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Commentary — From the Margins

Waters That Fail

O Lord, you know;
remember me and visit me,
and take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
In your forbearance take me not away;
know that for your sake I bear reproach.
Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart,
for I am called by your name,
O Lord, God of hosts.
I did not sit in the company of revelers,
nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because your hand was upon me,
for you had filled me with indignation.
Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?

Will you be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail? (Jer 15:15–18)

1.

What happens when God seems to have forgotten us, when He seems to be a spring that fails when the heat of a summer drought comes, transforming the flowing waters into first a mud hole, then cracked alkali flats? Does our faith fail? When we have done everything that can be reasonably expected of us, keeping from those things that defile a person, and we seem to find ourselves alone, without resources, hungry, poorly clothed—in this age, without vehicle, decent house, employment, health care, retirement, and shortly without a television set that will work—what is our response? Do we get angry with God, want to quit on Him for after all He has quit on us? Is that our response? That is the question the prophet Jeremiah posed: Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, / like waters that fail?

Before I was called, I made a fair income: in May 1966, I blew the engine in the 1962 Ford F-100 pickup I drove to work, and I paid for the engine to be rebuilt out of the cash in my pocket, for that was the first month I grossed over a thousand dollars, taking home two checks that month, one for \$403, and one for \$401 after taxes and deductions. I never liked the way the pickup ran after the engine was rebuilt, so when the 1967 model year Ford Broncos were released, I bought one with a 289 cubic inch engine.

But something happened when I was called to be part of the Body of Christ: I paid taxes on nearly \$14,000 in 1971, the last full year before I began to tithe. My gross income in 1973, the first full year of tithing was \$3,600 ... what happened? My income was less than a fourth of what I had been making. I thought the promise of tithing was that a person would be blessed—how could I say that I was blessed. Yet in spring 1974, I relocated to Alaska's Kenai Peninsula. In 1975, I purchased an acre of ground just off the Kenai River between Soldotna and Kenai; in 1976, I built a 26 by 36 foot shop on that acre, yet I barely had a taxable income in 1974, 1975, 1976.

Without having money to spend, without a steady job, and without incurring debt, I moved to Alaska, purchased property and opened a business that by 1978 produced a fair income. And yes, I was tithing on my income. But throughout this period I never knew from where the next dollar was coming, or even if there would be a “next” dollar. I lived by faith. Was it easy, no! I worried about how the bills would be paid, for they weren't always paid on time. I was involved in a few business deals that went south, leaving a bad taste in everyone's mouth. Prayers didn't seem to help: those deals that turned out poorly, turned out poorly regardless of trying to do right. It seemed like every time I tried to do a good

deed I got kicked in the head ... and I received today in an e-message from a person earnestly seeking to obey God a story very much like what I experienced in the 1970s, only this person is presently living within the story, trapped by circumstances, and expecting the hammer to come smashing down at any moment.

The Apostle Paul wrote,

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Cor 4:9–13 emphasis added)

The scum of the earth—that's not much of a recommendation for Christianity, especially when there are beavies of pastors promising their parishioners the good things of this world if they will only sow seed into their ministry in a perverse “name-it-and-claim-it” gospel that is as false as any message Simon the Magician could have delivered.

I haven't made even a good income since being called by God in 1972 ... 1978 and 1979 were financial anomalies; they were years when I had inwardly gotten away from God, when my focus was on business and not on the things of God—and that focus on business had me selling the shop, buying a boat, and fishing commercially out of first Kodiak, then Dutch Harbor. In November 1979, while fishing king crab out of Dutch I listened to a tape about the entire Church having jumped the track, and I looked around and saw no one, myself included, being where the person ought to be. Indeed, the Church, like Badlands cattle winding distant water, had bolted through fences and was miles from where it belonged. But then, the Church was never where it belonged, which was probably why in a decade it began splintering into slivers.

What about what the Lord [YHWH] told Malachi:

For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?” Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, “How have we robbed you?” In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so

that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. (3:6–12)

Are disciples the children of Jacob? That is to whom these words of the Lord are addressed. And the Apostle Paul certainly doesn't identify disciples as the children of Jacob in his tour de force metaphor: "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise" (Gal 4:28). Elsewhere Paul writes, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29), and "This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring" (Rom 9:8). It is not the natural children of Jacob to whom salvation has come; for salvation has come to the nation that was not before a people (1 Pet 2:10), the nation circumcised of heart (Rom 2:28–29), the nation that has been "qualified" by the Father (Col 1:12) by having the Father individually draw persons from this world (John 6:44, 65) by giving these persons the earnest of His breath, or said otherwise, by giving the person a second breath of life (pneuma Theon). The promise of filled storehouses is made to a people who have not been born of spirit and who cannot store up treasure in heaven and who have nowhere else to put the bounty of God but in earthly storehouses. But better promises were added to the second covenant when Jesus Christ replaced Moses as its mediator.

Jesus tells His disciples,

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. / Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Luke 12:22–34 emphasis added)

Jesus told the same thing to His disciples as He told to the rich young ruler: "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Luke 18:22).

But there is a cost to following Jesus:

And a scribe came up and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.” (Matt 8:19–22)

The writer of Hebrews adds,

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (11:32–38 emphasis added)

For those whom the world was not worthy that went about in skins, destitute, living in caves, there were not many full storehouses ... did they neglect to tithe? Is that why they were destitute? No, they did not neglect to return to the Lord what was His; they did not rob from the Lord. Rather, they were mistreated by the prince of this world, Satan the devil, because they sought citizenship in a kingdom not of this world or from this world (John 18:36).

The prince of this world blesses his own. He bestows his favors on those who worship demons. He doesn't give his wealth or his power or his authority to the children of God, but to his servants who have disguised themselves “as servants of righteousness” (2 Cor 11:15). And you can recognize the servants of Satan by both what they teach and by what they possess; for John writes,

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ... No one who abides in him [Jesus Christ] keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. ... No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the

children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:4–10)

The Christian pastor who does mighty works in the name of the Lord, who casts out demons in the name of the Lord, who teaches disciples that they need to be in church every Sunday morning is an anomian — from Matt 7:23], a teacher of lawlessness, a servant of the devil, regardless of how friendly, sincere, outgoing, honest appearing the pastor is. This pastor makes a practice of sinning, especially when the pastor knows that if he or she were suddenly to begin keeping the Sabbath, two-thirds or more of the pastor's congregation would leave, thereby stripping him of his means of support, requiring that he (like the Apostle Paul) has to work with his or her hands. So our pastor teaches what he or she knows is a lie in order to keep food on the table and a late model car in the garage ... where is this pastor's heart? Squarely centered in the things of this world? If it isn't, then the pastor needs to immediately repent and get into covenant with the Lord. But except for the rare case, that isn't what will happen, is it? The pastor will make some sort of a lame argument about Jesus fulfilling the Law and thereby abolishing it, or about Christians are today under a dispensation of grace whereas when Jesus delivered His Sermon on the Mount Israel was still under a dispensation of Law.

Why lie to yourself? You, who would argue for a dispensation of grace, should know better. If you don't, shame on you!! For you teach as one who hasn't been called to teach and are thus heaping fire upon your head.

Three decades after I was called into the Body of Christ (2002) a second calling came in a manner similar to how Paul was called ... I was then a lay member of a Church of God splinter. I wasn't a minister, a pastor, a teacher of Israel. I was a gunmaker, a logger, a commercial fisherman, and a writer, who had for unexplainable reasons begun writing in 1979, when my boat was tied to the old Sub Dock at Dutch Harbor. I had been careful not to write anything theological for I wasn't, until Thursday of the second full week of January 2002, at 10:12 CST, called to be a teacher of Israel.

When I began writing, I had no training in English, my poorest subject in high school. I had started college as a 16 year old math major, with high enough scores on my SATs that I didn't have to take first year Composition as a math/physics major—and when I was 18, I left college, not to return for 23 years. I had married that summer of 1965, and I left school to make enough money to support a wife. So in 1988, with daughters ready to start college, with no money to send them to college, I returned to the university, but not as an undergraduate. Based on the strength of my writing and my G.R.E. scores, I returned as a graduate student in University of Alaska Fairbanks' Creative Writing degree program. My first degree is my M.F.A. in Creative Writing—and having the M.F.A. as my first degree hindered obtaining full-time employment.

Only in one year between 1980 and 2008 have I earned as much income as I did in 1971, and I cannot convey how embarrassed I was (even though no one knew) when for one of those years in the 1980s I found that I was a few dollars short of paying my full tithe ... it

happened to be the year when I made more than I had in 1971.

So today, I don't find it difficult to work on the same terms as the Apostle Paul wrote, not burdening those I teach, not asking another human being for money, for tithes, for offerings, for contributions in kind; for I don't work for another human being. And if I don't work for another human being, why would I ask a person, any person for my wages. I work because I was called to this work—and the Father has been faithful to supply my needs, sometimes using other people, sometimes by having things just work out. But He hasn't supplied much more than needs, for the remainder is being stored in heaven, not that I'm concerned about what's there or not there. It is a privilege to do a work that builds on the foundation Paul laid in heavenly Jerusalem, and that privilege alone is enough to put in the time needed to overturn the constructs upon which Western Christianity is built.

Now, what do I tell the person who sent me the message about the person's plight? What do I tell the person who is worried about being evicted from his or her house? It is not enough to simply say, trust God, even though that is what needs to be said. But that seems like a cop-out response to the person who is genuinely suffering. Can I say that I know what they are facing? I do know, for in spring 1974 I had to move because I could no longer afford \$45 per month rental. I write about what happened in the sonnet cycle *At Abby Creek*:

6.

War in Israel made me a trapper ...

hunting season over, I had muzzleloaders

to build, but the gas shortage left customers

sitting in two-hour lines, two

and a half hours away. I had to catch fur

if we were to stay off welfare, traded

deer antlers (trophy I'd mounted,

had bragged about) for traps. Hippies made

pipes from the antlers, sold them mail order.

Too far out of town, we agreed it was time

to move (now we can't agree on what a dime

is worth). I asked who owned the house there
at Abby Creek, the one I passed when I ran
my traps. No one would say but Don.

7.

Publishers Paper owned the house and didn't
want to rent to hippies—afraid of fire—
(returning to the land for so many kids our
age—yes, we were still kids ourselves—
meant living with wood stoves they couldn't
bank). Don said to call Publishers, but
nine hundred acres? when we couldn't
afford the one-forty we rented at Logsdon.

I don't remember their forester's name.
He looked at my hair—it was on my ears;
I needed a trim ... his apples & mossy pears
needed pruned. His fruitless cherries were the same
variety, and I would've left right
then, but his wife invited us in for a bite.

8.

You never knew how we got the house there
at Abby Creek. Publishers' forester served
chocolate cake and coffee, and said,
"Wayne let that fucking fence down again
last night." His bull was in Wayne's pasture,
siring blooded calves in scruffy heifers.
I asked if his red hogs were 'shires.
"Only the near ones." Then as if a foregone
conclusion, he asked if three-fifty
would be too much—Dick Parks was already
leasing the river pastures. I wanted
the place, but not that bad.
He said that'd be thirty a month, twenty
in December, as if he owed an apology.

9.

Two bedrooms and a bath upstairs,
a flagstone fireplace in the living
room, a second flue and a stove facing
the kitchen, cork tile floors, full-length
utility room: a house for growing daughters.
You hung clothes on lines strung

between the house & the woodshed, strung
chicken wire down to the creek, up & back,

and laughed when Wayne Hodges sawed the flat
roof off the chicken house I'd built
at Logsdon—it was too tall to fit
through the covered bridge. The roar of that
chainsaw woke up Elk City and started
roosters crowing. Even Flip barked.

At Abby Creek is from 1989; it consists of 109 stanzas written in two weeks;
and what's recorded is what happened following the Yom Kippur war of 1973.

When I was faced with being homeless the first time after I was called into the Body of Christ, I got a better place in a more desirable (to me) location for less money. But I cannot tell the person who contacted me that the person will not be living under a bridge or in the city park if the person loses the person's home. I know God is faithful to care for His own, but I don't if the person has been truly called by God. I know the person professes to be a Christian and professes to be in covenant—and I also know that the person is more than a thousand miles away and that I have no money to employ the person who would like to do translation work for me. The person isn't asking for a handout, but for work. If I were in this person's position, I too would be looking for work ... that's probably not true, for when I have been in the person's position I opened a business and scratched out a meager living. I didn't trust others to give me work; I was told far too many times that I was overqualified for the position being offered.

Christian prosperity isn't what those name-it-and-claim-it pastors say it is; for they are foxes that have dens and that raid the flocks of God to pick off strays not careful to remain in covenant with the Father and the Son. Christian prosperity is about trusting the Father to provide for His sons, knowing ahead of time that there will be times when it seems He is asleep. He isn't. He's merely watching to see what you will do; for when glorified as younger siblings to Christ Jesus, we will be the ones who have to solve problems. We will be the ones on the spot who are expected to come up with the right answers. Being glorified isn't about sitting on a cloud strumming a harp. It is about doing the work of the household

of God, not as a servant but as a son who's supposed to have the answers.

Again, how do I answer a person plagued with doubts when I have had a log cast from atop me and seas calmed and any number of other things that have no explanation in the natural world? How do I, poorly dressed, near destitute, living in a house that cost less than a new Cadillac, tell a person to trust God if that person is saddled with a house payment of two grand or more a month? Does that person want what I have? Probably not. Is that person going to believe me about trusting God? Probably not. So what's to be done, other than to write another Commentary?

To repeat, if a Christian is being financially or materially blessed in this world, the Christian has probably wandered away from God—and to test this, under the New Covenant, the Torah [??????] will be put within those who are of God (Jer 31:33) ... how many Christian pastors do you see on television behaving as if the Torah, the five books of Moses, were written on their hearts and placed in their minds. When you find the first one, let me know.

The Lord [YHWH] had more to say to Malachi:

Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord. But you say, “How have we spoken against you?” You have said, “It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.” (3:13–15)

That would seem true in this era, but look how He answered Jeremiah:

Therefore thus says the Lord:

“If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.

If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.

They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.

And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,

but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,
declares the Lord.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. (15:19–21)

The answer to the person's trials is what I found true: If you return, I will restore you.

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