight Show, Sam Cooke performs his civil rights protest song “A Change Is Gonna Come,” quite different from the lightweight love songs that Malcolm X criticized in Miami. Cassius Clay announces his conversion to Islam and a name change to Muhammad Ali.

Some viewers will emphasize how One Night in Miami omits so much context that it is more like fantasy than a helpful imagining of history. Others will see the film as a window into different strains of the black experience.
Bilbro suggests that obsession with the present makes us lose track of past and future: We become dissatisfied and distracted, bowing to trivia and ignoring what’s important. He rightly cautions against assuming we know what God is doing when we hear either good or bad news, so we should avoid both premature joy and despair. We can benefit from what Blaise Pascal called a sanctified indifference, one based on a humble confidence that God is in control.

Bilbro writes well. His vantage point high up the ladder of abstraction may leave many nonacademic readers impatient, but he can help all of us focus on two questions, whether we write letters, blog posts, or magazine articles: How will this piece of writing help those who read it to love their neighbors? How will it help them to live faithfully in the place and time God has placed us?

Presuppositions play a huge role in scholarship. The go-to history book for abortion proponents is still James Mohr’s *Abortion in America* (Oxford University Press, 1978), but he admittedly didn’t understand why 19th-century doctors saw “human life per se as an absolute.” Duh, because there’s a baby?

Mohr provided useful information but rarely connected the dots. He noted accurately that “Before 1840 abortion was perceived in the United States primarily as a recourse of the desperate,” but he couldn’t figure out why middle-class women became customers during the next two decades. Not inexplicable: A midcentury New Age movement advocated “free love”—and abortion whenever love proved expensive.

But Mohr’s book does open the door for a Supreme Court transformation of *Roe v. Wade*. He claimed that in early America abortion cases hinged on when the unborn baby showed the ability to move. Today’s court could emphasize movement—doctors can hear beating hearts at six weeks—and uphold some recently passed protective laws. —M.O.

Jeffrey Bilbro’s *Reading the Times* (IVP, 2021) raises good theological questions about how Christians should consume news. Bilbro suggests that obsession with the present makes us lose track of past and future: We become dissatisfied and distracted, bowing to trivia and ignoring what’s important. He rightly cautions against assuming we know what God is doing when we hear either good or bad news, so we should avoid both premature joy and despair. We can benefit from what Blaise Pascal called a sanctified indifference, one based on a humble confidence that God is in control.

Bilbro writes well. His vantage point high up the ladder of abstraction may leave many nonacademic readers impatient, but he can help all of us focus on two questions, whether we write letters, blog posts, or magazine articles: How will this piece of writing help those who read it to love their neighbors? How will it help them to live faithfully in the place and time God has placed us?
Aftermath by Terri Blackstock: A bomb blast at a political rally kills dozens of people, and Dustin Webb is the prime suspect after an anonymous tip leads police to explosives in the trunk of his car. When he realizes someone is setting him up to take the fall for a crime he didn’t commit, he calls his childhood friend to be his defense attorney. Jamie Powell is certain of Dustin’s innocence, but she has an uphill climb to prove it legally. Meanwhile, a survivor of the bomb attack, suffering tremendous emotional trauma, stalks Dustin with the intent to kill him as revenge for her friends’ deaths. A solid mystery with a romantic undercurrent. Subtle reminders of God’s love are sprinkled throughout the story.

Never Miss by Melissa Koslin: Lyndon Vaile, a biomedical genius, has dedicated his entire life to studying the Ebola virus, the disease that killed his parents. When someone steals his research and tries to kill him, Kadance Tolle, a cagey, ex-CIA sniper who has spent her adult life running from her family, steps in and rescues him from imminent death. Once they discover a secret plot to release the deadly virus on society, they team up to stop the attack. The social misfits are drawn to each other, and Lyndon’s faith in God has a positive effect on Kadance. Featuring likable characters—and one quirky cat—it’s an enjoyable read, although some coincidental plot elements strain believability.

Cross Shadow by Andrew Huff: Small-town pastor John Cross is trying to shed his former persona as a CIA agent. But when video evidence shows his girlfriend’s stepbrother killing someone, John can’t resist the urge to follow her to Texas—against her will—to gather clues about what really happened. As they dig for answers to clear her stepbrother, they stumble on a much larger conspiracy, and now their own lives are in jeopardy. Meanwhile, John is second-guessing his calling as a pastor and his relationship with girlfriend Christine. The extended car chases should add excitement to the plot, but physics-defying maneuvers drag it down. Book 2 in the series lacks the charm of Book 1 but leaves plenty of loose ends for Book 3.

The Paris Betrayal by James R. Hannibal: A covert operation in Rome goes sideways for spy Ben Calix. Then, things get worse. Ben has to play defense against a shadowy enemy without backup from his superiors, who have cut off communication. He doesn’t know why his team has “severanced” him, but he’s determined to track down singlehandedly a terrorist who plans to release a deadly bioweapon on the world. Ben’s on his own, except for his quirky blue-haired neighbor and her dog, who literally stumbled into his path during his escape from a would-be killer. This story moves at Hannibal’s customary breakneck speed and keeps the reader enthralled. It lacks spiritual elements found in his other books, but the author’s endnotes mention the Biblical Job as inspiration for his Calix character.
For God so loved
Picture books with Biblical themes
by Kristin Chapman

Go and Do Likewise! by John Hendrix: In Go and Do Likewise! author and illustrator John Hendrix offers a visual feast as he shares some of Jesus’ best-known parables like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Hendrix writes that his latest book is not intended to be an exegetical or hermeneutical text but rather a retelling to help younger audiences hear familiar Bible stories in new ways: “My aim is to help readers imagine themselves as the first audience of these words.” His resulting compilation combines expressive illustrations with careful paraphrases for families to enjoy together. (Ages 4-10)

The God Contest by Carl Laferton: In this Tales That Tell the Truth book, Laferton contrasts Elijah’s God contest against Baal worshippers on Mount Carmel with Jesus’ final God contest on Mount Zion. The people of Elijah’s day were confused about which God to believe in, just as the people from Jesus’ time weren’t sure He was really God. In the Old Testament, holy fire consumes Elijah’s water-logged sacrifice to prove Yahweh is God. In the New Testament, Jesus rises from the dead, proving He is God. Catalina Echeverri’s illustrations energize the text. (Ages 4-8)

The Marvelous Maker by April Graney: In this creation and redemption parable, Graney uses rhyming prose to tell the story of Adamus and Genevieve who (like Adam and Eve) experience the Fall and its consequences but (unlike Adam and Eve) also witness God’s rescue plan. Monica Garofalo’s colorful illustrations enhance the story by incorporating subtle Scripture references pointing families to the Bible for further study. Since the book’s parable format and Graney’s renaming of Adam and Eve could be confusing for some young readers, parents should read it along with children to help them interpret the message. (Ages 4-8)

God Made Me Unique by Chonda Ralston (with Joni and Friends): Joni Eareckson Tada writes in the introduction that she hopes this picture book will help caregivers teach children that “God creates each unique individual and that disability is sometimes part of his plan.” With rhyming text, the book emphasizes that everyone is made in God’s image and therefore “has tremendous value, regardless of their appearance or abilities.” It also explores the important role each person plays in the larger Church body, as referenced in 1 Corinthians 12. Endnotes provide additional suggestions for helping children form a gospel-centered understanding of disability. (Ages 4-8)

How do we know Christianity is really true? Why does God let bad things happen? What happens when we die? Chris Morphew writes for middle schoolers as he tackles these tough topics through three books in the new Big Questions series (The Good Book Company, 2021).

In How Do We Know That Christianity Is Really True? Morphew helps kids evaluate historical accounts and evidence of Jesus’ resurrection so they can answer confidently the questions their peers ask about the hope they have in Christ. In Why Does God Let Bad Things Happen? Morphew engages kids in a conversation about why suffering exists and why a good God allows it, reminding them that suffering is a time to trust Jesus because “we know it’s not the whole story.” In What Happens When We Die? Morphew peels back common misconceptions about the afterlife and roots his discussion of heaven and hell in the transforming work of Jesus, who will one day return and bring “the power of heaven to heal our broken world.” —k.c.
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BROKEN TOGETHER
Poverty, segregation, Christ, and the path toward racial healing

JOHN PERKINS, whose 91st birthday arrives on June 16, is one of the few still-living evangelical leaders of the civil rights movement. Police in Mississippi killed his older brother in 1946 and almost killed him in 1970. Hate could have consumed him. Christ intervened.

This year on March 11, Mississippi’s largest Southern Baptist church—Pinelake, a predominantly white church—donated $200,000 to establish a scholarship at Jackson State University in honor of John and Vera Mae Perkins, who married 70 years ago. Last year, as religious and racial hatred raged through Americans, John Perkins was WORLD’s Daniel of the Year.

He’s also a great teacher. I first sat in John’s Bible studies almost three decades ago and still remember them as the most vivid I’ve experienced. Here are edited excerpts of two recent interviews I did with him.

Tell us something about your hard childhood.

My mother died of starvation when I was 7 months old. I lived only because a black lady brought me a quart of milk. It was hard. But some rich folks have the same loneliness. There are lots of needy
people, broken human beings. We’re ready to come to Christ only when we come to an end of ourselves. We have to say, “I’m broken.”

You didn’t get much of an education. No incentive in my whole broken house. Work in the fields as soon as you can. Third grade dropout.

You were poor, but when you moved to Southern California, you had opportunities to work. I started off as a janitor and became a leader. I saw some good programs. There was a credit union with incentives for people to save for education.

What would you do to our welfare system? We need more incentives to work. Now we have a few, but it’s too little too late. We need redistribution, not reparations. Distribute by community groups training people for good jobs—a redistribution engine based on more of a work ethic and economic growth.

Better schools would help ... I visited some special middle schools in Boston and asked the students why they’re there. They were there because they’re poor but have good brains.

Do we have a lot of racism in America? To say people are racist is to say there’s more than one human race. There’s not. We are one blood. But we forget that. We sing God loves all the children of the world, but we don’t mean it. We say all people are created equal. We get fuzzy about that and cry about that, but we don’t mean it. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”: We don’t mean it.

Some white police killing blacks? Yes, but we’re still killing more of ourselves.

When you can cut the racial tension with a knife, do people start carrying knives? Black folk are broken just as much as white folk, and white folk are broken just as much as black folk. But we’ve lost tolerance. You can’t even get anybody to answer a pollster now. But maybe that’s why voting in secret is good. I don’t want my neighbor thinking I hate him because I vote against his idea.

Chances still tend to be segregated. The National Baptist denomination, black, made some kind of alliance with the Southern Baptist churches, white. They said they’d have revivals to shout out to God. They were both having revival at the same time, a black revival and a white revival. Two separate revivals. I said, “Am I going crazy? We shouldn’t be having separate revivals.” The more we get together the more we can do together. We meet to learn from each other but also to share each other’s gifts.

Lots of black kids are aborted. Are churches doing enough to teach about that? We need to offer help so when somebody meets a young lady and says I’ll take you to the abortion center, she has an alternative. But if she has an abortion, we still love her. Right after she does it I don’t tell her she’s a murderer.

I think back to the hopes of the 1990s. Promise Keepers took a stand against racism. What happened to that? The founder of Promise Keepers was a football coach. He was used to having blacks to win a championship, and he got converted. Promise Keepers wanted multicultural churches. It was ahead of its time. Maybe if we emerge from our dark cloud now we can get back on that path again.

What would progress look like now? Progress to me is the multicultural church. We need to be intentional about getting together. We’ve got a racial language. We’ve lost a love language. Churches grow better when they enter into the pain of society. We weaken the church when we turn it into a prosperity gospel.

What should Christians be doing? We need to understand what is nonnegotiable in the Bible. Start there and organize your teaching around the main purpose. Then go out into all the world and teach the gospel. That’s what they did in Acts. They didn’t sit at home waiting for food to come by chariot. They went out to homes and started classes. They taught we are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Christ lives in me but I am still living in the flesh. I live by the grace of the Son of God. That is the fruit of the Spirit.

Still living in the flesh—we need to realize our own brokenness? I tell people they’re broken, but I can’t do that if I don’t tell them I’m broken too. Otherwise, they’ll think I’m better than them, or think I think so. And a lot of people who have broken the mold and then get some intelligence about it become very effective Christians.
Rock ’n’ roll that’ll preach

Chuck Girard’s autobiography details his role in Jesus music’s beginnings

by Arsenio Orteza

HUCK GIRARD, a founding member of the seminal Christian rock band Love Song, wanted to call his 1975 solo debut *Rock and Roll Preacher*. But Word Records told him no Christian bookstore would touch anything labeled “rock and roll.” So it became simply *Chuck Girard*.

That anecdote and many others populate Girard’s recently published and eminently readable autobiography, the title of which should come as no surprise. *Rock & Roll Preacher: From Doo-Wop to Jesus Rock* (Worldwide Publishing) chronicles Girard’s pre- and post-Jesus music ups and downs as well as the development of Jesus music itself. That its appearance dovetails with a soon-to-be-completed Love Song documentary and the upcoming 50th anniversary of Love Song’s eponymous debut is, according to Girard, a coincidence.

“None of the projects were coordinated,” Girard told me. “The documentary has been in the works since 2017. And I’ve been working on the book for 30 years.”

Girard “got really serious” about finishing *Rock & Roll Preacher* during the last five years, and initial feedback has been positive.

Besides diving deep into the role Pastor Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel played in fostering what would eventually morph into Contemporary Christian Music, *Rock & Roll Preacher* details Girard’s upbringing and his pre-conversion brushes with stardom as a member of the Letterman-foreshadowing Castells and the Beach Boys post-shadowing Hondells.

It also details his quintessentially ’60s search for enlightenment, replete with gurus, eccentric diets, and enough drugs to have turned Girard into a zombie. That they didn’t was just one of the miracles leading up to his rebirth.

“I wasn’t hesitant to get into the drug topics,” says Girard, “but I was cautious about how far to go in revealing details. My wife and I went through that section carefully, as we didn’t want to stumble anybody.”

Girard also writes candidly about his two post-conversion bouts with alcoholism, each of which nearly derailed his marriage and his ministry. Now, with 20 consecutive years of sobriety under his belt, his marriage is stronger than ever.

COVID-19 has put a crimp in his rock ’n’ roll preaching. “When churches closed,” he says, “my invitations dried up.”

To take up the slack, he has experimented with podcasting. “But,” he admits, “live was a lot more fun.”

As for that looming Love Song 50th anniversary, Girard concedes that the group’s 2010 box set *Book of Love*, Disc 5 of which contains “pretty much all the unreleased material,” may have stolen the occasion’s thunder. But the group’s legacy rolls on.

“Evangelism motivated everything that we did,” he said of the group.

“And if we had the opportunity to go out again, it would still be that way today.”
Reimagined rock

Noteworthy new or recent releases

by Arsenio Orteza

**Deep Cuts by the Choir:** For most of these 10 songs, Derri Daugherty and Steve Hindalong stick to setting terse, faith-based wisdom to the echoey, chiming hooks for which they've become beloved, the career-summarizing “Aces Over Eights” a particular high point. But as their sound softens and conforms to the adult-contemporary hooks awaiting most bands who've survived for nigh on 40 years, it becomes clear that the singer whose voice Daugherty's most closely resembles is America's Gerry Beckley's—and that Beckley, probably because he was aiming at Top 40 instead of merely expressing himself, was better than Daugherty and Hindalong at making his love songs open-ended enough for outsiders to imagine them as their own.

**Breathe by Dr. Lonnie Smith:** It’s a testament either to Smith’s belief in his Hammond B3 organ’s ability to speak for itself or to Iggy Pop’s declining cultural stock that Pop’s name isn’t emblazoned on the front of the album cover. But it should’ve been—the punk legend’s studio vocal contributions on this otherwise live at the Jazz Standard album’s bookends, Timmy Thomas’ “Why Can’t We Live Together” and Donovan’s “Sunshine Superman,” not only keep Smith’s extended explorations from deliquescing into the jazz-o-sphere but also unveil a suavity heretofore kept under wraps. Two explorations not in danger of deliquescing into anything: Thelonious Monk’s “Epistrophy” and Smith’s own “Bright Eyes,” both of which cook.

**Year of the Cat (45th Anniversary Edition) by Al Stewart:** No one knew it at the time, but this album’s producer, Alan Parsons, would soon be a bigger star than the dulcet-voiced former folkie whom he was helping to put over. The reason: a sound that blended folk, pop, and prog into something sleek enough for Top 40 and for demonstrating the audiophile properties of high-end stereos. To emphasize what Parsons brought to Stewart’s musical tales of mystery and imagination, this anniversary reboot (available in both digital and hard-copy formats) includes a 1976 Seattle concert without Parsons at the sound board, the main revelation of which is that Stewart seems like a really likable bloke when he talks between songs.

**The Battle at Garden’s Gate by Greta Van Fleet:** “When informed that someone has achieved an American synthesis of Led Zeppelin and Yes,” wrote Robert Christgau in his one-line review of the first Boston album, “all I can do is hold my ears and say gosh.” And, initially, the Led Zeppelin half of that dismissal sufficed for these Michigan keepers of the ‘70s hard-rock flame. But as they’ve morphed into their Yes phase (which, given Josh Kiszka’s vocal range, might just as well be their Rush phase) they’ve become easier to appreciate and to like. Who knows? If they keep developing, they might even add a standard or two to the canon they revere. Meanwhile, they’re currently the best at—as well as the only ones doing—what they do.

**Encore**

If the chance to reinvestigate peak Al Stewart leaves you cold, consider Epic/Legacy’s recent “expanded” reissues of the Jacksons’ albums, at least one of which, 1984’s *Victory*, truly deserves a reappraisal. Released in the wake of brother Michael’s *Thriller* and on the cusp of what was supposed to be the concert tour of the century, the album’s relatively modest (i.e., relatively Michael-lite) demeanor underwhelmed those hoping for *Thriller II*. What’s clear in retrospect is that even if *Victory* lacked a knockout punch, its delivery of one high-quality, high-energy pop jab after another should’ve had judges giving it the nod on points alone. Between the carnality of the Marlon-sung-and-written “Body” and the spirituality of the Tito-sung-and-co-written “We Can Change the World,” the music only lets up when Michael, to the sound of an acoustic guitar, a harp, and strings, goes all weepy about a world in which both human suffering and armies coexist. —A.O.
Threats inside and out

Israel-Palestinian conflict flares with new fury

The most common description of life inside Gaza is that it’s like a prison. That’s how I felt entering it in 2010. A lengthy approval process gave me permission to enter, but I wasn’t prepared for the border-crossing mind-flip.

In southern Israel the cars were new and commercial farms at a peak of production—almond and peach trees blooming, orange groves filling the air with sweetness. The Erez Crossing into Gaza was a gray wall of foreboding concrete, broken by observation towers. I passed through a maze of mechanized gates, each closing behind me. No Israeli guards were visible, only disembodied voices giving directions over a loudspeaker.

On the other side of the half-mile tunnel through the buffer zone, young men were digging potatoes and dumping them into a cart pulled by mules. Those carts and beat-up sedans dodged potholes along the road into Gaza City, where high-rises stood bombed and askew, just weeks after another confrontation ended.

Israel and Gaza militants have traded rocket fire in spates of conflict since Hamas took control of the territory in 2007. But the assaults of mid-May are unprecedented: Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched more than 2,000 rockets from Gaza in the week ending May 14. That’s about what was fired in a month of Gaza rocket launches during a similar conflict in 2014. The terror groups have upgraded their range and production capability, thanks to help from Iran.

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U.S. troops are leaving Afghanistan, but the war on the Afghan people, and threats to the country’s underground Christians, are staying—and growing
Afghan National Army Special Forces Commandos regroup after a war-game exercise on April 28.

MARCUS YAM/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES
Under a dull, Sunday morning sky, American troops lowered the flag at Camp Antonik. For a storied moment marking one of the final steps toward the end of the longest war in American history, the May 2 handover was unremarkable and small. A contingent of American soldiers lowered the Stars and Stripes, photographers snapped a few photos, then Afghan soldiers raised their flag in its place.

The camp, adjoining the larger complex once known to American and British soldiers as Camps Bastion and Leatherneck, is the last in the area to change hands. The total withdrawal that President Joe Biden ordered in April already is well underway. U.S. and NATO commanders say it may be completed by July 4, well ahead of Biden's Sept. 11 deadline.

The complex was the wartime logistics hub for NATO forces in Afghanistan in restive Helmand province and held at its peak 28,000 military personnel and contractors. Years ago Afghan forces took over the sprawling bases, with most materiel, along with the KFC and Burger King outlets, shipped home.

Camp Antonik was the last to undergo a handoff, continuing as a strategic operating base for U.S. and Afghan commandos in the heart of a Taliban insurgency. Nearly half of the 2,300 Americans killed in two decades of war in Afghanistan died in Helmand province.

But closure would be short-lived: The day after the turnover, Taliban fighters launched a large-scale attack in Lashkar-gar, the capital of Helmand. They set improvised explosive devices, attacked checkpoints, and confronted Afghan units.

Afghan forces said they killed hundreds of Taliban fighters, including key commanders and dozens of al-Qaeda militants from Pakistan. Doctors Without Borders reported civilian casualties, as thousands of Helmand residents fled in trucks and tractors piled high with rugs and furnishings.

As Afghan National Army casualties mounted, the United States found itself engaging in battle once again, joining the Afghan Air Force to launch airstrikes on Taliban strongholds across southern Helmand—a fury of bombardments local officials said they had not seen in years.

A peace process with the Taliban that the Obama administration began and that the Trump administration completed in February 2020 could unravel in only weeks. The Sunni jihadist movement that
once governed Afghanistan and sheltered al-Qaeda leading up to the 9/11 attacks on the United States is once again fighting for territory across 21 of the country’s 34 provinces. Residents fear the militants may return to power with the kind of terror regime the Taliban imposed in the 1990s.

That jeopardizes the two-decade effort by the United States and its allies to ward off a civil war and ensure economic and civil rights progress. It also threatens Muslims and non-Muslims who don’t conform to the Taliban’s draconian Islamic strictures.

“AMONG AFGHANISTAN’S non-Muslims are Christians who have seen a revival of faith and rapid growth since the U.S.-led liberation from the Taliban in 2001. There are basically three types of believers,” said a foreign worker in Afghanistan whom WORLD is not naming due to threats—“those who have been forced to leave the country, those who survive by exercising their faith underground, and those who are dead.”

The shrouded group of believers—who meet in homes and small, trusted fellowship circles—exists entirely underground. There are no local recognized churches. One international church serves expat believers in Kabul, military bases include chapels, and one legal church building, a Catholic church, exists on the grounds of the Italian Embassy.

Yet Muslims have continued to come to faith across the country: Internet access coming even to remote parts of the country has brought online evangelism and private discipleship. Some Afghan church leaders became Christians while living as refugees abroad, and they teach online or have returned to disciple others.

When the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, supreme leader Mullah Omar ordered churches razed and Christians lynched, including foreign Christians. The
Taliban jailed and tortured some into exposing others.

Their plight eased with liberation in 2001, and a 2004 constitution guarantees freedom of religion. But it also declares Afghanistan an Islamic state, and Islamic clergy exert power over the judicial branch and public officials with little regard for the constitution.

The church enjoyed steady growth until 2010. *Operation World*—the global index on Christian populations—ranked it as the second-fastest-growing Christian population in the world (behind Iran). After a local television station broadcast a video clip showing a public baptism, the Afghan government cracked down, arresting 25 Afghan Christians in one day. Hundreds of Christians fled Kabul, and many left the country.

It took U.S. and European diplomatic efforts to win the release of jailed Christians, and many were exiled (see “Fugitives,” Aug. 13, 2010). One Afghan church leader who lives outside the country told me the government has not actively jailed or tortured Christians since then.

Church growth rebounded, but conversion from Islam continues to carry a high cost in the Afghan honor-and-shame culture. It often means loss of family, inheritance, and a job. Conversion is seen as bringing shame on an entire family and destroying its social standing. The stigma plays to militant groups like the Taliban.

Threats to Afghan Christians may come from militant groups, government officials, or family members. Those I have interviewed over the years often must hide their faith from even spouses and parents. A doctor, once labeled an “infidel” for his conversion, lost all his patients. An Afghan worker for an international aid group, once his conversion became public, had to quit or the group risked losing its permit to operate.

For these reasons fellowship among believers can be rare, often taking place in online chat rooms accessed through VPNs, a secure connection to the internet that makes the user hard to trace. When believers do gather, they do so in small groups over lunch at an office or behind curtains in a safe house in an otherwise nondescript neighborhood of dusty streets. Bibles are usually contraband, so Scripture is shared using the internet or with cell phone SIM cards.

For all the risks, bold church leaders evangelize Muslims and baptize new believers. As one said to me, “Only God keeps us safe.”

“Where young and vulnerable movements to Christ exist in countries with occupying Western military forces, dynamics are always complex, delicate, and awkward,” said Jason Mandryk, the editor of *Operation World*. The U.S. and NATO withdrawal will almost certainly mean gains for the Taliban, he said, “and gains for the Taliban almost certainly mean great difficulty and suffering for followers of Jesus...
there.” Yet, “history is filled with God working in ways that astonish us.”

Many things in Afghanistan have changed since the Taliban governed, said the Afghan church leader, but the Taliban ideology is the same. “Their policy is the total revealing of the local church, and the killing of believers.”

The persistence of the Taliban, said the foreign worker in Afghanistan, has sparked interest in conversion: “The Taliban has been the driving force to move people out of Islam because Afghans see extremism in the name of Islam. You could say the Taliban actually has spurred the growth of the church.”

WITH THE U.S. DEPARTURE, international nongovernmental organizations that have been the backbone of development work also face new realities.

Global Leadership International (GLI), a U.S.-based group that provided curriculum and training in Kabul and other cities, has trained 2,000 Afghan students over the years, including 30 who became Fulbright scholars. “That’s a significant base of future leaders, and they are throughout the country and in a range of professions now,” said GLI director Jeff Woods, who lived in Afghanistan for 13 years.

“My friends in America don’t believe such things are happening in Afghanistan. And in Afghanistan our friends can’t believe the United States is leaving. I do not have any Afghan friends who think it is time for the United States to go.”

GLI and other U.S.-based groups I surveyed say they do not have plans to depart Afghanistan with U.S. forces—but they are making contingency plans. Security meetings for these groups include planning for alternate scenarios in weeks ahead: an outright Taliban takeover, a rapid descent into civil war similar to Syria, a gradual erosion of freedom and gains, or a peace deal that would call for a transition government to include the Taliban and the current government led by President Ashraf Ghani.

“We have our bags packed but we are planning to stay,” said Lars Peterson, president of Morning Star Development, a Colorado-based nonprofit that’s worked in Afghanistan since 1997. Troop pullouts have been on the table for years, he said, “so this is not our first rodeo.”

Twenty years ago, Morning Star focused its work in remote rural areas, opening community centers to drive development and care for war victims. In 2012 the Taliban kidnapped a Morning Star doctor, Dilip Joseph, and held him until a Navy SEAL team rescued him. In 2019 an Afghan doctor who served as the group’s assistant country director was assassinated as he left a remote community center.

Morning Star transferred the centers to local communities and today focuses on work in key urban areas, providing leadership training, addiction recovery services, and medical care, including infant and maternal health. Morning Star has contingency plans in place to move personnel to a third country to work with Afghan refugees, if necessary, “but we don’t plan to head out the door at the first trouble,” Peterson said.

FOR MANY, TROUBLE has already arrived. An April 30 car bombing in Logar province killed 30 people and also targeted students. A triple bombing on May 8 at a school in Kabul killed at least 85 people and wounded more than 150, most of them schoolgirls. The attack bore the marks of a Taliban attack (though the Taliban denied responsibility).

The swift unraveling prompted European allies to push the Biden administration for a delay in its withdrawal, according to The Wall Street Journal. It’s also highlighting the flaws in the Trump-era agreement the Biden administration has embraced.

The 2020 deal covered only conditions for a U.S. withdrawal. It did not condition withdrawal on Taliban negotiations with the Afghan government or lay a road map toward a peaceful transition to a government including the Taliban within the current parliamentary system.

Talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government opened last September only to stall on basic premises. Yet President Ghani has said he would end his term of office early “if it meant peace” and would welcome the Taliban back to
governance via a loya jirga, the traditional grand meeting of community leaders.

Facing a May deadline inherited from his predecessor, Biden in April announced plans to withdraw the estimated 3,500 U.S. military personnel. But the president has faced decided criticism for it.

Besides NATO objections, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin argued against an unconditional withdrawal. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told CNN she feared “huge consequences,” namely a resumption of terrorism and an outflowing of refugees from Afghanistan.

Others, such as Institute for Policy Studies analyst John Feffer, may not oppose withdrawal, but contend Biden’s political calculation on Afghanistan had “very little to say about Afghanistan itself,” about the Afghan economy, Afghan society, or the Afghan people.

The country in many ways was a pre-literate society when the United States ousted the Taliban government in 2001. UN statistics showed 22 percent of boys and 8 percent of girls in school in 2001, and the overall literacy rate was about 20 percent. Today 40 percent of girls and women are educated, and the literacy rate is at 45 percent.

Infrastructure and major roads were nonexistent in many parts of the country. Now highways connect even the most remote mountainous provinces with cities. Democracy, though still faulty and corrupt, has brought civil organizations and economic improvement. Direct deposits and international banking—still impossible in many parts of Central Asia and the Middle East—are routine.

“Twenty years ago you had warlords running things, and now you have a government,” said Morning Star’s Peterson, who pointed out half of Afghanistan’s population was born after 9/11. “They all have Facebook, and they know what life is like outside their borders. They don’t want to go back. Modernity has changed the mindset of most Afghans.”

“Reorganize” counterterrorism assets “from over the horizon,” not from Afghan soil—but these critics say that will prove impractical and less effective.

Experts from opposite ends of the political spectrum oppose President Joe Biden’s unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan, and loudly so.

Bruce Hoffman is one of the country’s leading experts with roots in traditionally liberal institutions, a Georgetown University professor who served as the CIA’s scholar-in-residence for counterterrorism, and was appointed by Congress to the FBI 9/11 Review Commission. In an article titled, “Leaving Afghanistan Will Make America Less Safe,” Hoffman said the United States is both “understating and underestimating the threat posed by the Taliban.” Failing to retain “a couple of thousand elite special operations, intelligence, and support personnel in Afghanistan,” he wrote, “encourages terrorists by showing the weakness of U.S. resolve.”

At the same time, Frederick Kagan, director of the Critical Threats Project at the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute (AEI), called Biden’s withdrawal decision “one of the most unjustifiable, foolish, and irresponsible decisions I can remember, and that’s saying a lot.”

At its high point in 2011, 98,000 U.S. troops were serving in Afghanistan, according to the Department of Defense. At the start of this year’s drawdown, about 2,500 U.S. troops (and an estimated 700-1,000 additional U.S. Special Forces and intelligence officers) were there with about 7,000 military personnel from NATO-allied countries.

Hoffman, Kagan, and other experts—along with current Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and former Pentagon heads—argued that the remaining contingent is a small investment, allowing the United States to keep Taliban, al-Qaeda, and now ISIS militants at bay while maintaining an important base for intelligence gathering.

Biden in his April 14 speech announcing the withdrawal also pledged to “reorganize” counterterrorism assets “from over the horizon,” not from Afghan soil—but these critics say that will prove impractical and less effective.

Like Presidents Trump and Obama before him, Biden cast the war in Afghanistan as the “forever war.” Yet the United States has not had a combat casualty in the past 15 months, reflecting the changed role of U.S. forces to advisory, tactical, and training missions. (It had four combat deaths in 2020, and 20 in 2019, three of them classified as “friendly fire” incidents.)

“The mindset is that the United States is fighting and dying in Afghanistan, as opposed to providing help and support to an ally that is bearing enormous costs,” said Kori Schake, director of foreign and defense policy at AEI. “The casualty figures for Afghan National Security Forces are eye-poppingly high, and yet Afghans continue to volunteer because they want the kind of Afghanistan that we are helping them build.” —M.B.
UNCOVERING HIS FATHER’S PAST.

Marvin Olasky explores how his Jewish American father was impacted by World War II, Reconstructionist Judaism, and social Darwinist teaching at Harvard—facing pain in order to understand and forgive.

“A sense of longing and loss pervades Marvin Olasky’s tribute to his father—a reckoning with his Jewish heritage that remains sensitive to time and culture, faith and freedom. A beautiful lament suffused with gratitude and honor.”

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NEIGHBOR BARRIERS
Residents and businesses want the area around George Floyd Square back to normal, but demonstrators are still facing off with the city

BY SHARON DIERBERGER IN MINNEAPOLIS
Traffic sounds drift past. Three young children sit quietly reading books as their mom perches on a piano bench and dad sits in an armchair sipping coffee. The domestic scene belies what’s been going on outside the walls of their home for almost a year.

Keith and Bethany Breyer live with their children in a corner house that stands directly behind one of 12 barricades the city of Minneapolis erected the week George Floyd died a block from their home last May. The city originally intended the barricades to protect pedestrians who flocked to the site to lay flowers down or attend gatherings, prayer vigils, or press conferences or who simply came out of curiosity. But since their placement in June, violence has skyrocketed behind them, even after a jury convicted former police Officer Derek Chauvin of murder in Floyd’s death.

The Breyers, who are white, say most people here are weary of living in what feels like limbo or being held hostage. Like others whose homes, restaurants, and shops happen to be in the off-limits area, they worry about recurring violence, especially after dark.

Most residents and businesses want the barricades removed: A survey the city of Minneapolis conducted in April showed 81 percent of local residents say streets should reopen along with a Floyd memorial that won’t interfere with traffic. The police rarely cross the barricades into what residents call the “autonomous” or “no-go” zone, cautious not to provoke more ill-will from protesters who insist barricades will stay until the city meets their 24 demands for justice. The concrete barriers have come to embody the other barriers standing in the way of the neighborhood functioning as normal again: rampant crime, divergent views on the best way to move forward, and the city of Minneapolis’ inaction.

NINE YEARS AGO, the Breyers moved to this multiracial neighborhood. Until the riots started last summer, they’d always felt relatively safe, despite local gang activity.

When the unrest began, with near-nightly gunfire, the Breyers moved their children, ages 8, 6, and 4, into a basement bedroom, concerned bullets might pierce upstairs walls. The kids eventually moved back into their own rooms, but on the same day the jury convicted Chauvin, a gunfight broke out on the street again, interrupting the neighborhood’s celebration over the verdict. Gang members fired more than 50 shots, taking cover behind the stucco and brick house across from the Breyers. They wounded two men, then hid in the zone. The Breyers’ next-door neighbor, Phillip Brassfield, called 911 but says officers never arrived (the police department wouldn’t answer my questions about this).

Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo and Mayor Jacob Frey in March reported huge crime increases here in the last year: 378 percent more assaults and 240 percent more robberies. The MPD recently began partnering with federal agencies to reduce crime throughout the city.

Residents of varying races want police back. “Police would provide a calming presence to gang activity and crime,” Breyer said. Out of caution, he has stopped walking to George Floyd Square and won’t let his kids play in the front yard. A few weeks ago, a drunk driver crashed over his retaining wall, narrowly missing their front steps. Tire tread marks still imprint the grass just past the crumpled wall.

Last summer, Breyer talked with two black police officers walking down the alley behind their home who’d been looking for stolen cars. At least one protester threw eggs at them. “It just about made me weep to see how these people, trying to serve, were treated,” Breyer said.

On another street, a single mom, Kamyia Whitehead, sat on a rattan bench outside her stone-arched doorway. She talked about the time police offered to take her home after she reported a family altercation. But they wouldn’t pass the barricades, so she had to walk several blocks in the dark. “I felt safer when I lived in Chicago,” said Whitehead, who is black. “It’s like a war zone here many nights. I’m afraid for my children.” She feels no safer since the Chauvin verdict.

In the square, signs and spray-painted slogans cover walls and pavement. Portraits of black men who’ve
been killed around the country sit amid flowers surrounding the raised fist monument in the square’s center. Billboards displaying Floyd’s face tower above Cup Foods, the store outside which he died. A now-closed Speedway gas station’s sign now reads “Peoplesway.”

Owners of five businesses I spoke with here want the police back. Although they also want police reform and some kind of memorial for Floyd, they say the neighborhood needs protection and streets must reopen. At least five shops in the barricaded zone are shuttered. Dwight Alexander and his wife Ivy own Smoke in the Pit restaurant. They’ve thrived here for eight years, but since barricades went up business is down 75 percent, they said. Other businesses have suffered similarly.

A small building between shops houses Agape Movement, a nonprofit trying to bridge law enforcement and the community. Agape workers, many of whom are former gang members, act as security patrols under contract with the city to help keep peace. They are not opposed to police (and are not aligned with protesters’ demands to dismantle the whole system) but prefer police respond only for life-threatening situations. Mostly, they encourage young men to leave gangs, providing solutions like faith, mental health training, employment, and life skills.

Agape senior adviser Steve Floyd (no relation to George Floyd) stands on Agape’s front steps. He says police are in a difficult spot: Every time a shooting occurs between a black person and police anywhere in the nation, officers grow more wary of entering the neighborhood, concerned their presence may provoke more violence. Agape meets weekly with Police Chief Arradondo to talk about promoting peace.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT what’s going on among police, residents, and protesters vary widely, especially over whether police can easily enter the zone. The city declares no autonomous zone exists, yet barricades and protesters remain. A walk through the neighborhood shows lawns and walls displaying signs with slogans such as “ACAB” (All Cops Are Bastards), “F12” (F-bomb the police), and “No Justice No Streets,” the activists’ rallying cry. Many properties show no slurs or slogans.

Police spokesman John Elder says police and first
responders do enter the area, but protesters interfere. He mentioned a recent incident when activists tried to disrupt an EMS responder who was helping an injured man. Because citywide crime is up and staffing is down, response times have lagged. Residents, though, say police rarely come after 911 calls, or sometimes instruct them to meet outside the barricades.

A local Minneapolis radio station recently published audio from police radios during a domestic assault victim’s 911 call in late April: “Is it possible to have her move at least a block away maybe 38th and 10th?” “Copy, she is bleeding and cut everywhere, but we’ll call her back and ask her to move a block away.”

In March, by Cup Foods, a gang member from the local Rolling 30s Bloods shot a former member, Imez Wright, who had left the gang and was mentoring young black men with a nonprofit, Change Inc. When police responded, protesters interfered, says Elder. Others had already taken Wright to a local hospital, where he died.

Residents I spoke with, who are afraid to speak publicly, say onlookers disturbed the Wright crime scene, pocketing shell casings to thwart police. Surveillance video captured the shooting, and police later arrested a suspect in a northern suburb.

Brassfield, the Breyers’ neighbor, says he was at a meeting where a young girl spoke openly about removing bullet casings from the murder scene of Dameon Chambers, a black man killed here last summer during the Juneteenth holiday. That crime remains unsolved, a point of contention with activists who say police delayed emergency workers. The city says emergency workers couldn’t get to Chambers, and police had to pull him to a waiting ambulance.

Protest spokeswoman Marcia Howard is a local resident on leave from teaching English in a public high school. She contends police can cross barricades but often don’t because they want to make protesters look bad.

The protesters hold meetings twice daily. Howard maintains everyone is welcome, but Breyer says when he attended and brought up safety issues, they quickly started chanting “No justice, no peace.” That chant has morphed to “No justice, no streets.” He says last summer some protesters asked, “How do we get rid of all the evangelicals?” referring to church groups that came to share their faith or hand out food. Howard told me she sees churches as part of a “segregated system.”

When Brassfield raised concerns, he says, protesters called him a white supremacist. He stopped attending meetings, fearing for his safety. He says other residents share his fear: “We talked about banding together to speak up and I tried starting a texting group, but it gets to a point where you’re afraid to say anything, even to neighbors.”

Brassfield is convinced many activists moved in after the riots started so they could be part of the movement. He says when residents in the apartments next door left, new ones moved in whom he now sees with activists. He, Breyer, and Floyd say most protesters, other

LEFT: Pastor Curtis Farrar and his wife, Pam. RIGHT: Marcia Howard speaks to community members at the Speedway gas station during their weekly meeting.
than the leaders, are white. Howard insists only residents are in the movement, but avoids saying how long they’ve lived here.

Two young white men manning the plywood shack at the blockade by the Breyers’ house repeat “No justice, no streets” when I ask why they are there. One, a 27-year-old self-described unemployed resident, twirls a batonlike staff and cheerfully talks about how he enjoys living for a higher purpose.

Breyer describes the beliefs of activists he’s talked with or observed as anti-capitalist and polarizing: “If you’re not completely on board with everything they want, you’re racist. They want to tear the entire system down and start over.”

Protest spokeswoman Howard claims the group has no leaders. She repeatedly asserts “the powers that be” are the problem, and when asked whom she means, tells me “the whole entire country, systemic racism, white supremacy.” As to what should replace the current system, she says, “That’s what you have to figure out. ... How do you replace disenfranchisement?” She identifies her only worldview as “black” and talks about plantation politics and colonialism ruining the country.

The protesters have posted their 24 demands on whiteboards at the barricades, periodically checking off demands they believe the city has met. Demands have included firing the Hennepin County attorney, ending qualified immunity for police officers, declaring a moratorium on property tax increases for residents of George Floyd Square for two years, and keeping the site closed until trials for all four police officers present during George Floyd’s death are complete. Howard maintains she and other activists won’t budge on them, but later says they might negotiate. When asked what she and the occupiers will do if the city doesn’t have the authority or funds to satisfy all demands—some require state, federal, and even voter action—she replies, “No justice, no streets.”

MEANWHILE, the Minneapolis City Council and the mayor are arguing about who should have more control over police and city decisions. The mayor wants to reassert his executive power as the 14-member council continues its infighting, often over defunding the police.

“JESUS IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN HEAL THE CITY.”

Both the mayor and the council may put their own proposals on a November ballot. Neither the mayor’s office nor council members responded to my numerous calls for comment.

Residents I talked with in the community don’t want to wait for the city to make police funding and reform decisions before the streets open, which the city has promised to do since August.

In mid-May, residents met with the mayor’s assistant at the home of Monica Nilsson to express concerns about continued crime and to push for reopening streets. Nilsson runs a housing shelter and has become an advocate for neighbors who want streets opened and a police presence. She says the assistant confirmed the mayor wants streets opened but has revealed no plan for working with demonstrators.

One idea Nilsson and other residents support: turn the former Speedway gas station into a center for racial reconciliation, moving the George Floyd memorial out of traffic patterns while still recognizing the site.

Meanwhile, Curtis Farrar, a black pastor whose church sits near where Floyd died, says he’s not political and isn’t taking sides. Instead, he’ll keep preaching, saying Jesus is the only one who can heal the city. For 39 years Farrar has pastored Worldwide Outreach for Christ and leads gang members to claim Christ as their new identity.

A recent Saturday found Farrar and his wife, Pam, along with the church’s multiracial worship band, leading a time of praise and prayer, serving food, and handing out groceries in the church parking lot. At one point, he called for attendees to join hands, making a huge circle to join him in prayer. As he had told me earlier, “God made us all from the same blood.”
As President Biden proposes a massive aid program to stem migration from the Northern Triangle, some wonder what’s happened to billions of dollars already spent on a problem with no end in sight

BY JAMIE DEAN
IN the western highlands of Guatemala, visitors to the market town of Salcajá can’t miss the 40-foot statue dominating the town’s entrance: It’s a towering figure of a man in simple clothes, sturdy shoes, and a small backpack, holding one hand high and waving north—toward the southern border of the United States.

_Homage to the Migrant_ pays tribute to the thousands of local residents who’ve left the Guatemalan town to trek north and enter the United States—and those who have sent millions of dollars back home over the last four decades.

It’s a small part of the billions of dollars in remittances that Guatemalan migrants in the United States send to family members in Central America each year. The stream of income totaled some $10.5 billion in 2019—about 13 percent of Guatemala’s GDP.

Remittances haven’t enriched most Guatemalans, but they’ve eased financial burdens for some living in a nation with a high poverty rate and a low supply of decent-paying jobs.

Still, the gains come with loss.

In a nearby town, Michael Shead has worked as a missionary among indigenous Mayans for a decade and says he’s witnessed the sorrows of family separations. He doesn’t mean families separated by border patrol once they reach the United States but local families separated by a parent (or sometimes a child) leaving Guatemala for the long trek north.

Shead says he’s met young Guatemalan men who told him they grew up with what they needed materially from the funds their migrant dads sent back home. But they also lament: “I didn’t have a father.”

Some migrants say such separations are the cost of trying to provide a better life for loved ones living in difficult conditions, says Shead: “But I don’t think people realize it’s costing them more than they think.”

With a recent surge of migrants from Central America arriving at the U.S. border, officials are asking a related question: What would it cost to help some migrants stay in their home countries instead of attempting to enter the U.S. illegally—and what kind of aid actually helps?

It’s a question that’s perplexed presidents from both parties for decades, but President Joe Biden has suggested a new aid package with a hefty price tag: $4 billion over four years. That’s a billion dollars more than the plan he proposed as vice president in 2015, when President Barack Obama tasked Biden with confronting the same problem after a similar border surge.

Ryan Berg, a fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says the 2015 initiative—called the Alliance for Prosperity—produced some results, but “not a whole lot of prosperity.” And history indicates the aid won’t be effective as long as crime and government corruption plague the countries migrants are fleeing. Berg says the current dilemma shows that one of the highest costs is one of the hardest to pay. “The problem here is time,” Berg says. “Central America is a long-term project.”
corruption, poverty, and violence that ran through the chaotic days of the infamous drug wars of the 1980s continue to the present day in the region known as the Northern Triangle: Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

The three countries account for an estimated 85 percent of Central American migrants who’ve arrived in the United States in the past three years. Not all immigrants enter the United States illegally, and some apply for asylum, but a surge of illegal migration in 2014 included an alarming number of unaccompanied minors showing up at the U.S. border.

Obama tapped Biden to intervene. The administration birthed the Alliance for Prosperity initiative, calling for billions in U.S. aid. During a 2015 visit to Guatemala, Biden told the region’s leaders it was critical to find ways to keep millions of their young workers in their home countries for the sake of local economies and local communities: “If we don’t do this, all of us will feel the consequences.”

Six years later, President Biden’s secretary for the Department of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, acknowledged in a March 2021 briefing: “We are on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years.”

That doesn’t mean U.S. aid hasn’t accomplished anything in the Northern Triangle, but it does underscore what Biden acknowledged in Guatemala back in 2015: “The devil is in the details.”

U.S. OFFICIALS aim to disperse most aid to nongovernmental organizations and civil service groups working in the receiving nations. While aid-related corruption is certainly possible in those groups, the goal is to keep money out of the coffers of politicians who could misuse it.

Congress appropriates the funds and taps U.S. government agencies to disperse the money: USAID usually focuses on poverty alleviation projects. The U.S. State Department usually focuses on initiatives related to security and violence.

But those aren’t separate endeavors. While poverty remains a driving force in pushing migrants to the United States, it’s deeply intertwined with violence and corruption.
in the Northern Triangle. Promoting economic growth without making the region a more secure place to live is a difficult task.

For example, USAID has worked with local organizations on scores of programs that promote better agricultural conditions for farming jobs in rural areas and better training for technology-related work in cities.

But staffers from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported gangs and criminal activity can make it hard for some citizens to pursue a simple education or secure a basic job: Agency officials in El Salvador reported many children won’t attend school after the seventh grade because they’re afraid to cross gang borders on the way to class. They fear being attacked on the way to school.

The report’s authors said children from a particularly violent neighborhood in Honduras told them it was hard to secure a simple job because employers sometimes reject applicants based on where they live.

In some neighborhoods, ongoing shakedowns from local gangs make it hard to keep a small business afloat. A 2015 report by the investigative group InSight Crime described a tightly managed extortion racket run by violent gangs like Barrio 18 and MS-13 in Honduras.

On a small scale, gangs target corner stores and sometimes street vendors. A gang’s demand for a supposedly one-time sum turns into weekly payments. One store owner told InSight Crime that a local gang insists on living in an apartment above her family’s store rent-free. She assumes they use it for their crime ring.

On a bigger scale, dangerous gang members operate wide-scale extortion of taxi and bus fleets. A leader of one organized group of 80 buses operating in the capital city told researchers he was paying four different gangs. An initial demand for payment can range between $3,000 and $13,000, depending on the size of the business. Weekly payments could range from $300 to $700. Locals call it a “war tax.”

It makes maintaining a business or keeping a job difficult for a segment of Hondurans who sometimes decide it would be safer and more sustainable to flee. Some start over in other cities. Others head north.

The dynamic can also make it difficult to achieve widespread results from local programs funded in part by U.S. aid.

A study by the GAO in 2019 said U.S. government agencies had allocated some $2.4 billion for 370 projects in the Northern Triangle from 2013 to 2018: “However, agencies reported mixed results for projects and little information about overall progress.” The conclusion: “Limited information is available about how U.S. assistance improved prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle.”

**Kurt Ver Breek** does have information about how U.S. aid has helped in some parts of Honduras.

The co-founder of the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), a Christian organization based in the city of Tegucigalpa, says his group has used U.S. funds to pay for projects related to improving security and justice in the country of nearly 10 million people. (When former President Donald Trump slashed aid to Central America in 2019, citing surging migration levels, the group had to cut about half its staff.)

In 2019, I visited some of the organization’s projects and met attorneys helping frightened survivors walk through the process of testifying against gang members and other criminals who had killed family members and likely expected impunity.

Corrupt police have contributed to impunity in the past, and a pair of ASJ staffers joined a massive project to confront corruption in the ranks: In 2016, a presidential commission ejected 5,000 out of 13,000 officers from the police force, including six out of nine generals. ASJ staffer Omar Rivera endured death threats during the process but said, “We...
have always been convinced that to be a brave Christian, you have to do more than criticize.”

Other groups have had targeted success as well. Roger Noriega of the American Enterprise Institute testified before Congress in 2019, noting that USAID and the State Department worked with El Salvador on crime prevention programs that led to a 45 percent reduction in homicides in targeted areas. USAID efforts in Guatemala helped local prosecutors accomplish a dramatic increase in successful prosecutions for extortion.

Ver Beek acknowledges the many problems that persist in Honduras, but he rejects the notion that U.S. aid can’t help make life more livable for Hondurans tempted to leave or that the United State can’t distribute it responsibly to groups that can help.

He says ASJ has been in communication with the Biden administration on ways to attach more accountability to any potential aid package. One idea that might gain traction: a scorecard for each nation in the Northern Triangle that would track each country’s progress on goals in areas like education, healthcare, economic progress, and violence reduction.

Every three months, newspapers would report the results on their front pages and countries could see how they compare with their neighbors. Ver Beek says the public comparisons could put pressure on individual governments and give U.S. officials leverage to insist on progress in connection with aid.

Still, even as Biden taps Vice President Kamala Harris to tackle the same issues he confronted as vice president years ago, members of his own party are skeptical. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., told The New York Times in March: “We have a long history of sending aid to Central American governments that failed to produce lasting, positive results.”

Leahy said nations receiving U.S. aid “need trustworthy leaders who want to help their people, rather than to stay in power and enrich themselves.”

That may be a tall order, given corruption among government officials: In late March, a U.S. judge sentenced former Honduran congressman Tony Hernández to life in prison after a conviction on charges of trafficking drugs into the United States. Hernández is the brother of Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández.

In February, federal prosecutors in New York indicated the Honduran president himself was under investigation. Hernández has denied any connections to drug trafficking or bribes.

Even members of Biden’s own team seem wary. Ricardo Zuniga, special envoy for the Northern Triangle, recently co-authored a report for the Wilson Center that said if donors, including the United States, “do not make good governance and anticorruption their top priority in the Northern Triangle, progress related to economic growth and security will be fleeting at best.”

BACK ON THE STREETS of western Guatemala, missionary Michael Shead says progress sometimes meets an unexpected roadblock because of the money migrants send back home to their families.

Shead said the U.S. dollars flowing into the economy drive up property prices for other poor Guatemalans. (One recent U.S.-funded program offered financial education for Guatemalans receiving remittances.)

But Shead’s biggest concern remains Guatemalan families separated when one or more members head north. He sees it undercutting the kind of solid family structures that stabilize any country.

Shead thinks about a man he knows who missed his father’s funeral in Guatemala because he’s afraid he won’t be able to reenter the United States if he leaves. For some migrants, Shead says, the intention to reunite becomes a far-off goal: “Maybe next year.”
“Exvangelicals” make headlines, but what can help wayward Christians embrace their faith again?

by Sophia Lee
ANDREA PALPANT DILLEY GREW UP knowing suffering. As the daughter of Quaker missionaries who spent the first half of her childhood in Kenya, she watched her father bring a dying man home and bathe him in their bathtub, followed her mother to the hospital to minister to sick and dying people, worshipped with refugees who fled genocide in the middle of the night. It was a Ugandan nurse named Betsy who led Dilley, at age 3, to profess faith in Christ. Suffering was all around her, but so was deep, hardened faith that proclaimed love for Jesus in the middle of tragedy.

This intimate cognition of suffering followed Dilley as a young college graduate when she went back to Nairobi, Kenya, to assist a widowed professor who had experienced profound grief: He had lost his wife, his mother, and his daughter to a single car accident. One day, Dilley stood in the largest slums in Africa, holding a wailing, muslin-wrapped baby born with AIDS. Looking at the rows of cribs filled with crying AIDS-positive babies, she lost faith in a good God: “How do I make sense of this? How can a good, omnipotent God allow this kind of suffering?”

Dilley is one of many evangelical Christians who have disavowed their faith for various reasons. Many, like Dilley, leave because they cannot reconcile what they see in the world with a compassionate, sovereign God. Some leave because they say Christians perpetuate or ignore injustice. Others leave because they suffered personal trauma in the Church.

These ex-evangelicals are bound not by their beliefs but by what they repudiate, said Blake Chastain, a former evangelical in Chicago who coined and popularized the term exevangelicals through his same-titled podcast: “It’s a term to acknowledge a prior experience, just like someone might describe a prior relationship with an ex-spouse.”

Many who left the faith had strong ties in the Church: Pastor and author of I Kissed Dating Goodbye Joshua Harris announced on Instagram, “By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.” Jon Steingard, a pastor’s kid and lead singer of a Christian rock band, wrote on Instagram: “After growing up in a Christian home, being a pastor’s kid, playing and singing in a Christian band, and having the word ‘Christian’ in front of most of the things in my life—I am now finding that I no longer believe in God.” Paul Maxwell, a former writer for Desiring God, announced in April he is “not a Christian anymore.”

Paul Chamberlain, director of the Institute for Christian Apologetics at Trinity Western University who wrote the book Why People Don’t Believe, said the most common reason he hears ex-evangelicals give is they want to “be free from the shackles of religion.” When those people have been raised and trained in evangelical churches and seminaries, the arguments they form against Christian beliefs and values are intelligent and precise because they know the theology inside-out.

“These folks don’t argue like anyone else,” Chamberlain said. Since 2012, Chamberlain started noticing a “new wave” of ex-evangelicals who not only walk away from the faith but mobilize a significant force against it: “I saw a different group of critics. They’re much more ardent, more passionate, more knowledgeable with an insider’s perspective that others don’t have.”

That’s why Christians need to be prepared to engage those who have deep, difficult questions, Chamberlain said, not dismiss them: “We must carry out the Second [Great] Commandment and love these folks, because we gotta remember: People do have second thoughts. You and I have them—why wouldn’t they?”

Andrea Palpant Dilley
LIKE MANY EVANGELICAL KIDS growing up in the purity culture movement of the 1990s, Ryan Connell was ashamed of his constant thoughts about sex. He knew lust is a sin, but no matter how hard he tried not to, he continued fantasizing and masturbating.

So at age 14, when he heard the church camp preacher quote Romans 7:24—“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”—those words struck a chord. As the lights dimmed and the music softened, he stood up, tears streaming, and professed faith in Christ. He had what he calls his “big conversion experience.” Not only was he delivered from his sins, God was now his forever friend. God would always be there for him, the pastor promised him. To the shy, sickly, lonely, homeschooled preacher’s kid, the idea of eternal companionship was comforting. He was ecstatic when his lustful thoughts seemed to disappear.

Then less than a week after church camp, lust crept back into his mind, and Connell slipped back into his old ways. Then came shame: “I felt both incredibly loved, but also incredibly like a failure.”

Connell suffered from anxiety and depression since childhood. He dealt with those issues even as he enrolled in a church-affiliated ministry school after high school and spent the next several years working for his church, street-evangelizing, and preaching. People in his church community didn’t have a language for such mental issues. They called his episodes “spiritual relapse” or “lack of faith” or “spiritual attack.” A pastor once told him he had nothing to be depressed about and to “portray a victorious life.”

Connell knew the Scriptures say he’s saved by grace through faith alone, but he didn’t know how to reconcile that with Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 5:48: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” So he prayed up to six hours a day, repenting of his perpetual sins and praying earnestly for the unsaved. He memorized Bible verses, read through the entire Bible twice a year, participated in accountability groups, and kept asking God for forgiveness.

Meanwhile, Connell met people on the streets who asked questions he had never considered before: Is the Bible
historically reliable? Why do Christians have so many different interpretations of the Bible? “Um, let me look that up. Come back next week,” he told the skeptics. But the more he researched those questions, the more conflicting information he read, and the more confused he got.

Then he met a young black gay man while street-evangelizing. They began meeting regularly for coffee. Connell remembers thinking, “I should invite him to church, but there is no way he’s going to be loved at my church.” That realization rattled him.

At age 23, Connell stepped down from ministry. He realized he could no longer preach in good conscience when he questioned everything he was preaching. That same year, he sat at his parents’ church listening to a sermon about loneliness. Once again, he was reminded of how intensely alone and isolated he felt. He wept as he responded to an altar call and prayed: “Please, God. Let someone come and pray for me. That’s all I’m asking.”

No one did. Since then he no longer calls himself a Christian. It wasn’t so much that he stopped believing in God: “I just didn’t really believe that God cared, I think.”

FOR SOME, LIVING WITHOUT FAITH may be as hard as wrestling with it. What’s next for someone after rejecting something so foundational?

“That’s the challenge of deconstruction,” said Emily Joy, a poet and pastor’s kid who graduated from Moody Bible Institute: “Taking stuff apart is a lot faster than putting it together. It’s like, ‘I don’t believe this anymore, I don’t believe that anymore,’ and you have a whole list of things you don’t believe anymore, but you can’t replace them at the same pace.”

Joy attended church several times a week as a kid, hung out with Christian friends, read Christian books, attended Christian concerts and festivals. Then when she was 16, her parents learned she had been in a romantic relationship with her 30-something-year-old church youth leader.

Today, after years of therapy, Joy understands that “relationship” was a form of sexual grooming and abuse, but she didn’t know it then. Her parents forced her to call the man and apologize to him. Joy had no language or context to understand what had actually happened to her. Instead, she got depressed and tried to make penance: She went to church to help out five times a week, volunteered at the nursery, played in the worship band, and stacked chairs.

When the #MeToo movement exploded, Joy went public with her story on Twitter and co-created the hashtag campaign #ChurchToo, which went viral. She now attacks many facets of the faith she grew up in. She gives speeches in churches, college groups, conferences, and festivals criticizing Biblical sexual standards. She landed a book deal. She also divorced her husband after coming out as gay (she previously identified as bisexual) and is currently in a relationship with another woman.

So what’s left in her faith? “I don’t know,” Joy said. “I feel like that changes, always. For a while, Jesus was still there.” But when she crossed out everything she didn’t like in the Nicene Creed, “There wasn’t much left.” Joy says at times she misses the idea of an interventionist, empathetic God. She misses the assurance of salvation, the comfort of certainty in her faith. Whatever semblance of faith she has left now, she holds in a loose fist, ready to ditch or pick up whatever seems right to her then.

It’s not uncommon for ex-evangelicals to miss their past. A year ago, Connell spent several months visiting various churches across the country. Each time he entered a service, he once again felt his heart drawn toward the shimmering possibility of the divine: “There’s still that pull. I still really want God to exist. I want this stuff to all be true—that friendship and intimacy with God, that divine experience, that holy glow.”

BOTH CONNELL AND JOY first started questioning if God is good, then progressed to questioning if God exists. Andrea Palpant Dilley also questioned if God is good, but she never stopped believing that He exists because of what she described as “anchors” for her faith.

Two years after she decided she couldn’t believe in a good God anymore, Dilley still struggled with the reality
of suffering and evil. She had spent those two years toeing around the fringes of secularism, hanging out with non-Christians who loved drinking and laughing at bars but didn’t ask existential questions. She felt unhappy and lonely, still probing for answers to satisfy the longings of her soul.

It was while standing inside that tension that she remembered her father would take her out for father-daughter breakfast dates when she was a girl. Over waffles, she had peppered her father with questions: What does it mean to be Christian? Why do we suffer? Her father had once walked through his own crisis of faith, so he didn’t panic over his daughter’s questions. Instead, he listened carefully, then calmly and confidently engaged with her doubts: “Those conversations served as anchor points, like rock climbing. They still anchored me even though I drifted quite a ways.”

Dilley also remembered that widowed professor in Kenya, who despite tremendous loss still trusted God. She remembered the African refugees she met as a missionary kid who sang joyously to the Lord despite their traumas. Their lived-and-tested demonstration of faith also anchored her.

One Sunday morning, for reasons she still can’t explain, Dilley woke up and decided to attend a church. She chose one full of strangers and sat in the back. She returned the next Sunday. And again, and again. Sometimes she sang along with the hymns, sometimes she kept quiet. The questions didn’t go away, but the same questions about evil and suffering that pushed her away from God drew her back in. Much as C.S. Lewis realized and wrote in Mere Christianity, Dilley realized that outside of faith, she didn’t have the language or moral framework to wonder why evil exists. Can there be evil without good? And she acknowledged that if anyone understands injustice, it is Jesus.

Dilley didn’t choose to return to God because all her deepest questions had been answered. Rather, like Peter who confessed to Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,” Dilley returned to God in a state of defeat: “Lord, I don’t know where else to go. I feel defeated, but here I am.”

Today, Dilley is a contributing editor for Christianity Today. It was within the Church that Dilley could freely wrestle with God again. “Listen to that grief, that yearning,” she encourages others who struggle with their faith: “Those griefs do lead to God, and they belong in the space of faith. It can really be tended to carefully and faithfully inside the body of Christ.”
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A TRANSBORDER EDUCATION

Amid the pandemic, college and K-12 students have continued to cross the U.S.-Mexico border for school

by Esther Eaton in San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico

WHEN SHE WAS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN living part time in Mexico, Nanitza Comparan Cuadras often crossed the border into the United States during her commute to school. As a U.S. citizen, she showed her passport to border agents; walked through a plaza crowded with currency exchange booths, workers, and street preachers; and hopped on a trolley headed to her college’s downtown campus in San Diego. Before each weekend, she headed back to Mexico.
By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Comparan Cuadras had transferred schools and rented an apartment in San Diego. Then she worried the border would close, separating her from her parents. So she packed up clothes and books, moved back in with her parents in Tijuana, and resumed attending class—this time via Zoom.

Students cross the U.S.-Mexico border every school day. They’re often U.S. citizens whose parents either can’t afford U.S. housing or aren’t citizens themselves. They navigate a time-consuming commute to get an education that leads to better job opportunities in the United States. COVID-19 has added challenges and uncertainty to cross-border schooling, but it has also produced unexpected upsides for some.

No one knows the exact number of cross-border students. Norma Iglesias-Prieto, a professor at San Diego State University, estimates from border crossing data that the San Diego–Tijuana region alone has thousands. Public schools typically require students to live in their school district, and colleges charge extra for international students, so some students stay with U.S. relatives while frequently visiting their Mexican home. Others use a relative’s U.S. address to enroll or move midyear.

In Columbus, N.M., 80 percent of Columbus Elementary School’s students come from Mexico. Their parents drop them off on the Mexican side of the border crossing around 6:30 each morning with backpacks, lunchboxes, and passports, said Principal Viridiana Chacon. Crossing guards from the school district guide students as young as 4 years old on a half-mile walk to board buses for the 10-minute ride to school.

The school and others in the Deming Public Schools district have enrolled cross-border students for decades. New Mexico allows public schools to admit students living outside their districts, and the practice has survived legal challenges. District administrators point out that their students are U.S. citizens, and that schooling is cheaper than the support services that would be necessary if they remained uneducated and unable to land jobs. In San Diego, Iglesias-Prieto argued that the problems caused by intertwined economies and cultures in border regions like San Diego–Tijuana can ultimately be best solved by well-educated cross-border students.

Cross-border students do face extra hurdles, particularly during COVID-19. During online classes, border restrictions prevented parents in Mexico from crossing the border to pick up meals for their students, so Deming Public Schools got permission to deliver meals through customs. When rural Deming students in Mexico needed internet access, a business in Mexico let them use its Wi-Fi. Classes are meeting in-person again, but after a COVID-19 exposure, students need a negative test to avoid missing weeks of school in quarantine. New Mexico offers free tests nearby, but parents in Mexico drove an hour for tests costing about $80, Chacon said. Another Deming principal, Jesus Saenz, said his school emailed one mother a letter from the school nurse certifying her child needed a test, and border authorities allowed her to cross.

The pandemic has also brought some silver linings. Deming students from Mexico typically skip after-school programs, worried about getting home late. But more have participated since the programs went online for COVID-19. The district plans to keep digital options. Plus, principals have built relationships with officials in Mexico, and teachers have reached parents through WhatsApp chats—connections they hope will outlast the pandemic.

For Comparan Cuadras, now a college senior pursuing a journalism career in Washington, D.C., living cross-border inspired her research and internship choices and helped shape her perspective and career goals. She crosses less during the pandemic, but she says, “I am still a transborder individual.”
HELP WANTED BUT HARD TO FIND

As pandemic restrictions ease, businesses regain customers but find a shortage of workers

by Sarah Schweinsberg

SOUNDS OF CHATTER and clanging plates fill Mariscos Puerto Nuevo, a Mexican restaurant in Seaside, Calif., where waitresses serve up plates of burritos and tostadas smothered in cheese to a lunchtime crowd. It’s a contrast from two months ago, when government COVID-19 restrictions barred indoor seating in restaurants in much of the state, including Seaside, a coastal city in Northern California.

But even as the customers have returned, the restaurant staffers have not. Antonia Garcia, the owner of Mariscos, has had a “help wanted” sign hung in the front window for more than a month now. She’s also taken out local newspaper ads as most of her employees are older. The restaurant, which has openings for a full-time table busser and a waitress, would pay minimum wage—$13 an hour—plus tips.

Even though California had an 8.3 percent unemployment rate in March, Garcia hasn’t had anyone agree to fill these positions. She believes many potential employees are still worried about being exposed to COVID-19 at a restaurant. Meanwhile, existing employees must work overtime, which costs extra in wages.

“Help wanted” signs adorn quite a few storefronts across the country. As COVID-19 restrictions ease and the economy recovers, businesses are trying to fill vacant positions. For many, that hasn’t been easy.

Job openings rose nearly 8 percent to a record-breaking 8.1 million in March, according to a Labor Department report released in May. Yet overall hiring rose only 4 percent, revealing a yawning gap between the number of jobs available and the number of people willing to return to work. An April survey by the National Federation of Independent Business found 44 percent of small businesses had job openings they couldn’t fill.

Analysts point to different factors behind this conundrum. Sean Higgins, a research fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, said some people aren’t returning to the workforce due to ongoing COVID-19 health concerns. Another reason is that with schools closed, some parents can’t go back to work because they need to stay home to take care of their kids.
A big factor keeping people home may be the lack of incentive as they continue to receive enhanced unemployment benefits, said Rachel Greszler, a labor policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation. Under the Trump administration’s CARES Act, the federal government added $600 a week to state unemployment benefit checks, later cutting that amount down to $300. President Joe Biden’s March stimulus package extended those benefits through September. By then, a worker could have been on supplemental unemployment benefits for up to a year and a half.

Some economists estimate up to 42 percent of unemployed workers are making more by staying home than they did at their previous jobs. “We might not see that unemployment rate fall as quickly as it otherwise could, unless those benefits are pared back,” Greszler said.

That’s an issue that Rafik Ebelian, the owner and manager of a Cold Stone Creamery franchise in Santa Cruz, Calif., is facing. At this time of year, he’d typically have 12 employees in preparation for the summer tourism crowds. Right now, he has seven.

Ebelian has found the increased unemployment benefits are making it more difficult to attract lower-wage workers right now. “Why would they want to come out and work anymore?” he said. “Staying home pays better.”

But some economists say businesses like Ebelian’s need to offer more competitive wages to attract the workers they need. The pandemic has changed jobs, especially those in the service sectors, by making them inherently more stressful, said Heidi Shierholz at the Economic Policy Institute. That also makes them worthy of higher pay, she argued.

Yet Higgins believes raising wages isn’t easy for a small business to do after a year of restrictions. Plus, businesses tend to pass that increased cost on to consumers—or cut back services.

In the meantime, García and Ebelian said they’ll just have to make do with the staff they have. “When I don’t have enough people, the workload gets tougher,” Ebelian said. “So my goal is to hire as soon as possible, just to relieve that tension.”

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next 24 days. These hotel-like postpartum centers, common in East Asia, help mothers practice the tradition of postpartum confinement known as zuo yuezi (literally, “sitting the month”). With a team of nurses to care for the baby 24 hours a day, three meals delivered to the room, and cleaning ladies to tidy the room, a new mom can rest and recover from her pregnancy and delivery before fully taking on the hardships of motherhood.

Chinese culture places much significance on the first month after childbirth—people blame later aches and pains on not getting enough rest early on. The traditional practice of zuo yuezi, which dates to first-century China, includes a myriad of restrictions: For one month, mothers can’t go outside, wash their hair, take a shower, use air conditioning, or drink cold water. The rules aim to protect mothers from getting sick or chilled in their weakened state, although today many have ditched the more stringent rules. The tradition demands new mothers eat nourishing foods such as ginger, sesame oil chicken soups, and herbal teas (see “New baby? Just relax,” March 18, 2017).

In Taiwan, most new moms rest at home as their mothers or mothers-in-law (or hired helpers) move in for a month to cook, clean, and help care for the baby. In recent years, postpartum centers have cashed in on the practice, often advertising their nursing staff and amenities (think massages, spas, yoga classes). The centers can cost $150 to $450 a night, depending on the level of luxury.

In my practice of zuo yuezi, I took a lax route. I washed my hair, occasionally ventured outside, and ate sushi and pizza (in addition to the traditional foods). But I also took advantage of my time at the postpartum center to recover, rest, and learn all I could about caring for a baby. Each room was stocked with new-mom necessities: an electric breast pump, a baby bottle sterilizer, and a breastfeeding pillow that doubled as a postpartum seat cushion as sitting became painful.

Due to a minor respiratory infection, Miles had to stay in the birth clinic for his first five days, at times hooked up to an IV. When he finally arrived at the postpartum center, the nurses patiently instructed me how to breastfeed him for the first time and how to keep him awake as he inevitably fell asleep in his tiresome endeavor of eating. They taught us clueless first-time parents how to change Miles’ diaper, how to swaddle him tight, and how to bathe him.

During those first few days, it gave me peace of mind knowing I could call a nurse to my room anytime I had a question. The nurses had me keep a log of Miles’ feedings and diaper changes, and every other day they recorded his weight gain to ensure he was getting needed nutrients. At night, most of the mothers wheeled their babies to the nursery for overnight care so they could get better sleep. I kept Miles in my room most nights. During the day, if I needed to run errands, take a walk, or just get some time to myself, I handed Miles to the sweet nurses.

A week after his birth, I woke up with a fever and flu-like symptoms. A nurse took my temperature and urged me to see my obstetrician, who told me I had mastitis, an inflammation of the breast. After I returned to my room with medicine, the nurses checked on me and offered tips to treat the problem.

The center hosted weekly classes—including one on baby massages. One night the nurses let Miles go for a “swim” in a small pool inside the nursery. With an inflatable ring holding up his head, Miles quickly fell asleep, allowing a nurse to place a fuzzy bunny hat on his head so we could take photos. Another day, professional photographers came to our room and transformed the bed into a makeshift photography studio: For more than two hours they dressed Miles up in various outfits and snapped photos. They came back days later to sell us the expensive pictures, which we sentimental parents could hardly refuse.

Yet the restrictions of the confinement also took a toll. I spent most of my time in one room with a small window providing a view of a narrow alley and countless air conditioning window units. I sometimes felt restless. When I did go out, the cleaning lady fretted that I wasn’t wearing enough clothes or that I needed to put on a hat. Friends could visit, but they weren’t allowed to hold the baby: They could only look at Miles through the glass of the nursery.

By the end of our stay, we were eager to return home. I said goodbye to the cleaning ladies and nurses who had cared for my son so well, and a friend drove us back home. I walked through our front door carrying Miles in his car seat, still very much a new mother, but a much more confident one.
Perfect crime
Even when we think we have it all figured out, we don’t

ERNANDO ARAUJO’S PIPE DREAM is to rob the Banco Río in Buenos Aires. But he is an idea man, not an engineer. So the high-grade marijuana grower hits up his old high-school friend Sebastián García Bolster, now a family man who tinkers in his spare time.

Bolster is game, and they hatch a plan (detailed in a 2020 GQ article) to enter the financial institution through one of the underground storm drains that honeycomb the city and empty into the river. Faced with the problem of how to disable the bank’s night alarm system, they decide on a daytime heist.

Since the duo are after the basement safe-deposit boxes where Argentinians distrustful of their national banking system increasingly keep their valuables, they will stage a phony first-floor robbery to distract from the real crime scene below. Araujo recruits two veteran bank robbers out of mothballs, Doc and Beto. A legendary Uruguayan thief named Vitette agrees to be an investor.

With the patience of an ant, Bolster drives nightly to Perú Beach and splashes through the labyrinth of tunnels in the direction of the bank. But how to dig a passageway at just the right angle to reach the building’s foundation? One night he bicycles to the bank and feeds a weight on a string through a storm drain, ascertaining the vertical distance from street to canal floor.

To get the horizontal distance to the tunnel without being conspicuous, he measures the perimeter of his bike tire, walks it from the manhole cover just above what will be his starting point, and counts the tire revolutions. Thus he ascertains the two sides of the triangle, and simple math will give him the hypotenuse.

At a nearby branch of Banco Río, Araujo pretends to be interested in renting a safe-deposit box, takes note of the brand name, and buys several from the manufacturer for Bolster to practice cracking. The tinkerer devises a quiet jackhammer he can transport in pieces and reassemble on-site. How to carry away their booty from the plundered boxes? Inflatable Zodiac boats.

But what if the dinghy’s contents bog down in the shallow canal effluvium? Build a dam to raise the water’s depth! Exit at Perú Beach? No, the cops will expect that: Flee in the opposite direction, and surface somewhere else in town, with a getaway van at the ready sitting on top of a designated manhole.

On the big day, their fingertips glue-tipped to ensure no prints, a band of seven sets out in three stolen vehicles. Doc and Beto enter the bank, Beto flashing a toy gun. Meanwhile, Vitette and another Uruguayan drive into the underground bank garage, barricade the door, and join their team upstairs. The third car, nails and oil cans in the back seat as if prepared to slow pursuing police, is a decoy getaway car.

Vitette will deal with the police encircling the building. Playing the part of charming negotiator, he drags out a hostage release drama (making the officers feel they have the upper hand) long enough for Doc downstairs to break through the attenuated wall behind which patient Bolster waits in darkness. On the signal from Araujo, Vitette has the police order six pizzas. Meanwhile the gang hurriedly stuffs bags with booty, bleaches the room of DNA evidence, and scatters hair sweepings from a barbershop.

Five men in a Zodiac tugging bags containing $20 million of loot swoosh through the bowels of a captivated city whose attention is misdirected to a building they no longer occupy. The dinghy engine motor floods, but Araujo has thought of that too, and dispenses paddles. Heavy bags are hoisted up to the getaway van with a pulley system, and the air-filled conveyance, having served its purpose, floats away. Credit cards from the boxes are strewn here and there on streets to keep the lawmen busy for a while.

Perfect crime.

Except it’s not. Five weeks later, Beto’s wife, fed up with her husband cheating on her, rats him out. Moral of the story: “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD” (Proverbs 21:30).
“Whatever the news, the purpose of the Lord will stand.”

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No wound too deep
Thanking a father for what he didn’t say

The most moving letters from WORLD members that I’ve received came in response to an Oct. 26, 2019, column about not playing catch with my father. Many readers said their experience was similar. A typical comment: “My dad never, and I mean never, played anything with my brother or me. I deeply regret what I lost not having memories of my dad taking time to play with me.” Another wrote, “I know the great black hole that remains when a father is present and willfully absent at the same time. We finally walk away and begin the search for a Heavenly Father.”

Sometimes books I write lead to columns. This is the one time a column led to a book. The letters pushed me to research why my dad was unhappy and socially isolated decades before COVID-19. The result is Lament for a Father, published in time for Father’s Day.

These days I feel grateful for what mine provided but also what he did not: a bitter sense that the whole world is against me. Like many of his generation, my father never spoke of his hard World War II experiences. In his case, what he saw right after the war was the worst: concentration camps with piles of bodies and a few walking skeletons.

What if, as I was growing up in a Jewish home, my father had embedded in me the gruesome detail he saw while sweeping up the ruins of the Third Reich? What if he had told me how some of my great-grandparents probably received bullets in their heads from Nazi soldiers and collaborators? I grew up without consciousness of anti-Semitism. What if my father had rat-a-tat-tatted into my brain a sense that evil lurked around every corner?

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I went seriously astray but retained an overall optimism unmarred by nightmares about Holocaust horrors. I regret as an adult not pressing my father further for information about his past, but I also see more method, and love, in his reticence.

Instead of blaming my father, I now see how Harvard Darwinism, Hitler’s power, and my mother’s nagging took away his self-confidence. I understand my mother more: She had a brutal father and a mother who gave up. My tendency at one point in the research was to blame my maternal grandfather, but then I learned how Russian Cossacks brutalized him until he escaped to America.

I could blame the Cossacks, but it didn’t start with them either. I’m not excusing everyone’s bad behavior, including my own. I do want us to focus on empirical proof for a Christian worldview: the universality of sin and our desperate need for grace.

Philosophers William James and Bertrand Russell a century or more ago, and Stephen Hawking and Antonin Scalia more recently, described a person who believed the earth sits on the back of a tiger, which stands upon an elephant, which stands on a giant turtle. When asked what supports the giant turtle, she quickly replied, “It’s turtles all the way down.”

History shows it’s sin all the way down. We are naturally wretched, passing on original sin in ways occasionally creative, usually repetitious. An iron chain seems to bond generation after generation—yet sometimes, with God’s grace and mercy, that iron chain becomes a readily breakable daisy chain. Those who see the miraculous transition cry out joyfully, as the Apostle Paul did, “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25).

Researching Lament for a Father taught me that he was wounded, as was my mother, as was her father, as were the Cossacks, as is everyone. But no wound is too deep for Christ to heal.

Note: If you’ve ever wanted to do journalistic writing for WORLD, the road to possible publication runs through my Austin living room. The 13th World Journalism Institute mid-career course will take place there on Oct. 7-13, God willing. For more information, please go to www.worldji.com.
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