

This week the world was riveted by the "masterpiece" mission of an international team of expert divers, medics, cavers and ordinary people from all walks of life who came together to search for and rescue a team of young soccer players who were trapped by floodwaters in an underground labyrinth in northern Thailand.

The event provides us the opportunity to explore themes of salvation, teamwork and sacrifice. So we will focus on these themes for this week's lesson.

If you'd prefer a different topic, please see our second lesson, which looks at the recent decision of U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Anthony Kennedy to retire and President Donald Trump's nomination of Federal Appeals Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh to replace him. These developments give us a chance to think theologically about justice, the role of judges, how we ourselves make judgments, what commitment Christians should have to judicial systems where they live and what it would be like to live in the kingdom of God when it comes in full flower.

The Editorial Team of *The Wired Word*



International Team Mobilizes to Rescue Thai Soccer Team Trapped 18 Days in Cave

The Wired Word for the Week of July 15, 2018

In the News

On Saturday, June 23, a group of 12 Thai soccer teammates, ages 11-16, and their coach, Ekapol Chantawong, 25, became trapped by floodwaters in Tham Luang Nang Non, the longest cave in northern Thailand, near the Myanmar border.

British divers located the boys almost 10 days later, huddling together on a narrow ledge in the darkness, 2.5 miles from the cave entrance. They were cold and hungry, but otherwise alert and curious about how long they had been underground and when they could get out.

"Many, many people are coming," the Brits told them. "We are the first. Don't worry now."

The first priority of the rescuers was to send in a medic, food and supplies. Then they began to plan for what would become a complex international rescue operation.

"Our first mission is accomplished. Now we are trying to get them out," said Narongsak Osotthanakorn, governor of Chiang Rai.

For more than a week, divers laid guide ropes and placed extra oxygen tanks along the escape route, while other workers used large pumps 24/7 to reduce the water level in the cave so the boys, most of whom are not skilled swimmers, would be able to walk part of the way.

Anmar Mirza, an American cave rescue expert, said, "Trying to take non-divers through a cave is one of the most dangerous situations possible, even if the dives are relatively easy."

On Friday, July 6, tragedy struck when former Thai Navy SEAL Sunan Kunam, 38, died of oxygen deprivation, ironically while delivering extra air tanks along the route the rescuers would follow to retrieve the soccer team. His colleagues said they would "not let the sacrifice of our friend go to waste."

Don Mann, a former U.S. Navy SEAL, observed that divers like Sunan are generally brave, selfless people "who go in [to a rescue operation] with the notion that ... they're going to ... risk their lives ... to save others' lives."

Waleepom Gunan, Sunan's widow, told reporters, "Sunan once said we never knew when we would die. 'We can't control that, so we need to cherish every day,' [he said.] 'I want to tell you, honey, you're the hero of my heart. You always were, and you always will be.'"

Narongsuk Keasub, a diver for the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, said the thought of their own children kept them going through every hardship and risk: "I'm quite emotional as a father -- everybody has this feeling because we feel like it's our children who are inside the cave."

By Sunday, July 8, water levels were low enough that the team was ready to launch the first rescue attempt.

"Today is D-day," Narongsak said. "The children said they are ready to come out. They're ready to join our mission." Choorat Panngao, Provincial Police Region 5 deputy commander, agreed. "If we don't do it today we will lose our opportunity."

Authorities had considered other options, including supplying the boys in the cave until monsoon season was over, but that could have taken months, since Thailand's rainy season normally extends through October. Experts warned that declining oxygen levels in the cave could be fatal. Others suggested using an experimental child-size submarine, drilling down into the cave or searching for another way through the mountainside to where the team was located. For various reasons, each of those options was discounted.

Rescuers faced a number of challenges: the threat of torrential monsoon rains that could raise water levels; strong currents; declining oxygen levels and the rise of carbon monoxide in the chamber where the boys were waiting; limited visibility; the inexperience, weakened condition and possible disorientation and panic of the children; dark, muddy water; tight tunnels and sharp terrain the teams would have to navigate.

To pass through the narrowest, 15-inch "pinch point," each boy would have to detach from the divers, ascend to an air pocket before diving down to reconnect with the lead diver in his team. Members of the rescue and recovery team, including 40 elite divers from Thailand and 50 from other nations, rehearsed different scenarios tirelessly to prepare for any eventuality during the

mission. Divers taught the soccer team diving skills and helped them practice use of masks, breathing apparatus and scuba gear.

Each boy was escorted on his five-hour journey by two divers, one in front who carried his own oxygen as well as a tank for the boy, and one behind. At times, the three were fully submerged, while at other times they could walk or swim with their heads above water.

Each day's rescue took between nine and 11 hours. Each team was aided along the way by a "daisy chain" of divers and other volunteers. Four boys emerged each day, Sunday through Tuesday, with the coach the last of the team to be escorted to safety. They were followed by three Thai Navy SEAL divers and the doctor who had assisted them throughout their ordeal.

After what some have called a "masterpiece" mission, the Thai Navy SEAL Facebook page posted, "We are not sure if this is a miracle, a science, or what. All the 13 Wild Boars are now out of the cave."

The soccer team members are back together again, this time in an isolation unit at a hospital in Chiang Rai, where they are being evaluated and treated for such conditions as dehydration, malnutrition, slow heartbeat, an infection known as "cave disease" (histoplasmosis), sleep disorders, hypothermia, lung inflammation, light sensitivity and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They could face weeks, months or even years of recovery and may have symptoms of depression, anger, fear or anxiety.

Families were able to talk to the children by phone and to see them through glass at the hospital. They have been told they will be reunited as soon as the boys are free of infection.

Some criticized the assistant coach, Ekapol, for leading the boys into the cave so close to monsoon season, but others see him as a loving caregiver who helped the team conserve energy and stay calm through meditation techniques he learned when he was a novice monk. He sacrificed his own share of what limited food and water they had while trapped in the cave so the boys would have more.

Orphaned at 10 when his entire family succumbed to an illness, Ekapol empathized with other poor boys. Friends and co-workers said "he loved them more than himself" and "gave a lot of himself to them." A drawing that is circulating widely shows Ekapol sitting in a monk's pose holding 12 young wild boars in his arms, a reference to the soccer team's name, the Wild Boars.

Joy Khampai, a longtime friend of Ekapol, said he was likely to blame himself for what happened. The mother of one of the freed soccer players, Pornchai Khamluang, said, "When [Ekapol] comes out, we have to heal his heart. My dear Ek, I would never blame you."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[All 12 Boys and Their Coach Are Rescued From Thai Cave After 2 Weeks. NPR](#)

[All 12 Boys, Coach Brought Out. Bangkok Post](#)

['He Loved Them More Than Himself': How a 25-Year-Old Former Monk Kept the Thai Soccer Team Alive. *The Washington Post*](#)
[Why the Thai Cave Rescue Drew So Much Attention Compared to Other Crises. *NPR*](#)
[Divers Came to 'Risk Their Lives' to Save Boys, Coach Trapped in a Thailand Cave. *ABC News*](#)

The Big Questions

1. Have you ever been surprised by an unexpected turn of events that put you in a life-or-death situation? How did that experience impact you? What role, if any, did faith play in how you moved through that experience?
2. Have you ever participated in a search-and-rescue operation? If so, in what capacity? What motivated you?
3. Have you ever made a mistake that put the lives of others, as well as your own life, in danger? How did you handle the realization that you had done that? How did others treat you, and how did their reaction affect you?
4. What is the most significant experience you have ever had working as a team with others to accomplish something important? How do you see the church working as a team today? Where and how could we improve our functioning as a team?
5. Compare the search and rescue of the Thai soccer team with the kind of salvation we read about in the Bible. Where do you see similarities? Where do you see differences?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 139:11-13, 15

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
... My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.* (For context, read 139:7-16.)

The psalmist asks rhetorically whether there is any place in heaven or on earth where he can escape from God's spirit, any place where God is not present. The answer is clear to him: God is everywhere.

Even in the pitch blackness of a cave without access to natural light, God saw the 12 Thai boys and their coach. They were not hidden to God, any more than we were hidden from God when we were still embryos in our mothers' wombs.

Questions: When, if ever, have you experienced total darkness, literally or spiritually? What was your first reaction? If the darkness was extended, did your reaction change over time? If so, how?

Does the knowledge of God's omnipresence fill you with trepidation, hope or something else? Why might different people have different reactions to God's presence? Why might we want to hide from God at times, as Adam and Eve tried to do in the garden (Genesis 3:8-13; John 3:20)? Why does the awareness that he cannot flee from God ultimately fill the psalmist with comfort and cause him to offer praise to God?

John 10:11, 15

[Jesus said,] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... I lay down my life for the sheep." (For context, read 10:1-18.)

John 15:12-14

[Jesus said,] "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (No context needed.)

Former Thai Navy SEAL Sunan Kunam and the other elite divers who gathered to work for the rescue of the Wild Boars knew the rescue operation was risky, but they committed themselves to the mission anyway. Sunan paid the ultimate price to bring the boys home to their families.

The coach who led his team into the cave, Ekapol Chantawong, apparently didn't consume all of his own rations while in the cave, preferring to share them with the boys. He demonstrated love for them by his daily sacrifices so that they might live.

In the two passages from John quoted here, we see how Jesus pictures himself, and the vision he has for his followers. He is not a thief or a predator who wants to ravage the flock, nor a hired hand who will abandon the sheep when the going gets tough. No, he is the Good Shepherd, who lives for the sheep, even to the point of sacrificing his life.

And the vision he has for his disciples follows the same trajectory: He has shown his love for us by laying down his life for us, and we are to show our love for one another the same way -- by laying down our life for each other, by loving one another, Jesus says, "as I have loved you."

Questions: Point to an example of extreme sacrifice in your life or experience. What effect did that have on you?

How can we who follow Christ "lay down our life for our friends" in our ordinary lives? Is there a difference between Christ's self-sacrifice and that of others like Sunan and Ekapol? Explain.

Luke 15:3-6

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" (For context, read 15:1-7.)

When Jesus told this parable, his listeners were no doubt aware that it's not always possible to bring a large number of creatures through a season without any losses. One might consider a shepherd successful who returns with 96 or 97 of the 100 sheep and question whether it's even possible to save everyone. Indeed, that's often the excuse given when we as a society are faced with large problems such as disease, hunger or migration of millions displaced by war, ecological disaster or poverty.

Jesus attracted all sorts of people who were not welcome in "respectable circles" -- people like tax collectors and sinners, who listened to him gladly. But some religious leaders grumbled about it, suggesting that it was improper to associate with such riffraff. After all, "birds of a feather flock together," right? And "lie down with dogs, wake up with fleas"!

When the families of the Thai boys heard that divers had located them and that they were alive, they rejoiced. You can imagine how they celebrated the news that the entire team had been rescued from the cave.

Jesus makes the point that it doesn't matter how many sheep a shepherd has; if one is lost, he goes looking for that lost sheep, wherever it may be, even if it is among the tax collectors and sinners. Each one is precious to him! And after he finds one lost sheep, he throws a party! That's what it's like in heaven when one sinner repents: tremendous joy!

Questions: What made the rescue of these children so compelling to people around the world? Why were such expensive, extraordinary and heroic measures necessary when distressing numbers of children die every day? Why isn't there this same compelling need to rescue when it comes to the loss of thousands of children to hunger and malnutrition?

Suppose you have several children, and one day one of them gets lost in the woods while you are vacationing in another state. Would you say, "No biggie! I have several other children. One more or less doesn't really make a difference"? Explain.

What is Jesus saying in the parable about the worth of each individual in God's eyes? What does that mean for how God feels about you?

Colossians 1:12-14

... giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (For context, read 1:9-14.)

The 12 soccer players and their coach have to wear sunglasses after spending nearly three weeks in the darkness underground, as their eyes re-adjust to the light. Experts say they may have to deal with the physical and mental after-effects of their experience for days, months or even years.

Paul prayed that the Colossians would be "filled with the knowledge of God's will ..., [would] lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him ... in every good work and ... [would] grow in the knowledge of God" (vv. 9-10). He prayed that they would "be made strong ..., prepared to endure everything with patience," joy and thanksgiving to God (vv. 11-12).

Questions: How might the experience of emerging from a cave after weeks of light deprivation compare to the experience of being rescued from the power of spiritual darkness to live in God's light? In what ways has your own salvation experience moved you from darkness to light? What are some of the challenges of moving from a state of spiritual darkness into God's light? What are some of the blessings? How does the knowledge that in God's Son "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" help us emerge from spiritual darkness?

Luke 5:17-20

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." (For context, read 5:17-26).

The soccer team trapped in the cave were in effect paralyzed like the man in our text due to their circumstances. They could not fix the problem without the help of others. In addition to the practical, physical skills of the divers, medics and other local volunteers, people around the world contributed their prayers, knowledge, finances and other forms of assistance to the rescue effort.

The men who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus believed Jesus could heal him, but they had to figure out how to overcome the obstacles in their way first.

Questions: Role-play the story in the text for a few moments. How do the men carrying the paralyzed man on a bed strategize how they are going to get him to Jesus? What options do they consider? What options do they discount, and why do they choose to go through the roof? Who or what obstacles stand in their way, and how do they overcome them? How do they work as a team to accomplish their goal?

Why is it significant that Jesus forgives and heals the man not because of his own faith, but because of the faith of his helpers?

How is this story a model for how the church can bring people to Jesus for forgiveness and healing? How do you strategize with other believers about how to bring "paralyzed" people to Jesus? Whom do you know who could be considered "paralyzed" and in need of assistance from a spiritual community? Who might be mobilized to become part of your local spiritual "search and rescue" team? What obstacles stand in the way of your bringing people to Jesus, and how will you tackle them? What options are feasible?

For Further Discussion

1. Using Psalm 23 as a template, write a psalm as if you were among those rescued from the cave in Thailand. Begin with the phrase "The Lord is my lead diver ..."

2. On July 2, Lisu tribeswomen carried paper flowers in a ritual to appease the spirits of Tham Luang cave.

Prior to the implementation of the rescue strategy, Narongsuk Keasub, one of the divers, said, "If the rain god helps us, then we may be able to work fast. But if the rain god doesn't help, then it could be challenging."

People around the world sent "positive vibes," "good thoughts" and prayers to various gods. Were all the prayers equally effectual? How would you explain monotheism to a polytheist who might believe that the more gods, the better the chances that one of them will hear and answer your plea for help?

3. Consider this, from some TWW editorial team members: How many times did Jesus teach about the importance of seeking and finding the lost? Has the church lost the sense of how *dire* it is to *not* be rescued -- that is, saved? How can we regain the sense of urgency regarding people's need to hear the good news of Christ's great love? What must happen to make us feel genuine fear and grief over the thought that people for whom Christ died are in spiritual darkness and in eternal jeopardy without him?

Responding to the News

Listen to or sing together the gospel hymn "[Rescue the Perishing](#)," as you think about Jesus' mission "to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10) and how you can be a part of that mission.

Prayer

We give you thanks for the successful rescue of the boys and their coach, O God, who is mighty to save! We thank you for the example of Sunan Kunam, who gave his life to save them. We thank you, too, that for this moment in time, at least, people from different nations, worldviews, ethnicities, races and beliefs came together as a team to help those in need. May we in the church be inspired to do the same, putting aside our differences to extend your love and grace to others. In the name of Jesus, which means "Yahweh saves." Amen.

Other News This Week

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Kennedy to Retire; President Trump Nominates Replacement

In the News

Supreme Court Associate Justice Anthony Kennedy's recent retirement announcement came as a surprise to many Americans, though he's 81 years old and has served on the court since February 1988, after being appointed by President Ronald Reagan.

Kennedy has been widely viewed as a swing vote, meaning he typically adopted positions that citizens who consider themselves conservative found worthy, but also would side with justices viewed as more liberal. Thus, in the latter category he supported keeping abortion legal, and he wrote the majority opinion in the case that made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states. But he also recently voted with the majority to declare that President Trump's travel ban on some people from terrorist-ridden countries -- which critics have called a "Muslim ban" -- is constitutional.

The reaction to Kennedy's announcement has ranged from great joy to dread.

For instance, the author of an opinion piece in *The Washington Examiner* wrote: "This signaled to many evangelicals that perhaps Kennedy was exiting by going back to his conservative roots and intending for his legacy to read more like [Justice Antonin] Scalia than his more left-leaning tendencies in the past few years with decisions such as the same-sex marriage opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015.

"This announcement has encouraged Trump's base and conservative families and evangelical leaders all over the nation. I had the amazing privilege of walking into [Focus on the Family's] Dr. James Dobson's office and personally sharing with him the news. He told me that this is an answer to prayer for millions of American families, and I agree -- with the opportunity now for President Trump to nominate a second [Justice Neil] Gorsuch, the likelihood of reversing bad constitutional outcomes like *Obergefell* [same-sex marriage] and even *Roe v. Wade* [abortion] is now very real."

By contrast, an opinion column in *The Boston Globe* bemoaned what appeared to the writer to be a forthcoming hard turn to the right by the court: "This year, Kennedy was consistently with the conservatives. In the just-completed term, there were 19 5-4 rulings out of 63 decisions. Kennedy voted with Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, and Neil Gorsuch in 14 of them. He voted with the bloc of liberal justices -- Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan -- zero times. A year ago, in the ideologically divided cases, Kennedy was with the liberals 57 percent of the time.

"What then will it mean to replace Kennedy with someone probably even more conservative? One way to look at it is that this will make Roberts the ideological middle justice on the court, and he is far more conservative than Kennedy."

While the political pundits were having their say, so were other, lighter voices -- giving us all pause and encouraging us to think about how we ourselves make judgments and what it means to live in the kingdom of God, which Jesus said was at hand.

For instance, comedian Stephen Colbert took the kind of over-the-top approach that late-night TV show hosts often do and [told his audience](#) that Kennedy's retirement means "we are supremely screwed." Meanwhile, *The Babylon Bee*, an online religious satirical publication (think of it as a theological version of *The Onion*), published [this piece](#) drawing on the old gospel hymn that contains the words "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." But the headline on the article said instead: "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less Than Getting a Conservative Majority on the Supreme Court." And the article, making a bit of fun of certain Christians, said: "As Christians, we need to focus our energies on the primary task that Christ left for us: to achieve a conservative majority in the Supreme Court of the United States."

What remains to be seen now is whether the Senate, where Republicans barely outnumber Democrats, can confirm Federal Appeals Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh, Trump's nominee, before November's midterm elections, which some analysts say could swing control of the Senate to the Democrats.

Kavanaugh's nomination was greeted with expected praise from Republicans and those who identify as conservatives, and with expected condemnation from Democrats and those who identify as progressives or liberals. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, anticipating a tough fight for Senate confirmation, [said](#) on the Senate floor before the nomination was announced that people opposing Trump's nominee have it wrong: "Destruction of the Constitution? Please, give the American people some credit. This far-left rhetoric comes out every single time, but the apocalypse never comes. Americans see beyond this far-left fear mongering. This kind of fear mongering they've tried over and over again for 40 years. Senators should do the same, we should evaluate this president's nominee fairly, based on his or her qualifications and treat the process with respect and dignity that it deserves." The NAACP, by contrast, issued [a statement](#) saying that Kavanaugh "is a dangerous ideologue whose extreme views on civil rights would solidify a far right majority on the Supreme Court" and who "has been a strong and consistent voice for the wealthy and the powerful."

The Kennedy retirement also brings into focus a shift in power among the three branches of government that has been taking place for some decades -- with more power flowing into the hands of the president and the executive agencies and to some extent into the judiciary while flowing away from Congress. For Christians, it raises questions about how they are to relate to governments of their nation-states and how their allegiances may be divided between those political bodies and the triune God. And it encourages Christians to remember that Jesus said they can live in the kingdom of God today, a kingdom in which the values include justice, mercy, compassion and especially love.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Trump Nominates Judge Brett Kavanaugh to Replace Justice Anthony Kennedy on the Supreme Court. AOL](#)

[How We'll Remember Justice Kennedy's Supreme Court Impact. PBS News Hour](#)

[Justice Kennedy, Abortion and the Legacy of a Third Choice. SCOTUS Blog](#)

[Justice Kennedy's Retirement Is an Answer to Prayer for Evangelicals. Washington Examiner](#)

[The Supreme Court Is Poised to Take a Hard Turn to the Right. The Boston Globe](#)

The Big Questions

1. First as a Christian -- and then as an American -- do you feel it makes a difference who serves on the U.S. Supreme Court? If it makes no difference, explain why.
2. In what ways have U.S. Supreme Court decisions affected you? Have they made your life better or worse? How do you judge that?
3. Should there be term limits on Supreme Court justices? What are the advantages and disadvantages of letting justices serve for life? Are there Christian doctrinal reasons for your answer?
4. What are the criteria on which you make daily judgments about important matters? Do you ask, "What would Jesus do?" Do you ask, "Is it good for the children?" Do you ask, "Is it good for my career?" Do you ask, "What does the law of the land require?" Name other judgment questions that may affect your choices, such as the "THINK" criteria: "Is it True, Helpful, Inspiring, Necessary, Kind?"
5. If, in the end, judgment belongs to the Lord, do our daily judgment calls really matter? Do they in some way help demonstrate to others what the kingdom of God will look like when it comes in full flower? Or are they, in an eternal sense, meaningless?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 7:1-5

[Jesus said,] "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (No context needed.)

Jesus is teaching here about how people are to live in peace and harmony. He isn't telling people not to be discerning. Rather, he is reminding them that none of us can know everything about the people we are tempted to judge, so we should approach relationships not with strict judgment but, rather, with love. Love means being not just sympathetic but empathetic, meaning we should try to place ourselves in the other person's situation and see things from that point of view. That approach should remove our rush to judgment without eliminating either our ability to see that

certain things, such as racism and sexism, are in themselves bad or our witness to the world as to what is good.

Questions: Have you ever declined to make a necessary judgment because you thought Jesus told you not to judge anyone ever or failed to witness against wrongdoing because you were afraid of being labeled judgmental? How can you best remember to take the log out of your own eye before telling neighbors about the speck in theirs?

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

The end of the matter has all been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing whether good or evil. (For context, read 12:9-14.)

The person the book of Ecclesiastes identifies as "the Teacher" has spoken earlier in the book of what seems to be futility in life and the idea that "[a]ll things are wearisome; more than one can express" (1:8). But here, at the end of his musings, he is content to turn all things -- even all mysteries -- over to the judgment of God.

Questions: When you are confronted with mystery, with frustration, with judgments that aren't going your way, does it help to remember that, finally, "God will bring every deed into judgment," or does that feel like an excuse for not confronting the situation yourself? How do you know when to make an extra effort to fix what's wrong according to your judgment of things and when to turn it all over to God? Or can you do both?

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (For context, you may wish to scan Deuteronomy 16 and 17.)

As God, through Moses and other leaders, was working to turn the people of Israel from a ragtag group of newly liberated but rebellious people into a disciplined, loving community of God's own people, judges were appointed to help keep civil order. But these were not judges with unlimited power who could rule by whim. Rather, they were called to render fair justice for all -- a model from then until now for how judges should conduct themselves.

Questions: As you have read about or perhaps even experienced the way judges in various levels of our court system have acted, how closely have they followed the rules God laid down for Israel's judges? Should those rules apply at all to America's judges in civil and criminal courts, or should the constitutional and other guidelines for judges in this country be completely separate from this religious history? Because judges are human, they're likely at times to fail to live up to standards. What can be done to minimize such failure or at least the effects of failure?

James 2:8-13

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (No context needed.)

In the Jewish context in which James wrote, his hearers or readers would have understood the details of the Jewish law and, thus, grasped his point about being committed to obeying it in full as much as humanly possible. But James, a central leader of the early disciples of Jesus -- and often identified as Jesus' brother -- also wants his readers to know that keeping the law is a matter of mercy, not just judgment.

Questions: Even if the law is reduced to just the Ten Commandments, are you capable of keeping it at all times? What about the hundreds and thousands of federal, state, county and local laws? What part should mercy play in judging whether we've broken one or more of these laws? How might Supreme Court justices rule with mercy and not only with judgment? Or is ruling with mercy a requirement for such justices?

Romans 2:1-3

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (No context needed.)

The apostle Paul is writing to Christ-believing Gentiles who, at this early point in church history, have become a subset of the Jewish community in Rome. He is teaching them how to behave in that context, how to be something of an outsider in that community and still be accepted so they might engage the Roman Jews in conversations about their belief that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah has come as Jesus of Nazareth. So Paul is insisting that they not judge either other Gentiles or the Jews in Rome with whom they are in relationship, but remember that the only trustworthy judge is God.

Questions: What are the circumstances, if any, in which it is proper to make judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of people in your own congregation or of people from different faith traditions? How strictly should denominational or congregational rules about discipline be enforced? If no one is in a position to make such judgments, why have such rules? If you cannot escape what Paul calls "the judgment of God," is there any way to survive that judgment save by calling yourself a disciple of Christ and throwing yourself on the mercy of the divine court?

For Further Discussion

1. If you could have nominated the next Supreme Court justice, what criteria would you use for the choice? In what way, if any, would your faith inform your decision?
2. What is the most difficult judgment you have ever made? How did your Christian understanding of the idea of judgment help you?
3. Just as Supreme Court justices must interpret the Constitution, we Christians are obliged to interpret the Bible. How do we stay true to God's will without interpreting scripture for our own benefit or misinterpreting it to the detriment of others? How can we become more aware of our own biases?
4. Discuss this comment from TWW team member Frank Ramirez, who says that it can take quite a bit of time to be able to judge whether Supreme Court decisions were wise or destructive: "[One thinks of the Dred Scott decision](#) or [Brown v. Board of Education](#). Both were momentous, but from the vantage point of history we know better which was good and which was evil, and we judge justices accordingly. I suspect many of us could make a snap judgment about the various justices. My guess is that at some point there will be consensus about their worth."

Responding to the News

This would be an appropriate time to pray for Justice Kennedy's eventual replacement on the Supreme Court and for the court itself. And it would be a useful time to review how your faith community makes judgments of all kinds, from matters of the building in which you meet to the choice of your local leaders. Are those processes in line with what scripture teaches about judgments?

Prayer

Oh, great Judge of the universe, we come into your court with praise because your judgments are right and good and true. We ask your forgiveness for the ways in which our own judgments injure your children and ask that you would guide us so that when we make judgments, they would conform with your will. In Christ's saving name. Amen.