

"A grand tool for sustaining and elevating our souls by preaching the massive gospel of Christ to, of all people, ourselves!" —R. Kent Hughes

# “Hidden in the Gospel”

 Truths **You Forget to Tell Yourself** Every Day

WILLIAM P. FARLEY



Whoever thought that “back talk” could be good? In the form that Bill Farley describes it, back talk is not only good but is essential for growth and health in the Christian life. Every Christian benefits from consistent and regular reminders of what God has done for us in Christ, and this involves reflection on some of the most glorious teachings of Scripture that span from eternity past to eternity future. Such is the breadth of the gospel, and such is the opportunity for Christians to have their minds and hearts transformed by the gospel’s power. Those who read this book will enter into this gospel breadth with the hope and promise of greater love for God and longing to live in the fullness of the gospel.

—**Bruce A. Ware**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Bill Farley continues his valuable contributions to gospel-centered living with *Hidden in the Gospel*. While others have mentioned the importance of preaching to ourselves, Bill shows us how to do so. His practical unpacking of the primary theological components of a “wide-angle” understanding of the biblical gospel is just what we need to keep our self-talk grounded in God’s redemptive work in Christ. I am confident this book will be useful to all believers, whether for individual study or in a group setting.

—**Randal Roberts**, President and Professor of Spiritual Formation, Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon

Pastor-theologian Bill Farley has given us a grand tool for sustaining and elevating our souls by preaching the massive gospel of Christ to, of all people, *ourselves!* This small gem of a book provides a joyous gospel feast that begins with our election in

Christ before the foundation of the world and ends with Christ's new creation. No small thoughts here! This is the recipe for big, expansive, and ever-expanding hearts.

—**R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church in Wheaton

Pastors would have to engage in very little counseling if Christians prioritized what Bill Farley exhorts his readers to do in *Hidden in the Gospel*. To gain clarity on the gospel of Jesus Christ and to practice consistent self-talk based upon that gospel would transform the lives of Christians, their homes, and their churches.

—**Don Whitney**, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality, Senior Associate Dean for the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

# Hidden in the Gospel

Truths You Forget to Tell Yourself Every Day

WILLIAM P. FARLEY



P U B L I S H I N G

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*Dedicated to Ken Fry and Johnny Masis.*

*Their love for the gospel, and their encouragement,  
inspired me to write on this idea.*

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# Preface

This is a book about basic Christian doctrines, with an emphasis on practical application.

I have written it with the conviction that theology matters. However, theology separated from real life is not helpful. It is just dry, crusty religion. Who wants that? On the other hand, attempts to apply the Christian life without clear-cut, sharply defined theology will usually end up in legalism. No one wants that either. What really changes believers is clearly defined theology driven deep into the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. It produces love, joy, and peace. That is the goal of every Christian, and it is also the goal of this book.

In other words, you are holding a book in your hands about basic theology for everyday Christians like you and me. It is a book about the most fundamental doctrine—the gospel—and why we should daily preach it to ourselves. That raises an important question. Why another book about the gospel? More pointedly, why a book about preaching the gospel to oneself? This topic is not new.

The church needs this book for at least two reasons. First, we need to preach a bigger gospel. The gospel is more, but never less, than justification by faith alone. In addition, it is more, but never less, than penal substitution. This book is about what I will call a wide-angle gospel. By “wide-angle” I mean it is about all that God the Father has done to save us, starting in eternity past and moving forward to eternity future. I am not aware of any books that exhort Christians to preach a wide-angle gospel to themselves.

There is a second reason that this book matters. I don't know of any books that connect preaching the gospel to yourself with daily life application.

## PREFACE

I was a Christian for at least twenty-five years before I first heard the words “Preach the gospel to yourself!” Looking back, I wish I had heard that message earlier. This concept has been decisive in my Christian maturation. At first it meant, “Remind yourself regularly that Jesus died for you, that he loves you, that he forgives you, and that you are saved by faith plus nothing.” Then it began to morph into something bigger and more beautiful. As the years have progressed, the meaning and application of the gospel have expanded. The applications to my own life, and to the lives of people in my congregation, have grown and multiplied. I have written this book to share my joy with you, the reader, and also to motivate you to go beyond this little book in your knowledge of, and application of, the gospel.

### **THE GOSPEL IS THEOLOGY**

Christians get their theology—their understanding of who God is and what he is like—primarily from the gospel. The gospel, culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ, reveals God. It unveils him. The unveiling is always shocking. God is not what we expect. However, after the shock wears off, we find God infinitely better than we expect.

This book is about how to know God through the gospel story. It is about the joy that proceeds from getting to know God through the discipline of talking back to yourself—what some have called “preaching the gospel to yourself.”

This book is not a comprehensive analysis of the many doctrines that make up the gospel. For example, I do not cover Pentecost. Instead, each chapter covers one of the events that form the matrix of the gospel.

It is also important to note that this book does not treat these truths comprehensively. For example, chapter 5 surveys the doctrine of the atonement in only three thousand words. An informed writer could spend three thousand pages

## PREFACE

on this subject and not exhaust it. Rather, this book is an attempt to help the reader connect some of the crucial gospel doctrines with their *application to daily life*. In other words, this book is an attempt to help you feed on Jesus by going deeper with the gospel.

### FEEDING ON JESUS

At the Last Supper,

Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."  
(Matt. 26:26-28)

The body and blood of Christ represent the heart of the gospel event, the cross of Christ. In other words, just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood sustain spiritual life. If I don't eat bread, my body will die. If I don't feed on Jesus, my spiritual life will die.

The context of Jesus' command is the gospel. The bread is Christ's body, broken on the cross. The wine is his shed blood. In other words, the Lord's Supper is a reminder of what Jesus *did* for us, and we are commanded to feed on it daily.

Most of us eat at least three meals a day (sometimes with snacks in between). In the same way, God wants us to feed on Christ by feeding on the gospel. We do this by preaching (meditating on) the gospel to ourselves throughout the day.

Jesus expressed this idea in another way. "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4). To *abide* means literally "to dwell in." We dwell in Christ by abiding in the truths of the gospel. Those who do so become increasingly fruitful!

## THREE SPIRITUAL TREASURES

In addition, God enriches those who cultivate this discipline in at least three ways. First, they progressively get to know God—I mean, they really come to know him. The gospel makes God’s justice exquisite. The gospel glorifies his mercy and grace. The gospel makes God’s wrath terrible, but then God’s wrath makes the love of God inexpressibly precious. The gospel shows us the absolute sovereignty of God, but it does so without diminishing our responsibility. The gospel magnifies the horror of human sin, but it salves that knowledge with God’s grace and compassion. We could go on and on.

Second, the gospel motivates their sanctification. The more you know God (theology), the more you will want to imitate him. The more you gaze upon the glory of Christ through the window of the gospel, the more you will long to be like him. That was what Paul had in mind when he wrote, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). The glory of God shines most clearly through the gospel truths discussed in these chapters.

Third, the gospel defines God’s will. The gospel is our ethic. It shows us how to live. Although each chapter of this book will make practical applications, my fervent hope is that you will go deeper and apply the gospel to every area of your life—your marriage, your parenting, and how you relate to your peers on Monday morning. A recommended reading list is at the end of each chapter for those who want to explore the material in that chapter in more depth.

I have written this book to be used in a variety of settings. The chapters are intentionally short. New Christians, unbelievers who want to understand basic Christian doctrine, and long-time saints who want to know how to apply the gospel constitute my target audience. I have placed study questions at the end of each chapter to facilitate small group reading and discussion.

## Preach to Yourself

I sat down in a comfortable seat at a local coffee shop with a hot cup of “Joe” to do some reading. Seated across from me was a young woman deeply engrossed in a book. Sensing we might have something in common, I struck up a conversation.

“I notice you’re reading Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.”

“Yes, I’m reading *Spiritual Depression*. It is one of my favorite books. Are you familiar with it?”

“I finished it a few months ago. What chapter are you on?”

“Actually,” she said, “I’ve read it three times.”

“Well, I’m a pastor,” I confessed. “And *Spiritual Depression* has helped many in my congregation.”

“Before I read this book, I was in the habit of listening to my fears and doubts,” she answered. “But now I preach to myself. This concept has changed my life.”

As she said this, I remembered “the Doctor’s” exhortation at the end of the first chapter. “I say that we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing ‘ourselves’ to talk to us! Do you realize what that means? I suggest the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self.”<sup>1</sup>

Lloyd-Jones was on to something. It is a key to robust spiritual experience. We can either listen to ourselves—our fears, doubts, insecurities, hurts, and failures—or we can preach to ourselves. Maturing believers cultivate the discipline of preaching to themselves. In fact, they turn this into an art form. They

## PREACH TO YOURSELF

read Scripture, internalize it, and then continually preach its truths back to themselves. When fears of death and dying arise, they speak to themselves about the world to come. When guilt grips their heart, they remind themselves that they have been united with Christ and that Christ's righteousness is theirs. They don't listen to self. They preach to self!

What do I mean by preaching to self? First, it is more than Scripture memorization. Scripture memorization is an important discipline. However, you can memorize the Bible but never cultivate the discipline of preaching to yourself. Individual verses seldom sum up the big picture that we so desperately need.

Preaching to self also differs radically from positive thinking. Truth is often irrelevant to the positive thinker. Instead, he or she tries to create reality by thinking positively. *I can become whatever I affirm. Reality is irrelevant. I am wonderful and talented. Whether I really am makes no difference. But if I say this enough, I will believe it and become it.*

However, when a Christian preaches to himself, he presumes just the opposite. He does not manufacture truth with affirmations. He cannot create reality. Instead, his affirmations reflect the immutable Reality that is really there. It alone changes lives. In other words, Christians do not create truth. The Truth creates the Christian. It shapes and molds us. Someday we will give an accounting to the God who is the ultimate Reality.

The contention of this little book is that Lloyd-Jones was right. It also contends that there is one truth that matters more than all the others combined, and the Christian should preach it to himself on a regular basis. It is the gospel, the most fundamental Christian reality.

Jack Miller (1928–1996) first popularized the idea of preaching the gospel to oneself. A Presbyterian church planter in Philadelphia, a seminary professor, and a prolific author,

## PREACH TO YOURSELF

Miller was thoroughly gospel centered. He saw the centrality of the gospel to all of life. In Miller's view, the gospel was not just a subject for new believers. The gospel was crucial for the progressive sanctification of all believers at all stages of their spiritual journey.

In his book *The Discipline of Grace*, Jerry Bridges popularized Miller's idea. Bridges exhorts his readers to preach the gospel to themselves. For Bridges, this means a solid focus on what happened at the cross.

To preach the gospel to yourself, then, means that you continually face up to your own sinfulness and then flee to Jesus through faith in His shed blood and righteous life. It means that you appropriate, again by faith, the fact that Jesus fully satisfied the law of God, that He is your propitiation, and that God's holy wrath is no longer directed toward you.<sup>2</sup>

The book you are holding is a tutorial on how to preach the gospel to yourself. I am shamelessly and unapologetically building on the ideas of men like Lloyd-Jones, Miller, and Bridges. But I am also speaking from personal experience. I have discovered the benefit of continually preaching the gospel to myself. It has melted the fog of depression, repulsed the demons of despair, and displaced feelings of unworthiness and failure with the love of God. When I have been discouraged, it has motivated me to keep plodding. It has humbled me before the wonder of God's glorious grace. It has encouraged me to love God and others. It has prompted me to be patient with the failings of others. It has urged me to forgive seventy times seven times.

What do I mean by the gospel?

## DEFINITIONS

I want to go back to a subject that I brought up in the preface. When we think of the gospel, we usually think of Christ's death and resurrection, and that is appropriate. Christ's death

## PREACH TO YOURSELF

and resurrection are the heart and soul of the gospel. “The message of the atoning death of Christ for sin,” note Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington, “is the heart of [the apostles’] gospel and is forever to be the cornerstone of the Christian faith. . . . [It is] the central fact in all of the entire history of the world. It is the chief topic and essential truth from which they always start and to which they always return.”<sup>3</sup>

Although I agree with Bridges and Bevington wholeheartedly, I want to go one step further. In this book, I want to take a broader view of the gospel. The English word *gospel* is a modernized version of the Middle English word *godspell*, meaning “good tale.” Going back further, *godspell* is a translation of the New Testament Greek word *euangelion*, which just means “good news,” usually as declared by an emperor to his subjects. The gospel is the declaration of what God—our sovereign King and Emperor—has done to rescue us from sin and its consequence, the wrath of God.

It is good news indeed! In fact, when one’s plight in sin is fully understood, it is the best news anyone could possibly hear.

Using the term more broadly, the gospel is good news about all that God has done in Christ to save sinners and redeem the cosmos from the effects of sin. It includes our election before the foundation of the world, Christ’s incarnation, his active obedience, his substitutionary death, his resurrection and ascension, Pentecost, and the final judgment. It also includes the hope of a new creation purged of sin and infused with the active presence of God.

Although the gospel commands us to respond with faith and repentance, it is not fundamentally about what we should do. The gospel is about something that God has done. “The gospel is objective,” notes Jeff Purswell. “It tells us what God has done to save his people.”<sup>4</sup> Or, in the words of the *New Bible Dictionary*, the gospel is “the good news that God in Jesus Christ has fulfilled his promises to Israel, and that a way of salvation has been opened to all.”<sup>5</sup>



## PREACH TO YOURSELF

In other words, thinking of the gospel in this way is like seeing it through a wide-angle camera lens. It is bigger than Christ's death and resurrection. It includes what God did for us in eternity past and what God still plans to do for us in eternity future.<sup>6</sup>

Why the gospel and not some other truth? There is no subject more important to preach to oneself. It is the story line of Scripture. It is the central theme of the Bible. The Old Testament predicts and looks forward to the gospel. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record the central facts of the gospel—Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Acts records the efforts of the early church to export the gospel. The Epistles explain and apply the gospel. The Bible is all about the gospel!

In addition, the gospel is the Bible's unifying theme. Some don't think the Bible has a unifying theme.<sup>7</sup> Others find it in the many covenants throughout Scripture. Some find it in prophecy or the millennial hope. However, I am convinced that the Bible does have a unifying theme and that it is knowable. But if we aren't careful, we can miss the forest because we are so engrossed in the trees. The gospel is so obviously the center of the Bible's story that it's often assumed and subsequently overlooked.

Last, it is through the gospel that God achieves his ultimate end. The glory of God is the ultimate end of all things, and the gospel is the means through which God glorifies himself. It is how he achieves his ends.<sup>8</sup>

The cross of Christ is the focal point of the gospel. It is the heart and soul of the gospel. Why? Because Christ's suffering and death on the cross, more than any other event in history, displays before our eyes the glory of God. There we see the love of God hidden in his wrath, the mercy of God concealed in his justice, and the grace of God displayed through the demands of his holiness. In addition, we see ourselves. We see the horror of our sin. We see our failings as God sees them.

## PREACH TO YOURSELF

This book will look at several crucial aspects of the gospel. Each chapter will explain one aspect of the gospel and then answer the question, “So what?” It will conclude with an example of how to preach this truth to yourself. Starting with election in eternity past, we will progress to Christ’s incarnation. Then we will examine his sinless life, his substitutionary death, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, his return in glory to judge the living and the dead, and finally our ultimate hope, the new heavens and the new earth, which Peter referred to as the “restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21 *NKJV*).

### **BENEFITS**

Why should you read this book? Cultivating the discipline of preaching the gospel to yourself has many benefits. Let’s close this chapter with seven.

First of all, it regularly and repetitively exposes us to the glory of God. Moses wanted to know God’s essential nature, so he screwed up his courage and asked to see God’s glory, but God replied, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20). However, the next day God passed by and declared to Moses what he was not allowed to see. “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Ex. 34:6–7). What a glorious verbal picture of God’s moral beauty. Here we have mercy, grace, steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiveness all coupled with a strict observance of God’s perfect justice.

The staggering promise of the new covenant is that God has made available, in a way that we can see and survive, a glimpse of that glory. We see it, not with our physical eyes, but with the eyes of our heart. That is the essence of new birth. God

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“has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

God has displayed this “glory” through the gospel, and meditation is a key that unlocks it. The best way to meditate is to preach the gospel to oneself regularly. “To behold the glory of Christ in the gospel is a discipline,” writes Jerry Bridges. “It is a habit we must develop by practice as we learn to preach the gospel to ourselves every day.”<sup>9</sup> This is what Paul has in mind when he tells us to “seek the things that are above” and “set your minds on things that are above” (Col. 3:1–2).

There is a second reason to preach the gospel to yourself. It will help you grow in humility. On the cross, Jesus takes our place. He gets what we deserve, and it is ugly. In a previous book, *Gospel-Powered Humility*, I made this point. When many people hear the word *humility*, negative thoughts come to mind. Who wants to be humbled? But those with spiritual wisdom beg God to humble them. They know that most of God’s riches flow through the funnel of humility. God gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). What does this grace look like? How does it come to us? Here are some examples: intimacy with Christ (Isa. 57:15), favor with God (Prov. 3:34), exaltation by God (Ps. 147:6), salvation in the broadest sense (Matt. 5:3), and honor from God (Prov. 15:33). These are all manifestations of God’s grace to those growing in humility. “The good news of Jesus is not intended to make us feel good about ourselves,” notes Ed Welch. “Instead, the good news humbles us.”<sup>10</sup>

Third, those who preach the gospel to themselves are most likely to gain deliverance from that three-headed monster—guilt, inferiority, and low self-image. Here is the reason. The gospel is all about grace. Grace is reward given to those who deserve punishment. The gospel is the good news that God loves us not because of our virtues. He loves us in spite of their absence. The gospel is about divine power flowing through weak people. It is about the exaltation of God’s wisdom through foolish

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people. It is about God using the lowly and despised to shame the important. In other words, the gospel is for the needy, the guilty, and those who feel inferior. The gospel increasingly dissolves guilt, inferiority, and despair in the solvent of God's love.

Fourth, preaching the gospel to oneself accelerates sanctification. *Sanctification* is just a big word meaning "growth in godliness." As Paul David Tripp writes, "No one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one else talks to you more."<sup>11</sup> What you say to yourself will influence you more than all the sermons you hear, all the counseling you receive, and all the Bible reading you do.

A right understanding of the gospel provides motivation for developing love, compassion, and grace toward others. Yes, the gospel is a message for unbelievers. But, as we have seen, it is also the most important motivator for growing holiness. John Piper writes, "Our temptation is to think that the gospel is for beginners and then we go on to greater things. But the real challenge is to see the gospel as the greatest thing—and getting greater all the time."<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, those who repeatedly preach the gospel to themselves are increasingly "abounding in thanksgiving" (Col. 2:6). Why? The gospel shows us what we deserve—judgment. But, here is the good news: because of the gospel, we will never get what we deserve. No matter how bad our circumstances are, this truth will make us overflow with gratitude. The gospel reminds us that Christians are not getting, and never will get, what they deserve. Believers who preach the gospel to themselves understand this. Therefore, they are increasingly thankful, and thankful people are joyful people.

Sixth, those who preach the gospel to themselves are increasingly hopeful. That is because the gospel culminates in a new heaven and a new earth—a future utopia that God has promised to bring to pass. It is about "Paradise restored." The future for every Christian is an eternity with no crying, nor mourning, nor pain.

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Finally, preaching the gospel to oneself culminates in worship. The gospel is the ultimate ground for worship. Revelation 5 paints a picture of the worship that is taking place in heaven as you read these words. At the center of that worship is the Lamb who was slain, now standing in victory. What is the response? Heaven spontaneously erupts in a glorious, noisy, ecstatic worship. There is clapping, shouting, and singing. Every step toward the gospel takes us closer to the infinite goodness of the infinite God. That is why the gospel provokes grateful worship.

I preach the gospel to myself when I am shaving, when I am driving, when I am discouraged, and when I am in a place of deep comfort. Most importantly, I preach the gospel to myself after failure, which is all too often. I have written this book with the hope that you will do likewise.

“To really hear the Gospel,” notes Mark Dever, “is to be shaken to your core. To really hear the Gospel is to change.”<sup>13</sup>

That is my hope for you as you read this book.

### Discussion Questions

1. In your own words, what was the main point of this chapter?
2. What was your favorite passage from this chapter? Why?
3. What does it mean to listen to oneself? What things do you hear when your self is speaking?
4. By contrast, what does it mean to preach to oneself? What kinds of truth should you preach to yourself?
5. What comes to mind when you hear the word *gospel*?
6. In your own words, explain the difference between a wide-angle gospel and a narrow-angle gospel.
7. What are some of the doctrines that this author includes in the wide-angle gospel?
8. In light of this chapter, what would repentance look like?

### Further Reading

- Bridges, Jerry. *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006. See esp. chap. 3, "Preach the Gospel to Yourself."
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- Gilbert, Greg. *What Is the Gospel?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- Greear, J. D. *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*. Nashville: B&H, 2011.
- Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991. See esp. chaps. 2 and 3, "Bible Intake (Parts 1 and 2)".

**We live with our own thoughts 24/7—after all, we’re kind of stuck with them! But when we listen to our sinful thoughts instead of to the truth, they can carry us away into poor spiritual decisions all too easily.**

Does this sound familiar? How can we start changing this? How can we start living lives that are influenced by gospel thinking moment by moment?

William Farley argues that, whether we are new or seasoned believers, we can solve many of the spiritual problems in our lives by preaching the gospel . . . to ourselves!

The story of the gospel is familiar to us, but we don’t always realize that its key moments—such as Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension—teach us lessons that we can apply to our lives every single day. In this user-friendly book, Farley shows us how to remind ourselves of the gospel truths that are hidden in plain sight.

*“Pastors would have to engage in very little counseling if Christians prioritized what Bill Farley exhorts his readers to do . . . [and this] would transform the lives of Christians, their homes, and their churches.”*

**–Don Whitney**, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

*“This small gem of a book provides a joyous gospel feast that begins with our election in Christ before the foundation of the world and ends with Christ’s new creation. No small thoughts here! This is the recipe for big, expansive, and ever-expanding hearts.”*

**–R. Kent Hughes**, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

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