

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

A JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO

NAAMAN'S SLAVE GIRL

MARK BELZ

“Bible-study habits gone a little cold? Need to be warmed by the retelling of a remarkable story? Too long since you saw the gospel in the pages of the Old Testament? This highly readable account of Naaman’s little slave girl and God’s amazing grace will both encourage and instruct you.”

—**Joel Belz**, Founder, *WORLD* magazine

“This is a book that lingers. Not only did I frequently stop reading and spend time reflecting and praying, but I continue to ponder and celebrate the deep wonders of the gospel in the beautiful story of Naaman’s slave girl. This riveting read is now on my list of favorite books.”

—**Susan Hunt**, Speaker, Author, and Former Director,
Women’s Ministries in the Church (PCA)

“What I particularly like about Mark’s book is that it reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways, nor is his method of reconciliation the same as the world’s. Naaman’s slave girl acts much like Christ. She brings reconciliation through humility and servanthood, rather than through special strategies of communication. She shows that in God’s economy, weakness is really strength, and that by deferring to others, one can intervene and bring about a redemptive reconciliation.”

—**Paul D. Kooistra**, President, Erskine College and
Seminary

“Using this beautiful Old Testament presentation of the gospel, Mark Belz woos us to be reconciled to God and man. While Mark is a masterful Bible teacher, his real effectiveness in charting the journey to wholeness comes from his having walked it with Jesus.”

—**George Robertson**, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church,
Augusta, Georgia

“For some reading this book, the narrative found in 2 Kings 5 will be familiar. For others, it is about to become

familiar. This historical event not only anticipated the New Testament clarity of the gospel of saving grace in Christ, but also demonstrated and announced the gospel message and ministry of reconciliation. Mark Belz unfolds this story with energy and theological clarity.”

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

A JOURNEY TO
WHOLENESS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

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of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament*

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A JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
NAAMAN'S SLAVE GIRL

MARK BELZ


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For
Barry and Ann Henning
slaves to the gospel of reconciliation

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SERIES FOREWORD

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

C oncerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
(Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the Prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged for an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament—not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah, but also by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament series was begun by my former professors, Tremper Longman and Al Groves, to whom I owe an enormous personal debt of gratitude. I learned from them a great deal about how to recognize the gospel in the Old Testament. I share their deep conviction that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. This series of studies will continue to pursue their initial aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

These volumes are written primarily for pastors and laypeople, not scholars. They are designed in the first instance to serve the church, not the academy.

My hope and prayer remain the same as Tremper and Al's: that this series will continue to encourage the revival of interest in the Old Testament as a book that constantly points forward to Jesus Christ, to his sufferings and the glories that would follow.

IAIN M. DUGUID

FOREWORD

I first learned of Mark Belz's interest in the narrative of the healing of the Syrian general Naaman when in June 1992 I heard him deliver his moderatorial address to the General Assembly of my church, the Presbyterian Church in America. Proof of the impression made on me by that address is a note that I entered in the margin of my Bible at 2 Kings 5: "Gehazi's action changed the news that Naaman took home. When Naaman, back in Aram, told his story, he would no longer say that the gift had been free—the flesh may glory a little in his presence." A keen insight!

What you will find in this book is a time-honored form of biblical exposition in which a particular narrative is expounded in depth, the history brought to life with the addition of background, context, and collateral detail, and its various lessons drawn out. This is the kind of work that used to be very popular with thoughtful Christians. Alexander Moody Stuart's *The Three Marys* is a specimen of this art; so is George Lawson's *The History of Joseph*. On a larger scale, we might think of F. W. Krummacher's *Elijah the Tishbite* or James Stalker's *The Life of St. Paul*. Those are older works, harder for twenty-first-century Americans to read, but they were works much beloved of the deeper sort of Christian for the way they drew from biblical narratives lessons for the life of faith.

It is high time that such works should be furnished for a new generation of readers, for if we have learned anything about the Word of God over the past generation, it is how artfully its histories were written and how intentionally the biblical writers communicated theology, ethics, and

FOREWORD

wisdom in, under, around, and through their narratives. More subtle and implicit than, say, Paul in his letter to the Romans, the author of *Kings* was nevertheless every bit as much a theologian as the great apostle to the Gentiles and as much a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have found through years of preaching the biblical narratives that God's people find the lessons of these histories as easy to grasp as in the straightforward exposition of the prophets and apostles and often feel the force of their truth more powerfully because in the narratives the truth is personalized, depicted in flesh and blood. We may not find a John 3:16 in the Old Testament, but where, pray tell, is that good news more beautifully expressed and commended to faith than in 2 Kings 5? Here is the conversion of Zacchaeus and of the apostle Paul, but with so much interesting psychological detail. A man in need, a message to be believed, a believer transmitting the message, the gift of grace, the promise of healing, the necessity and the challenge of faith, the power of God, the confession of Yahweh as Lord, a changed life, even a baptism—it is all here in 2 Kings 5.

Mark Belz is a man who knows of what he speaks and has done a beautiful job of drawing out from one of the most beautiful narratives in the Bible the most beautiful truth in the world.

ROBERT S. RAYBURN, PH.D.
Pastor, Faith Presbyterian Church (PCA)
Tacoma, Washington

PREFACE

Some parts of Scripture do not yield well to an outline, and I believe the passage presented here is one of them. For some reason, 2 Kings 5 has interested me for more than two decades, and because it is narrative, a story, and because it didn't happen in an outline, it has increasingly seemed best to me to exegete it "as it sits," and not impose something on the passage that is not there.

Of course, the truths gleaned from the story can be organized, and a different level of understanding is gained by doing so. That, however, is the task of systematic theology, and the story of Naaman's healing is not systematic. So perhaps one of the reasons I've chosen not to organize or outline the passage is that I am anything but a systematic theologian.

Writing a book is much like building a house. There are two ways to do it: with plans and without. I've never been adept at planning anything, so after lengthy consideration of all the pros and cons, and bouncing the issue off many of my friends, I opted for no plans. We'll see how that approach works out.

Whether three or ninety-three, everyone loves a story. I've noticed that when a preacher begins to tell a story from the pulpit, drowsy eyes open, heads swivel, and people look straight at him. No matter whether they had heard a word he said before, they want to see how the story turns out. Some might not even much care how the sermon turns out! We are quickly drawn in when a story is told. Surely this is one of the reasons that Jesus himself resorted so often to parables.

We also remember stories. Outlines have to be memorized, but stories do not. The reason for this is that human beings, by nature, are more interested in events than theories. Our lives *are* stories, not outlines; real experiences, not math. We are people, and stories are about people. If you read 2 Kings 5 even once, you will be able to close the Bible and tell the story to your children. Try this with the first chapter of your high school algebra book, and you'll get the idea!

Stories also illustrate—they make things clear. In this story, the healing of Naaman, we will find that old gospel truths, the subject of systematics, are colored in and clarified for us. For example, when we say that “salvation is by grace alone,” we state a wonderful, bedrock truth. But we are helped immensely when we see that illustrated when a poor prophet, standing on his front lawn, refuses to take bars of gold and silver from a repentant sinner. *That* is what “salvation by grace alone” means in real life, and we understand it best by illustration.

My hope is that the reader might benefit not so much from any insight that the author may have, but from what the story itself teaches. It is just one chapter, and in a way may seem isolated from the rest of Scripture. While it does stand on its own feet, I think you will find it exciting to explore the ways in which it relates to and exemplifies so many truths found elsewhere in Scripture, as well as so many issues confronting us in the world today. In other words, I hope you find it as exciting as I have.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am not just being polite in acknowledging those who have aided me in composing this book. Being an inexperienced writer, I greatly needed every one of them and profited immensely from the help that each gave.

Maybe it's not typical, but in 1964 I fell in love with my bride, Linda, in significant part because she could write like no one else. She has fervency and is able to articulate ideas powerfully. Unfortunately, she hasn't written nearly enough in her life, but she has helped others to do so, particularly her husband. Thank you to the love of my life.

My son Aaron is a poet and writer. His father thinks he is good at it, as do many others. Aaron has attempted to bring me up to date as far as style is concerned and has aided in many other ways. He has urged me to push ahead when I flagged, and encouraged me every step of the way. Aaron, I needed that.

The most kindly but ruthless help came from my good friend and law-school classmate John Stonebraker. He accepted my request that he, an accomplished author, read the manuscript and make whatever suggestions he desired. He read the whole thing (poor man) in detail and, for the most part, did not make suggestions but issued orders. By way of example, one of them, which I initially resisted, was to eliminate most of the semicolons that I had inserted in the first manuscript. John e-mailed me and said that I "was singlehandedly attempting to revive the archaic use of the semicolon." Not wanting to appear archaic, I removed most of them. You could say that he performed a "semicolonectomy" on the author, and without anesthesia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

But in this and myriad other ways, he greatly improved the writing and did so without remuneration. Thank you, John.

Finally, I must thank my six-year-old granddaughter, Hannah, who would often prod me along by asking, “Grandpa, when are you going to finish making your book?” This question sent me right back to my Bible and laptop. Now that it’s written, Hannah and I have time to sit on the couch and read someone else’s book.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY

OVERVIEW

This is a story, recorded in 2 Kings chapter 5, of the prophet Elisha healing a Syrian general of leprosy. It is a story, and I will refer to it as such as we progress through it. But like many stories, it is also history, a true story. It's not a parable, although it has many similarities to the parables that Jesus preached. The characters are real people. The nations involved were real nations at a particular time in world history, more than eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus. It's reliable as a historical record because it was written by good historians and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We know that the Lord has preserved this event in the written Word because, like all Scripture, it is profitable for us—"for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). It illustrates, in real lives, the truth, principles, and dynamics of the gospel. It shows God's sovereign interest and power in salvation and in making the gospel available to everyone, long before New Testament times. The story is about God's overarching grace in the gospel, bridging the chasms between slave and owner, Jew and Gentile, prophet and pagan, God and man.

THEME AND FOCUS

The theme of this writing is the ministry of reconciliation, which the apostle Paul claimed as his own in 2 Corinthians 5, and the focus is the Syrian general's little Jewish slave girl. She is sometimes forgotten as this story is recounted, perhaps because she is mentioned only once. But in fact, she is the protagonist. Without this unnamed child's testimony to her mistress, there would have been no healing and no story.

The story comprises the whole of 2 Kings 5. As one reads that chapter, the author's compact style is immediately evident. There is a wonderful economy of language that begs to be "unpacked." And we know it was meant to be unpacked because Jesus himself unpacked some of it in Luke 4. That is, its meaning, its application, and its prophetic nature go far beyond the story itself. For the person even passably acquainted with the rest of Scripture, one reading of Naaman's story will conjure up all kinds of thoughts regarding what he or she already knows about the gospel. The story resonates.

JORDAN RIVER

The Jordan River is central to the event because it is where Naaman's healing occurred. The river is important throughout Scripture, and to this day is associated with cleansing, healing, and crossing over. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, commanding his hearers to repent of their sins, and he baptized those who listened and obeyed in the Jordan River. Jesus himself was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. For us, water baptism signifies, among other things, cleansing from sin, and the Jordan has always carried this meaning. Ricky Skaggs, a contemporary Kentucky bluegrass singer, characterized the Jordan's cleansing power like this: "I'm going down

to the River of Jordan/And let the cool waters cleanse my soul,” and noting that Naaman saw that “the cool waters made him whole.”¹

The river also conveys a “crossing over”—its meaning from the fifteenth century B.C. forward, when the Israelites crossed as a nation into Canaan. This landmark in Jewish history became a symbol for all believers, representing not only death—crossing over from this earthly life to heaven—but the new birth as well, experienced in this life and at death. This is the “crossing over” that Jesus talked about when he said:

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. (John 5:24–25)

The river sometimes represents healing, although it was a surprise to me, as I studied this story, that Naaman’s is the only scriptural record of physical healing in the Jordan River. In fact, Naaman’s healing there is one reason that thousands of people have made pilgrimages to the river even to this day, hoping they, too, will receive healing. To Christians, the river has become a symbol of spiritual healing and transformation, and as we “cross over,” we are cleansed and made fit for entrance into the kingdom:

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell’s Destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan’s side.²

All three of these symbolic aspects of the Jordan River—cleansing, crossing over, and healing—are relevant to the story of Naaman the Syrian. In this episode

THE STORY

of God's supernatural action, Naaman was cleansed of his sin, crossed over from death to life (John 5:24), and was healed. He received every blessing of God's salvation in Christ.

TEXT

This story is just a sliver of Jewish history. It records an unusual occurrence in Israel—the northern kingdom—about two hundred years after Solomon's magnificent kingdom had collapsed and been divided. It's a story about disease and healing, riches and poverty, unbelief and faith, smallness and greatness, weakness and strength, allies and enemies, slavery and freedom, lies and truth, worship and sacrilege, the common and the holy—even church discipline. Though written compactly, it is a wonderful and riveting story. Whether you have read it or not, please read 2 Kings 5 through again (or for the first time) before you read this book; I've included the entire chapter below. And if time doesn't permit you to read this book, skip it!—and just ponder the story itself.

Imagine this as a play. The story begins with a mighty Syrian military officer, an enemy of Israel, afflicted with leprosy, a dread disease. The proud but diseased enemy officer enters from stage left. During the story, this mighty Syrian is healed. At the end of the play, when the final curtain descends, the military officer exits stage right, now humbled, healed physically, and—astonishingly—a member of the family of God. He had been an enemy of that family but was now fully reconciled to them and to their God.

The story is a powerful example of the gospel of reconciliation. As the story develops, we will see the gospel light shining brighter and brighter until we can see an Old Testament example of what the prophet Isaiah was referring to when he said:

The people walking in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 on those living in the land of deep darkness
 a light has dawned. (Isa. 9:2)

We will see this truth in action here: God's saving grace is extended to a Gentile. It's a foreshadowing of the great opening of the gospel to the Gentiles recorded in the book of Acts. It becomes evident that when the apostle Paul said that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:19), he was not referring exclusively to the era following the death and resurrection of Christ. It is God's eternal purpose to reconcile the world—both Jew and Gentile—to himself and to one another, and here we find that he was doing so eight hundred years before Jesus came to earth.

For ready reference as we begin the discussion of this story, here is the text:

2 KINGS 5

¹ Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

² Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

⁴ Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ⁵ "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and

ten sets of clothing. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: “With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.”

⁷ As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!”

⁸ When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: “Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.” ⁹ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house.

¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.”

¹¹ But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.

¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?” So he turned and went off in a rage.

¹³ Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’”

¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world

except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant.”

¹⁶ The prophet answered, “As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

¹⁷ “If you will not,” said Naaman, “please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. ¹⁸ But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.”

¹⁹ “Go in peace,” Elisha said.

After Naaman had traveled some distance, ²⁰ Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, “My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.”

²¹ So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

²² “Everything is all right,” Gehazi answered. “My master sent me to say, ‘Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’”

²³ “By all means, take two talents,” said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. ²⁴ When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants

THE STORY

and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left.

²⁵ When he went in and stood before his master, Elisha asked him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?”

“Your servant didn’t go anywhere,” Gehazi answered.

²⁶ But Elisha said to him, “Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes—or olive groves and vineyards, or flocks and herds, or male and female slaves? ²⁷ Naaman’s leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went from Elisha’s presence and his skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow.

THEME OF RECONCILIATION

As we progress through the story, we will gain just an inkling of the eternal bond formed when we are reconciled with God in Jesus Christ and reconciled with one another. That “double bonding” appears in seed form in the story of Naaman, a prototype of the truth made explicit in years to come, but even in seed form, it is profound. The two bonds are inseparably intertwined; reconciliation with God will always mean reconciliation with one another, and true reconciliation with one another cannot exist apart from reconciliation with God. It has been said that the ground at the foot of the cross is perfectly level, and that is so. The apostle Paul summarized it thus:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed,
and heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3:26–29)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What are some reasons that this story was included in the Bible? Upon first reading, can you identify other parts of Scripture that it relates to?
2. How would you characterize the theme, or themes, of this story? How does it fit in with the overall message of the gospel? Does it echo any other themes found in the Bible?
3. As the story is told, is there anything in it that comes as a surprise to you?
4. Before reading 2 Kings 5, what popped into your mind when you heard the words *Jordan River*? Do you think your ideas are related to what happened in this story?
5. In a very general way, what do you think this story has to say about God's relationship to different races, and about different races' relationships to one another?

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

WHAT DO PEOPLE SAY ABOUT THIS SERIES?

“Written at a thoughtful but popular level.” —*D. A. Carson*

“Like manna in the desert.” —*Sinclair Ferguson*

“A tremendous resource.” —*Tim Keller*

“An important series.” —*Philip Graham Ryken*

A JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO NAAMAN'S SLAVE GIRL

Mark Belz brings to life a beautiful story of biblical reconciliation between rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, powerful and weak. The focus is on Naaman, a Syrian general, and his Jewish slave girl, whose simple testimony helps to bring about a spiritual reconciliation between her Syrian master and God. Belz reaches beyond Naaman's miraculous healing in the river Jordan to examine its wide-ranging implications—among them, the greater truth of God's love for the Gentiles and the breadth of the gospel's reach.

“Using this beautiful Old Testament presentation of the gospel, Mark Belz woos us to be reconciled to God and man.”

—*George Robertson*, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia

“This is a book that lingers. . . . This riveting read is now on my list of favorite books.”

—*Susan Hunt*, Conference Speaker, Author, and Former Director, Women's Ministries in the Church (PCA)

MARK BELZ (M.Div., Covenant Theological Seminary) has served as moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. He and his wife, Linda, have two grown children and four grandchildren.

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