

TABLETALK

FROM LIGONIER MINISTRIES AND R.C.SPROUL | JANUARY 2015 | \$3

The GOOD NEWS



What Is the Gospel?

The great nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge said, “The gospel is so simple that small children can understand it, and it is so profound that studies by the wisest theologians will never exhaust its riches.” The gospel is absolutely fundamental to everything we believe. It is at the very core of who we are as Christians. However, many professing Christians struggle to answer the question: What is the gospel? When I teach, I am astounded by how many of my students are unable to provide a biblically accurate explanation of what the gospel is, and, what’s more, what the gospel is not. If we don’t know what the gospel is, we are of all people the most to be pitied—for we not only can’t proclaim the gospel in evangelism so that sinners might be saved, but we in fact may not be saved ourselves.

In our day, there are countless counterfeit gospels, both inside and outside the church. Much of what is on Christian television and on the shelves of Christian bookstores completely obscures the gospel, thereby making it another gospel, which is no gospel whatsoever. English pastor J.C. Ryle wrote, “Since Satan cannot destroy the gospel, he has too often neutralized its usefulness by addition, subtraction, or substitution.” It is vital we understand that just because a preacher talks about Jesus, the cross, and heaven, does not mean he is preaching the gospel. And just because there is a church on every corner does not mean the gospel is preached on every corner.

Fundamentally, the gospel is news. It’s good news—the good news about what our triune God has accomplished for His people: the Father’s sending His Son, the incarnate Jesus Christ, to live perfectly, fulfill the law, and die sacrificially, satisfying God’s wrath against us that we might not face hell, thereby atoning for our sins; and raising Him from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the victorious announcement that God saves sinners. And even though the call of Jesus to “take up your cross and follow me,” “repent and believe,” “deny yourself,” and “keep my commandments” are necessary commands that directly follow the proclamation of the gospel, they are not in themselves the good news of what Jesus has accomplished. The gospel is not a summons to work harder to reach God; it’s the grand message of how God worked all things together for good to reach us. The gospel is good news, not good advice or good instructions, just as J. Gresham Machen wrote: “What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you.”

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Tabletalk (USPS 009-013) is published monthly by Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, FL 32771. Annual subscription price (12 issues): \$23.00. Periodicals postage paid at Lake Mary, FL, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Ligonier Ministries, 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, FL 32771*. Unless noted, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, *English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION: Required by Title 39 United States Code 3685. Title of publication: *Tabletalk*. Publication no.: 009013. Date of filing: 10/11/14. Frequency of issue: monthly. No. of issues published annually: 12. Annual subscription price: \$23/yr. USA; \$33/yr. foreign. Location of known office of publication: 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, Seminole Co., FL 32771. Mailing address of headquarters: 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, FL 32771. Publisher: Ligonier Ministries. Executive Editor: R.C. Sproul. Owner: Ligonier Ministries, a nonprofit educational organization. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: none. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months. Total no. of copies printed (net press run): average/last year: 80,000; last issue: 80,000. Paid/requested circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: average/last year: 4,628; last issue: 4,481; (2) Mail subscription: average/last year: 61,883; last issue: 61,567. Free distribution by mail, carrier, or other means: average/last year: 4,754; last issue: 6,355. Total non-requested distribution last year 7,621; last issue 6,776. Total distribution: average/last year: 74,311; last issue: 74,698. Copies not distributed: average/last year: 5,689; last issue: 5,302. Total: average/last year: 80,000; last issue: 80,000. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.—*Burk Parsons*, editor

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PREACHING *and* TEACHING

Over the years, I've made no secret of my admiration for men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, who were so instrumental in the recovery of the gospel during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. I'm amazed by their towering intellects and their ability to stand firm amid much

danger. Their love for biblical truth is an example to follow, and as I approach twenty years of weekly preaching at Saint Andrew's Chapel, I'm particularly grateful for their pastoral model. Both of these men were "celebrities" in their day, but neither of them spent his years traveling Europe in order to consolidate a movement of followers. Instead, both of them devoted themselves to their primary vocation of preaching and teaching the Word of God. Both men were tireless preachers—Luther in Wittenberg, Germany, and Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. They took the ministry of the Word of God seriously, so when they talk about the task of the preacher, I pay close attention.

More than a decade ago, I was invited to give a lecture on Martin Luther's view of preaching, and I found that preparing for that exercise was invaluable for my own work as a preacher. I also discovered that what Luther had to say about preaching was not only for the pastor but also for the entire church, and it's amazing how timely his words remain in our day.

One of the emphases that we find again and again in Luther's writings is that a preacher must be "apt to teach."

In many ways, this is no great insight, for he's just restating the qualifications that are set forth in the New Testament for church elders (1 Tim. 3:2). Yet given what we expect from our preachers today, Luther's words—echoing biblical revelation—need to be heard anew. The concept that the primary task of the minister is to teach is all but lost in the church today. When we call ministers to our churches we often look for these men to be adept administrators, skilled fund-raisers, and good organizers. Sure, we want them to know some theology and the Bible, but we don't make it a priority that these people be equipped to teach the congregation the things of God. Administrative tasks are seen as more important.

This is not the model that Jesus Himself commended. You remember the encounter that Jesus had with Peter after His resurrection. Peter had denied Jesus publicly three times, and Jesus went about restoring the Apostle, telling him three times to "feed my sheep" (John 21:15–19). By extension, this calling is given to the elders and ministers of the church because the people of God who are assembled in the congregations

of churches all over the world belong to Jesus. They are His sheep. And every minister who is ordained is consecrated and entrusted by God with the care of those sheep. We call it the "pastorate" because ministers are called to care for the sheep of Christ. Pastors are Christ's under-shepherds, and what shepherd would so neglect his sheep that he never took the time or trouble to feed them? The feeding of our Lord's sheep comes principally through teaching.

Typically, we distinguish between preaching and teaching. Preaching involves such things as exhortation, exposition, admonition, encouragement, and comfort, while teaching is the transfer of information and instruction in various areas of content. In practice, however, there is much overlap between the two. Preaching must communicate content and include teaching, and teaching people the things of God cannot be done in a neutral manner but must exhort them to heed and obey the Word of Christ. God's people need both preaching and teaching, and they need more than twenty minutes of instruction and exhortation a week. A good shepherd would never feed the sheep only once a week, and that's why Luther was teaching the people of Wittenberg almost on a daily basis, and Calvin was doing the same thing in Geneva. I'm not necessarily calling for the exact practices in our day, but I'm convinced that the church needs to recapture something of the regular teaching ministry evident in the work of our forefathers in the faith. As they are able, churches should be creating many opportunities to hear God's Word preached and taught. Things such as Sunday evening worship, midweek services and Bible classes, Sunday school,

home Bible studies, and so on give laypeople the chance to feed on the Word of God several times each week. As they are able, laypeople should take advantage of what

The church needs to recapture something of the regular teaching ministry evident in the work of our forefathers in the faith.

is available to them by way of instruction in the deep truths of Scripture.

I say this not to encourage the creation of programs for the sake of programs, and I don't want to put an unmanageable burden on church members or church staffs. But history shows us that the greatest periods of revival and reformation the church has ever seen occur in conjunction with the frequent, consistent, and clear preaching of God's Word. If we would see the Holy Spirit bring renewal to our churches and our lands, it will require preachers who are committed to the exposition of Scripture, and laypeople who will look for shepherds to feed them the Word of God and take full advantage of the opportunities for biblical instruction that are available. **TD**



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What is the Gospel?



In one sense, the whole Bible is the gospel. Reading it from Genesis to Revelation, we see the vast sweep of God’s wonderful message to mankind.

But many people read the whole Bible, and their understandings of the gospel differ widely, remain vague, or are just plain wrong. Some speak of the gospel in terms of God’s favor pouring out in financial prosperity. Others describe a political utopia in Christ’s

name. Still others emphasize following Christ, bringing in His kingdom, or pursuing holiness. Some of these themes are biblical. But none of them is the gospel.

Fortunately, we can turn to passages that tell us, explicitly and clearly, what the gospel is. For example, the Apostle Paul explains what is “of first importance” within the biblical message:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1–4)

Paul reminds the Corinthian believers of the gospel message and its comprehensive relevance to them. They received

it, they stand in it, they are being saved by it. These sacred and powerful benefits flow into their experience as they hold fast to the gospel word that Paul gave them. The Corinthians do not deserve such blessing, but the gospel announces God’s grace in Christ for the undeserving. The Corinthians’ only catastrophic failure would be unbelief. With so much to commend about the gospel, no wonder Paul ranks it as “of first importance” in his priorities.

What, then, is the gospel? The gospel is the good news from God, first, that “Christ died for our sins.” The Bible says that God created Adam without sin, fit to rule over a good creation (Gen. 1). Then Adam broke from God and brought our whole race down with him into guilt, misery, and eternal ruin (chap. 3). But God, in His great love for us rebels now thoroughly unfit for Him, sent a better Adam, who lived the perfect life we’ve never lived and died the guilty death we don’t want to die. “Christ died for our sins” in the sense that, on the cross, He atoned for the crimes we have committed against God our King. Jesus, dying as our substitute, absorbed into Himself all the wrath of God against the real moral guilt of His people. He left no debt unpaid. He Himself said, “It is finished” (John 19:30). And we will forever say, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!” (Rev. 5:12).

Second, the gospel says, “he was buried,” emphasizing that the sufferings and death of Jesus were utterly real, extreme, and final. The Bible says, “So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard” (Matt. 27:66). After killing Him, His enemies made sure everyone would know Jesus was stone dead. Not only was our Lord’s death as final as death can be, it was also

humiliating: “And they made his grave with the wicked” (Isa. 53:9). In His astonishing love, Jesus identified with us sinners and sufferers fully, omitting nothing.

Third, the gospel says, “he was raised on the third day.” Years ago, I heard S. Lewis Johnson put it this way: the resur-

The Living One conquered death and is now preparing a place for us.

rection is God’s “Amen!” to Christ’s “It is finished.” Jesus “was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:25 NASB). His work on the cross succeeded in atoning for our sins, and obviously so. Moreover, by His resurrection, Christ was “declared to be the Son of God in power”—that is, our triumphant Messiah who will rule forever (Rom. 1:4). The risen Christ alone can and does say to us, “Fear not, for I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:17–18). The Living One conquered death and is now preparing a place for us—a new heavens and new earth, where all of His people will live joyously with Him forever.

This is the gospel of God’s massive grace toward us sinners. Whatever else might be said only tells us more of the mighty work of Jesus Christ. Let us hold fast to the Word preached to us. If we believe this gospel, we cannot believe in vain. **■**

Dr. Ray Ortlund is lead pastor of Immanuel Church in Nashville, Tenn., and president of Renewal Ministries. He is author of *Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*.

Who Is God?



Moses said to the Lord, “Please show me your glory” (Ex. 33:18). In effect, he asked, “Who are you, God?” God responded with these words: “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (v. 19). He promised to reveal Himself.

But no man can see God and live.

That is too much for any man—sinful man in particular. God told him to stand on the rock and said, “While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (vv. 22–23). Moses did well in asking God who He is rather than telling God who he wanted Him to be. Thus, God was going to reveal Himself in part to Moses. He was going to pass by, protect him with His own hand, and proclaim His own name. This meant far more than simply pronouncing the name *Yahweh*—“LORD” in our English translations—in Moses’ hearing. He was going to proclaim His nature:

And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “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.” (34:6–7)

“The LORD, the LORD”—here God revealed Himself to Moses by His personal name, *Yahweh*. He is the great I Am. He is the self-existent, changeless God through whom all things exist, and He is merciful, gracious, longsuffering, full of goodness and truth.

Forgiveness is so important that it is expressed using three similar terms: “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” He abounds in forgiveness and mercy. But our God, according to His self-revelation, is also just. Our text states that He will not simply clear the guilty. It would be contrary to His nature to simply overlook sin. Justice must be done because of who God is. Our God must be true to who He is. But how can He be both merciful and just at the same time? How can He act in a way consistent with these two traits? If He shows only mercy, justice is set aside. If only justice is served, there is no mercy.

The answer is the incarnation and the cross. The Father, because He is both merciful and just, sent the Son to represent all whom the Father had given Him (John 17:18–23; Eph. 5:25–32). Without ceasing to be God, the Son took to Himself a human nature, and having been conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, He lived perfectly under the law of God, keeping the law that Adam broke. He willingly went to the cross, having taken His elect, as their federal head (representative), to be one with Him, including our sin. He then bore the wrath of the Father, paying the debt that we cannot pay.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” By making us one with Jesus, the Father could have His wrath fall upon the Son.

God does for those who trust in Christ what He did for Moses. He hides us in the cleft of the Rock.

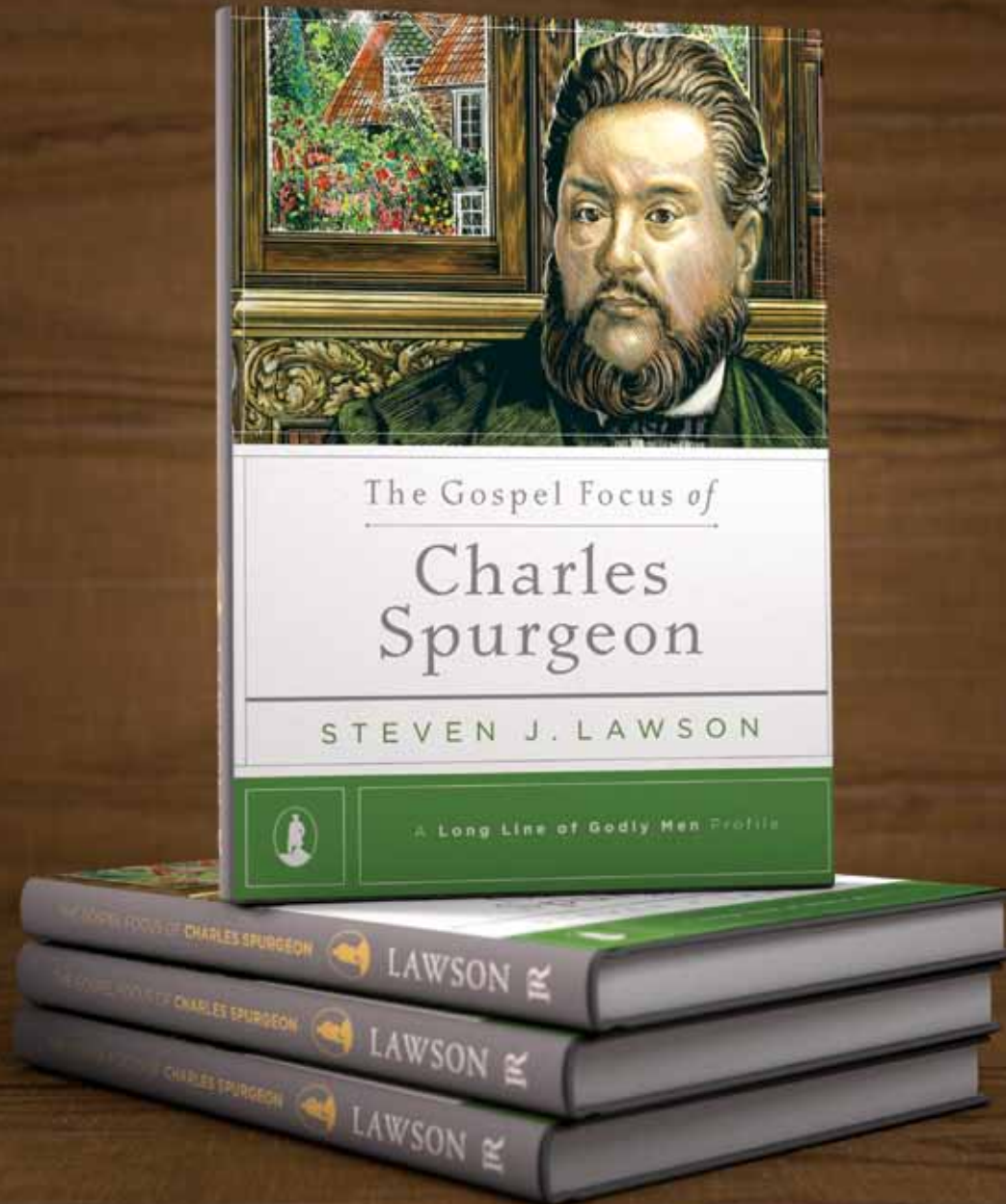
Justice was done, and our guilt was removed. At the cross of Jesus, we find both the amazing mercy and the perfect justice of God on full display.

Let’s go back to Moses. He knew that no man could see God and live, but God said that while His glory passed by, He would put Moses in a cleft of the rock and cover the prophet with His hand. David knew this imagery well, saying, “The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps. 18:2). And Paul makes it clear that the Rock of our salvation is Jesus (1 Cor. 10:1–4). Our God does for those who trust Christ what He did for Moses. He hides us in the cleft of the Rock. He hides us in Jesus. In Him, our sins are forgiven. In Him, we are saved from the wrath of God. In Him, we know both justice and mercy. **■**

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What Is Man?



Every evening after work, I sit down to spend a few minutes catching up on the news of the day. Though it's a restful few minutes for my body and mind, I have to admit that I don't find in those moments much rest for my heart. That's because what I see in the headlines reminds me of a deep-rooted reality: there is something wrong with our world, and even with ourselves as human beings. But what is it?

People have given different answers to

that question. Some say the problems are primarily economic, others that they're social, and still others that they're psychological. Certainly, these answers may give some insight into some of the symptoms of our travail, but the Bible teaches that the disease is something far deeper and more profound. In a word, the problem is sin—rebellion against the creator God who created us.

The book of Genesis recounts how God created the world by the power of His mere command, and according to Genesis 1:26–28, the crowning act of God's work was the creation of human beings. Unique among all the creatures in the universe, human beings are made “in his own image.” To be created in the image of God means many things. We human beings reflect God's character and nature in our rationality, our creativity, even our ability to relate to God and one another. But the image of God does not merely refer to what we are; it also refers to what God created us to do.

Besides living in fellowship with God, Adam and Eve were given the job

of ruling over and caring for His creation as His vice-regents. Thus, God told them that they were to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over it—not by abusing and tyrannizing it, but by “working it and keeping it” (Gen. 2:15). In doing so, they would communicate to all creation the love and power and goodness of the Creator. Perhaps most fundamentally, this is what it means to be God's image in the world: just as an ancient Near Eastern king might set an “image” of himself on a mountain as a reminder to his people of who sat on the throne, so Adam represented God's authority to the world over which he was given dominion.

Adam's authority over creation, however, was not absolute. It was derived from and circumscribed by God Himself. People often wonder why God put the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden. The reason is that tree reminded Adam and Eve that their authority to rule and subdue the earth was not absolute. That's why Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit was such a tragic sin. By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve were trying to do precisely what the serpent falsely told them they could do—they were trying to “become like God” (Gen. 3:5). They were grasping for more power and authority than God had given them, thereby making a play for the high throne.

The consequences of Adam's sin were nothing short of catastrophic. God had promised that if the humans ate from the forbidden tree, they would surely die. What He meant was not just physical death, but also—and more horribly—spiritual death. This was a just and right punishment. Not only could a perfectly holy and righteous God never tolerate such evil and sin in His presence, but by declaring their independence from God,

Adam and Eve cut themselves off from the source of all life and goodness. They deserved the wrath of God for their rebellion against Him, and the wages of their

Instead of leaving us humans to die in our sin, God acted to save.

sin was nothing short of eternal death, judgment, and hell.

Even worse, when Adam sinned, he did so as the representative of every human being. So Paul wrote to the Romans, “Many died through one man's trespass” (Rom. 5:15). That is why each of us ratifies over and over again Adam's act of rebellion against God with our own sin. We, too, long to be free of God's authority and rule, and so we give ourselves to the pursuit of pleasure and joy in created things as ultimate ends. In the process, we declare that God is not worthy of our worship, and thus we prove ourselves worthy of the curse of spiritual death that God pronounced in the beginning.

If the story of the Bible were to end there—with human beings under God's wrath without a possibility of escape—we would live in a hopeless reality. But praise God, the story doesn't end there. Instead of leaving us to die in our sin, God acts to save. Through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, He saves His people from their sin and makes everything right once and for all, finally and forever. **✠**

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Who Is Christ?



On December 16, 1739, George Whitefield preached a sermon on Matthew 22:42 at Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Va., in which he asked his audience the very same question that Jesus had asked his hearers 1,700 years earlier: “What think ye of Christ?”

The language Whitefield spoke was different from that of his Lord, but the eternal consequences of the answer were the same. Some of the answers of Jesus’

day—He was John the Baptist risen from the dead; He was one of the prophets; He was Elijah (see Mark 8:27–28)—were similar to answers given in Whitefield’s day. Deists such as Benjamin Franklin, a good friend of Whitefield’s, considered Jesus a peerless teacher, but they stopped far short of confessing His deity. Others regarded Jesus as divine, but in such a way that His deity is less than the Father’s. Whitefield, true to the testimony of Scripture, was not ashamed to tell people that Jesus Christ is fully God and that “if Jesus Christ be not very God of very God, I would never preach the gospel of Christ again. For it would not be gospel; it would be only a system of moral ethics.”

TRUE GOD OF TRUE GOD

Evidence for the full deity of the Lord Jesus is found throughout the New Testament. Jesus is explicitly called “our great God and Savior” (Titus 2:13). The fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him (Col. 1:19; 2:9). He bears titles and names given to Yahweh in the Old Testament (compare, for example, Isa. 44:6 and Rev.

1:17). He is set forth as the object of worship (Heb. 1:6) and is addressed in prayer (Acts 7:59–60; 1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8). He does things only God can do, such as creating the universe (John 1:3; Col. 1:16), forgiving sins (Mark 2:5–10; Col. 3:13), and judging us on the final day (Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10). He possesses divine attributes, such as omnipresence (Heb. 1:3; Eph. 4:10), omniscience (Rev. 2:23), omnipotence (Matt. 28:18), and immutability (Heb. 13:8). The full deity of Christ is integral to the gospel. Any other position distorts the New Testament.

WHO BECAME INCARNATE

The New Testament also bears witness to the other truth about Christ’s identity—His complete humanity. As the Apostle Paul puts it, He is “the *man* Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5; italics added). He was raised in humble circumstances (Matt. 13:55). He experienced the pangs of hunger (4:2). He knew weariness and thirst (John 4:6–7). He wept genuine tears of sorrow (11:35). Yet while His humanity is like ours in all of these aspects, there is one way in which it is totally unlike ours: it is sinless. As we look at Christ’s life, there is not one incident to which we can point and say, “Look, a sin.” To deny the humanity of Christ is to undermine the gospel (see 1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7–9).

FOR OUR SALVATION . . . CRUCIFIED

After a life of doing good, healing the sick, and preaching the gospel, Jesus was arrested by Jewish and Roman authorities. He who is Truth and a flawless lover of God was accused of being a blasphemer. He suffered shamefully at the hands of Jewish guards and Roman soldiers, being scourged and mocked. He was stripped of all of His clothing and put to

death with nothing to cover His nakedness (John 19:23–24; Mark 15:24). His death was the most shameful and painful death known to the Romans—crucifixion

Death could not keep Jesus in the grave.

(Heb. 12:2; John 19:16–18). The Author of life, who had raised the dead, was buried in a tomb. Most horrific of all, however, was the sense of abandonment by God that flooded the soul of Jesus as He died (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), for in His death He bore and experienced for sinners the hellish wrath they deserve (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:11–14, 28). His death was nothing less than a vicarious, propitiatory death. To deny this is to deny the gospel.

But death could not keep Jesus in the grave, for neither death nor Satan had any claim on Him (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:24–31). So, God the Father, by the Holy Spirit, raised Jesus from the dead on the third day (Matt. 28:6–7; Acts 2:32; Rom. 8:11), and He was seen on various occasions by His Apostles and select witnesses (Acts 1:3–8; 1 Cor. 15:4–8). Rejecting the bodily resurrection cuts off our hope of salvation.

This is the gospel that the New Testament teaches, that Whitefield preached, and that we still hold forth: Christ, fully God, became man for our salvation, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead. Believe this and you will be saved. **✠**

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What Is Faith?



One of the statements I have found myself repeating most frequently over the last fifteen years of ministry is J.I. Packer’s insightful comment that half-truths masquerading as whole truths are whole lies. Packer’s observation is a beautiful reminder that half-truths are just that: *half*-truths. When they are presented as though there is nothing more to say, the result is that the truth is compromised. To say that Jesus is one hundred

percent human is true. But it is only half the story. Jesus is also one hundred percent divine. If we focus only on Jesus’ humanity and never say anything about His divinity, we are guilty of presenting a half-truth as though it were the whole truth, and we thus commit a whole lie.

My fear is that many of us in the church today may be dangerously close to violating this precept in our preaching of the gospel. There is no question that the call of the gospel is to believe in Jesus Christ, which is why our preaching must regularly call people to faith. But if our preaching stops there without ever calling people to repentance, it is dangerously close to presenting a half-truth as though it were the whole truth. Repentance and faith are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin. Faith is the positive side of turning to Christ, and repentance is the negative side of turning away from sin. It is impossible to turn to Christ and to turn to sin, just as it is impossible to travel in two different directions at the same time. By definition, traveling east means not traveling

west, and turning to Christ correspondingly means not turning to sin. Faith and repentance necessarily go together.

We can see this inseparable link between faith and repentance in several passages in Scripture. In Acts 2:38, for instance, Peter responds to those who have been “cut to the heart” and who have asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” by telling them to “repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.” He does not tell them to “believe and be baptized,” as Paul does in virtually identical circumstances with the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:30–34, but to “repent and be baptized.” The reason seems clear, especially when we take Peter and Paul together: faith and repentance are inseparable. It is impossible to repent and not believe, and it is impossible to believe and not repent.

We see this again in Luke 24:47, when Jesus tells His disciples that they are to proclaim a gospel of “repentance and forgiveness of sins,” and in Acts 3:19, when one of those disciples heeds His words and actually calls his listeners to “repent . . . that your sins may be blotted out.” In both cases, we are again told that the call of the gospel is not simply “believe, and you will be forgiven” but “repent, and you will be forgiven.” The reason is that faith and repentance go hand in hand.

Mark makes this connection even more explicit in his account of the life of Christ. In 1:14–15, Mark records Jesus as proclaiming a gospel that overtly calls people to “repent and believe.” For Jesus, faith and repentance obviously go together. The gospel calls us to both.

This is not to deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Jesus is not adding anything to faith but, rather, defining what faith actually looks like.

Justifying faith is not a bare or naked faith, so to speak, but a repentant faith—that is, a faith that is always accompanied by repentance. To be sure, it is

The same gospel that calls us to faith also calls us to repentance.

possible for genuine faith to be impenitent for a season. The example of David remaining unrepentant for a time after his sin with Bathsheba demonstrates this (2 Sam. 11–12). But an impenitent spirit cannot last forever. Christians may not be repentant immediately, but they will be repentant eventually. God will see to that, just as He did with David, because faith and repentance necessarily go together. Where one is, there the other will be also.

The same gospel that calls us to faith also calls us to repentance. If we focus only on the call to faith, we are focusing only on one side of the coin and ignoring the fact that there is another side. To draw a parallel with one of Jesus’ most famous teachings, proclaiming faith but not repentance is like teaching people to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” without ever mentioning that they are also to render “to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). We are dangerously close to presenting a half-truth as though it were the whole truth and, thus, of committing a whole lie. **TC**

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What Are Justification and Sanctification?



The words *justification* and *sanctification* have largely fallen out of use in Western culture. Sadly, they are also fading from sight in the Christian church. One reason this decline is distressing is that the Bible uses the words *justification* and *sanctification* to express the saving work of Christ for sinners. That is to say, both terms lie at the heart of the biblical gospel. So, what does the Bible teach about justification and sanctification? How do they

differ from one another? How do they help us understand better the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ?

Justification is as simple as *A-B-C-D*. Justification is an *act* of God. It does not describe the way that God inwardly renews and changes a person. It is, rather, a legal declaration in which God pardons the sinner of all his sins and accepts and accounts the sinner as righteous in His sight. God declares the sinner righteous at the very moment that the sinner puts his trust in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21–26, 5:16; 2 Cor. 5:21).

What is the *basis* of this legal verdict? God justifies the sinner solely on the basis of the obedience and death of His Son, our representative, Jesus Christ. Christ's perfect obedience and full satisfaction for sin are the only ground upon which God declares the sinner righteous (Rom. 5:18–19; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Phil. 2:8). We are not justified by our own works; we are justified solely on the basis of Christ's work on our behalf. This righteousness is imputed to the sinner. In other words, in justification, God puts

the righteousness of His Son onto the sinner's account. Just as my sins were transferred to, or laid upon, Christ at the cross, so also His righteousness is reckoned to me (2 Cor. 5:21).

By what means is the sinner justified? Sinners are justified through faith alone when they *confess* their trust in Christ. We are not justified because of any good that we have done, are doing, or will do. Faith is the only instrument of justification. Faith adds nothing to what Christ has done for us in justification. Faith merely receives the righteousness of Jesus Christ offered in the gospel (Rom. 4:4–5).

Finally, saving faith must *demonstrate* itself to be the genuine article by producing good works. It is possible to *profess* saving faith but not *possess* saving faith (James 2:14–25). What distinguishes true faith from a mere claim to faith is the presence of good works (Gal. 5:6). We are in no way justified by our good works. But no one may consider himself to be a justified person unless he sees in his life the fruit and evidence of justifying faith; that is, good works.


Both justification and sanctification are graces of the gospel; they always accompany one another; and they deal with the sinner's sin. But they differ in some important ways. First, whereas justification addresses the guilt of our sin, sanctification addresses the dominion and corruption of sin in our lives. Justification is God's declaring the sinner righteous; sanctification is God's renewing and transforming our whole persons—our minds, wills, affections, and behaviors. United to Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection and indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, we are dead to the reign of sin and alive to righteousness (Rom. 6:1–23;

8:1–11). We therefore are obligated to put sin to death and to present our “members to God as instruments for righteousness” (6:13; see 8:13).

Second, our justification is a complete and finished act. Justification means that every believer is completely and finally

Christ has won both justification and sanctification for His people.

freed from condemnation and the wrath of God (Rom. 8:1, 33–34; Col. 2:13b–14). Sanctification, however, is an ongoing and progressive work in our lives. Although every believer is brought out once and for all from bondage to sin, we are not immediately made perfect. We will not be completely freed from sin until we receive our resurrection bodies at the last day.

Christ has won both justification and sanctification for His people. Both graces are the concern of faith in Jesus Christ, but in different ways. In justification, our faith results in our being forgiven, accepted, and accounted righteous in God's sight. In sanctification, that same faith actively and eagerly takes up all the commands that Christ has given the believer. We dare not separate or conflate justification and sanctification. We do distinguish them. And, in both graces, we enter into the richness and joy of communion with Christ through faith in Him. 

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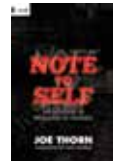
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What Is Our Response?



Good works aren't bad. They are good. As Christians, we should want to do them. Just because we are not saved according to our works doesn't mean that we shouldn't be concerned about pursuing a life of joyful obedience to God's Word. Jesus emphatically states, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Obedience, however frail and feeble, is evidence of our love for Christ. Far from undermining

the gospel of grace, good works are the perfect complement to the gospel.

SAVED NOT BY GOOD WORKS

To be clear, good works are bad when they are seen as the basis of salvation. A person is not saved by works but by God's grace through faith in Christ. The Apostle Paul explains:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

Works are not meritorious. Salvation is "not your own doing" and "not a result of works." Even the faith through which we receive salvation is a gracious gift from God. As fallen creatures, our best efforts are laced with sin. To borrow from Francis Schaeffer, how many finite buckets of good works would it take to fill the

infinite gulf that exists between God and us because of our sin? Good works provide no basis for boasting because they are utterly worthless to save. The only foundation for salvation is Christ. We are saved by His works, not ours.

SAVED FOR GOOD WORKS

Good works are not bad when they are seen as the goal of salvation, not its ground. While good works aren't meritorious of salvation, they are a necessary component of Christian faith. As James states, "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). Paul makes this same point when he contends that we are not saved *by* good works but that we are saved *for* good works.

Every word in Ephesians 2:10 is important for explaining the dynamic of good works in the Christian life. We learn that good works are the result, not the cause, of our being new creations, and they testify to the fact that we have been redeemed so that our lives might reflect the craftsmanship and character of God. Good works are also the result of our being united to Christ. Apart from Him, we can do nothing that pleases God. But in Christ, we are created to perform God-honoring acts of obedience. In Christ, we can be confident that God accepts our weak and wobbly efforts. Paul further states that good works are the result of God's pattern for the Christian life. We need not wonder what God requires of us. He has told us in His Word. Good works are deeds done in conformity to God's Word.

A FAITH THAT IS NEVER ALONE

Good works are good because they spring not from a lifeless faith but a "true and lively faith" (WCF 16.2). We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; however, the faith that saves

is never alone but is accompanied by spiritual life and loving obedience. Christ is the ground of our salvation, faith is the instrument of our salvation, and works are the fruit of our salvation. Whenever the gospel takes root in our lives, it always produces Spirit-wrought fruit (Gal. 5:16-26).

The Spirit enables us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling.

The Spirit enables us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling to pursue Christlike lives (Eph. 4:1-7).

The value of walking the pathway of obedience is manifold. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that there are at least six benefits of good works. First, good works manifest our gratitude to God for the gift of His Son (Col. 2:6). Second, good works bolster assurance of faith (1 John 2:1-6). Third, good works are a means of encouraging other Christians toward greater acts of Christ-centered love (Heb. 10:24). Fourth, good works are concrete avenues for adorning the doctrine of God our Savior in life and ministry (Titus 2:7-10). Fifth, good works silence critics who devalue the goodness of biblical Christianity (1 Peter 2:12, 15). Sixth, good works glorify God by displaying His work of love in our lives (John 15:8-11).

What is our response to the gospel? An old hymn puts it nicely: "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." **T**

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Preaching the Gospel to Yourself



There is great security in the salvation of the Lord. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, and His decision stands. The Holy Spirit has caused us to be born again, and there is no means by which we can destroy the life He has given us. Every believer has been crucified with Christ, and nowhere in Scripture do we see a way we can be uncrucified. Everyone who has believed in Jesus Christ is justified, and no work of

man or Satan can overturn the verdict of God. Jesus exercises sovereign care over all His people. Those in His hands cannot be taken from Him. Yet, despite the security of our salvation and standing before God through Jesus Christ, we can still find our way into trouble when we wander away from the hope of the gospel.

And wander we do. While wandering can come in the form of giving in to immorality, it more often masquerades as a kind of Christianity. For many, the Christian life is driven by doctrinal precision. We may rightly value our confessional heritage and see the importance of robust theology, but this can itself become the goal for which we strive while missing the connection of all theology to the gospel. Knowledge often “puffs up” and the resulting pride leads us into confessional confidence over gospel confidence. Some Christians base their spiritual life on emotions—the deep stirrings of the heart that are often connected with the profound truths of God. But while the truths of God never change, our experience of them does. And when the feelings

are not there, our faith ends up in crisis. In finding confidence in our emotions, we wander from what should be our only hope in life and in death. Many of us lose sight of the gospel as we focus on our own works and how well we are doing spiritually. By measuring ourselves against self-imposed standards, we believe ourselves to be strong or weak, but in each case the fix is found in doing our best, rather than the work of Christ.

Fundamentally, the gospel is forgotten when it no longer functions as our ongoing hope and confidence before God, or when it becomes unessential for the practical, daily living of the Christian life. The gospel we often forget must be reclaimed and retained for the safety of our souls, and this is done through preaching the gospel to ourselves.

Preaching the gospel to ourselves is calling ourselves to return to Jesus for forgiveness, cleansing, empowerment, and purpose. It is answering doubts and fears with the promises of God. Do my sins condemn me? Jesus has covered them all in His blood. Do my works fall short? Jesus’ righteousness is counted as mine. Are the world, the devil, and my own flesh conspiring against me? Not even a hair can fall from my head apart from the will of my Father in heaven, and He has promised to care for me and keep me forever. Can I really deny myself, carry my cross, and follow Jesus? Yes, for God is at work in me, willing and working in me for His own pleasure. This is what it looks like to preach to ourselves.

This private and personal preaching can only happen when the Word of God is known and believed; when God’s law reveals our sin and helplessness, and His grace covers that sin and overcomes our weaknesses. Preaching the gospel to

ourselves is not simply the act of studying the Bible (though we can preach to ourselves in that act), but it is actively calling ourselves to believe the promises of God in Jesus His Son.

Most of us need to rediscover the gospel.

We preach to ourselves through the disciplines of prayer and meditation on Scripture. In praying, we look to God to graciously meet our needs, and in the act itself we exercise faith. In his exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, Thomas Manton said, “Prayer . . . is a preaching to ourselves in God’s hearing. We speak to God to warm ourselves, not for his information, but for our edification.” The gospel promises in God’s Word guide us in prayer, leading us to the safety of Jesus’ service and sacrifice. By meditation, we call to mind the gospel; by prayer, we claim the gospel as our great hope.

Most of us need to rediscover the gospel. And such a recovery is needed daily because our need is ever present and our hearts are prone to wander. But gospel recovery only happens when we feel the weight of our sins, the weakness of our flesh, and the frailty of our faith. This means that only those who know themselves to be unworthy sinners and God’s Word to be true will find the gospel to be not only good news, but good news for their own souls. **TT**

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The New Heavens and New Earth



Right Now Counts Forever. The title of Dr. Sproul’s column in every issue of *Tabletalk* concisely captures the relationship between the gospel and the new heavens and new earth. The good news of Christ’s sacrificial death and glorious resurrection has eternal ramifications for the destiny of every human being. Your response to that message—whether in humble trust or in defiant unbelief—will be your tipping point

between boundless bliss beyond your wildest dreams and unrelenting torment beyond your worst nightmares.

The living God, sovereign over every atom in His universe and every nanosecond of its history, is directing the cosmos toward a consummation that will display the majesty of His wisdom, power, justice, and mercy for every creature everywhere to behold. The present heavens and earth, stained by human sin and the curse it incurs, will “wear out” and “be changed” (Heb. 1:11–12), shaken and removed (12:26–27). For the first heaven and earth, no “place” will be found, but in their stead a new heaven and a new earth will appear (Rev. 20:11; 21:1).

The promise is as old as Isaiah’s prophecy: “I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isa. 65:17–18; see 66:22–23). The Apostle Peter asserts that righteousness will inhabit the new heavens and new earth for which we hope (2 Peter 3:13). Paul adds that all creation, now subjected to futility and decay, joins God’s children

in longing for liberation from “its bondage to corruption” at our resurrection (Rom. 8:19–22).

How to describe the new heavens and new earth? To describe the coming cosmos *negatively*, we can say that miseries that now cause such damage and distress will be gone: no mourning, pain, death—no remnant of curse will remain (Rev. 21:4; 22:3). It is more challenging to portray *positively* what a world purged of wickedness and woe will be. Prophets

and Apostles strain language to its limits to offer glimpses of glorious realities beyond our experience. We can say that Jesus’ resurrection is the firstfruits of the consummated new creation, so His glorious risen body foreshadows the resurrection awaiting His people (1 Cor. 15:20–22; Phil. 3:21). After He arose, He could eat and be touched (Luke 24:39–43), so the materiality of His body leads us to expect that the landscape painted in the book of Revelation—the tree of life’s curative leaves and ceaseless fruitfulness, for instance (Rev. 22:1–5)—is not wholly symbolic. At least we can say that our ultimate home is not ethereal and immaterial, but a robust reaffirmation of the Creator’s original design, for He pronounced the first heaven and earth “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

God’s Word reveals enough about the new heavens and earth to impress on us the urgency of the question, “How can I access that promised homeland of pure pleasure in God’s presence?” This question brings us to the gospel. The new heavens and earth will be populated by God’s “servants” (Rev. 22:3–5), who have clung to the Word of God and confessed Jesus (1:2, 9; 20:4). They have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and their names are written in His Book of Life (12:11; 20:12, 15; 21:27).

Yet Revelation’s visions underscore the crucial importance of the gospel from another—very sobering—perspective. Those whose names are not in the Lamb’s book will be judged by their

Right now really does count forever.

own actions throughout life. Without the cover of the Lamb’s atoning blood, they will stand exposed to God’s righteous wrath, condemned, and “thrown into the lake of fire,” the second death (20:13–15). Their souls will be reunited with the bodies in which they acted out their rebellion, and in that fiery lake they will experience not only ceaseless physical anguish but also utter deprivation of mental and spiritual relief. Jesus Himself spoke of this dire, eternal doom awaiting rebels, a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43–48; Isa. 66:24).

Does the prospect of unremitting woe—secured by God’s unflinching justice—strike fear to your heart? It should. Now is the time to trust in the Lamb and His redeeming blood.

Do the delights to come in the new heavens and new earth whet the longings of your heart? They should. Now is the time to trust in the Lamb and His redeeming blood. Right now really does count forever. **✠**

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MAY THE BEST MAN WIN

It begins, I suspect, with a far too small view of the fall. There is plenty we lament about that dark day in history's most beautiful spot. We know that sin brought division to Adam and Eve. The two were designed to be one flesh, but when God challenged Adam for his sin, Adam threw

his bride under the bus: "It was the woman." We know the fall brought death into the world and the expulsion of our parents from a garden paradise. We know, of course, that it created enmity and estrangement between man and God.

Perhaps we miss the scope of the destruction because we want to subsume it all under God's judgment against man. That is, the pain in the child-bearing, the presence of sickness and death, the thorns and thistles that infest the ground are not mere angry thunderbolts that God throws at us out of His anger. Instead, they are the natural consequences of the decidedly unnatural choice of the stewards of God's creation. The earth groans not just because Adam and Eve took an illicit bite of fruit, but because they failed in their calling—to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue, to rule over the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the ground. The first Adam, in disobeying His Father, did more than earn His disfavor. He plunged the world into a vortex of death and destruction.

But God. Grace began in the garden. There, our Father graciously made animal skins as coverings for Adam and Eve. Better still, in the midst of pronouncing judgment,

He called them to continue in their calling of exercising dominion. He promised to call out a people from among the mass of fallen humanity, and He promised that the seed of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent. This is the proto-gospel, the gospel in its basic form. There is no clear exposition of substitutionary atonement. There is no clear prediction of an incarnation. There is no specific reference to a resurrection. But there is the promise that Jesus wins. That is the gospel—Jesus wins.

From Genesis 3 to the end of the Old Testament, God is about the business of preparing the way for the coming hero. He graciously provides restraints against the downward spiral our sin has brought upon us. First, He establishes His worship. He rescues Noah and his family while wiping out the rest of humanity. He calls Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees. He promises Abraham that he will be the father of nations, and in turn that all the nations of the world will be blessed through him. God continues to reveal more about Himself, about His law, about His covering of sin. He calls His people out of Egypt, establishing

Israel as His bride. He blesses her with judges, and later with King David. He sends His prophets, who bear His Word.

Even as God continues to reveal more and more, even as He beats back some of the destruction of sin, every hero He provides turns out to have feet of clay. Sin, time and again, intrudes into the narrative, reminding us that the Seed of the woman is still somewhere in the future. God's people sink deeper and deeper into their unbelief. The nations of the world grow more powerful, more brazen. And then, four hundred years of silence.

But God. The incarnation is the very picture of wonder, as we consider God

the new earth, even as the old groans in the travail of labor. He has received all authority in heaven and on earth, and He is using that authority to see to it that every principality and power will kiss Him, that every knee will bow and every tongue confess Him as Lord.

The gospel is that Jesus wins. He wins our hearts. He wins our souls. He wins our bodies. He wins His bride. He wins victory. He wins newness of life. He wins over sin, over the devil, over everything that exalts itself against Him. He wins over entropy. He wins over disease. He wins over strife. He wins over discord. He wins over death.

THE INCARNATION IS THE VERY PICTURE OF WONDER, AS WE CONSIDER GOD DWELLING AMONG US, BORN OF A WOMAN, LYING IN A MANGER. HIS PERFECT LIFE, HIS ATONING DEATH, THE RESURRECTION THAT VINDICATED HIM, AND OUR UNION WITH HIM ARE NOT JUST GOOD NEWS BUT GREAT NEWS. BUT THE INCARNATION IS PART OF A BIGGER PICTURE—JESUS WINS. JESUS, THE FINAL ADAM, HAS COME NOT ONLY TO UNDO WHAT THE FIRST ADAM DID, BUT TO DO WHAT THE FIRST ADAM FAILED TO DO. HE IS BRINGING ALL THINGS UNDER SUBJECTION.

dwelling among us, born of a woman, lying in a manger. His perfect life, His atoning death, the resurrection that vindicated Him, and our union with Him are not just good news but great news. But the incarnation is part of a bigger picture—Jesus wins. Jesus, the final Adam, has come not only to undo what the first Adam did, but to do what the first Adam failed to do. He is bringing all things under subjection. He, the firstborn of the new creation, is overseeing the birth of the new heavens and

In the end, what He wins is the beginning, only better. Because of Him, we will walk with our Father in the cool of the evening, through streets of gold in a garden-city, the New Jerusalem, Eden glorified. In the end, the best man does indeed win. For He is the groom, and we His bride. And we will dance. **TC**

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INTO

THE WORD


WISDOM FROM GOD

What characterizes the age in which we live? Some would say irreverence. Others might point to vulgarity. Still others would highlight impiety, a failure to acknowledge God as God and to worship Him accordingly.

All of these answers, of course, are correct. But there is one term that summarizes all the aforementioned characteristics and many others—*foolishness*. It is the fool who says in his heart that there is no God and then goes on to live impiously, irreverently, and in a vulgar manner (Ps. 14:1). Scripture tells us that foolishness has ethical, practical, and intellectual dimensions. If we are purposefully ignorant, do not rightly apply our knowledge, live in impenitent sin, and fail to fear God, then we are fools.

JOHN CALVIN, FROM HIS COMMENTARY ON PSALM 111:10

“ALL THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD, WITHOUT THE FEAR OF GOD, [IS] VANITY OR AN EMPTY SHADOW.”

The only antidote to foolishness is wisdom, and this year in *Tabletalk*, our daily studies will be taking us through the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, also known as the Poetical Books—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. We will examine the defining qualities of wisdom, consider how these play out in our lives, and learn to live our lives in awe of God. Our study will cover the key points of these books, so each month will feature many different topics covered in the Wisdom Literature. This month we will also look at the background of these books with the help of *Wisdom*, a teaching series by Dr. R.C. Sproul. 

ABIDING IN THE WORD

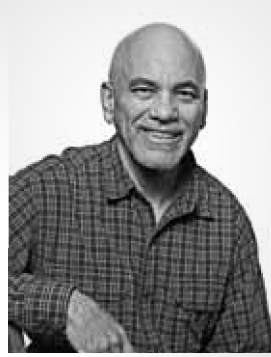
THESE VERSES PARALLEL THE THEMES OF THE STUDIES EACH WEEK. WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO HIDE THEM IN YOUR HEART SO THAT YOU MAY NOT SIN AGAINST THE LORD:

WEEK OF JANUARY 4 ► **PROVERBS 2:6**

WEEK OF JANUARY 11 ► **PSALM 119:11**

WEEK OF JANUARY 18 ► **PROVERBS 15:3**

WEEK OF JANUARY 25 ► **ROMANS 12:11**



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THE PURPOSE OF WISDOM LITERATURE

THU | JAN


1

PROVERBS 1:1-7 “To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity” (vv. 2-3).

Today we begin our yearlong study of the Poetical Books of the Old Testament, a category that includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These works are typically grouped together because of their abundant use of Hebrew poetry, but that is not all that they hold in common. Traditionally, these five books have also been known as Wisdom Literature because of their emphasis on understanding and attaining wisdom for all areas of life, including our relationships with God and with one another.

Although today’s passage is the introduction to the book of Proverbs, what it says about the purpose of that work has bearing on our study of all the Wisdom Books. Tomorrow we will consider what it means that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10), but today we will look at why the book of Proverbs—and by extension all of the Wisdom Books, and indeed, all of Scripture—has been given.

We read in Proverbs 1:2-3 that the Lord has given Wisdom Literature to reveal true wisdom and to provide instruction “in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity.” The emphasis on our need “to know” and our reception of “words of insight” indicates that what the Lord has revealed in the Wisdom Books is not trivia, nor is it information that need never penetrate into the core of our being. Instead, the readers and hearers of Wisdom Literature are to pay close attention to it, studying these wise sayings so that they come to a deep understanding of what it means to live life wisely, or well. Of course, the Wisdom Books come to us in the context of God’s covenant with His people, so this reality must always inform our understanding of what the Lord has revealed in Proverbs and the rest of the Wisdom Literature. Even when our Creator is not mentioned explicitly, the truth that He has redeemed us in order to bring Him glory in all things must never be forgotten (Eph. 2:8-10). The Wisdom Books often deal with what the world considers small, even mundane matters, but the fact that these are addressed in the context of God’s covenant with us shows us that the Lord cares about even the smallest things.

According to Proverbs 1:3, the goal of wisdom is not that we show others how clever we are, but that we receive instruction “in righteousness.” Wisdom Literature shows us what it means to please God; thus, all can benefit from it. Young and old, educated and uneducated—everyone who pays heed to biblical wisdom will become wise (vv. 4-6). 

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

James 1:5-8 contains the incredible promise that the Lord will give wisdom to all who sincerely ask Him for it in faith. Ultimately, Christ is our wisdom, and He will never cast out anyone who comes to Him by faith alone (1 Cor. 1:30-31). God has given us Christ, the wisdom of His salvation; however, He also gives us wisdom to deal with our daily successes and failures. As we study the Wisdom Literature and seek the Lord’s face, He will make us wise.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- 1 Kings 3:1-15
- Proverbs 2:1-5
- Daniel 1
- 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

- Genesis 1-2
- Matthew 1

WHAT IS WISDOM?

FRI | JAN


2

PROVERBS 9:10 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

During the year ahead, our study of the Wisdom Literature will take us through several books that together make up a large part of the Old Testament. Here at the beginning of our study, it will be helpful for us to consider the nature of wisdom, the context of the Wisdom Books, and some features of Wisdom Literature that will assist us in their interpretation. Dr. R.C. Sproul’s teaching series *Wisdom* will guide our study of these elements.

It would be impossible to find a culture that does not in some way prize wisdom. Although we would not agree that everything that goes by the name *wisdom* actually deserves that designation, it is nonetheless true that people love the proverbs and aphorisms handed down in their own societies. Moreover, we cannot explain the origin and history of the discipline of philosophy without accounting for humanity’s pursuit of wisdom. The English term *philosophy* comes from one of the Greek verbs that mean “love” (*phileō*) and from the Greek word *sophia*, which means “wisdom.” Thus, philosophy actually refers to “the love of wisdom.” Historically, people did not study philosophy merely to increase their own learning or to show themselves artful in debate. Instead, both ancient Greek and later Western philosophers engaged in the study of philosophy in order to know what is good, true, and beautiful, and to find the precepts needed to live rightly in this world.

The Bible also prizes wisdom (Prov. 23:23), but it approaches it from a very different stance than the ancient Greek thinkers did. Ancient Greek thinkers concluded quite late in their quest for wisdom that there is only one God, but the deity they posited had little in common with the God revealed in the Bible. For the biblical authors, the Lord is not merely the end of wisdom, but He is also its beginning. As today’s passage notes, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

Fear in this context is not the fear one has of an enemy; rather, it is honor and love for the Lord. Such fear is manifested in reverence and awe, a disposition to apply what God has revealed in order to live a life that pleases Him in gratitude for His salvation. This wisdom is not equivalent to knowledge of facts. One can know a lot of information and still be a fool. Yet we must note that it is impossible to be wise and ignorant, for wisdom is the right application of knowledge, specifically the knowledge of God. Wisdom may not be the same thing as knowledge, but without knowledge, wisdom cannot exist. 

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the surest way to become wise is to pursue the knowledge of God. As we come to know more about Him, the foundation for wisdom becomes firmer in our lives, and we grow in our ability to discern things according to His revealed truth. We come to know the Lord primarily through the prayerful reading, preaching, and teaching of His Word. If you want to be wise, you must know the God of Scripture.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Ecclesiastes 7:11-12
- 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

- Genesis 3-5
- Matthew 2

THE WEEKEND

- Genesis 6-10
- Matthew 3-4

Jesus' Imminent Return

J. D. GREEAR

Many churches today downplay Jesus' return because they are afraid of looking like "fundamentalists." But far from being an obscure detail of Christian theology, the second coming is intensely practical. Expecting Jesus' imminent return produces four changes in us:

SPIRITUAL ALERTNESS

Apocalypse-obsessed churches may be wrong in many respects, but they are right to eagerly expect Christ's return. The New Testament writers all strain forward to that day. But do we?

At my home church, the pastor would end each service by saying, "Maranatha," meaning, "The Lord is coming." We would respond, "And it could be today." We could use some of that attitude. This may be our last chance—to share the gospel, to forgive, to repent.

MISSION URGENCY

If you know the world has an end—and that it could be soon—that rearranges your priorities. Yet so many of us are consumed by vacations, hobbies, and bucket lists that our actions tell the world, "The end is not soon and the mission is not urgent."

When the Master returns, I want to have invested my talents to the fullest. Sadly, many in the church on that day will hear Jesus' chilling words: "Why didn't you invest what I gave you for my kingdom? Away with you, you worthless servant."

POWER TO FORGIVE

When people wrong us, we long for justice. As Tim Keller puts it, we run to the


judgment seat and help God mete out retribution. But we were never meant for that seat. The more we sit in it, the more we see the worst in others, and the more blind we become to our own sin.

On our own, we are powerless to keep ourselves from running to that seat. Only by knowing that Jesus is coming back can I be content to stay off of it. I can endure injustice now because He will set things right then.

HOPE IN SUFFERING

Jesus says He will return "in clouds" (Mark 13:26), echoing those times when God appeared in the form of a powerful cloud—leading His people out of Egypt (Ex. 13:21), giving them the law (24:16), and filling the temple (2 Chron. 5:14). This "glory cloud" signified that God is coming to undo the effects of the fall.

Jesus promises that He will return with power and glory. So, the suffering in our lives cannot last forever. As Cornelius Plantinga says, "The return of Christ is good news for people whose lives are filled with bad news."

So if your son just died of cancer, if your marriage just dissolved, if your body is racked with pain, then Jesus is saying to you: "There is reason to hope even in the midst of the darkest valley. Lift up your eyes—I am coming back, and it might be today." 

Dr. J.D. Greear is lead pastor of The Summit Church in Raleigh, N.C. He is author of *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart and Gospel: Rediscovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*.

PARALLELISM

PROVERBS 10:1 "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother" (v. 1b).

MON | JAN

5


Wisdom and knowledge have a relationship to one another, as we have seen. On the one hand, one cannot have wisdom without at least some knowledge of the Lord and His creation. Since wisdom is, essentially, the right, God-honoring application of knowledge, one cannot have wisdom if one has no knowledge to apply. At the same time, we must remember that the mere possession of knowledge does not ensure wisdom. Some of the most highly educated people in the world foolishly rail against the one true God.

In regard to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, part of acquiring the knowledge needed to grow in wisdom involves a basic understanding of the literary structure of these writings. Of the Wisdom Books—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon—only Job is not made up entirely of poetry. Yet even Job is mostly poetry, though its introduction and conclusion fall under the genre of historical narrative. To understand these books rightly, therefore, we need to have some idea of how their poetry works.

We are accustomed to finding rhyme and meter in English poetry, but Hebrew poetry is different. Hebrew poetry exhibits parallelism as its chief characteristic. We see parallelism when two or more lines of a Hebrew poem correspond closely with one another in order to make a point. There are three major types of parallelism in Hebrew poetry: synonymous parallelism, antithetic parallelism, and synthetic parallelism.

Synonymous parallelism is probably the easiest one for us to grasp. A synonymous parallel says the same thing in different ways in order to convey its teaching. Though it is not from one of the Wisdom Books, Jesus' prayer in Matthew 6:13—"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"—exhibits synonymous parallelism. The prayer has us asking God for the same thing in two different ways, namely, that He would keep us from the full assault of the evil one. The parallel does not mean that the Lord is able to tempt us (see James 1:13).

Antithetic parallelism uses a contrast between two or more lines to teach us truth. Proverbs 10:1 is an example of antithetic parallelism; there, opposing behaviors of wise and foolish sons reveal to us the kind of children that please their parents.

Synthetic parallelism synthesizes two or more poetic lines. In such parallelism, successive lines build on and intensify the first line. Proverbs 6:16–19, wherein the list of things God hates expands over the course of the verses, illustrates synthetic parallelism. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalms 1:6; 2:1–3; 3:4
Proverbs 10
Ephesians 4:8
2 Timothy 2:11–13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 11–13
Matthew 5

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

Understanding how the different biblical genres work will help us avoid misinterpretation, thereby improving our ability to find the wisdom that God is showing us in His Word. Our Creator commends the careful study of His Word (2 Tim. 2:15), and this careful study is essential for building the knowledge that is necessary for true wisdom. Getting a grasp of the basic, sound principles of biblical interpretation is a must for discipleship.

PROVERBS

TUE | JAN


6

PROVERBS 26 “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (vv. 4-5)

The books of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature all come to us in the genre of poetry, but each offers its own unique perspective. Together, they give us a full picture of what it means to live wisely in this world. For example, the poems in the book of Psalms show us how wise men and women praise the Lord. The often darker notes sounded in Ecclesiastes help us to look at the repetitiveness of life from the standpoint of eternity. Song of Solomon gives us a picture of marital love that encourages us to look beyond this world for a love that will never fail to satisfy. The narrative framing sequences in Job reveal the sovereign God behind all things.

Proverbs, of course, emphasizes practical living before the face of God with its distinctive aphoristic sayings. As we consider the background of this book, the majority of which comes to us from King Solomon, we need to recognize that while the book is inspired by God, it makes use of a literary form that is common even in cultures that do not know the Scriptures—the proverbial saying. Proverbial sayings can be found around the world, and getting an idea of how they work in a non-inspired context will help us see just what Solomon and others are doing with their divinely inspired proverbs.

Among the most well known of all proverbs in English is, “Look before you leap.” It is easy enough to grasp what this saying means—we should carefully take the future into account before we make any decisions. This is true in general, but particularly regarding decisions with long-term consequences. In English we also find the proverb, “He who hesitates is lost.” This saying gives us the opposite warning. There are times that we will miss a good opportunity if we are too cautious. Obviously, we cannot apply both of these proverbs in the same way to every situation we face. Whether we must be extra cautious or quick to act depends largely on the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Though they are divinely inspired, the proverbial sayings in the book of Proverbs work in a similar fashion. To apply the book of Proverbs rightly, we must carefully consider the situation in which wisdom is needed. We are not endorsing situational ethics or denying the objective truth of the Word of God. We are only recognizing that we apply proverbs differently than we do other literary forms such as commands. 

C O R A M D E O  *Living before the face of God*

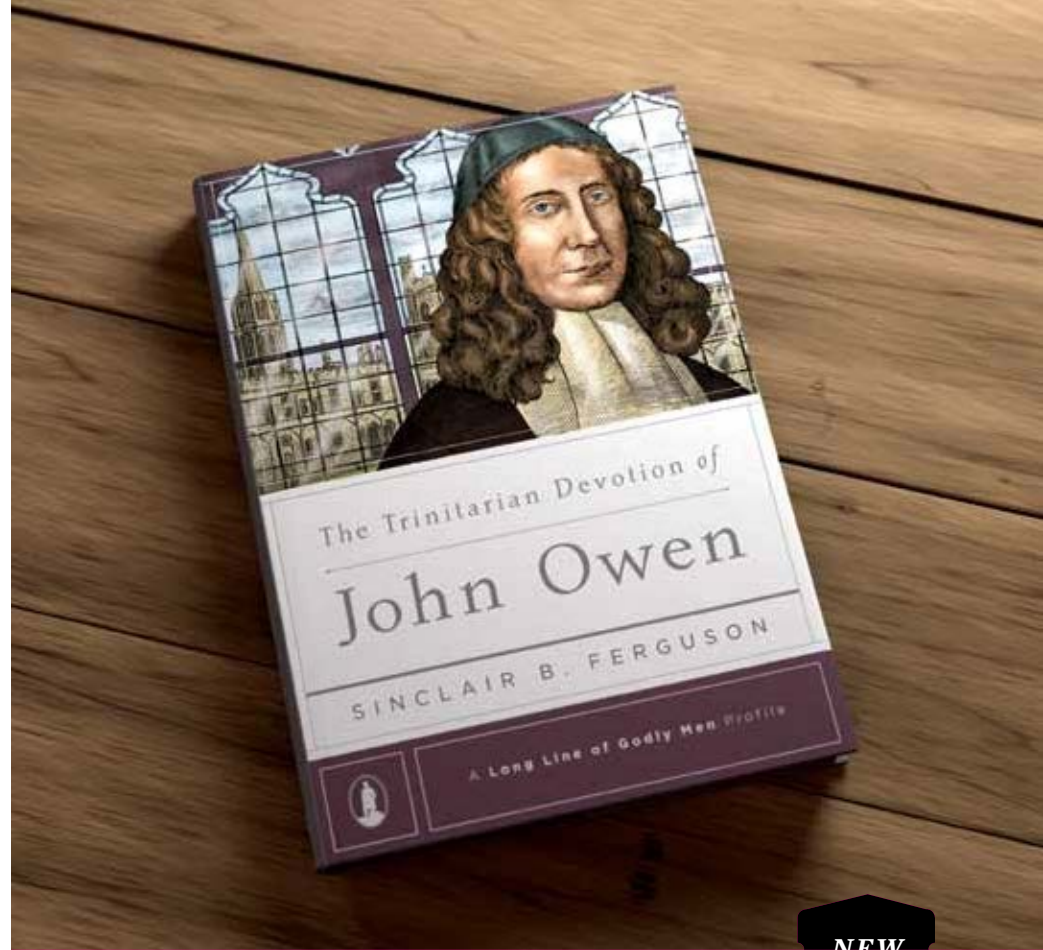
The pair of proverbial sayings chosen for today’s passage shows us that many of these statements from the book of Proverbs are situation-specific. Sometimes a fool cannot be silenced by responding in kind, and at that point one must say nothing. But if the fool is teachable, responding in kind can be beneficial. How do you know which one applies? As with all proverbs, you have to know the kind of circumstances—the kind of person in this case—you are facing.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 1; 8; 31
Ezekiel 18:1-4
Luke 4:16-30
2 Peter 2:22


THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 14-16
Matthew 6



COMMUNION WITH OUR TRIUNE GOD

The writings and teachings of John Owen, a seventeenth-century English pastor and theologian, continue to serve the church. Daily communion with God characterized his life and equipped him to minister and persevere. In this addition to the Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series, Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson offers careful reflection and insight for Christians today as he highlights Owen’s faith in the triune God of Scripture. We’re reminded that regardless of our circumstances, we can know God, enjoy Him, and encourage others. **Now available in print and digital editions wherever books are sold.**

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PSALMS


PSALM 51 "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions" (v. 1).



We have noted that each book that makes up the Old Testament Wisdom Literature provides a specific perspective on wisdom that enhances our understanding of what it means to live wisely before the face of God. Now it is time to look at what the book of Psalms says to us about godly wisdom. While Proverbs emphasizes practical day-to-day living, that does not mean that the other Wisdom Books are to be regarded as less practical. Psalms, for example, is one of the most practical books in the Bible.

Since the book of Psalms is filled with prayers and songs, it might be hard for us to consider it a book of practical importance. Yet to think that way is to neglect the essential role of prayer in living wisely unto the Lord. It is easy to think about wisdom purely as a matter of acquiring new knowledge and looking at examples of everyday situations in which we can apply it. But even though it is important to engage in lifelong learning, particularly lifelong learning of the Word of God, gaining wisdom is more than just increasing our head knowledge. It is also important for us to have a deep relationship with the Lord so that we are prepared to act wisely in specific circumstances. This relationship requires knowledge of Him and His Word, but it also demands a life of prayer. This is what the book of Psalms tells us.

Throughout Scripture, we find a close connection between wisdom and the prayers of God's people. Solomon, for instance, is known for his wisdom, but he did not gain this wisdom until he asked the Lord for it in prayer (1 Kings 3:1–15). James 1:5 instructs us to ask God for wisdom, knowing that He will always answer that prayer in the affirmative if we offer it in faith.

Many Christians find prayer to be a difficult spiritual discipline to practice. Often, we are unsure of how or what to pray. Thankfully, God has given us the Psalms to guide our practice of prayer. In the Psalms, we get a picture of the adoration that comes from the man or woman who is completely dedicated to the Lord. We also see ways in which we may wrestle with the Lord in prayer when it seems that the world is against us. Many of the Psalms, such as the one chosen for today's study, are prayers of deep contrition and repentance. Wise people do not run from God when they sin; rather, they turn to Him in prayer, seeking His face so that they can be forgiven and restored. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalms 19; 33
Proverbs 3
Luke 11:1–4
1 Thessalonians 5:17

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 17–19
Matthew 7

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

One of the first manifestations of ungodly wisdom occurred in the garden of Eden just after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Instead of turning to the Lord, our first parents hid from Him. That is not the model that Scripture gives us. Wise people know that they cannot truly run from God and that it is better to come to Him when they sin than to hide themselves. Only He can provide the forgiveness and the covering for our shame that we need when we have fallen.

THE WISDOM OF JOB

THU | JAN
8


JOB 42 “Job answered the LORD and said: ‘I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted’” (vv. 1–2).


In addition to Psalms and Proverbs, Job is also reckoned among the books that make up the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. This work provides critical insight into the nature of suffering and the sovereignty of God, and its instruction is vital for viewing our pain in a Lord-honoring manner.

The account of Job’s suffering was likely put into writing after his death, but the man Job was a historical person who lived sometime during the era of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (c. 2000 B.C.). As such, its account is one of the oldest stories recorded in the Bible.

Unlike the other Wisdom Books, Job includes sections written in the genre of historical narrative. These sections open and close the work, providing the context for the dialogue between Job and his friends that takes up most of the book. Chapters 1–2 introduce the book by telling us of Job, a righteous man of faith whose uprightness is well known in his day. We also get a window into heaven, as it were, in these chapters. The author pulls back the veil and describes the dialogue that takes place between Satan and God concerning Job. Satan claims that Job only believes because he is a man greatly blessed, a fairweather follower who will abandon his trust in the Lord if he loses his prosperity. God permits the devil to test Job’s faith by robbing him of his wealth, family, and health. Over the course of the rest of the story, Job proves Satan wrong. He does not abandon his faith but continues to seek the Lord, even revealing his hope for the resurrection of the dead (19:25–27).

Despite the persistence of his faith, Job does question God throughout the book, demanding to know why he, a righteous man, is suffering undeservedly. Job’s “friends” repeatedly tell him that he must be suffering because of personal sin, and though they say many true things about our Creator, they wrongly imply that suffering and sin always have a one-to-one correlation. In fact, the Lord never explains to Job why he has suffered. What He does do is answer Job out of the whirlwind to remind him of His sovereignty and that much of His will and purposes are inscrutable (chaps. 38–41).

Though that answer is not what Job was searching for, it is enough. He bows to God’s wisdom and admits that he does not fully comprehend the ways of God (chap. 42). All wise people rest finally in the sovereign goodness of the Lord. 

CORAM DEO  *Living before the face of God*

Wise people maintain the distinction between Creator and creature, recognizing that there are some matters where God has chosen to remain silent. They respect the Lord’s decision and do not try to speak where He has not spoken. They trust in His sovereignty and goodness, believing that He will be faithful to all of His promises. May that be true of us, that we might be wise and trustworthy servants of God.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Job 38
Jeremiah 12:1–4
Romans 8:28
1 Peter 3:14a

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 20–22
Matthew 8

ECCLESIASTES AND SOLOMON’S SONG


FRI | JAN
9

ECCLESIASTES 12:14 “God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

We have saved two of the most difficult books in Scripture for our last study on the background and emphases of the Wisdom Literature. These books are Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, two works that have been traditionally attributed to Solomon. Many have even said that Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon when he was a young man and Ecclesiastes when he was elderly and had seen much over the course of a long life.

The Song of Solomon gives evidence of being from Solomon’s hand, for its opening verse states, “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (Song 1:1). Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, makes no claim of authorship besides the fact that it consists of the “words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1). Since Solomon was the king in Jerusalem at one point in history, Ecclesiastes may well come from him. But we cannot be dogmatic about this because Ecclesiastes itself does not identify Solomon explicitly.

The Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes are difficult books for different reasons. The greatest difficulty with the Song of Solomon is that it hardly mentions the Lord explicitly, speaking of Him once at the end of the book (8:6), and then only in passing. That the work seems to give very little direct theological teaching also makes it hard to interpret. What we find in the Song of Solomon is a picture of love between husband and wife, with a particular focus on their physical relationship. Because of this, and because many interpreters have found it hard to conceive of God’s inspiring a book that is about love, marriage, and sex, the work has most frequently been read as an allegory of the love of Christ for His bride, the church. It is hard to accept this work as a mere allegory because the biblical authors almost never use that interpretative method, and in the one place where something is explicitly called an allegory, the example given is not an allegory in the traditional sense (Gal. 4:21–31). Solomon’s chief intent is simply to show us the love of husband and wife. That does not mean the book is not ultimately about Christ, however. The work makes us yearn for the perfect love that no creature can give us. In this way, it directs us to the Savior who alone can satisfy us.

Ecclesiastes has a slight pessimistic tone, which is why many believers have had trouble with it. The key to understanding the work is to see it as an example of biblical apologetics. It points out that apart from God, life is temporary and futile. It states that so much of life is incomprehensible, thereby pointing us to the Lord, who alone makes sense of it all. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY


Proverbs 2:6–8
Ecclesiastes 12:13–14

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 23–24
Matthew 9

THE WEEKEND

Genesis 25–29
Matthew 10

CORAM DEO  *Living before the face of God*

Ultimately, all of the Wisdom Books make one point: that life without God is meaningless and that only He can understand the creation fully and finally. The only way for us to find true wisdom of eternal significance is to turn to Him and His Word. Otherwise, whatever meaning we find is fleeting, whatever joys we have will come to dissatisfy us, and every love we have will not meet the needs of our souls.

God Is on the Move

GUY M. RICHARD

When I lived in Edinburgh, Scotland, my home was situated just below an extinct volcano that was appropriately called “Arthur’s Seat” because it resembled a very large saddle. Several times each year, a dense fog would cover this mountain completely and shield it from view. On those days, I would wake up and look out my window, and the mountain would not be there—or so it appeared. But even though I could not see Arthur’s Seat, I knew that the mountain was still there. It had not gone away, despite the fact that I could not see it.


Many times in the Christian life, God appears to be invisible. We cannot see Him. We cannot see what He is doing. The fog rolls in; the storm clouds gather; and they shield Him completely from our view.

That is precisely where the creatures in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* are at the beginning of the story. The White Witch has seized control of Narnia and has magically imposed winter. She has terrorized the Narnian inhabitants by turning many into stone and by putting a stop to Christmas. To make matters worse, Aslan is nowhere to be found. He is silent. He is hidden from view. And yet, in the midst of all this, the Narnians find hope in the reminder that they share with one another: Aslan is on the move. This reminder helps them hold fast even through the most difficult circumstances when Aslan is silent and seemingly far off.

When we find ourselves in the midst of difficult circumstances, when God is

silent and hidden from our view, and when we cannot see what He is doing, we need this same reminder that God really is on the move. He is at work. Even if we cannot see it, the invisible hand of God is moving and working behind the scenes, bringing His perfect purposes to pass in our lives.

Luke 2:1–2 gives us one such reminder. In this familiar passage, God’s invisible hand is working in and through ordinary people and events to bring Joseph, Mary, and Jesus (still in the womb) to Bethlehem in order to fulfill Micah 5:2, which states that the Christ child is to be born in Bethlehem. I find it fascinating that God chooses not to appear to Joseph and Mary in a dream or by way of an angel to tell them to leave Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem. He did both of those things previously with Joseph and Mary, when He revealed to them that Mary would have a child by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:26–38). But He does not do either here. Instead, here in Luke 2, in order to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so that His Christ can be born in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, God uses a pagan king’s calling for the inhabitants of his kingdom to be registered.

God is at work today, just as He was in Luke 2. He really is on the move even when we cannot see what He is doing. Be encouraged. 

Dr. Guy M. Richard is senior minister of First Presbyterian Church in Gulfport, Miss., and author of *The Supremacy of God in the Theology of Samuel Rutherford*.

OUR WISDOM AND GOD’S

PROVERBS 21:30–31 “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.”


MON | JAN

12

Capturing the essence of sin is not easy, so Christian thinkers have suggested many different definitions. The Westminster divines, for example, define sin in terms of its relation to a legal standard: “Sin is any want of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God” (WSC 14). Dr. R.C. Sproul often speaks of sin as “cosmic treason,” emphasizing transgression as our personal betrayal of the One who could never deserve it.

As we return to our study of particular passages from the Old Testament Wisdom Literature today, we will consider sin from the standpoint of epistemology (the nature and grounds of knowledge): sin is irrational. To believe we can depose the Lord from His throne and become a law unto ourselves, inventing our own standards and rendering ourselves unaccountable to God, is the height of absurdity. There is nothing so foolish, so unreasonable, as the belief that creatures and law-receivers can take the place of the Creator and Lawgiver. Scripture constantly warns us that our plans cannot prevail against God’s, but we find it all but impossible to accept this truth. We find such a warning in Proverbs 21:30: “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.”

It should be obvious that the creature cannot overcome the Creator, but only those regenerated by the Spirit of God believe this truth. It is not that the unregenerate entirely fail to understand that the Lord and His wisdom are invincible; rather, this truth cannot penetrate the heart apart from the Spirit’s work. God must bring us to our knees before we will embrace the superiority of the Creator’s wisdom to our own. Just as Jacob had to be wounded in his pride and strength before he would submit fully to the Lord (Gen. 32:22–32), we must be humbled and brought to repentance before we will begin to give up trying to take God’s rightful place as the Lord of our lives. Otherwise, we will spend eternity raising our fists against our Creator in the futility of rebellion against Him (Rev. 21:8; 22:11, 15).

Proverbs 21:30 focuses on the invincibility of the Lord’s wisdom in relation to His enemies’ wisdom, but verse 31 balances it with the reminder that even the wisdom of God’s people takes a backseat to the divine plan. People can wisely plan for success in battle, doing all they know how to do in order to improve their odds of winning; nevertheless, final victory comes only by the determination of the Lord. Even plans made with the godliest of intentions cannot come to pass if they are not in line with what God has ordained. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 28:29

Jeremiah 1:18–19; 8:9;
10:11–16

Romans 1:18–23

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 30–31
Matthew 11:1–15

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

God’s wisdom has the final say in all matters. No plan, no matter how well conceived or potent, can keep Him from accomplishing His purposes. His enemies can advance only as far as He allows, and what might look like victories on their part are ordained by the Lord as part of His plan to defeat them fully and finally. If we are in Christ, the undefeatable Lord is on our side. In that we can and must rejoice, for it means that our enemies cannot finally prevail.

THE BLESSEDNESS OF KEEPING GOD'S LAW


TUE | JAN
13

PSALM 119:1-8 “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!” (vv. 1-3).

Wisdom is God's gift to His people, a blessing that He always gives to those who ask for it in faith (James 1:5-8). Yet the Lord does not ordinarily grant this wisdom by placing it immediately in our hearts and minds. Instead, it comes through the diligent study and application of His revelation. Today's passage emphasizes this truth.

If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), we cannot attain wisdom if we do not have the honor for God that Scripture commends, and we cannot honor our Creator if we do not know Him. This is where God's Word comes in, particularly His law, which is one emphasis of Psalm 119. As verse 7 indicates, the one who in faith seeks to understand the Lord's righteous rules will end up praising Him and honoring His name.

The psalmist proclaims great blessing on the person who seeks to know and walk in the law of God, even going so far as to assert that the one who lives according to the Lord's statutes will “not be put to shame.” As John Calvin notes in his commentary on this passage, the psalmist speaks in an ultimate sense. In this fallen world, unbelievers often shame those who endeavor to live by God's law; however, this shame will not endure, for the Lord will finally vindicate all who seek to obey His commands (Ps. 135:14). On the last day, all people will see that those who have served the Lord have done the most honorable thing possible.

Although blessings are associated with observing the law, we must note that the psalmist is not talking about absolute perfection when he speaks of keeping the law blamelessly (119:1). The psalm teaches implicitly that no sinner can render this kind of obedience, for the psalmist, an exemplary figure, prays that he would be able to keep the commandments (v. 5). He recognizes his own inability and prays for the grace to walk in righteousness. The blamelessness commended is a life wherein one is oriented in the main toward the things of God. It is a life lived in gratitude that another—Jesus Christ—has kept the law perfectly in our place (Rom. 5:12-21). We do not obey the law in order to be declared righteous in the Lord's sight; we obey because we have been declared righteous in Christ alone. Calvin writes that “when uprightness is demanded of the children of God, they do not lose the gracious remission of their sins, in which their salvation alone consists.” We always fall short of God's perfect standard, but He forgives all who give up their own efforts to merit citizenship in heaven and trust Christ. Our place in His kingdom is based on the righteousness of Christ. 

CORAM DEO  *Living before the face of God*

John Calvin comments, “We must not be influenced by our own designs, nor decide, according to carnal reason, what we are to do, but must at once come to the determination, that they who turn not aside, either to the right hand or the left, from the observance of God's commandments, are indeed in the right path.” Wisdom comes to those who seek God and endeavor to follow His law of gratitude for His great salvation.

FOR FURTHER STUDY
Deuteronomy 4:1-8;
11:26-28
Psalm 1
1 Peter 2:1-3

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR
Genesis 32-33
Matthew 11:16-30


GOD'S WORD IN THE HEART

WED | JAN
14

PSALM 119:9-16 “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (v. 11).

God in His grace has decided to work through the means of His Word to accomplish His purposes for His people. He works through the preaching of His revelation at the start of our walk with Him, bringing us to new life via the Spirit-blessed teaching and exposition of the “word of truth” (James 1:18). Our Creator also works through His Word after conversion, deepening our knowledge of Him, instructing us in how to serve in His kingdom, and strengthening us to resist temptation.

Psalm 119 takes a special interest in the ongoing place of the Word of God in the life of the believer. Having proclaimed a great blessing on those who endeavor to obey the Lord according to His law (vv. 1-8), the psalmist expands on his point in verses 9-16, emphasizing the practicality of putting Scripture to work in one's life. The key verse in this section is verse 11, in which the psalmist confesses that he has stored up God's Word in his heart in order that he might not sin against the Lord. Commentators note that this does not refer simply to memorization of the Bible, although that certainly plays a part. Hiding the Word of God in one's heart involves both knowing what our Creator has revealed and living one's entire life in devotion to the Lord. Hiding the Word in our hearts does not mean only knowing what it says, although it is not less than that. It also involves structuring one's life around its precepts, being so thoroughly under its dominion that it is embedded in one's everyday life (Deut. 6:4-9).

John Calvin comments on the necessity of hiding the Word of God in our hearts by drawing an analogy: “Among scholars, those whose knowledge is confined to books, if they have not the book always before them, readily discover their ignorance; in like manner, if we do not imbibe the doctrine of God, and are well acquainted with it, Satan will easily surprise and entangle us in his meshes. Our true safeguard, then, lies not in a slender knowledge of his law, or in a careless perusal of it, but in hiding it deeply in our hearts.” It is not enough to have a copy of Scripture on the shelf that can be accessed at any time. We must take our Bibles down and read them, study them, meditate on them, all the while asking the Holy Spirit to teach us His ways (Ps. 119:12). This does not mean we must all have the same patterns of daily devotion, but it does mean that we all make time to learn from God's Word. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY
Ezra 7:10
Proverbs 22:17-19
Colossians 3:16
Hebrews 4:12-13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR
Genesis 34-35
Matthew 12

CORAM DEO  *Living before the face of God*

When we have the Word of God hidden in our hearts, we are equipped to resist temptation because we are better able to discern what is truly good from that which is not good or edifying. We also acquire the wisdom for navigating the treacherous roads in our lives, enabling us to steer clear of problems that can entice us to sin. Are you making regular time for the study of God's Word in your life both privately and as part of the corporate body of Christ?

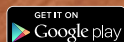




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HEEDING GODLY AUTHORITIES

PROVERBS 1:8–9 “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.”


FRI | JAN
16

For several decades now, a pervasive anti-authority sentiment has swept through popular culture in the West, which has then exported this philosophy to the rest of the world through entertainment, advertising, and other avenues. Many of us are likely familiar with the popular phrase, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” Irreverence is in vogue, and what is young and new is prized over that which is old and traditional.

Scripture never teaches that everything old and traditional is necessarily good, and it certainly does not claim that authority figures and structures are always godly. Paganism goes right back to the fall of mankind, and history is littered with despots who persecuted their citizens and defied the one true God. The Bible condemns all false religions and ungodly authorities (Ex. 20:3; Isa. 5:20; Rev. 13; 19:19–20). Nevertheless, the Lord in His Word understands such ungodliness as a perversion of authority and tradition. In fact, our Creator extols the aged and commends submission to authority because of the wisdom that comes with experience and the order that thoughtful leaders provide.

Proverbs 1:8–9 is one of many passages that takes such a perspective. Solomon exhorts sons to heed the instruction of their fathers and the teaching of their mothers. By extension, this exhortation applies to daughters as well, for if the future leaders of the homes in Israel (sons) need to learn from and obey their parents, so do all other citizens. Solomon’s teaching is nothing new, for the fifth commandment calls children to honor their parents (Ex. 20:12). Note that both the law of Moses and today’s passage speak of heeding both fathers and mothers. Children are not permitted to respect one parent and ignore the other.

While Proverbs 1:8–9 focuses on the obligations of children to listen to their parents, we cannot miss the high call it gives to mothers and fathers as well. Solomon assumes that parents are training their children in godly wisdom, which should not surprise us given the call of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 to instruct our children in the law of God. Our sons and daughters cannot follow the teaching of today’s passage if we do not faithfully catechize them in what the Lord has revealed and do not model godly wisdom for them.

Today’s passage speaks explicitly of parents and children, but Solomon’s words apply to all relationships between authorities and subordinates. It will go well for us if we submit wisely to those in authority, and teach and model godliness to those whom we lead. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 6:20
Ephesians 6:1–4

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 38–40
Matthew 13:24–58

THE WEEKEND

Genesis 41–46
Matthew 14:1–21

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

Matthew Henry comments on today’s passage, “Those are truly valuable, and shall be valued, who value themselves more by their virtue and piety than by their worldly wealth and dignity.” A life of wisdom gained by heeding the godly instruction of parents and others is a far greater adornment than the best jewels money can buy. Such a life evidences the presence of saving faith and will receive the Lord’s commendation, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Hannah's Perseverance

OWEN STRACHAN

One of the most heroic figures in Scripture is not known for slaying a giant, conquering a nation, or hurdling a wall. Her name is Hannah. Her role in the biblical narrative is rather simple: to give birth. But it's the obstacles she overcomes on her way to this outcome that reveal her to be a hero.

In 1 Samuel 1, Hannah faces three rather ordinary challenges that show her life to be a difficult one. First, she is one of two wives of Elkanah. Penninah, her rival, is not kind to Hannah. She “used to provoke her grievously to irritate” Hannah (v. 6). Penninah tormented Hannah because the latter could not conceive. Already we see that Hannah faces serious adversity in her day-to-day life.


Hannah's second challenge is her husband's inability to understand her pain. Penninah would wound Hannah as regularly “as she went up to the house of the LORD,” leaving Hannah in tears (v. 7). Elkanah seems to be a kind man, but he suffers from a common malady: obtuseness. Hannah's husband seeks to encourage her, but he offers cold comfort.

Hannah's third challenge comes when she goes to the house of the Lord. She is clearly a devout and godly woman. She goes to worship at Shiloh and to pour out her heart to Yahweh. She is “deeply distressed” while there, and she weeps “bitterly” (v. 10). What happens next is painful. Eli the priest sees her lips moving and takes her for a drunk. Instead of offering her solace, he issues a stinging rebuke.

At every level, Hannah is suffering.

There is an escalation of her suffering in this passage that shows the difficult spiritual climate of Israel in her era. Despite her trials, she perseveres. She prays, goes to worship, and cries out to her God. Yahweh then shows her favor. Eli pronounces a blessing on her, she conceives, and soon gives birth to a son named Samuel (vv. 17–20), who becomes one of Yahweh's greatest prophets.

When challenges occur in our lives, we have a choice: will we remember Hannah? Her example is powerful. Yet Hannah foreshadows another child born to a persevering mother, a son who met many, many more difficulties on his life's path. Jesus Christ overcame a family who did not understand His purpose, a band of disciples who consistently misunderstood His teachings, and a foe who craved His undoing. Despite these trials, He followed the will of God all the way to the cross. He suffered and died to bring us to glory—and to give us daily strength to honestly face and perseveringly triumph over our own difficulties.

God is the Savior not only of the blood-streaked warrior, but the henpecked friend, the physically challenged sufferer, and the misunderstood wife. His grace is perfectly fitted for our daily struggles—indeed, it is more than sufficient for them. It makes heroes of even the most unsuspecting and normal of God's people. 

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THE GOOD MEDICINE OF JOY


PROVERBS 17:22 “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”

MON | JAN

19

Even those who are not very familiar with the Bible are likely familiar with the first half of the proverb in today's study, or they at least have some understanding of the truth it presents. After all, one can hardly listen to the news for a few weeks without hearing of some research demonstrating the dangers of stress on the body or a study providing evidence that cheerful people live longer than those who are perpetually grumpy or unhappy.

Such research only confirms what God's people have known for centuries, that “a joyful heart is good medicine” (Prov. 17:22). There are salutary benefits for those who have joy in their lives. This proverb is not talking about frivolity, and it is not commending an attitude that rejoices because it ignores the difficult circumstances of life. Instead, as Matthew Henry comments, the proverb “means a heart rejoicing in God, and serving him with gladness, and then taking the comfort of outward enjoyments and particularly that of pleasant conversation.” The joy that is good for the soul and the body is the joy that we find first in the Lord and then in the simple pleasures that He has created for human beings. Ecclesiastes, for example, is filled with admonitions to take joy in the ordinary goodness of the created order—the satisfaction of a hearty piece of bread, the taste of a nice glass of wine (Eccl. 9:7). Over and over again, the book of Psalms exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord (Pss. 32:11; 53:6). We rejoice in the Lord and in the goodness of what He has made in order to bring Him glory, of course (1 Cor. 10:31), but today's passage indicates that His glory is not all that results from the cheerful hearts of His people. Our joy glorifies God *and* it benefits us. By His grace, the Lord has ordained that what glorifies Him is what is good for us.

The opposite of a cheerful heart is a “crushed spirit” that “dries up the bones” (Prov. 17:22). Here, “bones” is used to represent the whole person. A cheerful heart brings tremendous benefits to all that we are, and a broken spirit brings harm to the whole person. The crushed spirit that dries up the bones is not the broken spirit of repentance (Ps. 51:17), for repentance restores us to the Lord and thereby is a means to life. Instead, the writer refers to the heart that cannot rejoice in the Lord, that has become so cynical that it cannot find joy in the simple things. May none of us possess such a heart. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 30:5
Ecclesiastes 8:15
Isaiah 12:3
3 John 4

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 47
Matthew 14:22–36

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

A cheerful heart does not pretend that all is well, and it grieves at the appropriate time (Eccl. 7:2). A cheerful heart responds appropriately to a given situation, all the while possessing a deep and enduring peace that enables one to trust in the Lord and know that He is the source of true, eternal joy. A cheerful heart may not always show itself with a smile, but even when it is not in happy circumstances, it is confident that an eternal weight of glory is being prepared for us (2 Cor. 4:17).

A PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE

TUE | JAN


20

PSALM 6 “Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?” (vv. 4–5).

Where do you turn in the midst of great suffering or trouble? Do you seek to escape it by your own cleverness? Do you complain to others that life is unfair?

For the man or woman of God, there is only one place, or more appropriately, one person to turn to when we are in pain—the Lord Himself. Whether we have done nothing to deserve maltreatment or we have “earned” our suffering by our sins or bad judgment, we are to run to our Father. The book of Psalms is filled with hymns of lament wherein the speaker, in dire straits, pours out his heart to God and calls on Him to act. Psalm 6 is one such lament.

We do not know exactly what prompted David to pen these words, but it seems that personal sin is not the cause of his trouble. Unlike laments that serve as prayers for forgiveness, such as Psalm 51, we find no confession of sin in today’s passage. David appears to be suffering some kind of injustice. However, it is instructive that in Psalm 6 David sees his suffering as the Lord’s discipline even though his pain is not tied to any specific sin. He asks God not to rebuke him in anger or discipline him in wrath. The suffering is so intense that it seems to David that God is on the verge of pouring out His wrathful chastisement (v. 1). David sees his troubles as the Lord’s discipline, but he asks God to refrain from disciplining him in a punitive manner because he sees nothing that should bring on his pain. He sets himself apart as a righteous man, separating himself from “workers of evil” (v. 8).

In Scripture, discipline is often associated with personal sin. Moses, for example, suffers punitive discipline when he does not heed the Lord’s word at Meribah, and he is barred from entering the Promised Land (Num. 20:2–13). But Scripture also knows of discipline that is not punitive, discipline that keeps one drawing near to the Lord for more than just forgiveness (for example, see Eph. 6:4). Not all of our suffering is tied to specific sin, but all of it is used by the Lord to discipline us and keep us in His service. When we are in the midst of such discipline, it is permissible—even advisable—to turn to God, pour out our grief, and pray for our deliverance from our troubles that we might rejoice on the other side of our pain. This is what David does in Psalm 6. His profound expressions of grief and pleas for deliverance give way to confidence that God has heard and will vindicate him (vv. 6–10). As we turn to the Lord, He will likewise renew our joy, assure us that all will one day be well, and confirm in us the wisdom of turning to Him in all things. 

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

Only when we have a high view of God’s sovereignty will we be able to understand that God uses the pain in our lives to discipline us, either to show us the consequences of our sin or to keep us drawing closer to Him. When we are disciplined for our sin, in fact, He brings us to Himself and helps us understand the ways our transgression affect ourselves and others. Because God is in control of all, all of our pain is meaningful and used by Him for a good end (Rom. 8:28).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Genesis 32:9–12
Psalm 34:4
Luke 22:39–46
Romans 7:24–25a

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 48–49
Matthew 15:1–28

THE SORROW THAT ATTENDS KNOWLEDGE

WED | JAN

21


ECCLESIASTES 1:16–18 “I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (vv. 17–18).

Ignorance is bliss.” That well-worn saying is not a piece of divinely inspired wisdom, but it certainly captures an important element of biblical truth. In fact, Ecclesiastes 1:16–18 expresses much of the same sentiment when it tells us that there is “much vexation” to be found in much wisdom and that to increase knowledge is to increase sorrow.

That growing in knowledge can cause one to grow in sorrow is clear from Scripture. After all, sin and sorrow entered the world when Adam and Eve grasped for knowledge that God said they should not have (Gen. 3). We also find warnings in the Bible about knowing too much about evil, about becoming expert practitioners of sin (1 Cor. 14:20).

As important as the notion is that the sinful chasing after knowledge brings sorrow, this is not the kind of knowledge-seeking that the Preacher is talking about in Ecclesiastes 1:16–18. Instead, today’s passage is speaking of the right acquisition of knowledge, the effort to learn righteous wisdom and to increase in one’s understanding of persons, places, and things. Scripture frequently commends the search for wisdom and calls us to make every effort to find and possess truth and understanding (Prov. 23:23).

Paradoxically, the search for wisdom does bring sorrow in some ways. Matthew Henry helpfully comments on today’s passage that “the more we know the more we see there is to be known, and consequently we perceive with greater clearness that our work is without end, and the more we see of our former mistakes and blunders, which occasions much grief.” We do not really understand how much we do not know until we start to learn and come to know ourselves and the world around us. However, the more we know ourselves and the world around us, the more we realize that we do not know very much at all, that there is a seemingly infinite amount of information that must be mastered, and that we will never attain all the knowledge we seek. As we grow in knowledge, we also come to understand how much our ignorance has caused—and continues to cause—problems for ourselves and others. That brings sorrow.

Furthermore, as we know others better, we see just how deeply sin affects them and us. That brings great sadness, especially when we have to deal with situations so complex that the most righteous course of action is by no means clear. At such times, it can seem as if there is no good solution, which is a sorrowing realization indeed. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 31:9–10
Zechariah 12:10–14
Mark 14:34–36
Romans 9:1–5

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Gen. 50–Ex. 1
Matthew 15:29–16:4

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

Coming to understand the limitations of our knowledge and wisdom can be deeply sorrowing. At the same time, however, there are senses in which it can be liberating. First, knowing the limits of our own understanding forces us to flee for refuge to Christ and to recognize that we are ever-dependent on the grace of His wisdom. Furthermore, knowing that our wisdom is limited frees us from the burden of feeling like we must be an expert in all areas of life and knowledge.

OUR ALL-SEEING LORD


THU | JAN
22


PROVERBS 15:3 “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.”

Most of us reading this devotional are likely what the world would consider “ordinary” people. We are not leaders of great nations. Our accomplishments will never make it into history books. Our actions will never be the focus of the paparazzi.

Given such a reality, it is all too easy for us to think that what we do is essentially insignificant. Few, if any, will notice our contributions and our service, so we might wonder if our actions are meaningful in any real sense. Similarly, the fact that we are “ordinary” and that no other human being sees much of what we do or think might lead us to believe that the sins we commit in secret will never be found out. No one will see what we do behind closed doors, so we need not worry about bending the rules when no one else is around.

Only a solid grasp of the omnipresence and omniscience of the Lord disabuses us of these notions. Today’s passage gives perhaps the most succinct statement on these attributes of God in all of Scripture. We read in Proverbs 15:3 that “the eyes of the LORD are in every place.” No one is so insignificant as to be ignored by our Creator. Nothing is so trivial that God overlooks it. We never find ourselves in a situation where no one is looking, for even if other people never see our thoughts and deeds, the Lord does. When the psalmist asks God, “Where shall I flee from your presence?” the answer is clear: nowhere (Ps. 139:7).

This is sobering because Proverbs 15:3 also says the eyes of the Lord are “keeping watch on the evil and the good.” The Almighty is no passive observer. He takes stock of every situation, evaluating it according to His unchanging standards. The use of the verb *keeping watch* in other contexts indicates that our Creator observes in such a way as to prepare Himself for the appropriate course of action. When people do good, God will reward them. When they do evil, they will suffer the consequences. We may not separate this from the biblical truth that outside of Christ, no one can do what is fully good according to God’s perfect standards and that even followers of Jesus fall short in their obedience. This is why we rely only on Christ’s perfect righteousness for our justification (Rom. 3:21–26; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 John 1:8–9). Still, we cannot allow that precious truth to blunt the force of Proverbs 15:3: God will deal appropriately with all of our deeds. This should motivate us to do what is right—not to get into the kingdom, for our deeds cannot merit salvation—that we might please our Father and receive blessings over and above our heavenly citizenship (Matt. 25:14–30). 

CORAM DEO  *Living before the face of God*

Matthew Henry comments that God has “an eye to discern all, not only from which nothing can be concealed, but by which every thing is actually inspected, and nothing overlooked or looked slightly upon. . . . An eye to distinguish both persons and actions. He beholds the evil and the good, is displeased with the evil and approves of the good, and will judge men according to the sight of his eyes.” God sees all that we do, and He will not forget those who obey Him.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Numbers 32:23
Psalm 44:20–21
Matthew 6:1–6
Romans 2:16

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 2–4
Matthew 16:5–28


THE FLIGHT OF THE WICKED

FRI | JAN
23

PROVERBS 28:1 “The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

Like a metastatic cancer, sin that goes unchecked, unconfessed, and unrepented of will spread to affect the entire person. First and foremost, sin destroys the relationship between God and unregenerate people, and for the regenerate, sin disrupts the fellowship between the Lord and His children, for our transgressions grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). Beyond that, however, sin also has pervasive effects on the entire psyche. Paranoia and fear consume the man or woman who gives into sin impenitently.

That is the point of today’s passage, which tells us that “the wicked flee when no one pursues” (Prov. 28:1a). Anyone who has battled secret sin understands the truth of this statement. Try as we might to believe that what we do in secret does not matter and that living our lives apart from God means we can cast off the fear of the Lord that gripped “less enlightened” generations, we all know that impenitent sin fosters terror in the heart. We know that our Creator keeps His eyes on all, watching for the evil and the good (15:3). Though we try to ignore this truth, we cannot escape it, for it is written on our consciences (Rom. 2:12–16). Because we know God really can see everything, repeated, impenitent sin, particularly repeated secret sin, sustains in us the kind of fear that stalks us and threatens to overtake us. We worry that God will expose us, and then we transfer His all-seeing nature to those around us. We grow paranoid that others can see what we have tried so hard to hide, and we withdraw from our relationships. We begin to believe that everyone is watching us, and we do not like it. Matthew Henry comments, “Those that have made God their enemy, and know it, cannot but see the whole creation at war with them, and therefore can have no true enjoyment of themselves, no confidence, no courage, but a fearful looking for of judgment. Sin makes men cowards.”

Ironically, we sin because we believe we do not have to fear God, and then end up fearing other people. On the other hand, the righteous, because they fear the Lord appropriately with filial honor and not cowering terror, end up being afraid of no man. “The righteous are as bold as a lion” (Prov. 28:1b). They need not worry being found out by other people because there is nothing to be found out. Whatever sin they have, they have confessed. There are no secret sins to ruin righteous people, so righteous men and women can face others with boldness, not worrying about what their enemies will reveal about them. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY


Isaiah 59:12–13
Romans 2:12–16

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 5–6
Matthew 17

THE WEEKEND

Exodus 7–10
Matthew 18:1–20

CORAM DEO  *Living before the face of God*

Numbers 32:23 says that our sin will find us out. We live in fear if we are in impenitent sin because we know the truth of this verse, namely, that we cannot hide our wickedness forever. The only solution to such fear is confession and repentance. Confessing our sins to one another puts fear and paranoia to flight because it brings our transgression out into the open, encouraging us to fight our sin and to take an honest stand for Christ as sinners saved by grace alone.

Abiding in Christ: More than Sentiment

DEREK W. H. THOMAS

The slippery, imperceptible slide into mysticism is always a danger. The Bible itself warns of an anti-propositional Christianity, embodied in the slogan *no creed but the Bible*: “Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle” (Ps. 32:9). John Stott’s *Your Mind Matters* opens with a statement that, in effect, prioritizes the role of the mind in Christianity. Many others have added similar expressions of concern about modern evangelicalism’s capitulation into sentimentality—the “Hallmarkization” of the church, perhaps.

And nowhere is this sentimentality more apparent than in discussing (a cerebral process, by the way) what Jesus meant when he said, “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4, see v. 6).

What does “abide” (Greek *menō*) mean in this context? Greek and English dictionaries suggest these synonyms: *continue, dwell, endure, be present, remain, stand, tarry (for)*. The relationship we enjoy with Christ in the gospel is entirely of grace. God initiates it. But once it is initiated, we do not then become passive in that relationship. There is a response on our part. True, the response is one that requires the energy of the Holy Spirit: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). This God-directed and -sustained synergistic cooperation on our part in our sanctification (Paul calls it “obedience” in v. 12) is something both the Holy Spirit and we do. We dare not

lose sight of the emphasis on our effortful involvement.

The context in which Jesus exhorts us to abide suggests some more focused ideas of what it means to abide.

First, abiding in Christ has something to do with the way Scripture dwells in our hearts: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you” (John 15:7). To abide in Christ is to be immersed in Scripture: to read it, study it, ingest it. “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

Second, abiding in Christ suggests categories of obedience, responsive behavior, and holiness. The goal of having God’s Word in our hearts is that it might refashion us to become more like Christ. Abiding in Christ is a measure of our conformity to what God asks us to do in response to His grace to us in the gospel.

Third, abiding in Christ suggests a passionate, increasing, enduring love of Christ: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:10). Our love for Christ must grow and flourish. I need to be able to say that I love him more today than yesterday.

Fourth, abiding in Christ will shape our praying, enabling us to pray in a manner that conforms to His will. Walking in God’s law will mean less selfish praying—“ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). **TL**

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FOOLISH SONS AND PRUDENT WIVES

PROVERBS 19:13–14 “A foolish son is ruin to his father, and a wife’s quarreling is a continual dripping of rain. House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.”

MON | JAN

26

A home should be a place of refuge for its residents, and when relationships are harmonious and things are going well, a home is exactly that. However, when a home is full of strife, its residents desire to flee from it far more than they hope to dwell in it. The book of Proverbs recognizes this reality, and many of its sayings capture both the joy and the sorrow that can be found in the home.

Today’s passage is one such saying. Employing a contrast between a foolish son and wife on the one hand and a wise family on the other, the saying encourages sons and wives to seek wisdom, parents to raise their children to be wise, and men to find prudent wives. First, we read that “a foolish son is ruin to his father” (Prov. 19:13a). A foolish son cannot be counted on to provide for his father in his father’s old age, for he is not a trustworthy steward (21:20). The son who is a fool is also unable to preserve his family’s good name. He brings disgrace and ruin on his heritage, as Eli learned firsthand (1 Sam. 2:12–36).

Proverbs 19:13b warns that “a wife’s quarreling is a continual dripping of rain” (Prov. 19:13b). In the ancient Near East, roofs were constructed from wooden sticks and boards laid crosswise and then sealed with clay and other materials. It was not uncommon for them to leak during heavy rain. One expects to find shelter and protection under a roof, but a leaky roof fails to provide them. Similarly, a man expects the protection of encouragement in the arms of his wife, but a quarrelling wife betrays him, providing no refuge.

A foolish son and a quarreling wife are curses, but a sound heritage and a prudent wife are great blessings (v. 14). Yet unlike houses and wealth that can be passed down for generations from father to son to grandson if one follows the financial wisdom that is the common possession of all mankind, it takes divine intervention to find a good wife. “A prudent wife is from the LORD” (v. 14b), and an excellent, prudent wife who can be trusted not only to manage a household well but to increase its abundance is a special gift indeed (31:10–31). Wise men marry women who are better than what they actually deserve, and they ask the Lord to bring them godly wives who look out for their husbands’ best interests and conduct the affairs of the house well. A wise husband recognizes that such a wife is a precious jewel, a rare and priceless treasure, and he continually thanks the Lord for bringing her to him. **TL**

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Judges 4

Proverbs 10:1; 17:25;
27:15–16

Matthew 27:19

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 11–12
Matthew 18:21–35

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

If you are a married man, thank the Lord for the wisdom that your wife provides in the affairs of your home. If you are a married woman, pray that God would cause you to grow in wisdom so that your husband will find it easy to thank the Lord for you. If you are single man and looking for a spouse, ask the Father to bring you a prudent wife. If you are a single woman who wants to be married, pray that God would prepare you now to be a wife who is known for her wisdom.

REJOICING UNTO THE LORD

TUE | JAN


27

PSALM 100 “Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (vv. 1–2).

Among its other purposes, the book of Psalms serves as the hymnbook for the people of God. Its contents reveal the kinds of prayers that please the Lord. These prayers are also intended to be sung. Psalm 100 is a hymn of thanksgiving and praise unto our Creator, and its call for the people to sing unto the Lord makes it a fine call to worship as well.

Remarkably, the psalm opens with a call for all the earth to “make a joyful noise to the LORD” (v. 1). Because the Old Testament is so concerned with the history of God’s relationship to ancient Israel, it can be easy for us to assume that the ancient Israelites had no real concern for the salvation of the nations around them. Without a doubt, the prophets do condemn Israel for being a poor witness to the Gentiles, for not fulfilling her call to be a servant and light to the nations (Isa. 42:18–25). Nevertheless, there were always people in the old covenant community who sought to bring the worship of the one true God to the nations.

This is confirmed in Psalm 100:3, which states, “Know that the LORD, he is God!” In our English translations of the Old Testament, the Hebrew name *Yahweh*, which is the special covenant name of Israel’s covenant Lord, is typically rendered using small caps: “LORD.” To paraphrase, then, verse 3 is a call to the nations to understand that the Lord of Israel alone is God, that the Lord of Israel is not ruler over just that nation but is the only true God, the Creator of all. The Lord who has revealed the Scriptures treasured by the ancient Israelites is the only God. All people belong to Him by right, and those who will trust and believe in Him will belong to Him as His treasured possession. They and they alone will be His children (Deut. 7:6; John 1:11–13).

In calling for the whole earth to “make a joyful noise to the Lord,” the psalmist also exhorts Israelites and non-Israelites alike to “serve the Lord with gladness!” Those who have come to know the Lord God Almighty are His servants, but this is not a service of drudgery. Augustine of Hippo, in his sermon on Psalm 100, writes, “Fear not the servitude of that Lord: there will be no groaning there, no discontent, no indignation; no one seeketh to be sold to another master, since it is a sweet service, because we are all redeemed.” To be a servant of the Lord is to hold a high and enjoyable calling. It is service to the One who never mistreats His servants but rather accepts them into His family. 

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

In our day, the term *servant* often has negative connotations, at least in popular ways of thinking. We cannot import this negativity into what it means to be a servant of the Lord. To be the Lord’s servant is to serve the Master who always has the best interests of His people in mind. To serve God is to serve the One who never fails to recognize even the smallest gesture of service to His name. It is a great thing indeed to serve the Lord with gladness.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Nehemiah 2:20
Psalm 135:1
Romans 12:11
Hebrews 2:17

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 13–16
Matthew 19:1–15

JOY IN THE PRESENT

WED | JAN


28

ECCLESIASTES 2:24–26 “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (vv. 24–25).

Asceticism is not the mark of true Christian spirituality, but it dominated church teaching on sanctification—growth in holiness—for much of the church’s history until the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers did much to counter this trend; however, there is still a lingering assumption held by many Protestants that true obedience to God consists in forgoing many of the pleasures that this life has to offer, whether those pleasures are a fancy dinner, date night at the movies, a glass of fine wine, or other such things. Yet the Bible never teaches such a view of the Christian life. In fact, Scripture frequently commends the joys to be found on this side of heaven, joys that we find in the created order itself.

Today’s passage is one of many in the Bible that exhort us to enjoy the pleasures available to us in the present. After observing the incomprehensible reality that we will finally give up the fruit of our labor at death (Eccl. 2:18–23), the Preacher offers the answer to the conundrum that this reality causes. We are not to try to “fix” the problem by probing the mystery as to why so much of what we do does not finally benefit us. We are not to be perpetually dissatisfied with this, such that we work harder and longer so that we might create more for ourselves and our families. (Of course, creating more for ourselves and our families is not wrong in itself. It is only wrong when it is motivated by covetousness and selfishness.) Instead, the Preacher tells us, enjoying what we do have is how we deal with the frustration that comes from not seeing so much of the fruit of our labor (vv. 24–25).

What is more, the Preacher says that the ability to enjoy the fruit of our labor is the gift of God. Frustration with the futility that we sometimes feel in our work can lead to dissatisfaction and discontentment with the good that we do have. It takes the grace of the Lord for us to be satisfied with what we have produced, and if God does not give us that grace, we will never be happy with ourselves or our circumstances.

Today’s passage also says it is incomprehensible that God ordains those who displease Him to build up wealth for His people. The incomprehensibility of this is that while the Preacher knows that this is true in an ultimate sense, we do not always see it work out that way on this side of glory. Serving the Lord is no guarantee of wealth, and it can lead to hardship and poverty. Why some servants of our Creator prosper greatly in a material sense but other faithful servants do not is difficult to grasp. Only God knows why this is the case. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ecclesiastes 5:18–19;
9:7–10
Philippians 4:11
Hebrews 13:5

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 17–19
Matthew 19:16–30

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

Often we experience suffering when we have faithfully served the Lord, while other faithful servants experience prosperity. When this happens, it is easy to wallow in dissatisfaction. We are also tempted to try to find the reasons why our situation is different than another’s. The answer, however, is to seek the Lord’s face and ask Him to give us contentment and satisfaction with whatever blessings we do have, whether they are large or small.

OPPOSING THE LORD'S ANOINTED

THU | JAN


29

PSALM 2:1-6 “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed” (v. 2).

One does not have to read very far into the book of Psalms before it becomes clear that the Davidic king is a special focus of the Psalter. In fact, the Davidic emphasis is evident as early as Psalm 2, which looks at the opposition to the king in Israel. It is also one of the most frequently cited psalms in the New Testament.

The reference to the Lord’s “Anointed” in Psalm 2:2 indicates that this hymn is about the king. Under the old covenant, prophets, priests, and kings were set apart through anointing with oil (Lev. 8:10–13; 1 Sam. 16:1–13; 1 Kings 19:16). Over time, however, the designation *Anointed* came to apply specifically to the Davidic king and, particularly, the Messiah. The English term *Christ* comes from the Greek word *christos*, which is itself a translation of the Hebrew word that means “anointed.” Thus, it is no surprise that the New Testament Apostles, as well as Christians throughout history, have seen Psalm 2 as having special reference to Jesus Christ.

As noted, Psalm 2 concerns opposition to the Lord and the Davidic king, but note that the psalmist does not seem alarmed by the king’s foes. He says that their plotting is “in vain” (v. 1). The enemies make a lot of noise, but they cannot finally achieve their ends. There is a close association between opposition to the Lord and opposition to the king He has anointed (v. 2). In ancient Israel, the king ruled as the God-appointed steward of the covenant community, so it was impossible to submit to God without submitting to the king. Certainly, the submission encouraged in Psalm 2 assumes that the king is fulfilling his responsibilities to know and keep the law of the Lord (Deut. 17:14–20). Ancient Israelites were never justified in sinning just because the king might have told them to break God’s law. In any case, in enjoining submission to the Lord and His anointed one, the psalm fostered hope in the ancient Israelites for the king—the perfect Anointed One—to whom unquestioning allegiance could be sworn because he would never deviate from God’s law.

Today we know this promised Anointed One as the Lord Jesus Christ. It is impossible to submit to God without submitting to Him as Lord and Savior, for the Father has made Him Lord and Christ, bestowing upon Him the name above all names (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:5–11). John Calvin comments, “All who do not submit themselves to the authority of Christ make war against God. . . . It is in vain for them to profess otherwise.” 

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that Christ executes the office of king by “subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies” (Q&A 26). All who oppose this work do so in vain. He will conquer the hearts of His elect, drawing them all to Himself. He will defeat His enemies and ours. He is the mighty King and Lord of all, and we need not fear anything if we are in Him.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Samuel 22:32–51
Psalm 28:8–9
Matthew 3:13–17
Acts 4:23–31

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 20–22
Matthew 20:1–16

GOD’S CALL TO KISS HIS SON

PSALM 2:7-12 “Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (vv. 10–12).


FRI | JAN

30

Vain is the attempt to oppose the Lord and His appointed king, as we have seen thus far in our study of Psalm 2. Any attempt to overthrow God’s rightful rule can only end in failure (vv. 1–3). Moreover, striving against the Creator is futile to the point of being ridiculous. When God sees people plot against Him and His “Anointed,” He responds with a hearty laugh (v. 4). God’s laugh, however, is not merely an expression of derision, but the prelude to His wrath. Those who will not give up their revolt against Him will be rebuked in His anger and will feel the terror of His wrathful judgment (v. 5).

It is the Lord Himself who has installed the king, and He has given the king a decree (vv. 6–7). The immediate reference in these verses is to the Davidic ruler in ancient Israel, particularly David himself, who was chosen by God for the monarchy (1 Sam. 16:1–13) and given the honor of speaking God’s revelation. It is no accident that David, one of the men who most typified Christ under the old covenant, penned a large portion of the book of Psalms. David’s greatest son—who is also God’s Son, Jesus Christ—would likewise proclaim God’s revelation, preaching the gospel of the kingdom wherever He went (Matt. 4:23).

The specific decree that the Davidic king issues in Psalm 2 focuses on the establishment of his kingdom. He is to declare to the world that he has been enthroned as king over the nations. All the kingdoms of this world must bow to the Davidic king because he has been set over them by none other than God Himself. In fact, this king is God’s “Son,” harking back to the promise of the Davidic covenant that the Lord would be father to David and his line in a special way (Ps. 2:7–9; see 2 Sam. 7:1–17). Because God has set this king on the throne and has chosen to speak through him, there can be no excuse if one chooses not to honor this king and serve the Lord. We are called to “kiss the Son” lest we perish, but if we show due honor, we will experience the blessing that comes from taking refuge in Him (Ps. 2:10–12).

Ultimately, this psalm is about Christ, the greatest descendant of David according to the flesh, who was revealed in His resurrection to be God’s Son, coequal to the Creator in power and glory (Rom. 1:1–4). Psalm 2 shatters the popular view of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” for while our Lord is gentle to His people, He will pour out His wrath on all who rebel against Him. To delay bowing the knee to Christ is to put oneself under the threat of His eternal judgment, for His merciful offer of salvation does not extend past our deaths. 

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 8:13
Malachi 2:1–9

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 23–25
Matthew 20:17–34

THE WEEKEND

Exodus 26–28
Matthew 21

CORAM DEO



Living before the face of God

It is not difficult to get people to say nice things about Jesus when the only Jesus they know is the gentle Jesus of popular culture who makes no demands on anyone. That is not the Jesus of Scripture. We live in an era of divine patience, when God is holding back His wrath so that many may be saved. But make no mistake, this patience is not eternal. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, will execute His wrath at the appointed time. Today is the day of salvation, tomorrow the day of wrath.

Let It Go

ROBERT ROTHWELL

A little more than a year ago, Walt Disney Animation Studios released a little movie called *Frozen*. At the time I am writing, the film is ranked as the fifth-highest-grossing movie of all time. The film is also notable for producing the hit song “Let It Go,” an anthem extolling the virtues of leaving one’s past behind, relying on oneself, and refusing to conform to the expectations of others.

The song is interesting because it can be interpreted in many different ways. In the context of the movie itself, Elsa, the girl who sings the song, actually learns the negatives of overt self-reliance, as it takes the sacrifice of her sister, Anna, for her to be saved from certain death. Read as a song that calls us not to conform to the expectations of others, however, it points us to an important lesson.

Christians and non-Christians alike face pressure to conform to the expectations of others. Some of these expectations are legitimate—parents should provide for their children, employees should do a good job in service to their employer, and so on. Many of these expectations, however, are illegitimate—women should be perfect mothers, cooks, housewives, and lovers, all the while looking like fashion models; men should be ideal fathers, lovers, handymen, and corporate go-getters, all the while maintaining the perfect upper-middle-class lifestyle, featuring a large home, immaculate lawn, and children destined for the Ivy League.

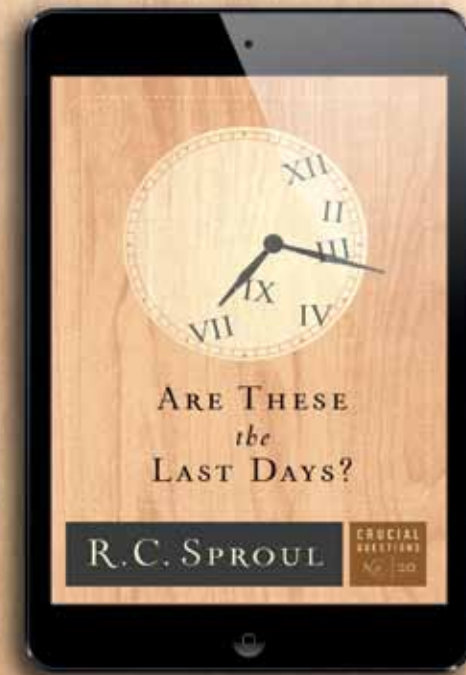
In “Let It Go,” Elsa trades one set of illegitimate demands—one set of legalistic requirements—for another. She casts

aside demands for her not to feel or let anyone know what she can do. She gives them up, imposing on herself the obligation not to let anything bother her and the demand to keep testing her limits, to keep doing what is bigger and better.

Human beings are expert legalists, and in our pursuit of freedom from constraints, we exchange one kind of legalism for another when we seek freedom apart from the gospel. So often, we confuse our own self-imposed standards with the liberating law of Christ (Gal. 6:2; James 1:25). We come up with our own standards of perfection. We may not live under the legalism of having to maintain a certain economic lifestyle, but we bind ourselves with a law that says we have been horrible parents if our children are not always the definition of politeness. We beat ourselves up for not having the perfect family devotions every night. We look down on ourselves—and others—for not toeing the line on homeschooling, private schools, and public education.

Christ came, however, to liberate us from all illegitimate demands, even the illegitimate demands that we label as “Christian.” It is not that we escape all law—for we are under the law of Christ. But this law is freedom from all that God has not actually commanded. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). In Him alone can we let it go without being pressed into a new legalism. **TC**

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WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE SINGING

Over the past one hundred years, Christians have sung, “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free” countless times. Despite what one might think about “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” the hymn rings true in that our joy and freedom in Christ make us want to sing. Yet,

sometimes we are not happy and do not feel like singing in corporate worship. It is therefore helpful to consider some aspects of sung praises in order to properly address this feeling.

PURPOSE

God saved us to proclaim His praises (1 Peter 2:9). He seeks true worshippers (John 4:23) who express their worship in song. Singing is an important means of glorifying and enjoying God. Singing expresses our covenant relationship with God and submission to His will. It demonstrates the unity we enjoy in God with His people. We sing to offer adoration, praise, and gratitude to God for His name, perfections, Word, and works. Singing helps us remember and celebrate God’s past saving deeds, rejoice in His present goodness, and rehearse our future heavenly worship. Singing is also a command, gift, and spiritual discipline that is formative not only for what we believe, but how we live. *Therefore, proclaim God’s praises.*

PASSION

Worship rightly evokes feelings, but it is not chiefly about how we feel. Our feelings

must be informed by God’s Word and subject to Christ’s lordship, not to the whims of personal preference. Scripture commands us to rejoice in the Lord. Singing

enlivens our minds, wills, and feelings in ways that words alone cannot. When we engage our whole selves by presenting our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1), He does not despise our worship, but is pleased to bless our obedience with a greater hunger for and joy in Him. *Therefore, sing even when you do not feel like it.*

PRESENCE

Find great encouragement in the knowledge that in worship, Christ is with us. By His blood, we may boldly enter the Most Holy Place (Heb. 10:19). He is our ever-present High Priest who inhabits our praises (Ps. 22:3), sings with us, praises God, and declares His name to us (Heb. 2:12; Ps. 22:22; Rom. 15:9). His presence is our joy (Ps. 16:11) and His joy is our strength (Neh. 8:10). *Therefore, pray for Christ’s mercy and aid.*

PROVISION

God gives us all we need for life and godliness. Genuine joyful singing, like every discipline, is the work of God’s grace. We cannot muster up joy in our own strength. God gives us the desire and strength to

obey Him. Philippians is helpful in showing the relationships among God’s precepts, promises, and provisions: “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13); “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (4:13); “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (4:19). *Therefore, trust in God’s full provision.*

PRIORITY

Give priority to grateful praise and communion with God in all of life (Ps. 34:1; 113:3; Heb. 13:15). The Psalms model the believer’s desire to be in God’s presence. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD’” (Ps. 122:1; see Pss. 26:8; 27:4). As with any ritual, corpo-

porate praise (51:10–15). Seek the forgiveness of those against whom you have sinned, forgive those who have sinned against you, and remove all bitterness. God promises that in Christ, the genuinely repentant may have full assurance of faith and a clear conscience (Heb. 10:19–25). *Therefore, find true joy in the forgiveness of your sins.*

PREPARATION

Singing is not a passive activity. We are commanded to love, worship, and sing to God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30; Ps. 138:1), in spirit and truth (John 4:24), and with understanding (1 Cor. 14:15). We must be spiritually prepared, physically rested, mentally alert, emotionally expectant, and

AS WITH ANY RITUAL, CORPORATE WORSHIP IS ONLY AS MEANINGFUL AS THE RELATIONSHIP, ACTIVITY, OR EVENT TO WHICH IT POINTS. IF CHRIST’S WORD DWELLS RICHLY IN OUR MINDS AND HEARTS, JOYFUL CORPORATE WORSHIP WILL FOLLOW.


porate worship is only as meaningful as the relationship, activity, or event to which it points. If Christ’s Word dwells richly in our minds and hearts, joyful corporate worship will follow (Col. 3:16–17). *Therefore, prioritize the practice of daily communion with God via His Word, prayer, and song.*

PENITENCE

If we are not seeking the Lord throughout the week but are living in unrepentant disobedience, we will not feel like singing to the Lord. Our joy will be sapped, our lips silenced, and our vitality dried up (Ps. 32:3–4). We must pray for God to search us, give us repentant hearts, renew our spirits, restore our joy, and open our lips to show forth His

readiness to commune with God in worship. The Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120–134) are helpful in refocusing our attention on the joy of entering God’s presence. *Therefore, prepare to meet God in corporate worship.*

CONCLUSION

Singing to the Lord, in all its fullness, is not simply reciting a text set to a tune, but expressing the offering of our whole selves to God in vital, personal communion. May God “take my voice, and let me sing, always, only, for my King.” 

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WHAT SHOULD WE SAY?

“**B**rother, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). Church discipline is both painful and awkward. How should we interact with those under discipline? What should

we do when we meet such people while shopping for a birthday present, when we sit next to them at work, or when we see them getting mail from their mailbox? What should we say?

BIBLICAL DIRECTIVES

Fortunately, the Bible gives us clear direction. Jesus exhorts us to “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). Romans 16:17 says, “avoid them.” Paul orders the church at Corinth not to associate or eat with them (1 Cor. 5:9, 11). Paul concludes in 2 Thessalonians: “Have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (3:14–15).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

While the Bible’s directives are clear, practical application can be difficult. What exactly does it mean “not to associate with” someone under discipline? Here are a few things we try to practice:

Recover biblical community. The consumer-driven model adopted by many American churches makes it difficult to carry out biblical church discipline. People hop from church to church for

superficial reasons such as music style and children’s programming. The New Testament model of a congregation that is committed to one another and takes care of one another is rare; thus, discipline often does not have its intended effect. People who have been confronted for their sin often think, “Fine! I’ll just go down the street and join another church,” and may be accepted into membership without question. Nothing is really lost in church discipline. In the Old Testament, when someone was expelled from the community, he could not simply go down the street to join another people. Being separated from God’s people was devastating, and we see the same picture in the New Testament. We need to recover biblical community where the church is a family that shares life together, where exclusion means something.

Excommunicate those who refuse to repent. Under Christ’s authority, the church should remove the person from membership and treat him like a lost person. This tragic action is necessary in order to keep unchecked sin from contaminating the entire body and to avoid sully the name of Christ (1 Cor. 5). But from what else should the church remove the person? Should they be removed from corporate worship, small groups, or from taking the Lord’s

Supper? Certainly, the unrepentant should be barred from the Lord’s Table as well as other benefits of church life.

Each church will have to determine the extent of these actions for itself. If a church practices the “one another” commands of the New Testament, then the excommunicated could potentially attend corporate worship while still feeling the force of their dismissal because they no longer share life with their brothers in the same way (for example, they do not break bread together anymore). However, if a church is not practicing biblical community well, then I would argue that they must bar the person from corporate worship so that the force of the excommunication is felt.

Do not eat with those under discipline. Scholars debate Paul’s exhortation not

purpose of this break in relationship is to wake the unrepentant up to the danger they face. But church members should never be rude to this person. They should be friendly, but not close friends. One thing that is clear in Paul’s guidelines to the churches is that he does not intend for the excommunicated to be completely shunned. Paul exhorts the church at Thessalonica to “have nothing to do with him,” and then in the next verse to “warn him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14–15). So, while not completely ignoring him, you also do not act as if nothing has changed. When you see him in the store, you should not ignore him. Rather, you treat him as someone in danger and in need of an intervention by calling him to repentance.

Pray and act for eventual repentance and restoration. The intended outcome

THE INTENDED OUTCOME FROM THIS PAINFUL SEPARATION IS ALWAYS REPENTANCE AND RECONCILIATION. . . . WHAT SHOULD WE SAY TO THOSE WHO ARE UNDER DISCIPLINE? WE SHOULD LOVINGLY CALL THEM TO REPENT, AND AS WE DO, THEY SHOULD HEAR THE WORDS AS IF THEY WERE COMING FROM JESUS HIMSELF.

to eat with the excommunicated. Does he mean the Lord’s Table only, or does this prohibition extend to any meal with the unrepentant? Table fellowship in the New Testament seems to include the Lord’s Table but extend beyond it (Acts 2:46). Therefore, meals in a home or at a restaurant that were previously enjoyed cannot continue. Also, in many churches, the significance of the Lord’s Table needs to be recovered—perhaps by observing it weekly—so that being barred from participating in it is perceived as a real loss.

Interact with those under discipline only to call them to repentance. The

from this painful separation is always repentance and reconciliation. Brothers and sisters should continually pray that the action of the church under the authority and approval of Christ would bring restoration. What should we say to those who are under discipline? We should lovingly call them to repent, and as we do, they should hear the words as if they were coming from Jesus Himself.

Dr. Jonathan Akin is senior pastor of Fairview Church in Lebanon, Tenn., and director of Baptist21. He is also an adjunct professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.



ADVANCING THE GOSPEL ON THE FRONT LINES

TT: HOW DID YOU BECOME A CHRISTIAN AND DISCERN YOUR CALL TO MINISTRY?

TK: I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home and a gospel-preaching church. My earliest memory of my mother was her reading the Bible to me. When I was ten years old, during several weeks of preaching, I felt more and more the burden of my sin and my desperate need for Christ. He showed His grace and mercy to me and set me free. I will never forget the joy and

freedom I experienced that night. As Jesus said in John 8:36, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” When I was fifteen, God’s Word seemed to come alive to me like it never had before. The Lord’s presence and promises became very real to me when I read His Word and heard it preached. That’s when, in a definite way, He caused me to know that making Him known was what I was to give my life to.

TT: HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED IN WORLD MISSIONS?

TK: Little by little. Back when I was in college, I taught an adult Sunday school class at my church. We renamed our class “Regions Beyond Bible Class,” from 2 Corinthians 10:16. We tacked a world map on the wall, which was a focal point for prayer and projects, especially for the needs of persecuted Christians. We

raised funds to print and smuggle Bibles behind the Iron Curtain and organized letter-writing campaigns to highlight the plight of brothers and sisters suffering in prison for the sake of the gospel. These were just little things—mobilizing twenty to thirty people to pray and invest. I often think of what an early mentor of mine said: “Between the great things

we cannot do and the little things we will not do, lies the danger of doing nothing.” I am thankful for my great God who graciously does not despise “the day of small things” (Zech. 4:10).

TT: HOW WAS FRONTLINE MISSIONS INTERNATIONAL FOUNDED? HOW DOES IT CARRY OUT ITS MISSION?

TK: Frontline Missions International started in 1992 after the fall of the Iron Curtain. It was a remarkable time of gospel opportunity in those suddenly unshackled lands. Frontline helped equip pastors and Christian workers for the work of the ministry among their own people by providing theological training, equipping church planters, publishing gospel literature, and supplying humanitarian aid in areas torn by war. As more doors opened in Central and South Asia and the Far East,

we continued to form gospel partnerships to strengthen churches in those lands and to position workers for the further advance of the gospel. Frontline Missions is “a team from many nations reaching the nations.”

TT: WHAT IS A “CLOSED COUNTRY”? WHAT ARE TWO OF THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO ADVANCING THE GOSPEL IN SUCH PLACES?

TK: A “closed country” is one way of describing a gospel-destitute country that does not permit visas for religious

workers—that is, a country closed to traditional missions activities. But really, there is no such thing as a “closed country” to the gospel. Jesus has *all* authority in heaven and in earth—and that includes every country. He’s not concerned about borders and visas. Two of the biggest obstacles to advancing the gospel in these settings are (1) fear, and (2) an institutional unwillingness to engage in nontraditional approaches to serving in the hard places. However, the Great Commission’s success isn’t dependent upon American



ILLUSTRATION OF TIM KEESEE BY INDIANAK FOR TABLETALK MAGAZINE

Dr. Tim Keesee

is executive director of Frontline Missions International, a ministry that seeks to advance the gospel around the world—especially in those regions that have little access to it. He is author of *Dispatches from the Front: Stories of Gospel Advance in the World’s Difficult Places*. Frontline Missions International also produces a DVD series with the same name. To learn more about the ministry, visit frontlinemissions.info.



participation. A country may be closed to an American, but it is never closed to Christ. The gospel is not bound by lines on a map. As Christ is calling men and women to Himself from every nation, so He is sending them out to every nation. Thankfully, the worldwide missions force is more diverse—and looks more like the church—than ever before.

TT: WHAT IS THE “10/40 WINDOW,” AND HOW DOES FRONTLINE MISSIONS SERVE IN THAT PART OF THE WORLD?

TK: It is missions shorthand for the most-populous and least-reached region of the world. The 10/40 Window spans from ten degrees north latitude to forty degrees north latitude—from Saharan Africa eastward to China and the

BUDDHISTS, HINDUS, AND OTHERS WHO ARE RESISTANT TO THE GOSPEL?

TK: There is a reason why “Fear not” is the most often repeated commandment in the Bible—we are fearful people. We too easily build walls out of our own fears and do not see Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and others first and foremost as lost sinners, just like we were before Christ changed us. These people are just looking for ways to save themselves and, like us, desperately need Christ. The gospel gives us good reason for humility, and the gospel gives us a good reason for boldness.

TT: PLEASE DESCRIBE THE DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONT BOOK AND VIDEO SERIES. WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING TO ACCOMPLISH THROUGH THESE WORKS?

“The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. . . . It is a radical, inside-out work of God that’s made to last.”

Indonesian archipelago. It contains two-thirds of the world’s people along with the superlatives of despair—worst poverty, shortest lifespan, greatest persecution, least access to the gospel. Frontline Missions is serving in this region by providing training, gospel literature, and support for new church planting efforts. In addition, Frontline has developed creative platforms in education and business to gain greater access to difficult countries in this region.

TT: HOW CAN CHRISTIANS OVERCOME THEIR FEAR IN SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH MUSLIMS,

TK: For as long as I can remember, I have kept a journal. Over the years as I have traveled and ministered, I have recorded stories of the church and how Christ is building it all over the world. The book is a collection of journal entries from eight regions of the world—about twenty countries. The video series is also based on my reporting from the front lines. I see all of these as simply opening windows to Christ’s kingdom all over the world. I believe it grows our vision of our great God and builds confidence in His gospel—that it works and that it is unstoppable.

TT: WHAT ENCOURAGEMENT CAN YOU GIVE TO CHRISTIANS WHO FIND EVANGELISM DIFFICULT?

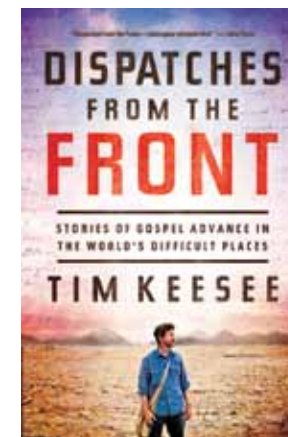
TK: A number of years ago, I was challenged and convicted by the words of a friend—and am reminded often of what he said to me. His name is Tahir, and he is a converted Muslim. He has been very effective in leading many out of that prison house and into the light of Christ. My brother once said to me, “The world is more willing to receive the gospel than Christians are willing to give the gospel.” Evangelism is not having the answers for every objection. Nor is it dependent on our debating skills. We are the willing messengers, but the winning, saving work is God’s part.

TT: YOU’VE TRAVELED TO SOME OF THE MOST DIFFICULT PLACES IN THE WORLD TO DO MINISTRY. WHAT ARE TWO EXAMPLES OF HOW YOU HAVE SEEN GOD AT WORK IN THOSE PLACES?

TK: First, I’ve seen that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It’s not merely mental assent—it is a radical, inside-out work of God that’s made to last. There’s no other explanation for the story (and this is just one of many witnesses to this truth that I’ve met) of a Muslim sheik in the Horn of Africa who beat his sons for becoming Christians but who later became a Christian. The persecutor is now the pastor of the church in what had previously been a one-hundred-percent-Muslim village.

The second thing is that Christ is in us, with us, and for us. This explains the peace in the heart of Gulzar, whom I met in Pakistan. His house had been looted by Muslim mob action and his church burned to the ground. Yet he was confidently quoting Scripture to me, saying, “Let not your heart be troubled. . . . I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1–2), a place that no one can burn down. It’s the explanation for the extraordinary joyful

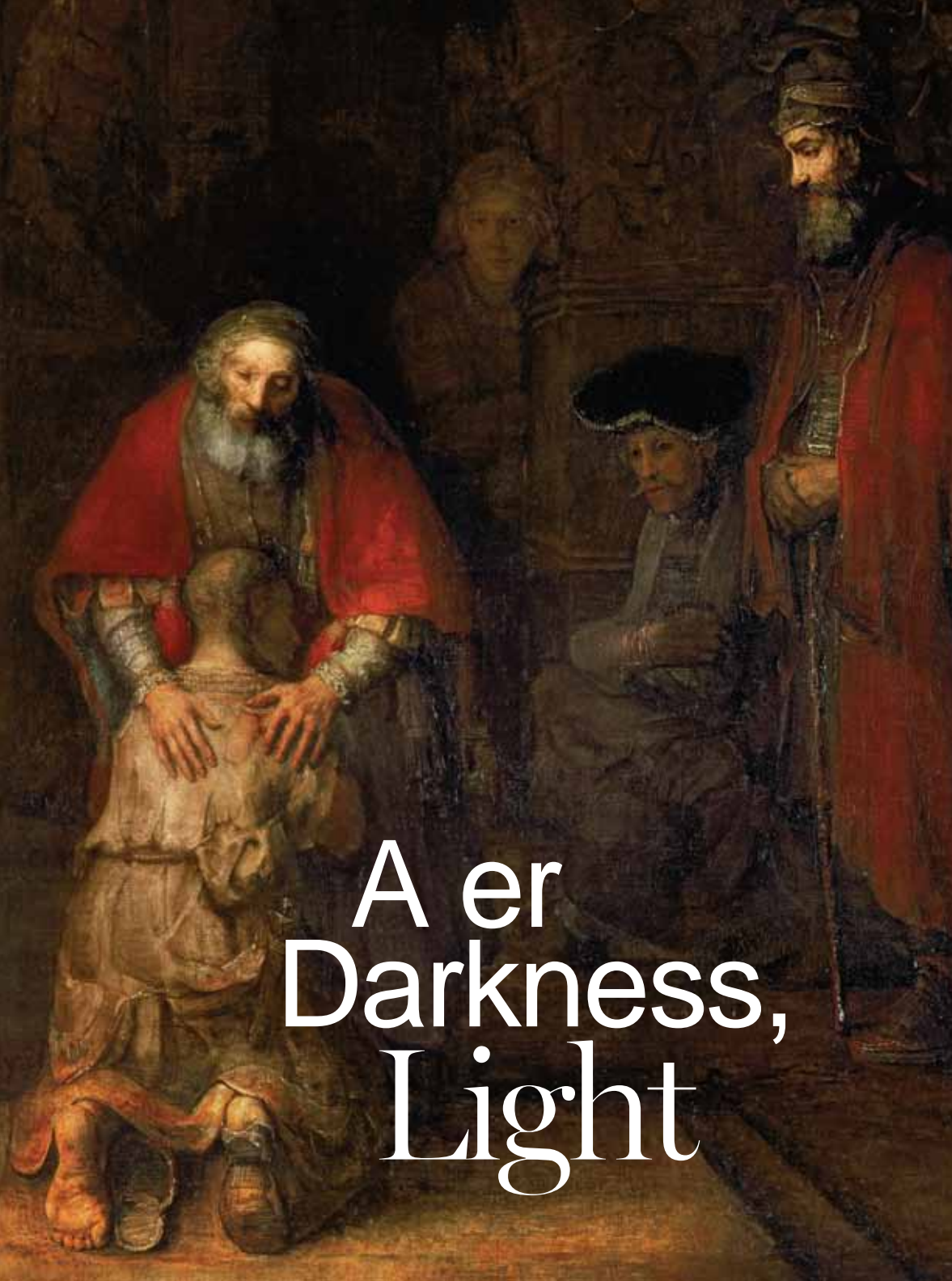
boldness of a brother in North Africa who, on the day he was baptized, sent a group message to everyone in his phone contact list saying, “Walit Masihi!” (I have become a Christian). In his country, that is like asking to be killed, but my brother does not have a death wish—he now has a living hope. **TT**



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PREACH IT

Some years ago, it was common to see young evangelicals sporting a peculiar fashion accessory: the WWJD bracelet. These bracelets—the initials woven therein standing for “What Would Jesus Do?”—served to remind the wearer to consider the example of Christ in all his daily activities.

For some, these bracelets likely also had a secondary function: evangelism. This was the case for a friend of mine who worked among many non-Christians. He told me one day that he wore the bracelet in order to elicit curiosity among his coworkers, in hopes that they would see it, along with his upstanding behavior, and ask him what the bracelet meant.

But what then? My friend did not want to rock the boat at his office by being verbally open about his faith. But at some point, the gospel must be preached, for the need of our neighbors is great. Let us look at three reasons why behavior and other externals cannot take the place of preaching the gospel.

WE ARE NOT ALONE

We as Christians do not have a monopoly on good behavior. In the West, the legacy of Christendom lingers such that even non-Christians will still often profess a moral code that borrows heavily from the Scriptures. In the East, kindness and humility are cardinal virtues. For every story of a Christian saint, there is a Gandhi or a Buddha.

It is not unusual to find non-Christians whose upright behavior matches or exceeds that of even the most sanctified among us. We should not be surprised at this.

Paul says God has given each of us a conscience, and that conscience serves to guide and correct even unbelievers (Rom. 2:14–15). So, while our good works bear witness to the work of the Spirit in our lives, they are not sufficient in themselves for evangelistic purposes.

DOCTRINE MATTERS

We dare not reduce Christianity to a life well lived, one that can be caught and need not be taught. To do so threatens to water it down to a works-based religion, one based on what we do, rather than what Christ has done.

Nearly a century ago, J. Gresham Machen clashed with those who sought to define the Christian faith as a life rather than a doctrine. Such a view has the appearance of godliness, he said, but it is radically flawed. For the Bible records not simply the ethical teachings of Jesus, as if that were enough, but also a singular, epochal event in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God (1 Cor. 15:3–8). And the Bible goes further, telling us what that event means. Machen says:

The world was to be redeemed through the proclamation of an event. And with the event went the meaning of the event; and the setting forth of the event with the meaning of the event was doctrine. These two elements are always combined in the Christian message. . . . “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried”—that is history. “He loved me and gave Himself for me”—that is doctrine.

The life change wrought by the Spirit in the wake of one’s receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation is a won-

not return in judgment: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). Similarly, the ease of modern life lulls us into complacency. The non-Christian tries to console himself with the thought that he need not fear judgment, either because he is a “good person” or because no judgment is coming.

But, Peter says, the scoffers overlook the fact that God has judged the world before, and He will do it again (vv. 5–7). Thus, we must challenge our neighbors. As only those in the ark survived the

WHEN OUR NEIGHBORS ASK WHY WE LIVE THE WAY THAT WE DO, WE MUST TELL THEM: WE HAVE BEEN FREED FROM THE BURDEN OF SIN BECAUSE OF THE WORK OF CHRIST, AND NOW WE LIVE FOR HIM. AND WE MUST WARN THEM: A JUDGMENT IS COMING, AND THEIR WORKS WILL NOT SAVE THEM—BUT GOD, IN HIS LOVE, HAS MADE A WAY FOR THEM THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF HIS SON, JESUS.


derful and desirable thing, but it can never be divorced from Christ’s work on the cross, or else it puts the focus on us and our works. Thus, we must always point people to the cross. If it is not merely a life to us, neither is it for them. There is truth that we must grasp, and so must they. And for them to grasp it, they must hear it (Rom. 10:14).

JUDGMENT IS COMING

Many teachings of Christ (Matt. 11:20–24; 25:31–46; Mark 1:14–15) and much of the preaching of the early church (Acts 2:38; 17:30–31; Heb. 9:27–28) focused on the coming judgment and on repentance and faith in Christ as the only way to avoid it.

Some in Peter’s time pointed to continuity in life as proof that Christ would

flood, so only those who are in Christ will survive the judgment.

As we live lives of faithful obedience, we must always be ready. When our neighbors ask why we live the way that we do, we must tell them: we have been freed from the burden of sin because of the work of Christ, and now we live for Him. And we must warn them: a judgment is coming, and their works will not save them—but God, in His love, has made a way for them through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. If they will repent and believe the gospel, they will surely be saved. 

Kevin D. Gardner is associate editor of *Tabletalk* magazine and a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

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