

Title

WITH is better than Over

If you were organizing the closing ceremonies for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and you needed to choose one song that would inspire unity and hope in the face of a worsening global pandemic and climate change, what would you choose? If you needed that song to have the broadest possible appeal – such that people all over the world would recognize it and resonate it with its themes – which song would that be?

For the Tokyo Olympic Committee, that song was John Lennon's *Imagine*.

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us, only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Livin' for today

Even as I read these lines, you can hear the song in your head. If its inclusion in the closing ceremonies is any indication, just about everyone on earth can too. It continues to be ranked third on *Rolling Stone's* list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time."

When it was released fifty years ago as the title song to Lennon's solo album, it resonated with a disillusioned generation of Americans overwhelmed by the Vietnam war, the cold war with the Soviet Union, and the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Today a new generation feels overwhelmed. It is a global generation with global problems – Covid-19, climate collapse, and over 82 million people displaced from their homes worldwide.

Lennon's *Imagine* still resonates. What he yearns for is a world beyond ideas about God, religion, and national identity that keep us in constant conflict. Lennon imagines a future when people will be able to just "live for today." He imagines a life *over* God.

You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one

John Lennon was right. He isn't the only one. A growing number of people identify themselves as "nones" – that is, people who mark "none" on questionnaires asking about their religious identification. This sea change has happened in our lifetimes. As one pastor put it, "When I was a young preacher, if a man wasn't in church with his family on Sunday then his boss would ask him about it on Monday." (See Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*) Can you imagine that happening today? Our culture's relationship with religion has changed that much, that fast.

When it comes to God as an idea to maintain the status quo, our culture is over it.

This shift didn't begin in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. We continue to be deeply influenced by the Enlightenment. This 18<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy is based in the belief that reason is the primary source of legitimacy and authority. The universe can be known and understood using human reason. Natural laws and predictable patterns govern how things work, and through careful study and analysis we can develop rational principles to direct the course of our lives. We can know something is real and true because we can see it, measure it, test it, and prove it. When people spoke of God in relation to the Enlightenment, it was often in terms of the Divine Watchmaker: God has created the universe, set it in motion according to natural laws, and now stands apart from creation allowing it go along without interference.

When it comes to knowing God apart from natural laws and principles, children of the Enlightenment are over it.

But life over God is just the position of secular humanists or atheists. This posture is held by Christians too. We hear it when someone says the word BIBLE is really short for "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." Instead of being a love letter and living story that has our relationship with God at its center, we treat the Bible like a user's manual. We pull it down off the shelf when we need to fix a problem or get good advice. Otherwise it collects dust.

When I suggest that life WITH God is better than life over God, here is what I mean:

Life over God reduces faith to predictable principles, laws, and instructions. We control our destinies.

Life WITH God creates space for mystery, and for God's grace accomplish good in spite of our limitations.

I think we all live a Life over God posture in some area of our lives. Maybe we can take solace in the fact that Moses – even Moses! – did as well. Moses, a person who regularly went into the Tent of Meeting to "speak to God as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11), succumbed to the temptation. Let's see what that that looked like.

Numbers 20

**20** The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.

<sup>2</sup> Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. <sup>3</sup> The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! <sup>4</sup> Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? <sup>5</sup> Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink." <sup>6</sup> Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the

entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. <sup>7</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>8</sup> Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

<sup>9</sup> So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. <sup>10</sup> Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" <sup>11</sup> Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. <sup>12</sup> But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." <sup>13</sup> These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and by which he showed his holiness.

I have always had trouble with this text. It seems like God really over-reacted. God said speak to the rock – command it – but Moses struck it instead. And for this Moses doesn't get to go to the Promised Land?

To understand what is happening here, we need context. In Exodus 17, God did in fact tell Moses to strike a rock with his staff in order to bring water out for the people. This is the essence of the Life-over-God dilemma for people of faith. If God answered my prayer in a certain way last time, then now I KNOW how God will behave this time. I can follow the same steps and get the same results. Right? The life-over-God posture is so attractive because in giving us a sense of certainty that God *always* does this or *never* does that or *only* does it in such-and-such a way, then we feel more in control.

We can sense, can't we, that Moses is really scared here? He is feeling very out-of-control. He is caught – quite literally – between a rock and hard place. The people are about to riot. The entire mission was in jeopardy. Moses' leadership and legacy were on the line. He needed a proven formula, something he knew would work because it had worked in the past. So Moses took his staff - the symbol of his God-given power and authority – and he used it in exactly the same way he had used before. Instead of following the direction God had given him while they were in communion with one another, Moses gets cold feet and falls back on a guaranteed solution. "He put his trust in the watch instead of the watchmaker" (Jethani 55).

There are two major limitations to a life over God posture. The first is that it disconnects us from the intimate relationship with God. All relationships have a significant element of the unknown or yet-to-be-known. Such mystery is especially true when it comes to our relationship with God, and that relationship is the basis for trust-filled life. If we are doing it based on principles and formulas instead of that relationship, then all the responsibility for the outcome falls upon us. This leads to the second major limitation. If we bear all the responsibility, then the burden of fear is as heavy upon us as ever. If someone else succeeds, then we assume it is

because they followed the right step and worked harder, smarter and better. When we fail, it's because we didn't try hard enough. But as we learned last week, this is not the yoke Jesus offers us. That is not the kind of burden we were ever meant to bear. A WITH God life is far more preferable.

Moses striking the rock a second time is a story of grief. Moses paid an enormous price for his disobedience. But it is also a story of grace. Water did indeed come of the rock, in abundance. The people lived and they went on to receive what God had promised them. God was faithful even if Moses and the people were not. God was faithful not *because* of what Moses had done, but *in spite* of it. This too, is a mystery. So for this week, here is what I'd like for you to do:

Notice which areas of your life and your decisions rarely or never include God. Then ask yourself: What do you rely on instead? How does doing it this way affect you when it comes to areas of fear and control?