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The Gospel According to the Blues

Introduction

My first introduction to the blues was when I was a teenager. My friend George Lowden (who has since become one of the world's leading acoustic guitar makers) lent me an album entitled *The World of Blues Power*, made in 1969, which was a compilation of stuff by John Mayall's Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton, Ten Years After, Peter Green, and Savoy Brown.

As a boy brought up in a very conservative church in Northern Ireland, my exposure to music was pretty limited. That is to say—very limited. I knew a lot of hymns and choruses and a bit of classical music from my years of learning piano—but beyond that I was green. The pop revolution of the sixties with The Beatles and The Rolling Stones and so on had largely passed me by—but, given that George was a bit older than me and a pretty cool guy, I borrowed the album, took it home, and put it on the turntable.

When I listened to Clapton playing "All Your Lovin', Pretty Baby" and Savoy Brown singing "taste and try before you buy," not to mention some more rather tasty lyrics later on in that song that certainly were not the sort of things discussed in the church in which I had been brought up—I was hooked on the blues. The next stop was another album George lent me, by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee—this time not the electric blues of Eric Clapton and John Mayall, but much more raw, Delta-style blues with acoustic guitar and harmonica.

As I listened, I realized that there was something about this blues music that seemed to reach right inside of me and just grab my innards and twist them. It was something visceral: it felt real, it felt important—in a

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way that the pop stuff most of my friends were listening to didn't. And that really is the essence of the blues. It's music that goes deep; it moves you; it seems to be able to speak to you in ways that are far from superficial.

And so began a lifelong love of the blues—music from a culture and time far removed from mine, and yet which has had the power to draw me again and again over the years. As time has gone on, I've increasingly pursued my passion for two things—first, trying to understand the New Testament, and secondly, the blues. Despite having a career in the software industry, I completed my BD and PhD studies in universities in London and Belfast and have taught the New Testament for a number of years at my local university. I've a particular interest in the writings of the Apostle Paul. But my interest in the blues has increased in recent years as well, and I love listening to and playing the blues (I'm an enthusiastic, if not skilled guitarist) and reading blues history. But it never occurred to me until recently that it might be possible to combine in some ways these two passions and to be able to reflect on Christian theology through the lens of the blues.

A few years ago a new minister, Steve Stockman, came to our church in Belfast. I discovered he had written a couple of books on the connections between secular rock music and Christian faith. Steve is passionate about music and, with his encouragement, the church has put on a number of musical evenings, where we have explored the music of various artists and have reflected on the ways in which their songs are relevant to faith—challenging, encouraging, or questioning. We are now running an annual blues evening, which has been a great success, with lots of great live blues music, along with critical reflection on matters of life and faith. The experience of these evenings has encouraged me to begin to reflect on both blues music and my Christian faith more deeply and, in particular, on how we might think about various aspects of the Christian gospel. So this book is an attempt to think about the gospel through the lens of the blues—to see if there might be angles and ways of thinking about faith through a connection with the blues that might be both challenging and beneficial in considering the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ in today's world.

In his excellent *Getting the Blues*, which looks at what blues music might have to teach us about suffering and salvation, Stephen Nichols quotes third-century church father Tertullian, who said "What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?," and reframes it as, "What has Christianity to do with the Mississippi Delta?" Nichols feels that Tertullian's negative answer to this question about the relationship between philosophy and faith was mistaken

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and that it would also be wrong to suggest that there should be no engagement between Christian faith and modern culture. Instead, there needs to be an engagement that is a "two-way street; we find common ground to speak the gospel to others and from others we gain a better understanding of the gospel."[1] That being the case, Nichols argues that Mississippi has rather a lot to do with Jerusalem.

Christianity and Cultural Engagement

For many years in a large section of the Christian church there has been deep suspicion of engaging in any meaningful way with modern culture. In the circles in which I grew up, much was made of "being *in* the world" but not being "*of* the world." What this meant in practice was that Christians should confine themselves to the sanctified world of the church and leave unredeemed culture well alone. So things like the cinema, rock concerts, certain types of literature, and popular music were all pretty much off-limits. Things have changed enormously, of course, but there is still an inward-looking Christian subculture where it seems safe for Christians to dwell, where faith is not challenged and where Christians can remain untainted by the "sinful" outside world. In this version of Christianity, the gospel is simply about a person understanding she or he is a sinner, repenting, exercising faith in Christ's death on her or his behalf, receiving forgiveness, being put right with God and bound for heaven after death.

The problem is, such an individualistic and other-worldly focus doesn't do justice to the full reality of the gospel, which has as much to do with world-transformation as it does to do with personal transformation. As we will see, the gospel we find in our New Testament, preached by both Jesus and Paul, is about the arrival of the rule of God on earth, about God renewing the cosmos and reconciling all things to Godself through Christ. It's about God putting things to rights—or, to put it another way, bringing justice. Once we start thinking about the gospel in this way, the focus shifts from the individual (although of course, importantly including the individual) and we see that there is not a part of our world that God does not wants to touch, redeem, and transform. And that God wants God's people to be a part of that redeeming, transformative project.

The story in the first few chapters of Genesis, for sure, tells us about a world gone wrong, about human beings who have given up their God-given

1. Nichols, *Getting the Blues*, 20.

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task of representing God to God's world and taking responsibility for that world, because of their own desire for independence from God. The ramifications of that are far-reaching and include broken human relationships, broken societies, injustice at every turn, and broken responsibilities towards the earth. As Bob Dylan says simply, "Everything is broken."

God's plan for his world is nothing less than complete redemption for fallen human beings and a fallen cosmos. The Bible is the story of the creator's plan to deal with the problem of evil and to restore the order of God's world. As New Testament scholar Tom Wright maintains, God's plan was always to do this through a people. Despite the failure of God's ancient people to be God's agents of transformation, God's purpose was achieved through the one who represented Israel, Jesus, the Messiah—through his death and resurrection. Now this transformative project, which God will complete when Jesus returns, is to be moved forward by those who are, according to Paul, "in Christ."

Jesus followers are to be those who show what this new, changed world will be like—here and now. So Christian mission becomes more than simply appealing to individuals to respond in faith to Christ. It becomes an active engagement of God's people with culture, politics, society, and issues of justice, bringing the upside-down values of God's kingdom and Christ's love to bear wherever we can. The death and resurrection of Jesus, according to Paul, has resulted in "new creation," where all things have become new. It's a far-reaching idea that really does mean "all things," in terms of the scope of what God wants to make new.

Our engagement with the world is, however, as Nichols has pointed out, not a one-way process. Jesus talked about providing aid to the helpless and those in need and finding out that as much as we do it to them, we do it to him. Somehow as we engage with the poor and the disadvantaged, we find Jesus is their midst. And we ourselves are changed in the process. As we get involved in working to relieve suffering and combat injustice, it's not just those for whom we are working that are changed. In this very process of bringing compassion and justice, our own lives are transformed.

So too with the arts—Steve Stockman, in his book *The Rock Cries Out*, talks about finding "eternal truth in unlikely music." He maintains that there is much in the music of contemporary artists that is "saturated with spiritual context and redemptive messages that can teach life-changing truth to the believer and spiritual seeker alike."[2] Michael Gilmour in *Gods and Guitars*

2. Stockman, *The Rock Cries Out,* back cover copy.

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approaches song lyrics as texts and finds it remarkable that, in music that has no connection to organized religion, there is to be found a great deal of meaningful spirituality and engagement with religious questions.[3]

In Christian Scharen's recent book, *Broken Hallelujahs*, he warns against looking at popular music as spiritually dangerous, and argues for a more positive engagement with something that is to be seen as part of God's good creation, albeit broken and damaged. He quotes Psalm 139:7–8 to suggest that we might routinely find evidence for God's presence in the midst of this broken creation:

> Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit?
> To be out of your sight?
> If I climb to the sky, you're there!
> If I go underground, you're there.

Scharen suggests the need to "surrender" to a work of art in order to engage imaginatively and properly with it. "If we attend to what sorts of people we are as a result of an encounter with [the artist], and how we describe the nature of our opinions in relation to what [the artist] has actually done," then we are able to encounter the art in a discerning, knowing way that goes far beyond simply reacting to it on the grounds of "taste." In this way, Scharen argues "we are enabled to give ourselves away to a broken and hurting world, seeking to understand it, love it, and ultimately share in its midst God's ongoing work of reconciliation." In the process, we ourselves are changed for the better.[4]

The gospel of Jesus Christ, then, is much wider in its scope and concerns than individuals' salvation. It's a message of hope for the whole world, a coming transformation, a transformation that God's people are called to participate in right now, engaging with all aspects of the life of this world, seeking to bring something of the life and love of God to bear on it and seeking to understand more of God through it.

The Blues and the Gospel

And so the blues, as with almost every other genre of music, is an appropriate area for Jesus followers to engage. Given the rich history of blues music and its genesis in black suffering, we might expect to find here a deep well

3. Gilmour, *Gods And Guitars*.
4. Scharen, *Broken Hallelujahs*, 130, 131, 137; from chapter 7, "Practicing Surrender."

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from which to draw in reflecting on matters of faith. We might expect to find insights, challenges, and resonances with Christian faith. And that is just what we are going to find as we explore the blues in succeeding chapters. We're going to find that the blues is a very useful jumping-off point from which to reflect on the wide scope of the Christian gospel we've just begun to consider.

It is the case, of course, that whatever else we want to say about the blues, from its earliest days, whether it was the early women blues artists playing large shows or country blues artists playing juke joints, blues was entertainment. It was music to dance to, to drink to on a Saturday night, to help you forget the harshness of everyday life on the sharecropper's farm. That being the case, the blues and the church have often sat uneasily together. In the rural South, the church was an important part of life, a stabilizing influence on the community, and many churchgoers condemned the blues as sinful. It was the devil's music. It's not hard to understand why—with its myths of musicians going to the crossroads to sell their souls to the devil, the idea of "mojo" magic (originally a voodoo charm, but then coming to refer to sexual prowess), and associations with hard liquor drinking, blues music was difficult to reconcile with a churchgoing lifestyle. Michael Bane, in his book, *White Boy Singin' the Blues*, says,

> The blues especially were the opposite side of sacred. . . . You could sing gospel or the blues, but never both. The blues belonged to the Devil, with his high-rollin' ways . . . and if you sang his music, the door to the Lord's house was shut to you.[5]

The relationship between the church and the blues, however, was not quite so one-dimensional as Bane makes out. Blues artists went back and forth between careers as preachers and blues performers, and churches hosted blues artists—Blind Willie McTell from Georgia was one who often performed his music in a church setting. Plenty of blues musicians—Son House, Skip James, and Bill Broonzy, for example—were preachers before they were bluesmen. And some left the blues for the church—Georgia Tom, for example, recorded bawdy secular music before leaving behind the blues to record several hundred sacred songs and become the father of gospel music.

The blues, to be sure, was entertainment, but the blues has always expressed something deep about human life. It includes the whole gamut

5. Bane, *White Boy Singing the Blues*, 39.

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of human experience—deep sorrow and lament, rage, resentment, murder, right through to joy, hope, and victory. The blues has always had the power to touch people deeply and they are music that seems to resonate at the deepest levels of our souls. This earthy, gritty nature of the blues is not something for Christians to shy away from—rather it is all the more reason to want to engage deeply with the blues, for in the blues we come face-to-face with real, human life-struggle, discrimination, imprisonment, violence, and poverty, with ramblin', no good, drunken men with unfaithful women—these are all the subject of the blues. All human life is here.

It seems to me, then, that the blues might very well be a very interesting and, indeed, appropriate place from which to consider the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel that itself has much to say about failed human beings, suffering, sorrow, justice, joy, and hope.

What Is the Blues?

So, to start off—what is the blues? If you're a musician, especially a guitarist, the blues means things like the pentatonic scale, flattened thirds, fifths, and sevenths, bent notes, and such like. But beyond the technical details, what is it really all about?

Robert Johnson, King of the Delta Blues, said "the blues is a low-down shakin' chill, it's a achin' old heart disease." Son House said the blues was something between a man and a woman. Memphis Willie widened it out, saying, "A blues is about something that's real. It's about what a man feels about some disappointment that happens that he can't do anything about." More profoundly, Furry Lewis of Memphis said, "All the blues, you can say, is true."[6] But perhaps the most important definition of the blues comes from B. B. King: "The blues is an expression of anger against shame and humiliation."[7]

He said that because, at heart, the essence of the blues is rooted in human suffering, in grief, in distress. The blues was rooted in the hardship, toil, injustice, and bondage of African Americans. Throw in bitterness, anger, broken relationships, sex, and virtually every aspect of life and you've basically got the blues.

6. Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues*, 12.
7. King, *Blues All Around Me,* 213.

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B. B. King's "Why I Sing the Blues" (1969) locates the blues firmly in the context of slavery, injustice, and poverty. He starts off by reminding us of where it all started:

> When I first got the blues
> They brought me over on a ship
> Men were standing over me
> And a lot more with a whip.

The injustices suffered by the black community in the US, of course, didn't stop with the abolition of slavery. B. B. goes on to talk about the lack and poverty that was the lot for his community:

> I've laid in a ghetto flat
> Cold and numb
> I heard the rats tell the bedbugs
> To give the roaches some.

And in case there was any doubt as to the widespread nature of black suffering, King sings:

> I caught me a bus uptown, baby
> And every people, all the people
> Got the same trouble as mine.

The experience of poverty was compounded by the criminal justice system in the South, where simply being black increased an innocent man's chance of falling foul of the police:

> Blind man on the corner
> Begging for a dime
> The rollers come and caught him
> And throw him in the jail for a crime.

And that's why I sing the blues, says B. B. King:

> I got the blues
> Mm, I'm singing my blues
> I've been around a long time
> Mm, I've really paid some dues.

Where the blues started for many people was with a certain W. C. Handy, bandleader of a successful black orchestra, on a railway platform in Tutwiler, Mississippi, in 1903. As Handy waited for his train, he heard the sound of a man in tattered clothes playing a guitar in a most unusual fashion—he was

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sliding a pocketknife up and down the strings, creating a strange sound. For Handy the combination of the sliding guitar, the wailing voice, the repeated lyrics and the emotional intensity was incredibly powerful. "The effect," he said, "was unforgettable."[8] Handy first encountered the blues in the Mississippi Delta and it was on the Delta farms and in other Southern states like Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and the Carolinas that the blues took root in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century.

The Mississippi Delta was ideal as a breeding ground for the blues—it was here that a large black community lived and worked, struggling with poverty and the back-breaking work. The Delta soil, in a rich alluvial plane is, it is said, as thick as tar in some parts. While a few white people thrived on it, a whole lot of black people who worked on it were completely impoverished. Tommy Johnson, Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker—musicians we associate with the birth of the blues—were just some of the artists who toiled on the land in the heat of the Mississippi sun. In the early decades of the twentieth century, African Americans worked on cotton and sugarcane farms, in what for most were pitiful conditions—long, back-breaking work for very little pay. Grandparents and parents of the first blues artists had been slaves; their children, though notionally free, were still living in conditions that were coercive and repressive.

James Cone, professor of theology at Union Seminary in New York, says the blues is the artistic response to the chaos of life. He says that no black person can escape the blues, because the blues is an inherent part of black existence in America. To be black, he says, is to be blue. As Leadbelly, ex-convict and country bluesman, said, "All negroes like the blues . . . because they was born with the blues."[9]

W. C. Handy said simply, "The blues were conceived in aching hearts."[10] Songs like Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Broke and Hungry," Leadbelly's "Pick a Bale of Cotton," Leroy Carr's "How Long Blues" ("I ain't seen no greenback on a dollar bill, How long, how long, baby how long?"), Victoria Spivey's "T.B. Blues" ("I got a tuberculosis; Consumption is killing me. It's too late, too late, too late, too late, too late")—and many, many more—all speak of the harshness of life for African Americans. All of this was the result of

8. Handy, *Father of the Blues,* 73–74.

9. Quoted in Shaw, *The World of the Soul,* 31.

10. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 79.

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poverty and discrimination, leading to ill-health, high infant mortality, family breakdown, and a whole host of social ills.

It's hardly surprising, really, that the blues emerged when and how it did. It was at once an expression of the sorrow and hardships of life for black communities in the South and a means of escape from those very trials.

The blues was part of life. It was sung at socials, parties, and juke joints—small, rural shacks where black people converged on Saturday nights to drink cheap whiskey and dance. As we have noted, although the blues may be thought of as an art form or as an expression of deep feeling, the early performers, be they successful, colorful stars like some of the women blues artists or more raw, rural blues singers, were entertainers who wanted their audiences to dance. How better, after six long days working hard to grow your own food and some cash crops for which you earned very little, to escape for a few hours on a Saturday night than with good company, music, and something to eat and drink.

So although we might say that the essence of the blues is rooted in human suffering, in grief, in distress, the blues is not simply a wallowing in all of that—it is just as much an expression of anger and hope that rails against the problems facing us, and that enables us to get to a place where we can rise above it all. And the blues deals with all of life. It's all there in what are lyrically quite simple songs—although in their own way, quite profound. And I guess that's one of the things that still draws us to the blues.

So—how does all this relate to Christian faith? What does the Delta have to do with Jerusalem? What does the crying and the hollering and the complaining and the raw expression of everyday life in the blues have to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

And the answer is—quite a lot, as we will discover as this book proceeds. There are two basic reasons. One is that, actually, the Bible has rather a lot of the blues in it. Stories of relationships, sex, murder, complaints to God, cries for deliverance, aspirations for a better future—it's all there, Genesis to Revelation. And the second reason is, as we have noted, the gospel is a big subject, encompassing all of human life and revolving around God's plan to transform God's world. The gritty, everyday expression of the blues, embedded deeply in the sorrows and joys of human experience, therefore, should give us good grounds for considering the transformative good news of Jesus Christ.

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The Blues in the Bible

With respect to the blues in the Bible, we only need to look at the Psalms, for example—Israel's hymn book—to see a clear reflection of what we know as the blues. The Psalms actually might be better termed Israel's Blues Book. Here are some of the things the Psalmists write:

> For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
> Through my groaning all day long (Ps 32:3).
>
> I am weary with my moaning
> Every night I flood my bed with tears (Ps 6:6).
>
> I am distraught by the noise of the enemy
> Because of the oppression of the wicked
> For they bring trouble against me (Ps 55:2–3).
>
> For I am ready to fall
> And my pain is ever with me (Ps 38:17).
>
> I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on
> The terrors have destroyed me (Ps 88:15–16).
>
> In vain I have kept my heart pure
> For I have been stricken all day long
> And chastened every morning (Ps 73:13–14).

A quick look at these verses from a range of Psalms is enough to convince us, I think, that the Psalmists have the blues. Any of these could fit neatly into almost any blues song you care to mention—and many of the blues verses could likewise be slotted into the Psalms—Bessie Smith's "I can't move no more; there ain't a place for an old girl to go to" ("Back Water Blues"); Blind Willie McTell's "Since my mother died and left me all alone, All my friends have forsaken me, People I haven't even got a home" ("Death Room Blues"); or Mississippi John Hurt's "I'm just an orphan, where my folks is I don't know, With my heavy burden, Lord, I wished I was dead" ("Blue Harvest Blues").

Many of the Psalms are written from the experience of Jewish people in exile. Their land was conquered, their holy city and temple destroyed, they were transported to live in a land of pagans who had no regard for their traditions—God seemed to have abandoned them. It's enough to make you sing the blues, isn't it? And that's exactly what they did—Psalm 137 records it for us—"By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and

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wept; We hung our guitars [Okay, it says "lyres" in the original] upon the willows." That's the blues all right. And don't forget the anger at the end of the Psalm—"O daughter Babylon, how blessed will be the one who repays you . . . who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock."

And of course, there is that other Old Testament blues book—Job. Job was a man who was "blameless and upright" yet suffered terribly, and who protested against a theology that claimed that God punishes people in proportion to their disobedience and rewards them for their obedience.

The prophetic literature in the Bible, too, is shot through with the blues. Bemoaning the state of his people, Jeremiah cries:

> Raise a dirge;
> Eyes run down with tears
> Eyelids flow with water (Jer 9:18).

And actually, we could read many Old Testament passages where God's people get frustrated, get downcast, lament the state of affairs they find themselves in, suffer defeat after defeat, and cry out to God, sometimes in faith for deliverance, sometimes just in utter despair and complaint—and sometimes, as with the Psalmist, the cry for justice becomes a cry for revenge on the oppressors.

The prophets of Israel, in particular, knew that it was no use being in denial about the disastrous state of the world and of God's people. For them it was important to speak out the truth of the matter and thus to confront the oppressive powers of alienation, acquisitiveness, self-indulgence, and refusal to face reality that gripped priests, politicians, and people in their societies. Their speaking out—their truth-telling—about the reality of the world can be compared to the blues, which rises up from the experience of a world gone deeply wrong. Furry Lewis was right—the blues does indeed speak the truth.

When we turn to the New Testament, too, we find the blues: Jesus promised his followers persecution for seeking justice; he said people would revile them and slander them just for following him; he expected his followers to mourn for the state of the world and to deny themselves and take up a cross as he did. When we read Paul's letters to the first churches we find ourselves face-to-face with people who suffered poverty, adverse living conditions, and opposition from their neighbors. Paul describes himself as hungry and thirsty, poorly dressed, buffeted, and homeless (1 Cor 4:11). His list of adverse conditions in Romans 8—tribulation, distress,

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persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, the sword—are not hypothetical; they describe the real perils of the life of Paul and his fellow Jesus followers in the context of the Roman Empire.

The Blues, the Gospel, and Hope

Of course, as we'll see, telling the truth about the harsh realities of life is not where the Bible leaves things—there is an alternative narrative of hope and joy that is even now challenging the way things are and pointing the way to an alternative tomorrow.

We said earlier that the gospel is about God's plan to transform God's world and to deal with the problem of evil. The gospel both points to the fact that the world is broken and to the hope that God will transform the world. The Bible talks about this in terms of the reign of God coming to the earth. This was the hope of the Jewish prophets who longed for the "Day of the Lord," when Israel's God would decisively enter history and bring in the blessed day of his reign. The word the Old Testament uses to describe the blessings to be experienced in that day is the Hebrew word *shalom*, often translated "peace." The meaning of shalom goes far beyond the absence of strife, and is more about the flourishing of humanity and creation. The Day of the Lord, the day of shalom, was to be a day of well-being in body and mind, of abundance, of joy and satisfaction in all of life.

For the first Christians, this new day had broken into the present because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah—meaning that the present reality of oppression, injustice, inhumanity, fear, and trouble was in the process of passing away. A new day was beginning to dawn, giving Jesus followers hope for a renewed creation, where peace, justice, joy, and glory would replace the struggles of this present age. As we will see, this is not just a hope for escape out of this world, but a hope for a transformed world and a call to anticipate and play our part in God's transformation project.

The blues, too, is not just about struggle, heartache, and truth-telling about injustice. The blues has always had a sense of hope, of anticipating a better day. Willie King, Mississippi bluesman, talking about the early Delta blues said, "the good Lord in his spirit had to send somethin' down to the people to help ease they worried mind. And that where the music come in—it would work in what you tryin' a do, what you strivin' for, to help give you a vision of a brighter day way up ahead, to help you get your mind offa

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what you are in right now . . . and the blues, like John Lee Hooker says, is a healer."[11] So the blues is partly about suffering and partly about hope.

That being the case, then, thinking about the blues—the history, the artists, the songs—might just be good stimulation for thinking about the Christian gospel. Both are about a world gone wrong, about injustice, about the human condition, and both are about hope for a better world.

Listening Guide

If you're new to the blues, a good place to start is with some modern exponents of the blues, who play both traditional blues and their own material. You might like to try the following:

Eric Bibb, *Spirit & the Blues*, Opus, 1994

B. B. King and Eric Clapton, *Riding with the King,* Reprise, 2000

Keb' Mo', *Martin Scorsese Presents*, Okeh, 2003

Guy Davis, *Red House,* Legacy, 2004

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11. From interview with Martin Scorsese, director, *Feel Like Going Home.*

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