

THE223 Christian Narrative 1 Creation and Fall

Unit 6 Reading 2

Plantinga, “Flight”

Presented by the



LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

For Use by the

Blue Letter Bible Institute

[Web: Study.Bible](http://Study.Bible)

A Ministry of the

Blue Letter Bible

[Web: BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org)

**Flight (an excerpt from *Not The Way It's
Supposed to Be; A Breviary of Sin*)
By Cornelius Platinga**

1. *Conforming*

In the spring of 1993, Lakewood, California, a middle-class suburb of Los Angeles, made national news with a scandal involving teenage peer pressure and conformity. News sources revealed that a number of Lakewood's most popular boys had formed a sexual conquest group (the "Spur Posse") in which members scored a point every time they achieved orgasm with a girl. What disgusted observers was not merely that these young studs competed with each other in this way or that their scores ranged into the fifties and sixties or that some of their victims were as young as ten but also that the members of the Posse were proud of their exploits, that a number of their fathers defended them ("Nothing my boy did was anything any red-blooded American boy wouldn't do at his age"), and that several of their mothers blamed the victims ("Those girls are trash") or threw up their hands in resignation. Some Lakewood girls felt pressured into having sex with twenty or twenty-five members of the Posse (especially naïve ninth graders who thought that sex with the Posse was *de rigueur* for social acceptance in Lakewood). Other social climbing girls actually sought the notoriety of having "done" the whole Posse. After several of the boys had been arrested on various felony charges and then released, they returned to their high school classes, where class member's cheered them.¹

The story of the Spur Posse is a story of sub cultural conformity. We should note that conforming and obeying are distinct phenomena. People obey superiors but conform

¹ Jill Smolowe, "Sex with a Scorecard", *Time*, 5 April 1993, p. 41.

to peers. Conformity typically includes imitation; obedience does not. To obey is to comply with an explicit requirement; to conform, with an implicit one. Finally, when accounting for our actions (especially questionable ones, we readily acknowledge our obedience but minimize our conformity.² The reason is we tend to see obedience as a social strength and conformity as an individual weakness.

But however we view conformity, we do conform, and sometimes to fine effect, as when small-town business people confirm to each other's high standards of honesty or when, according to community precedent, almost every able-bodied person assists in a local disaster relief effort. But suppose our peer group is a mob or a gang. Suppose our peer group is the Spur Posse—or their parents, whose casual “boys will be boys” attitude perfectly exemplifies the flight from adult responsibility. Suppose our peer group is Charlie Company at My Lai on 16 March 1968. Suppose it is merely a standard congregation of people occupying “some local pocket of human society”, as C.S. Lewis puts it “inside which minimum decency passes for heroic virtue and utter corruption for pardonable imperfection”³ All too few of us dare to be Daniel under such circumstances. Peer habits and expectations are too strong: they pressure us not only into acting but failing to act. Hence the experience of “happy families” in which nobody challenges incest or mentions alcoholism, and “groupthink”—an eerie phenomenon in which cozy groups of decision makers “tacitly conspire to ignore crucial information” on the ground that it doesn't fit what the group already assumes.⁴

² Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, pp. 114-115

³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, Macmillan, 1962), p. 62.

⁴ Groupthink lay behind the failure to plan the bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, behind American military unreadiness for the bombing of Pearl harbor, behind the numerous smaller disasters that derive from a failure to face the facts. See Danile Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York: Simon and Schuster., 1985), pp. 174-89, martin Bolt and David Myers, *The Human*

2. *Conniving*

To shut one's eyes to an injustice, to look the other way, to pretend ignorance of evil—to do these things is to connive. We generally think of connivance as a case of active conspiracy, but it needn't be and often isn't.

At about 3:20 am on 13 March 1964 Kitty Genovese, a twenty-eight-year-old manager of a bar in Queens, New York, returned to her quiet residential neighborhood, parked her car in a lot adjacent to her apartment building, and began to walk the thirty yards through the lot to her door. Noticing a man at the far end of the lot, she paused. When he started towards her, she turned and tried to reach the police call box half a block away. The man caught and stabbed her. She screamed "Oh my God, he stabbed me! Please help me! Please help me!" Lights went on in the apartment building across the street, windows opened, and a man called out, "Let the girl alone!"⁵

The assailant shrugged and walked away. Windows closed and lights went out. The assailant turned and stabbed Genovese again. This time she screamed, "I'm dying! I'm dying." Windows opened and lights went on—many more of them than before. The assailant walked to his car and drove away. After he left Kitty Genovese crawled along the street, bleeding from her wounds, reached the outside door of her apartment building, and dragged herself inside. The assailant returned once more, walked to the apartment building, tried one door and then another, and stabbed her again. This time he succeeded in killing her.

Connection: How People Change People (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1984), pp. 95-107; and Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink, rev. ed.* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1983)

⁵ *New York Times*, 27 March 1964, pp 1, 38. My account paraphrases that of the *Times*.

During three separate attacks spanning thirty-five minutes, none of Kitty Genovese's neighbors tried to intervene. No burly neighbor grabbed a baseball bat and dashed outside to save her life. Worse, while more than thirty respectable people saw at least one of the attacks and heard Genovese's screams and her pleas for help, not one of them picked up a phone to call for help. After much deliberation one man did call a friend to ask for advice about what he should do; he ended urging another neighbor to call authorities, which she did. Police arrived in two minutes but Kitty Genovese was already dead.

Interviewed afterward, conniving residents admitted, sometimes sheepishly, "I didn't want to get involved" or "I didn't want my husband to get involved". One mumbled that he had been too tired to call police and had gone back to bed. Several didn't know why they hadn't helped. Many residents stated that they had been afraid to call. When asked why within the safety of their own homes or apartment they should be afraid to make a (perhaps anonymous) call to police, they gave meaningless answers.

The Kitty Genovese incident—so dramatic, appalling, and public—has become notorious, a defining moment, perhaps *the* defining moment, in American consciousness of urban apathy in the latter half of the twentieth century. At the time it occurred, many thought the incident shocking, bizarre, and atypical. In some ways, it was.

But the connivance it revealed was certainly not unique—not unique where urban street crime is concerned and not unique in general. People connive everywhere. Family members avert their eyes from domestic abuse that is obvious to outsiders. Church councils connive at humiliation of members by power-hungry pastors who discourage

questions and rebuke dissent.⁶ These councils show elaborate mercy to their pastor and offer victims little justice—sometimes listening hospitably to the pastor’s “explanations, disavowals, and reinterpretations” while ostracizing plaintiffs as troublemakers.⁷

Advisers, board members, and chief executive officers of major investment houses overlook runaway greed, check-kiting, entertainment receipts issued by brothels, and links with mafia laundering schemes. When these signs of trouble do come home to them, they respond by raising the corporate advertising budget (an image of health is healthy) and by trying to pick “a few choice bits off the company’s skeleton” before it collapses.⁸ Officers of manufacturing corporations reject the addition of a relatively minor safety feature to the vehicle they make, weighing the cost of the addition against paying legal settlements to the victims of the crashes which that safety feature would have prevented. Board members and other officers know of this gamble, approve it, and try to ignore the plight of the maimed with whom they have to settle.⁹

3. *Leaving Town*

Human beings follow fashions, not only in clothing, automobiles and worship but also in going AWOL. Take two examples of dereliction from opposite ends of the social spectrum. In the summer of 1939, Winston Churchill kept trying to warn his colleagues in the British government that the great nation of Germany had fallen into the hands of a band of criminals, that shadows were lengthening, and that emergency decisions needed

⁶ See Ronald M. Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), especially pp. 147-65

⁷ See Melvin D. Hugen, “Who’s Minding the Preacher?” a review of *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship*, by Marie M. Fortune, *Reformed Journal*, November 1990, pg. 28.

⁸ James Stergold, *Burning Down the House: How Greed, Deceit, and Bitter Revenge Destroyed E.F. Hutton* (New York: Summit, 1990), p. 154.

⁹ See Russell Banks, *The Sweet Hereafter* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 91; and Stephen Grenleaf, *Impact* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).

to be made. The trouble was that the upper-class men who had the power to make such decisions—the ones who ran parliament and the government—kept leaving town each weekend, putting themselves out of the reach of telephones and government business.

William Manchester comments:

To Churchill's exasperation, Britain's ruling class continued "to take its weekends in the country, " as he puts it while Hitler "takes his countries in the weekends"... Suggesting that country weekends be shortened, or that provisions be made for emergency policies, were met with icy stares. Britain's leaders detested being pushed... Haste was somehow regarded as un-British. The ruling class was not called the leisured class for nothing.¹⁰

In *Streetwise*, a book about life in the Northton section of Philadelphia, Elijah Anderson tackles one of the most serious, sensitive, divisive, and expanding social problems in contemporary America—the soaring unwed pregnancy rate in the black underclass (nearly two-thirds nationally). As elsewhere, teenagers and young adults in Northton make more babies than they take care of, and this is especially true of males. In Northton's inner city culture, young black males have little relish for raising a family or caring for the one they have begun. They deride "playing house" (their term for accepting responsibility for one's family), mock those who attempt it, in any case, mistrust females to identify the fathers of their children they have borne. (Street-corner jokes sometimes

¹⁰ Manchester, *The Last Lion: William Spencer Churchill—Alone, 1932-1940* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), p. 483

center on whom babies look like and on the uncertainty of their parentage.) For Northron's young males, to "get over" on a woman (i.e. to lure her into sex with vague promises of love and marriage. to impregnate one (or three or five), and to "get away without being held legally accountable for out-of-wedlock children" is to prove strength, virility, and status.¹¹ To a number of underclass youths, love is just another hustle.

4. Specializing

While conducting his experiments at Yale, Stanley Milgram noticed that certain subjects would ease the strain of what they were doing to the shrieking victim in the other room by taking an exaggerated interest in the merely technical features of the experiment. They began to articulate the test words exquisitely. They began to press the generator switches officiously and with extra care. They began to *perform*.¹² By specializing in this way, people shrank the event ("I'm just trying to do my job well") so as to get it past their conscience.

Similarly, navigator-bombardiers focus their educated minds not on the human beings they will kill but on the skillful operation of the high-tech weaponry that does the killing. Attorneys make themselves expert in manipulating technicalities of the law while avoiding questions about the cause their expertise serves. Jesus indicted Pharisees and other respectable believers for specializing in certain details of religious observance while neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23).

5. Minimizing

¹¹ Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in the Urban Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), pp. 103, 112, 114, 132.

¹² Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 7

People try to settle moral debts by paying just a part of them. They offer an apology, for example, when what they owe is repentance.¹³ They offer kindness in place of the much tougher virtue of love. Thus, in struggling to open in her children a space for long-term joy, a mother settles for short-term happiness. Instead of being a father to his children, a man sends a child-support check. Instead of a child- support check, a birthday card. Instead of a birthday card, the thought of sending one. Some husbands, in lieu of loving their wives, sit on a bar stool and *talk* about how much they love them.

6. *Going Limp*

One way to evade responsibility is to play dead, to do absolutely nothing and to do it repeatedly. Hence lazy employees who accept a day's pay for much less than a day's work. Hence idlers who think it hypocritical to get out of bed when they don't feel like it. Hence middle-aged professors who, once tenured, sink into boring repetition of old courses and dull, inquiring habits of mind. Hence flat-souled college student whose main judgment of life's sacred acts is that they are "no big deal"¹⁴ Hence lazy speakers of English who cannot be bothered even to state their indifference accurately: "I could care less."

In what really amounts to a cartoon, Proverbs 19:24 describes a sluggard's approach to his meal: "he buries his hands in the dish, and will not even bring it back to his mouth" (RSV). As a former student of mine once put it, the sluggard's body tells him

¹³ See Lewis B. Smedes, "Forgiving People Who Do Not care", *Reformed Journal*, April 1983, p. 15

¹⁴ Allan Bloom writes, "I once asked a class how it could be that not too long ago parents would have said, 'Never darken our door again, ' to wayward daughters, whereas now they rarely protest when boyfriends sleep over in their homes. A very nice, very normal, young woman responded, ' Because it's no big deal.' That says it all. This passionlessness is the most striking effect, or revelation, of the sexual revolution, and it makes the younger generation more or less incomprehensible to older folks." (*The Closing of the American Mind: Education and the Crisis of Reason* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987], p. 99)

he needs food, but wasted will can manage only a straight hand drop into the pot. That's it. The sluggard will not attempt the return trip because it includes an uphill battle against the massed forces of gravity. He cannot think of a good enough reason to test those forces. In fact, he cannot think of a good enough reason to think.¹⁵

Making a career of Nothing—wandering through malls, killing time, making small talk, watching television programs until we know the characters better than our own children—robs the community of our gifts and energies and shapes life into a yawn at the God and savior of the world. The person who will not bestir herself, who hands herself over to Nothing, in effect says to God: you have made nothing of interest and redeemed no one of consequence, including me.

C.S. Lewis has the devil Screwtape explain to the junior devil Wormwood that the man he is after can be drawn from God by Nothing:

Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's years not in Sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what And knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long, dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish, but which, chance association has started them, the creature is too weak and fuddled to shake off. ... The only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy... Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the

¹⁵ Rolf Bouma, in an unpublished sermon on sloth written in 1986.

Safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.¹⁶

7. *Cocooning*

Some of us retreat into the small world defined our friends, work, church, and family and build a snugger there. Inside it, we may be busy enough, but only with local concerns. Perhaps on television we watch with disdain or amazement the passing show of misery, novelty, and grief in the larger world outside, but if our insulation is good enough we needn't be significantly disturbed by it, and, in any case, we do not wish to be inconvenienced by it. We do not welcome strangers into our lives or homes, and we do not go out to meet them. We do not inform ourselves of events abroad or cannot locate them on a map or in context. We dismiss the needs of future generations. We have never dealt seriously with a homeless person. We do not grieve over stories of poverty or starvation, and we make only token efforts to relieve such suffering by our charity. Claiming allegiance to the Christ who speaks in active imperatives (Go! Tell! Witness! Declare! Proclaim!), we Christians nonetheless prefer to keep the bread of life in our own cupboard and to speak of it to those who already have it. Do we subconsciously suppose that in such inbred silence we keep our dignity, and unbelievers can go to hell where they belong?

Perhaps the last refuge of the self-protected soul is the web of its own feelings. This is true of the modern neurotic, who after the fashion of Woody Allen, rummages endlessly through the layers of his obsessions and hang-ups, seeking the sources, contours, streams, and eddies of his own creativity and his own consciousness of his own

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters and the Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 56.

creativity.¹⁷ It is true as well within the less neurotic world of etiquette. Judith Martin (“Miss Manners”) remarks that in this age of imperial self and its sovereign feelings, ill-mannered persons no longer feel embarrassed over their sins of omission; to the contrary, they expect credit for them:

Such omissions such as not visiting the dying or attending funerals, and not sending thank you letters in return for hospitality, favors, or presents were once perceived as evidence of rudeness, presumably prompted by selfishness or sloth. Now the explanations (“I want to remember him as he was”; “Funerals give me the creeps”; “I hate to write letters”, “People should do things just because they want to, not because they expect to be thanked”) imply there is virtue in [these failures].¹⁸

8. Amusing Ourselves to Death

If we had no other barometer of American interest in amusement, we could measure it by the salaries of professional athletes and other entertainers. By this barometer, we value amusement more than good law, medicine, government, ministry, education, architecture, or scientific research. For these are all salary—or fee-compensated professions in which, very often, the financial rewards pale in comparison with those for baseball players, rock singers, and talk show hosts. In a capitalist culture, money is how you keep score, and in the professions, such as medicine and football, salaries and fees separate the winners from the also-rans. Thus the orthopedic surgeon who examines the anterior cruciate

¹⁷ For a fine example, try Philip Roth’s Peter Tarnopol in Part II of Roth’s *My Life as a Man* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1974).

¹⁸ Martin, “The World’s Oldest Virtue”, *First Things* May, 1993, p. 22

ligament of a bench-sitting guard for a professional basketball team is looking, and likely looking up, at his cultural superior.

And, of course, jocks and clowns *are* important people. We need then and what they do. Who doesn't need and relish amusement now and then? Who doesn't need a partly playful attitude toward her own work? Isn't it a sign of pride that turns so much of human life gray with earnestness? Isn't grace, not achievement, the light of the gospel and the center of the Reformation? Still, the value we place on entertainment suggests that it has become a diversion not only in a sense of a playful relief from the main business of life but also in the sense of a distraction from it, an evasion of it, a sometimes grim, big-business alternative to it.

By its nature, amusement should not be taken seriously. Nothing comes of it. The winner of the World Series makes front page news, but, objectively speaking, who wins doesn't matter at all. All that matters is that then contest be entertaining. Similarly, televised discussion of whether the celebrity du jour of a talk show will spend January by the sea in Malibu or golf on course in Palm Springs amounts, in the greater ball game of life, to little more than a whiffer.

So when people begin to focus their lives more on amusement than doing their work well, raising their children securely, gaining an education, and helping those in need, they begin to evade responsibility. The problem is that the evasions are lots of fun and therefore very tempting to all of us. It takes strength to resist them. When we fail, when a whole society fails to resist, life turns around in such a way that consumerism and the hunger for unreality converge and spending our leisure time becomes our occupation. Being a deft and knowing *consumer* of clothes (clothes that make a statement), films,

sports events, pro wrestling, concerts, tapes, compact discs, and video games—and especially the entertainment products in which these things combine—becomes a main goal of one’s life and a measure of its success.¹⁹

However far we take them, our flights of amusement cost us more than time and money. They may also cost us our grasp of the general distinction between money and illusion. On a segment of National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition* in late 1993, a National Parks ranger explained in an interview why the rate of accidental injury and death in Arizona’s Grand Canyon has been rising in recent years. The main reason is that the tourists no longer obey ranger signs and warnings. They think of the Grand Canyon as an amusement park in which the dangers, and warnings about them, have all been contrived for their entertainment.

Another cost of the national obsession with amusement is that such serious activities as education, the dissemination of news, political debate, and reasoned public life gets shaped, shortened, lightened, and in worst cases, trivialized by the requirement that they entertain us. Thus colleges award credit for courses in leisure activities, networks package their news presentations with music and the smiling faces on celebrities who are at least as much actors as journalists, and politicians shape their messages to fit his package. “In America,” Neil Postman says in his prophetic book about these matters, “the fundamental metaphor for political discourse is the television commercial.”²⁰

¹⁹ See Quentin J. Schultz et al., *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 111-45.

²⁰ See Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death : Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New Yourk: Penguin, 1986), p. 126.

Even Christian worship has been affected, perhaps, in part, because worshippers watch a lot of television, and some of them watch a lot of televised worship. But worship doesn't fit the television medium very well, just as the music of a string quartet doesn't fit well into the warm-up events of Saturday night auto races. The reason, as Postman observes, is that we cannot consecrate the space in which we experience TV religion—it's the same room and the same screen we associate with sitcoms, hockey games, and cartoons. Moreover we are able, and we know we are able, to change channels on anything, including prayer, that lacks pizzazz. Everything about our experience with TV tells us that it is an entertainment medium.; everything about our experience about TV religion tells us that it's producers know this as well as we do. After watching many hours of TV evangelism, Neil Postman reports that every sober viewer can see with her own eyes: on TV, "everything that makes religion an historic, profound, and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana."²¹

When television-saturated worshippers attend their local churches or wonder how to draw secular seekers there, it's therefore not songs of Zion they want but songs of Babylon and Hollywood—or something like them. People attend worship with expectations shaped by television, and evangelical preachers try to meet them. In such cases worship may denigrate into a religious variety show hosted by some gleaming evangelist in a sequined dinner jacket and patent leather dancing slippers who chats with celebrities and introduces for special music a trio of middle-aged women in pastel evening gowns with matching muffs for their microphones. He may also include, or even

²¹ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 117.

perform, certain eye-popping acrobatics or karate moves.²² Each act in the show is pre-timed, including estimates of the length of audience applause. Imagine a High-Five for Jesus replacing the Apostles Creed; imagine praise time beginning when the evangelist shouts, “Gimme a G! Gimme an O!...”

Naturally, services of this kind give an impression from a religion somewhat different from historic Christianity. One could imagine a visitor walking away from such a service and saying to himself, “I had it all wrong. I thought Christianity included a shadow side—confession, self denial, rebuke of sin, concern with heresy, a willingness to lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus Christ. Not so, apparently. The Christian religion isn’t about lament or repentance or humbling oneself before God to receive God’s favor. It’s got nothing to do with doctrines and the struggle to preserve truth. It’s not about the hard disciplined work of mortifying our sinful self and learning to make God’s purposes our own. It’s not about the inevitable failures in this project and the persistent grace of Jesus Christ that comes so that we may begin again. Not at all! I had it wrong! The Christian faith is mainly about celebration and fun and personal growth and five ways to boost my self-esteem. And especially, it’s about entertainment.”

These developments remind us that corruptions of the general culture and that our contemporary religion generally proceed in the same direction as corruptions of the general culture and that our contemporary religion, to borrow some words from Newman, would therefore benefit from becoming “vastly more superstitious, more bigoted, more gloomy, more fierce”—not because these qualities are more desirable, but because they

²² For more, consult the testimony rich in pathos and detail, of David Wells in *No Place for the Truth; or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (William B. Eerdmans, 1993), especially pp. 173-75.

would serve as an antidote to our artificial cheeriness, because they would shorten the grins on the happy faces of show-biz religion.²³

The Flight from Shalom

We evade responsibility in lots of ways, including some we have discussed in earlier chapters. Several of these (compartmentalizing, self-deception, the adoption of moral subjectivism or relativism) amount to mental shifts by which we evade the *knowledge* of our responsibility and our failure to meet it.²⁴ Dimensions of this shiftiness may be found as well in specializing, minimizing, and conniving as we have just seen. Other evasions—conforming, cocooning, going limp, leaving town, amusing ourselves to death—involve a more straightforward dereliction of duty to our neighbor. Of course, these two kinds of evasions usually appear together (as in connivance) because they are linked: the same laziness and cowardice that keep us from doing our duty also keep us from knowing it and from facing it and facing the fact that we have shirked it.

But at the heart of such evasions lies another—or perhaps, two others. The sinner who abandons his children or who goes on permanent safari within his own psyche or who shuffles back to bed instead of going outside to help someone being stabbed in the street has turned his back not only on his neighbor but also on God, and even in some way, on himself. By refusing his calling, he extracts his own core, hollowing himself out to the shell of a human being, without weight or substance. Spiritually, he begins to move

²³ John Henry Newman, "The religion of the Day", in *Sermons and Discourses, 1825-39*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York: Longmans, Green, 1949), p. 136

²⁴ Mary Midgely says of Sartre, Nietzsche, and other "immoralists" who deny objective right and wrong that their denials finally amount to little more than an evasion of traditional morality. They do not and cannot step outside the moral sphere altogether (which is like trying to step outside the universe), as evidenced by their strong moral recommendations of their own positions. "Beyond good and evil" is mere hyperbole for "beyond conventional morality" (*Wickedness; A Philosophical Essay* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984], pp. 36-44).

out into that “cold and desolate night” of which Henry Stob speaks. He has made himself an alien to the gospel and a stranger to Jesus Christ.

How so? Our neighbor is God’s child just as we are: to sell a neighbor short is therefore to sell God short and to fail a brother or sister.²⁵ We ourselves are God’s children: to fail God and our brothers and sisters is to shrink our own role in the great drama of redemption and to cut some of the lines that attach us to its center. The gospel, after all, is a portrait of the courage of Jesus Christ—the one who “set his face like flint” to go to Jerusalem and meet its terrors, the one who gathered himself to undertake there the one piece of work by which he might protect his neighbors from harm as much as he could.

The gifts of God—vitality, love, forgiveness, courage against evil, joy at our depths, and everything else that flows from the terrible work of Christ—may be found only in the company of God. And we keep company with God only by adopting God’s purposes for us and following through on them even when it is difficult or initially painful to do so. To place ourselves in range of God’s choicest gifts, we have to walk with God, lean on God, cling to God, come to have the sense and feel of God, refer all things to God. Contrary to our self-interested impulses, we have to worship God with a disciplined spirit and an expectant heart.

But just here lies our main evasion, the one we have all practiced a thousand times: like the Israelites, indicted by Jeremiah, we “forget God” (Jer. 2:32, 13:15, 18:15). For weeks at a time we go through the motions, never seriously attending to God, never focusing on God, never—with all the weight of mind and heart—turning ourselves over

²⁵ In hell, as C.S. Lewis pictures it, the distances between houses are very great: people keep moving farther and farther away from each other (*The Great Divorce* [New York: Macmillan, 1946], pp. 18-22) For them, as Sartre famously put it, hell is other people.

to God. The thought that by such negligence we keep on wounding the only being who loves us with a perfect and expensive love, the thought that we are deeply entangled not only in our sin but in the bloody remedy for it—these thoughts become bearable and then routine. At last we put them away and sink into functional godlessness. When we are in that state, God does not seem very real to us. So we do not pray. And the less we pray, the less God seems real to us. And the less real God seems to us, the duller our sense of responsibility becomes, and thus the duller our sense of ignoring God becomes.

It's important to emphasize that the loss is ours. The loss is God's, but it is also ours. It is not just that we owe God our respects and fail to pay them. Despite certain modern assumptions, life with God isn't mainly a matter of knuckling under our superior—the image modernity so much detests. We do not have to trust and obey God, we do not have to express our devotion to God, but not merely that God is stronger than we are, and surely not because God wants to bully us into submission. We must trust and obey God because these responses are *fitting*. After all, we know something of God's goodness and greatness. We know that we have been made and rescued by God. We know that we have been *graced* by God – forgiven, accepted, renewed as slowly and arduously as addicts. Indeed, only inside the cradle of grace can we even see the true depth and stubbornness of our sin.

This knowledge of God and ourselves opens us up to a whole range of opportunities and duties—to worship God, to try to please him, to beg his pardon when we fail, to receive God's renewing grace, and, out of gratitude, to use our lives to weave a whole pattern of friendship, service, and moral beauty.²⁶

²⁶ See Richard Swinburne, "Original Sinfulness," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionphilosophie* 27 (1985): 283-39.

We could describe our situation like this: we must trust and obey in order to rise to the full stature of sons and daughters, to mature into the image of God, to grow into adult roles in the drama of redeeming the world. God has in mind not just what we should be but also what, one day, we *could* be.²⁷ God wants not slaves but intelligent children. God wants from us not numb obedience but devoted freedom, creativity, and energy. That's what the grace of God is for—not simply to balance a ledger but to stimulate the spurts of growth in zeal, in enthusiasm for shalom, in good hard work, in sheer delicious gratitude for the gift of life in all its pain and its wonder.

In short we are to become *responsible* beings: people to who God can entrust deep worthy assignments, expecting us to make something significant of them—expecting us to make something significant of our lives. None of us simply finds herself here in the world. None of our lives is an accident. We all have been called into existence, expected, awaited, equipped, and assigned. We have been called to undertake the stewardship of a good creation, to create sturdy and buoyant families that pulse with the glad give-and-take of the generations. We are expected to show hospitality to strangers and to express gratitude to friends and teachers. We have been assigned to seek justice for our neighbors and whenever we can, to relieve them from the tyranny of their suffering. Some of us have been called, in imitation of Christ, to bear unusual suffering of our own.

But we have also been called, and graced, to delight in our lives, to feel their irony and angularity, to make something sturdy and even lovely of them. For such undertakings, we have to find emotional and spiritual funding from the very God who assigns the, turning our faces toward God's light so that we may be drawn to it, warmed

²⁷ See Richard C. Erickson, Reconciling Christian Views of Sin and Human Growth with Humanistic Philosophy," *Christian Scholar's Review* 8 (1978): 124

by it, bathed in it, revitalized by it. Then we have to find our role within God's big project, the one that stretches across the border from this life to the next. To be a responsible person is to find one's role in the building of shalom, the re-webbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment and delight. To be a responsible person is to find one's role and then, funded by the grace of God, to fill this role and to delight in it.

In the first chapter of this book I said that shalom is God's design for creation and re-creation and that sin is a blamable vandalism of shalom. Here at the end, let's expand the image: by the sins of attack we vandalize shalom; by sins of flight we abandon it. When we flee responsibility, we turn our backs on God's presence and blessing, we walk out on the one work project that will outlast every recession, and we begin the slow process of converting ourselves into derelicts. We "hate the light and do not come into the light" (John 3:20). Instead, we gather all we have and make our way toward a far country, toward the outer darkness, toward a place of self-deception, a place of our own making.

Taken from **Not the Way It's Supposed to Be** by **Cornelius Plantinga**. Copyright © (1995) by **Apollos**. Used by permission of Eerdmans Publishing.