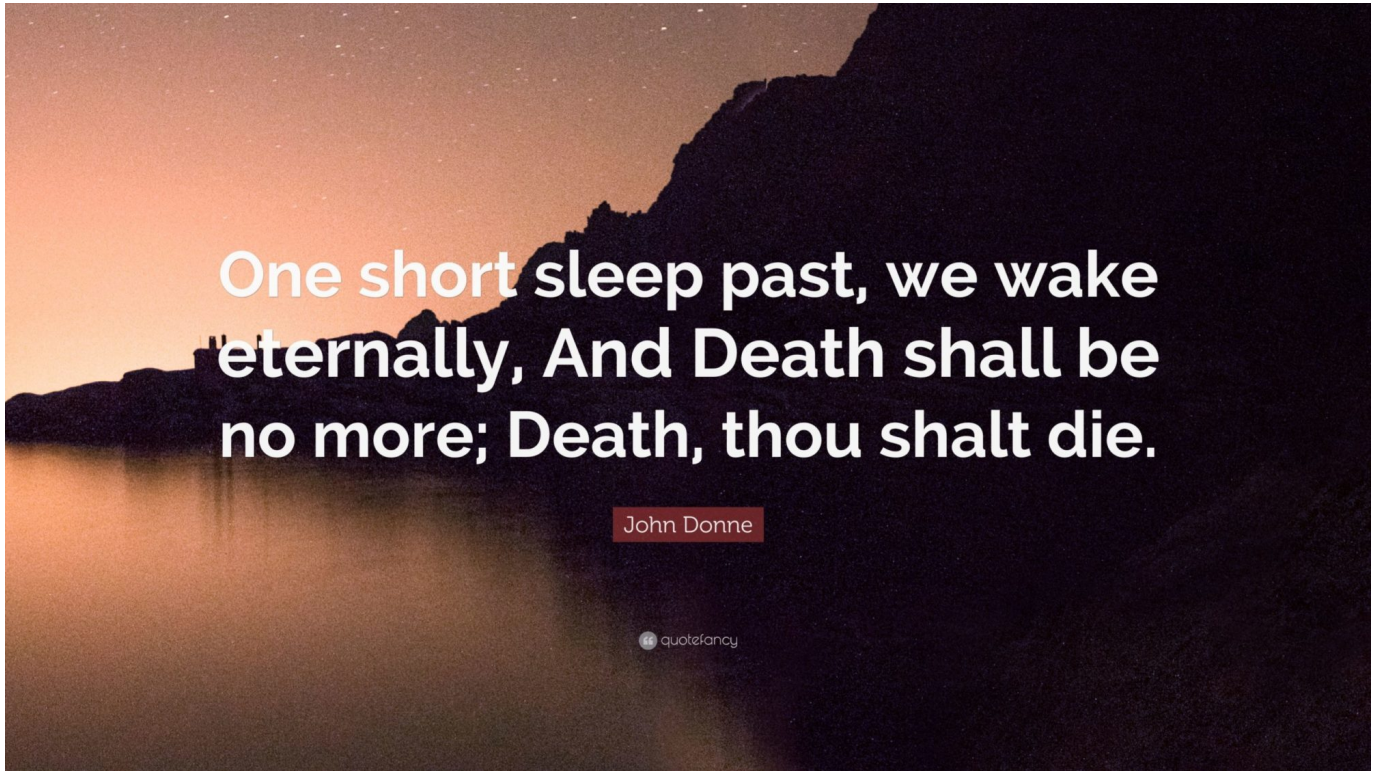


# When the Ultimate Promise is Terrifying



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## Co-missioners,

Kudos to writer Chris Neumann for today's one-of-a-kind post. We urge it on you for three reasons.

First, Chris raises an issue that has never surfaced in Crossings. We know of no prior writer who has addressed it. That includes Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. We doubt that it has ever crossed your own minds as an issue that needs addressing.

Second, Chris writes with a gutsy candor that few people possess. It takes a deep faith in Christ to be this honest with a bunch of fellow saints.

Third, you'll find Chris wrestling with Christ as Jacob did with God at the Jabbok. It's a sight to behold—and be awed by, we think.

We would welcome your comments on what you read here today. Send them to our editor, [Jerry Burce](#).

We should mention that Chris has written for Thursday Theology a couple of times in recent years, bringing Christ and his benefits to bear on issues that lay people face and too many pastors are oblivious to, his own included. Last summer he was elected to the Crossings Board where he serves as Treasurer.

And with that, another reminder: we gather in Belleville, Illinois at the end of next month to think and talk about “The Promising Community” in which all of us are included. Will we see you there, whether in person or virtually? We certainly hope so. [Now is the time to register](#) if you haven't yet.

**Peace and Joy,**

***The Crossings Community***

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# When the Ultimate Promise is Terrifying

by Christopher Neumann

I worked in an organization owned and operated by a family of strict Orthodox Jews for more than fourteen years. Kosher diets, sidelocks, tassels, and touching the mezuzah affixed to every doorframe were commonplace. So too was a mass exodus early on Friday afternoons this time of year, as the days grow shorter allowing less time for Sabbath preparation. The owner's sons and sons-in-law were my age or thereabouts. Being of different yet similar piety, we got along well, with plenty of good-natured ribbing included. On their way out the door one Friday, we shared the following exchange:

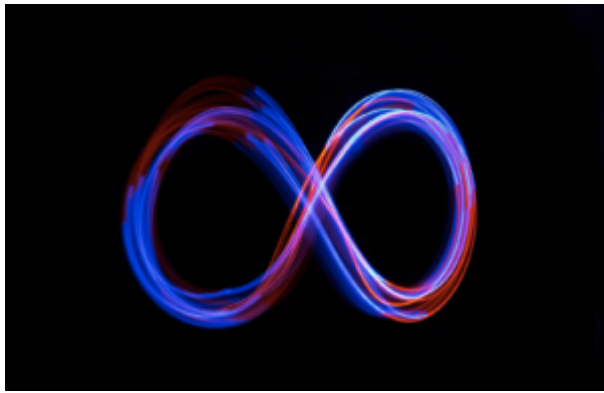
Me: How much of the prep work is really yours? Seems a convenient excuse to avoid several hours of work in the office.

Them (*laughing*): Right! Says the Lutheran guy practicing the easy faith. Maybe I'll spend the time today considering a full conversion, so I don't have to actually do anything either.

*The easy faith.*

Funny what lodges itself in a person's subconscious. That one line from a dozen years back stuck in mine to be sure. The easy faith.

On one hand, I appreciated where my Jewish friends were coming from, heavily laden yet all-in on the "have-to." They practiced an intense devotion to rituals, customs, and laws, always precisely doing as told. Doubt one of them would have been caught striking the rock for water. Suppose it also must look painless to them as a Lutheran simply makes the sign of the cross over her heart and walks away at peace. The easy faith, huh.



As another birthday passes during the writing of this, firmly entrenching me in what we'd call "midlife," I'm not sure I've ever felt ours to be an easy faith. Grasping the Gospel, genuine Gospel, is not easy. Trusting God is not easy. And these hard facts

are made all the more difficult by a crippling personal fear that induces panic and horror that can't be overstated, all the more evident as Advent envelops us and in doing so creates a particular paradox.

Google tells me the clinical term for my phobia is *apeirophobia*, the fear of eternity. Important to note that this isn't a fear of God. It isn't even necessarily a fear of dying. The fear itself is succinctly summarized in a quote from philosopher Todd May, given in an interview for the *New York Times* in 2020. May, an atheist, says, "Imagine a desert the size of the Sahara. Every 10,000 years a bird comes along and plucks a single grain of sand from the desert. By the time the Sahara has been cleared not a single flicker of immortality would have passed." Spending more than one minute considering the magnitude of truth in that quote is enough to send me off to bend the knee before the porcelain throne in the nearest bathroom.

Exacerbation of the terror that frequently visits came when I stumbled upon the unfortunate fact that several of my children possess the same fear, God help them. My wife took to teasing our college-aged son about missing church often while home for the summer. His response shocked and saddened. His response hit home with enormous force. It might as well have been me speaking twenty years ago, had I the courage at his age to spit it out as plainly as he did in that moment. His brother heard this from an adjacent room and casually popped out. "I don't like that

either. It is super scary if you think about it." I knew exactly how they felt.

What my son articulated was a clear acknowledgment that Jesus died and rose to save him, a baptized child of God. Yet instead of feeling relief, feeling free, feeling joy in the life-giving promise, he felt immense fright. How can the Good News be all that good when it is the gift itself in the end that terrifies? Again, I'm right there with him. I get it. In fact, for me the situation seems to take the Crossings methodology and embed one of those traffic roundabouts right smack in the middle of it.

Steps one and two of the diagnosis are clear. No denying it. There are external and internal issues with me, sinner as I am. What's more, step three, the eternal problem encountered, is also conceded. No denying that one either. Step four provides the rub, wherein rather than arriving at the eternal solution, I'm sent circling around, headed back towards a perceived eternal problem all over again. A life that does not end? Right

back to being horrified, in despair



As if the roundabout trip back to Crossings' step three was not a daunting enough burden to bear, heading back the other direction means that before long I'll also approach steps one and two again, where I'm under the giant magnifying glass. The thoughts of inadequacy and guilt aren't just poking around anymore; they've set up camp. And stationed in this party: my foe the devil, all the while prowling, as St. Peter puts it. He licks his chops as the doubt and shame connect like dots ultimately exposing me as a picture of Christian failure. Right?

- I mean really, what TRUE believer looks at God's gift of everlasting life with an eyebrow raised, not sure he wants it. My goodness, especially as a member of the Lutheran Pieper family—my great-great-grandfather, the esteemed dogmatician. Surrounded by brilliant preachers, teachers,

and faithful family my whole life long too. Imagine telling any of them that you feel like THAT! What a sorry, spoiled sack I am. You're supposed to be better than this. So much more.

- That, of course, is to say nothing of admitting this fact to God Almighty. I'm essentially treating the eternal-solution gift like a six-year-old would a stocking full of dress socks. If the lukewarm are getting spit out, what is to become of me, you know—the guy who is manifestly cold? Gulp...if a gulp is even able to be choked down at this point.
- Sure would be easier to avoid going to church. This way I can keep both the fear and the failure at arm's length. Why subject myself? The answer to my problem is Jesus. I know it. But what he's ultimately offering is petrifying, and more than I care to handle. Better not to think on it, you know. Especially true around this time of year as Advent unfolds. I'm to stand among others who boldly ask Jesus to come quickly? I can't say that. God knows I don't mean it. To make matters worse, it's Nicene Creed season—the one that specifically calls for me to profess a kingdom without end and send my mind reeling with twenty minutes of the service remaining.
- God tells me over and over and over again not to be afraid. So why can't I get there? Sealed by the cross of Christ in holy baptism and I still can't get there. What is the matter with me? In fairness to me, though, why would God even afflict me with this insidious fear? Why not flying? I'd gladly drive. Why not the ocean? Mountain vacations will be just fine, thanks. A God that cares for me and wants me to love him with heart, soul, strength, and mind above all else also saddles me with this yoke, this overwhelming fear of the inevitable? Seriously?



## *The easy faith?*



It was about eleven years ago when the penny dropped. Given my church-filled upbringing I'm surprised the Holy Spirit didn't kick me in the backside and slap me upside the head before knocking the thing out of my hand. Nonetheless, it occurred to me as someone I loved and respected immensely faced his own death. Word trickled down to me that this prime example of Christian faith was scared. Scared? Him? It was if God was

winking at me, arm around my shoulder as all the words over the years were finally starting to permeate my thick head—right through the cross traced on my baptized forehead. If Jesus for this dying saint, then Jesus for me too, just as I am. God is not giving up on me, no matter what. Aha! *Good News!*

- This fear is not the negative reflection of me as the complete fraud the devil would have me believe I am. To the contrary, the fear simply labels me as human. Better yet, when God looks at me, he sees Jesus...and he smiles. Smiles because I still belong to him, fear and all, and nothing but nothing can separate us. Smiles because he knows the future we have in store, together. Smiles because he has the ultimate surprise up his sleeve. Just you wait, he says laughing. No eye has seen, nor ear



heard, nor heart of man imagined what God has prepared. How does the hymn go...though today we sow no laughter, we shall reap celestial joy. Joy! We have no idea the joy that awaits. Trust that it does just the same. Joy beyond our simple human minds. Hard as it may be. Keep on trusting it. Resist the prowling devil. And when that task gets too difficult to accomplish, when fatigue sets in—pass the baton. Hand it over to Jesus.

- In passing the baton, I can rest assured that I'm in the absolute best of company because for his part, Jesus knows exactly how I feel. Imagine that. He too once looked at the future God had teed up for him with fear. Not just any fear either; rather a debilitating agony. An agony that had him sweating blood in the garden as he pleaded with God for an alternative. He wanted out. God didn't let Jesus off the hook. Jesus responded with trust and grabbed his cross. He gives me the same instruction—take up your cross and follow. Here's an opportunity to do just that.
- Taking up my cross inevitably leads to some suffering. Rejoice in it. Embrace it. Sure, it's counterintuitive. It might even prove nearly impossible. This is *not* the easy faith! Try all the same, in the freedom we have been given to fail. That very suffering produces endurance, endurance produces hope and hope does not put us to shame. Hope is one of God's greatest gifts. You know the feeling when hopes are finally realized? You got the job. Your offer was accepted on the new house. Your children make it home safely for Thanksgiving and fill the house as it once was. It's that Andy-Dufresne-breaking-out-of-Shawshank feeling of sheer joy. So utterly good! And yet it doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of what God has waiting on the other side of our hope in him. Again—trust this! Hope in the Lord. He will renew your strength. He will wipe

every tear from your eye. He will not let you down.

May the God of all grace, who has called us to his eternal glory in Christ, after we have suffered a little while, restore us and make us strong! Blessings to all this Advent season.



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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
A publication of the Crossings Community