

Herb Lamp's Top Ten Book List for 2023: (in no particular order)

With my eye problems, I was not able to read as much as in previous years, but still found some terrific books. I hope you might find a gem or two for your library here. Enjoy.

1. Kristen Page. The Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022), 128 pgs.

Have you ever like me and wandered the imaginative landscapes of Middle Earth and Narnia in your mind, wishing you could actually experience what it would be like to visit those places? And in so doing you realized something beautiful about our own real world? Biologist and Wheaton College Professor, Kristen Page, helps us navigate Lewis' and Tolkien's imaginative worlds in order to better steward our own. In Page's own words, "Could literary landscapes teach us to see creation in a new way and possibly even motivate readers toward environmental stewardship?" I think the answer is a resounding yes! Tolkien's well-known love of trees for example has instilled in me a greater love also for the real woods and forests that surround my home and places I visit. It produces in me an even greater sense of protection and care, for Tolkien has taught me something marvelous about my real world as I discover the impactful character of the Ents, shepherds of the forests in LOTR. This is a delightful book which can help you learn to appreciate our natural settings simply by reading of fictional worlds. (Full disclosure: Page acknowledges my sister, Marj, as the inspiration behind this book in the opening sentence. – well done, Marj!).

2. Peter Wohlleben. The Hidden Life of Trees: What they feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2016), 272 pgs.

Staying with the "tree theme," here is my favorite read of the year! Peter Wohlleben is a German forester and writes on the complex ecosystem of the great central European forests. This is of course not a theological book – it is about trees! but at the same time after reading it, I would be hard pressed not to see the incredible creative joy of God's handiwork. There are just so many amazing things we can learn about forests and trees which I never knew before. For example, trees by nature might just appreciate beauty! They can actually talk to one another! Trees in cities are never in their natural habitat and can actually feel pain! And on and on. I will never walk through a forest again with the same mindset after reading The Hidden Life of Trees. If you are a fan of nature or the TV series "The Planet Earth" you will not be disappointed in Wohlleben. I was not.

3. Ryan A. Brandt and John Frederick, eds. Spiritual Formation for the Global Church: A Multi-Denominational, Multi-Ethnic Approach (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021), 234 pgs.

The premise of this book is that there is no spiritual theology that is the same for everyone because Christians must in their own contexts practice it in order to understand how it is to take place. In other words, how the fruits of the Spirit are expressed will differ depending on the cultural and spiritual experiences of diverse people in diverse times and places. And so, we have a fascinating look across the globe at what spiritual formation looks like in diverse cultures and different peoples. The book is composed of twelve chapters divided up into three parts: part I examines the biblical and theological education of spiritual formation; part II explores the acts and elements of worship as spiritual formation; and finally, part III looks at Christ and contemporary culture and spiritual formation. Authors of each

chapter come from a diverse spectrum of places and theological backgrounds including Americans, Africans, Canadians, Australians, Chinese, European, and Koreans. After reading this book, I was left with the strong conviction that spiritual formation is (paraphrasing the great theologian and church father, Anselm) “faith seeking understanding seeking discipleship.” Spiritual Formation involves the mind, heart, soul, and body (cf. Mark 12:29-30) all interpreted for us through our unique cultural lenses.

4. Matthew Y. Emerson. “He Descended To The Dead”: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019) 251 pgs.

“I believe He descended to the Dead” is part of both the Apostle’s and Athanasian Creeds expressing the Christian Faith’s belief that Jesus descended into Hell between His crucifixion and His resurrection. To be honest with you I have never really studied this doctrine and was a bit hazy on the meaning of it. That is why I picked up this book, in order to explore what the Church has traditionally taught and why it matters. Emerson does a masterful job of rediscovering the theology of Holy Saturday and how it is intrinsic to the very identity of the God we worship. I do wish Emerson had been a little bit clearer and cleaner in his language. His book can be dense at times. (EX.: – speaking of the intermediate state -do you know what he is saying here? “A modification of exegetes’ and theologians’ rejection of substance dualism in favor of non-reductive physicalism is the same rejection of substance dualism in favor of hylomorphic dualism of the animalist sort.”(157) – I think he is trying to say some theologians reject the intermediate state based upon the fact that the soul cannot survive the body – my best guess!?). Christ descended into Hell so that you and I would not have to. Christ descended into Hell so that you and I can ascend into heaven. That is truly clear!

5. M. Jeff Brannon. The Hope of Life After Death: A Biblical Theology of Resurrection (Downers Grove, IL: IVP 2022), 185 pgs.

Really a wonderful book of hope and joy. Brannon discusses what the Bible says about resurrection from the opening pages of Genesis through the ending pages of Revelation. He clearly explores how the hope of life after death is woven throughout Scripture – even in unexpected places. Using the well-known thematic grid of creation, fall, and redemption, Brannon places resurrection theology within and with foreknowledge of the biblical authors. The point of this book is that death is the last weapon of our great enemy and totally against the plan of God for our lives. Death through the Cross of Christ has been defeated. Now we await the final resurrection where we will join with the saints of old and our Savior Jesus on a new earth and new heaven and all that this new life will bring us. Read this book if you want to dispel the despair and regain God’s perspective on our future. Very readable.

6. Mark Buchanan. God Walk: Moving at the Speed of Your Soul (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2020), 238 pgs.

I was talking to a stressed-out global worker the other day when I asked them if they would do one thing for me in the next week – take a hike! Actually, take a long and unhurried slow walk around their neighborhood that would last for at least one hour. Afterwards, they told me how restorative that was for them. I got that idea from Buchanan’s God Walk, his part-theology, part-field guide to the benefits of slowing down and traveling at God’s speed in life. Buchanan is a Canadian author and pastor and I have enjoyed his other books This one is no exception. Using the theme of walking, he reminds us that Jesus’ methods of discipleship was always built around walking – his disciples learned from Him as they walked

with Him – at the three-mile-an-hour God-speed. Jesus was content to let the disciples learn slowly, slowly as they keep pace with Him. How might our lives change if we took this simply truth and applied it to our “faith walk” as Christians? This is a book that simply encourages us, as we walk alongside our Lord, to hear His voice as He passes alongside us, saying, “Come, follow me.”

7. Wang Yi. Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from the Chinese House Church Movement (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022), 264 pgs.

This is an important book, especially for anyone who is interested in understanding the house church movement in China and the current political persecution of the church there. Did you know for example that the unregistered house church movement is neither small nor restricted to houses? Many of the large urban centers have hundreds of members in churches and meet in large buildings. In fact, meeting in small groups is a last resort among these fellowships because they want to be a known presence in their communities. Do you also know that the main disagreement between the registered three-self patriotic movement of churches and the house church movement is theological not just political? Drawing upon the writings of Wang Yi, the pastor of the well-known Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, and others, this book presents a well-defined and biblical defense of the theological position of the church of Jesus Christ in China. Presently, Wang is imprisoned for his faithful witness (arrested in 2018). I found Wang’s testimony in these pages to be inspiring and costly. There is much for those of us outside of China as well as our brothers and sisters in China to ponder here.

8. Hans Boersma. Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 152 pgs. Scot McKnight. Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021), 161 pgs.

These two works are meant to be read together, one by a theologian (Hans Boersma) and one by a biblical scholar (Scot McKnight). Each presents a case for their respective fields to be better understood by the other. McKnight’s argues that theologians need to constantly return to scripture in their studies, need to know its impact on biblical studies, need historically shaped biblical studies, needs more narrative in their approach to theology, and finally theologians need to live out their theology. Meanwhile, Boersma asks biblical scholars to understand the following five things in relation to scripture: Christ as center, Plato as philosophy, providence as starting point, the Church as the interpretative grid, and finally heaven as our end place. I found both books to be informative, gentle in approach and well-written. I learned a lot on what recent scholarship in both fields add to my knowledge of scripture and theology. Both author’s perspectives were enlightening and useful for me in my study and application of the Bible. As Boersma states at the end of his book and in which I completely agree with: “The best Christians are the best Bible readers” (128).

9. Samuel Emadi. From Prisoner to Prince: The Joseph Story in Biblical Theology NSBT 59 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022), 188 pgs.

Joseph has always been one of my favorite Bible characters and I have usually taught him as a type of Christ. Yet, modern scholarship has moved away from seeing Joseph in scripture as a forerunner of Jesus, arguing that he is rarely mentioned outside the latter pages of Genesis. So it is with immense pleasure that I read Emadi’s book which reasserts Joseph as a supreme example of the Messiah in redemptive history. He does this through presenting a comprehensive canonical treatment of the Joseph narrative. After reading Emadi, I think I can conclude with confidence that Joseph’s life not only fulfills

the earlier Abrahamic promises of land, nationhood, and blessings by the rejected, royal deliverer, but also points to a future and more complete fulfillment of God's promises through a chosen Messianic King to come. I walked away from this book seeing God's sovereign faithfulness to His covenant and how God from the very beginning of Scripture is able to pull off the impossible. Emadi concludes his work by saying: *"Joseph's story is the story of the whole Bible. It is the story of glory through suffering, exaltation through humiliation. It is the story of the cross and the crown"* (149).

10. Terra McDaniel. Hopeful Lament: Tending Our Grief through Spiritual Practices (Downers Grove: IVP, 2023), 178 pgs.

Along with denying grief and sorrow, we have lost the practice of lament. Most people do not know how to process personal or communal mourning and instead struggle to attend to their tears. Terra McDaniel has authored a beautiful book to help us learn how to and engage in the ancient art of lament. She believes that we resist lament because it involves pain and loss and unanswerable questions. But by practicing lament we tell the truth about what reality is. And as McDaniel says, it is an expression of love. "What is grief, if not love persevering?" (x). And so, in ten short chapters, McDaniel does grief work – including lamenting such things as learning to voice grief with God and others, encountering trauma, communal grief, and children and loss. What I particularly found unique and helpful was at the end of each chapter she gives a spiritual practice which can address lamenting in a practical way. For example, I loved the idea of tearing cloth to represent the OT practice of tearing your clothes in lament. Also, for each exercise she has an age-appropriate explanation for children to help them process grief. This book is an aid in helping us remember the ancient spiritual practice of *memento mori*, Latin for "remember you will die." So, let us treat life as precious and worth remembering by properly lamenting.