

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – September 2026

This is a summary of recent books read by Martin Davie, compiling his evaluations and the commendations of others.

In this edition:

Author	Title	Martin's opinion
Stuart Burgess	<i>Ultimate Engineering</i>	A book that works brilliantly on two levels. It shows the brilliantly sophisticated design to be found in the natural world, and in the human body in particular. It thereby debunks the claim that the bad design in nature shows that the natural world developed by chance.
Grace Hamman	<i>Ask of Old Paths: Medieval Virtues and Vices for a Whole and Holy Life</i>	The vices and virtues described so vividly by medieval Christians are exactly the same vices and virtues that Christians today are called to combat and cultivate, and Hamman uses her scholarship to show how careful study of what medieval Christians had to say about them helps us to think better about our engagement in that combat and cultivation. Highly recommended.
Grace Hamman	<i>Jesus through Medieval Eyes: Beholding Christ with the Artists, Mystics, and Theologians of the Middle Ages</i>	Re-visiting medieval images of Jesus via Hamman's book challenges our familiarity. They force us to think in new ways about the reality of Jesus' person and work and so help us to come to understand and love him more deeply. An important piece of applied scholarship which any Christian who wants to know Jesus better will benefit from reading.
Tish Harrison Warren	<i>What Grows in Weary Lands: On Christian Resilience</i>	An important resource which draws on the wisdom of the ages about how we can keep going in that unexciting middle of the Christian life where walking with God can seem like a long slog that is going nowhere. A book to buy, to ponder, to learn from and to share with others who are walking the long road with us.
Tom Wright	<i>The Vision of Ephesians: The Task of the Church and the Glory of God</i>	A very valuable study that introduces its readers to the clear and coherent message that runs through Ephesians. It also shows how this message is firmly rooted in the teaching of the Old Testament. This is a book that is based on first rate biblical scholarship, but accessible to any reasonably well-educated Christian, even if they have no background in biblical studies. Highly recommended.

Stuart Burgess, *Ultimate Engineering*, Discovery Institute, ISBN 978-1-63712-084-2, £18.45 (e edition also available)

Overview:

Professor Stuart Burgess is a world-renowned engineering designer, who has, among other things, helped design prosthetics, spacecraft for the European Space Agency, and the world's fastest track bicycle for the British Olympic team. He is currently Emeritus Professor of Engineering Design at the University of Bristol.

In his new book *Ultimate Engineering*, Burgess draws on his experience in engineering design to consider the evidence of design that can be found in nature. Contrary to the claim made by many evolutionary theorists that nature is full of bad designs, and that this shows that life has developed by a blind process of natural selection, he argues that:

... biology contains design that is far superior to human technology – design that is, in fact, ultimate engineering. By this I mean design at the limit of what is possible. Take the lubrication system in animal joints. It's not just optimal. It's at the limit of what is physically possible and far better than the best human lubrication system.

This expectation of ultimate engineering fits comfortably with the intelligent design paradigm, and all the more so when reinforced by specifically a theistic design paradigm, if the whole universe – including its laws and materials – is understood to have been made by an intelligent designer, as theism holds, then it follows that this designer would possess intimate knowledge of how to use those laws and materials to produce designs at the limit of performance.

As Burgess explains, the focus of the fifteen chapters that make up the bulk of the book:

... is a series of extraordinary engineering feats found in the living world – in the human body especially – feats that anyone can appreciate regardless of worldview commitments. The first five chapters explore the engineering genius evident in the foot, knee, wrist, fingers, and spine. Then we will move up to the head to examine even more sophisticated engineering marvels, including our hearing and vision. We will also look at skin, seemingly simple but in reality, a marvel of design sophistication. Additionally, we will consider the biomechanics of birth, of muscles and tendons, and of three physiological systems unmatched by anything in the realm of human technology.

In the remaining chapters of the book Burgess then goes on to:

... dive deeper into a comparison of evolutionary theory and intelligent design. When we remove ideological constraints and social pressures, and simply follow the evidence, what do we find? Was the origin of these various biological marvels the work of Richard Dawkins' 'blind watchmaker,' unguided evolution, or was a seeing and designing mind involved?

Burgess' final conclusion is as follows:

Like many other researchers today, I am awestruck by the ultimate engineering of biological systems and I can see how this points to intentional and purposeful design. But you do not have to have research grants or a PhD to be awestruck by design in biology. You only need to look at your hands and feet or consider your creative abilities, or contemplate your capacity to sense beauty. If there is an intelligent designer, people ask, shouldn't he demonstrate his existence? Well, I believe the designer has done so, through ultimate engineering, through extremes of design, and most of all, through the design of humankind.

Martin's opinion:

Ultimate Design is a book that works brilliantly on two levels. Firstly, it is a book that shows interested lay people what science now knows about the brilliantly sophisticated design to be found in the natural world, and in the human body in particular. Secondly, it is a book that thereby debunks the claim often still made by advocates of evolutionary theory such as Richard Dawkins that the bad design in nature shows that the natural world developed by chance. As Burgess argues, belief in an intelligent designer, God, is actually the most rational way of accounting for the existence of the

human body and the world in general. As the recent BBC series *Evolution* shows, a belief in unguided evolution is still deeply embedded in our culture. Burgess' book shows that this belief is simply bad science.

Commendations:

Howard Glicksman comments:

Finally! An easily accessible and superbly written book, from a seasoned professional with stellar credentials, that skewers the (supposedly) "bad design" arguments of those quack engineers aka evolutionary biologists. Learn incredible things about how your body actually works that only a design engineer in biomimetics can teach you. Enjoy the ride and pass it on!

Grace Hamman, *Ask of Old Paths: Medieval Virtues and Vices for a Whole and Holy Life*, Zondervan, ISBN 978-0-31016-720-4, £20.00 (e and audio editions also available)

Overview:

Grace Hamman is an American Christian scholar whose field of study is Christian writings from the Middle Ages. Many modern Christians, Protestant Christians in particular, tend to overlook writings by medieval Christians as a source of guidance for Christians today. Like C S Lewis before her, Hamman thinks that this is a serious mistake and that Christians today can learn much from their medieval predecessors if only they are willing to make the effort to listen carefully to what they have to say using the language and thought forms of their time.

In *Ask of Old Paths* Hamman proves her case by showing how Christians today have much to learn from the writings of Western medieval Christians about the vices and the virtues and the pictures they produced to illustrate their teaching.

As Hamman writes in the Preface to her book:

This book wanders through the garden of the ancient tradition of virtue language called the seven capital vices and their remedies: the medieval word pictures and teachings on pride and humility; envy and love; wrath, patience and meekness; avarice and mercy; sloth and fortitude; gluttony and abstinence; lust and chastity.

As she goes on to say:

Each chapter will give some context on one of these vices and then dive deep into its remedy, one or more of the virtues paired with it in medieval literature and pastoral writings. These virtues are called remedies not because they immediately fix the problem but because, like wholesome and medicinal plants in a garden, the cultivation begins to transform the person suffering under the oppressive habits we call vices.

The remedies aren't about good behaviour or prudent life choices. The virtues are not about being a special individual who is better than other people. They are neither clumsy one-size-fits-all rules nor a dry works-righteousness perfectionism to be shoved upon others. In the practise of virtues, we become more wholly human, more ourselves as images of God. The seven capital vices and their remedies are a medieval guide on our long and winding journey into communal and individual wholeness, because you can't have one without the other.

In each of the seven main chapters of her book Hamman explores one of these pairs of vices and virtues with help of a range medieval thinkers and applies their thinking to the issues we still face today. Each of these chapters finishes with some verses from Scripture relevant to the chapter's theme, some suggestions for individual Christian practice and a prayer. In Hamman's words:

These are an invitation to meditate on or practise some of the central ideas about each virtue and vice. These are not necessary but truly invitational; try them if you wish.

It is impossible in a short review to do justice to the way Hamman draws on the medieval tradition as a basis for thinking about vice and virtue today and the forms of Christian behaviour that need to flow from it. However, the following two extracts will serve to give a flavour of the book as a whole.

First, in her chapter on pride and humility Hamman comments on the statement by Julian of Norwich that that what God asks of us is 'humble accusing.' Hamman writes:

'Humble accusing' is a tricky phrase. But it means nothing more than to 'nakedly know our weakness.' I must leave behind my self-deception and, with much flinching and painful humiliation, learn how I have hurt other people and myself. Yet this knowledge is nothing without holding inseparably with it the everlasting love and mercy of God. There is never one without the other.

Secondly, in her chapter on sloth and fortitude' Hamman notes that:

The Carmelite Friar Richard Lavynham defines sloth as a vice which is rooted in the person uneager [or *unlusty* as he more vividly puts it] to serve God or the world, desiring no other bliss but ease alone.

Prizing ease above all other goods exacts a shockingly high cost in relationships, whether those are with God, with other humans, even with the land. And relationships are what we are called to as the children of God and the body of Christ.

Martin's opinion:

Ask of Old Paths is a book that can be highly recommended. The language and illustrations found in the medieval tradition can seem weird and off putting to people today, as in the case of the medieval habit of calling human beings 'vats of excrement' or the illustration of humility by a bishop licking snot off the nose of a leper. However, behind the strangeness there is also profound continuity. The vices and virtues described so vividly by medieval Christians are exactly the same vices and virtues that Christians today are called to combat and cultivate, and Hamman uses her scholarship to show how careful study of what medieval Christians had to say about them helps us to think better about our engagement in that combat and cultivation.

Commendations:

Carolyn Weber writes:

In our current age, talking about vices and virtues may seem out of place, even weird. But Grace Hamman notes how the omnipresent vibrancy of a value-imbued medieval vocabulary challenges the modern reader to consider how deadened our language, and so our identity, has become by the emptiness of communication void of moral power. Hamman harkens back to the wisdom of a time in which the values of language reflected real habits and dispositions. In doing so, she calls for the rehabilitation of our own current language of the virtues so that we may pay more careful attention to our humanity made in the image of God. With her timely, beautiful, and compelling book, Hamman reminds us of a tried and telling truth: 'Virtues are the fruit of well-ordered love.' Indeed.

Grace Hamman, *Jesus through Medieval Eyes: Beholding Christ with the Artists, Mystics, and Theologians of the Middle Ages*, Zondervan, ISBN 978-0-31014-583-7, £20.00 (paperback, e and audio editions also available)

Overview:

As noted in my previous review, Grace Hamman is an American scholar whose speciality is the Christian writings of the Middle Ages. In the opening chapter of her book on medieval Christian depictions of Jesus, she explains the thinking behind her book as follows:

Reading old books in this humble mode creates space for actual community with these ancient witnesses of love. We are given the gift of dialogue with the past – a past saturated in beauty and love of Christ. We live in a perilous, often depressing world. So did the writers, artists and theologians who portrayed these different versions of Jesus. These medieval faces of Jesus reveal human error, ingenuity and often trust in a transformative charity. They remind us of Christ's love that binds us as the church, which suffuses and transcends history and cultures in surprising and unforeseen ways.

As we gaze at these medieval faces of Jesus, we learn to wait patiently, as a narrative or image may at first seem inaccessible or bizarre. We learn to listen, as we encounter beliefs wildly different from our own but that still profess love for the Incarnate God. We learn to ask questions insistently and excitedly again, like a child. And like in any friendship, as we wait, listen, and question, we form community and learn other forms of loving well.

The main body of the book consists of eight chapters that each concentrate on a different medieval image of Jesus. These images are Jesus as the judge, the lover, the knight, the word, the mother, the good medieval Christian, the wounded God, and Jesus as us. Each chapter concludes with suggestions for meditation, practice and prayer related to its subject matter.

As with her book on medieval teaching about vices and virtues, space does not permit a detailed account of what Hamman writes about these medieval images of Jesus, but as before two extracts will serve to illustrate the contents of the book as a whole.

First, in her chapter on Jesus the knight, Hamman notes that in his work *Piers Plowman* the medieval English poet William Langland depicts Jesus as a barefoot knight, dressed in peasant's clothing and riding an ass, contrary to the normal practice of knights going into combat booted and spurred, wearing their best armour and riding their finest war horse.

What Langland is offering is a 'word picture of the incarnation: Jesus clad in human nature, jousting in the 'armour' of a simple ploughman against the Fiend and all the powers of death.'

Langland's depiction of Jesus as a knight who is a barefoot peasant is deliberate and witnesses to the fact that:

Langland's knight comes to fight a holier battle, one that ultimately eschews the typical knightly trappings of wealth and violence. The Christ knight is still committed to providing defence, salvation, and justice to those at the mercy of their enemies. But this knight dressed in ploughman's garb demonstrate God's radical, division-destroying humility and love in his embodiment as Jesus.

Secondly, in her chapter on Jesus the mother, Hamman explains that in spite of the misogyny that was such a central part of medieval thought, male medieval writers were nevertheless led through meditation on the biblical witness to refer to Jesus as mother, because just as our mothers are the people through whom we are born to life in this world, so according to the biblical witness Jesus is the vessel through whom we are born to eternal life.

She then goes on to note that contemplative writers of the later Middle Ages, often women, then took this idea a stage further:

They wrote Jesus as a pregnant, labouring, and postpartum mother: lactating, bleeding, meant to be adored and imitated in his long-suffering mercy and compassion ...

Thinking of Jesus as a labouring mother powerfully contextualises Jesus' suffering. The crucifixion is not suffering for suffering's sake, as it has sometimes been depicted. Suffering alone is not redemptive, though we can often mistake it as such in our attempts to make sense of the world. Christ's passion is more similar to childbirth than to cancer, wounds received in war, accidental injury, leprosy, COVID-19 or any other bodily affliction. Though in his agony Christ encompasses, shares, and knows all other pain, his suffering is profoundly generative just as in childbirth. He gives birth to us in his passion, his resurrection, and his life of love.

Martin's opinion:

When thinking about Jesus it is easy to reach for the familiar images of Jesus as the king, the good shepherd, or the teacher. The problem with the use of these images is not that they are misleading. The problem is that their very familiarity means that they are too comfortable. They no longer challenge us to think afresh about who Jesus really is and what he did (and does for us). Re-visiting medieval images of Jesus via Hamman's book challenges that familiarity. These images present us with pictures of Jesus that are counter-intuitive and in some cases, like the depiction of the leprous Jesus by Matthias Grunwald on the Isenheim altar piece, downright shocking. Precisely because of their strangeness they force us to think in new ways about the reality of Jesus' person and work and so help us to come to understand and love him more deeply. *Jesus through Medieval Eyes* is an important piece of applied scholarship which any Christian who wants to know Jesus better will benefit from reading.

Commendations:

Claude Atcho declares:

In *Jesus through Medieval Eyes*, Grace Hamman offers an absorbing and accessible work of Christian retrieval, guiding readers back to the delightfully distinct treasures of medieval Christianity. With erudition and devotional care, Hamman guides us toward the radiant goodness of Christ – a goodness best beheld when we gaze upon him from a vantage point beyond our own. Whether 'medieval' as a modifier to 'Christianity' makes you sing with joy, hum with curiosity, or shriek with fear, humble readers will find this book an intellectual and spiritual feast.

Tish Harrison Warren, *What Grows in Weary Lands: On Christian Resilience*, Ebury Vine, ISBN 978-1-91176-407-6, £18.99, (e edition also available)

Overview:

Tish Harrison Warren is an American writer and an Anglican priest. She is currently the C S Lewis Theological Writer-in-Residence for The Anglican Episcopal House of Studies at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

In her new book on the importance and practice of Christian resilience she writes that,

What our culture – and what the church – tends to lack are stories of a long steady continuation in faith. We revel in newness and youthful passion. We might even occasionally laud the wisdom of years – the sages, the gurus, the living legends. But we don't have categories for the prolonged middle, for the slog, especially if this slog is accompanied by the feeling of abandonment by or distance from God. Here's the thing, though: we cannot get from newfound ardour to tried and tested wisdom without the winding middle.

The purpose of her book is to explore what it means to live as Christians in the winding middle. In her words, her book,

... is about what the Christian tradition often called fortitude, but we now more commonly name resilience. Perseverance and resilience are unsung virtues not nearly as splashy as courage or justice. They can seem tired or uninteresting – the 'eat your vegetables' of the spiritual life, but I have come to believe that perseverance is the most vital quality in a lifetime of discipleship. That grit is an essential ingredient of grace, and that resilience is indispensable if we are to become what we are made to be. What I need and what I long for, are stories of *reconversion*, of coming back to Jesus, day by day over a lifetime of being lost and found and lost and found, again and again. I want to learn from those who have slowly discovered the long way to what lasts.

In her book she sets out what she has learned from the Christians of the past about this long way that lasts:

It is a survey of historic voices who mapped the stages and stretches of the Christian life; and it's an exploration of the gifts that can only be found when we are no longer quite sure how to keep going. In these pages, I'm pulling from voices across time, cultures, and various Christian traditions – from ancient monks to Reformed preachers, from Popes and poets, from Saints and sinners – all who faced the void of weariness, torpor or dullness and left behind wisdom in their wakes. I'm setting out a display table, or a kind of theological storehouse, full of resources for resilience that I discovered when I most needed them.

Warren sets out her display table in eight chapters as follows:

1. Discovery in the desert – lost and found in a weary land.
2. Stay in your cell – stability in practice.
3. Pledge your body to the walls – stability in commitments and community.
4. Wait in the womb – how hope transforms perseverance and fosters resilience.
5. Relax the bow – how grace transforms our efforts.
6. Let the silt settle – silence and connecting to the source.
7. Brace the wall – persevering amid doubt and disorientation.
8. All smoke, all flame – the culmination of Christian resilience.

Martin's opinion:

This book is an important resource which draws on the wisdom of the ages about how we can keep going in that unexciting middle of the Christian life where walking with God can seem like a long slog that is going nowhere, or to use a metaphor Warren employs, is like sitting by a fire that refuses to light no matter fuel what we add to it or however many matches we strike. The message of the book is that what we need to learn from those who have walked the same way before us is that:

The practises of our faith, acts of perseverance and trust that may feel futile, are at last the fragile kindling set ablaze by the Spirit, at just the right time. In the end it all feeds the flame. In the end nothing will be wasted.

What Grows in Weary Lands is a book to buy, to ponder, to learn from and to share with others who are walking the long road with us.

Commendations:

John Corner declares:

Warren is one of our best living spiritual writers; her ability to blend Christian spirituality and insights from church history with beautifully down-to-earth honesty and raw humour, all while keeping our soul hopeful in God, is a rare gift. It would be impossible to overstate how warmly I recommend this book to all, but especially to the 'weary and heavy laden' of the kingdom.

Tom Wright, *The Vision of Ephesians: The Task of the Church and the Glory of God*, SPCK, ISBN 978-0-28109-065-5, £13.99 (e edition also available)

Overview:

Tom Wright is Research Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews and Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He is the author of over ninety books which encompass a variety of different genres ranging from his multi-volume scholarly studies of Jesus and Paul to his popular *For Everyone* commentaries on the New Testament.

Like his earlier studies *Into the heart of Romans* and *The Challenge of Acts*, *The Vision of Ephesians* is neither a full-blown scholarly monograph, nor a popular commentary. It is instead the written form of a series of introductory lectures on Ephesians, first given in Oxford and then in Houston, which work through the letter section by section with the aim of opening up what Ephesians has to say: 'so that what may seem dense and allusive to a reader today can become clear, fresh, challenging and encouraging.'

After an Introduction which covers the overall nature and shape of Ephesians and why Wright thinks it was written by Paul, the book is divided into eight further sections which look in turn at Ephesians 1:3–14, 1:15–23, 2, 3, 4:1–24, 4:25–5:20, 5:21–6:9 and 6:10–20.

In his introduction Wright argues that the central message of Ephesians concerns the calling of the Church:

The church united and holy, is designed to demonstrate to the hostile watching world that the God revealed in Jesus is the true God, the creator, redeemer, lover and glory of the whole world.

Paul expounds this in terms of creation and new creation, of humanity and new humanity. Much traditional theology and preaching has downplayed these themes, being more concerned with the supernatural and otherworldly salvation, with going into heaven after death. So too, many theologically minded expositions have stressed the divinity of Jesus and the divine power at work saving humans. This is obviously important; but in Ephesians, more clearly perhaps than anywhere else, we see that God's plan in the Messiah Jesus was *to sum up the whole cosmos in him, everything in heaven and on the earth*. Jesus has fulfilled the role marked out in scripture for the truly human being, as well as the role marked out for God himself. The humanity of Jesus is not simply a necessity for the purposes of rescuing the world, but the fulfilment of the creator's original purpose, and the true humanity of Jesus' followers is designed to display to the world what human life was meant to be like.

The way I have come to see this in recent years is to understand the calling of the churches being central to the purposes of God for creation and new creation and thus to think of the vocation of the church as the call to live as *the small working model of new creation*. This theme is found right across the New Testament, but Ephesians has a claim to be its clearest exposition.

In the bulk of *The Vision of Ephesians* Wright shows how he thinks the overall understanding of Ephesians just outlined helps us to make sense of what Paul says in the various parts of the letter.

When it comes to Paul's teaching on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10–20, Wright suggests that this teaching is about the Church's calling to participate in the cosmic victory against evil which Jesus as the Messiah has won on the cross in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

Paul's list of armour echoes Old Testament passages which refer either to the Messiah or to YHWH himself. He is drawing on the picture of the Messiah in Isaiah 11, and of the divine warrior in Isaiah 59, adding Isaiah 52 for good measure. This cannot be accidental. The personal or private application remains important. But I think Paul is saying that, precisely through our being seated with the Messiah in the heavenly places, we are now recruited to take part in the larger battle, the ongoing messianic battle in which God himself, and the Messiah, are implementing the victory won on the cross. Jesus must reign, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The battle is ongoing. We are recruited to play our part.

Martin's opinion:

The Vision of Ephesians is a very valuable study that introduces its readers to the clear and coherent message that runs through Ephesians about how the re-creative activity of the creator God of Israel was at work in the person of the God man Jesus Christ and is now at work in his body the Church, which functions as the small working model of the new creation and is part of the means by which God implements the cosmic victory over the powers of evil won by Jesus on the cross. It also shows how this message is firmly rooted in the teaching of the Old Testament. This is a book that is based on first rate biblical scholarship, but which is written in a manner that will make it accessible to any reasonably well-educated Christian, even if they have no background in biblical studies. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

Paul Foster has written

A beautifully crafted study of Ephesians, replete with penetrating insights that will enrich the mind, the heart, and the spirit.