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In the Beginning

Seeing Jesus—January 5, 2014

John 1:1–14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. **8** He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. **9** The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. **11** He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—**13** children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full

of grace and truth.

The Word of the Lord.

Christmas is the time of the year in which we, as a church, observe and think about the birth of Jesus. Lent is the time in which we think about the meaning of the death of Jesus. Traditionally, in the church year, the season between Christmas and Lent (not as well known a season) has a name: Epiphany. *Epiphany* means looking not at the birth or death of Jesus but at the life of Jesus, what he said, and what he did.

You can't really understand the real Jesus if you only look at his birth and his death. You must also look at his words and his deeds during his life. That's what we're going to do for the next two months. We're going to take one particular gospel, the gospel of John, and we're going to look at the words and deeds of Jesus in his life between his birth and his death.

We start today with John 1, the prologue, one of the most rich and famous parts of the Bible. In some ways it takes pressure off a preacher, because preachers always feel like, "I have to pull out all of the great stuff that's in this text," but this is one of those times in which there's too much great stuff to pull out that I couldn't possibly get it all. So I would like to give you a top-level view of it by outlining it and looking at the three main parts and, therefore, the three main points.

Verses 1–4 are about a *claim*: a radical, amazing claim. Verses 5–11 are about the *rejection of that claim*. But verses 12–14 are the *answer to the objections to the claim*. So you have the claim, the rejection of the claim, and the answers to the objections to and rejection of the claim. Let's walk through it like that.

1. *The claim.* The first four verses, which are very famous, constitute a claim. It's a claim about the Word. There are five things we're told about the Word.

First of all, *the Word is a person*; it's personal. Notice the word *he*. Secondly, *the Word was divine*. The Word was God. Thirdly, we're not just talking about a divine-ish kind of person. *This is a person who was never created*; he doesn't have a beginning. It says, "**Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.**" This means everything that has a beginning, found its beginning in him, which means he is without beginning.

Fourthly, *we have an uncreated, divine person, the source of all life*. "**In him was life ...**" (not just "he got life" or "has life"); all life comes from him. And the last thing we learn is all the way at the bottom. In verse 14 it becomes very clear *this is Jesus Christ*. "**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory ...**"

We could obviously spend five hours, days, weeks, maybe even years ... taking each of those five claims and pulling them out, but what's really significant is the word *Word*. It's the fact that John uses this very interesting and unusual way of

describing Jesus Christ. He says “**In the beginning was the Word ...**” (Jesus is the Word), and because he wrote in Greek, the Greek word he used here was *logos*. In the beginning was the *Logos*; Jesus Christ was the *Logos*; the *Logos* became flesh.

John deliberately used a word here that had an enormous amount of cultural, linguistic, and philosophical freight. He deliberately used it, and the only way we’re going to understand what it means, why he used it, and what a radical claim this is if we can get some background. You have to start with the Greek philosophers, because they came up with this idea of a *logos*. They looked at nature, and do you know what they saw? They saw balance, harmony, and an order to nature, and they posited there was a spiritual, cosmic principle of order behind it.

Here’s one philosophy book that says, “The *Logos* ... for the Stoics merged with the impersonal, harmonious, and divine structure of the *cosmos* as a whole.” So behind the order and balance of nature was the *logos*. The word *logos*, of course, didn’t just mean *word*. It has a broader semantic range than our word *word*. *Logos* means purpose or reason (logic) for life. In other words, when they said, “We believe the universe has a *logos*,” that means there’s an absolute truth or reason for its existence. There’s a meaning or purpose to things.

This is pretty high. Are you getting a philosophical nosebleed? To get the gist of this, I have to talk about our space heaters in our apartment. You know Local Law 11. Every so often they have to do brick work on the front of our building. So our building is going through Local Law 11. We have these guys going up and down, knocking the bricks out and all that, and during the day we are not allowed to turn our heaters on because it blows out on the guys.

I don’t know if any of you have looked at the thermometer recently, but that can be a problem, so the building gives us space heaters. The space heaters always come with a set of directions, and it’s very important to read them, because do you know what’s in the directions? The *logos*, or the design, of the space heater.

There are certain ways in which you need to use the space heater. It was built in such a way that you must plug it in to *these* sources, not *those* sources. You must put it over *here*, not over *there*. In other words, your use must be aligned with its design, its reason for existence. If you do not use it in alignment with its *logos*, at best, you will not get the value of it; at worst, you will burn down your place. It’ll be a disaster.

Here’s what the Greeks said: “What if the universe is a *logos*? What if life has a *logos*? What if there is a divine order or spiritual, cosmic structure behind the universe? That would mean if we aligned with that, our lives would go well. If we didn’t align with the way things really are (the *logos*, the universe’s reason for life), we would experience, at best, a lack of contentment and, at worst, we might burn our lives down.

So that’s what they did. What they said is, “That’s what you have to do. You

figure out what that *logos* is, and you align with it.” Of course, the problem was it makes sense to say, “I want my life to be aligned with ultimate reality. I want my life to be aligned with the fabric of the universe, so I’m living along the grain of the universe, as it were.” That makes perfect sense, except nobody could completely agree on what it was.

The Greek Stoics (by the word you know right away what I’m going to say) believed what it meant to align your life with the *logos* was to accept everything that happened. Whatever happens in nature is all right; therefore, you align with it. The Stoics meant you accept everything. Stiff upper lip. Suffering? Death? Don’t let it get to you. That’s one way to have a happy life: Get absolutely aligned with the universe. And what they meant by that was *everything*.

Now, you had the Epicureans … You had a lot of other different approaches that said, “No, no, no. What it means to align with the universe is you just live to make this world a better place for the people who are coming later: live unselfishly.” The Epicureans said, “No, no, no. You live selfishly. The meaning of life is to find what makes you happy and do it.”

So people had these different approaches, “You have to align with it,” and then, the earthquake. It was an earthquake in history. Along comes John, and he says, “Oh, there is a *Logos*, but it isn’t like anything you’ve ever thought. You’re looking for principles, abstractions, and books of rules. There is a *Logos*, and it is the thing we are to live for, and the *Logos* is our source of our design, but it’s a person, not a principle.

This history of philosophy book I was reading says this (this was written by a French philosophy professor who is not a Christian), “The *Logos* … for the Stoics merged with the impersonal, harmonious, and divine structure of the *cosmos* as a whole. [...] To the horror of the Greeks, the new believers maintained that the *Logos*—in other words the divine principle—was in some sense identical with the harmonious order of the world, but was incarnated in one outstanding individual, namely Christ.”

Not a principle, but an actual person. If the heart of the universe were not impersonal (as the Greeks and Eastern religions believed) but a person, it meant there was now an unprecedented emphasis on the idea and importance of love in human life.

“But there is more: by resting its case upon a definition of the human person and an unprecedented idea of love, Christianity was to have an incalculable effect upon the history of ideas. To give one example, it is quite clear that, in this Christian re-evaluation of the human person, the philosophy of human rights to which we subscribe today would never have established itself.”

That’s absolutely right. This philosophy professor is not a Christian, by the way. He goes on, and many others say the same thing. If you believe the universe is essentially impersonal, then people don’t really matter, but if you say the meaning of the universe is essentially personal, that it comes from a person, a

Creator, then people matter, and everyone has rights and dignity.

Here's the point: If you believe the meaning of life (the reason for life, the *logos*) is basically an abstract principle, then how do you align with that? You have to be smart, because you have to do philosophical contemplation to figure out what it is. You have to be scientific, and you have to check out the order of nature. You have to be strong, because you have to align with it. You have to be brilliant. You have to be self-controlled. How elitist is that? What about the rest of us?

Along comes Christianity and says, "No, no. There is a *Logos*. Life is not a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. There is a meaning to life, but if you want to align with the ultimate reality, you have to have a relationship with a person: your Author, your Creator, the Progenitor of us all. And by having a personal relationship of love with him, you are aligned with the universe." That's revolutionary. It not only changed human thought, but of course, it swept the old Roman Empire.

That was the claim. Do you see how revolutionary it was? Having said that, as great and amazing as that claim is, and as much as it has actually left a permanent imprint on the history of Western civilization.... Western civilization, because of Christianity, will always have a higher regard for persons than all other kinds of worldviews, backgrounds, or civilizations.

2. *The rejection of that claim.* The second part of this passage says in spite of all that, there has been widespread rejection of this claim. Verses 5–11 says there has been widespread rejection of the idea that Jesus Christ is the *Logos*, the meaning of life, the heart of reality we have to know. Of course, this section right here talks about that. It says, "**The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.**"

This middle section is about the fact that, by and large, there has been widespread rejection of the claim that Jesus is the *Logos*. To understand that rejection, we need to take a look at one really interesting verse. Some of you who are familiar with this passage realize it often gets translated in different ways depending on the translation.

It says in verse 5, "**The light shines in the darkness, and ...**" What does it say here? "**... the darkness has not overcome it.**" But, you know, there are other translations that say, "**... the darkness has not understood it.**" The old King James Bible says, "**And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.**"

We read this during Lessons and Carols, and one of you in the choir came up to me afterwards and said, "Wait a minute, this morning it was read and it said, '**... the darkness has not overcome it,**' but I thought it was, '**... the darkness has not understood it.**'" The reason is because the word John uses here (again, very deliberately) is an ambiguous word.

In fact, Don Carson, a friend of mine who has written a commentary on the book of John, says about this verse and this word, “This verse is a masterpiece of planned ambiguity.” The same word can mean overcome and understand. You can either fail to overcome something or fail to understand something. You say, “Well, they don’t seem to be related.” Think of the word *master* for a minute. What does it mean to master something?

To *master* something might mean to overpower it, but it also can mean to get it, to figure it out. I would like you to think for a minute with me. The reason it’s planned ambiguity is it means there are at least two different ways of rejecting Jesus Christ. One is to be overtly hostile to him, and the other is to not understand him (or think maybe you do, but you don’t). Either way, you’ve rejected him.

Let’s take a look at those two. Let’s see how that’s playing out now. John had what he was thinking about in his time, but it’s played out over the years. How does it play out today? First of all, of course, those of us who live in a place like New York City know there are lots of people who are hostile to the idea that Christianity is the truth or that Jesus Christ is the absolute truth behind the universe and even to the idea that there *is* an absolute truth, a *logos*. Some people are trying to overcome that.

Christian Smith is a sociologist who has studied the religious, moral, and spiritual lives of young adults who live in America. Very interesting books. One of the books is called *Souls in Transition*, one is called *Lost in Transition*, and there’s another book on teenagers called *Soul Searching*. By talking to thousands and thousands of young adults about their moral views, he comes to the conclusion that their moral views have three characteristics. Are you ready? Listen to this.

First, *they have very strong moral feelings*. They are very much against injustice, violation of rights, treating anyone without fairness, exploitation of the poor, not caring for the poor. Secondly, *they are moral relativists*. They will say over and over again that no one has the right to tell somebody else what is right or wrong for them. There are two aspects to that moral relativism: they would say morality is person-specific and culturally relative (not that they would use those terms; those are the sociologist terms).

To say *person-specific* is to say, “Everyone has the right to determine what is right or wrong for them, and you don’t have the right to tell somebody else what is right or wrong for them. *Culturally relative* is that every culture has its own set of mores and ethics, and you at your culture should not be telling their culture that your culture is superior to theirs.

So first of all, they have strong moral feelings; secondly, they’re moral relativists; and thirdly, *they believe morality is self-evident*. If you ask a younger American, “You feel that’s wrong? *Why* is that wrong?” They’ll say, “Well, everybody knows it.”

“What are the reasons you believe that’s wrong?”

"It's just ... People know that. You just recognize it."

The sociologists took a look at these three things and here's what they conclude. First of all, they conclude this is incredibly incoherent. You know the way it comes out? One of the things they'll say is, "Hey, do you know about this country, this culture over here, where the husbands won't even let the wives drive? Women aren't even allowed to have a driver's license. And do you know about this other country over here where husbands make ... Women can't do this and they can't do that. Do you think that's right or wrong?"

"It's wrong!"

"Why is it wrong? That's their culture. Are you saying your culture is better than their culture?"

Total crickets.

Here's why it's incoherent: They have strong moral feelings yet absolutely no basis for a program of justice. They have no basis on which they can say to somebody, "You're doing it wrong." They have strong moral feelings but have no way of carrying out any kind of program. It's totally incoherent.

Secondly, the sociologists say, these three views (Strong moral feelings, moral relativism, and the idea that morality is self-evident. [It isn't, by the way; everybody disagrees, how can it be self-evident?]) are not only incoherent; they're inconsistent. They point out that younger Americans, even though they feel very strongly we should care for the poor, are unbelievably consumeristic and selfish with the way they spend money on themselves. That's a problem, isn't it? The idea that there's no absolute truth leads to being inconsistent and incoherent.

So what do we do? We decide there *is* a *logos*. There *is* absolute truth. We're going to believe in absolute truth, there are moral absolutes, and we're going to accept that, embrace that, and bring our lives in alignment with that. We're going to be really good persons. Let me tell you how that works. Just to say those are moral absolutes ... there is a *logos*, and I'm going to live up to it ... is oppressive. It leads to oppression in two ways.

The first way is *it can oppress and crush you* because you're trying so hard to live up according to it, and you're never going to get there. You're always hating yourself and beating yourself up: "I'm just not the person I should be." That's one way of aligning with the universe, but it doesn't work.

The other bad thing that could happen is *you could live up to it*. You might be one of those elite people who actually can set your standards and live up to them, in which case you're not oppressed on the inside; you become an oppressor. In other words, you become a bigot, self-righteous, a Pharisee, someone who says, "Look, I'm good, why can't you be? Suck it up. I pulled myself together. I've kept myself out of jail. I've made a lot of money. You're poor? You're in jail? What's

wrong with you?"

You see, if you say, "There is no *logos* or moral absolutes," what do you have? Incoherence and inconsistency. "All right, there is a *logos*, I'm going to align with it," and you have oppression, either oppression on the inside or oppression through you on the outside. But that's not what Jesus is about. It's one thing to say there is no *logos*, and it's another thing to say there is a *logos*, but was Jesus about moralism?

To say there is no *logos* is relativism, but to say there is a *logos* and I'm going to live up to it is moralism. Is Jesus about that? No! Here's where you see it. Verse 11: "**He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.**" "He came to his own, but his own did not receive him." Why? He was Jewish, right? He went to the Jews, and they rejected him because they didn't comprehend him. They didn't get him because he did these strange things.

He hung out with prostitutes and sinners, and then he said to the Pharisees (they were very good people who were aligned with the absolute truth), "The prostitutes and whoremongers get into heaven before you." They didn't get him, because he's not about relativism. If you're a relativist, you've rejected Jesus, but moralism is also to reject Jesus. It's not to comprehend him or understand what he's about.

Before moving on to the last point to show how we get out of this conundrum, may I say something kind of daring? It's not like I've never said this before, but it still feels daring. Who are his own today? If we're talking about Jesus' own, who are his own today? It's us. It's the church. It's the people who say, "We're Christians."

To what degree do we not get Jesus? To what degree do we not comprehend him? To what degree do we fall into moralism as opposed to understanding the gospel? To what degree do we say we believe in absolute truth but are vehicles for oppression, that is, oppression inside (always feeling guilty and like they could never live up) or outside.

Do you see the problem? On the one hand, you have one way of rejecting this claim: relativism. The other way of rejecting is moralism. We are stuck, and I'll tell you why. Our culture has rejected moralism. We don't like it. We don't like people saying they have the absolute truth. We've rejected that.

To put it in a little cultural context: those of you who are my age, whose hair is not the same color as it used to be ... If you grew up in America, who were the bad people? Who were the people trying to blow us up? Communists, right? And who were the Communists? They didn't believe in God. All right, so religious people were the good people, and the people who didn't believe in God were the bad people. That's what we grew up with.

A lot of you who look like your hair is what it was when you were born grew up with a very different situation. Who are the people trying to blow us up now? Religious fanatics. People who think they have the truth. If you grew up with that

shadow, you don't like religion. You're scared of it or anybody who believes too much.

But we've just said if you say there is no *logos* and everybody has to decide what is right or wrong, do you realize what that is? Incoherence, inconsistency, and no basis for a program of justice. It's a problem. Of course, the other problem is moralism, so is there a way through? Is there a way forward?

3. *The answer to the objections to the claim.* Is there a way to solve this problem? Yes, there has been for 2,000 years, it's called the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is beautifully, beautifully put in these last three verses. Memorably, famously, as good of three verses as you'd ever want to explain the gospel.

"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Let's unpack this briefly but carefully. First of all, it says not everybody is a child of God; it has to be received. This pushes against the popular idea that all human beings are God's children. The Bible says in one sense that's true. Paul says in Acts 17, "**We are his offspring.**" In fact, he's talking to Greek philosophers, interestingly enough. Paul talks to the Greek philosophers, Stoics, the Epicureans, the people who were looking for the *logos*.

He says, "**We are his offspring.**" In a sense, because God created us, yes, just like Henry Ford is the father of the Model T, God is our Father in the sense that he's our Creator, and he's produced us. But the Bible, in general, does not say God is your Father just because you've been born. The idea of having a relationship of child to Father, son or daughter to Father, is so special in the Bible. It's a gift.

How so? If you are an employee, and you have a boss, and you misbehave, what happens? The more you misbehave, the more your boss' regard for you goes down, and eventually you lose your job. Do you know why? Because your relationship with your boss is based on your performance and a cost-benefit analysis. Right? Not that your boss might not be sympathetic, but if you keep misbehaving, his or her regard for you goes down, and eventually you lose your job because your relationship is based on your performance and cost-benefit.

But if you're a good father, and you have some children, and one of them really starts to misbehave, what happens? Your father's heart is *more* engaged. Your fatherly love is *more* intensified. Do you know why? Because the relationship between a child and a father is not based on performance. It's not a consumer relationship. It's not cost-benefit. It is a covenant relationship. It is based on unconditional faithfulness and commitment.

What does that mean? If you don't have an appointment with the president of the

United States, and you try to get in to see him, you'll be stopped. If you start running toward him, you'll be shot. In fact, even if you *do* have an appointment and you start running toward him, you'll probably be shot. But if he's your daddy, because you're his little boy or little girl, you go right in. You don't have to have credentials. You don't have to be worth the president's time.

Is it possible to have a relationship like that with God, the Author of the universe? Yes. A relationship based on grace? How could that be? Here's how. "**The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us ...**" Again, it's amazing. When John is writing in Greek, he's being so careful, because the word that's there ... It says, "**The Word became flesh, and dwelt [tabernacled] among us ...**"

What was the tabernacle, the temple? All around the world there have always been temples, because all human beings instinctively sense that if there is a God, there's a gap: God is great, and we're small; God is perfect, and we're flawed. Temples were places to bridge the gap. You had offerings and sacrifices, you atoned for sin, and you sought to do everything you could to bridge the gap. You had priests who did it full time for you.

But now, we're told, Jesus becomes the tabernacle; he becomes the temple. He is the ultimate priest, because he laid down the ultimate sacrifice. When he went to the cross, he died for our sins, and that means he's the temple. He gets rid of the need for temples, and we can become children by grace.

That is exactly what you need. We can't live without absolutes, but we can't have an oppressive absolute. *We need a non-oppressive absolute*, and here it is: a man dying on the cross for your sins, a God of strength becoming weak and flesh, a man with life going to the cross and losing his life, being the ultimate sacrifice, tabernacling, becoming our temple.

And if you see a man dying for his enemies, sacrificing his life, and forgiving his enemies, that can't make you into an oppressor. On the one hand, that means I'm saved by grace. That won't crush me on the inside. On the other hand, if I am saved by grace, it's only because I don't deserve it, and I can't feel superior to anybody else, so that doesn't make me an oppressor to anyone else.

You say, "Well, haven't Christians been oppressors in the past?" Yes. Only if they didn't comprehend it. Only if they didn't understand it or get it. And the ones who did, the early Christians, invented orphanages and hospitals (they didn't exist before). They stopped the infanticide of girls. They changed history. Now, you. Comprehend it. Get a love relationship with the heart of reality that's based on grace and then go out and take your part in continuing to change history until he comes again. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have given us a wonderful glimpse of who Jesus Christ is, and we ask that you would help us to apply this to our lives. We want to be agents out there in the world. The world needs people who not only can help them find God and connect to you through Jesus Christ.

But even if they don't believe the gospel they need people around who have

been changed by the gospel, people who are not oppressors, who pour themselves out even for their enemies and opponents the way your Son Jesus did. O Father, please change us with the gospel so people can see that you sent your Son. Help us to apply this to our lives through the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

The Lamb

Seeing Jesus—January 12, 2014

John 1:19–34

19 Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. **20** He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." **21** They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

22 Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" **23** John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "

24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent **25** questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" **26** "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. **27** He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." **28** This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! **30** This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' **31** I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

32 Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. **33** And I myself did not know him, but

the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

At Christmas, the church observes the birth of Jesus Christ and thinks about what that means. At Lent, Good Friday, and Easter, we think about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means. But there's a season between Advent and Christmas and Lent and Easter that's not as well known but has been there for centuries. This less-well-known season in the Christian church is called *Epiphany*.

During Epiphany, the church customarily reads passages of Scripture about the life of Jesus (which, by the way, some of you would be able to deduce comes between the birth and the death of Jesus). What he said, who he said he was, what he did ... In January and February, we're going to be looking at the gospel of John and what John tells us about who Jesus is.

Last week we looked at the first part of the book of John and how Jesus is the Word of God. Today, we see the next part of this chapter in which we learn he is the Lamb of God. We ask every time, “What does that mean for us?” This particular passage which you just heard read to you actually is about something very contemporary.

People come up to John the Baptist and say, “What is your identity? Who are you? What is your self-image? What is your self-imagination? What is your self-understanding?” That has a very contemporary ring to it, so it has quite a bit to do with us. Let's take a look at *John's view of himself, John's view of Jesus, the resulting personality and character that flows from those two views, and what that means for us*.

1. *John's view of himself.* Who was John the Baptist? He was a very popular preacher. He had tons of people out to hear him, but he was a man who came up outside of the right channels. He was not educated by an approved and recognized rabbi, he was not accredited by an approved religious institution, yet he was out there preaching. Lots and lots of people were coming to hear him in the wilderness, which means outside the city, and he was talking about the Messiah, that the Messiah was coming.

This bothered the Jewish authorities quite a bit. Lots of people in those days believed there would be a Messiah who would come. The Messiah was conceived to be a Jewish leader who would rally the Jews against the rule of Rome. There was also a prediction that someone would come who was the Elijah figure. Malachi 4 says before the Messiah came there would be a forerunner who would be a prophet like unto Elijah.

The question that was circulating around Israel was, “Who is this John the Baptist? Is he the Messiah? Or does he think he's the Messiah, but he just hasn't

announced it yet? Or does he think of himself as the Elijah prophet? After all, he's wearing rough clothes, and he's outside in the wilderness. Maybe he's cultivating an Elijah image. We'd better go find out who he is."

One of the reasons they had to go find out who he is was because the Roman overlords were not at all happy with any kind of talk about a Jewish Messiah. The Jewish leaders knew if they cracked down, they would be cracking down on them. So they sent out an investigative team. Verse 19 says, "**... the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.**" They came right out and asked him a set of questions. "Are you the Messiah?"

"No, I am not the Messiah."

"Well then, are you Elijah?"

"No, I am not Elijah."

"Well, are you the prophet?"

Now, in Deuteronomy chapter 18, there's a prediction of a figure coming to help Israel called the prophet, a prophet like unto Moses. You know how people would debate about these things. Some people thought this great prophet to come was the Messiah. Other people said, "No, the great prophet to come was the Elijah, the forerunner." Other people said, "No, it's a third person." So there was all this debate.

Just to make sure they went down the list and weren't leaving any stone unturned, they said, "Well, are you the prophet?" He said, "No." Here's what we have to immediately see if we compare what John is saying about himself with what Jesus says about John. John is getting it wrong. In Matthew 11, people ask Jesus about John. They want to know who John is. Listen carefully. Jesus says,

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? [...] A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. [...] Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist ... And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."

Take a look at that. First of all, he says, "Amongst all those born of women ..." That's a lot of people. Outside of the three or four Martians that are here undercover ... What he says is, "Of all the human beings who have ever lived, this is the greatest one in history, up to now." And then he says, "For those of you who are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah forerunner."

What this means is very simple and stark. Jesus had a far higher view of John the Baptist and his ministry than John the Baptist did. Jesus believed he was a person of momentous historic significance. John the Baptist did not. He says, "No, I'm not anybody special. I'm not anybody of significance."

Who was right? Well, today, an awful lot of people have heard of John the Baptist. He obviously was a person of enormous historical significance. Jesus was right, John was wrong. John couldn't see his own greatness. He got it

wrong. Why? “Well,” somebody says, if you’re from New York, “low self-esteem.”

Here’s a guy who didn’t know his own talents, abilities, or greatness. Is this low self-esteem? To answer we need to go on in the sermon, but before we go on let me just point something out to you. There are two reasons why a person who is really great at something might not know they’re as great as they are.

One is they are so focused on themselves, looking at themselves with such self-absorbed intensity, that they’re picking every little thing that’s wrong with them out and not seeing the whole. In other words, one reason a person of greatness might not know they have that greatness is *they might be focused on themselves incredibly.*

The other possibility is *they’re not looking at themselves at all.* They’re looking away from themselves to something else, and they just aren’t looking at themselves. They’re not figuring out, “What is my legacy? What is my place in history?” They’re not even thinking about it, because they’re looking at something else. It doesn’t have to be low self-esteem. Let’s go on.

2. *John’s view of Jesus.* John says three things about Jesus, and they are astounding. He’s kind of vague about who he is, but he’s not vague about who this Messiah is who’s coming. First of all, in verse 23, he quotes Isaiah 40. He says, **“Make straight the way for the Lord.”** That’s Isaiah 40. If you go back to Isaiah 40, it says, “A voice crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make a highway for our God.”

The word *Lord* there is the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, the covenant name. What Isaiah 40 is talking about is making a highway or pathway for God himself who’s going to come back and redeem his people. And John the Baptist has the audacity to say, “That’s the one who I’m pointing to, the one who’s about to come, the one who Isaiah 40 is talking about.” He’s really saying this is a divine personage.

Secondly, down here in verses 32–34 … I won’t go into it in-depth, but what’s interesting about verses 32–34 is where he says, **“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove … I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”**

Interestingly enough, Matthew, Mark, and Luke actually describe the baptism of Jesus with the voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit coming down on him. In John it’s only recalled right here. In other words, John the Baptist has already seen it. He says this divine personage, this astounding person, I’ve already seen, and I am baptizing with water, calling people to repentance, getting them prepared to serve a great King. I’m calling people to humble themselves and get ready to serve a great King with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The third thing he says is up here in verse 27. He says, **“… among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of**

whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist (sort of psychologist, sort of anthropologist) who teaches at New York University, wrote a book called *The Righteous Mind*. In that he says pretty much all cultures have something most of the people in the culture agree is overwhelmingly disgusting.

Every culture has something or some things that are utterly stomach-turning disgusting, absolutely foul and degrading. In that culture (it was a dusty, hot culture, a dirty time of history), everybody wore sandals all day. At night, when you took the sandals off, it was really foul. It was considered unbelievably degrading to have to take somebody else's sandals off. Taking your own off was probably bad enough, but after all, that's you. To take somebody else's off was considered absolutely degrading.

There were all kinds of rules to guard people from that actually happening. For example, if you had servants, one of the rules was you could never make a Jewish servant take your sandals off. That would be too degrading to make a fellow countryman do. If you have a Gentile dog who's a servant, then do that.

There was another rule ... Rabbis had disciples, like teachers and professors have students. The students served the rabbi, which meant they did a lot of the things the servants did. But one of the rules was even though the disciples needed to serve their rabbis, the one thing the rabbis could not make the disciples do was untie their sandals at night. Why? Because, after all, they are disciples. They're not slaves.

Notice John the Baptist does not say what you would expect him to say, "I am *only* worthy to untie the sandals." If he had said that, it would have been to say, "I'm not even a disciple. I'm not even a servant." But he doesn't even say that. He's trying to destroy the categories. He says, "I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals." He doesn't say, "I'm *only* worthy to untie his sandals." He says, "I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals."

Do you know what this means? He is saying, "This is not just a regular rabbi. This is not just a regular king. This is someone so far above you and me that all the pecking order, all the social categories, are just shattered. This is someone who is so high I am below the below of the lowest because he is above the above of the highest." That's an amazing way of looking at Jesus. That's who he's looking at. He's thought about this. Look at the descriptions of it. Now we're getting a little closer to who John the Baptist is.

2. *The resulting personality and character.* Where do you get your self-image, your self-understanding, your self-regard, your self-assessment? How do you decide whether you're a good or bad person? How do you feel good about yourself or bad about yourself? I'll tell you. If you leave God out of the situation, there are only two places to go.

You can look at what other people think about you or you can look at what you think about yourself. You can look at other people's standards and expectations

for you (your family, culture, peer group, whatever it is), you can look at what other people say and think about you (what they expect you to be, and how they assess you) or you can look at yourself. You can say, “What matters is what I believe and what my standards are and what I want to do in life.”

Let's be honest, most of us actually put our self-image together somewhat by putting them together. Those of you from more traditional cultures know in traditional cultures, your identity is based on whether you fulfill the social role given to you by your community and your family. What makes you a good person is you're a good father, mother, son, or daughter. In those situations, it's what other people, especially your family and community, think of you. That's where your self-esteem comes from.

Those of us in more Western cultures put much more stock in what we think about ourselves. What matter are my standards, what I've decided I want to do, and whether I've achieved it. You can look at what other people think, and you can look at what you think. John the Baptist isn't looking at either of those places, and that's the reason why the character he has developed and the person he has become is so absolutely unique. How so? Let's take a look.

Who is this guy? We already saw that here is a person who actually is mistaken about his greatness. He actually is not aware of it. He's mistaken about it, and yet you would say, “That's low self-esteem. A person who doesn't have a proper assessment of his greatness will be shy, won't have confidence, won't do new things, won't be bold, won't be innovative, won't do risky things ...”

Really? Is that what we see in John the Baptist? Notice something ... When you go through the Bible, there's quite a bit in the Bible about John the Baptist. You know what he's like. You know his boldness, his almost brashness, his courage. In fact, let me show you even right here. Notice how they're getting frustrated. “Are you the Messiah?”

“No.”

“Are you Elijah?”

“No.”

“Are you the prophet?”

“No.”

In verse 22 they say, **“Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us.”** In other words, they're getting upset because they're afraid. “All you've done is tell us who you're not. We have to go back to our masters, and they're going to say, ‘Who did he say he was.’ Give us some answer. Who are you?”

Here's the reason why they're asking that. Verse 24: **“Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”** They're really interested in the fact that he baptizes. The reason they're asking, “Why are you

baptizing if you're not one of these great personages?" is the baptism he was doing was radical.

When a Gentile wanted to convert to Judaism ... And there were numbers of them. They were called *God-fearers*. These were Gentiles that started reading the Old Testament Bible. They were very interested, and they would sometimes come and say, "I want to join the covenant community. I want to follow the God of Israel." If you were a Gentile and you wanted to follow the God of Israel, you were considered a convert, and you were often baptized.

Why would you baptize a Gentile? Because Gentiles are "unclean dogs." Gentiles are of those other impure races, you see, so we baptize as a signification of the fact that they're unclean and being made clean. John the Baptist is demanding *everybody* get baptized. He comes up out of the river and says, "Repent and be baptized. Not just you Gentiles. Repent and be baptized, all of you, for the forgiveness of your sins."

Do you know how radical that is? Do you know what he's saying? He's saying we're all unclean. There is no one who deserves salvation. There is no one who can merit it. We are all unclean. The salvation of the Messiah is going to be by grace alone. He's also saying that all races are going to be equal before his feet. This is innovative, radical, and in your face. And this is a guy who doesn't even know his own greatness, what we would call low self-esteem.

Forgive me, I'm going to do this for 90 seconds. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* is a movie made in 1965. It was a typical Hollywood epic, and it's the story of Jesus' life. It has all these great actors ... Everybody was in there, even doing little bit parts and stuff like that. One of the most interesting characters, I think, is Charlton Heston plays John the Baptist.

Even though I think he overacts a little bit, and of course many of his lines are not in the Bible, it's almost pitch perfect. He's always yelling, "Repent, repent!" So they arrest him and bring him before Herod (who, by the way, is played by José Ferrer, who does not overact and does a wonderful job as Herod, very world-weary, very cynical) ... I'm only telling you the names just in case some of you might access a memory chip and remember it.

Anyway, John the Baptist is brought before Herod. "Repent!" he says, and Herod says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah ..." Then Herod's wife comes in, except it's not really Herod's wife. It's actually his brother's wife from whom he's stolen her. She just walks in to say something to Herod, and John the Baptist sees her and says, "Repent! That's adultery!" Herod turns around and says, "You're going to die for that." John the Baptist says, "You're going to go to hell for that." Herod says, "I can kill you." John the Baptist says, "Then you'll just free me."

John the Baptist ... voilà. There he is. That's him. Here's the question I'm trying to get you to ask. I've been asking it for 20 minutes now. How can someone who is that unaware of his own greatness, who is that truly blind to his own assets, you might say ... How can someone this humble, with that kind of understanding

of himself, be this powerful, bold, confident, hopeful, and fearless? How does that work?

When they say, "Who are you?" he actually gives the answer. To see it you have to pay attention. He's actually quoting this out of Isaiah 40, but the answer is still very important. Here's what he says. "I am just a voice." That is so brilliant, and that actually explains how he can be so humble and bold at the same time, how he can think of himself as nothing and act as if he's everything.

That's the reason why they're saying, "Who the heck do you think you are, that you're out here baptizing Jews? You must have an incredible ego. You must think you are some extraordinary personage, that you would have the confidence to do that." And John the Baptist says, "No, no. I'm just a voice pointing to the one who is to come." Here's what he's saying. "In myself I am nothing, but the one I serve is the greatest in the world. I'm just a voice, but I'm talking about the greatest one in the world."

I think I inherited these books. I'll have to ask Kathy afterwards, but when she and I got married, Kathy brought with her two books of William Shakespeare's works from the Book of the Month Club. They're just compendiums of Shakespeare's plays, but the editors (whose names I don't remember and you probably wouldn't know) evidently put together little three- or four-paragraph introductions to each of the plays.

The introductions are astonishingly eloquent. In the introduction to *Henry V*, the editors say what Shakespeare is giving you is the ideal man. The actual Henry V was obviously not as perfect as this, but he was idealized. This is what he says. Listen carefully. In fact, I'm going to reread one part of it.

The editors say, "Henry exhibits the utmost greatness which the active nature can attain. [...] He can be terrible to traitors, and his sternness is without a touch of personal revenge. In the midst of danger, he can feel so free from petty heart-eating cares as to enjoy a piece of honest, soldierly mirth."

"A devotion to great objects outside of self fills him with a force of glorious enthusiasm. Hence his ... humility or modesty—he feels that the strength he wields comes not from any clever disposition of forces due to his own prudence, but streams into him and through him from his people, his country, his cause, his God."

Listen to that. A devotion to great objects outside himself fills him with a force of glorious enthusiasm. The strength he feels does not come from any clever disposition of his own prudence but streams into him from his cause and his God. That's John the Baptist. That's the kind of greatness we're talking about here.

It says, for example, a person like John the Baptist is a person who is not bold *or* humble, but bold *and* humble at once, not incredibly confident *or* very humble and self-effacing, but both at once. This is the reason it can say this ideal person can be terrible to traitors, but his sternness is without a touch of personal revenge. You go after injustice, but it's not personal. You never say, "How dare

you talk to me like that." That's arrogance.

That's the kind of pursuit of justice that's basically coming from ego. There's no ego here. Therefore, the pursuit of justice is perfect. It's ego that makes you arrogant, and it's ego that makes you afraid to get out there. It's ego that makes you arrogant as you pursue your cause (therefore, you're going to overreach), and it's ego that keeps you afraid and thinking so much of what's going to hurt you so that you don't get out there.

But what if the ego is taken away? What if you're just a voice? What if you're filled with glorious joy and enthusiasm because of the great objects and the things you're looking at outside yourself, and the joy you have in that streams through you? That's the kind of man John the Baptist was too.

4. *What does that mean for us?* Question ... *Is that possible for us?* Is that something you and I could participate in? Could it be true for us in any way? The answer is yes. How? You have to behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. This is the heart of the passage, of course. Look. "**The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look ...'**"

Now, that's all right. It's modern English. But honestly, the Greek word there is *ide*. It's translated in older translations as *behold*, and *behold* means gaze, think, grasp. To say *behold* means, "I get it! I see it. Do you get it? Do you see it?" "[Behold], **the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**"

What in the world was going through his head when he said that? It must have been something like this. What he would have known about lambs, he would have known from the Passover. Centuries earlier, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and Moses went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go." Moses went after him, and Pharaoh wouldn't give them up.

God sent plagues, and finally God says, "I'm going to finally send a plague on Egypt because of their oppression, injustice, and rebellion. I'm going to bring that plague on them, and when that happens, they're going to let you go. I'm going to send my angel of death, and the angel of death will slay the firstborn son in every home."

In a patriarchal society, everyone's hopes were in the family, and in primogeniture, it all went to the oldest son. Therefore, this was a way of striking at the very hopes of every family. It was a terrible judgment. So God says, "Because of their rebellion and oppression, and because they're not letting you go, I'm going to judge them. I'm going to send my angel of death"

But then he said to the Israelites, "Don't forget this. Sin is a debt, and you're sinners too. And when the angel of death comes, the only way you are going to have your firstborn saved is if you kill a lamb and sprinkle the blood on the doorpost. Then the angel of death will pass over you, and you will not be slain for your sins."

That's the beginning of the Passover. Year after year, a lamb was slain to

commemorate the Passover, the night in which the Israelites did not pay for their sins. Thoughtful people had to say, "Really? That's it? You kill sweet, loving little lambies and that atones for you sin? Can that be?"

The other thing that John the Baptist would have known besides the story of the Passover and the difficulty with believing that's all it takes to atone for sins is he would have known about one more mysterious figure from the Old Testament. There were all these figures in the Old Testament that were predicted to come, and nobody quite knew who they were.

There was the great messianic king of the early part of Isaiah, and everybody thought, "Oh yeah, that's the guy. We want him." But then there was the prophet from Deuteronomy 18. Who's that? And then there was the suffering servant. This was someone who was predicted in the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah, the suffering servant who was to come. Nobody could quite figure out who that was. It surely couldn't be the great messianic king of the early part of Isaiah. There's one place that's talking about this servant that says,

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter ..."

Suddenly the Holy Spirit gives John the Baptist a revelation, and all these threads, questions, and themes come together, and he says, "I get it. Behold! I get it! It wasn't little animals that died for our sins. This is *the Lamb of God*. This is God's Son. The reason why our firstborn did not die that night was because God is offering up his firstborn. He's coming and he's taking the sins of the world.

Think about this. This is a strong weakness. This is the King who is a lamb. This is the messianic King who comes in weakness, as a little lamb. How could that be? Here's how it could be. If the messianic King came in strength (the first time) just to destroy evil, because evil is in your heart and my heart, what would happen to us?

But instead of coming in strength he comes in weakness. He comes in bold humility. He comes in strong weakness. He's the Lamb who is the King, and he goes to the cross and pays the penalty, so that some day he can come back and end evil without ending us. And suddenly, John the Baptist gets it. He sees the strong messianic King is the meek Lamb of God and the suffering servant. "I get it! God has done that for us and God is doing this for us."

Do you realize what this means? When Jesus Christ said John the Baptist was the greatest in the history of the world until now, he added something. I didn't give it to you, I saved it. In Matthew 11, he said, "No one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist, yet I say unto you, the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

What? The greatest person in the history of the world up to now is John the Baptist, but the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. Who's the

kingdom of God? It's us, Christians. How could that be? John the Baptist's greatness, and the reason he was the greatest in the history of the world, was this: *he grasped the greatness of Jesus better than anyone else.*

That's the reason he could say, "I am nothing. I'm just a voice, but I'm filled with glorious enthusiasm and joy because of the greatness of the one I serve." He saw the greatness of the one he served more than anyone else up to that time, but every single Christian today, everyone who believes the gospel today, actually understands the greatness of Jesus better than John the Baptist.

He didn't understand the cross yet. He didn't really know. He didn't get the resurrection. And do you know what that means? That means you have more capacity for that glorious joy, that greatness that flowed through John the Baptist than he did. You could do greater things. You should have more confidence and humility than him. You should have that ability to mix those things.

How do you get it? You have to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That word *behold* doesn't just mean see it. It means grasp it, rest in it, trust in the fact that you need a Savior. That you have to be saved by grace. That you need the Holy Spirit that this One can give you.

But here's what happens if you take it. There are three things, just to end. One is *you'll finally have an identity that doesn't crush you*. Whether you're from the East or the West, whether you have a traditional identity that's based in social roles and what people think about you or a Western identity that's based on your achievement, Christianity gives you an identity that's not achieved but received. Therefore, you're free.

I love to quote Isak Dinesen. She says there are many people who don't know about their relationship with God and, "They have got to accept as success what others warrant to be so, and to take their happiness, and even their own selves, at the quotation of the day." But Christians are freed from that. You have an identity that won't crush you. It doesn't get better when you do better. It doesn't get worse when you do worse. It's based on what Jesus Christ thinks about you, not what other people think about you or what you think about yourself.

Not only that, but secondly, *you get an identity that won't crush other people*. Don't forget this. Any achieved identity where you say, "I'm a good person because I'm living up to what my family wants," or, "I'm a good person because I'm a successful at this or that ..." Any achieved identity is based on relative status.

That means your identity is based on your being better than other people. "I'm more successful or better than others." That means you tend to look down at other people, and it's very easy to sneer at people, to disdain people, to become self-righteous, and to be oppressive to people. But this is an identity that so humbles you, because you're a sinner saved by grace, yet lifts you up, because Jesus Christ loves you enough to die for you. That takes away that superiority completely.

Here's one last thing. Not only do you get an identity that doesn't crush you and an identity that doesn't crush others, *you can become a voice*. To the degree you are seeking to let Jesus Christ speak to the world about himself through you, to the degree you are willing to spread the gospel, to that degree you are letting that greatness flow through you, because the gospel is a power. It can change the world, and it doesn't matter how good or bad or how weak or strong you are if you are a voice for it.

I think one of the greatest little bits of movie-making I've ever seen is in that play, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. After they've taken John the Baptist (Charlton Heston) off-stage to be executed, Herod is sitting there in a dark throne room with Salome, the one who said she wanted the head of John the Baptist, and she's dancing all around. It's very quiet except for the music.

They're pulling John the Baptist off because they're going to behead him, so you hear Charlton Heston yelling, "Repent! Repent!" And finally, he goes, "Repent!" and you hear *chunk!* It's pretty obvious he's dead. And then, about 10 seconds later, suddenly you hear a whisper. You see Herod's face, and you hear a little whisper. And it says, "*Repent.*" Who said that?

The point is, you can't kill the voice. It's gone into Herod's heart. You can't kill the voice, and in a sense, you can't kill John the Baptist. You can't kill anyone who is a voice crying out in the wilderness. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the sweetness and the power of people who have come to believe in you, the tenderness, meekness, and boldness of those who ground their lives in what you have done for them. Father, we pray you would help us to behold the Lamb of God so that we, like John the Baptist, have that humble boldness, that strong weakness, and we become voices for the one message that is infallible and will outlast history. We pray, Father, you would help us to amend our lives in accordance with what we have learned today by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

The Feast

Seeing Jesus—January 12, 2014

John 2:1–11

¹ On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there,² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the

wedding.³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."⁴ "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."⁶ Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.⁷ Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

⁸ Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so,⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew.

Then he called the bridegroom aside¹⁰ and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."¹¹ What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

The Word of the Lord.

Between Christmas and Advent, we think about the birth of Jesus. At Lent, Good Friday, and Easter, we think about the death and resurrection of Jesus. There's a season that is not as famous in the church year that's called *Epiphany*, and Epiphany is a time in which we think about the life of Jesus, usually by looking at his accounts of what he says and what he does.

What we're going to do at Redeemer for January and February is look at what the gospel of John tells us about Jesus' words and deeds. In particular, we're looking at his miracles. In the book of John, there's a series of miracles that are called *signs*. Do you see it down here in verse 11? It says, "**What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee ...**" The miracle of turning water to wine. "**... was the first of the signs ...**"

That's important. It means the miracles of Jesus weren't just naked displays of power. That would get something done, just to prove, "Hey, look, I'm a divine person. Look what I can do." But Jesus' miracles are not mere displays of power. They are signs. That means they signify, they're symbolic, and they point to who Jesus is and what he came to do.

The reason it's important to point this out is we're going to look at the symbolism here. It doesn't necessarily mean every single part of the Bible has to be read symbolically. If you read the account of the battle of Jericho, where the Israelites came in and sacked the city of Jericho, at one point Rahab puts a scarlet cord out the window of her home as a sign to the Israelites to spare her home when

they sacked the city.

I've heard people look at that and say, "See Rahab's red cord here? What does it mean? What does it symbolize?" The answer is it's a historical narrative. It means the Israelites should spare the house when they sack the city. It's just what happened. It's not symbolic. We shouldn't be thinking every single part of the Bible is to be read symbolically. Sometimes it's just telling you what happened.

That's not the case here. Because, even though this did happen (I don't mean *that*), it's called a sign, which means it has symbolic meaning. It's important for us to realize the first sign that Jesus Christ's ministry ... When you're rolling out a campaign with the very first thing you do, all the symbolism is very important. What you do, who you're on the podium with ... Everything has to convey what you're all about.

Jesus' first sign was not feeding the poor. It wasn't healing the sick or raising the dead. It was keeping a party going. What does that say about him? How is that a sign? Let's take a look at three points and an application. First of all ... *What do the jars point to?* Jesus does his miracle in a set of jars. Secondly ... *What does the brusque exchange with his mother point to?* What is the brusqueness with which he talks to his mother? Thirdly ... *What does the wine point to?* And finally ... *What does this mean for us?*

1. *What do the jars point to?* "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples [were also there]. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.' " Down in verse 6, "Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water'; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, 'Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.' They did so, [and it was wine]." First of all, what's happening here? Weddings were a big deal. You say, "Well, weddings are a big deal now." It was a bigger deal then. When I first met Kathy's grandfather, who was Croatian and had been married since 1910 or something like that, I was in his little home, and there was a picture of his wedding party, his wife, and himself.

I said, "Weddings were a pretty big deal in those days, right?" And all he said to me was, "Whoo boy, four days." What he meant was his wedding feast (they don't call them receptions) went on for four days. It was long. It involved the entire village. It was a far more socially significant event than it is even now.

You also have to keep in mind, even though this isn't life-and-death, they run out of wine. Especially back then, the wine was what made a feast a feast. It was a major oversight, a major problem. This was an honor and shame culture. Some of you do know what that is, and some of you don't. In a more individualistic culture, it's different, but in an honor and shame culture, to bring dishonor to your

family and people was a big deal.

Also, by the way, in those days and that time, eating with somebody was very value-laden. To eat with somebody meant friendship. To not eat with somebody meant rejection and disrespect. Everything was more value-laden, it was an honor and shame culture, and therefore, this major lapse in judgment meant this couple were going to be shamed.

They were going to experience guilt and shame, and Jesus rescues them. The fact that he knows he's rescuing them is seen in the fact that he deliberately chooses to make the wine in these jars, the kind used by Jews for ceremonial washing. The ceremonial, sacrificial system of worship was such that there were all these various ways in which Israelites were to wash and shed blood, and all these things cleansed people. It represented being cleansed from sin.

You can't go in before God unless your sin is cleansed. What Jesus is saying is, "I have come to bring in reality, what the ceremonial and sacrificial rites of the Jews only pointed to. I have come to bring atonement and cleansing for sin. I am coming to bring the reality to which these things point."

He rescues them from guilt and shame, and he has come in order to deal with guilt and shame. By the way, in English now, the word *shame* kind of means a general sense that you're not what you had ought to be. *Guilt* is painful guilt over something you've actually done. Shame is more general, "I know I'm not what I should be." Guilt is more pointed.

If you want to get an idea about the two things, one way to talk about shame, for example, is in the 1941 movie *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with Spencer Tracy. By the way, watch the 1931 version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* starring Fredric March. It was much better than the '41 version. Fredric March does a much better job than Spencer Tracy.

But at one place in the 1941 movie, however, I got a sermon illustration, so I like it. There was a place in the movie where Spencer Tracy is at this dinner party, and Dr. Jekyll is explaining he is working on some kind of science in which he'll be able to separate the good from the evil in every person.

This shocks the dinner guests, and one person says, "But see here ..." That's how they used to talk back then. "But see here, aren't you rather presumptuous in assuming there is evil in all of us?" Dr. Jekyll gets his back up a little bit and says, "We'd be hypocrites if we didn't admit it. We've all had thoughts we wouldn't care to have published or shout out loud. Our desires aren't always confirmed in a drawing room. As Christians, shouldn't we face it?"

Everybody gets very uncomfortable, because this is a terrific argument. He's saying, "Wouldn't it be a nightmare if all your thoughts were published, and all your thoughts appeared on the wall or suddenly became audible?" Nobody could live with that. Everybody gets very quiet in the drawing room when he says, "There's nobody here who would be able to live even a few hours with all of your thoughts, the thoughts of your heart and mind, all suddenly being published."

We're ashamed of who we actually are. To lose control of what people see about what's going on inside would be a disaster. And what that means is we all know, at a certain level, we are not what we should be. We know we're not what we should be. We all live with a degree of shame, or else we would have no trouble with that idea, that thought experiment.

Probably, if you want guilt, there's no better image in all of literature than poor Lady Macbeth. She killed a man trying to help her husband. She killed a man, but then the guilt destroyed her. She went psychotic, and she saw blood on her hand she couldn't get out. Of course, in her famous delirium she says something like, "Out, damned spot! Who knew the old man would have so much blood on him? Not all the perfumes in Arabia can sweeten this little hand. Out, damned spot! I can't get it out!"

Jesus comes and says, "I can. I can get it out. Whatever spot, whatever guilt, whatever stain, no matter what you have done, I can cleanse it. That's what I came to do." That's the first thing we learn here.

2. *What does the brusque exchange with his mother point to?* Let's take a look at this interesting exchange. "**When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.' 'Woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. 'My hour has not yet come.'**" This is extraordinary, and it's also key. First of all, it immediately raises a question, because he calls his mother "Woman." Somebody says, "Oh, you're going to tell me in the Greek it means ..." No, it means what it looks like.

It's not wrong, exactly. It's not evil, but it's cold and brusque. In a paternalistic, patriarchal society where your father and mother were king and queen, it is very stark. Why? Is he in a bad mood? Well, Jesus Christ was tortured to death, and being tortured to death really puts you in a bad mood, and even when he was being tortured to death you never saw a false word.

No, something is troubling him enormously, and he tells you what it is. "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come." In the book of John, the word *hour* always means the crucifixion, the hour of his death. Whenever the hour is talked about, it's the hour of his death. That means we have a really, really big non sequitur here. She comes to him and says, "They've run out of wine." He says, "I'm not ready to die yet." Come again?

Why does the situation make him think about his death? Why does a wedding feast make him think about his death? Why does the request to keep the wedding feast going, to bring joy to the wedding feast, because the wine was the joy of the wedding feast ... Why does this all make him think about his death? It's not a really easy question to answer, but I think it can be answered.

The answer starts with something you can see yourself. It's interesting to watch single people or to be a single person at a wedding reception. There's always a little far-away look in their eyes. Why? Because if you're single at a wedding reception, it's very hard not to wonder about, envision, or think about your own

wedding day. You say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Jesus didn't have a wedding day." Oh yes he did, and it was on his mind all the time.

Jesus Christ was saturated with the Old Testament. He understood the Old Testament very well. In the Old Testament, God constantly calls himself the Bridegroom of his people. Sometimes he calls himself the King, of course, but God doesn't just want a relationship with his people like a king to a set of citizens. He also wants a love relationship with his people, like that of a bridegroom with a bride. So sometimes (actually, fairly often) he calls himself the Bridegroom of his people, the Lover of his people.

Only if you understand that background are you as astonished as you had ought to be in Matthew 9. They're complaining that Jesus' disciples never fast. John the Baptist's disciples were always praying, fasting, and repenting, trying to get closer to God. They always had hollow cheeks and looked kind of worn out. They're always fasting, not eating in order to pray, and all.

But Jesus' followers never fasted. They always were eating and drinking, and people said, "You guys aren't very spiritual. Why don't you fast? And Jesus says, in Matthew 9, "Why should the friends of the bridegroom fast when the bridegroom is still with them?" He calls himself the Bridegroom.

That's one of those places in the Bible where you read past it. Unless you know the background, you won't be shocked, but you should be shocked. He's calling himself the Bridegroom of Israel. He's calling himself the Son of God. John, the author of this gospel, also wrote the book of Revelation. When you get to the end of the book of Revelation, you see this vision that John has about how history is going to end. Do you know how it's going to end? It's going to end in a wedding feast, Jesus' wedding day.

Revelation 21 talks about the city of God, which is the corporate people of God (those of us who believe), coming down dressed beautifully, as a bride is dressed for her husband. At the very end there's this call that comes out, "Blessed is he who is invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb." Jesus Christ is going to have a wedding day, and this is how history is going to end, according to the Bible.

On that day, all of us who have learned to love Jesus Christ and see his beauty, but only by faith in this life, will see his beauty by sight. We will fall into his arms as it were. The long waited-for union will occur, and it'll be the feast to end all feasts, and it'll go on forever. It'll be the joy that'll end all joys, and it'll go on forever.

Jesus absolutely has a wedding day. The history of the universe is going to climax in his wedding day. So you say, "Well, why would that make him sad?" Don't you realize? Here's Mary saying, "Please bring joy to this wedding feast." He's thinking about his own wedding.

This is what he must be saying in his heart, "Oh, Mother, if I'm going to bring joy to my wedding feast, if I'm going to fall into the arms of my bride, first I'm going to have to go through the hour. First of all, I'm going to have to go to the cross and

die." Absolutely, that's what he's thinking, because he talks about the hour. He puts the water turned to wine in these jars that cleanse from sin. That leads us to our third question.

3. *What does the wine point to?* Remember this: wine was not drunk from a glass. They didn't have glasses. It was drunk from a cup. There's only one other place near the end of Jesus' life, in fact, one night, in which he talks about wine cups twice. One is figuratively, one is literally.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, he knows he's going to go to the cross. He's praying, sweating, and bleeding, and he says, "Father, if it be thy will, if there's any way out of this, let this wine cup pass from me." He's talking figuratively, because the wine cup he's talking about is the cup of wrath. It's divine justice. It's what sin deserves.

Look at sin, evil, and injustice in the world. What does it deserve? It deserves punishment, and that punishment is the cup, the punishment we deserve. Jesus says, "Is there some way I can get out of drinking that cup, that cup of cursing and poison? Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done," he says. Then he goes to the cross.

But just before that, he had lifted up another literal cup with real wine in it. He said, "This is the cup of my blood. I won't drink it again with you until I drink it in the kingdom." This means Jesus Christ has to take the cup of God's curse so that we could get the cup of blessing. He raises the cup of cursing to his lips so we could raise the cup of blessing. He dies in the dark all alone so we can be brought into the wedding feast and married to him, as it were.

In other words, the wine, his blood, is joy. He turned water into wine in the ceremonial pots. He knows what this all means. "The shedding of my blood, which is going to be agony to me, will be joy to you." This idea that Jesus' death brings joy, I think, is the theme of the passage. I think it's what the sign is talking about. Let me show it to you on two levels. It brings joy.

First of all, let's go back to the original question. Why is this the first sign? Why is this the first thing out of the gate he wants to tell that he's all about? Why didn't he feed the hungry, heal the sick, or raise the dead?

When the wine was brought to the master of the banquet (see this in verse 8), and he tasted the water that had been turned into wine, he didn't realize where it had come from. He called the bridegroom and said, "Hey, everybody brings out the best wine first and the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink and can't tell the difference. You have saved the best for last."

Who's the master of the banquet? He's kind of the presider, the emcee. The reason he was really happy that the better wine was coming now was it was his job to kind of keep the festivities going. But don't you see, Jesus is the real Master of the banquet. He is the real Lord of the feast. He knows how to bring joy.

I think it's as if Jesus is trying to tell us this. He says, "I came to suffer, of course. My followers will suffer. Yes, they will, but those are just means to an end. I'm not here to bring suffering. Suffering is not an end in itself. I'm not here because I exalt in suffering. I'm not a masochist. I come to bring festal joy. It is as Lord of the feast that I am come. I'm doing all this so that someday we can be in each other's arms. We can have a new heaven and new earth. All tears are wiped away. All sickness, sorrow, and death are all gone."

Isaiah 25 says on that mountain he will make an end to death. So first of all, he says he's about joy. Isn't that interesting? That's his calling card ... "I'm here to bring joy, but a particular kind of joy." I want you to think about this. It's a little bit of an extended metaphor, but think with me.

The fact that Jesus, God, calls himself the Bridegroom points to the idea that he is the true Bridegroom. You've heard these very important words, "Jesus died on the cross for your sins. If you believe in him, your sins are covered. You're washed in the blood of the Lamb. God accepts you now, for Jesus' sake." Those are very important words. In fact, some of you may know I say them all the time, yet I want you to know at some level that's still kind of an abstraction. But this is not.

As a minister who does weddings, I want you to know I think I've seen as many brides as anybody. Think about it, who sees more? You say, "Photographers." Yeah, maybe, maybe. I don't know. I've seen an awful lot of brides, and I'll tell you where I see them. I'm standing right behind the groom. When the bride walks out for the first time and is seen in all her glory, she turns and comes on down. Here's the groom, and here I am. He gets that once. I get it every week, or I did at one time.

Here's what I learned about brides. Every woman knows she has imperfections in how she looks. Evidently, they must spend weeks and weeks and months and months thinking about how to make sure every single one of those imperfections is covered. Because, no matter what a woman looks like, when she turns that corner and comes down as a bride ... I'm trying to show you this is not a cliché. You always look up and say, "Wow. She looks great!" And it's not just a compliment. It's not like, "Okay, you say that to a bride."

No, she actually really does look great, because all the imperfections are covered. They've thought about it, and there's just a little dab of powder at the right place. All the imperfections are covered, and when she turns that corner and the groom sees her, you can hardly keep him from just running down the aisle. In other words, no matter what she looks like in reality, as a bride she's absolutely beautiful. All imperfections are covered.

How dare Jesus Christ use this metaphor. Does he really mean he delights in us that way? Does he really mean, like a bridegroom feels at that moment, he's ready to do anything at all for us? The point is, he *has* done "anything at all" for us. He's gone to the end. He's gone to infinite lengths. Is it really possible that

because of what he has done on the cross all our imperfections are covered, we are an absolute beauty to him, and he is that committed to us? Is that possible?

Yes, of course it's possible, it's the gospel. But here's what I want you to see. The knowledge of that is the wine. Why is it called wine? Why would the blood and salvation of Jesus be wine? Because it goes to your heart, it's joyful. Do you know how to sip the wine of the gospel? Do you know how to think like I just tried to do for the last couple of minutes, with a little humor? Take some of the metaphors.

There's also the fact that he's the true elder brother, the true Son, and now we're the children and God is our Father ... You need to think about what you are in Jesus Christ and what has happened to you, to the degree you realize he looks at you the way the bridegroom looks at the bride. There'll be a poise, a joy, and a peace. Listen, there is nothing better than to be adored by someone you adore, to be loved by someone you admire to the skies. There is nothing better than that.

The fact is, we only have it by faith, but the very knowledge we're going to have it by sight at the end of time is like wine. You can sense it now. You can taste it now. You can't really drink it, but you can sip it right now, and it will bring you a peace and poise. It will enable you to not rest your heart too much in anything else. Have you tasted that wine?

4. *What does this mean for us?* What would this mean to us if we took this seriously? The teaching that he can take out any spot. The fact that he is our bridegroom, and we are his bride if we give ourselves to him in love and faith. The fact that the knowledge of how he regards us is the wine. What does that mean for us? I'm going to give you five things.

What did we learn from this practically? First, *any wine except this wine of Jesus Christ will run out*. Let me get a little allegorical on you, here. What is it that gives you joy in life? You may believe in God, you may believe in Christianity, you may say, "I'm a Christian," but what's the real wine?

What's the joy in your life? Is it your career? Is it a person, your family, or a cause? What's the real joy in your life? I want you to know if it's not this, it will run out. Something will come in and ruin it. You can't stop it. It doesn't matter how savvy you are. I want you to recognize that. All wine but this wine will run out.

Secondly, *do whatever he tells you*. It's pretty interesting how often in the Bible people ask Jesus for something, and he gives a kind of confusing, enigmatic answer. We're going to see some others. Instead of just giving you the answer you expect, he gives you the kind of "What? Come again" kind of answer. Why did Mary tell Jesus about the problem to start with?

We don't really know what Mary knew about her son yet, but after all, if you read the birth narratives from Luke and the angels and all that, she knew he wasn't normal. She knew he was something special. Whatever her theology (it's hard to imagine she had figured all this out), she knew enough about his greatness to go

talk to him, and she knew enough about his greatness not to be too upset.

What she could have said is, “I am your mother. How dare you talk to me like that?” Nope, she knew enough to go to the people around him and say, “Do you see that guy over there? Do whatever he tells you. He sometimes acts in a strange way. He sometimes says things nobody can understand, but I want you to know he knows what he’s doing.”

Frankly, there are a lot of things about Jesus we don’t get, and there are a lot of things going on in your life right now you don’t understand. It doesn’t matter. Do whatever he says. It wouldn’t make sense, if he is who he says he is, that everything he says and does would make sense to you. When you have a 5-year-old child and a 35-year-old parent, sometimes the 5-year-old says, “Explain it to me.” At a certain point, the father has to say, “You’re 5, I can’t explain it to you. You’re just going to have to do what I tell you.”

Thirdly, *learn how to draw on your knowledge of what’s coming in the future to help you deal with the troubles of the present.* Edmund Clowney, a teacher of mine and a great preacher, once said something like this as he was preaching on this text, “Jesus sat amidst all the joy sipping the coming sorrow, so today we can sit amidst all this world’s sorrows sipping the coming joy.”

In the midst of all that joy, why was he saying, “Woman, hour, death …”? In the midst of all that joy, he was, in a sense, sipping or foretasting the sorrow to come, so we can sit in the midst of our sorrows, and we will have sorrows, sipping the coming joy.

Fourthly, *please don’t let marriage throw you.* (This is going to be brief, and some of you are going to say, “I wish it weren’t so brief,” but listen,) This is all about weddings. Please do not let marriage throw you. Here’s what I mean by that. Some of you are very anxious right now because your marriage isn’t very good. Some of you are very anxious, angry, or upset because you’re not married and you want to be. Some of you are very, very discouraged, maybe despondent, because your marriage is really pretty bad.

All three of those situations are rather different and, therefore, they each have their own distinctive ways in which you should be responding. But here’s one thing you should keep in mind no matter what. There is only one person in the universe who can give you everything your heart longs for, and if you believe in Jesus Christ, he’s waiting for you.

You mustn’t think any other kind of relationship or spouse can ever give you that. You must never look to marriage to fix you or to give you all the love, sense of value, and significance you need. You may believe in God, and you may believe in Jesus, but if he is not an existential reality in your heart, you’re going to put all the weight of your soul’s longings and hopes on somebody or something else, and it will crush him or her or it.

What you need to do is say, “All right, I want you to do this. I’d like to be married. I’d like to get my better marriage, but I also have to realize the deepest longings

of my heart can only be satisfied by one person, and he's waiting for me." That keeps you from putting too much hope, weight, anger, and even joy in anything but Jesus.

Lastly, *don't settle for anything but a rich prayer life*. Jesus came to bring joy, sensation, and love. Even though that's the future, we also are supposed to be able to sip it now. That means you have to be able to learn how to access this right now. Dwight Moody was a Chicago minister in the nineteenth century. In 1871 there was a terrible fire in Chicago, and many of the buildings of his institutions and his church were devastated, and he was devastated.

He got very depressed, actually, and he spent quite a bit of time in prayer seeking God's love. He wanted to sense it and remember all that God was. When he was in New York City (he was trying to raise money to repair buildings and things), his prayers were answered. By the power of the Holy Spirit he began to experience God's love. He began to sip the coming joy.

He says, "Well, one day, in the city of New York—oh, what a day!—I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name. [...] I can only say that ... I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand. [...] I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world ..." Don't settle for anything other than a rich prayer life. Don't let marriage or anything else throw you. Do whatever he says. Sip the coming joy. See his glory in this sign and believe. Let's pray.

Our Father, all we ask is you would help us apply this to our hearts by your Holy Spirit. Let us know these realities. Let us know the joy of really grasping all we have through your Son. We pray you would bring the kind of joy we need into our lives in order to live the lives we ought to live. Thank you, Father, for assuring us of all these things in your Word. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

The Healing

Seeing Jesus—January 19, 2014

John 4:46–54

46 Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. **47** When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

48 “Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.” **49** The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” **50** “Go,” Jesus replied, “your son will live.” The man took Jesus at his word and departed. **51** While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living.

52 When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, “Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him.” **53** Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he and his whole household believed. **54** This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Each week, we're taking a look at another one of these accounts from the book of John on what John calls the miraculous signs of Jesus. John calls the miracles of Jesus *signs* because he pulls these miracle accounts out and says, “Not only do they show Jesus' power, but they also teach us things.” A sign is a symbol. It's a pointer to something. It's very easy to understand what the gospel of John is about, because he actually gives you the theme of the whole book near the end in chapter 20, verses 30–31. John says,

“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Right there he lays out two themes. He says the miraculous signs are there to provoke belief (faith), that by your faith you might have life in his name. So the two themes are faith and eternal life. The miraculous signs are there in order to provoke faith, and that faith brings eternal life. Tonight we're not going to talk about eternal life. That's one of the big themes that will come up later as we go through these passages.

Tonight I think this particular account, this miracle story about the healing of the royal official's son, is designed to tell us about the nature of faith. *Faith* is a very general word. Faith in some degree is a temperament. For example, some people are skeptical. Some people are very trusting and receptive, but some people are more skeptical and cynical.

I'm actually more skeptical. I think it's helped me as a preacher. The fact is, I had to come to New York because I didn't want to live in parts of the country where it was obvious to everybody that Christianity was true. It has never seemed obvious to me. I believe Christianity is true, but it was a hard one thing, and I think it's good. But my temperament is not to believe.

I don't think when the Bible talks about faith it's talking about that. There are people who are trusting, and there are people who are not trusting, but the faith that brings eternal life, saving, eternal life-giving faith, is for everybody. It's not just for certain kinds of people. I've had people say, "Oh, I wish I had his faith. I wish I had her faith. I don't have that faith." As if faith is a talent. Some people can sing, and some people can't. You know who you are, by the way. Faith is like that. Some people have faith, and some people don't.

I do think there's a kind of faith that's a temperament or maybe a talent, but that's not saving faith. There is no Christian type. There is no type of person who becomes a Christian. Saving faith, the faith that brings you eternal life, is for everyone. In this passage, we learn five things about it, and it's extremely important that we know all of them.

1. *Life-giving faith starts with reason.* It involves your thinking and rationality. You must not pit faith completely against reason. You don't just say, "Well, there's reason, and then there's faith." No, faith starts with reason. What do I mean? Verse 47: "**When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.**"

Why would he do that? Because he had heard reports. In fact, we probably should have started with verse 45. In verse 45 we're told Jesus had come back to Galilee after having been in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem he had done many mighty deeds, many public miracles. We're told in verse 45 that the people who had been in Jerusalem came back to Galilee and were telling everybody about it, and now Jesus was getting very famous for all these miracles.

This man would not have come to Jesus for a miracle unless he had heard, weighed, and believed the reports. Maybe a couple of his best friends whom he trusted implicitly came back and said, "I saw it with my own eyes." The point is, this man starts with thinking. Most of the things you believe, you didn't really have first-hand account of, right? Most of the things you believe, you took on the authority of the report.

Historians tell you things have happened. Scientists tell you things have happened. You've read books, you've had teachers, and you've trusted them. Some you have, some you haven't. Most of our views of things come to us through reports, and we sift the reports with our reason and decide which ones to believe and which ones not to.

This man must have heard reports, not second-, third-, or fourth-hand, but probably first-hand. He comes because he has reason to believe that Jesus Christ has power to do miracles. However, as we're going to see, though faith starts with reason, it has to go beyond reason to real trust. Reason can't take you all the way home. Reason is the beginning, but eventually you have to trust. You have to exercise faith.

I can hear somebody out there saying, "Aha! I knew it. You can't prove it, can

you? Hmm? You can't prove Christianity, you can't even prove there is a God, can you? Uh-huh. Well, I am not going to believe in God or Christianity unless you can give me some water-tight arguments and prove it." I have three things to say to you.

A. *Ultimately, you can't prove anything at all.* Haven't you seen *The Matrix*? I knew you would laugh. That's sermon preparation. When I was writing my sermon, I said, "I'll say, '*The Matrix*,' and everybody will laugh. And you did. Every single service, you did.

Actually, *The Matrix* makes a point the great philosophers will tell you about. That is, in the end, you really can't prove anything. You have to take on faith your senses are telling you what's really out there and your memory is valid. If there really is somebody who stuck you in a vat and has programmed your memory to have all kinds of memories that never really happened ...

That could happen. There's no way to prove your memory really works. You know that without relying on your memory? That's called *circular reasoning*. You can't prove your memory is reliable without relying on the memory you're trying to prove is reliable. Same thing with your cognitive senses.

In other words, philosophers say ultimately you can't prove anything. Everything you believe, you have to take on faith. "Well," somebody says, "okay, I remember. I had philosophy 101. All right. Ultimately you can't prove anything, but having said that, all that does is sort of inject a certain amount of uncertainty into our lives. But inside that mild uncertainty, surely there are things that can be proven.

B. *Nothing important can really be proven.* For example, can you prove there are 212 species of fish in Lake Erie? Yeah, probably you could prove or disprove a thesis like that, but none of the important things in your life can be proven. Let me give you two classifications of things you can't prove.

First, *you can never prove this is the right person to marry.* You can check his or her references. You can check the references' references' references. You can use your reason, but in the end, you're going to have to have faith. You can start with reason, but in the end, to marry anybody is a leap of faith, is it not?

Secondly, *you can't prove any moral convictions.* Every single one of your moral convictions, anything you are sure is right or wrong, you can't prove. You have reasons for them, but in the end, it's a matter of faith. To say, "I won't believe in God or Christianity unless you can prove it," is really a little disingenuous, because in no other area of life do you operate like that. You base your life on all kinds of things you can't prove, so why single out Christianity and God?

Lastly, *you can only live in one of two ways.* When people say, "Well, you can't prove there is a God. I'm not going to believe in God unless you can prove it." Blaise Pascal, a great philosopher, said it's probably true you can't prove there's a God. It's also true you can't prove there's no God, which means you can only live in one of two ways. You can either live as if there is no God when there might be, or you're going to have to live as if there is a God when there might not be.

In either case, you're risking your whole life. You're betting your whole life on something you can't prove, which means you are living by faith, no matter who you are. Except Christians usually admit they're living by faith, and very often skeptics won't. It's not fairly honest. You need to realize that in no other big area of your life do you demand proof, and therefore, faith starts with rationality.

It's so important for you to see this because I have talked to people over the years who have never used their brains. I say, "Are you a Christian?"

"Sure, I'm a Christian."

"Why are you a Christian?"

"Well, I was raised Christian."

"Okay, but why do you believe?"

"Well, I don't know, my family is Christian, and I'm a Christian."

"So you've never engaged your mind? You've never thought it out? You never decided whether it was true or not?"

At some point in your life, Christianity is going to not seem true. A lot of bad things are going to happen, and at that point, if your mind hasn't been engaged, your faith will just blow away. To think Christianity and faith are not rational to some degree is a mistake, but it's also a mistake to say, "Unless you can prove it to me, I'm not going to believe." Faith involves reason and engages the rationality.

2. *Life-giving faith has to move beyond reason to trust.* That's the heart of this passage. That's what Jesus is doing. Let's look at what Jesus does to this poor guy. This man is desperate. He comes up and begs him to come heal his son who is close to death. This man is really desperate, and later on when he says, "**Sir, come down before my child dies,**" that word *child* is a diminutive word. It's a Greek word that would be like saying, "Please come before my dear little one dies." He's in agony.

So here is this father who is in agony. He says, "Come and heal my son." What does Jesus say the first time? "You people seem to want all these miracles, or you won't believe." That's kind of nasty, isn't it? Pretty harsh? Do you realize how often, when people ask Jesus for something, he gives a response that seems inappropriate or enigmatic?

For example, if you were in church last week here at Redeemer, you know we went to John 2. In John 2, Jesus is at a wedding feast, and they run out of wine. You might remember Mary, the mother of Jesus, comes to him and says, "Hey, they're out of wine." Remember what Jesus says? "Woman, why do you involve me? It's not my hour to die." Come again?

In Mark 7, there's this Syrophoenician, Gentile woman who comes to Jesus and begs him for help. He says, "Well, I was sent to Israel, why should I help you?"

You're a Gentile." Actually, that's not what he says. Do any of you remember what he actually says? He does say he's going to Israel and he's not going to help her, a Gentile, but the way he puts it is, "The food that was meant for the children should not be thrown to the dogs." That's what Jesus says.

Sometimes, people come to Jesus with perfectly natural requests, and he kind of puts them off. Why? The answer is always *love*. He's always doing it for a loving reason, because it's necessary. Let me show you here. This man has no idea who Jesus is. If you go to Matthew 8, there's a similar kind of story where there's a centurion who is a great man. The centurion is also asking for Jesus to come and heal, but he says, "I am not even worthy to have you under my roof."

The centurion knows who Jesus is. He kind of has some idea of who Jesus is, but there's no indication here of any kind of deference or trust, really. Why? The man just heard the stories about Jesus being a miracle worker. All this man knows is this is Gandalf or Miracle Max. Remember Miracle Max from *The Princess Bride*? You don't remember Miracle Max. It was Billy Crystal.

Anyway, all he knows is this guy can do miracles, but he has no sense of who he is. If Jesus is just a conduit of magical power, then this man has no actual faith in Jesus himself. Here's the point: Jesus doesn't just want to heal the son physically. He wants to heal the whole family spiritually.

The only way the father and the whole family will be healed spiritually, having their souls healed as well as the boy's body, is if this man can see beyond the magic to who Jesus really is. He's trying to draw the man out. That's why he's being so caustic. Look at how he challenges the man twice.

The first time, he's sort of putting him off. "**Unless you people see signs and wonders ...**" "You're after the supernatural, not after me." Fortunately, this man does not respond the way the typical New Yorker would respond. The typical New Yorker would respond like this: "I don't need this!"

Instead, very, very courteously, persistently, you might say doggedly, he says, "Sir, would you please come down before my child dies." He's not put off. He's a lot like Jacob, wrestling with God in Genesis 32, not really understanding what's going on, and saying, "I will not let you go until you bless me." To some degree, he reminds me of Jacob.

He's not put off the first time, and he prays again. It's sort of like he's prayed to Jesus, Jesus gives him a kind of strange answer, so he prays again. This time Jesus says, "Go, your son will live." When we first see that, because we know a lot more than this man knows, you and I go, "Well, that sounds like a great response." It's not. It's a terrible test. It's a worse test than the first response.

This man is saying, "Please go with me." All we knew about magicians, prophets, and the way these miracles were ever done was the person who could do it had to go. The greatest miracle workers in the Old Testament up to now were Elijah and Elisha, those two prophets in the Old Testament. But even though they did amazing miracles, they had to be there. They had to say things. They had to do

things. They had to put their staff on the man's face, or they had to stretch out ... In other words, they had to be there.

Jesus, at this point, is making a claim that must have been absolutely astounding. He was saying, "I'm not going to go with you. I can heal with a word." No one in redemptive history this man would have ever heard of had the ability to heal from a distance, with a word. Do you realize how god-like that is?

Here's how you and I work. We say, "Let there be a house," and then we have to go and actually build the house or pay somebody to do it. But God could say, in the beginning, "Let there be light," and there was light. His word and his deed are the same thing. His word is a word of power.

For Jesus to claim this kind of massive, god-like power, to say, "I want you to trust me. I'm not going with you. I can heal with a word," would have been a sore test. This guy was really thinking, "If this Jesus Christ can't do this astounding thing he says he can do, and unless this Jesus Christ really has this power no one's ever had before, my son is a goner. Am I going to trust my son's life to this man's incredible claim?" And the answer is, "Yes, he does."

This is probably the key verse. "**The man took Jesus at his word and departed.**" This is just the beginning. He doesn't believe yet, but he's on his way. Jesus is moving this man from a mere intellectual, rational belief in his power to a personal trust. He's not just seeing Jesus as a miracle worker but as the Messiah. He's not just believing about Jesus. He's believing Jesus, and he's moving to life-giving faith. The difference between life-giving faith and mere intellectual assent is trusting your life.

This is a story pastors and preachers have been using for a hundred years, and I'm going to use it too. In the late nineteenth century there was a very, very famous French tightrope walker, an acrobat named Charles Blondin. Charles Blondin was especially famous for walking across a tightrope over Niagara Falls. He became very famous because he did amazing things. Here are five things he did (he walked across the Falls a number of times).

One time he walked across blindfolded. One time he walked across pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with quite a lot of weight. One time he walked across with his manager on his back. I don't know how that happened, but he did it. One time he walked across, sat down midway on the tightrope, cooked an omelet, and ate it.

My favorite is one time he went out with a chair to stand on. Maybe you've seen acrobats do it, but what he did was, instead of putting two legs of the chair on the tightrope, he put one leg of the chair on the tightrope and got up on the chair. I can't imagine how he could do that. People saw him and said, "There is nobody like this guy. This guy is incredible. He's amazing." They saw it empirically, with their own eyes. They cheered and all that.

Here's how the story goes. It's probably apocryphal, but it might have happened. One time during his great feats, he walked over to the crowd with a wheelbarrow.

He said, "You just saw me go across with 200 pounds in the wheelbarrow, right?" "Yes." "Do you believe I could take a human being across safely and successfully in this wheelbarrow?" Everybody said, "Yes, of course."

"Are you really sure?"

"Absolutely!"

"Anybody wanna get in the wheelbarrow?"

No, no, no. Nobody wanted to get in the wheelbarrow. Why? It is one thing to believe and be rationally, completely convinced the man could go across. Who knows? Maybe they're saying, "I think it's 99 percent sure you can make it." However, it was another thing to entrust their lives to him.

That's being a nominal Christian, a person who believes intellectually and may be very convinced in Christianity, but you're not acting in your life as if it's real. You're not trusting your life to him. How many people do I know who say, "I believe in Christianity. I'm completely convinced of it," yet you're living as if money is the only thing? Money drives you. Money, money. It's what worries you all the time. Which means you believe in Christianity and you trust in money. Your life has been entrusted to money.

I remember talking to a man one time who had blown up his life. He had done things in secret he thought would never come out, but they did come out and blew up his life. He said, "I'm a Christian." I said, "Okay, you're a Christian. Didn't you know God could see you? No matter how secret you are, if you believe in God ... God could see you."

The point is there was no connection. "I believe in a God who sees me, but I don't connect that to the way I live. I believe Jesus is this and that, but I live as if money is the main thing." Which means you do not have eternal life, because eternal life comes when you don't just believe with your mind but you actually entrust your life to what you believe he is. You rest your life in him. You get in the wheelbarrow.

Martin Luther said faith has three parts. It actually has two if you think about it. *Notitia, assensus, and fiducia*. *Notitia* means knowledge. *Assensus* means belief in the knowledge. In other words, that's the rationality. The first part of faith is you see certain things about Jesus, and you believe them. You believe he did this, you believe he's that, but *fiducia* means you entrust your life to him. You act as if it's true. You commit to him, so the way in which you're living depends on that being true.

Do you? That's life-giving faith. When Jesus Christ said, "I want you to trust your whole life, really, to my claim ... I'm claiming to have this kind of power. I'm claiming to have this kind of love for you. I'm claiming to have this kind of concern and power, and I want you to act on it. And when he did, his son was healed.

Of course there are stages here. He finds out the son was healed, then he finds out the son was healed the moment Jesus had spoken. That pushed him all the way. So Jesus Christ is pushing him beyond rational assent and firm, rational belief in Christ to life-giving, life-saving, life-changing, and life-transforming personal trust.

There are three other things I'm going to say briefly about what we're told about faith here. They're very important, because I don't think I can ... There are a couple of other insights. Let me just go through them quickly.

3. *Life-giving faith grows beautiful and pure where gold grows beautiful and pure.* The furnace. Jesus is deliberately making this hard. The man wanted an immediate response. Jesus puts off the response. The man wanted Jesus to go with him, and he says, "I'm not going with you." You know Jesus could have gone with him. It would have been so reassuring. All he had to do was say, "Sure, I'll come with you." And that's wonderful, but instead ...

By the way, from Capernaum to Galilee was at least 20 miles. That's a long way. Everybody walked. Just imagine. That must have been the longest walk that man ever, ever took, and Jesus could have lightened his heart and gone along with him.

Forgive me for lapsing into Narnian dialect. There is a place in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which is an allegory of Christianity, where these children find out the king of Narnia is a lion. They say, "A lion? Oh, my goodness, that's frightening. Is he safe?" And the answer is, "Safe? Who said anything about him being safe? Of course he's not safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

That's Jesus Christ. He is unpredictable and uncontrollable. He is not a tame lion. He is incredibly good, but he is in no way safe, because he's a wonderful counselor. He knows when you need a slap in the face, and he knows when you need a hug. He knows when you need smelling salts, and he knows when you need a kiss.

He knows when you need reassurance, which he could have easily done here, and he knows when you have to take an incredibly long walk, feeling absolutely sick in your stomach. Jesus knew it was the only way for him, so he did it. Don't think you know best what you need. Life-giving faith grows pure and strong and beautiful in the same place the gold does: the furnace.

4. *Life-giving faith saves by its object, not its quality.* Let me explain that. I want you to see how incredibly comforting this is. When this man turned away to go home, do you think he was filled with high spirits? It says he took Jesus at his word and left, but when Jesus said, "I want you to go back," do you think he went back and said, "I know my son will live! I have no doubts. I'm claiming my healing!" Do you think he's talking like that? I doubt it.

He probably went back so scared, yet this is the faith that led to eternal life. It's the object of your faith, not the quality or strength of your faith that saves you. If I

have a chair here, and it's a lousy, weak chair ... By the way, for a chair to collapse under me wouldn't necessarily make it an incredibly weak chair, keeping in mind my great bulk.

If I have a weak chair here, and I have lots of faith in it, and I say, "I know it can hold me up," and I sit on it, it falls apart, you all laugh at me ... Terrible. The other possibility is I have this incredibly strong chair. I put it here, and I say, "I don't know, I'm not sure it's going to hold me up," and I sit on it, it's fine. Whether I sit or fall does not depend on the strength of my faith. It depends on the strength of the object of my faith.

In other words, I might be filled with fears and doubts, but how much faith do I need in the chair for it to hold me up? Just enough to sit in it. How much faith did this guy need in order for him to get eternal life? Just enough to go home. Just enough to do what Jesus said. He could have all kinds of doubts and fears.

Don't you see how comforting this is? You're not saved by the strength and quality of your faith. You don't have to have this perfectly wonderful faith. It's your faith that connects you to him. It wasn't the man's faith that saved his son. It was Jesus' power that saved his son, and his faith connected to that power. How much faith did he have to have? Just enough to do what Jesus said.

You know that great place in Mark 9 where a man comes, and he's trying to get Jesus to heal his son? He says, "Please heal my son," and Jesus says, "All things are possible to those who believe." The man says, "I'm trying to believe. Help my unbelief." What does Jesus do? He heals his son. That means to say to Jesus, "I don't have any faith; help me," is faith. To say to Jesus, "I'm filled with doubts; I don't believe," is belief. If you take them to Jesus, cling to him, hold on to him, that's all you have to do. You don't have to have perfect faith.

I don't want to go all Aristotelian on you, but there's a difference between causes. If I turn on a light switch, and the lights go on, is it the power of the light switch that put on the lights? No. The light switch has no power in itself. The light switch is the instrumental cause, but the efficient cause is the electricity. Therefore, your faith doesn't have any power. Don't be crushed under the idea that you have to have incredible faith for God to save or hear you. All you have to do is cling to him.

5. *Real, life-giving faith comes to love Jesus for who he is in himself, not for the benefits you get.* Jesus' whole point is, "I want you to love me for myself and not just for the benefits you're getting out of me." That's the whole point of verse 48: "**Unless you people see signs and wonders ...**" "You're after things I can give you but not after me."

When you first fall in love with somebody, you have to admit you love the person for the things the person gives you. In other words, you say, "I like how you look." What that means is, "I like the self-esteem I get when a person who looks like you likes me." "I love what a hard-working person you are." Actually, you're thinking, "It'd be great to marry somebody with such a successful career."

In other words, in the very beginning, what makes a person attractive are things that are benefits to you, but in the end, if you go on and really love that person, you have to get past that to the place where you love them just for who they are. If you think you're in love with somebody, and you have a financial reversal, and they drop you, don't you feel used and exploited? Don't you feel like, "My goodness, they didn't love me. They just loved my money." And you're right. Don't you think Jesus would feel the same way?

In the end, what you have to do, and what is not only right for Jesus but right for you, is get to the place where instead of being up and down because of whether your prayers are being answered, you're just loving him for who he is. You're resting in him and finding him satisfying, which give you such poise and balance and ballast in life.

Do you know how you get there? Like this. When that man got home, he believed. He knew Jesus had loved him. When he got home and saw his son alive, he said, "Jesus did not blow me off. He *did* love us enough to help us. He loved us, and I was afraid, but he didn't blow us off. He loved us, and he saved us."

He believed because he believed Jesus loved him, but you and I have way, way, way better evidence for Jesus' love, do we not? It's the cross. As that man walked away, Jesus might have said in his heart, "I'm going to save your son, even though you don't deserve it. You're not going to lose your son, because my Father is going to lose his Son."

None of us deserves it. None of us are living the lives we had ought to live. We're not even living up to our own standards, let alone God's standards. We don't deserve this. Why is it that man didn't lose his son? Because Jesus saved him. Why did Jesus save an undeserving family? That man did not lose his son because the Father on the cross did lose his Son.

Do you see this man's agony? A father losing a child ... that's agony. But the great mystery is on the cross, deliberately, the Father and Son lost each other. They did that in order for the Son to bear the punishment we deserve so that Jesus can answer prayer and save us. Jesus can save us because the Father didn't save his Son on the cross. When you see him doing that for you, that'll enable you to start loving him for who he is.

Charles Simeon, the great nineteenth century British preacher in Cambridge, was a great Bible expositor. I looked up his sermon on this passage, and at the very end he told his people he wanted them to realize three practical lessons from this text. First, when you have a real suffering or problem in your life, do what this man did. *Go to Jesus.* Are you guys suffering right now? Do you have problems? Go to Jesus.

Secondly, *let Jesus answer you on his own terms.* This man wanted this, this man wanted that, and Jesus didn't do it. He knew best. Do you have suffering? Go to Jesus, but let him answer you on his own terms.

Thirdly, *tell your family and friends about it*. When he answers you eventually, when he comes through, and when he helps you, and he will (maybe not in your terms or your way, but he will) ... When you sense his power and love, tell your family and friends about it. Notice it didn't just say he believed. His whole household believed because he told them about it. Tell your friends and family what Jesus has done for you. How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? Let's pray.

Our Father, thank you so much for the gift of faith, and it is a gift. We ask you would not only give us the gift of saving faith but you would strengthen the faith, even though we know this means times in which we take long journeys where we feel like you are not with us, or times in which we seem to get answers from you we don't understand.

We know that, Lord, but we still ask for you to increase our faith. Give us faith, because that is the way we will not only glorify you but will live happy lives in which we can navigate the troubles of this world. We pray, Lord, in all the ways we have been seeing tonight, you would make us more into the image of your Son, in whose name we pray, amen.

A Meaning That Suffering Can't Take Away

Questioning Christianity—January 30, 2014

We've never done anything like this here at Redeemer, but what we're going to do for the next seven weeks is explore the claims and character of Christianity, especially to see whether it makes sense. I would hope that everything we talk about would be of interest no matter who you are, no matter what your beliefs are, but I must say I'm actually thinking mainly about people who either aren't convinced that it makes sense or even those of you who may be convinced that it *doesn't* make sense.

You're the ones in view, even though I would hope the things we talk about would be of interest no matter what you believe or what faith you are or what religion you are. I would think it would be interesting. I hope so. By the way, if you're here, I don't want to start off by flattering you, but in our attention deficit disorder culture, where people just skim things, I'm amazed that you're here. I'm not so stupid as to think you're coming back if tonight isn't engaging, but I would like you to at least consider this: the seven weeks are cumulative.

You might say the case I'd like to make hangs together. It fits together. The case is cumulative, and the different talks and discussion are going to build on each other. One of the reasons they're going to build on each other is I'm going to

listen to you enough that I'm not giving you the topics. In a minute I'll give you tonight's topic, and at the end of this discussion I'll give you the next two weeks so you know what the topics are.

In my head I have seven topics I'm partly prepared for, but I want to listen enough to your questions, both formally and informally, so that I may decide, "You know, I clearly wasn't very clear," or "There's so much interest in that I probably need to break that into two weeks and do part of it *this* week and part of it *that* week." I'm really going to listen so that what we cover in these seven weeks is sensitive to what you're saying you would like to hear more about; therefore, it will fit together.

In our technologically advanced and mobile age, it's very unlikely that any New Yorker I know would be around seven Thursday nights in a row, but I would hope if you find tonight engaging that if you don't make a particular week you watch it online or, if you're away, even watch it live stream so that you actually have the whole picture, because that's what it's going to be.

Now even though I just said I am not totally sure what every one of the topics are (I have a working tentative view of what I want to do), the basic trajectory is in the title. The basic arc I'm going to try to traverse is that, as Blaise Pascal, the great French mathematician philosopher, said, people will not sit still or give sustained attention to an argument for why something is true unless they already have good reason to hope it's true.

Unless you have a good reason to think it would be good if Christianity were true, why should you sit and think in a sustained way about evidence for it? I think what little most people in our society know about Christianity is fairly unattractive, and they don't realize even what the claims are. If you don't know what the claims are, it's difficult to even see any good reason to care about exploring it.

So what I'm going to do is spend the early weeks, and maybe all of the first weeks until the last week (it depends on you, actually; it depends on what I hear), on why Christianity makes emotional and cultural sense before I get to why it makes rational sense. I'm not going to start off by arguing Christianity is true. I'm instead going to talk about why thoughtful people might like it to be true because of the things it offers.

In order to get started, what I'd like to do is give you the topic tonight. The topic is Christianity gives you a meaning in life that's basically indestructible, a meaning in life that no suffering, nothing that happens in this life can take away from you. In order to talk to you about this, what I want to do is ask three questions and try to give you answers.

First ... *What is meaning in life?* Secondly ... *Is it possible to have meaning in life without God?* That is the main thing we're going to talk about, because that's actually a complex question. Thirdly ... *If Christianity was true, what would the meaning in life be?*

1. *What is meaning in life?* This is short, but it's very important we figure this out.

If you go to a dictionary and look up the word *meaning* or if you even just consult your own experience with the phrase *meaning in life* ... This sounds a little weird. “What is the meaning of *meaning*?” That sounds really deep, but actually we have to use the word *meaning* to talk about this.

First of all, you have meaning if you have purpose, if you have a goal. For example, look at words themselves. We talk about the meaning of words, but do you know what the meaning of words is? You know what a word means if you know the purpose for which the speaker is saying it. For example, let's just say you don't know English, and suddenly someone comes into your room and says, “Fire!” but you just sit there. I'll tell you why.

The word *fire* in English signifies a chemical reaction that if it comes in contact with you hurts a lot. So when the English speaker says the word *Fire!* the purpose of the person saying that and forming that sound in the air is to get the listener to get up and run away because you know you're going to get burned.

If you don't get up, it's because you don't know the purpose of that sound. That's what we mean when we talk about the meaning of words. I know the meaning of a word if I know the purpose of the speaker or the writer of it, what he or she is trying to convey. So first of all, meaning means purpose or a goal. If I have a purpose, I have meaning.

Secondly, it has to be a significant goal. I don't think anybody would consider picking paper up off the ground meaning in life. Why? It's a goal, isn't it? If it's your job to pick up paper, isn't that meaning in life? You'd say, “Well, it's not a significant purpose. It doesn't make a difference.” To have meaning in life, therefore, means I matter. What I'm doing makes a difference. There's something significant.

I have a purpose, and it's a significant purpose. I have a purpose, and it makes a difference somehow. I'm not superfluous. You can do something, but if it's superfluous it makes no difference at all. You don't feel it's meaningful. So what is meaning in life? It means to have a purpose, and it means a purpose that really matters, where you feel like you're making a difference.

2. *Can we have meaning in life without belief in God?* If there's no God, can there be meaning in life? My answer is “Yes and no.” You say, “You live in New York City. Of course you're going to say that.” I'd like to say it's not nearly as ambivalent or ambiguous as you think. I'm going to say that, at one level, without God, yes, you can have meaning in life, but at another level, no, you can't have meaning in life. That other level is extremely important, and to abandon that level is actually deadly.

So can we have meaning in life without God? The answer is “Yes and no,” but a bigger *no* and a smaller *yes*. Let me explain. First of all, when I say *yes*, there's a remarkable amount of consensus amongst the most widely read, brilliant, and respected public intellectuals in Western culture today who are secular people, who don't believe in God, who believe everything has a natural cause, that we

weren't created by some creator being ...

There's remarkable consensus amongst all of those folks that whereas human life in general doesn't have any meaning and the world doesn't have any meaning *you* can have meaning because all you have to do is decide what you want to do with your life. There's no objective meaning. There's no discovered meaning. There's no meaning outside of yourself that you have to discover and align with, but there's a self-created meaning. There's no objective meaning; there's subjective meaning.

Just to explain this, first of all, Tom Nagel, professor of philosophy at NYU, some years ago wrote a little book called *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*. By the way, it's a really fascinating book and very helpful. Each chapter deals with an area where the philosophy is treated historically. The last chapter is called "The Meaning of Life."

Tom Nagel, from the vantage point of what he thinks is largely the accepted position of most public intellectuals, academics, and smart people in the West, which is that we weren't created by God but are the product of blind forces, basically says there is no meaning of life for the human race. He says that even if you produce a great work of literature, which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down and collapse and all trace of your effort will vanish.

If your life is going to matter, it can only matter from the inside. From the outside, it wouldn't matter if you never existed and after you have gone out of existence it won't matter that you *did* exist. If one's life has any point as part of something larger, it is still possible to ask, "What is the point of that?" What he's saying is that in general, objectively, human life has no purpose. Why? Because nobody put us here for a purpose.

You might say there's no speaker, no creator, who put us here for a purpose and, most important (I'm going to get back to this), he says, nothing you do makes any difference. He says even if you write a book that was to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool, the universe will wind down and collapse, and all trace of your effort will vanish. What he means is if there is no God it means that whether you are a cruel person, maybe even a serial killer, or a good and kind person and work for justice and help the poor, in the end how you live makes no difference at all.

Not only will it not make any final difference but there won't be anybody around to remember it. Therefore, objectively, he says, there's no meaning in life. The way he puts it is if your life is going to matter, it can only matter from the inside. From the outside it doesn't matter. Do you hear that? There are other people who say the same thing. Let me just point this out.

Bertrand Russell, a famous British philosopher, says something like, "Humanity is the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving. Our origin, hopes, loves, and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of

atoms. All the labors of the ages, all the devoted inspiration, all the brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

Historian Carl Becker, in his very famous lectures in 1941 at Yale, said from a strictly scientific viewpoint human beings must be viewed as "little more than a chance deposit on the surface of the earth, carelessly thrown up between two ice ages by the same forces that rust iron and ripen corn." Scientist Stephen Hawking says, "The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet."

The point is that, objectively, there's no meaning in life, but every one of these folks, including Tom Nagel, who I just talked about, says, "But that shouldn't be a problem. Since there's no objective meaning in life, no discovered meaning you have to align with, you can decide what your meaning in life is, which is freedom." They say it's good news. "Let's not get all grim and gloomy about it. It's good news."

A very famous *LIFE* Magazine interview in 1988 asked a bunch of famous thinkers, "What is the meaning of life? Why are humans here?" Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, who has now passed away but was at Harvard for many years, said, "We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and crook."

"The pathways that have led to our evolution are quirky, improbable, unrepeatable, and utterly unpredictable. [...] Wind back life's tape to the dawn of time and let it play again—and you will never get humans a second time. [...] We may yearn for a 'higher' answer—but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers ourselves." You have to decide what's right for you.

Much more recently, Jerry Coyne, who's a biologist at University of Chicago, who argues strongly there's no God and no objective meaning for your existence, makes the same move as Stephen Jay Gould. He says, "Cosmology doesn't give one iota of evidence for a purpose ... or for God. Most of the universe is cold, bleak, airless, and uninhabitable. [...] Secularists see a universe without apparent purpose and realize that we must forge our own purposes and ethics, not derive them from a God for which there's no evidence. [...] But although the universe is purposeless, our lives aren't."

There we go. It's the same thing Nagel said and the same thing Stephen Jay Gould said. "Although the universe is purposeless, our lives aren't. [...] We make our own purposes, and they're real. Right now my purpose is to write this piece, and then I'll work on a book I'm writing, and later I'll have dinner with a friend.

Soon I'll go to Poland to visit more friends. Maybe later I'll read a nice book and learn something. [...] Those are real purposes ... [I have purpose in life]."

Now what do we say about that? The answer is if we define meaning in life as having a purpose and having a purpose that you think is significant, you feel makes a difference, matters, then if you say, "My purpose in life is to be a good father or mother to my child or to be an instructor in something and help people learn this or that ..." If that's meaningful to you and that is a purpose, just like Jerry Coyne said, and you feel that makes a difference in life, do you have purpose? Yes. Do you believe in God? No. Yes, you have purpose.

By the way, as a Christian pastor, I'd say, "Of course you do," because of the way we define purpose. Now here's where I push back. However, you have to realize this is a very new experiment. There has never, ever been a time in the history of the human race where this kind of self-created subjective meaning in life is the only meaning you have. Objective discovered meaning in life isn't there. That's the idea. Subjective self-created meaning in life is the only meaning in life you have.

By the way, do you want a perfect example of this? Do you remember the end of the movie *I, Robot* with Will Smith and the little robot guy, Sonny, who ends up being a good guy? It turns out that his creator had programmed him, basically, to head off a robot revolution. After he does that and everybody is happy, he turns to Will Smith and says, "I have no purpose in life anymore," because he was programmed for that purpose. He says, "I have no meaning in life, because I fulfilled my purpose. What am I supposed to live for now?"

He says, "Well, now you're like the rest of us. You just have to find your way. You have to sort of make it up as you go," which is exactly what Nagel, Stephen Jay Gould, and Jerry Coyne say. "There's no objective purpose anymore, Sonny. You just have to make up whatever purpose you want to." There has never been a culture in history that did that. The Greeks believed the *logos*. They believed there was a rational order behind the universe that you had to conform your life to.

Confucius believed there was, again, a natural order that he called *heaven* that you had to conform yourself to, you had to align with. Buddhism has always understood that the physical world is an illusion; the real world is a single soul and the purpose is to get in alignment with that and to see it. Christians, Muslims, and Jews have always said the purpose of life is to know God and serve him, and so forth. We are the first culture in history that has said, "You have to create your own meaning in life."

Stephen Jay Gould said it's liberating and exhilarating, but I'd like to say there are two ways of doing meaning. One is you create it, and one is you discover it. One is you make it up subjectively; the other is you discover it and align yourself with it objectively. This self-created meaning is *far less rational, far less durable*, and, my third point (which I'm only going to touch on because it's my topic for next week), *unable to give a good reason for moral values*.

If you believe you have to create your own meaning, if you really believe the universe is meaningless but your life doesn't have to be ... You just decide what you want to do. You create your own meaning. That kind of meaning in life, compared to the older version the human race has always put forward, is far less rational, far less durable, and doesn't give you a base for moral values.

A. *Self-created meaning is far less rational.* Here's what I mean by that. Tom Nagel points out in his book that one of our problems with finding meaning in life ... He actually says we probably need to stop thinking about meaning in life. He actually goes so far as to say if life is not real and the grave is the only goal and nothing you do makes any difference at all, we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously and we should stop thinking about meaning in life.

This is pretty interesting. What he's saying is if you think too much about what you really believe about the universe ... You say, "Well, I have meaning in life, like Jerry Coyne says. I'm writing a book, then I'm going to go to Poland, then I'm going to do all this stuff. I have meaning in life." But Tom Nagel is better, I think, when he says, "Yeah, but the point is nothing you do is going to make any difference at all, so we need to stop talking about meaning in life or at least stop thinking about it."

There's a place where C.S. Lewis wrote an essay about this. C.S. Lewis is a Christian. He's not like the rest of the guys I've been reading to you, but this is what he says. Here he's pushing the way Tom Nagel pushes. He says if you believe there's no God and the universe is meaningless but you are creating your own meaning, then the only way you're going to be happy is not think too much about the universe you really have.

He says, "If nature is all that exists—in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort somewhere outside nature ..." There's no afterlife; this life is all there is. There's no spirit or supernatural; this material life is all there is. "... then all stories will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without possibility of return.

[All of human civilization] will have been an accidental flicker, and there will be no one even to remember it. No doubt atomic bombs may cut [human civilization] shorter than it might have been; but the whole [of human civilization], even if it lasted for billions of years, must be so infinitesimally short in relation to the oceans of dead time which precede and follow it ..." Why should we get upset about it being a little shortened?

He says if you believe that, here's what you can do. "You might decide simply to have as good a time as possible." Let's just not think about the fact that life is meaningless. Just go out and have a good time. But he says, "You can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising

from the behavior of your genes,” which is what Jerry Coyne and Bertrand Russell say love really is. It’s an illusion.

He says, “You can’t go on getting any very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a ‘good time’; but just in so far as [anything in life] becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between your own emotions and the universe in which you really live.”

What he’s saying is the way to be happy if you believe the universe is meaningless and that you have to create your own meaning is by not thinking too hard. Just don’t think too hard about it. Leo Tolstoy in *A Confession* in 1879 wrote, “I was baptized and brought up in the Orthodox Christian faith. [...] But when I abandoned the second course of the university at age eighteen I no longer believed any of the things I had been taught. [...] My lapse from faith occurred as is usual among people on our level of education.” He’s talking about Russia, nineteenth century.

He says, “So I lived; but five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I experienced moments of perplexity and arrest of life, as though I did not know what to do or how to live; and I felt lost and became dejected. [...] All this befell me at a time when all around me I had what is considered complete good fortune. I was not yet fifty; I had a good wife who loved me and whom I loved, good children, and a large estate which without much effort on my part improved and increased. I was respected ... more than at any previous time.

[My] name was famous. [And yet] I could give no reasonable meaning to any single action or to my whole life. [...] Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come ... to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort? How can [we] fail to see this? [...] That is what is surprising!

One can only live [without God] while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud! [There is] nothing either amusing or witty about it; it is simply cruel and stupid. [...] My question—that which at the age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide —was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man ... a question without an answer to which one cannot live ...

It was: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?’ Differently expressed, the question is: ‘Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?’ It can also be expressed thus: ‘Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?’ ”

What he’s really saying is that even though he tried not to think about it, because

he had his wife, his novels, his reputation, things were going well ... He says if it's really true that when I die I rot and when the sun goes out nothing will matter ... He couldn't stop thinking about it. Tom Nagel says, "Stop taking yourself so seriously, Tolstoy. Gosh, these Russian writers, they take themselves so seriously. Don't worry about it. Go out and have a good time. Don't ask, 'Is this going to make a difference?' Of course it's not going to make a difference, but don't think about it." Tolstoy said, "I can't. It keeps breaking in on me."

If a Christian is discouraged and truly believes the Christian faith ... The Christian faith teaches that you're loved right now and forgiven. It teaches that if you die right now your life will only get better. It teaches that someday God is going to come to earth and resurrect us and he's going to make the new heavens and new earth and wipe away every tear and create a material world in which there's no suffering, pain, or death.

You may not believe that, but I'm just trying to say if you believe that and you're having a bad day, how do you feel better? By thinking out the implications of what you think about the reality in the universe. How does a Christian feel better? By thinking out the implications. "I believe *this* and *this* and *this*." Think until the glory of it breaks on you. How does a person with this particular understanding of not discovered meaning that I align with but self-created meaning deal with it? Don't think too much. I think that's a weakness.

B. *Self-created meaning is far less durable.* Self-created meaning can always be destroyed by suffering. You're going to suffer. Viktor Frankl was a very famous Jewish German doctor who survived the death camps. He was put in the death camps during World War II and came out. He wrote a book called *Man's Search for Meaning*, a fascinating book. In it he was trying to understand why it was that some people in the death camps were able to maintain their dignity and their goodness.

He said there were three kinds of people. There were some people who collaborated. They turned evil. They did anything to survive. They informed. They became bad. The second group of people lost all hope and literally curled up and died. The third group of people stayed noble and good. He tried to figure out what it was, and he decided ... You can tell from the name of the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. He decided that everybody has to live for something.

Everybody has to have something that is their purpose and meaning in life, and if the death camp can take it away from you, you will be destroyed, because you can't live without meaning. If your meaning in life was status or money or your beauty or popularity, or whatever, the death camp will take everything from you. He says the people who lasted were either religious people or even people who had some meaning of life that was a little idiosyncratic but still believed this world wasn't the only world there was.

For example, he said there was a man who believed his wife was looking down on him from heaven. The reason he kept good, the reason he kept his hope up, the reason he kept his virtue was because he said, "I don't want her to be

disappointed with me.” Now that’s not Christianity. I’m not even sure that’s Judaism, but the point was this world was not all there was. Viktor Frankl said if your meaning in life is something inside this world, inside this time and space, suffering will take it away from you, and there are all kinds of things that will utterly destroy you.

Western civilization is the worst civilization in history, I think, at helping people deal with suffering. Dr. Paul Brand, who was a pioneering orthopedic surgeon who treated leprosy patients, spent the first half of his medical career in India and the last half in America. He said, “[In the United States] I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it.”

What he’s saying here is that he found it fascinating that people in other parts of the world could handle suffering better than Americans, basically. Here’s what he decided, and here’s what I’m going to tell you. The meaning of life in Hinduism, karmic religions, is to live a good life so you can escape the cycles of reincarnation and go into bliss. The meaning of life in Christianity or Judaism is to go to heaven or ... It depends. There are different versions. In Islam it’s the same thing: paradise.

The meaning of life in Buddhism is to overcome the illusion of this world and become part of the All Soul. The meaning of life in northern paganism, the Germanic pagans, was to live a life of mobility, especially in the face of unending defeat and, therefore, live long in glory. Every single religion or culture before our own always said your meaning in life is something outside of this life; therefore, even though suffering hurts, suffering can actually help you get to your goal. Suffering is terrible, but it can actually make you a better person.

If the meaning of life is here, if it’s something a death camp can take away from you, then you’re not durable. In history, discovered meaning is something that enables you to handle a death camp, but self-created meaning not only doesn’t handle a death camp but doesn’t handle life, because bad things happen to everybody.

C. *Self-created meaning is unable to give a good reason for moral values.* If there is no God, it’s not hard to understand why a person might have a moral feeling. Right? You might have a feeling that X is right and Y is wrong. Why do you feel that way? It could be evolution. It could be your genes. It could be your culture. It could be your choice. You have the right to your moral feelings.

Without God there’s no problem explaining why people have moral feelings, but without God it’s extremely hard to explain moral obligation, because in moral obligation I’m saying to somebody else, “You must stop what you’re doing, because it’s wrong, regardless of how you feel about it. My feelings trump your feelings.” How do you do that? Without God, what do you appeal to to say, “Your moral feelings are wrong; my moral feelings are right”? I don’t know. We’ll get to that next week.

3. *If Christianity is true, what is the meaning in life?* Christianity is not quite like all of these other religions. All of the other religions do give you a meaning in life that's discovered. The Greeks, for example, believed in something called the *logos*. The *logos* wasn't God. *Logos* actually means the word or logic. They believed there was a rational structure behind the universe.

They believed it was your job to align with that rational structure, and if you aligned with that rational structure life would go well. It's a little bit like ... I have space heaters in my apartment, and when I get the space heater I open it up and there are the directions. The directions say the space heater was made for *this* kind of power outlet, but don't plug it into *this* kind of power outlet. The space heater was made to be set over *here*, but don't set it over *there*.

The directions are saying, "*This* is the design and purpose of the space heater. It wasn't made for *this*. It wasn't made for *this*. It was made for *this*." So the directions say, "Please align your use of the space heater with its *logos*, with its design, with its purpose. Align with its purpose." Why? If you don't, at the very best you won't get your full value out of it; at the very worst you'll die.

The Greeks said, "Wait a minute. What if there's a *logos* to the whole world? What if there's a natural order to the whole world behind the whole world? By aligning with it we would find our lives going well. If we don't align with it, if we're going against the grain of the universe, we will, at the very least, not have a very good life and, at the very worst, we'll die."

So the Greeks said, "Let's figure out what that *logos* is and align with it." Actually, almost every culture except Western culture has believed there was something like that. Here's the problem. The Stoic Greeks believed what it meant to align with the universe was simply to accept whatever happened. That's one way to align with the universe: just not care. Toughen yourself.

The Pharisees believed the *logos* behind the universe was the Ten Commandments, so you obey. The Epicureans believed, basically, the meaning of life is to find out what makes you happy. If you don't believe there's any *logos*, then you have the Tolstoy problem. So relativism, stoicism, moralism, legalism, and hedonism are all ways of saying, "I have to find out what the meaning of life is and align with it."

What's interesting about that term *logos* is that in the gospel of John, one of the first four gospels, the very first chapter says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory." The word *Word* there is the word *logos*, and it's talking about Jesus. It's calling Jesus the *Logos*. John deliberately chose a term that was completely weighted with enormous philosophical freight. Do you know why?

There's a French philosophy book ... It was a history of philosophy and talks about why Christianity came along and completely usurped the place of Greek and Roman philosophy. It says something like, "The *logos* for the Greeks was the

impersonal, harmonious, divine structure of the cosmos as a whole, but to the horror of the Greeks, the Christians maintained that the *logos* (in other words, the cosmic principle, the harmonious order of the world) was not an abstract structure but was a single unique personality, one outstanding individual: namely Christ.

This brought an unprecedented emphasis on the history of human thought, on love and persons. By resting its case upon a definition of a human person and an unprecedented idea of love, Christianity was to have an incalculable effect on the history of ideas. It's quite clear that without this Christian reevaluation of the human person the philosophy of human rights to which we subscribe today would never have established itself."

I don't know whether you agree with that, and I'm not going to try to press that. Here's the point. Christianity comes along and says, "The meaning of life is Jesus, and the way you find meaning in life is to have a love relationship with a person." Not that the meaning of life is to live up to a code. That's moralism. Not that the meaning of life is to accept whatever happens in life. That's stoicism. Not to just say there *is* no meaning in life. That's relativism.

Not just say, "Well, the purpose of life is to find out what you want to do and do it." That's selfishness. Christianity came along and said, "There is a rational structure to the universe. There really are absolutes. There is a discovered meaning that you have to align with. There is an objective meaning, but it's a person. To find meaning in life is to love that person and be in a personal relationship with that person."

Boy, that revolutionized history. Before then, to find the *logos* took philosophical contemplation. It was only for the elites. Now this is for anybody, and it's so personal. It's not moralistic and it's not stoicism, and so on. If Christianity is true, the meaning of life is a personal relationship with the person behind the universe, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Creator of the world, who came into the world.

Female: We're going to have Q&A now. The first question is, "My worldview or belief system is so strongly shaped by my family and my culture. How can I or anyone else have a sense that my beliefs are truly my own?"

Tim Keller: Terrific question. There is a great chapter in a book called *A Rumor of Angels* by Peter Berger, who's a very famous sociologist. There's a chapter in there called "Relativizing the Relativizers." It's an extraordinarily interesting chapter. He comes at this question a little differently than you, the questioner, did, but here's how he put it.

He said that in the late twentieth century we've increasingly come to see that we are profoundly shaped in our beliefs not by reason but by our communities and our social, cultural location, which actually is what you're saying. He said, for example, we tend to find most plausible and rational the views of people we want to like us. He says if it's a person you really want to like you and really want to be part of, then, for some reason, everything they say seems so reasonable.

He says we've had study after study after study that shows we are profoundly influenced by our social location, cultural location, family, and that's what you're noticing. Here's the problem. He says if you try to say, therefore, there's no way to be objective, there's no way in any way to be reasonable ... If you say, for example, we're all locked into our beliefs so nobody can be sure of anything ...

We're locked into our beliefs by our social location. Everything is culturally conditioned. Therefore, we can't be shaped by anything. He says the only problem is if that's true, then that view is culturally conditioned and you can't trust that either. (I can assure you he does a better job than I'm doing right now. If what I'm saying right now doesn't sound very compelling, you ought to read the chapter. He takes more time.)

He's saying if you say nobody can know truth because everybody is culturally conditioned and we're all stuck, why should I believe that? That is a statement that you expect me to believe. Why would you tell me that? You're also trying to shut down debate and you're trying to say, "Oh, don't even try to figure out what's true, because you're not objective."

He says, then what you're saying shouldn't be trusted, which means in the end you should be chastened, you should be humbled, you should know that you are deeply influenced by your family and your background and your culture, and yet we still have to look at the competing claims and still decide which one is right. As soon as you say, "Nobody can know which one is right," that is a claim you're assuming that everybody should accept is right, which means you're contradicting yourself. It's self-refuting.

He says relativism is self-refuting, and saying it's all a matter of cultural relativism doesn't work. So he says in the end we should be more chastened and more humble about it and take our time and not come down each other's throats. He wrote that before the Internet, by the way. He's still alive, and he actually blogs now. It is astounding how what he's really saying is, "Let's be kind to each other. Let's work with each other. Let's not hit each other over the head, but let's still, at the same time, say it's possible to conclude whether some claims are true or not."

Female: The next great question is, "How can we know that religion isn't just a cultural solution to an inherent human discomfort with the meaningless universe with no objective God?"

Tim: Oh, you need to keep coming. I said emotional, cultural, and intellectual or rational sense. I freely admit that these first couple of times I'm going to be talking to you about why it would be great if Christianity was true, but I'm not going to be trying to establish that it is yet, in which case you have absolutely every right to say exactly what you said.

"Hey, that's great. Indestructible meaning, a meaning that the death camps can't take away from you. Wonderful. That would be great. But how do I know this isn't just an illusion?" We'll have to get to it, and I don't think I'll take too much time

right here. Christianity is a wonderful balance. It doesn't strictly appeal to existential experience. It doesn't strictly appeal to rational evidence.

Because of the claim that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead, because it's a historical claim, because there are historical documents that we can judge as to whether we trust them or not, there's more grist for your reason mill in Christianity than most of the other religions. There are more claims that can be tested and weighed.

So we'll get there, but the first couple of times we meet together I'd like to talk more about what Christianity offers you and claims so you have an idea of what it really is saying before we turn and say, "Well, let's discuss whether or not it's true."

Female: The next question is, "You describe Christianity as giving you indestructible ability to deal with problems in life. What do you have to say about those, and many, who have left faith as a result of suffering?"

Tim: These are wonderful questions. I'm a pastor, so when I talk to people who have felt like, "My faith isn't real; I've gone through suffering and trouble and I just can't believe anymore," I want you to know that if I ever talk to you I won't say anything quite as brusque as what I'm about to say right now. It's one thing to believe in God; it's another thing to have your main hope and meaning be God.

For example, if I say, "I believe in God," but I'm really living for money, if the thing that makes me feel good about myself is I make money ... If in my heart I say, "What really makes me feel like a man is I make money; what really makes me feel like a significant person is I make money. I believe in God. In fact, all my life I believed in Christianity ..."

The person who gets into this is Saint Augustine. Saint Augustine talks about the order of our loves. He says our heart has a hierarchy of loves. There are some things we really love and things we really hope in and that really give us our significance and security, and then there are lower loves. He would say that even if God is your main hope, God himself and his love is your main meaning in life

...

Like I said at the end, a love relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If that's your main love, your main meaning in life, then suffering couldn't take that away from you. It certainly can hurt. Oh my word, of course it has to hurt. If I love God more than my wife and she dies, that would be devastating. I don't mean I just breeze through life. I certainly hope I didn't give you that impression. But I'll be able to survive.

If I actually love my wife more than God, if God is sort of an abstraction and it's my wife's love that gives me all my meaning in life ... I believe in God, I pray, but God is sort of an abstraction to my heart ... then maybe when I lose her I might not make it. So I would say the degree to which your heart is set in a love relationship with God through Jesus Christ, to that degree you're impervious to devastating loss of meaning.

You are not impervious to grief. In fact, I could argue that you're more able to feel grief in some ways. That would be another whole talk. I think Christians, because of their relationship with God, actually can feel the sadness, the brokenness of the world a little bit more. You don't need to say, "These are the good people; these are the bad people." We see everybody as broken.

I don't want to give the impression that you wouldn't hurt and suffer, but I would say that, ultimately, if God is your meaning, that can't be taken away. Saint Augustine basically says this. This isn't a quote, but this is a well-known précis of his teaching. "Only love of the immutable can bring tranquility." That's the idea behind a meaning in life that's indestructible.

Female: The next one is a long question, but it's very good. "How do you respond to the idea that your argument for the durability and rationality of objective meaning reinforces the concept of an inclination toward religious belief as a human behavior that has only been propagated as a survival mechanism of the human species, allowing it to exist in large societies?"

Tim: There's a whole area of study right now that talks about trying to understand why religion exists. Of course, anyone who says that everything that happens in our lives happens because of natural selection ... Everything about us is true because it helped our ancestors survive and, therefore, was passed down to us. So religious sensibilities, religious feelings, religious arguments are only here because they helped us adapt. Here you are saying that religion gives you meaning in life that's indestructible. That doesn't prove ...

I'm trying to hold off on saying, "Here's why it's not an illusion. Here's why it's not just a way of adapting to my environment." I think I can make a case that religion actually doesn't adapt to the environment very well, but I'm putting it off. I'm sorry to have to say to two of you very good questioners who say, "Just because it gives you indestructible meaning doesn't mean it's true," which is kind of what you're saying ... I'm saying, "Yeah, I know that."

I got the idea for the series when I read two books recently. One book is by a guy named Francis Spufford called *Unapologetic*. He's British. He started right off by saying, "I'm going to show you why thoughtful people who understand what Christianity offers would find it at least an attractive package. At the very least, it would be something that resonates. But I'm not anywhere in the book going to talk about why I think it's true; only why I think it makes emotional sense, why it makes cultural sense."

I'm not going to do that to you, because when I read the book I was frustrated on your behalf, on behalf of people who are skeptical. I was saying, "Okay, but how do you know this isn't true?" Nevertheless, I'm still going to put it off. Even if you don't get back here, which I hope you will, you can get all the rest of the material I'm going to produce. I just ask that you would put what I'm talking about tonight in along with the other stuff I give you later on. I'm afraid if I just try to give you an off-the-cuff thing I will actually not put Christianity in the best light because it'll be

so spotty.

Female: Shorter question. “Why is Jesus, a person, a more believable *logos* than anything else?”

Tim: Well, I don’t know that I’d say it’s more believable. I know the book I was reading called *A Brief History of Thought* ... One of the questions historians ask about is why Christianity supplanted Greco-Roman view. Again, I’m being pragmatic here. Some of you are going to say, “You’re just being pragmatic. You’re not telling me which is true.” Pragmatically, the historians say the Greco-Roman approach to *logos* was elitist. You might have heard me allude to it as I was trying to wrap up.

It was elitist because it was for very strong people. That’s why some of them were called *Stoics*. They decided, “I’m going to align myself with the harmony of nature, and I’m going to live in a certain way.” Most historians said the *hoi polloi* found Greek philosophy elitist and very, very difficult. Seneca, a Stoic philosopher, wrote a series of letters to a woman whose son had died, and you can see that the Stoic approach was saying, “Look, this is life. People die.”

It sounds like *The Lion King* music is going to break out any minute when you’re reading Cicero and Seneca, because they’re saying, “It’s all part of the great circle of life. We die and then we become fertilizer and then the plants come up, and so on.” He was trying to say, “This is life, and you have to align with it and you have to get yourself straight with it. That’s the only way you’re going to find meaning in life.” He was basically saying, “Don’t mourn too long. He’s been dead for six months. Get over it.”

The historians said it was kind of harsh and cold. The idea of having no meaning in life was, back then, unconscionable. Along comes Christianity and says the meaning of life is found in a love relationship, not contemplating philosophically the nature of the rational order of the universe. So they said Christianity was much more egalitarian, much more populist, much easier for the poor and the uneducated to pick up, as well as the educated, Saint Augustine and people like that.

I am answering your question about why it was more popular and why it seemed more warm and why it seemed more human and why it seemed to include everybody instead of just the elites. Is it more believable? It might be more plausible, but, on the other hand, an idea that God would become human was actually pretty hard for a lot of people to believe.

It was almost impossible, if you read Acts, chapter 17, where Paul actually speaks to Stoic and Epicurean philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens. When he gets to the idea of a resurrected Son of God, they just go nuts and think it’s crazy. So I wouldn’t say that Jesus as the *logos* is more believable, but I would say in many ways it’s more attractive, and that’s what I’m trying to talk about tonight.

Female: The next question is, “Can a secular subjective meaning of life, such as commitment to help the poor and the weak, that is comparable to the teachings

of Jesus have rationality and durability?"

Tim: I said I feel like discovered objective meaning is more rational and more durable. When I say it's more rational ... If you believe in God or you're a Christian, the more you think about the implications of what you believe, the better you feel. I think Tolstoy and even Tom Nagel and C.S. Lewis, three very different people ... a British Christian, an American atheist philosopher, and a Russian novelist ... all agreed and said, "If you think too much about the fact that you're in a meaningless universe and nothing you do is going to make any difference, it starts to break in on you in a bad way."

Is it rational? It can be rational. Sure it can, because you're saying, "I just want to see people helped. I can make the world a better place for 10 years or 20 years. I can make the world a better place for one family." Of course that's rational. I didn't want to say it's not. I don't want you to think I'm talking out of two sides of my mouth. I really do believe that without God you can have meaning in life. I'm not saying you can't.

I really do think that if you decide, "I'm going to work for a better world, and I'm going to work for more social justice," that's both rational and has a lot of durability. I'm just saying that in the history of life, most cultures would say, "Boy, that's thin. What happens if things go wrong? What happens if there's a war? What happens if there's a famine? What happens if there's *this* or *that*?"

I think self-created, subjective meaning requires an awfully safe environment, an awfully prosperous place. Most people, most places, most times in the world would say it wouldn't work for them. However, is it rational and durable? Yes. Is it as rational and durable as discovered meaning? No. That's my point.

Female: "If one doesn't believe in God, why can't the purpose in one's life be relationships with others and making the lives better for those around you? This is not selfishness, and even if the world ends, what you do matters for that period of time."

Tim: I'm pretty sure that's close to what the last question was about. When William Wilberforce, who was a strong Christian layperson and member of Parliament, was working to abolish slavery in the British Empire, he'd come into meetings and say, "I'm a Christian, and the reason I think slavery is wrong is because of what I read in the Bible. It's because of my Christian views, my Christian understanding that every human being is made in the image of God. It's wrong to enslave them."

He says, "However, I don't care why you're against slavery. If you are against slavery and you're ready to work with me, let's go. It might come from Islam. It might come because you're a Quaker and I'm an Anglican. It could be you're an atheist. I don't care. If you have a vision for a world without slavery, we can work together." That's humble cooperation with people.

From a Christian point of view, if a person says, "I'm not a Christian; I don't believe in God, but I see that this is a good thing to work for," we would say that

probably God has inspired them anyway. You may not believe God has inspired you, but we think all good gifts come from God and you have wisdom that comes from God whether you admit it or see it or not. So there's really no reason why a Christian can't say, "That is meaning in life. That's a good thing."

It's certainly better than living a selfish life. It will make the world a better place. It'll make you a better person. So yeah, it's rational, it's meaningful, it's a purpose; it's just way thinner. If that's the best you feel like you can do, that's fine. Like Wilberforce would say, "Let's work together." I'm trying to simply get you to think, "Maybe there is something deeper, thicker, more durable, more powerful than what I have." That's all I'm trying to get you to do tonight.

Female: Several people have asked something to the effect of, "Why is asking 'What is the meaning of life?' a worthy question anyway? What is the color of the number seven?"

Tim: Tom Nagel says that in his book. He basically says, "Is this the right question to ask, and why do we have to ask that question?" Here's the comeback. I got the book out when I was preparing for my talk here tonight. It's a book written in the 1980s, so I've had it maybe since the 1980s. It's interesting to read the jottings I wrote in the margins 30 years ago. He keeps saying, "Why are we even asking the question? It's a nonsense question. It's like, 'What's the color of seven?' Who needs to have a meaning in life?"

I don't know how to answer that. You say, "Well, why should we even ask the question? Why do we need to ask the question?" All I know is there's something about human nature that will keep imposing the question on you. You may not be Tolstoy. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, those guys ... Gosh, people who could write like they did. I mean, they're weird. I'm not Russian, so I don't understand all that. Nevertheless, I think something like that happens to most people.

I actually think the question imposes itself on you even though you can't really give ... I can't give you a good answer of why we even need to ask the question. I think you may be kidding yourself if you don't think you have an operative meaning in life. In Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue* he tells a story about how you can't make sense of anything or even make a move without putting an incident in a story. You have to have an overarching story that helps you make sense of anything. He gives an example.

Just imagine that you're at a bus stop and somebody you never met before, a young man, walks up to you and says, "By the way, the Latin word for the wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus*," and then he walks away. What just happened there? MacIntyre says, first of all, it's possible that yesterday that young man was in a library and it wasn't very good lighting and he walked over to a person and asked a question. You look like that person, and today he saw you at the bus stop and mistook you for that person, so he continues the conversation he started with somebody else.

Another explanation is this is a mentally ill young man. He's just mentally ill and

he does this and it's terrible. The third is that this is a foreign spy and he's here to do some dastardly deed and he thinks you're his contact and he just gave you his code. MacIntyre says one story is a kind of sad story. One story is a kind of routine story. One story is a kind of out-there, unlikely, scary story, but he says the only way you can possibly make sense of what happened is to put it in a story.

An awful lot of philosophers, not necessarily Christian ones, are saying *meaning of life* means life is about a story. It's about a struggle between *this* and *this*. It's about *this* and *this*. This is what life is all about. You can't live a life without a protagonist and antagonist. You can't live a life without moral values. You can't live a life without saying some things are good and some things are bad. You can't live a life without saying some things are worth doing.

All of the answers to those questions, "What is worth doing? What is good and bad? What is life about? What's wrong with the world? What will make it better?" You need to have answers to those things or you can't live life, and those things are a meaning in life. So I don't know that you can really say it's meaningless, and I think it'll keep pushing itself on you, but I do think you have to have a meaning in life in order to function.

Female: One last question, a very good general question for tonight as we start this seven-week series. "You keep saying the word *God*. Can you please define that?"

Tim: Well, tonight I was very generic about God. I was willing to say, for example, that Buddhists, karmic religions like Hinduism, dualists like Zoroastrianism, who believe there's eternal evil and eternal good that are the same level, Christianity, Northern European paganism ... I actually at one point went through and said every single one of them believes there is a supernatural world, a world outside of the physical, that the material world is not all there is and there is some kind of spiritual life, some kind of supernatural, and also some kind of existence that goes on after you're dead.

In that sense, all of those views do a better job of giving you meaning in life that can handle suffering than the current view, which is this life is all there is and you have to create your own meaning. All of them do better at suffering. Everybody can see it, anybody who knows. Tonight, until the very end, I was actually trying to say, for our purposes tonight, God was any spirit, any personal or impersonal, All Soul, or ... I was willing to talk about all kinds of god.

The Christian idea is that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even though he's one being he's three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equally God and they know and love each other. That is utterly unique. The Christian view of God means God has been in a love relationship from all eternity. It's not like God created the world and people and then had love after he created people, and before that he was just hovering in space for a billion eternities or something. No, from all eternity he has known and loved.

God was a family in which there has been love and communication from the beginning; therefore, love is intrinsic to life and to the universe. That's a radically different view of God ... radically personal, radically loving ... than the Buddhist view. Sometimes I'm going to talk about God in general. Tonight I was trying to say any belief that there's a God beyond the physical and material world helps you with meaning in life better than not believing in God at all.

Then at the very end I did a move and said Christianity brings the personal and the love in in a way Buddhism can't do, Hinduism can't do, I don't think even Islam can do. At some point I'm not here to try to lift Christianity up over other religions so much as to talk about why Christianity in general makes sense more than anything, including secularism.

Here's what I would like you to see. I will try to define God when I'm talking and say, "Here I'm not talking about the Christian God; I'm just talking about the view of God that any religion would have." But at other times I'll try to be careful and say, "Here I'm talking about the Christian God, the Father of Jesus Christ," and so on. That's a helpful thing to point out.

Female: Well, thank you so much for all of your questions. I know we had so many and many of you have more questions and some questions came in that we didn't get to ask, but don't worry. That's why there are extra weeks. Before we end, Tim, did you want to give us a brief teaser of what's to come in the next week?

Tim: Next week I'd like to talk about the problem of how you work for justice. For example, when people say, "Well, I don't believe in God, but I'm working for justice in the world," right away my question is, "You're working against injustice. You're working for justice. How do you define that? How do you appeal to somebody to say, 'You must stop doing injustice'? If they say, 'No, I'm not doing injustice,' how do you mitigate between your feelings and their feelings?"

This is, by the way, a very hot issue right now. Tom Nagel recently wrote a book in which he said that even though he doesn't believe in God he thinks it's extremely difficult to account for moral values without belief in something beyond the natural material world. It's gotten an enormous amount of pushback, and I'll try to give you a layman's update.

The week after that I want to talk about identity. Christianity can offer you an identity that not only frees you from the expectations of others but also frees you from your own crushing standards. Talk about psychology, basically; talk about identity and how identity works inside the Christian faith. So those are the next two weeks, and beyond that kind of depends on how our discussion goes.

The Pool

Seeing Jesus—February 2, 2014

John 5:1–18

¹ Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish

² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered

³ colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the

⁴ waters. From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease he had.

⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition

for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” ⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred.

While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”

⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” ¹¹ But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’ ”

¹² So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had

slipped away into the crowd that was there. ¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish

leaders began to persecute him.¹⁷ In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”¹⁸ For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

In January and February we're looking at the life of Jesus, especially at these incidents, these miraculous signs the gospel of John recounts for us, so we can get to know what Jesus is like, who he is. Let's just say you were to write a story about mountain climbing and you'd never, ever climbed a mountain. You'd never even set foot on a mountain.

So you write it and you send it to somebody who *is* a mountain climber and that mountain climber comes and sits down with you. The mountain climber says, “Oh, you really have it wrong at a lot of spots. It's like *this* and it's like *this* and it's like *this*.” You're listening, and at first you'll say, “What? Really?” kind of surprised. Then you say, “Oh yeah. Oh yeah.” Then you totally rewrite the story.

Can you imagine a perfect human being? Can you imagine a perfect man? You say, “Sure, I can imagine.” And you could, except you have to remember that since none of us are perfect human beings, you'd have to be perfect to perfectly imagine a perfect human being. Let's just say you're imagining a perfect human being. Most of us have some kind of idea. Otherwise we wouldn't be criticizing other people all the time.

What if a real perfect human being was presented to you? You would react the same way. You'd look at him and then you'd say, “What? Really? Oh yeah.” If you were reading about a truly perfect human being nobody has ever seen that you are too imperfect to perfectly imagine, you would be surprised constantly at him but also instructed. The reason you'd be surprised is these would be the surprises of perfection. Perfection would be surprising to us, because we've actually never seen it.

The challenge of the New Testament is to read about Jesus Christ. Not just once. Not just read one account and say, “Oh, really?” Page after page after page. Let it sink in who he is. The challenge is if you do that you will pretty much be forced to the conclusion nobody could have imagined someone like this. These stories were not made up. More and more, if you read about him, you'll see he's not just what we call larger than life; he's bigger than the world.

That's what we're doing every week here, looking at the book of John. John deliberately says near the end of the gospel of John, “Jesus did many, many miracles, but the ones I've chosen to recount to you are signs.” They're not just miracles. They happened, of course, but they also, John believed, always taught us something. The miracles he chose are the ones that are signs. They symbolize, signify, who Jesus is and what he came to do.

They're not just miracles that happened; they're also instructive. So let's take a look at three aspects of this. This is the third miraculous sign: the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda. Let's look at *the pool*, *the man*, and *the Sabbath controversy*, the controversy about the Sabbath that comes afterwards.

1. *The pool*. The pool is an interesting place. It says here it was in Jerusalem. It was near the Sheep Gate. It was a pool called Bethesda, and it was surrounded by five covered colonnades, or porches. It was a pool that was reputed to have healing properties. Some of your texts will point out that verses 4–5 were actually in the margin of the original manuscript. It's not like the Bible is actually teaching that there was an angel that came down. It's describing the belief.

The reason the paralyzed and the lame and the blind sat around this pool was they believed that when the waters stirred without a palpable wind ... Sometimes it did. It's difficult to know how. It could have been an underground source. If the water stirred and you didn't feel a wind, if you got down in there while the water was still stirring and you were sick, you were healed.

Now just something about the pool that's of interest. It's brief but important, I think. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when modern historical scholarship was beginning to develop, a lot of the historians cast an eye on the Bible to try to figure out whether or not they believed it was reliable history or whether it was filled with legends. One of the things they looked at was this particular chapter.

It talks about a pool with five porches. What many historians concluded was this is a perfect example of why we can't trust the Bible historically. First of all, at the time, there was no knowledge of there ever being such a pool. There was no historical record of it. There was no knowledge of there ever being a pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. Secondly, the author of this gospel said it was surrounded by five porches. The Greek word is *stoa*. It means a roofed colonnade, which is what you and I would call a *porch*.

It was a roof without any walls but supported by columns. Around the edge of a pool would be a porch. People who came to the pool would sit in the shade. They didn't go out in the sun of that time and climate. They would sit in the shade, go down in the pool, come back out, and sit under the porch. The historians said not only is there no record of any such pool, but to have five porches around it, five *stoas*, would mean it had five sides, and no one had ever heard of a pentagon pool.

That just shows that whoever wrote this did not know the architecture of the time. This was part of the academic case against the reliability of the Scripture that developed in those centuries. They said, "Look. It's very clear whoever wrote this was not a contemporary eyewitness. It couldn't have been the apostle John. It had to be somebody who did not know what Jerusalem or the architecture was like in those days. It must have been written much later." So it was an argument against it being a contemporary eyewitness.

When I was in college, I was wrestling with whether I could trust the Bible, and I came upon a little book that was a classic by a top-flight historian who knew ancient history named F.F. Bruce. The name of the book was *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* In the book, one of the things he points out is this pool. He says for quite a number of years people said, “Ah! There is no such record of a pool. It was clearly made up, and even if there was a pool it wouldn’t have five sides to it.”

Then they dug up the pool. First of all, they discovered the pool was under a church that had been built many, many years ago to mark the location of the pool. Secondly, when they actually got down and excavated the pool, they discovered there were actually two basins. The pool had two parts, two basins, and the two basins were divided by a ridge of rock. There were five porches like this: porch, porch, porch, porch, and then a porch on the ridge. So there were five porches. On the other hand, it wasn’t five-sided.

F.F. Bruce says the irony is since probably the pool was destroyed very soon after Jesus’ life, when Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans, now the pool of Bethesda in John, chapter 5, actually is evidence that this *was* a contemporary eyewitness. Anybody who lived very long after Jesus wouldn’t even have known about the pool. So what used to be evidence that you *can’t* trust the Bible as historically reliable now is evidence that you *can* trust the Bible as historically reliable.

Question ... *What does it matter?* What does it matter whether you can trust that the New Testament documents are telling you things that actually happened? It makes all the difference in the world, and here’s the reason why. If Christianity was like all of the other religions of the world, all of which say God saves the worthy ... If you want God’s blessing, if you want God’s salvation, you must be worthy of it. You must live a particular kind of life. You must have a particular kind of virtue and character. You must do these sorts of things. God saves the worthy.

If that was the case and Christianity was like all of the other religions of the world, it really wouldn’t make much difference whether this stuff actually happened or not. Why? Because when you read the life of Jesus you’re getting a blueprint for how to live. Look at how he loves people. Look at how perfectly he follows God. Look at how he goes to the cross. He dies for his enemies. He forgives them as he’s dying.

Wow! Look at this life of virtue and character and self-denial and forgiveness. Look at that. That’s how you’re supposed to live. Whether it happened or not doesn’t really make any difference, because you have the blueprint and what saves you is your life. If your life conforms to this, you are saved, so whether or not the blueprint happened or not doesn’t matter. Right? But, of course, Christianity is not at all like the other religions.

Jesus says, “I come not to call those who think they’re righteous but only those who know they’re sinners.” Paul says in Romans 4 that God saves and justifies

the ungodly apart from anything they do. Christianity says salvation is by free grace, wondrous grace, amazing grace, crazy grace, absolute grace. Why? Because Christianity says we're not saved by *our* life; we're saved by *his*. We're not saved by *our* fulfilling the requirements of the law and loving and doing. We're saved because *he* has done it all.

He has fulfilled all of the requirements. He lived the life we should have lived. He died the death we should have died. He did it all in your place, and when I believe in him now it becomes mine. I receive it as a gift. It does matter whether these things happened or not, because if it didn't happen, you can't be saved by grace. You're just going to be like everybody else. You're going to be under the crushing burden of having to be worthy, but if it happened, you can be saved by grace. And it did happen.

2. *The man.* We're going to see the very same idea, which is that our salvation is by sheer grace. Let's look at this man, starting in verse 5. Who is this guy? "**One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.**" It's important to see that we really don't know what caused his inability to walk. The word *invalid* is a general word that means disabled. It means unable to walk. It doesn't tell us whether it was an injury. It doesn't tell us whether it was a sickness.

When it says he'd been an invalid for 38 years, we're not told if he's 38, so he was sort of born with some kind of disability. Is he 60 and this happened when he was in his twenties? We really don't know. All we know is he couldn't walk and he was lying there, hoping that if the water stirred he could get in there and get his healing. Now let's notice three things about him. Basically, these are the three stages in his relationship with Jesus, and each one of them is instructive for us.

First of all, notice that Jesus comes to him. "**When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'**" Jesus asked the question. He doesn't come to Jesus; Jesus comes to him. He doesn't ask Jesus for something; Jesus asks him for something. He doesn't know who Jesus is. He's not in any way after Jesus. Jesus comes after him.

This is the first thing we ought to notice. We have here a picture of what the Bible lays down as a principle. That principle is that if you ever find God it's because God came searching for you. For example, Paul says it very categorically in Romans, chapter 3. First of all, he says no one is good. We understand that. Nobody is perfect. We get that. Then he says no one seeks for God. When you read that ... I felt this way the first 10 times I read that in my life.

That seemed to be overkill. That seemed to be reaching for too much. What do you mean no one seeks for God? There are a lot of people who seem to be seeking or looking for God. You come to realize that what Paul means there is not that no one is interested in God in general or that no one is interested in spiritual issues. What he's saying is no one actually deliberately seeks the true God as he's described in the Bible. Here's why he's absolutely right.

There are all sorts of concepts of God that are actually pretty attractive, but as a person who has been teaching this stuff for 40 years and been exposing people to what the Bible says about God, I know that when you actually open the texts where it talks about God's absolute sovereignty ... He speaks out of the whirlwind and says to Job, "I do not have to justify myself to you. Who are you? I created you." On Mount Sinai he comes down and says, "I am absolutely holy. I'm on the mountain. If any sinner even touches the mountain, you're going to die."

When you see this absolute sovereignty, this utter glory, this perfect holiness the Bible says is the true God ... Whenever I open that to anybody at all, we hate it. There are all kinds of gods we can be kind of attracted to, but the God revealed in the Bible there is a deep, deep allergy to. We recoil from it. Genesis 3 explains this. The first temptation. The Serpent, Satan, comes to Adam and Eve and says, "Did God say he'd do that? No, he won't. If you obey him, *this* is going to happen, *that's* going to happen."

The old theologians call that the *lie of Satan*, and at the deepest depths of your heart there is this lie still, this belief. It's very deep, and it goes like this: "Don't get near to God or he will utterly destroy your happiness. God is a killer ... at least he's a happiness killer. If you get near him and start to obey him, if you give him control, you will never be happy again. Never." That is, according to the Bible, the deepest level of your heart.

Whatever else is in your heart, you believe that. If you don't believe that, I don't think you know your own heart. If you don't know that's in there, you don't know your own heart. I try, as much as possible, to only say things up here I'm absolutely sure of. When you get near this kind of unvarnished, raw God, not the prettified God, not the God we try to pull together that we're seeking, but the God who reveals himself in the Bible ... No one seeks a God like that.

You either are going to try to remake him or you're going to try to run from that God ... unless God does something about your blindness, does something about your fearfulness, does something about your denial, unless he penetrates, unless he comes in and starts to take away all that. That's the reason we have John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him." Acts 16:14: "The Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message." First John 4:19: "We love him only because he first loved us."

*'Tis not that I did choose thee
For, Lord, that could not be
This heart would still refuse thee
Hadst thou not chosen me.*

*My heart owns none before thee
For thy rich grace I thirst
This knowing, if I love thee,
Thou must have loved me first.*

Isaiah 65:24: "Before they call I will answer, and while they are speaking I will hear." By the way, this is good news. If you want to pray, if it comes into your heart to pray for something, don't say, "Oh, I wonder whether God is going to hear this." You wouldn't even want to pray it unless he was helping you. You wouldn't even want to seek him unless he was helping you at the moment. That's good, isn't it?

Now let's take a look at the next level. Jesus goes to him. "**'Sir,' the invalid replied, 'I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.'**" So Jesus comes and says, "Would you like to get well?" and the man says to him, "Yeah, of course. I would love some help to get into the water. That's why I'm not well: because I can't get into the water."

Here, again, we have a picture of something I think is a lot more subtle. Oh my goodness, it's subtle. He is willing to partner with Jesus. Jesus comes along and says, "Would you like to be well?" He says, "Hey, I'd love to have help getting into the water." In other words, "Yes, whoever you are, I'd be happy to partner with you to get me into the water which will save me." In other words, he's not looking at Jesus and saying, "Oh, *you're* where my salvation rests." He's saying, "Please help me get my salvation," not, "You *are* my salvation."

We're all like that at the beginning. Every one of us, honestly. I was. I think you are, you were. Here's what I mean. Usually, we come to Christ or start getting religious or start to go to church or come back to church, or whatever, because something goes wrong in our lives, because we thought Mr. Right or Ms. Right was going to make it all right and it didn't somehow or another, or the career is going in a bad direction or something.

So you start to go toward Jesus, but almost always what you're really saying is, "I need help to get back in the water." We're lying around the water. The water is Mr. or Ms. Right or a career. "These are the things that are my joy. These are the things that are my salvation, and I'd be quite willing to partner with Jesus if he helps me." People go into the ministry ... To serve Jesus? Yes, but to feel important, and they haven't been able to feel important somewhere else.

In other words, "What's really going to save me, what's really going to make me feel important is to do this, to do that, and I'd be happy to have Jesus help me get there." We are all like that. I would even go so far as to say, though in the very beginning when you're moving toward Jesus at first you're sort of saying, "Please help me get my act together. I need spiritual strength so I can get my career back on track, so I can start to feel better about myself ..."

In other words, we tend to use him as a means to an end, just like this guy. "Yeah, I'll be happy to help you help me get my salvation," instead of saying, "You *are* my salvation." "I'll be happy to let you help me get to something that makes me feel significant and secure," rather than to say, "You *are* my significance. You *are* my security. If I'm in you, if I have your love, if I am in you, then I have it. I

don't need to get into the water."

I would say even those of us who have finally figured that out and, to some degree, have embraced that truth probably spend the rest of our lives really truly understanding and practicing it. We still say, "I would be very happy, Lord Jesus, for you to partner with me and help me find the things that really are my salvation," instead of saying, "You're my salvation."

In Psalm 43, there's a place where David says, "My joy." He talks to God that way. "You're my joy." Not, "You can help me *find* my joy if you partner with me," but, "You *are* my joy." That's the second thing we see here. First of all, God has to come to us if we're even going to find him. Secondly, when he first starts working with us, almost always we're just trying to partner with him, using him as a means to an end to get us the things we think will save us instead of seeing our salvation in him.

Now, finally, in spite of all this, in spite of this cluelessness, what does Jesus say? "No, I'm not taking you down in the water. Get up. I *am* the water." "**'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.'** At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath ..." What's interesting is almost immediately there's a controversy. He has been told to take up his mat and walk. That immediately puts him in violation of the rabbinical laws at the time on what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath.

There were like 39 different things you couldn't do on the Sabbath, and most of them had to do with carrying weights. One of the things you couldn't do was this. Jesus says, "**'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.'**" It says in verse 9, "**'At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, 'It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.'**" He replied, "This guy told me to do it."

Pretty interesting. Remember God comes to Adam and says, "Why did you eat the fruit?" He says, "She made me do it." "Why did you give your husband the fruit?" "The Serpent ..." So down the line. Immediately ... "Why are you carrying the mat?" He realizes, "Oh my gosh, the powers that be are angry at me." He says, "It was *his* idea." But the guy had left. Jesus had vanished.

When Jesus comes back to him ... Look carefully. Jesus comes back to him in verse 14 and says, "**'See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.'**" Now we're not totally sure what that means. It's possible that he's saying, "The reason you were injured was because of some way in which you were living," or he might be saying, "If you don't come to faith now, maybe God will give you something else in your life to finally wake you up."

Jesus' whole point is, "I didn't want to just help you in the body. I want you to believe. I want you to be spiritually and completely healed, not just physically healed." There's no indication that the man in any way responds. When we get to John, chapter 9, we're going to see a man born blind who's healed. Immediately

Jesus leaves, but when Jesus comes back, he believes in Jesus and defends Jesus to the authorities.

This guy not only doesn't respond with belief, but the minute he figures out who Jesus is, look at what happens in verse 15. "**The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.**"

"Why are you carrying this mat?"

"Not my problem. This guy over here did it."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

When he finds Jesus, he runs back to the authorities to try to get in good with the powers that be and says, "*There's* the guy. Don't prosecute me. *There's* the guy." The man doesn't believe. The man doesn't appreciate what Jesus has done. I know there are a lot of people who say, "What? That's not how it's supposed to end. What do you mean? Jesus heals him and he's supposed to come back and say, 'O Master, I believe.' " Well, yeah, that happens in some places, but not all the places.

I remember some years ago I was studying the Bible every week with a group of people with very different places in their beliefs. As you go through the Bible, every one of the so-called heroes of faith is very flawed. Here's Abraham lying about Sarah. He'd say, "Oh, she's not my wife; she's my sister." So they'd take her into bed. He was afraid they were going to kill him for his wife.

Then later on, Sarah says, "I can't give you children." She says to Abraham, "Take my Egyptian slave woman and sleep with her, and then she'll have children for you." As soon as he does and a child is born, Sarah gets jealous. The slave gets jealous. Sarah says, "I'm going to send you off into the desert where you can die." Abraham says, "Leave me out of it." Then there's Isaac and Rebekah deceiving each other. Then there's Jacob and Esau deceiving each other. Then there's David killing a man to get his wife. Don't get me started on Samson.

I remember at one point somebody sort of pushed the Bible back and said, "This makes no sense at all. These people are all idiots." Here's Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David. We have whole chapters go by without anybody really being a good example. I remember the person said, "I thought the Bible was supposed to be a set of moral examples to inspire us to live." I said, "Ah, you've missed the whole point of the Bible."

If the Bible's message was "God saves the worthy," then, of course, the stories of the Bible would be all people who responded, who did the right thing, who summoned up the blood, who were faithful, who were courageous, but what you actually have is a set of stories about men and women who don't seek God's grace, don't deserve God's grace, and don't even appreciate God's grace once they get it, because salvation is by grace.

That's the message here. It's not a bunch of little Aesop's fables, little moral exemplars that inspire us how to live. It's actually to tell us we'll never be what we should be. You know you'll never be what you should be, and you need to throw yourself on the mercy of God and give your life wholly to him and receive that mercy as free.

3. *The Sabbath controversy*. This little controversy here at the end is more than you think. They come after him and say, "You are healing and doing things on the Sabbath." What does he say? He says, "**My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.**" Here's what's going on. The rabbis all taught that the only person who could work on the Sabbath without sinning was God. Jesus said, "Okay. What? My Father and I are doing our work."

They immediately knew what he was saying. I'm not sure you and I would the first time through, but verse 18 makes it very clear. They immediately knew he was saying he was God. He says, "I'm only doing the work God does." What is that work? See, if he's saying the healing of this man was part of his work, what he's saying is, "My redemptive work, my restoring work is what the Sabbath is really all about."

Do you remember how in John, chapter 1, Jesus is called the Lamb of God? The Passover lamb symbolized atonement. Jesus is essentially saying, "I bring the atonement the Passover lamb only symbolized and pointed to." He's actually saying, "I'm Lord of the Sabbath," which is, by the way, something he does claim elsewhere. "What that means is I bring the deep rest and salvation the Sabbath can only point to."

When God rested from his work at the end of the days of creation in Genesis 6 ... It says he rested from his work. That can't mean he was tired. It can't mean he needed physical restoration. What did it mean that he rested? It means he was satisfied. It means he was at peace. Over and over in the Old Testament, though God says one day a week you need to rest ... Of course that's physical restoration. One day a week you need to rest.

But it's very clear that *sabbath rest* refers to more than just physical restoration, because when the children of Israel are brought out of Egypt, he says, "I will take you into the Promised Land where I will give you rest." In the middle of the wilderness when they disobey God, he says, "Well, if you disobey me, you will never enter into my rest." He's talking about something deeper than that.

Here's why. It is one thing to rest physically for a day, but it's another thing to rest not just from your physical work but from the work underneath the work. What is that? Remember how Rocky says to Adrian in the first *Rocky*, the only good *Rocky* movie ... She says, "Do you want to win?" or something like that, and he says, "Oh, I don't even care about winning. I just want to go the distance. Then I'll know I'm not a bum."

Harold Abrahams was asked in *Chariots of Fire*, "Why are you working so hard to get the gold?" He says, "When that gun goes off, I have 10 seconds to justify my

existence.” Some of you come from traditional cultures, where you’re working, working, working, but you’re actually working to please your parents and your family, to make them proud. Those of us who are from more Western cultures are working, working, working, but we’re really trying to get self-esteem.

We’re trying to say, “I am good. I’m good at this. I can do this.” In other words, “I’m accomplished, I’m smart, I’m making money, and I’m thin.” These are ways that we’re told we can have self-esteem. See, there’s work, and then there’s the work *under* the work. There’s the work we’re doing, which we knock off because we’re tired, but the work under the work, which is to justify ourselves, to save ourselves, to get our self-esteem, our worth … That is crushing.

You can knock off for a day. You can knock off for a week, but what you really need is a rest from that work underneath the work. The book of Hebrews talks about this, because the Sabbath day is pointing to that rest. In Hebrews, chapter 4, it says, **“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their [own work], just as God did from his.”**

How do you rest from your own work? When Jesus died on the cross, he said, “It is finished.” What was he doing? What was finished? His work. What was his work? He was living the life and doing the work you and I will do unless we rest in what he has done. He says, “Because I have fulfilled all righteousness, believe in me and you’ll know that God loves you and accepts you. You are righteous in his sight.”

When you realize, “Because of his work, because he died on the cross, I can rest from that work underneath the work …” Of course I want to please my family. Of course I want to do well. Of course I want excellence, but it’s not the water anymore. It’s not the salvation anymore. Now it just becomes a good thing I’m going to try for, because deep, deep down inside I have rest. I have total and absolute rest. Do you have that?

C.S. Lewis in one place says it like this. He says this is what Jesus is saying. You know that place where Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.” Making Jesus Christ the person you live for will give you a deep rest. Living for anything else but Jesus Christ will just crush you with restlessness and weariness.

C.S. Lewis says this is what Jesus is saying to you: “I am the way, the truth, the life. Whatever is keeping you from God or from me, throw it away. Come to me, everyone who’s carrying a heavy load. I am rest. I am life. I am your food. Finally, do not be afraid. I have overcome the whole universe.” Let’s pray.

Father, we thank you that you have shown us again through this miraculous sign that your Son, Jesus Christ, is not just our helper. He’s not just our model, our exemplar. He’s our Savior. He doesn’t just help us get into the water; he *is* the water. He doesn’t just help us work ourselves out of that sense of unworthiness we have; he *is* our worthiness. He *is* our rest.

We thank you that he went through such agony and died on the cross so we can say it really is finished and we can rest. Father, please, make all these truths a reality now in our lives through the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we ask it, amen.

A Strong Basis for Doing Justice

Questioning Christianity—February 6, 2014

Last week a pretty good number of people watched this online. It's being live streamed, and you can watch it during the week as well. It's seven weeks, and I don't know if anybody can always make seven Thursday nights in a row, but I'm hoping there will be a kind of community of people who will digest this and talk about this and make this an opportunity to think about these issues. If you're not able to be here in person, you can watch it online, and cumulatively, hopefully, the arguments we're trying to make here will be complete. I actually would suggest if you don't make every one that you should try to watch it so you see it all.

What we're trying to do is explore the character and claims of Christianity to see if it makes sense to contemporary people, if it makes sense emotionally, culturally, and intellectually or rationally. Why do we put it that way? Because, actually, I think that's the way we determine all of our beliefs. There are some things you can prove. You can prove, for example, that there are a certain number of species of fish in Lake Ontario. If that's what you're trying to prove, you can prove it or disprove it, but nothing really important in our lives can we actually prove.

For example, you really can't prove the things you think are really right and really wrong. You can't prove what's worth living for, and you actually can't prove that there's a God or that there's not a God. If you say to me (and some of you did last week), "Nobody can be sure that there's a God, nobody can know there's a God," well, that's a belief. Right? Can you prove that belief? Of course you can't. If you say, "There is no God," you can't prove that. If you say, "There is a God," you can't prove that either, which means everybody's life is assuming one of these things.

You can't live without deciding what's worth living for. You can't live without deciding what's right and wrong. You can't decide unless you assume there's a God or there's not a God. Since you can't prove there is a God or there isn't a God, you're either living as if there's a God when there actually might not be or you're living as if there is no God when actually there might be. Either way, it's an enormous risk. It's an act of faith.

What I'm trying to say is everybody has a set of beliefs. You can't live without a set of beliefs about these big issues, and none of them can you prove. So what do you do once you realize that? I'm trying to avoid extremes. First of all, I do not think you just make a blind leap in the dark and say, "Okay, I'm just going to believe this, then; since I can't prove it, I'm just going to believe anything I want," without thinking, without weighing the evidence. Just because you can't prove something doesn't mean you necessarily just make a leap in the dark.

On the other hand, you shouldn't insist, "I'm only going to believe the things that can be proven," because then you couldn't live. You have to live on the basis of a number of assumptions about human nature and about the meaning of life and about whether there's a God or not, and you can't prove that. So I suggest to you that we all do this, that basically you arrive at your beliefs and run through these three.

You adopt beliefs that, first of all, emotionally resonate. They fit in with your feelings, your intuitions, your hopes, your aspirations. Secondly, you adopt beliefs if you like the way they're culturally fleshed out when you see them lived out in real life. You say, "I like the way they flesh out. I like the way they feel." There's also evidence and reasons to believe it too. Cumulatively, you say, "This is where I'm living. These are my beliefs."

I'm just saying that Christianity can pass those tests too, that Christianity makes sense emotionally, culturally, and intellectually, and I'm trying each week to give you another example of it. Last week we talked about what Christianity can offer: a meaning in life that suffering can't take away from you. We said that without God you certainly can create your own meaning in life, but that meaning in life will be based on something inside this world and this life and suffering can take that away from you. In other words, without God, whatever your meaning in life is, suffering can destroy it.

Christianity gives you a meaning in life, which is a love relationship with God that goes on forever, which gives you hope no matter what happens here. It gives you a basis for meaning in life. I was making the case that it's an incredibly robust meaning in life. This week I'd like to give you a second thing that I think shows Christianity making sense emotionally, culturally, and intellectually. That is, Christianity gives you a strong, non-oppressive basis for doing justice. Got it? Now let me unpack that.

Whenever we talk about whether there's a God or not, one thing that often gets brought up, to the endless irritation of atheist agnostics and more secular people ... Somebody pulls out this quote by Dostoyevsky: "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." By the way, rather than somebody ask, "Where does he say that? I've heard that, but I'm not sure ..." He writes that in part 4, book 11, chapter 4, of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The chapter's name is "A Hymn and a Secret."

"If God does not exist, everything is permitted." (I guess it depends on your

translation. It might be a little bit different.) This is extremely irritating and frustrating to many people who are agnostic or atheist or don't believe in God. In fact, we had a dialogue with Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard University. He wrote a book called *Good Without God*. I had to read it, of course, in order to have the dialogue.

The whole book is basically pushing back on this idea that you have to believe in God in order to be morally good. He makes a great case and shows his frustration, which I was sympathetic with. You have plenty of people who do not believe in God or don't know if there is a God, God is really not a big part of their lives, and yet they are incredibly good and are sold out for other people and are working to alleviate all kinds of human ills.

It's just insulting, he says, to hear that if God doesn't exist then anything goes. If you believe God doesn't exist, well, I can't really trust your morals. That is rightfully, I think, very frustrating, but I still think Dostoyevsky is on to something. He doesn't really say that if you're an atheist you can't be good. He's trying to say the nonexistence of God creates a problem for morality and morals. I do think he's right about that.

So let's do what we did last week, which is let me pose three questions. I think the first two will show you what I did last week, which is I'd like to break the issue down about what it means to be good. First ... *Can there be moral goodness without God?* Secondly ... *Can there be moral obligation without God?* Those are two different things. Thirdly ... *What would moral goodness and obligation look like if Christianity is true?* That's what we did last time.

By the way, those of you who want to save time and would like to leave right now, I'll tell you the answers. Can there be moral goodness without God? Yes, absolutely. Can there be moral obligation without God? No way, no matter how hard you insist. What do morality and justice look like if Christianity is true? I can't put that in a nutshell, so maybe you ought to stick around.

1. *Can there be moral goodness without God?* Oh yeah, absolutely. I would like to belabor this for a bit. Can people be good without believing in God? Very, very good. Absolutely, yes. I'll go further. Can a lot of people who don't believe in God be much braver, more honest, more self-sacrificing, more loving ...? Can a lot of people who don't believe in God be better than a lot of people who do? The answer again is, "Oh, yes."

Here's what I'd like to do for a second. Fortunately, we're kind of fairly evenly distributed between people who have Christian belief, who don't have Christian belief, who believe in God, who don't believe in God. So for the purposes of those of you who don't believe in God, in Christianity, let me for a minute talk to your neighbor there who does believe in Christianity. This will help everybody.

If you're a Christian and you think you really can't be good without God, that if a person doesn't believe in God you really can't trust their morals, you're not being true to your own Christian beliefs. Christian doctrine teaches that people can be

good without God. Did you know that? If you don't agree, then you're actually not being true to your own doctrine. How so? Let me give you two quick examples. I'm saying of course you can be good without God. Moral goodness. Definitely.

John Calvin is a very conservative Christian theologian from the sixteenth century. Many people would consider him narrow and rigid. (I don't, but let's not go there.) Nobody has ever accused him of being a liberal. He's a conservative, strict Protestant theologian. In one of his theological writings he is talking about how we regard the Greek and Roman and ancient writers, the philosophers, the mathematicians, and others whom he would consider polytheists (they believed in many gods) or atheists.

In other words, you're talking about Plato and Aristotle or all kinds of other people. "How do we regard those?" he was asked. Since they don't believe in Christianity, they don't believe in the true God of the Bible (therefore, they're all heretics by John Calvin's standards), when he reads these people, how does he regard them? He calls them *secular writers*, by the way. He's really talking about ancient Greek and Roman.

He says, "Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. [...]

Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? [...] Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. [...] Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature ..."

Do you hear what he's saying? If you are an atheist you might rankle a little bit at being told that if you have any wisdom or goodness it's from the Spirit of God, but right now here's my point. According to this theology, which is absolutely right, if you're a Christian and you believe the Spirit of God is the source of all truth and all wisdom and all beauty, then you have to say a lot of people who don't believe in God at all are being given that wisdom and beauty and truth. John Calvin says so. It must be true. He's arguing, saying it's just totally inconsistent.

I'll go one step further. If you're a Christian and you believe you're saved by grace ... Christianity does not believe that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. Christianity believes that humble people who are willing to admit that we're sinners and we're flawed and we need God's free mercy and pardon ... Christians believe that if you are in a right relationship with God it's strictly by grace.

It's not because you are smarter or more humble or more virtuous or more self-controlled or more loving or any of that. It's just the grace of God. Do we believe that? Then how can you turn to your friend or your relative or anybody around you who doesn't believe in Christianity ...? It's very likely that they are more loving than you, more self-controlled than you, wiser than you, and better fathers or mothers or sons or daughters than you.

You're not saved by being a good father or mother or son or daughter. You're not saved for those reasons. It's completely inconsistent for Christians, knowing what we know about what the Bible says, to say that people who don't believe in God can't be good. Of course they can be good. They are.

2. *Can there be moral obligation without God?* I'm going to say *no*, no matter how hard you insist. This is where I'm going to take the longest time to develop, because most people aren't used to thinking out this distinction at all, so I'm just going to have to help you tease it out. What is a moral obligation? It means a course of action that you're required to do regardless of your feelings about it.

What is the difference between moral goodness and moral obligation? Here's what it is. What does it mean to be morally good? It means to have moral feelings and convictions and then act on them. If you feel and believe that *X* is wrong to do and *Y* is absolutely right and important to do and then you act on that, you are morally good. You're a morally good person. You have strong moral feelings and you act on it.

The question that comes up is ... *Can we account for moral feelings without belief in God?* If there is no God, can you have moral feelings? If there is no God, can you account for moral feelings? If there's no God, does it make sense that people have these strong moral feelings and convictions? Yes. Now people disagree.

Some people would say, for example, that your moral feelings are basically from evolution, that you feel some things are good and some things are bad because your brain chemistry makes you feel bad when you see *X* and feel good when you see *Y*, and the reason your brain works like that is because that kind of behavior helped your ancestors survive; therefore, they passed that down to you. So your moral feelings are basically genetic traits that helped your ancestors survive, and that's why you feel that way.

Another explanation for moral feelings is that they're culturally constructed, that every culture decides how it wants to adapt to its environment, and collectively, not biologically, cultures work out a set of morality. We call that *socially constructed morality*. If you're part of a culture, a culture can really instill itself into you so you feel very strongly that *X* is wrong and *Y* is right. Or maybe, if you're more of a Sartre and Camus existentialist, you decide, "I, as an authentic individual, decide what is right or wrong for me and I have these very deep feelings."

So do you need to believe in God in order to be morally good? No. Do you need

to believe in God to account for moral feelings? No. There are a lot of ways we can explain moral feelings and convictions without God. But without belief in God is it possible to really believe in moral obligation or to require it? Now listen. Here's what the difference is. A moral feeling is "I believe X is wrong and Y is right," but a moral obligation is "You may not do X and you must do Y, and I'm requiring you, even though you don't feel it ..."

It's one thing for me to say, "I feel this is wrong." That's a moral feeling. It's another thing to say, "You're obliged to do it or not do it even though you don't feel it." That's moral obligation. Moral obligation is saying, "I don't care about your feelings. I don't care about your consequences. You may do this or you may not do this." The question is ... *What right do you have, if you don't believe in God, to not just say, "Here are my moral feelings" but to call someone else and say, "You ought not to do that," even though they don't share your feelings?*

Let me give you an example. Let's just say you see a culture ... It's not your culture. It's a long way away. In that culture women are not allowed to drive or vote or work outside the house. That's the way the whole culture is. You say, "I think that's wrong." Okay, why? The people inside the culture don't feel it's wrong. *You* feel it's wrong. So you have moral feelings and they have different moral feelings.

"I think that's wrong." You're not just saying, "I feel it's wrong." You're saying it *is* wrong and they ought to change, even though they don't feel it. Why? Is it because your feelings are superior to their feelings? Is it because your culture is superior to their culture? Do you see the problem? What gives you the right? If you're a Muslim, if you're a Jew or a Christian, and you believe in a God who's a law giver, if you're Greek or Roman and you believe ...

If you're Plato, for example, and you believe in a supertemporal realm beyond the natural world, where there are ideas and moral truths ... We would say *supernatural*. The Greeks and Romans were a little bit different. The point is if you're like the Greeks and Romans and you believe there is a supernatural realm or if you're a Christian or Jew or Muslim, then you could say, "That's how we know who's right."

You have your moral feelings, and I have my moral feelings. You have your little inner moral evaluator, and I have my little inner moral evaluator, and they're different. How are we going to decide who's right? Instead of me just saying, "I'm right because I'm right, because I'm stronger, because I'm six-foot-four and you're five-foot-three and I'm going to make you do," instead you could say what Martin Luther King Jr. said in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a very famous letter. He wrote it when he was in jail.

He says, "How do we know if a law is just or not?" You say it's just. I say it's not just. How do we decide? Is it might makes right? No, no. He says the way we know a law is just is if it accords with the law of God. If it fits the law of God, then it's just. If it doesn't fit with the law of God, it's not just. Now that's consistent. Within that view of life, that there is a God and there is a law of God, there's a

natural law, there's something out there besides this material natural world, then it's perfectly right to say there is such a thing as moral obligation.

But if you say there's no God, no supernatural realm, how in the world do you say there is moral obligation? What standard are you pointing to that adjudicates between your feelings and their feelings, or are you just saying your feelings are superior? It's a pretty big problem. There are a whole lot of very smart people who have spent the last 30 years talking about the crisis this is for our society. There has never been a society before in history that said there's such a thing as moral obligation but there's nothing outside of this world that exists.

Every other culture has always said there's something outside of this world, a standard by which we judge our various moral feelings and evaluators. We're the first society in history that said, "No, there's no way for us to make decisions between those two things." Now how are we going to decide what is right and wrong? How are we going to decide what is just? How are we going to decide what laws are just and what laws are not?

The single best place, I think, to read a scholarship is something that was in the very beginning of these last couple of decades where people were writing about it. You can get this online. Arthur Leff, who died, unfortunately, fairly young (I think somewhere in the 1980s), taught at Yale Law School for many years, and in the *Duke Law Journal* of December 1979 he wrote an article called "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law." By the way, Leff is not a believer in God, or at least there's no indication he is.

In it he says once you take away the idea of God or natural law, how do you judge between these competing moral feelings? You can't do what Martin Luther King Jr. did, which is how things were always done in the past, which was a just human law is just or not just on the basis of the natural law or God's law or something like that. What are we going to do now in the absence of the Greek moral absolutes or the law of God or natural order?

What he does in this article ... I'm going to read you the very last part, but let me just give you the gist of it. He goes through all of the possible alternatives people come up with, which, by the way, some of you will probably come up with too, but I'm actually trying to address them before you even bring them up. How do we decide whether something is right or wrong?

One is what's called *majority rule* or *majoritarianism*. A majority rule is that the human race is coming to greater and greater consensus about things and most of the people vote on it and it's a democracy, and if the majority of people say this is wrong, it's wrong. If the majority of people say it's right, it's right. In other words, the majority rules. Now there are two or three problems with that, and they're huge problems. Arthur Leff points them out.

For example, what about 200 years ago? Let me ask you a question, those of you who might say that. Two hundred years ago, most people in the world thought slavery was okay. You had the Quakers and a few outliers who were

saying it was wrong. Was slavery wrong when most people thought it was okay? If you say, “No, it wasn’t,” very clearly you have a standard for moral obligation that is not based in majority rule.

Besides that, if you had the views you have today back 200 years ago, on what basis could you have called people to start to change the law? What could you have appealed to? You can’t just say, “Everybody knows that human rights are important.” Oh really? See, the problem is you can’t do majoritarianism.

A second is hiding behind the idea that you can empirically decide what’s good for people. Immanuel Kant had something like that called the *categorical imperative*, where he said you’re not supposed to ever use a human being as a means to an end. You must always basically support the good of human beings and not use them for your own self-interest.

There’s a lot of empirical research that says people are happy when *this* is happening; people are happy when *this* is happening. There are many, many efforts to try to empirically say, “This is what is good for people, and we’re going to pass laws that are good for people.” The real problem, of course, is … *How do you define good?* Different religions, different cultures define a good human life in radically different ways.

As soon as you say, “Well, we’re just going to be empirical and scientific. We’re just going to find out what really works, what laws are good for people and what laws give people good lives,” then you say, “How do you define good?” “Well, you have to let people define good. If people say they’re happy, then that’s what we have to do.”

What if I found you a place in Mozambique where there are 10,000 people who are in slavery today, and what if you went in and did an empirical study and found out they were happier than most people in France, England, and the United States and way happier than people who live in New York City? What if I could show you that they are incredibly happy?

Would you say, “Then you shouldn’t try to repeal the slavery; you shouldn’t change anything”? You would say, “No, no, that’s no good.” Why not? “Because even though they think they’re happy, they’re not, because that’s wrong.” Aha! See? There you go again. You have an understanding of moral obligation that is not based on what people think makes them happy. It’s not based on majoritarian rule.

You say, “Look. People feel the way they feel because of evolution. We really feel that rape is wrong. We really feel that murder is wrong. We really feel these things are wrong simply because this helped us survive.” The real problem with that, of course, is there’s no moral obligation there at all. What you’re really trying to say is we feel things are wrong, but it doesn’t mean they are.

We’re programmed to feel they’re wrong and that they are pragmatically right or wrong (in other words, they help us survive), but not that they actually are wrong. They feel wrong and they have bad consequences, but not that they actually are

wrong and are always wrong. As soon as someone does get near you with murder or rape or even just cheating you out of a bunch of money, you're not going to say, "Look. I know you feel this is wrong because of your genes." No, you're going to say it *is* wrong.

I've never seen anybody who denied moral obligation who didn't immediately show that they believed in it in spite of the fact they intellectually wouldn't concede it to me. So Arthur Leff goes through all of these things and says there is absolutely no way to make any cogent argument for moral obligation if there's no God. We still have to have laws, so how are we going to do it? Here's what he says.

"There is no way to prove one ethical or legal system superior to any other, unless at some point an evaluator is asserted to have the final, uncontradictable, unexamining word. That choice of unjudged judge, whoever is given the role, is itself, strictly speaking, arbitrary." In other words, whatever standard you use to adjudicate all the different competing moral feelings and moral evaluating is totally arbitrary.

Then he says an example is Robert Nozick's book, which says, "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights)." Does that sound good to you? He goes on and says that's just an assertion. That's not an argument. That's just saying, "All smart people know." Well, not everybody in the world.

What is an individual right? Can you prove that empirically? You say, "Well, it's just practical." No. Most people are now believing that we need individual rights. Oh, okay. So it wasn't until we got the majority that people had individual rights? He just knocks it all down. What gives you the right to say that your Western individualistic understanding of human rights is right and everybody else is wrong? Then he goes on.

"Thus ... in the presumed absence of God, [each ethical and legal system] will be strongly differentiated by the axiomatic answer it chooses to give to one key question ... Who among us ought to be able to declare law that ought to be obeyed [by all the rest]? Stated baldly, the question is so intellectually unsettling that one would expect to find a noticeable number of legal and ethical thinkers trying not to come to grips with it ...

[We] are really forced to see ourselves as lawmakers rather than law finders, and we are immediately led into a regress that is, fatally, not infinite. [...] We can say that the majority cannot consistently disadvantage any minority. [...] We can say all sorts of things, but what we cannot say is why one say is better than any other, unless we state some standard by which it definitely is.

To put it as bluntly as possible, if we go to find what law ought to govern us, and if what we find is not an authoritative Holy Writ but just ourselves, just people, making that law, how can we be governed by what we have found? [...] All I can say is this: it looks as if we are all we have. Given what we know about ourselves

and each other, this is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect ...

Neither reason, nor love, nor even terror seems to have worked to make us ‘good,’ and worse than that, there is no reason why anything should. [...] As things now stand, everything is up for grabs. [We all believe] napalming babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked. Buying and selling each other is depraved. [...] There is in the world such a thing as evil. All together now: Says who? God help us.” He’s not a believer.

The vast majority of people who don’t believe in God or don’t know that there is a God are oblivious to everything Arthur Leff says, and I have to say I feel like it’s partly my job to wake you up. For example, recently I got a brand new book by an Ivy League critical theorist faculty member who now teaches at University of Toronto, Mari Ruti, who just wrote a book called *The Call of Character*.

In it she says this. Listen carefully. This is exactly what Arthur Leff says she shouldn’t do, but she is going to do, but she’s basically trying to get it under the radar. She doesn’t believe in God. She says, “Although I believe that values are socially constructed rather than God given, I am not a strict relativist in the sense that I think that there are (or should be) universally applicable codes of conduct that, say, prevent discrimination.

For instance, I do not believe that gender inequality is any more defensible than racial inequality, despite repeated efforts to pass it off as a culture-specific ‘custom’ rather than an instance of injustice. [...] It would be possible to assert that my insistence on gender equality violates the traditions of other cultures—that I am merely prolonging the legacies of Western colonialism by imposing my Western values on the rest of the world.”

Now listen. Final move. “[But I do not believe] gender equality is a specifically Western invention ... and I opt to uphold the ideal of getting rid of this discrimination because it seems like an ideal worth upholding.” In other words, she says all values are socially constructed except this one. Well, no, it’s socially constructed. Well, then, why is your socially constructed value trumping theirs? Here’s what she says: “Because it seems to me better.”

This is what Arthur Leff said. If you want constant warfare in this world, go ahead. Just do that. “Because I’m white, because I’m Harvard educated, because all smart people know, because all intelligent people know that what you’re doing over there is wrong.” You want peace in the world, and you’re going to talk to people like that?

Look at Martin Luther King Jr. He got a lot of people mad, but he said, “The reason I’m standing up against the majority is my understanding of the law of God is that you are not in accordance with the law of God.” You might be angry. You might try to kill a person who says that, but he’s not inconsistent. The real question is ... *What warrant do you have in your own view of things, if you don’t believe in God, to call people to do justice, to call people to moral obligation?* You don’t.

This is actually, I think, a clue, rational, intellectual evidence for the existence of God and Christianity. Do you know why? What if you say, "Okay, I don't believe in God, but I actually still believe in moral obligation," just like Mari Ruti did? She says, "I don't believe in God, but I still believe in moral obligation." If there is no God, it doesn't make much sense that there would be moral obligation. If there *is* a God, it makes more sense.

In a universe with a God, moral obligation, a sense that we all have that some things are wrong ... not just feel wrong but are wrong ... makes sense. In a world without God, it doesn't make as much sense. What you're doing is saying, "Moral obligation is something I see. It's more reasonable to believe in it in a world with God. It's less reasonable to believe in it in a world without God. I'm not going to be as reasonable."

You certainly have a right to do that. Again, I can't prove that God exists, but here's what I'm saying. By the way, somebody wrote it this way. While the view that there is a creator God would lead us to expect moral obligations and the view that there is no God would not lead us to expect it in the world, for you to say, "I see moral obligation, but I'm going to refuse to embrace God anyway ..."

Okay, you have the right to do that, but if your premise that there's no God leads you to a conclusion you know isn't true, namely, "These things only feel wrong. They're not really wrong. They're just something that came into my evolution ..." If your premise there's no God leads you to a conclusion you know isn't true, why not change the premise? Why not reexamine the premise?

3. *What would moral obligation be like if Christianity was true?* One of the big reasons I think most people really don't want God or Christianity involved in talking about justice is because they believe that so often in the past people who believed in moral absolute truth were oppressors. I'm trying to show you that, on the one hand, not believing in God puts you in a position where it's very, very difficult to actually do justice, because you have no basis except naked power and a sense of superiority on which to do it.

On the other hand, the problem is in the past people also didn't do justice because they *did* believe. If you don't believe in moral absolutes, if you don't believe in a God, just moral obligation, it's hard to do justice, but you also say, "But what about in the past you had all the oppression?" Let me briefly refer you to something.

In Luke, chapter 15, Jesus tells a very interesting story. It's called the *parable of the prodigal son*. It's very famous. In it there's a father and he has two sons, an older son and a younger son. The older son stays home, is very good, very moral, cares for the family, adopts the family mores. The younger son is the prodigal, and he goes off and squanders the family wealth in wild sex parties.

It's very clear in the story that Jesus is saying both are wrong, both the person who goes off and writes his own moral scripts and decides from his own conscience what is right or wrong for him and the person who actually stays at

home and is very obedient. You might even say one is a religious person and one represents the irreligious person, or you could say one is a bourgeois and one is a bohemian.

One person basically is a moralist and one person is a postmodern deconstructionist. Jesus says they're both wrong. Why? First of all, neither of them actually loves the father, who represents God, as different as they look. One is just trying to get the father's things and go off and have the wild sex parties, but the other one, by being really good and being very obedient, is also trying to get control of the father's things.

The older brother is self-righteous. He's a Pharisee. He's haughty and cruel, basically. Jesus is trying to say the moralist, who is very moral and very virtuous but is also self-righteous and cruel, and, you might say, the immoralist, the person who just goes off and does anything ... These are both dead ends. One is driven by his passions. The other one is driven by social expectations. They're both slaves. Neither of them really loves God.

Soren Kierkegaard believed Jesus was right. Kierkegaard was a Christian philosopher. He said, therefore, there are really three approaches to life. He called them the *aesthetic*, the *ethical*, and the *religious*. It's really worth thinking about this. He says the aesthetic is the younger brother, living life basically deciding for yourself what is right or wrong for you. The older brother is the ethical, the person who says, "I'm going to live according to the law and obey it and I'm going to be a good person."

He argues in his works that both the aesthetic and the ethical are really forms of selfishness. They just look different. On the outside they look very different. In fact, the ethical person could look very unselfish, yet inside the ethical person feels a lot of pride. "I'm a very good person. I'm doing things right." He tends to look down at the younger brother. He looks down at everybody. Even though he believes in moral absolutes, he's kind of oppressive about it.

Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, says you're saved by grace. You are no better than anybody else. You've received this pardon, and even though, yes, you now believe there are things you must do, there's moral truth and you must abide by it, you don't have that kind ... In other words, Kierkegaard would say the religious or the Christian approach is to have a non-oppressive moral absolute, a moral absolute that humbles instead of makes you proud.

To not have any moral absolutes you can't do justice. To be a moralistic person also makes you an oppressor, but this is the way forward. So Christianity actually completely, I think, changes the landscape. The role of moral goodness and the role of moral obligation in the Christian life is different. It means that you have, you might say, a moral backbone, but you shouldn't be an oppressor, though there are plenty of Christians who are not true to their beliefs.

Female: Now for a fun time when Tim will be answering your questions. Let's jump right in. The first question is, "Why is God the proper test of morality as

opposed to human happiness when God has been repeatedly used to abdicate responsibility that Leff leaves squarely on our shoulders?"

Tim Keller: I would like to think that I spoke to that during the talk, and actually I like a question that enables me to emphasize or clarify something I already said. There is no doubt that people have misused God. No doubt about it. When I told you the story of the parable of the prodigal son and why we have in Kierkegaard ... He's not the only person who does this. Augustine does it too, and even Paul Tillich, who taught here at Union Seminary years ago, talked about it.

There are not two ways to live. It's not like you either toe the moral law of God or else you decide what's right or wrong for you and follow your own conscience. Therefore, God has been used. There's no doubt about it. It's the ethical approach. Not the aesthetic, not the spiritual or religious, where the grace of God changes the way in which his law operates in your heart. The idea is the grace of God humbles you and turns you into a servant instead of someone who basically uses God for your own interest.

The reason I told you that at the end is, yes, of course it can be misused, but ... By the way, the other thing I said, which I think at least addresses this question, is I think, if I pressed you a little bit ... There are plenty of people who have said they've been happy in the past who we would say were deluded. In other words, we do have a moral sense of moral obligation that goes beyond a person simply saying, "I'm happy."

We do know that a person who is addicted can be happy, but they're destroying themselves and the people around them. We do know people who are in all kinds of denial can be happy. So I think you need some moral standard besides human happiness to decide what is right or wrong and, secondly, you need an understanding of God's grace that keeps the law of God from becoming an instrument of oppression.

Female: "How do you know the law of the Christian God is just? What standard are you pointing to that makes your feeling superior?"

Tim: Obviously, what you're really trying to say is, "How do you know Christianity makes sense in general?" Let me give you a whirlwind tour. If you read the New Testament documents, you have to believe they're historically reliable. I think there's a lot of evidence that they are. I can't prove to you that the Bible is infallible in every bit, but I can prove to you, I think, or pretty much demonstrate that the New Testament is a historically reliable document.

Then I decide whether or not the resurrection happened. There are these great accounts. You add up the resurrection evidence. If you decide the resurrection happened, that Jesus is the Son of God, then you take a look at what Jesus taught. What does Jesus teach? He believes the law of God. The Sermon on the Mount is an exposition of the Ten Commandments. He believes that there is a norm.

So I don't just believe in God's law in general, arbitrarily. My understanding of the

evidence is that Jesus is who he said he is. I cannot account for the data any other way. It's still amazing, but the alternatives saying that he's a liar, a lunatic, or a legend are less credible to me. I believe that the resurrection happened, and once I believe in that everything else comes. So I don't just say, "I like the law of God." I don't think Christians should do it that way. It comes as a whole.

Female: Next another two-part question. "Why is moral obligation needed? In practice, will deference to a moral obligation, not specifically the Christian God, yield a better world when the short-term may result in added violence?"

Tim: By the way, these are actually quite good questions. I still have to answer these briefly so I get to other questions. I hope you don't feel I'm giving any of them short shrift. I don't know anybody who doesn't think you need a sense of moral obligation for a society to hold together. One of the reasons many people say regimes fall is when people only follow the law because they know if they don't they're going to get punished.

If the only reason you obey the law is not out of a sense of moral obligation but simply because you're just trying to keep out of jail, or something like that, then basically society breaks down. There has to be an inner sense of moral obligation for the average interaction to be trustworthy, for people to feel like, "I can trust people. Promises are being kept. I believe what people say. I believe the doctors when they say this. They're not just trying to make money out of me, but they really care."

I've never heard anybody who didn't think you need moral obligation to have a society. You can have rules without a sense of moral obligation. It could be that you and I don't understand the word. I mean, you're dealing with a term I just handed you, and you may be thinking of it a little bit differently. *Moral obligation* means that, regardless of feelings, these things are something we need to do these things as a country or as a group of people.

Marriages don't work without a sense of moral obligation. If I only do the things I know my spouse wants me to do, otherwise she's going to get mad at me ... Friendships wouldn't work. Almost nothing would work without this deep inner sense that things don't just *feel* wrong but *are* wrong. Not that these things are impractical, but they're wrong. Not just if I get caught it's bad for society, but it's wrong whether I get caught or not. I think that's very hard to have without a sense of the supernatural.

People *feel* the moral obligation, by the way, but it's hard to be ... One of the questions people have is, "If you had a country where no one really believed in God for 100 years, what would happen to moral obligation?" My guess, as a Christian, is that it would still be there, because most people I know who don't believe in God, even though they can't account for moral obligation, still think they're there. I actually don't feel like if you don't believe in God society is going to break down. I still think, however, that it creates problems for you, big problems for really being able to do justice in the world.

Female: "What makes Christian morals better than other religious morals?"

Tim: I don't think that's how you decide whether Christianity is true or not. I know that originally you get attracted to a faith all kinds of ways. In the beginning you just might get attracted to the faith because there's somebody you admire who's a Christian, but in the end, you have to decide whether Christianity is true.

If you think it's true, if you think Jesus was raised from the dead, if you think all that happened, then the Christian morality comes with it. As times goes on, from the inside the superiority of Christian ethics might become pretty self-evident to you, but I don't think from the outside you can look at five different approaches to ethics and then say, "This is the best one."

In fact, even if I could do that, even if I could say, "Okay, I'm going to give you a lecture and I'm going to show you five different approaches to ethics, including the Christian one, and when it's all done I want you to feel that this is the best one," I don't know what standard I would use. Do you know what I'm saying? What standard would I use by which to judge them unless you already had an ethical standard that we're all agreeing on?

So it doesn't seem to work from the outside, like I judge which ones I like the best, because you'd have to have ethical standards in order to judge which set of ethical standards you liked. I say the better thing to do is to go at the claims. Is Jesus who he said he is? Read about his life. Think about the resurrection. Think about the existence of God, and don't start with the ethics. I wouldn't say that. The ethics come with the truth of the system, I think.

Female: "On the question of whether there can be moral obligation without God, what do you think of the works of John Rawls, who thought we could find an absolute idea of justice by stepping outside our particular circumstances and considering what kind of society we would want to live in if we did not know our own gender, race, level of status, religion, or any other characteristic?" Maybe you can also summarize or restate the question.

Tim: Actually, the question writer did an extremely good job. Rawls essentially is saying you need to think about what kind of society you'd like to live in if you were the outsider, if you were at the lowest rung of the ladder. Imagine that or imagine your family is there, and now construct the society you would want to live in. How mobile would it be? How democratic would it be? That kind of stuff.

That's called the Golden Rule. I know Rawls is very, very famous and he's now ... He gets criticized so much. He's gone now and he's respected, but he's criticized largely. Either the criticism is that he's really just giving you the Golden Rule. He's just saying, "Do unto others as you would want be done unto you if you were poor and an outsider." The postmodernist comeback of that is to say, "Who says that should be the standard?"

Arthur Leff probably knew John Rawls. I guess Rawls wrote his first book in the 70s. I think Arthur Leff was actually dealing with that in "Unspeakable Ethics,

Unnatural Law." He was basically saying it's wonderful when you come up with a standard like that, that people say, "Oh, that's great. That's terrific." A lot of Western people read it, and intuitively it sounds great, but he says, "Okay, a lot of other people in the world don't see it that way. Who says this is the way to decide right and wrong?"

You still are putting yourself in the position of saying, "My way is the right way and other approaches are wrong, even though there's no standard outside of me by which I can adjudicate." It really doesn't escape what Arthur Leff is saying. You either say it's self-referentially contradictory or you say, "It's too simple. It's the Golden Rule. We've always believed in the Golden Rule. Christianity believes in the Golden Rule. Judaism believes in the Golden Rule. It's no big deal." I don't mean to be dismissive of him, but he doesn't have anything like the clout he used to have.

Female: "If I can't prove that God does or does not exist, would I be morally obligated to follow any other myth? How do I differentiate without evidence?"

Tim: Oh, well, keep watching. I think I gave you some evidence tonight. A guy named Richard Swinburne, who taught philosophy at Oxford for years, has written a number of books on how you know there's a God. He's a believer in God. He says even scientific proof is not what most laypeople think it is. He says basically science sees a phenomenon (X is happening) and asks, "How do we explain that?" and you come up with a theory that explains it.

Then along comes Y , which doesn't fit in the theory that explained X , and now we have to find a new theory that explains both X and Y . He says experimenting creates new explanatory models that only exist for a while until something else comes along that the old model can't account for, and then you create a new model. He goes into great length at explaining that scientific proof is usually not proof. It's usually the best working hypothesis that explains the data. That is the scientific belief at the moment.

Now come to God. Moral obligation is a piece of data. I just made a case for God by saying, "In a world with God, moral obligation makes perfect sense." If there was a God, of course you'd feel moral obligation. If there was a God, of course there would be moral obligation, because if there's a God, no matter how you act, if you're acting unjustly you're wrong. In a universe without God, moral obligation doesn't make as much sense. It's hard to explain where it came from.

If you say it came from evolution, you really don't believe that or else you would admit that it just means you *feel* things are wrong, but that's not how you actually believe. You really believe they *are* wrong. It's not just this person feels it's wrong, but they are obliged not to do it. It's wrong. So I would say in a universe without God, moral obligation doesn't make as much sense, but that's actually how scientific hypotheses are demonstrated to be true or false.

Which one deals with the data the best? I just gave you one bit of data. I've had people say, "I admit that moral obligation makes more sense if you're a Christian

or if you believe in God than if you don't believe in God, but that doesn't prove God." I want to say, "How do you prove anything?" Isn't it through bits of data? I want the hypothesis that best explains life as I see it, and I just gave you a piece.

You can't prove there is no God, you can't prove there is a God, but it doesn't mean there isn't ways of moving rationally toward a view that you think is rationally supported. It's rationally supported if it fits the data. I'm going to be continuing to give you more arguments on why I think Christianity makes more sense of the world you see out there than if there is no God or if Christianity isn't true. Not demonstrably but rationally.

Female: "How do you know that your century-specific interpretation of Christianity is the correct one?"

Tim: That's a great question. There really is a core of Christian faith that all of the denominations hold to and that has been held for centuries. If you look at the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, these creeds that are often recited in the churches, these are extremely ancient documents. Even though, as the centuries go by, there has been a lot of fragmenting of Christianity, so the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern and Western church fragmented, Protestantism, and so on ...

You need to know that even though Protestants differ from Catholics and Catholics differ from Eastern Orthodox, nevertheless, the creeds of the first thousand years of the Christian church in which we all were together are still held by all of the branches of Christianity. If you go back to Augustine's book *Confessions* ... I've often pressed people to do this. If you read *Confessions*, which are written by an African 1,500 years ago or so, at least 80 percent of it resonates almost completely with anyone who's trying to live a Christian life right now.

It's an astonishing book. There are definitely plenty of things in there that you go, "What the heck?" It is 1,500 years old. It's a different world. Yet it's astounding the struggles, the things he's reading in the Bible, his beliefs. It is absolutely recognizable. I would say that the Christianity I'm sticking with generally is sticking with the core, the same kind of Christianity Augustine had 1,500 years ago. Therefore, I wouldn't say I'm generally being century-specific. I can be occasionally, but by and large I'm not being.

Female: "How do you know what is moral in Christianity? What about the morality guidelines in the Bible that seem outdated?"

Tim: Hard question, but a good question. One of the problems with looking at, say, the Bible and deciding that some of the morality is outdated is that means you are using your current time in history as the straight edge by which we're judging the Bible. You have sort of adopted it, baptized it. There are two problems with it. The one problem, of course, is that you do know ...

If you think about your grandparents and your great-grandparents and how many of their beliefs you think of as pretty cringe worthy ... There are things I

remember my grandmother and grandfather saying that now would be very embarrassing, many attitudes and things like that. The point is do you really think you've reached *the* historical moment now, that your grandchildren or your great-grandchildren will not be cringing at things you believe right now?

You don't think that's going to happen? Of course it's going to happen, which means there's a lot of stuff you right now hold as up-to-date that will soon be outdated. So why should we pull certain things out of the Bible as outdated when 150 years from now a lot of things you just pulled out will seem cool to that moment in history and the things you left in will seem outdated? There's no use in doing that.

You need to decide, again, if Jesus is who he said he is and that, therefore, the Bible is a revelation of God, and then you struggle ... At every single century and every culture there will be some things in the Bible that don't seem to fit, but that should make sense to you. If the Bible is revealed truth from God and not the product of any one century or any one culture, then it would have to offend every culture and every century somewhere. Right?

If you ever found a century or a culture in which the Bible made perfect sense to everybody's sensibilities ... How could that be? The Bible would be a product of that culture. If it's from God, it should offend you, but it'll offend your grandchildren at a different place than it offends you, and it'll offend a Middle Easterner in a different place it offends a New Yorker, and it'll offend a Japanese person a different place than it'll offend a Latin American person.

If it's God's Word, of course it would be like that. So when you say some things in the Bible are kind of offensive and outdated and outmoded, the answer is, "If it's really God's revealed Word, of course you'd feel that way." It would make sense for it to be. The problem with deciding to use your own historical moment as the straight edge to end all straight edges ... How can you do that? Why would you do that?

Do you realize how incredibly ethnocentric it is to say, "The feelings of all the smart people I know in my part of the world are the straight edge by which I'm going to decide which part of this ancient book of the centuries is right and which is wrong"? I wouldn't do that.

Female: Thank you so much, everyone, for your questions. Tim, before we wrap up these next couple of minutes, do you want to give the people a preview of what they can expect for next week?

Tim: I want to talk about identity, that everybody has to have one, and I'd like to talk to you about an identity that doesn't crush. I believe people who come from traditional cultures, where you have to live for your family and your people ... That's a smothering and crushing identity. I believe Western culture, where you have to achieve your own self-worth through your achievement and through exercising your freedom and deciding who you want to be, is also crushing.

I also think that those kinds of modern identities not only crush you but also crush

others. Christianity gives you an identity that doesn't crush you because it's not based on performance, and it doesn't crush others because it's not based on "Difference." We'll explore that next week.

The Feeding

Seeing Jesus—February 9, 2014

John 6:1–14, 27–35

¹ Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Festival was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"

⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there).

¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

²⁷ "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal

life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”²⁸ Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”²⁹ Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”³⁰ So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ”

³² Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”³⁴ “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”³⁵ Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at these passages in the gospel of John that look especially at Jesus’ miracles, what John calls *miraculous signs*. We’re getting an idea, bit by bit, about who Jesus actually is. Christianity teaches that Jesus was the only perfect human being because he was more than a human being. If you and I were to try to imagine a perfect human being, we would fail, because you would have to be perfect to imagine a perfect human being.

If a perfect man were to be presented to us, we would, on the one hand, be surprised, because we wouldn’t have imagined him to be exactly the way he was, but at the same time we’d be compelled. We’d be surprised and compelled. That’s exactly what happens if you’re willing to read page after page about his life and the things he said and did.

Now we get to this very famous of all of his miraculous signs, the feeding of the 5,000. It’s a miracle in which Jesus takes a few loaves and fishes and miraculously feeds a huge multitude of people. This is the only one of the miracles that is told in every one of the four gospels. John, unlike the other three gospels, gives us this final discourse in which Jesus explains the meaning of the miracle.

As we’ve been saying every week, John chose miracles to give us ... He said, “Jesus did many more miracles than I’m giving you in this book,” but he chose the miracles he did because each of them he called a *sign*. That is, they had symbolic meaning. Jesus explains it very clearly. “Why did you do the miracle of the loaves?” “Well, I fed people physically, but it was a symbol of the fact that I am the bread of life.” That’s verse 35.

All I want to do for the rest of our time together is, in a sense, meditate on the aspects of that remarkable statement. He says, “I am the bread of life.” I’d like to have three points to my address: “I am the *bread* of life,” “I am the bread of *life*,” and “*I* am the bread of life.” In other words, I’d like to first look at what the meaning of bread is in general (“I’m the *bread* of life”); secondly, the meaning of this bread in particular (“I am the bread of *life*”); and, finally, why Jesus is able to give it to us (“*I* am the bread of life”).

1. “*I am the bread of life.*” What does *bread* mean? For all ancient people, bread meant more than it does to us. People did not have meat, ordinarily. Meat was a luxury. A lot of other kinds of foodstuffs that you and I take for granted were not available. Therefore, bread was really the heart of the meal and it came, therefore, to essentially symbolize life itself.

That’s the reason Jesus could actually say in the Lord’s Prayer, when he gets to the petition where we’re supposed to be asking God for our needs ... All we have to say is, “Give us this day our daily bread,” because bread simply meant everything we need for life, what keeps you on your feet. For the Israelites, in particular, there were two very powerful historic references that came to their mind when someone talked about bread.

One was the manna in the wilderness. When God brought the children of Israel out of slavery, they were on their way to the Promised Land, they were in the wilderness, and there was nothing to eat. They would have starved to death, except God miraculously gave them manna six days a week. Manna appeared on the ground in the morning. It looked like frost. It was flaky. They gathered it and turned it into cakes that actually had the taste of honey. Therefore, manna was savory, which means it satisfied, and, of course, it strengthened them and kept them alive in the wilderness.

The other reference the Israelites would have known about was that when God told them how to build the tabernacle, the place of worship, the place where they related to God, one of the pieces of furniture of the tabernacle was the altar of shewbread. It was basically a table, and on it 12 loaves of fresh, hot bread were put. Imagine how the tabernacle smelled. The priests ate the bread and then replaced it, but it represented ... what?

Even today, for you and me to ask somebody out to eat is a friendly thing, but in those days, breaking bread was almost a formal way of saying, “I want you to be my friend.” If I bring you into my home, if I break bread with you, that means we are friends. Also, the way you ratified a covenant, the way you made a truce between two parties that were opposed, the way you showed the world and showed each other that we’re friends now, that we are no longer enemies ... What did you do? You ate together. You broke bread together.

All of this came together in this remarkable place in Exodus, chapter 24. In Exodus, God brings the children of Israel to Mount Sinai and says, “I’m going to enter into a relationship with you,” but when he first comes down on Mount Sinai

in the thunder and smoke and fire, God says, “I’m holy and I am glorious, and when I’m on the mountain, you can’t touch the mountain. You can’t come up on the mountain. You’ll die. I’m infinite; you’re finite. I’m holy and pure; you’re flawed and sinful. You can’t touch the mountain.”

There’s a remarkable spot in Exodus, chapter 24, where God, as it were, atones for their sin. He says to Moses, “Go to the 70 elders of Israel, sprinkle them with the blood of the sacrifice, and then bring them up on the mountain.” Even though they don’t literally see God’s face, they come near. They have an amazing experience. What do they do? Exodus, chapter 24, says:

“Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against [them]; they saw God, and they ate and drank.”

When they went up on that mountain, even though it was obviously inexpressible ... It says they saw something under his feet like a sky. It was some inexpressible sight, and they realized they were being brought into the presence of God and they weren’t being smitten. He did not raise his hand against them. He was saying, “I want a relationship with you.”

What did they do? They ate and drank. They broke bread, because breaking bread doesn’t simply represent savory satisfaction and strength. It also represents oneness. It represents peace. It represents relationship. Breaking bread with God meant not simply that he was your King but he was the friend of your heart.

2. *“I am the bread of life.”* Jesus doesn’t just talk about bread. He says, “I am the bread of *life*.” What is this particular *bread of life* he’s talking about? Well, he tells you in verse 27. If you look at the beginning of verse 27, at the beginning of his explanation of what the miracle of the loaves symbolized, he says, **“Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”**

The bread he’s talking about, the bread of life, is eternal life. That’s what the whole book of John is about: that through Jesus Christ you can have eternal life, which he is calling the *bread of life*. What is that? What is eternal life? There are three things we see here in the passage about eternal life. First of all, eternal life is a quality of life. The trouble with the term *eternal life* is it simply looks like to you and me that it just means life extended forever. No, no. It’s a quality of life.

There are two Greek words that are translated *life*. One is the Greek word *bios*, which means physical life, or maybe I should just say *existence*. The other Greek word is *zoe*, which refers not just to physical existence but to a quality of life. When he was 10 or 11 years old, I took my son Michael on a trip in an airplane.

Michael had never remembered being on a plane before, even though he had been. So here he was sitting in the plane next to me.

He's the middle son, so he often felt like he didn't get one-on-one time with Dad, but he had me all to himself. He was sitting at the window seat and looking out. Then along comes these people who are saying, "Can I get you anything to eat and drink?" which is amazing to him. He says, "I'd like a Coke," so she gives him a Coke. I still remember he pops the thing, leans back in his chair, puts his feet up, and says to me, "Dad, this is living."

He was using the word *life* ... how? What did he mean? Was he saying, "I am now physically existing"? No. He wasn't talking about *bios*. He was living before and he's living after. Well, maybe the caffeine might have helped his *bios* a little bit. What was he talking about? He was talking about quality of life. He was saying, "This isn't boring. This is exciting. I have time with you, and I've never done anything like this."

What's the difference between existing and living? There's a big difference. In fact, all of us are trying to live, not just exist. See, it says literally, "Eternal *zoe* is what I'm going to give you." He doesn't just say, "Eternal *bios*." You all know if it's simply eternal existence, is that anything to write home about? All of your self-doubts, all of your frustrations, all of the emptiness, everything you are right now ... Just imagine that going on forever. Is that exciting?

We have a word for it in the Bible. It's called *hell*. Eternal existence is hell. Eternal life is a quality of life. It's what you do to move from existing to living. It means meaning in life. It means energy. It means joy. It means fulfillment. It means satisfaction. So first of all, eternal life is a quality of life. It's not eternal *bios*; it's eternal *zoe*. It's a quality of life.

Secondly, it's a quality of life that starts *now*. Again, when you see the phrase *eternal life*, it usually means, "Oh, it means when I die I go into the afterlife and live with God." Yeah, it does, actually. *Eternal life* means at least that, but it means more than that. It *does* go on forever, but it starts now. How do we know?

In verse 35, which is the key verse, he says, "**Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.**" "Give us this bread? Here's how you get this bread. You believe in me. You come to me and you get it now." What does that mean? It can't mean you don't need to eat physically. Once you become a believer, once you come to Jesus and believe in Jesus, you don't have to eat? No. Of course. He's not talking about *bios* here. You still need to eat.

He says, "There is a deeper hunger. There's another kind of hunger. It's a hunger for that which moves you from existing to living, and every single person is trying to find that movement from existing to living somehow. You're looking to certain things. There's a hunger, and you're trying to have that kind of life. You're looking to things, and if it's anything but me it will spoil."

It's probably a reference to the manna story. If you know the stories about the

manna in the wilderness, when the children of Israel were first facing starvation and then, suddenly, Moses says, “God is going to give you bread; he’s going to feed you …” The first couple of days it showed up in the morning on the ground, it was a miracle.

But God warned them and said, “I will only give you enough for one day at a time. Every day you have to go out and get it for that day. Don’t try to hoard it. Don’t try to save it. Don’t try to store it up. If you try to hoard it overnight, it will go bad. It’ll spoil. It’ll stink. It’ll be filled with worms.” And it was.

Why? What’s the big deal there? Here’s the deal. God says, “I want you to depend on me. I don’t want you to think the manna is going to save you. It’s *me* saving you. I want you to trust *me*.” The reason people would hoard it was they were saying, “Hey, Moses pulled that miracle off today, but, wow, who knows if it’s going to be here tomorrow. Just to be safe …” What are you doing at that point? You’re not looking to God. You’re not trusting in God. You’re looking to something else.

Here’s what Jesus is saying. There are a lot of great things in this world. They’re gifts from God. There’s family. There’s career. There’s talent. There’s health. There are all sorts of things to do that add *zoe* to life. People say, “I want a career” or “I have a vision for art” or “I have a cause. I really want to work for social justice. I really want to make a difference in the world” or “I want a family” or “There are certain people I just want to love and be loved by” or “I want to get to a certain level in my career.”

Those are all great things, but when they become the main way you move from existence to living, your main joy, your main source of meaning and hope and security and love, he says they’ll spoil. “Anything more important than me will spoil.” There’s nobody who has ever put this better than C.S. Lewis in one of these radio talks he did over the BBC during World War II. He puts it something like this:

“Most people, if they really learned how to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love or first think of some foreign country or first take up some subject that excites us are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy.

I am not speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages or trips, or so on. I’m speaking of even the best possible ones. There is always something we grasped at in that first moment of longing that just fades away in the reality. The spouse may be a good spouse. The scenery has been excellent. It has turned out to be a good job after all, but *it* has evaded us.”

What’s *it*? It’s a quality of life that we think this thing can give us, and Jesus says it can’t. It will spoil. Do you want proof? Look at the most successful people in any realm, whether it’s in art or acting, whether it’s in business or finance,

whether it's in the media, government, political leaders. Go look at their interviews or, if they're prominent enough, their biographies or just what you know of them and just ask, "Does success endure? Does it spoil? Doesn't it eventually start to stink?"

Even those of you who have been pretty successful in your life, you know. It doesn't endure. Exactly what he's saying here. You thought that if you got it, it would bring more with it, more satisfaction, more of this quality of life you're looking for, that it would satisfy that deep hunger, and it doesn't. You know it doesn't.

So here's the second thing. Jesus Christ says, "Anything you're looking to in order to move you from existing to living that's not me will not satisfy you. I'm the manna. I'm the one thing that will satisfy you, that will give your soul the savor it needs. I'm the one thing that will give you the life and strength."

That leads to the third point. That's what's so remarkable about this. Not only that eternal life is a quality of life and it's a quality of life that starts now but that it comes through ... It's not really something Jesus gives you. He's it. The most amazing thing here is not "*I have bread of life*," even though he does say it occasionally. He says, "*I am the bread of life*." That is amazing. Of course it's amazing. He says, "*I am the bread of life*."

If you want to see what he means by that in the metaphor, how do you eat this bread? He tells you in verse 35. He says, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me and believes in me ...*" Now wait a minute. You don't believe in bread, do you? "*I'm the bread of life. Believe in me.*" You don't come to bread. I guess you can come to bread, but you can't believe in bread. But that's what he's saying. He's mixing it up. It's a metaphor, and metaphor brings two fields of discourse together.

What he's saying is, "*When you come to me and believe in me and make me your Savior and surrender to me as your Lord, you're feeding on me. You're getting the bread.*" Through faith in Jesus Christ we get reconciliation with God and we get the deepest satisfaction of our hearts. We eat and drink on the mountain. Isn't that amazing? Yes, it is. Why? Because it makes Christianity utterly unique in two ways: philosophically and religiously.

Many people have said that the history of all of philosophy is just a footnote on Plato. What that means is if you go back to the oldest days of the Greek philosophers, you not only have Plato lining up against Aristotle. Even before them you have Heraclitus and Parmenides. Basically, there was always this real question: The one or the many? The objective or the subjective?

Is truth objective, transcendent, abstract, up there, and we all have to conform to it, or is truth personal and subjective and everyone has their own truth? Is it really one and we have to submit or is it many? Is it principle or is it particular? Is truth objective or is it subjective? Of course, there are problems with both of those.

If it's objective, then we feel sort of trampled on, don't we? Everybody has to fit

the procrustean bed. No matter who we are, we have to just kneel to the truth. On the other hand, if you say it's subjective and everybody has their own truth and every individual is different, then what holds us all together? There *is* no truth now. Anybody can do whatever they want, and nobody feels like there's anything we're really living for. Is it one or is it many? Is it objective or subjective?

Then Jesus Christ comes along, and what is he saying? "I am the divine, cosmic truth that has become a person who can walk and talk and laugh and cry and you can know personally." In other words, you don't have to choose between the two. Christianity cuts the Gordian knot. It utterly breaks the historic, ancient philosophical logjam. Which is more basic? Is it the one or is it the many? Is it the objective or the subjective? In Jesus they all come together.

Secondly, though, Jesus Christ, when he says, "I *am* the bread of life," makes Christianity so unique. Essentially, even though they don't all use the terms, every other religious founder basically says, "Here's the way. This is the way to the bread of life. If you do these things, you can get the bread." The Five Pillars of Islam. The Eightfold Path to enlightenment. The bread is the divine connection. "Do this. Do this."

In other words, every other founder of every other religion basically says, "I can tell you where the bread is. I can show you how to find the bread. I can show you the way of life." If you say, "I have the bread; I can show you where to get it," then salvation is basically through your efforts. You have to do whatever you have to do in order to get that bread. You have to do whatever you have to do in order to go down that road.

If somebody comes and says, "I have the bread of life," you say, "Okay, what do I have to do? Do I have to pray every day? Do I have to obey the Ten Commandments? Do I have to love my neighbor? What do I have to do?" Then the person says, "Well, you have to do this, this, and this." If he says, "I *am* the bread. If you have me you have salvation. You don't have to achieve it," that means salvation is by grace.

That's the reason why this very important exchange in verse 28 ... They say, "What must we do to do the works of God?" In other words, he says, "I have this eternal life, this bread of life," and they say, "Well, what do we have to do in order to get it?" He says, "**The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.**" You don't have to do anything. You have to believe that the one whom God sent has done it. He has lived the perfect life.

He has loved God with all his heart, strength, and mind. He has loved his neighbor as himself. He's the only one who has done it. When you receive him, you receive it. When you rest in him, you have it. You don't have to say, "Now what do I have to do?" He doesn't say, "I can show you the way to life" or "I will be your guide on the road to life." He says, "I'm life." That means salvation is by grace. That makes it utterly different than any other faith.

3. "*I am the bread of life.*" How is this possible that Jesus could say, "I'm the

Bread of Life"? How is it possible that he could give you this? Especially in light of what we said in Exodus, chapter 24. The book of Exodus gets across the fact that if there is a God who really has created the world and who's infinitely exalted above it and transcendent and perfect and all that, how in the world could the life of God, which is the only thing that will really satisfy our souls, get into us?

He's infinite; we're puny. He's perfect and holy; we're sinners, flawed. How do you get an elephant in a dollhouse without crushing the dollhouse? You can't. So how could Jesus Christ be giving us this bread? The answer is twofold. First of all, he says, "*I am* the bread of life." This is impossible to get across in the English translation, but when Jesus says in Greek *ego* (meaning I) *eimi* (meaning I am), it's very emphatic. Here's the reason why.

Generally speaking, when you were saying, "I am this" or "I am that," the word *I am* was understood and not said. It's a little hard to convey. In every language, we have constructions in which words or letters are dropped. The listener knows they're there, but they're not, and they're understood. I come from western Pennsylvania. People drop part of their infinitives. They don't say, "It needs to be done." They say, "It needs done." Everybody knows what you're talking about. Or even contractions, where you say *don't* instead of *do not*.

In every language, there are ways in which you do shorthand. You say things and you ordinarily don't spell it out. You don't put the other words or letters in there. They're understood. In Greek, seldom did you say *ego eimi*. You said the rest of the sentence, and everybody understood you meant, "I am." This is the first of seven times where Jesus emphatically says, "*I am* the bread of life. *I am* the good shepherd. *I am* the light of the world," over and over again, very emphatically.

When he says *ego eimi*, it's almost like yelling. It's like you and me saying, "I am!" which means very emphatic. Why was he being so emphatic? Why was he saying it like this? Was this just a rhetorical flourish? No. He's making a point about who he is. That comes out in John, chapter 8. In John, chapter 8, they're having an argument. The religious leaders are saying, "We're children of Abraham. We don't need you." Jesus looks at them, and this is maybe the most astounding thing anyone has ever said. It's the most astonishing claim in the Bible.

He looks at them and says, "Before Abraham was, I am." When you and I read that, it just looks like atrocious grammar. If he had said, "Before Abraham was, I was," that would have been amazing enough, because what he would have been saying is, "I lived before Abraham. I'm older than Abraham." That would have been incredible. But when he says, "Before Abraham was, I am," everybody there knew what he was saying, because they immediately tried to kill him.

When he used the word *I am*, he was taking the divine name God had given Moses when he met Moses in the burning bush. In Exodus, chapter 3, God appears to Moses in the burning bush and says, "I'm sending you to Pharaoh." Moses says, "Who should I say has sent me? What's your name?" God says,

"Tell them I Am has sent you." It's just the Hebrew word *to be*, but Christian and Jewish theologians for centuries have known exactly what God was saying.

God is basically saying there, "I am the God who always am. I am beginningless and I'm endless. There never was a time in which you could have said about me 'He will be,' and there never will be a time about which you can say of me, 'He was.' I always am." Meaning, "There is no beginning, no ending, because I depend on nothing. Nothing caused me. Nothing could stop me from existing. I depend on nothing. Everything depends on me. I am the source of all being. Moses, tell them, 'Being itself, and the source of all being, has sent you.' That's my name."

Jesus is saying, "That's my name. Before Abraham was, I am." They immediately tried to kill him. Why? He was saying, "I am the source of all life, of all power, of all being." If Jesus had just simply said, "I'm God," there are all kinds of ways of reading that. If Jesus had literally said, "By the way, I'm divine; I'm God," you could have said, "Well, you know, he's that little spark of good in all of us. He's that spirit of love that binds us all together." There are all kinds of ways.

But when he said, "No, I am the beginningless and endless transcendent being, not only who created the whole universe but on whom every second depends ... I am the source of all being. That's me." That's the first reason he can be the bread of life: because he's the source of all life. Here's the second reason: because he says, "I am the bread." What I'm about to tell you you know, but, basically, because you live in an industrialized society, you don't remember it.

If you're a farmer or a hunter-gatherer, you are constantly aware of something. Outside of the odd mineral, like salt, everything we eat has died so we can live. You cannot live without eating, and everything you eat has had to die so you could eat it, so you could live, whether plant or animal. Bread is not just grain that has died so you could eat it, but you realize if the bread stays whole you're going to fall to pieces, because you're going to starve, but if you are going to be made whole, the bread has to be broken into pieces.

When Jesus Christ says, "I am God who has become bread," what he means is, "I am God made breakable. I am God made vulnerable. I am God come to die on the cross for your sins. I am God come to atone for the things you have done wrong. I am God come to become weak and vulnerable and do all the things you should have done so that you can be saved by grace. That's the reason why I can reconcile you to the Father. That's the reason why we can be friends. That's the reason why the life of God is not fatal to you when it comes into you: because I've atoned for your sins. I'm God made breakable."

That's the reason that when he broke bread (Luke 22) the night before he died, the Last Supper ... He broke the bread and said, "This is my body given, broken for you." Now what are we supposed to learn about this? Let me just give you three practical thoughts. First, this is teaching you that Jesus Christ is not just someone to be believed, but you're supposed to make him your strength and your life, and you have to do that every day, just like the manna had to be

gathered every day. You couldn't hoard it.

It's not enough just to believe in Jesus Christ with your brain. You have to find a way to every day make him your actual strength and life for living. It can't just be an abstraction. He's supposed to be food. When you worry, really worry, and some of you are very anxious ... Why? Because there's something that has to happen or you're not going to be happy or life isn't going to be right. Something has to happen.

Here's what you ought to think. If you're a Christian and have received eternal life and made Jesus your Lord and Savior, then here's what you ought to say: "This thing I'm worried about is a good thing, but it's not my life. It's not the thing that's going to keep me going forever. It's not the real satisfaction of my heart. It's not my life. It's not the real basis for my value and worth and security. This is a good thing, but it's not the ultimate thing. Jesus is my life. This is not my life." Guess what? You're going to stop worrying as much. You're going to start to relax.

Do you know why? You're feeding on him. You're actually making him your life and strength at that moment. Or let's say you're getting angry. You're very resentful toward someone. Why? Because they've robbed you of something. What is that something? Here's what you ought to say. "That something I lost, whether it's my reputation, my money ... It's a good thing, but it's not my life. Jesus is my life. Jesus has given me *this* and he has given me *that*. I'm going to be with him forever."

What are you doing? You're starting to forgive. Why can you forgive? Because Jesus died on the cross for my sins. How can I not forgive this person? What you're doing is you're feeding on him. You're actually getting strength from him. You have to do that every day. Manna has to be done every day. How do you do that? You do it the way you're doing it right now. You're in corporate worship. Jesus is becoming an existential reality to you in a way he wasn't before. You do it in your own prayer time. You do it in your own reading of the Bible.

The Bible is often looked at as bread and food. You're savoring it. You're thinking about the things it says about you, especially in the Lord's Supper, where we literally have bread and a cup and we believe the Holy Spirit is particularly present to make Jesus Christ a living reality and your strength at that time. You have to do that every day. You have to. It can't be hoarded. It can't just be you had an experience five years ago. Nuh-uh. Every day.

Secondly, if you're going through a wilderness right now, if you're going through really, really difficult times, God has manna for you. It's in Jesus. Here's what I want you to remember. It's hard to change your diet. It always is, but if you have nothing else going and you're out there in the desert, in the wilderness, turn to him and he will feed you. He will give you a savor. He will give you a satisfaction in Jesus Christ that is deeper than anything else you've ever had. Sometimes it's the bad times that teach you how to feed on him.

Very often it's the bad times in which you finally figure out how to make Jesus not

just an abstraction but something that really becomes your life and strength. Sometimes you don't realize that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have.

Lastly, receive him, if you're going to receive eternal life. If there's anything in your life you're trusting for your significance and security, for your salvation, if there's anything more important to you than Jesus Christ, it'll spoil. Go to him. Come to him. Believe in him. Let's pray.

Our Father, thank you. We thank you that your Son has been made our bread. He became breakable. The only reason your divine power is accessible is because of the incarnation and the atonement, because he left his glory behind him and became a human being and because he went to the cross and died there in our place.

Lord, bread has to be broken if we're going to be made whole, and that substitution, that means he had to go and take what we ... He died so we would live. He died in our place. We thank you for that, and we know that even the sadness that comes from knowing that we caused it is healing. It's softening. It's consoling. It's strengthening. Teach us how to feed on him in our hearts by faith by the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

An Identity That Doesn't Crush You or Others

Questioning Christianity—February 13, 2014

This is the third time we've met. I've enjoyed the fact that we are, in a sense, a kind of temporary learning community. Each time I talk to you, you ask me the questions. I go up to the fifth floor, and we have great conversations as well. It does feel much more like a learning community. I don't feel like a content provider. I feel like I'm a part of the community, and I appreciate that. Thanks for your involvement, and thanks for coming out tonight, and thanks for those of you who watch this online.

We're exploring the character and claims of Christianity to see if they make sense emotionally, culturally, and rationally to contemporary people, especially contemporary New Yorkers. Now why do we put it like that? You can prove some things. You can prove how many species of fish there are in a particular lake, but you can't demonstrably or empirically prove any of the things that are really important in life on which your life is based.

You can't prove what's right and wrong to do, what's worth spending your life doing. We've been trying to say you can't prove there is a God or that there's no God. You can't live without some kind of faith assumptions. You actually have to take some of these things by faith. You can't prove them, but you can't live

without them.

For example, if you decide there's no God or if you decide, "Well, there might be a God, but he doesn't care. If there is a God, it doesn't matter how I live. This God doesn't care what I believe," or you might decide there is a God and he can be known ... You can't prove any of those, and yet your life is going to be lived in very different ways depending on which of those you assume, and you're assuming it by faith.

The two extremes you want to avoid is the idea that since you can't prove any of these things you just take it blindly from the dark or, on the other hand, that you only live on these ideas if you can prove them. I've tried to say, "No, you can't." There's something in the middle. This is how we come to our beliefs.

The things that emotionally resonate with our intuitions, with our aspirations, also things that seem to make sense when you see them fleshed out in real life in people's lives and social life, and then there is evidence. There *is* logic. There *are* arguments, and we're going to put them all together and cumulatively decide what makes the most sense. I'm here, of course, to say I think Christianity makes a tremendous amount of sense.

The last two weeks I have come to you and said, "Here are two things Christianity offers: meaning in life that suffering can't take away from you and a strong basis for doing justice." In both cases, I was basically saying, "Here's how you live life if you *don't* believe in God, and here's how you live life if you *do* believe in God." I wasn't all that specific about Christianity as much as I was saying, "If there is a God, then there's this. If there's no God ..."

Starting this week and from now on, I'm going to be talking much more about the Christian version of belief in God. You'll see as we go. Tonight I'd like to give you a third thing that I think Christianity offers: Christianity offers an identity that doesn't crush you or others. The outline of our talk is three. First ... *What is identity?* Secondly, *Christianity gives you an identity that is not based on performance; therefore it doesn't crush you.* Thirdly, *Christianity gives you an identity that's not based on difference and, therefore, won't crush others.*

1. *What is identity?* Let me suggest that identity is two parts. First of all, your identity is what makes you distinct, and, secondly, your identity is what gives you some positive self-regard, some sense of worth. Now when I say what makes you distinct, the word *identity* means what makes you identical. I'm a husband to my wife. I am a father to my sons. I am a brother to my sister. I am a pastor to the people of my church.

We all have these roles. We all have these different hats, but your identity is whatever is identical in you in all of those places. The sociologists say (I just love the way sociologists talk) identity is whatever makes you stable within every one of your roles, which is another way of saying there has to be something that's true in every situation. If you have nothing in common, then there's no you. You're just a bunch of roles and a bunch of masks.

Your identity is what makes you distinct and what is identical about you in all of the roles. What is the core? What is the most true about you? When I'm with my sister, there are certain things that are true about me, but when I'm with my wife or with people of my church I'm somewhat different, but what is there that's always the same? What is there that always makes you *you* and distinct?

Secondly, what gives you a positive self-regard about what makes you distinct? What gives you a sense of worth or value? With those two ideas in mind, let me say that all sociologists and psychologists talk about identity formation. Identity formation is how you go through a process of coming to know who you are, what is the most true about you, what is true about you in every situation, and what gives you a sense of affirmed self-regard or worth and value.

I'm going to oversimplify it first, and I'll immediately backtrack, but I would say that right now out there in the world there are basically two ways to do identity formation: traditional cultures and contemporary Western cultures. Now in traditional cultures ... Some of you, either your parents are from these cultures or you're from these cultures, even though you're living here, so you know what I'm going to be talking about.

In traditional cultures, what really matters is the family or the community, and your identity is locked up in who you are in the family or the community. Therefore, what makes you distinct is the role your family or community gives you to play. You're a father or mother. You're a son or a daughter. You play roles for the good of the community.

Another way to put it is you are your duties, because the way you get positive self-regard in a traditional culture is you fulfill whatever role it takes to help your family or your community or your tribe move forward, and you do it sacrificing your own self-interest. That's how you feel good about yourself. You give up what you would like to do for the sake of your family, for the sake of your tribe, and that's how you become a person of honor.

In traditional cultures, you have no identity outside of who you are in your family or your tribe, you fulfill the role that's assigned to you, and you have honor if you sacrifice your own personal individual interests for the sake of the group. In modern Western culture, as you know, it's exactly the opposite. By the way, how many of you had parents who grew up in a traditional culture and they moved here and raised you in this culture?

They brought you to a place in which identity formation is exactly the opposite, because in modern Western culture what really matters is who you are as an individual. Again, I got this from a sociology book. It says in modern Western culture each person is understood to have a unique core of feeling and intuition that must be unfolded and expressed if you're going to come to a true identity.

The way to do that is actually to move away from other communities and families. What really matters is that you have to be who you want to be and who you feel you are. You have to look at your desires, you have to look at your dreams, and

you need to roll them out. By the way, in Western culture, you can get really dedicated to your people or you can become a social activist, but it's your choice.

If you want to sacrifice for your people or for your family, it's your choice. You've decided that. That's how you feel good about yourself. That's totally different than in a traditional culture, which is assigned to you. You're still an individualist. So in summary, who are you? In traditional cultures, you are your duties within a community, and your self-regard depends on you sacrificing your interests for the community, and then you're a person of honor.

Peter Berger, who is a sociologist of religion, said in traditional cultures what matters is honor, but in Western cultures what matters is dignity. Two different things. In Western cultures, you are your dreams, not your duties. In traditional cultures you are your duties, and that's how you get to know that you're a good person: because you do your duty. In Western society, you are your desires and your dreams and you know you're a good person because you fulfill those dreams. You execute those dreams. You become the person you feel you need to be.

Do you know how different these places are? Let me give you two songs. "The Battle of Maldon" is an old Anglo-Saxon epic written in traditional culture. It's a song and a poem about a great battle. At the end, the Anglo-Saxon warriors realize they're outnumbered, so what do they do? Well, Bryhtwold shook his spear of ash and called to his remaining comrades who were standing by their dead friends. He says something like:

*Thought must be harder, hearts may be keener,
Minds be the greater, as our strength lessens.
Here lies our prince all hewed and gory
I will not away, but I myself beside my lord,
So loved a man, think to lie.*

Honor. "I'm going to go down fighting." Here's another song, a little more recent:

*Climb every mountain
Ford every stream
Follow every rainbow
'Till you find your dream.*

By the way, if you know the stories, those are two very different understandings of vows. In one case you *are* your vow. You take a vow and that's all there is to you. You follow that out. The other approach is vows are okay if they help you climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, and find your dream, but if it doesn't, then you ditch it and go do something else. (I'm not picking on Maria von Trapp. She was a nice lady.) Anyway, you got the idea. It's enormously different.

By the way, I know it's not as simple as I made it. Let's just say an Italian family moves to New York City in the 1920s. The father is Italian and his identity is largely being Italian and being part of a family. He's also a craftsman of some

sort, and he's proud of that too, but it's being Italian that matters. His son is born in New York and grows up here, and his son, who's not Italian but Italian-American, now becomes a lawyer. What is more fundamental to his identity?

See, for his father, being Italian was at the top, next to that craftsman. Now for his son, at the top is, "I'm a lawyer. I'm making money, and I'm good," and secondly, "Oh, I like my Italian roots too." It has moved down. Most of us are kind of combinations of these things. I realize that. Somebody is going to ask me a question. I'm going to say, "It's not that simple." Still, those are the two basic ways of identity formation.

2. *Christianity gives you an identity that doesn't crush you because it's not based on performance.* My first argument is that both the traditional and the Western contemporary approach to identity formation is crushing. Now because I'm talking in the middle of New York City, I probably don't have to take much time to talk about the problems of the traditional model. For example, here are three.

First of all, an enormous number of people in the traditional model go into careers or they go and work and do things they hate and that they're no good at, but their families say, "You have to go there." In many ways it's bad for you. Secondly, as you know, in the traditional culture women are often exploited. Thirdly, there's very little social mobility. You might find this interesting.

My grandfather was born in Italy in a little town north of Naples in 1881, or something like that. When he grew up, his parents told him, "Look. There are only three things you can be. You can go be a priest, of course. Any Italian young man if he wants to be a priest can be a priest. Secondly, you can go into the military. Thirdly, you have to make pots. Our family has always made pots. We're potters."

My grandfather said, "What if I don't want to be a pot maker? What if I want to do something else?" He says, "I'm sorry. You're part of our family, and they wouldn't hire you anywhere else. In fact, they wouldn't even probably let you move to another town. They'd say, 'You belong over in *that* town.' " You could call that a *stratified society*. No, it was a traditional society in which the family mattered, not the individual, and you're part of the family and that's who you are.

So he came to New York City and worked on one of the first subways that came through Little Italy, and so on. Most of us do not have to be argued into the idea that the traditional approach to identity formation can be very exploitative and can be very smothering, but I would like to make the case that our modern Western approach is probably even more crushing.

By the way, Christians aren't the only people saying this. Plenty of folks are saying that the contemporary, individualistic, Western approach to identity formation is not sustainable. It creates enormous amounts of anxiety. It creates a tremendous amount of drug addiction. It's terrible. Why? Let me go through it. Basically, it's crushing because you have to decide who you want to be and then you have to go out and achieve it yourself.

The role isn't something that gets assigned to you and then you're a good son or a good daughter and you do things and help the family and you're a good person. Oh no. You have to go out there and you have to ... For example, in traditional society people do work. They work in order to live. They do work. In our society, to a great degree, you work to get an identity.

Dorothy Sayers, a British novelist and essayist, at one point says most people today ... She's talking about modern Western times. She says most people today work to make money and to get a position in society. Therefore, she says, most people she knows become doctors not primarily to relieve suffering but to bring themselves and their families up in the world. Most people become lawyers not to do justice but to bring themselves and families up in the world.

That's probably harsh to say "most people," but you do realize there's something to it. A guy named Benjamin Nugent wrote an article a little bit ago called "Upside of Distraction." He's just a writer. He's a novelist. He was writing in the *New York Times* about the huge pressures there are on us today to get an identity through our work. This is what he said. Listen carefully.

"When good writing was my only goal, I made the quality of my work the measure of my worth. For this reason, I wasn't able to read my own writing well. I couldn't tell whether something I had just written was good or bad, because I needed it to be good in order to feel sane. I lost the ability to cheerfully interrogate how much I liked what I had written, to see what was actually on the page rather than what I wanted to see or what I feared to see."

He's exactly right. When you work just to help your family, that's one thing, but when you work so you can say, "I want to feel good about myself. I want to know who I am. I'm an artist. I'm a lawyer. I've made money. I'm making a contribution ..." Whatever these things are that you're saying, "This is what makes me feel good about myself," those things will drive you into the ground. They become your identity.

He says, "I couldn't interrogate myself. I couldn't be honest about how good a writer I was, because if I wasn't good, I wasn't sane; because if I wasn't good at what I've chosen to be, I don't have a self left." Therefore, there's a sense in which if you're getting your identity out of your work, it's not really about the work. Dorothy Sayers is right. You're not doing it for the people you're helping. You're not writing to give people the pleasure that writing gives. You're doing it for yourself. It's about you. It's all about you.

If you make work your identity and you're successful, it'll go to your head. If you're a failure, it'll go to your heart. It'll destroy you either way. If you're successful, you'll think too much of yourself and think you're brilliant in every area. It'll give you an inflated identity. On the other hand, if you're no good, you won't feel sane. You'll feel like, "I don't even have a self left."

What's interesting about this guy ... Do you notice what he said? "When I made work my only goal ..." He realized basically he was getting his identity out of his

work. He realized it was killing him and it was killing his work. You have to get your identity out of something, and you're living in a Western culture where pleasing your family and being a good member of your community isn't enough. That's honor. We need dignity.

So what did he do? If you read the rest of it, he got a girlfriend. What he was trying to do was say, "I don't want to get all of my self-regard out of my work. I want to get it from my girlfriend." Well, that's a problem too. Ernest Becker, who was a Pulitzer Prize winner ... He's not very well known anymore. He was a Jewish author, not a believer in God, who wrote in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. His Pulitzer Prize-winning book was called *The Denial of Death*.

Basically, it's a book about how to live in a world where we don't believe in God anymore. One of the most astounding parts of the book, which I think is remarkable, is where he decides that the reason there is so much emphasis on sex, love, and romance is because we're trying to find our identity now in a way that wasn't true before.

It used to be I tried to marry somebody to have a family and to carry on the name, etcetera, but now, he says, we're really looking for somebody to make us feel good about ourselves. We're really basing our identity on "A person who looks as good as *that* likes me? Wow." We're not talking about love here. We're talking about how I develop a self. Again, it's selfish. It's self-absorbed. Becker says something very interesting. He's referring to us modern secular people. He's just assuming that thoughtful people don't believe in God anymore.

He basically says, "We need to feel heroic, to know that our life matters in the grand scheme of things. We still want to merge ourselves with some higher, self-absorbing meaning, in trust and in gratitude, but if we no longer had God, how do you do this? One of the first ways that occurred to the modern contemporary secular person was the romantic solution.

The self-glorification we needed in our innermost being, which used to come from the idea that God loves me, we now look for from the love partner. What is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to this position? We want to be rid of our faults, of our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know our existence has not been in vain. We actually want redemption—nothing less—if we're willing to admit it."

Then he goes on and says something like, "No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood. However much we may idealize and idolize the love partner, he inevitably reflects earthly decay and imperfection. If your partner is your 'all,' then any shortcoming in him becomes a major threat to *you*. After all, what is it we want when we elevate the love partner to this position? Redemption—nothing less. Needless to say, human partners cannot give this."

What happens is when you have to develop your own identity, then work, love, everything you do ... You put so much weight on it. It still hurts if you're not doing well in your career. It always has hurt if you break up with somebody you love. Of

course it does, but Becker is right, and Kierkegaard talks about this as well. He could see it happening even many years ago. When you get away from God, you have to, in a sense, put something in his place.

There was a group when I was young called The Righteous Brothers. Have you heard of them? One of their big songs was ...

*You're my soul and my heart's inspiration
You're all I've got to get me by
You're my soul and my heart's inspiration
Without you, baby, what good am I?*

That's the chorus, but at one point, somebody is in the background going, "Ooh, ooh," and there's a little monologue. Do you remember this? There was a guy with a high voice and a guy with a low voice. The guy with the high voice during the "woo, woo, woo" in the middle has a moment to do a little soliloquy, and here's what the soliloquy is:

*Baby, I can't make it without you
And I'm telling you, honey, you're my
Reason for laughing, for crying, for living, for dying.*

You're saying, "Why are you telling me this?" When you say, "I can't live without you; you're my reason for laughing, for crying, for living, for dying ..." I think Becker was on to something. He was saying, "Look, we've always had that." There's a tendency when you're in love to talk like that, but now there's something different going on. When you say, "You're my reason for laughing, crying, living, dying; without you, baby, what good am I?" that's worship. You might not call it worship, but that is worship.

When Benjamin Nugent says, "I'm looking at my writing, and I can't be sane if I don't believe I'm actually writing something pretty good. I need to feel good about these things. I kind of go nuts." What is that? That's an identity breaking up. The reason is that anything you make as the basis of your identity essentially is a god. It's essentially something you worship. You can't live without it. If something threatens it, you go nuts in fear. If somebody blocks it, then you get incredibly angry and bitter toward them. You're just being driven by this.

Again, I think traditional cultures are smothering, but there's an astounding amount of pressure in Western cultures. You really shouldn't ask the question, "Who am I?" in Western culture. You should ask the question, "Whose am I?" because you are not your own. Let's just say you're trying to control your life and create a safe life by making a lot of money and socking it all away, not spending any money on yourself. You're being controlled by money.

If you're living for approval, you're being controlled by the people you want to approve of you. You are not your own. You're basically the slave of whatever you think has to be your identity. What does Christianity do? As Christians, we think what you need is to have an identity that gives you deep certainty of your worth and value that's not grounded in your performance. It doesn't go up and down

depending on how you've done. It gives you astounding ballast.

If you're successful in love or work, it keeps you from having your head inflated. If you're really disappointed, it keeps you from falling apart, because your identity is not based on your performance. What do I mean by that? Well, you might think at this point that what I'm saying is, "Don't be traditional culture, living for your family. Don't be Western culture, secular culture, living for yourself. Live for God."

The problem with me saying that is that people who just live for God generically, who say, "Okay, I'm going to be good. I'm going to obey the Ten Commandments. I'm going to give to the poor. I'm going to pray every day ..." That's still performance. You're going to be just as crushed by that, if not more, because what you're doing now is you're not trying to please your family. You're not trying to create your identity and essentially please your own standards or whatever you've decided is your identity factor. You're trying to please God.

Who can obey the Ten Commandments? Who can follow the Golden Rule? Nobody can, and you'll be every bit as crushed, every bit as insecure, if you just look to God. That doesn't work. Christians' understanding is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who left his glory behind, took on a human nature, came into the world, and lived a perfect life. He is the only one who ever loved God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He's the only one who ever loved his neighbor as himself.

He's the only one who perfectly satisfied all that anyone would ever think a moral being should do. He lived a perfect human life, which means he earns the love of God. He earns the reward. He earns the blessing. At the end of his life, he went to the cross. There, as our substitute, he took the penalty we deserve for all the ways in which we fail to love other people, all the ways we screw everything up, all the ways in which we live for ourselves, all the things we've ever done that are wrong.

He earns the blessing. Then he goes to the cross and takes the punishment we deserve, which means if we believe in him we get his blessing. We are accepted in him. We are loved by him. We become an adopted child. I'm a father. I have children. I had three sons. Weirdly enough, if I was a boss and I had three employees, if one of the three employees is really acting up, disobeying me, doing bad things, what am I going to do? "You're fired."

If I'm a father and I have three sons and one of them is acting up, disobeying me, what happens? I actually get more involved in that kid. It brings out more of my fatherly love and compassion and commitment to him, the one who's messing up, because my love for him is unconditional. When you believe in Jesus Christ, God becomes your Father, truly, and that means you have ... Of course you're still other things. Of course if you fail you feel bad. Of course if you fall in love and you break up you feel horrible.

I'm not saying it makes you immune to any of those things, but, ultimately, it takes away what every other identity formation has a problem with. If you feel like

you're performing, you feel superior. You get a big head. You feel self-righteous. You might become a Pharisee. You're part of what's wrong with this world. You become a bigot. You look down at other people. On the other hand, if you're not performing, you hate yourself. You're down on yourself. That's a big problem as well.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is, "I'm a sinner saved by grace. In myself I don't deserve his love, but in Jesus Christ I get it perfectly, regardless of my performance, because he's my Father." Do you know what that means? It humbles me. No matter how good I am in this life, I'm no better than anybody else, because I'm just a sinner. I'm living by grace. On the other hand, it affirms me, because no matter how much I fail, I know God is not going to abandon me. It lifts me up if I'm down. It brings me down if I'm up. It makes me stop thinking about how I'm doing all the time.

Kierkegaard was incredibly right about this. He wrote a book called *The Sickness Unto Death*. You may have heard about it. He believes that if you don't ground your identity in the grace of God through Jesus Christ, you always are experiencing a kind of nausea. You're always feeling kind of sick, because you're never quite living up. You're always feeling anxious. You're not settled. You don't know who you are.

You certainly don't know whether you can really say, "I'm a valuable person," or if you *are* saying you're a valuable person, you're saying it hysterically because you're trying to get yourself to believe it. That's the sickness unto death. Kierkegaard said the ability to ground your identity in God's grace through Jesus Christ frees you. It utterly frees you.

Isak Dinesen in the great book *Out of Africa* writes, "Pride is faith in the idea that God had when he made us. [...] [Many people] are not aware of any idea of God in the making of them, and sometimes they make you doubt that there has ever been much of an idea, or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again? They have got to accept as success what others warrant to be so, and to take their happiness, and even their own selves, at the quotation of the day. They tremble, with reason, before their fate."

3. *Christianity gives you an identity that doesn't crush other people because it's not based on difference.* Postmodern theorists point out that all identity formation ... I'm going to come back and say they're wrong, because I believe Christianity gives you an identity formation that's different, but they say all identity formation, traditional, Western, or whatever, is comparative.

The reason it's comparative is since you are getting your identity from how well you're doing in your performance ... This is even true in traditional, where it's how well I am doing as a son to my father. Since everybody is getting their identity through performance, I'm comparing myself to other people as a way of bolstering and assuring myself that I'm doing okay. Therefore, I have only relative self-esteem, relative to other people through comparison.

So when I'm around a lot of people who are worse than me, I feel better about myself. When I'm around other people who are better than me in my identity factor, then I feel worse about myself. I actually did talk to a girl years ago who showed up here from some place in the South. She thought she was the best violinist, and she was the very best violinist in her town. She got off the train in Penn Station and walked by a guy who was begging, playing a violin, and he was twice as good as she was. It just freaked her out.

By the way, there are tons of counselors I've talked to who say the problem at elite schools, very often, is kids who always got straight A's from the time they were in preschool, who then finally go off to an elite school ... You can't give everybody A's even at the elite schools, so kids who got A's all their life start to get a *B* or two and they freak out. Why? They're losing themselves. There's an identity.

Basically, as long as we have performance as the basis, we do comparison and we relatively feel good about ourselves because of how other people are doing. Postmodern theorists are right in saying, "Here's the problem with that: in order to get a self, we have to look down at somebody." If your identity is based on your performance and, therefore, your self-esteem is relative ... it comes through comparison ... you have to despise somebody.

Because in traditional societies identity tends to be collective ... you are your family or you are your tribe ... racism is pretty bad in traditional societies. We in the West are really down on that. In our schools we're just pounding people. "You can't be racist. You can't be racist." Even though a lot of us still have racist attitudes ... We feel bad about them even if we have them. But even in the West you can see it.

If you are proud of being an open-minded liberal person, you have to despise conservatives. You don't just disagree with them. You don't even just dislike them. You really despise them. If you have become a self-made wealthy person because of incredibly hard work, when you see other people who feel entitled and are just mailing it in and they're not working, you just despise them. Why? Because we get a self by looking down at people.

The postmodern theorists say that all identity is, to some degree, based on "Difference." We're looking at people who are the "Other" and we're saying, "I'm not like them." Do you know the historic prayer of a Jewish male? Getting up every morning and saying, "O Lord, I thank you so much that you didn't make me a woman, a slave, or a Gentile." What is that? That's identity formation through comparison, through difference.

So postmodern theorists say we're all basically bigots or you wouldn't have any kind of identity. My question is this: Isn't it possible that though Christians have a tendency to not draw on the resources they have in this unique identity that's not based on performance ... If it's not based on performance, it's not relative to other people. If it's not based on performance, if you really think it out, it means

how could you ever feel superior to anybody since you're just a sinner saved by grace?

You're not saved because you work harder or you're more moral, so you shouldn't look at anybody and feel like, "I have to believe that I work harder and I'm more moral because I'm a Christian." That's not what Christianity is about. There is a kind of religious identity, and I think Christians fall into it, that says, "God loves me because I am a good person." Then you are dangerous.

Right after 9/11, I remember reading out loud to my wife from the *New York Times*, like three days later ... Somebody said, "This is where religious fundamentalism gets us. People who really believe they have the truth and believe in these fundamental truths." That's partly right. If you strongly believe in certain religious doctrines and you believe you have the truth but you think your identity is based on being a good person and, therefore, you're earning God's salvation, then you are very dangerous.

Kathy, my wife, listened to me and said, "Oh, I don't think that's true." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, it depends on what your fundamental is. Have you ever seen an Amish terrorist?" The Amish are fundamentalist by anybody's definition in the sense that they think they have the truth and they're very, very conservative. Here's the point. The fundamental of Christianity is a man dying for his enemies, a man forgiving his enemies as they're killing him, a man who does not fight back, a man who's actually dying in order to save and to forgive the people who are hurting him.

If that is the fundamental (and it *is* the fundamental of Christianity), the only way you can become an oppressor is if you are out of touch with it. Let me just say one last thing. Richard Bauckham taught history and Bible at the University of St. Andrews. He points out something extremely interesting, and I think you might want to hear this. He says every other religion except Christianity is basically local.

For example, one of the things he points out is that 88 percent of all Muslims live in the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia. Only 4 percent live in Europe, North America, China, or the Far East; 98 percent of all Hindus live in South Asia; 88 percent of all Buddhists live in East Asia. They all live in one or two continents. However, 25 percent of Christians live in Europe, 25 percent live in Central and South America, 22 percent live in Africa, 15 and growing rapidly live in Asia (it'll be 20 percent pretty soon), and 12 to 15 percent live in North America.

Christianity is the only religion that is massively represented on every continent and in every culture, virtually. According to Richard Bauckham, "Almost certainly Christianity exhibits more cultural diversity than any other religion, and that must say something about it." Christianity has been far more open to cultural diversity than any other religion. Every other religion has stayed, roughly speaking, near where it started. It has grown out from where it started, but by and large it has stayed there.

Christianity is the only one that's basically kind of universal, and the reason is that it is so culturally diverse. Why? Because the identity at the heart of Christianity is not based on performance, not based on complying with all the rules, not based on everything being just exactly this way ... all the ways in which you bolster an identity.

Please consider the idea that if you get a Christian identity, it would make you more open to different people. It would make you more open to welcome people who are different. It makes you more culturally diverse because it's not based on difference, and it also doesn't crush you because it's not based on performance.

Female: Now is the time that we get to dialogue with you all by getting your questions. The first question is, "It is interesting to hear you say that Christians have a reason not to oppress those who are different from them. That sounds nice, but how do you explain Christians who blatantly judge, slander, and disrespect people who have different beliefs and lifestyles from them?"

Tim Keller: I tried to explain ... I said, "Here's the core of Christianity. If you do that, isn't it true that you're actually alienated from, you're ignoring, the core of Christianity?" I've actually said that people do that because though they're Christians, they say they're Christians, they very often are culturally Christians, it can very much be part of ...

One of the problems is there are many people who actually are taking Christianity into what I would call the traditional identity formation process. The traditional identity formation process is, "I'm part of a community and it's better than other communities. I'm part of a family and we're proud of being our family." There's a tendency to look down on other groups. Traditional identity formation is, "I'm part of a great group and I'm looking down on other groups."

I've even seen some people, but not many, try to pull Christianity up into the Western identity formation approach, which is Christianity becomes something I'm really good at. I'm doing all of these ministries and all this stuff. Actually, I hate to say it, but most of the people who bring Christianity into a Western identity formation instead of actually letting the gospel shape their identity are people who go into professional ministry. In other words, it's a career.

If I get in here and I write books and I get a lot of people to come to my church, I feel good about myself. So I guess I would say, and I know this is a little subtle, but you asked me the question so I have to say it. You can be a real Christian, but you can basically be coopted by one of the powerful identity formation engines out there and become pretty much as oppressive or as nervous ...

A person who would say, "I'm a Christian; I believe the gospel," but is sucked into the Western approach is just as nervous and anxious, just as concerned about appearances, just as stressed out, having just as much performance anxiety as anybody else, and if you get sucked into the traditional, you can be just as bigoted and just as oppressive. I believe the gospel keeps you from that, but an awful lot of people can't resist the siren song of their particular culture.

Female: “Isn’t it equally true that the spread of Christianity is due in part to a long history of cultural imperialism, colonialism, and violence as much as tolerance and universal acceptance?”

Tim: Not as much, no. In fact, the places where there has been a lot of violence, Christianity doesn’t do so well. This is a little bit controversial, because everybody has their own idea of history. If a particular church went in and was oppressive and violent, very often Christianity did not spread very well there. It’s not unusual for people to be pretty remarkably uninformed about the modern spread of Christianity.

Africa went from about 2 percent Christian to something like 50 or 60 percent Christian in 100 years, from 1900 to 2000. Korea went from 0 percent Christian to about 40 percent Christian also from 1900 to 2000. China went from 0 percent to about 10 percent Christian in the last 80 years, and some of you know it was when the Western white missionaries were kicked out of China (this isn’t very good for some of us) by Mao Zedong that Chinese Christianity really took off. It has grown enormously, partly because it was more indigenous. It was less of a Western dominant.

So I’d say where there has been oppression, no, Christianity hasn’t spread like crazy, but we’re talking about astounding growth rates in most of the world. Outside of North America and Europe, Christianity is growing 7 to 10 times the rate of the population at large, and it is indigenous. It’s being brought forward by national people now.

Female: “How do I know that my attraction to Christianity isn’t just because I was born in a country that is basically a Christian nation? Maybe I’d feel differently if I was born in a country where Islam was prominent.”

Tim: You’re talking about the social construction, the sociology of knowledge, that to a great degree we’re influenced by the people around us and we find most plausible the beliefs of the people we most admire. There has been study after study that shows we’re not as rational as we think, that the people around us we most want to be accepted by … For some reason, their beliefs seem very plausible to us. That’s called the sociology of knowledge, social construction of reality, etcetera.

The problem is when you ask that question, you wouldn’t ask that question, “Is all belief socially constructed?” If it’s true, then that belief that all belief is socially constructed would have been socially constructed. You can’t say, “Everybody else’s belief about spiritual reality is constructed and culturally bound, but not *this* question.” Of course this question. Where did you get that question? Probably from some school you went to and you were influenced by certain professors.

Peter Berger wrote a book some years ago called *A Rumor of Angels*. He’s a sociologist of religion, retired now, very prominent. He has a chapter in there called “Relativizing the Relativizers.” He basically says what I just said. He says we do know that our culture and our society strongly influences what we believe,

but if you say, "Therefore, nobody can know the truth, because everybody is influenced by culture," that belief would have been influenced by some culture and, therefore, not true.

In the end, to say all belief is culturally constructed is self-refuting. So in the end, he says, there's only one thing we can do: be chastened. Realize we actually have a lot of trouble being rational. We are very affected not by reason, not by our minds; we're affected by the people around us. Now that we're chastened, now that we realize we're not very objective, nevertheless, we still in the end have to look at the competing claims and decide which ones we think are true.

You can't just say, "Nobody knows the truth. Everything is culturally conditioned." That statement would be culturally conditioned and, therefore, not true. You have to say, "Let's just go out there and figure out the best options."

Female: "What if I am satisfied with my identity? I don't think I'm overly ambitious, but I work hard without it stressing me out. I like what I do. Why do I need a Christian identity?"

Tim: You might remember the title of our series is "Why Christianity Emotionally, Culturally, and Intellectually Makes Sense." Tonight, to a great degree, I've given you a really strong emotional reason why Christianity makes sense, but you're right. You may have a relatively functional alternate identity. If you had a very loving set of parents ... I actually think people without Christianity can be doggone well adjusted. You may not be that stressed and you're saying, "I'm fine."

In your case, I would hope that you might become a Christian because of the other aspects, to see how it works itself out in life or to see the arguments for the resurrection of Jesus, all the other stuff. The emotional isn't enough of a reason. In fact, a couple of you the first week asked questions and said, "You've just made Christianity sound very attractive, but how do I know it's true?" Well, I'll get there. We'll talk more about it as the weeks go on. That's all I can say.

The other thing I could say about that is a little bit like meaning in life, Christianity gives you a durable identity. I would go so far as to challenge you to think about this. Maybe your identity is fine because you're not being too successful or having too much trouble. Especially if you're younger, you can also talk yourself into saying, "I'm not really fulfilled now, but because I'm going in a good direction I think I will be."

As you get older, you get to be my age, you get to a place where you've accomplished as much as you're going to accomplish, and sometimes the identity runs out of gas, because you realize, "This is as far as I'm ever going to get. I basically have been giving myself a certain ballast, because I kept saying to myself, 'Well, it's not so great right now, but it's going to get better.' " There are all sorts of ways in which identity can work for a good while. Christianity gives you an industrial-strength identity. It's not based on circumstances. It is utterly bomb proof.

Female: “If both Western and traditional identities crush us, why not just do what Buddhism promotes; namely, to get rid of all sense of self?”

Tim: That’s a great question. It’s a big question. Buddhism recognizes, with Christianity, the problem of what they would call *desire* and the craving to create a self by bringing in desire. I’d better say something about this now. You know how I keep saying, “This will come up later in the series”? This is not coming up later in the series. It would be really helpful, but we only have seven weeks and I just can’t get to everything.

Buddhism and Christianity agree that you can’t get an identity by trying to fill yourself with fulfilled desires, to say, “I’m going to have love and I’m going to have money and I’m going to have this.” Buddhism says the craving that never satisfies you is what’s hurting us. It’s the cause of suffering. We crave and we can’t get or we crave and we get it for a while and then lose it.

So in some ways, Buddhism would agree with an awful lot of what I said here. I’ve always appreciated that about Buddhism. But you’re right. Where Buddhism and Christianity go in very different directions is Buddhism says, “Extinguish desire. Destroy it.” The Greek Stoics did the same thing. They say what you do is find ways of not desiring the things anymore. You extinguish it, and there are ways to do that.

Christianity says you reorder your desires. Saint Augustine says you have to love God supremely. There’s nothing wrong with loving your spouse, but if you love your spouse more than anything else in the world, that’s like worshiping your spouse and you will, as Ernest Becker said, destroy it. You’ll destroy your spouse. No human being can be your savior. No human being can be perfect enough for that.

What Buddhism would say is extinguish this passion for your spouse. Buddhism believes in love and compassion but not passion. Christianity would say you just have to love God more than your spouse, and then you’ll love your spouse properly. Saint Augustine would say you reorder your loves and you love God more than anything else, and that reorders them and keeps them from destroying you. Buddhism and stoicism says you extinguish them. I consider Christianity way more attractive.

Female: “Couldn’t not being a good enough Christian be as crushing as any other type of failed identity?”

Tim: No. Well, the answer is actually “Yes and no.” If you have a good relationship between a father and a son, the son knows the father loves him and the son knows that when he screws up the father, if anything, almost loves him more. In some ways less, in some ways more. You know how that works? It’s kind of a combination.

If the son screws up and really hurts the father’s heart in some way, violates some of the rules, or whatever, on one hand, the son is not afraid the father is

ever going to give up on him. He knows the father is never going to stop loving him and stop helping him, and so on. But he also knows, in other ways, he grieves his father and displeases his father and creates great grief.

When I don't live up as a Christian there is pain, and that pain is the pain of knowing the relationship isn't right. You might say before I became a Christian I believed in the Ten Commandments and I believed you shouldn't lie. After I became a Christian, I still believed in the Ten Commandments, I still believed you shouldn't lie, but I did come to find that after I became a Christian and I lied, in some ways I felt more the grief of God than before.

In other words, I felt a certain pain that I had hurt my father, but it is not the same crushing feeling like I don't have an identity, like I'm not living up, I'm not any good, I'm a failure, nobody loves me, I'm not lovable. So I would say, "Yes and no." Of course there definitely is a conviction and the painfulness, but it is not the same thing as not believing I'm lovable at all. To know my father still loves me even though I've displeased him is not the same as losing any ability to feel good about myself at all.

Female: "You say that having a Christian identity will prevent pitfalls that come from depending on other identities, but isn't it healthier to have a variety of identities, including a religious identity?"

Tim: This is one where I'm going to actually agree with you, but it's partly because I didn't have the time to flesh this out. I think all identities have layers. Here's what I actually think. Let's say you have a career identity. You're rightly proud of being good at what you do. Let's say you also have a corporate identity. You're rightly proud of being from the Philippines or being Irish or whatever. You have the collective identity, which has ties to the traditional identity formation. You have the career; you live in the West. I don't want you to think those aren't part of it at all.

What happens, though, is if you think of it as layers, and here are the more superficial layers and here are the more powerful and deep foundation layers of who you are, what happens is Christianity goes to the bottom. Your relationship with Jesus Christ goes to the bottom. It becomes the foundation for everything else. In that sense, it relativizes the others.

I actually saw this happen. Some years ago, I had two friends of mine who were actors. They lived in New York and they were trying to make it in acting. Whenever they would audition ... I think it's awful to be in the arts, where every week you go out and audition. Nineteen times out of twenty they say you're not good enough for the job. How can you live like that? It's hard.

Their identities were taking a beating. One of them became a strong Christian. They both went for this make-or-break role. It was surprising they were even being auditioned for it. If they made it, it would have made their career. It wasn't the same role. It was very interesting that neither of them got the role. I saw the guy who had become a Christian ... He was very disappointed, but it didn't

devastate him. The guy who had not become a Christian was literally devastated.

By putting the relationship with Christ ... “I’m a son of the Father through Jesus Christ” ... at the bottom, it relativized the others. They just were not as crucial. They weren’t as absolutely necessary. Because it had slipped to the bottom, he didn’t experience the earthquake. *This guy had an identity earthquake. “I’m nothing. I’ve spent seven years of my life here trying to make it as an actor, and I have to go back to wherever with nothing. No money. I have no other skills. I’m a wreck.”*

This guy was actually in the very same spot. He also had no money. He also had spent seven years, or something like that, but he was a Christian. As a result, he had a kind of, “Okay, but I do know who I am.” This guy really didn’t. You might say Christianity becomes a kind of earthquake-safe thing that keeps from those self-quakes. It doesn’t mean the other things aren’t still part of you.

If you’re Chinese and you become a Christian, you don’t become white or African; you become a Chinese Christian. Your Christianity is Chinese. It’s not something else. What happens is, frankly, Christianity goes down there, so it tends to demote racism. It tends to demote workaholism. It tends to demote all those things because it goes lower. So you can think of identity as a set of layers and who you are in Christ going to the bottom and relativizing and even making the others more secure.

Female: “While it’s true that identity is shaped by personal and cultural factors, much of who we are seems to be biologically influenced. Since this is beyond our control, how can we be held responsible for these aspects of our nature?”

Tim: Some years ago, we had a family member who was in drug rehab at a very good rehab facility in the South, and my wife went down. I couldn’t be there, but it was part of the family therapy. I remember Kathy said sometimes people would say, “This is the way I am. I can’t help it.” But one of the things she heard down there was that there might be a really strong genetic component to various sorts of addiction. In other words, certain people are going to be very prone to it.

So do we say, “Well, that’s it; you’re dead”? No. In other words, who you are is not just your biology, your impulses, your capacities, and your feelings. It’s also how you interpret those. For example, there are some of my inborn capacities that I consider a talent. I say, “That’s good. I’m going to do that.” There are others, like if you’re prone to alcoholism or something like that, you say, “I’m not going to give in to that. There are things I can do about it. It’s not going to be easy at all. I’m going to need this, this, and this, but I’m not ...”

Whenever somebody says, “This is my feeling. It’s clearly part of my genetic makeup, so shouldn’t I be true to that?” the answer is nobody is true to your whole genetic makeup, because almost everything *is* part of your genetic makeup. Some people tend to be pretty angry and have an anger problem. That’s not all environment. Some of that is genetic.

The point is your identity is a combination of not just your feelings but how you

interpret those feelings, and you interpret feelings on the basis of beliefs. Your beliefs in the end still are the ground of your identity, not your genetic makeup.

Female: "You claim that identity gives us a sense of worth and value. However, for inanimate objects, such as the *Mona Lisa*, value is ascribed to it rather than having it perceive itself its own identity. So why is it even important to have a sense of identity?"

Tim: There is a certain sense in which, as a Christian, I believe all human beings are made in the image of God, so from the outside I know that every human being is of infinite value. Human beings should not be sold. They certainly shouldn't be killed because of a cost-benefit analysis. They are not things. So from the outside, I can absolutely agree that value is assigned, but from the inside the fact is ...

Christian Smith, a sociologist, wrote a book called *What Is a Person?* It's a sociological book. He basically says, "Every normal human animal rejects being a *something* and drives mightily to be a *someone*." What he says is if you have self-consciousness, you feel that you can't just have value ascribed to you, that you need to know it yourself. If somebody else says, "You're valuable," I need to know it myself.

Of course, human beings are self-conscious; therefore, we need an internal identity as well as just having value ascribed to us. Inanimate objects, of course, that's all, but they don't have self-consciousness, so they don't really need an identity the way we're talking.

Female: Well, that's all the time we have for a Q&A this evening. Tim, before we wrap up, do you mind giving us an insight into what's happening next week?

Tim: Next week is a harder one. Next week I'd like to talk about hope for the future, but I also want to talk about love. I don't have a good title. In fact, I was thinking about it as I was walking up here through the slush. "Love, Wonder, and Hope for the Future." By the way, the final three weeks are going to be a series ... I'm basically collecting a lot of the questions you're asking me on the fifth floor that I haven't gotten to and we're keeping a list.

The last three weeks, you're going to get a bunch of them. You're going to get 5 minutes on this, 10 minutes on this. You're going to get a whole bunch of them. So the first four weeks are kind of major presentations. Then after that we're going to be basically answering questions and taking these questions and talking upstairs. I really appreciate your questions. They are really quite wise and very helpful to me. So anyway, next week we're going to be talking about hope for the future.

The Crossing

Seeing Jesus—February 16, 2014

John 6:16–25

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake,¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them.¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough.¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened.

20 But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.”²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.²² The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone.

23 Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

The Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at these accounts in the book of John, helping us understand who Jesus is. This is a very famous passage with Jesus walking on the water in the storm. The disciples had decided to go from one town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee to another town by boat. During their voyage, they became caught in one of the very violent squalls and storms that often came up over the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee was actually below sea level, and hot air would very often come pouring in. It was a place where there were a lot of storms. They get stuck in the storm. Jesus comes walking on the water to them. It’s a very famous incident. Remember the gospel writer, John, says at the end of his gospel that

Jesus did many miracles, but John has chosen miracles to recount that don't just tell that Jesus is a powerful God who does these great things but also symbolize who he is and why he came.

Therefore, every time we look at one of the miraculous signs in the gospel of John, we should be asking not just how this shows his power but also what this tells us about who he is and what he came to do. When we look at this miraculous sign, I think we're going to learn at least three things. There are many others, but there are three I'd like to talk about this morning. It shows us *his uncontrollable force, his wonderful counsel, and his costly salvation*.

1. *His uncontrollable force.* The key to understanding the meaning of this whole incident ... It's very famous, but the key to understanding why he did it and why he did it where he did it and what he was trying to say in it is to read the two verses right before this particular account. It says after Jesus had fed the 5,000 miraculously ... He had miraculously fed 5,000 families in the wilderness by taking five loaves of bread and multiplying them.

Of course, the people who saw this were steeped in what we would call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, and they knew of someone else who had miraculously fed a multitude in the wilderness: Moses. Moses was the greatest leader they'd ever known. He led them out of slavery. He led them out of oppression. He had fed a multitude miraculously in the wilderness, and now this man has done it too.

In verses 14–15, right after the feeding of the 5,000, we read, “**After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.**” They were saying, “Here's a man with incomparable power. Here's a man who did what Moses did. We're also now under oppression. We're under the boot of Rome. We also need a deliverer. Let's make him king.”

Jesus knew they were about to do that, and in response to this profound misunderstanding of who he is, he sends the disciples away and he himself removes from the crowd and goes up on a mountain. There's a lot of perplexity, very often, when people are reading this part of John. Most of the miracles Jesus does are called *signs* by John.

He calls them *miraculous signs*. He even numbers them. “This is the first sign. That was the second sign. That was the third sign.” This is obviously a big miracle, but John never calls it a sign. It's interesting. I think the reason is this miracle needs to be brought together with the bread miracle, with the feeding of the 5,000 miracle, because only together does the message come forward ...

You might say this miracle, in a sense, supplements the miracle of the bread to make sure the message comes forward in a clear way. Here's the message: Jesus did not come primarily to deal with Israel's economic, political, and social problems, as important and as bad as they were. If he had just been made a

king, that's all he would have ever done, and it wouldn't have helped us, other than to maybe create a wonderful, inspiring story.

No, Jesus came to give us the bread of heaven. He came to bring us eternal life. He came to conquer sin and death itself. He came to reconcile us to God. That is our most fundamental problem and issue, and we don't even know it. None of us knows it. I even think, no matter who you are in this room, you hardly know it. The Bible talks about our need for reconciliation with God, that there's alienation, that we're fighting God.

Virtually all of us say, "I'm not fighting God." Very few people say that. Non-religious people say, "I'm not fighting God; I just don't believe in him." Religious people say, "Oh, I'm absolutely not fighting God. I'm not alienated from God. I'm obeying him. I'm trying very hard to live a good life." But if you go into the book of Romans, Saint Paul does a remarkable job of deconstructing religion.

He says, "You know, if you are trying to live a good life so that God has to bless you and take you to heaven, you're trying to control God, trying to be your own savior and lord. You're fighting God. You're all fighting God." We're all resisting him. We're all hostile to him. We don't want his control. We're finding all sorts of ways of throwing it off, and we hide how hostile we are toward God under all sorts of self-deception.

Paul says, "Your most fundamental problem is you're alienated from God. You're hostile to God. You're out of relationship with God." Jesus Christ says, "I have come into this world not just simply to help you with these economic, social, and political problems in this one location. I'm here to deal with *the* problem," from which, actually, all of our economic and social problems come: the problems of sin and death and alienation, us from God and, therefore, us from each other.

"I'm going to the cross," says Jesus. "My body is going to be broken. I'm the bread of life. My body is going to be broken so you can be made whole. I'm going to the cross. I'm going to pay for your sins, and I'm going to take away ..." Not only God needs to be reconciled to you, but then we need to be reconciled to him. When our hearts are healed and we have that relationship, everything changes: our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with each other. Everything. "That's the profound thing I have come to do."

The problem is that the bread miracle looked like Jesus had a power that we can just use and fit into our agendas. "Okay, wow. You have this power. We really need a king. We really need a messiah. We really need a political leader." Jesus says, "No, no. You can't control me like that." So what does he do? How does he refute that complete misunderstanding of him and that desire to, in a sense, control him? Well, there's a storm.

Here's what verse 19 says. This is one of those passages in which very careful attention to the original Greek text helps a lot. They were out there. They were in a storm, as I mentioned. The Sea of Galilee is not a big place, but you can still

sink and drown in it. Mark and Matthew also recount this and they give a little bit more detail. They were straining at the oars. They were in trouble. They couldn't get to land.

It says in verse 19, "**When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water ...**" John deliberately uses a Greek word that's a little surprising, when he uses the word *walking*. In Greek there are a number of different words. One of the words that could have been used for *walking* would be just the normal word for treading.

I've always thought Jesus would be slogging a little bit through the water and saying, "I'm glad I reached you guys," but the word that's actually used there is a word that means to amble or to stroll. As a matter of fact, it's a word that usually means to stop on your journey and get out and walk around and do sightseeing. It's a word for sightseeing. It has to be deliberate. It actually looks like (and some of the other texts, the other gospels, indicate this too) Jesus was very casually strolling.

Storms, hurricanes, especially over water, are the most chaotic, destructive, and uncontrollable powers on earth. There's really no more uncontrollable, destructive, and chaotic power than a hurricane, especially over water. You can drop a nuclear warhead into a hurricane and it doesn't bother it. Yet there are two places in the New Testament where Jesus is in the middle of one of these great storms over the water and he's surrounded by terrified sailors.

One time he speaks a word and it goes instantly calm. This time he's casually strolling through it, which means the greatest uncontrollable forces we know in the world ... Not only does he have absolute power over them, but they have no power over him. You know what this means. Jesus isn't just the ultimate Moses; he's the God of Moses.

Jesus is saying, "Yeah, okay. You want to go back where Moses led the children of Israel out of the wilderness and fed them with manna? If you want to go back to Moses, fine. But don't just go to the story about Moses feeding the children of Israel in the wilderness. Go to the Red Sea." Here's Psalm 77:

"You are the God who performs miracles ... With your mighty arm you redeemed your people ... The waters saw you, God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. [...] Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen."

In Job it recalls the passing through the Red Sea. It says, "He [God] alone treads on the waves of the sea. God led Israel out through the waters." Jesus is deliberately saying, "I'm not just Moses. Of course I'm the ultimate Moses. Of course I'm the ultimate leader, but I am the God of Moses. I'm the one who parted the Red Sea.

I'm the one who has infinite power, and you cannot control me for your own ends. You may not use me. I'm not here just simply to help you with the problems. I'm

not here just to fit into your agenda. I bring a whole new agenda. You must deal with me on your own terms. I am the uncontrollable force. I'm the untamed Lord."

Let's think about what that means practically. That's the principle. How does that apply? It applies in a lot of ways. There's a danger to what some people call the *prosperity gospel*, that you say, "I'm coming to God, but basically I'm coming to God expecting that if I'm right with God, bad things will not happen to me. Storms won't happen to me. Bad things aren't going to happen to me. Everything is going to be fine. I'm going to be healed. I'm going to be rich."

Jesus here is saying, "You can't make me a king. You can't use me, in that sense, just to fulfill your ambitions." By the way, every place where Jesus is almost literally made a king, like with the Crusades, when kings said, "We're a Christian country and we're going to conquer this pagan country and make everybody Christian ..." That happened a lot. Wherever that happened, wherever Jesus was literally, in a sense, made a king, it has been a disaster.

Not that, by the way. Becoming a Christian does have amazing political implications. If you are reconciled to God and your identity changes and your relationships with God and yourself and others change, it leads you to become agents for peace and reconciliation and justice in the world. Oh yes, absolutely. It changes the way in which you function in the world, but you can't reduce Christianity to a political program that is put into place by coercion.

Jesus says, "It just doesn't work. That's a complete perversion of what I came to do." I'd like to be a little more subtle, because most of you are saying, "Well, I'm not into the prosperity gospel, and I understand that thing about politics and that you have to be careful." We're more subtle about this. Let me just tell you this story.

When Kathy and I were young, we had a teacher, and the teacher had a teacher, and his name was John Gerstner. John Gerstner had a recording of a very famous sermon that went around called, *Your Life as a Living Sacrifice*. It had a true story in it about a girl who lived years and years ago. She decided she wanted to be a missionary, but she lived at a time in which a single woman would not have been able to go into the lands where she wanted to go.

So she went into missionary training, knowing that though she was going to get ready for missionary training, all God had to do was give her a husband, and then she'd be able to go do what she had trained to do. She says, "That's an easy deal. I give my whole life to missionary training, and that means I'm giving my life away to God. All God has to do is give me a husband."

John Gerstner tells the story about how after years of training, the night before her final graduation in which she was all done with her training, she had no husband. She hadn't any prospects for a husband. She was bitter and angry, and that night she suddenly realized that she'd been using God. She thought she had given herself away, but basically she was saying, "If I do *this*, then you'll do *this*." Another way of putting it is, "God, I'll serve you *if ...*" "I'll serve you *as long as ...*"

If you say to God, “I’ll serve you *if*” or “I’ll serve you *as long as*,” what’s on the other side of the *if* or the *as long as* is the real god and God is a means to an end. If you ever serve God conditionally ... “Lord, I’ll be with you as long as this happens.” That’s the condition. It’s the condition that’s the real god. It’s the condition that’s the bottom line. It’s the real thing you’re living for, and God is just a means to an end.

Jesus says, “You can’t use me like that. I won’t be used like that.” John Gerstner said that night this young woman, who for years had thought she was really living for God, realized she had just been using God. That night she took her hands off her life. The way he ends the story is if that girl who had done all of that for Jesus realized at the end that she had not taken her hands off her life, have you, do you think?

By the way, every time I tell that story and move on to the next point, we get emails coming to the office, saying, “Whatever happened to the girl?” Well, John Gerstner didn’t tell me. The reason he didn’t tell me is that he knew once she took her hands off her life, that *was* the end of the story. Now if she had a husband it would have been safe.

If she didn’t get a husband, she’d still be living okay. That *was* the end of the story. You don’t need to know how the story ended. That was the end of the story. So the bread miracle wasn’t enough. You needed the storm miracle to see that you must drop your conditions when you come to Jesus Christ. He’s an uncontrollable force.

2. *His wonderful counsel.* Notice, as usual, Jesus’ miracles are never simply naked displays of power. They are ways of ministering to people. Here is Jesus Christ up on the mountain, as it were, looking down into the world, and he sees his people struggling with forces beyond them. He sees them sinking. He sees that they’re overwhelmed. He sees them struggling with problems they cannot handle on their own, so he comes to them and speaks gently to them. What does he say? **“It is I; don’t be afraid.”**

Let’s just meditate on that for a second. It’s not too hard to understand what that’s supposed to be telling us or what John was trying to tell us by including this particular miracle here. There’s no refuge in storms at sea. If you’re in a storm and you’re in the mountains, you have caves. If you’re in a storm and you’re somewhere else, you can get under a tree, maybe, or you can get into a home or a fortress. There are refuges in a big storm, but in a storm at sea there’s no refuge.

Most people think life is more like a land journey. I recently read an interesting psychological study that said that when people hear about, see, or read about other folks whose lives have blown up and terrible things have happened ... Studies have shown that most people tend to blame the victim. Most people tend to say, “Well, that person either wasn’t wise or they didn’t save or they should have thought about *this* or they shouldn’t have done *that*. They should have

avoided it."

There's a strong psychological bent on most of our parts when we see someone suffering to assume that they probably contributed to it in some way. Why? It's self-defense. We see somebody else's life blow up and we desperately want to believe that doesn't have to happen to us, if we're smart enough, if we're savvy enough, if we're competent enough, if we do our diligence. There's a deep sense in which we feel that way, because we think life is a land journey.

The Bible says, "No, life is a sea journey, and darkness is upon the face of the deep." There are storms coming in your life that *will* be beyond you. You *will* be out of your depth. Let me just give you four: bereavement, illness, relational betrayal, and financial disaster. I don't care how hard you work, how smart you are, how many good connections you have. I don't care what you do. You're not going to avoid those things. Just those four. They're going to happen to you and you're going to be out of your depth.

Life is not a land journey; it's a sea journey, and darkness is on the face of the deep. In other words, there will be things coming into your life that you will not be able to handle. There will be no refuge unless it comes from outside of you. In fact, unless it comes from outside of the world. That's the point. Just notice one other thing. What this is saying is here's Jesus, and he's tender. Notice how he comes. He doesn't say, "You fools! Why didn't you trust me?" He comes tenderly. He's the Wonderful Counselor.

"Hey," he says, "it's me. Don't be afraid." If you put the first two points of the sermon together, his uncontrollable force with his wonderful tender counsel, think of how that can comfort you. You say, "If someone like this with this kind of power loves me like this, I can handle the storms. I *will* handle the storms." Just remember one thing. There are two storm stories in the New Testament, two times in which Jesus is in a horrible storm with terrified sailors around him.

One time he just speaks and it goes away. The other time he brings them through it. He doesn't stop the storm. He comes next to them in the storm and gets them to land. Sometimes the way Jesus helps you in a storm is he actually does take it away. Sometimes it doesn't happen or sometimes it's just lifted. Other times, it doesn't go away, but he comes in, gets into your life with you, takes you, turns you into something great, turns you to gold through it.

3. *His costly salvation.* What do I mean by that? One thing that many people notice on reading through is that when Jesus shows up he doesn't immediately comfort them. They were probably scared. I mean, Mark and Matthew, the other accounts we have of this, tell us they were very afraid. They were very worried and very anxious out there, but when Jesus showed up they got more afraid and worried. It didn't immediately resolve their fear and worry.

It says, "**When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened.**" That's a nice way to put it. They were terrified. Jesus coming terrified them. Why?

We say, "Well, it would have been scary to see somebody walking on the water." Yeah, I'm sure, but there was more to it than that. The reason is because of what he says. Verse 20: "**But he said to them, 'It is I ...'**"

I don't want to hear any criticism of the translators. There's no way they could actually put down what Jesus said. It wouldn't make any sense to English readers. He doesn't say, "It is I." He says *ego eimi*. He says, "I am." He uses a Greek construction that is extremely unusual. He says, "I am." What would that mean? Actually, nobody doubts what it means.

When Moses met God for the first time face-to-face in the burning bush in Exodus, chapter 3 ... The bush is burning and he's speaking to Moses and he says, "I'm going to send you to Pharaoh." Moses says, "When I go, people are going to ask, 'Who sent you?' What is your name?" he says to God. "Who should I say sent me?" God says, "Tell them 'I Am' has sent you." That's just the indefinite Hebrew word *to be*. "Tell them 'I Am' has sent you."

The Jewish and Christian thinkers and theologians over the centuries almost completely agree on what that means. When God says, "I Am," he's saying, "I always am." There was never a time in which it could have been said about God, "God *will* be," because he has no beginning, and there never will be a time in which someone will be able to say about God, "God *was*," because there's no ending. Do you know why? Because God has no cause.

God is the only one who is his own cause. He depends on nothing. Everything depends on him. This is God's way of saying, "I don't just exist; I *am* existence. Everything that exists exists because of me. I'm not just *a* being; I am *being*. Tell them being itself sent you. I'm the unconditioned cause." When Jesus says, "I am ..." In fact, in John, chapter 8, he actually says, "Before Abraham was, I am," and they immediately tried to kill him.

He didn't say, "Before Abraham was, I *was*." That would have been astounding, because he would have been saying, "I'm older than Abraham." He says, "Before Abraham was, I am," and they knew exactly what he was saying. They immediately tried to kill him. I'm glad he said it that way. Do you know why? Because if Jesus had just said, "I'm God," and we here in New York City read that, we could have read into that anything we wanted to, because we have such weird ideas of God.

"Oh, Jesus said, 'I'm God.' Well, you know what that means? He's the spark of love in everybody," or "He's that spiritual aura that binds all of creation together," or he's *this* or he's *that*. No. Jesus says, "I am the infinitely exalted, above-the-universe, transcendent one. I'm the one who created the world. I'm the one who sustains it every moment. I'm the one without beginning and without end. That's the God who I am."

It's astonishing. It's an astounding statement. What's even more astounding is he says, "I am" and then says, "Don't be afraid." That is completely different than anything you ever, ever see in the Hebrew Scriptures in the Old Testament.

Every time in the Old Testament God reveals himself, he immediately says, "Get back." For example, when he says to Moses, "I Am," he immediately says, "Take off your sandals. You're on holy ground. Don't get too close."

When he reveals his name on Mount Sinai and Moses says, "Show me your glory," God says, "No, I can't. It'll kill you." When he comes down on the mountain, he says, "Don't touch the mountain; you'll die." Every time in the Old Testament where God says, "I Am," he basically says, "Get back. My 'I-Am-ness' might kill you. I'm infinite; you're puny. I'm utterly holy and pure; you are flawed and sinful. You can't live with my greatness. You can't live with my glory and my holiness. My I-Am-ness will kill you. I Am; be very afraid."

Yet here it's the other way around. When Jesus shows up, they're terrified, because they know they're in the presence of something from another plane. They know they're in the presence of the holy. He says it. "I Am." But then he says, "Don't be afraid." What does it say? "**Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.**"

This is utterly different than the Old Testament. He doesn't say, "I Am; don't touch me." He gets into the boat and saves them. Something has happened. God's infinite glory and power is now *for* them, not *against* them. How do we explain this? Why wouldn't he say, "I Am; be very afraid"? But he doesn't. What changed? I'll tell you what changed.

When the gospel writer Mark talks about this, he makes it a little clearer. When Jesus is in a boat filled with terrified sailors in a storm and he saves them, who does that remind you of? If you are steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures, if you knew the Hebrew Scriptures inside out, who does that remind you of? Sailors scared in a storm and then suddenly being delivered. Jonah.

In the Old Testament, Jonah was a prophet. God tells him to go to Nineveh. Jonah disobeys God, gets in a boat filled with sailors, goes out to sea, trying to get away from God, and a huge storm comes up. It terrifies the sailors. Why? The storm is the storm Jonah deserves. The way in which they're delivered is Jonah says, "I'm the one who deserves the punishment. Throw me into the storm." They throw him into the storm and the sailors are saved.

Do you realize that Jesus says he's the ultimate Jonah? He says, "A greater than Jonah is here." In Matthew he says, "I'm the ultimate Jonah." What can that mean? Here's what it means. The storms of this world, literal storms and all of the other storms, really are here because we have turned away from God. That's what the book of Genesis says. It's the consequences of our turning from God, trying to be our own saviors and lords. The whole world doesn't work.

The brokenness of creation is something we've brought about. Jesus did not deserve it, but he's the ultimate Jonah. The reason he can save us from these storms ... Eventually, he's going to end all storms. It's going to be a new heavens and a new earth. No more suffering. No more death. No more tears. He's going

to be able to save us from storms, because he was thrown into the ultimate storm. He's the ultimate Jonah. He bowed his head into the storm of divine justice and wrath on our sin so we could have peace with God, reconciliation.

Now if you understand that ... Do you know that he did that for you? If he did that for you, if he took the ultimate storm, do you think he's going to abandon you in the storm you're in right now? Never. If you know he did that for you, that's how you'll be able to handle storms. You'll be able to look over the edge of the boat and you'll be able to sing a John Newton hymn.

*His love in time past
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink ...*

*By prayer let me wrestle
Then he will perform
With Christ in my vessel
I smile at the storm.*

Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have sent us your Son and he's an uncontrollable force. He's not tame. He's not someone we can use for our own ends, but why would we want to when he has this purpose to love us, to counsel us, to save us, to bring us to shore? We ask, Lord, that you would help us to trust him, especially trust him in storms, and obey him unconditionally, but most of all, believe in him, that we might have eternal life and reconciliation with you. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Hope that Transforms

Questioning Christianity—February 20, 2014

We are here every week exploring the character and claims of Christianity to see whether it makes sense to contemporary people. We actually are forming a temporary learning community, and let me tell you who's in the learning community. Charles Taylor, who's a French Canadian philosopher who has written a number of major books ... He's very prominent and respected. He wrote a book a few years ago published by Harvard University Press called *A Secular Age*. In it he comes up with an interesting concept. Most of us he calls *cross-pressured*.

He says at two ends of the spectrum you have people on the one end who have

no doubts in their belief. They believe in God. They believe in Christianity. They believe in their faith, and they have no doubts about it. At the other end you have people who disbelieve and have no doubts about their disbelief. They're absolutely sure there's no God, religion doesn't work, it's not true. So you have people who have no doubts about their belief and people who have no doubts about their disbelief, but most of us are in the middle.

He says the reason we're cross-pressed is that up until maybe 150 years ago, most people lived in societies where everybody around them believed pretty much what they did about God, about right and wrong. In other words, we lived in homogeneous cultural and religious communities, so you were never pressured by a lot of very good friends or neighbors who had utterly different beliefs than you do. Today, increasing numbers of us live in those very kinds of communities.

What that means is, on the one hand, most believers respect doubt. They respect the questions. They wrestle with the objections. They themselves have given those questions a great deal of weight and wrestle with them sometimes very immediately. On the other hand, you have an awful lot of people who disbelieve in religion and God, but at the same time, because they're surrounded by so many believers, often intelligent ones, often a lot of devout ones, they have doubts about their doubts.

So disbelievers feel cross-pressed, and they're always wondering, "Am I right? Have I made a mistake?" Believers are always wrestling with a lot of questions and objections, and believers and disbelievers and those of you who aren't quite sure where you fit can actually form a learning community in which we're willing to wrestle with the questions and ask the questions and then hear how people answer the questions and say, "I like that answer. I didn't like that answer."

So temporarily we're a learning community. It's particularly good to be here, because not only do I get a chance to hold forth to you, but then you get a chance to ask questions, not only up here but then upstairs where we can talk face to face. It feels like the learning community continues ... In some ways it's maturing even over the three or four weeks, and it has been great. Just terrific.

The premise is that since none of us can prove or disprove our deepest beliefs, your deepest moral convictions about right and wrong, your deepest convictions about what people should be doing with their lives, belief whether there's a God or whether there's no God ... You can't prove God. You can't totally disprove God. That means all of us have beliefs we can't prove, and yet you can't live without those beliefs.

We said you don't want to just do blind leaps of faith, but, on the other hand, you don't want to demand demonstrable proof that doesn't exist for these beliefs. So how do you decide what beliefs to believe? It's cumulatively. You look at beliefs that make the most emotional, cultural, rational, and logical sense, and cumulatively you come up with an idea that makes the most sense. I'm trying to see whether I can accumulate those things for you, and you can decide whether I'm doing a good job or not. You know that I'm open to your critique.

Now the first four weeks, including this week, are looking a little bit more at how Christianity makes emotional and cultural sense, and the next three weeks we'll be more looking at the traditional arguments and reasons and why Christianity makes rational sense, but today, one more week, I want to do this. I'd like to talk to you today about hope. I'll call it *Hope that Transforms*.

I'd like to talk to you about *what hope is, how it's a problem, the alternate views of dealing with that problem*, and then *the Christian way of dealing with it*. What hope is, why it's a problem, and what the various alternate ways are. I can give you at least six, and then a seventh, which is Christianity. Then you can judge yourself, because you're going to deal with the problem too. So let's take a look at it like this.

1. *What is hope?* Hope consists of two things: desire and expectation. Everybody has desires, things you want and long for. How will those desires be fulfilled? Well, you look to something to fulfill those desires and set your expectations on those things, and whatever those things are that you set your expectations on as you think being able to fulfill those desires, those are your hopes. That's what hope is. So you have to have desire and expectation for what will fulfill it.

Just for a second, let me tell you how incredibly important hope is. Let me just show you how important it is to the way in which you live your life. Imagine two women who both are hired by a company to do a certain task nine hours a day. They're put in two different rooms, but they're identical. Same climate, same lighting, same humidity, and they're given exactly the same thing to do. It's not particularly interesting. It's assembling something and then moving on and assembling something else.

So they have the same job and the same situation and the same circumstances in every way. You tell the one woman, "At the end of 12 months of work you will be paid \$15,000," but you tell the other woman, "At the end of 12 months of work you will be paid \$15 million." At lunch breaks they eat together, and the first woman says, "Boy, this is tedious. Don't you think this is boring?" The other woman says, "Not really. Yeah, but it's okay. It's all right."

Why? You know the answer why. These two women are experiencing identical circumstances in radically different ways because of their expectations. In other words, their future expectations, their future hopes, what they believe about the future, is completely shaping how they are interpreting and experiencing their present moment.

One of the things philosophers and sociologists and a lot of other people are trying to work on is that we are the very first culture that promises people nothing after death at all, essentially no future beyond death. There has always been reincarnation. There has always been karma. Buddhism is somewhat different, as you know. Greek stoicism, Christianity, Islam ... In other words, every culture has always, to some degree, said there's the possibility of bliss. There's the possibility of eternity.

We're the very first culture that has ever said, "No matter what you do here, it doesn't matter after death. No matter what you do here, it doesn't pay off or be punished. There's no ultimate fulfillment of so many of your desires." Even though every individual is different (there's no doubt about it; people are all over the map), a lot of people are saying, "That has to have an impact on how people live their lives across the whole swath of culture."

It has to have an impact on joy. It has to have an impact, frankly, on things like integrity. Why should you behave with integrity? What are the consequences? What are we after? We are hopelessly hope-shaped creatures. We are absolutely hope-shaped creatures. We are irreducibly hope-shaped creatures. We need it desperately. It has every impact on how we live now. So that's the nature of hope. It's very important.

2. *The problem.* What do I mean by the problem? Well, the problem is that our hopes are always being disappointed. They are inevitably disappointed. Let me give you five utterly different people. Horace, the Roman poet. He said, "No one lives contented." That's a pretty categorical statement. They think they're content. They're not. No one lives contented.

Wallace Stevens, a modern writer, says, "In contentment I still feel the need of some imperishable bliss." In other words, he's saying, "Even when I'm content I realize I'm really not content, because I realize that what I'm experiencing that makes me content is temporary, and because it's temporary it makes it hard for me to enjoy it. Even in contentment, I still feel the need for some imperishable bliss."

Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, says, "When you take away the life lie of anyone, they lose all their happiness." By the way, in the context, the *life lie* is that there's anything out there that will actually make you happy. Anything about which you think, "This is going to make me happy," when you actually lose the life lie, you lose all the happiness.

Cynthia Heimel, who used to write for the *Village Voice* ... When I first got to New York I was reading the *Village Voice* every week at least, and I came across this great column that I have saved and always bring out, because it's just so hilarious and also so cutting. If you live in New York long enough ... People who grow up here very often get to know some people who end up becoming incredibly famous. New Yorkers very often grow up in this place or that place and then they become stars, celebrities. They started out in humble origins.

Cynthia Heimel was thinking about ... She actually names three or four people who she remembered when they worked behind the cosmetics counter in Macy's or was a bouncer downtown and then they became big movie stars. She said she knew a number of people who had started out as nothing and became famous, and after they became famous they weren't happy. Listen to how brilliantly she speaks about it.

She says, "[The] giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going

to make everything okay, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment and (ha ha) happiness, had happened. And nothing changed. They were still them. The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable." Then she adds this. By the way, she's not a Christian believer, so she doesn't mean this literally.

She says, "When God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you he grants you your deepest wish and then giggles when you suddenly realize you want to kill yourself." That's exactly what Henrik Ibsen is saying. The worst thing that can happen to you is you get exactly what you thought all your life was going to satisfy you, and then God goes away giggling merrily. Do you believe what she's saying? It's a little exaggerated.

The most eloquent person talking about this was C.S. Lewis, who gave a radio talk over the BBC in the middle of World War II. Very, very famous. In it he makes this statement. I'm going to back it up with a couple of other places where he writes about the same subject. He says something like, "Most people, if they really learned how to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never keep their promise.

The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love or first think of some foreign country or first take up some subject that excites us are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy. I'm not speaking of what ordinarily would be called unsuccessful marriages or trips, and so on. I'm speaking of even the best possible ones. There's always something we grasp at in that first moment of longing that just fades away in the reality.

The spouse may be a good spouse. The scenery has been excellent. It has turned out to be a good job, but *it* has evaded us. You have never had *it*. All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it, tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest, if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself, you would say, 'This at last is what I was made for.'

Do you understand what *it* is? We can't define it. *It* is the thing that will satisfy us that we think the things have until we get to them, and then we want to kill ourselves when it's not there. That's what Cynthia Heimel says. Lewis ends like this: "Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy but the truest index of our real situation. We long to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality. That's our inconsolable secret."

What is that? I think he's right. I think you know he's right. If the *Village Voice* and C.S. Lewis agree, it must be true. The real problem, of course, is that we have

these desires and then we have expectations for those desires. That's what hope is. The things we expect to fulfill them just don't do it. Lewis actually says, "Do not think you're neurotic." That's going to hurt the practices of a lot of therapists, because most of us do think if we're just unsatisfied with everything in life it must be a neurosis of some kind. I'm sorry; this is too universal. When you have ancient Roman poets and the *Village Voice* and C.S. Lewis, this is not neurosis.

One other person, who ends up being a friend of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R Tolkien, wrote an essay that's just a classic called "On Fairy-Stories." Don't forget. Even though you may know of J.R.R. Tolkien just as a fantasy writer, he was a world-renowned Oxford professor of ancient Northern European languages and culture and literature. He was one of the world's experts on things like Old English and Old Norse and Old Gothic and Old Icelandic and all this stuff.

He understood myths and legends and sagas. He knew all that older kind of literature, what you and I would call *fantasy literature*. What's really important to see is he says we have a problem explaining why people are still producing this kind of literature and consuming it. He says this ancient kind of literature is always basically depicting several things.

He says in these stories, myths, *fairy tales*, you might call them, people are stepping outside of time. Secondly, they're escaping death. Thirdly, they're experiencing love without parting, love that you never lose. Fourthly, they're holding communication with non-human beings. Fifthly, we're seeing the final triumph of good over evil.

In the stories that depict these things, it used to be, years ago, that readers and listeners (because a lot of them were told orally) used to understand that they could happen. In other words, in the past people believed in the supernatural in a way that modern people don't. Tolkien is asking, "Why, today, when we know it's fiction and know with our heads these things are impossible, do we have this astounding appetite for stories like this?"

Why the sci-fi? Why the fantasy? Why is it that people are still spending billions on it? Why is it that if you write a serious modern realistic novel that everybody in the *New York Times Book Review* just goes gaga over you'll make *this* amount of money, and if you write a really great fairy tale, basically, and depict it in the movies, like *Harry Potter* ... Why is it that all of those stories make far more money? Why are they so much more accessible?

He says in "On Fairy-Stories" that we have desires that realistic fiction can't touch. We have an itch that only this kind of fiction can scratch. Realistic fiction can't scratch it. Even though we know it's not true, even though we think it's impossible, when we have these stories that show escape from death and love without parting and stepping outside of time and communing with non-human beings and triumph of good over evil, we can't get enough of them.

There's an incredibly deep longing for these things, and yet there's nothing we know of in this life that can possibly satisfy those longings. There's one place in

the essay where Tolkien says, “If fairy stories awaken desire, satisfying it while also whetting it unbearably, they succeed.” He says these kinds of stories succeed because, on the one hand, they’re satisfying.

Otherwise, we wouldn’t pay to see them or buy the books and read them all the time and love them so much, even when everybody else is saying, “Sorry, that’s not how life is. Modern realistic fiction … no happy endings, no happily ever after. That’s realism.” That stuff doesn’t sell. You know that. It certainly doesn’t move you in the same way.

Some people who have done everything they possibly can to change their aesthetic tastes so that they hate fairy stories (and there are a fair number of people like that) have really cut themselves off from most of humanity. The real question is … *Why do we want these things?* These are our longings. This is what we long for. Realistic fiction can’t scratch that itch. Even fairy stories whet the desire unbearably. They’re satisfying and yet at the same time they create more longing, because it’s just not true.

So now what are you going to do? This is the reality. We have desires that nothing we know of that we set our expectations on, that we hope in, can fulfill. What are we going to do about that? What are you going to do about the fact that all of your deepest hopes are always going to be disappointed by the things in this world that you put your hopes on? I’m going to suggest there are seven alternative ways to deal with the fact that our hopes are always being disappointed.

3. *Alternate ways to deal with the problem.* The first category is people who are almost always younger, who think *IT* … *IT* is the satisfaction for our deepest desires that we think is in the things but never is there. Younger people generally live lives for a number of years relatively untroubled, because they’re sure that if they actually get to the things they’re hoping for *IT* will be there. If they get the career, if they get the partner, if they get the marriage, whatever they’ve decided

...

Because you’re younger, you realize there’s a ramp and you have a lot of things you have to do. You have to get into the best graduate school, and then you have the career, and then you can meet *these* kinds of people, and maybe you got into that graduate school. So even though you actually don’t have it by any means, it doesn’t bother you. Why? Because you’re sure it’s out there. So you’re kind of living blissfully, sure that you *will* be fulfilled, and that gives you something of the sense of being fulfilled.

You’re so sure it’s going to happen it’s not so bad. It’s a little bit like the woman who’s sure she’s going to get \$15 million, and even though it’s really tedious, it’s all right. It’s fine. So first of all, you have people who are not unhappy because they’re sure *IT* is still out there; they just haven’t gotten there. Usually young people can live with that kind of illusion, because that’s what it is.

The second category is people more like my age who have failed to get the

things they thought *IT* was in. You're never going to have the career you always wanted. You're never going to have the marriage you always wanted. You're never going to have ... whatever. In other words, younger people say, "It's in *those* things," and even though they're nowhere near it they're okay, because, "I'm sure it's there. We just haven't gotten there."

You get to a certain spot where you get old enough that you realize you're never going to get the things you're pretty sure *IT* is in. What do you do? Well, you can really get tied up in knots, because usually the reason you realize you're never going to get the things you're sure *IT* is in is that something has blocked you. Generally, you become incredibly angry. If you think it was your own failures, you start to hate yourself.

If it was some person who did it to you, then you get incredibly bitter against your parents or this or that person. If it's a social condition, if you feel like it's prejudice or certain social conditions that have kept you from getting there, then you become a social activist, but an incredibly angry one. The point is you're sure that *IT* is out in the things and you couldn't get those things so you get incredibly angry at whatever kept you from getting those things. So your life is quite distorted.

The third through sixth categories are all people who have gotten the things and found *IT* is not there. What happens when you basically get to what you thought was going to be *IT* and it's not there? Let me give you four possibilities. You have to do something, so here are four. First there's the foolish approach. This is, by the way, from C.S. Lewis. Some of this is from C.S. Lewis' radio talk I quoted from earlier.

When you realize *IT* isn't in those things, the foolish approach is to go get other newer things. "I'll get a different spouse. I will get a different career." In other words, the reason *IT* is not in these things is because they were the wrong things. "I just got the wrong thing, so I'm going to keep going until I find other things." That really can make you a nuisance. There's another approach, which I would call another foolish approach, which is "I'm going to change the kind of things. I'm going to go spiritual."

What very often happens is you get to a spot where you say, "I thought that making money and having a career and having *this* and having *that* and having people respect me and all that was going to satisfy me, but I'm not satisfied, so now what am I going to do? I'm going to throw myself into caring for the poor, social activism, becoming a decent person. I'm going to get spiritual things, and *that's* going to satisfy me." No, it won't, but you can probably spend about 10 years thinking it will until you realize it hasn't.

Then you can just be despairing, and those people can kill themselves. They do. Go online sometime and look up a very famous poem called "Richard Cory." In a lot of elementary schools when I was growing up you had to read it, because it was such a shocking ending. This guy who has everything goes home and puts a bullet in his head. He was "imperially slim." That's all I remember from the poem,

but I do know it's an example of somebody who had everything.

Then there's the hardened response. The hardened response basically says, "There is no *IT*, and it was stupid and juvenile and adolescent of me to ever think I'm ever going to be satisfied, or *anybody* can be satisfied. When I was younger, I used to cry after the moon. I was hoping for the rainbow, but I've gotten over this. I've grown up. I realize life is just not like that." There's a minor and a major problem with that approach.

The minor problem is that it very often makes you into a stuck-up prig, because when you're absolutely sure that life sucks and everything is bad and nothing is ever going to satisfy anybody and this is just the way life is, you look at all of the other eager beavers running around, saying, "We're going to change the world and we're going to do this and I'm going to be happy," and you just despise them. It does make you very self-righteous. Far more seriously, you have just killed the part of your heart that made you really human, the part of your heart that hoped and longed.

I've just given you six ways, but there's a seventh way before I get to Christianity, and that's the Buddhist way. Buddhism is considerably more sophisticated. It also recognizes that the reason we're unhappy is that we crave things as ways of satisfying our desires, but what Buddhism says is that you crave things as satisfaction of your desires because you're living with the illusion that you're an individual. You're not. You're part of everything.

So to say, "Oh, I need to have that money or I need to have that career ..." No, no. We're not all separate entities. We're all one. It's an illusion that we are these separate entities; therefore, detach your heart. That's what Buddhism teaches. Detach your heart. When you have a loved one, don't say, "Oh, I could never lose you." Detach. The goal of Buddhism is tranquility, the tranquility that comes from destroying over-attachment to anything.

You're able to do that because you're telling yourself, "It's an illusion for me to think I'm an individual. I'm just part of everything. Everything is one." The problem with Buddhism is simply that I don't think we want tranquility. Of course there's a tranquility that comes from, in a sense, tamping down your heart so you're not loving. You can't detach from somebody you love without tamping down the love or tamping down the enjoyment of that love.

Of course, again, Buddhism is actually saying in the end you're not an individual. When you die, you're not an individual, and the illusion of love and joy goes away and you just become tranquilly part of the All. I don't think that's what the human heart is actually after. It's a very sophisticated way, though; a much better way than almost any other way of living in this world with a certain amount of poise.

4. *The Christian way.* First of all, what is the Christian hope? The Christian hope is not just that when you die, because of what Jesus Christ has done, you live with God. Unlike Buddhism, you keep your personality. You stay who you are. You are still *you*, and you are *you* forever. You are with your loved ones forever.

This is a very different kind of prospect than either Hinduism or Buddhism provides.

It satisfies a longing that you have right now that Buddhism and Hinduism says, "Well, you need to tamp that down. You need to deal with that. You need to ratchet that down." Christianity says, "No, the problem is not that I want things too much. The problem is that I want God too little in relationship to those things, because what I'm really looking for is not just love but love without parting. I'm not looking just for this or that better social policy; I'm looking for good over evil."

Christianity comes and says, "The thing you're really longing for ... escape from death, love without parting, communion with non-human beings, stepping outside of time ... will literally happen." All of the things the stories promise will literally happen. If Jesus Christ is who he said he is and was raised from the dead, all that stuff will come true, and Christians who experience assurance that Jesus is the Son of God have that hope, and it's astounding.

Keep one other thing in mind. The hope is resurrection. What is resurrection? Resurrection is the belief not only that God saves our souls and our souls go off and live in a disembodied thing forever but that we get new bodies and this world is healed from suffering and evil and poverty and we get a new material universe. There's no other religion that promises this.

The reason it's so important is if you only hope for eternal life with God forever, that could make you not concerned at all about what is happening here right now, but if you know it's God's will to end poverty, to end sickness and disease, to heal this material creation ... A Christian who has this incredible hope that no matter what happens I'm going to know escape from death and love without parting and all of these things ...

It also creates an ability to be extraordinarily concerned about what's happening here and now. So it neither gives you, you might say, the hopelessness of saying, "When you die, then you rot. There's nothing more after that. It doesn't really matter how you live, because that's what's going to happen, and nothing you do now counts forever." On the other hand, you don't get a hope that makes this world unimportant. That's the Christian hope.

Secondly, I would like you to consider whether or not I've just given you an argument for the existence of God. Not a demonstrable one, but at least a clue. Here's how it works. C.S. Lewis concludes his reasoning. He's talking about the fact that nothing in this world satisfies us, and here's essentially what he says.

"A duckling wants to swim; there's such a thing as water. A baby wants to suck; there's such a thing as milk. If I find in myself a longing which this world cannot meet, then it probably means I was made for another world as well. How could an idiotic universe have produced creatures whose mere dreams are so much stronger and subtler than itself? Do fish complain of the sea for being wet? Or if they did, would that fact itself not strongly suggest that they had not always been fish or would not always be purely aquatic creatures? If you were really a product

of a materialistic universe, how is it that you don't feel at home here?"

What you can easily say is, "Hey, just because I want something doesn't mean it exists." Well, Lewis is trying to say this. Just because you want Coke doesn't mean there is a Coke at hand or even anywhere in the world. On the other hand, if you're thirsty, that does mean there's liquid. Innate desires don't exist unless fulfillment for those desires is there. Is that demonstrable? No, but it's an argument. It's a clue.

J.R.R. Tolkien converted the atheist C.S. Lewis talking about this. Tolkien wrote a poem (not a particularly good poem, but it's lovely) called "Mythopoeia." It's basically the story of how he shared the gospel with C.S. Lewis in a unique way. I wouldn't suggest any of you try it with anybody, but here's basically what was going on. We have to piece this together from the poem, which is a little bit hard, but Humphrey Carpenter's great biography on J.R.R. Tolkien is also extremely helpful here.

They were walking along at Oxford and they were talking about myths and fairy stories. Lewis agreed that there was this deep itch in us, this deep desire that only fairy stories could scratch; the desire to escape from death and to believe in a supernatural and to have a world beyond this world and all of those things. He understood that.

He said, "There's something about fairy stories and myths and sagas that really hits us like that," but then he said, "But myths are lies though breathed through silver." Tolkien says, "No, they're not." Tolkien said this about fairy stories. This is all from "On Fairy Stories," a lot of which is what he tried to convey to Lewis. I'll show you how this works. He basically says:

"Fairy stories give you a consolation. It's the joy of the happy ending, the sudden joyous 'turn,' this joy which fairy stories can produce supremely well. It's not essentially escapist or fugitive. It's a sudden and miraculous grace. It does not deny the existence of sorrow and failure. Indeed, the possibility of these is necessary for the joy of deliverance. Rather, it denies in the face of much evidence, if you will, universal and final defeat. Therefore, fairy stories are *evangelium* (the gospel), giving a fleeting glimpse of joy, joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

It's the mark of a good fairy story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and a lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art and having a peculiar quality. For in the 'turn' we get a piercing glimpse of joy and heart's desire that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of the story, and lets a gleam come through."

He says that's what fairy stories do. Everything looks dark. Everything looks like a disaster, and suddenly, out of nowhere, hope and grace and triumph and escape. Lewis said, "They're beautiful. They move me and I love them, but myths

are lies though breathed through silver." Tolkien says, "No. When you come to Jesus Christ, the incredible story of the Son of God looking down from heaven, seeing the mess we're in, and writing himself into the story, coming into it, as it were, emptying himself for us, and at the end, after his death, resurrection and the end of sin and the end of punishment and new life ..."

He says the story of Jesus is like all of the other old myths. It gives you that turn. It's astounding. But here's the difference. The story of Jesus is not one more myth pointing to this underlying reality we all feel we want. No. This *is* the underlying reality to which all the myths point. The story of Jesus is the one fairy story that scratches that itch, that whets that need, but it's historically true, and that's the reason C.S. Lewis wrote an article about it called "Myth Became Fact." Jesus is the myth that became fact.

In the movie *Hook*, Maggie Smith plays old Wendy and Robin Williams plays Peter Pan with amnesia. There's one place where she's reading the stories about Peter Pan and Robin Williams is listening to them, and she turns and says, "Peter, the stories are true." When a Christian reads any of these stories or hears that, they get a thrill. Do you know why? Because you know she's right. We're all basically like Peter Pan. We've just forgotten how to fly. In Jesus Christ, it's all going to happen. That hope transforms. It gives you a hope, plants your feet right now in the material world, gives you the very thing that nothing else can give you. That's the Christian view.

Female: Now we can get started on the next fun part of our night, which is the question and answer. Just like all of the other weeks, this is your opportunity to ask a question on tonight's theme: hope. The first question of the night is, "You say that all we hope for, love without parting, etcetera, will actually happen, but how can any rational person believe in what sounds like science fiction?"

Tim Keller: Of course it sounds like science fiction. You're right. What I'll show you next week is there has always been pretty strong evidence, but not demonstrable, that there's a God. There has always been pretty strong evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. In a place like New York City, you probably have not been exposed to the best and latest scholarship and books. A major historian wrote an 890-page book not too many years ago, very thoroughly researched, on why the resurrection happened.

Another historian just put out a couple of books. These are with major academic presses. These are not marginal people talking about why. There's an enormous amount of historical evidence that miracles have happened. So I'm going to go through that. I'm a little afraid of putting a question like that off. That sounds like, "Well, I'll get to that later." At the very least I can say this so we can get on to other questions, because this will be the next three weeks. I'll be trying to rout out almost all the rationale, the arguments, the logic.

I think you've actually done what I've wanted you to do, which is recognize that if there's even a chance that Christianity is true you ought to be looking into it, because the promise is pretty astounding. Christianity is the largest religion in the

world. It has had an awful lot of smart people who believed it thoroughly and who still do, and there's a terrific amount of good scholarship. It's not nuts. If it's not completely crazy and nuts, then because of its promise, it seems like it deserves a pretty good hearing. We will get more to that later.

Female: "How do we know that our desire and hope for eternal life is not just a way of coping with the fact that life actually has no meaning and that when we die it's just over?"

Tim: Probably the same answer I just gave. Okay, two answers. One is to say the desire for meaning in life is actually probably the question of consciousness. Tom Nagel recently wrote a book called *Mind and Cosmos*. He's an agnostic, does not believe in God, but he has also decided that nature, just chemicals and material ... He does not believe that nature and materialism can account for human consciousness. Lewis was getting at that when he said, "Why would the universe produce something that doesn't feel at home here? It doesn't make much sense."

He's getting at this idea that, generally, our innate deep desires are there because there's something congruent with the desire. If you're thirsty, there's liquid out there. If you're sexy, there's sex out there. The real question he brings up is ... *Why does it even occur to you?* Why would it even enter into our minds that there's something wrong with life the way it is? This is all we've ever known. Right? This is it. Why does it even bother us?

This gets over into the question of if the strong eating the weak is natural (if there is no God, then the strong eating the weak *is* natural), why do we think it's unnatural? If just dying was something that's utterly natural, why does it bother us? You can say, "Well, maybe it's just wishful thinking," but the question Tom Nagel gives is that this ability to be unhappy at a high level is because we have consciousness.

There's a lot of debate about this right now, but he thinks it's very difficult to account for human consciousness simply as brain activity. Therefore, he says, there has to be something else besides brain activity. He just doesn't know what it is. So again, I think that's what Lewis is getting at here. I think that's what I'm trying to get at, but it's not demonstrable. You are asking me to get into some of the stuff we're going to get into later. I'm trying to respect every question here and not blow it off for another week, but I do want to say "Wait for a more substantial answer then."

Female: "If an innate desire qualifies the reality and justifiability of something, then how do you explain homosexuality, pedophilia, genocide, and other things Christians believe are wrong but humans argue they have an innate desire for?"

Tim: Most of those things are sexual desires. I don't want to beg the question. People differ as to what are good things to eat, even though we all agree we need to eat, and because we're hungry there's such a thing as food. There's a whole range of things, and there are some people ... In fact, nobody in this room

would agree. If I gave you eight different sexual practices, some of you would say, "Well, that's not good, because that's abusing power."

In other words, everybody has some standard by which we're judging that some sexual activity is good and some is bad. Most people would say pedophilia is bad. Why? Because of power. In the past, there were other reasons why people said it was bad. It doesn't matter. The point is that it just shows that sex is an innate desire. The fact that you have more legitimate and illegitimate ways of fulfilling that desire ... I don't think that hurts my thesis at all.

Peter Kreeft said that innate desires can't be created, but all kinds of other desires can. You can create an artificial desire for a certain kind of beverage that isn't good for you and that you feel like you really need, but you can't create the desire for beverage. That's innate. I wouldn't call, for example, pedophilia an innate desire. It's a shaped version or a created version of an innate desire, just like a desire for Coke or Pepsi. The innateness is not Pepsi or Coke; it's the desire for beverage.

Female: "Could you elaborate more on why Christian hope would make one care more about the current world?"

Tim: Yeah, that went by very fast. This question I'm grateful for, because I felt like I wasn't spending enough time on it. I would say that some forms of spirituality that say this world is an illusion, that we're not individuals but we're all one ... It's an illusion, so we should detach ourselves from our loved ones and realize we already have everybody. We're all together. Eventually, when we die, we become part of the All Soul. We're like a dewdrop going into the ocean. You're there but you're not there. The drop is gone.

There's no individuality anymore and your personality is not intact anymore. I actually think that would undermine motivation for saying, "Let's do something about this world." It's an illusion. Certainly, the Greeks' idea was the world was a passing shadow; the reality was somewhere else. They certainly didn't feel like it made a whole lot of sense that you had to make this world a better place and improve it and deal with poverty, and so on.

So I do think there are forms of religion that either see this world as an illusion or see this world as a bad, dark place. The important thing is to get into heaven, and that's reality. That would mean this world is just something you endure and you don't worry about it and you don't try to improve it. At the end of the book of Revelation, which is the end of the Bible, you actually see the city of God, heavenly Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven to the earth.

It's not us going out of the earth up to heaven; it's heaven coming down to earth and renewing the world and making it a garden of Eden again, as it were. Therefore, every tear is wiped away, and all of these prophetic images of releasing all the slaves and ending death and the death shroud that's over everything right now being taken away. (That's in Isaiah.) In other words, we're all under the shadow of death. It's going to be taken away.

Christians know, then, that God cares about this material world. This world matters. God created body and soul, and Jesus Christ came and did not just die and go to heaven; his body was raised from the dead, which means he's going to redeem body and soul, not just the soul. That means this material world is really important and it really matters. There are a number of people who have tried to make a case for it. I didn't do a very good job.

Every other religion does not offer a material eternal future. They offer a spiritual eternal future, not a material eternal future. Christianity does. That's one of the reasons the goodness of this world, the goodness of creation, is a big part of how Christians look at the world. Therefore, when we see a slum or a diseased person we want to do something about it, if we are walking in line with the God who says, "I'm going to do something about it."

Female: "Isn't there the possibility that the Christian resurrection will still not satisfy the human condition? Could that belief simply be another *IT*?"

Tim: That's a wonderful rhetorical move. That's kind of an unanswerable question. "How do you know when we get there we'll see the glory of God and be resurrected and have new bodies and we'll never die and we'll have all our loved ones around us forever and we'll run and not be weary, walk and not faint, and it won't be enough?" I'm doing it right back to you right now. I'm not trying to make fun of it. I'm just trying to say that I don't think so, but I'll tell you this. The reason I don't think so is because it does resonate. It *is* what the stories are about, basically.

Tolkien is always trying to say, "Look at the stories that arouse a desire and what it unbearably, and then look at your reality. That's the gap." I understand that if this was the last night and I never said anything else you'd have to go away saying, "It would be nice if it was true, but it's just not." If that's where you are tonight, I'm fine, by the way, but I wouldn't leave you there. I'm not sure I can bring you all the way to being convinced or anything, but if you're to the place where you say what it sounds like some of you are saying, "It would be nice if it were true, but I just don't see how it is," then I feel that you've heard me, and I actually feel good about that.

Female: "Animals also have desires, consciousness, and attachments. They can get sad when loved ones die. How are we not just a more advanced part of biology, the natural fabric, in the same way?"

Tim: There are two answers to that, which is a great question. First of all, what you just said about animals having consciousness is a controversial statement. It's very contested. You say, "Well, of course they're conscious. They obviously are sad." Well, many people think consciousness means self-reflection, which means the ability to see themselves and to know that they are a self. There's a lot of question about to what degree animals have consciousness.

I would have to say I'm unable to give you a good answer other than that I don't think I could use what you just said as a premise. I don't feel like there's

consensus on that. The thing I *will* talk to you about next week, but I'll give you a bit of a preview, is there's a growing number of both Christian and non-Christian philosophers, and not even philosophers ...

There are non-Christian philosophers like John Gray at the London School of Economics and Tom Nagel here at NYU and Leon Wieseltier, who's not a philosopher but writes on culture for the *New Republic*. Then, of course, people like Alvin Plantinga and others who are Christian philosophers. They're making a case that the real problem with talking about evolution being the cause of our consciousness, which was hinted at in the question, that basically we're just a more advanced version ... Animals have consciousness and desires and we have consciousness and we're just a little more advanced.

The argument is that if you can't trust your moral sense because it evolved ... Evolution says everything in you is just there to help you survive. Everything about you is there because it helped your ancestors survive; therefore, that's the reason it's in you. The reason your brain works the way it does is it helped your ancestors survive. That's the only reason it's there. Your brain has only been put together for evolutionary success, not to tell you the truth about things.

If your sense that God is there evolved ... Many people say the religious sense or the moral sense evolved. That doesn't mean there *are* moral absolutes; we just feel it. It doesn't mean there really *is* meaning in life; we just want it. It doesn't mean there really *is* a God; we just sense it. Why? Because your brain evolved. Well, the argument is if you can't trust your religious sense and your moral sense, why would you trust your rational sense? Why would you trust your logic?

Wouldn't you say the very thing you're saying right now you have to say because your brain operates that way because it helped your ancestors survive? Therefore, nothing you're saying right now I have to take seriously. You can't tell me if my sense of God or my sense of longing evolved that somehow your logic and your reason and your way of arguing didn't evolve, that somehow that has escaped the web. It hasn't.

Therefore, the idea that your brain is just the product of evolution proves too much, because it proves, therefore, that you can't even trust what your brain tells you about evolution, which is a nonstarter. You need to go back and start all over and say even though evolution is part of what we are, it can't be all that we are. Otherwise, I couldn't even talk about it.

There have been very highly developed arguments recently like that, and it's driving a lot of atheists crazy, because actually they have some weight. So anyway, I'm not sure whether animals have consciousness. Certainly I don't think they have consciousness the same way we do, and I don't think our consciousness is part of evolution.

Female: "You mentioned that our good experiences here on earth are glimpses of a perfect future. Why can't it be the case that our bad experiences are an

actual indicator of a future in which all things will fall apart?"

Tim: I don't know that I said our good *experiences*. In fact, I wouldn't say our good experiences are an indicator of a great future. One of the questions I think people raise, including Lewis in that quote I gave you, is "Why is it we want something that nobody on earth has ever experienced?" The things we want are impossible and nobody has ever experienced them, yet we want them. Why?

Wallace Stevens says, "But [even] in contentment I still feel the need for imperishable bliss." You might say that we just really want the good experiences we have to go on forever, but I don't think that's all there is to it. Anyway, the point is I think it's important for us to see that it's not our good experiences but our desire for experiences that nobody has had that I think are inexplicable.

By the way, I do not believe this is a slam-dunk argument for the existence of God. I'm really glad you're taking it seriously. I recently read a book called *God in Proof* by Nathan Schneider. He's just a journalist, not a philosopher or anything like that, and I don't think a believer in God. He tried to go through history and go through the world and list every single argument for and against the existence of God.

The whole book is worth it. In the back he puts them into five or six pages, and it's really quite good. However, when I was looking at them, I decided that probably all of the arguments fall into four categories: *matter*, *mind*, *morals*, and *music*. *Matter* we'll get to next week. It has to do with the question, "Why is there anything rather than nothing?" and the design argument.

Mind has to do with some of the stuff I already talked to you about. If there is no God, you can't trust your mind. There's a very powerful version of that argument. There's no reason to trust your cognitive faculties. If you trust your cognitive faculties, you're actually living as if there's a God, whether you know it or not.

The *morals* argument you already heard a little bit of. I'll give you more of it next week. As soon as you act as if there's moral obligation, you're living as if there is a God even though you don't believe there is; therefore, deep down you *do* know there is. The *music* argument is one I'm giving you tonight, which is beauty. The idea of beauty is hard to explain, in spite of the fact that people are doing everything they possibly can to explain it in terms of evolutionary biology. The desire for it is something that's hard to explain.

Cumulatively, I think there's a pretty strong argument for the existence of God. If you take any one of those arguments, yeah, there's always a way out. On the other hand, there's always a way out of belief in almost everything, except things like how many species of fish there are in Lake Ontario and that kind of thing.

Female: "I hear an emphasis on you speaking about our abilities, managing our own happiness, for the large part, based on what we have control over and what we don't. Does our Christian God want us to be happy? What does God ultimately want for us?"

Tim: I'll try to come back to this to give it a little more treatment than I'm going to give it right this second. The Christian idea of God is pretty different than most of the other kinds of creation accounts, because Christians believe God is triune, Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As soon as we start talking about that, Christians say, "Oh yeah, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons in one God. There's only one God. Not three gods, but three persons in one God."

Everybody who's not a Christian thinks that's kind of nuts. It *is* hard. However, Saint Augustine pointed out that if there was a god who is just one person, then he could not have known love until he created people, until he created something, some other rational being ... angels, or whatever. So basically, if there was a god who wasn't triune but was a person, or even impersonal ... If god is impersonal, then love, which is something between persons, is not intrinsic to the universe.

Buddhists would say the idea of love between individuals is an illusion. If you have a single person god, a unipersonal god, then love comes in later. God is there for aeons and aeons without any love, so God's being, his power, his wisdom is more important than love. Augustine says if God is three persons, knowing and loving each other from all eternity, beginninglessly, then love and communication is at the heart of who God is, literally. There never was a time in which it was not.

A unipersonal god might create other beings in order to get somebody to worship him. One of the reasons we get friends and fall in love is we want somebody to like us, to love us. It feels great. The triune God was never lonely. Within himself he had the absolute bliss of perfect love, three persons knowing and loving each other absolutely perfectly. Therefore, the only possible reason God could have ... This is what Augustine and a lot of other Christian theologians have taught.

Why would God have created the world? To share the happiness he had. He was happy. Why? Because he had love. He knew love within himself. Because he was happy, there's no other good reason ... He wouldn't be creating other beings in order to get love. He already had it. Or to get glory and honor. He actually already had it. They were glorifying each other. Jesus says in John 17 that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were glorifying each other from all eternity.

Then why would he have created us? To share it. To share the joy of love ... love with him, love with each other. That's it. That's what life is about. It's not about success or power. So does he want us to be happy? Absolutely. And the greatest way to be happy is love.

Female: That's a lovely answer for the ending, but I do want to ask one more question, because it's a very common question that I think many Christians get. "The Christian fairy tale speaks of salvation and triumph of good over evil for just Christians. How could a future hope that sends millions of people of other faiths to hell be good?"

Tim: On the outside, it doesn't look very helpful. On the inside, I think it's going to

be different. Now what does that mean? I promise to give you a good few minutes on this subject next week, but here's a foretaste. There are usually two things going on. First, people feel like it's unfair that good people who aren't Christians shouldn't go to heaven.

I will spend more time on this next week, because Christians don't believe good people go to heaven. We don't see ourselves as good people. We don't believe that people go to heaven because they're good. We believe people go to heaven only when they're willing to admit they're not and that they need a Savior and that they're really not good enough. That is incredibly egalitarian. You understand that.

The idea that salvation doesn't happen to those who work hard enough to be good but happens only to those people who are willing to admit they're not good enough, that even their motives for good deeds are bad motives, that they're too weak and they absolutely need a salvation from outside of themselves ... In other words, it's actually not the good people are in and the bad people are out, but the proud people are out and the humble people are in.

That's egalitarian. Why? Because to say you have to be good ... People start at different places. Some people had great family backgrounds. Some people came from strong families and had great moral exemplars, and if they try to live a good life they can. Other people just keep trying, but they came from terrible backgrounds and they weren't loved as they grew up and they're filled with anger and all that stuff.

To look at people and say, "You all have to be good and obey the Golden Rule and all that, and those of you who are good will go to heaven," is so unbelievably exclusive. To say, "Well, I think all good people from all good religions ought to be able to get into heaven," is so absolutely exclusive. That's not taking into consideration how different people are.

So the Christian idea that you're saved through faith in Jesus, admitting that he saved you, that he has fulfilled the requirements and you can't do it, is actually quite egalitarian. Then the question comes up, "What about the people who never heard, who never even got a chance?" That's what I'll come back to next time. The point is I'm not sure, but the question is ... *Is there any way God could let salvation be by sheer grace and, therefore, it has to be through Jesus?*

I told you that's egalitarian. Anybody can come. It doesn't matter. Good people, bad people. They just have to admit they need him. Even a child can do that. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It's incredibly leveling, but then it seems to leave people out who have never heard of Jesus. I'm not sure, honestly, but I do know that if you ask this question, "Is there any story you could imagine in which God is very fair and yet only lets salvation be through grace in Jesus ...?"

People have been spending time imagining it. I don't know that any of them are right. I'll tell you some of them. The point is even though I can't think of a good

one it doesn't mean there isn't one. Just because you can't think of a story in which God is fair and salvation is only through Jesus doesn't mean there couldn't be one.

I've had people say, "I can't be a Christian because of that. That's the whole reason I'm not a Christian." Well, what happens if on judgment day somebody tells you the story of how it's possible for God to have done this and still have been fair and then you say, "Oh"? Just because you can't imagine a story in which God could be fair and this could be true doesn't mean it doesn't exist. You can't say because you can't think of it it can't exist. We'll do a little bit more on that next week.

Female: Thank you very much, everyone, for your questions. Speaking of next week, Tim, can you give us an overview of what it'll be about?

Tim: I've been looking at your questions. Most of you don't get your questions answered up here, though quite a few of you upstairs come and get them in or continue the conversation. That's terrific. However, most of the questions aren't getting through, so I've been looking at them and trying to categorize them.

I'll try to get to most of them under one of three headings: *Questions about God*. "Can we believe in God?" That's next week. *Questions about the Bible*. "Can we trust the Bible?" That's the following week. *Questions about Jesus*. "Can we have faith in Jesus?" That's the third week. I have about 10 kinds of questions under each one. That's probably still not going to get to everything, but I'll give it a shot.

The Man Born Blind

Seeing Jesus—February 23, 2014

John 9:1–7, 35–38

¹ As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came

home seeing.

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” **36** “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” **37** Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” **38** Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

The Word of the Lord.

We've been looking at these accounts in the book of John of these miraculous signs. John says at the end of the book that he has chosen the particular miracles Jesus did, among many, many others, because they not only happened and not only were displays of power, but each of them, John thought, symbolized something about what Jesus Christ came to do and told us something about who he was and what he came to do.

Each week we're looking at one of these signs. This is the healing of the man born blind, the sixth of the seventh miracles and signs, and it takes up the entire chapter. We gave you the beginning and mostly the end of it. It's a story about a man who is born blind. He is healed in the very first few verses. Then there's quite a bit of interrogation that goes on between the Pharisees and the man. We didn't read any of that, because it's 41 verses, but we'll refer to it.

At the very end, the man comes back to Jesus. They have that encounter you just heard read and he comes to faith. What we learn from this passage is looking at three groups of people. We have *the disciples*, and they have a set of questions in the very beginning about the man born blind; then there are *the Pharisees* and how they respond; and then there's *the man himself*.

What we're going to learn from the disciples is something about pain and suffering. What we're going to learn from the Pharisees is something about spiritual blindness. What we're going to learn from the man is what heals it all.

1. *The disciples*. Let's look and see what the disciples teach us about suffering. It's not the main point of the passage. The main point is spiritual blindness, yet we learn something quite interesting from the very beginning, where they're going by a man who's born blind and his disciples ask him a theological question. “Rabbi, look at this man suffering. Why is this man blind? Who sinned? His parents or him?”

The *why* question is always attached to suffering. “Why me? Why them? Why, God?” Whenever you have suffering, you have this *why* question. But if you look at this particular kind of *why* question, you'll see that it's sneaky. The counsel is leading the witness. That is, the questioners are assuming the answer. Do you see what the answer is? They say, “Who sinned? His parents or him?”

It's interesting. The question is, “Did his parents sin so that a blind child was their

punishment or did *he* sin?" Now how you could be born blind as a result of your own sin is a little weird to contemplate, but probably the disciples were trying out some theories on Jesus. Many of the rabbis actually taught that you could sin in the womb. Don't think about that too much.

There were other theories the Jews did not hold to, like reincarnation, the preexistence of a soul, that you might be sinning because you lived wrongly, unvirtuously, in some former life, or perhaps they're thinking, "Maybe God looked into the future and saw this man was going to be a selfish, sinful man and decided to punish him with blindness at birth." So they're trying out these theories.

The reason they go so far as to say, "Was it somehow this man's sin that caused him to be born blind?" was how strongly they were rooted in the beliefs of the centuries that if you are having a hard life, you must have done something to deserve it. If you're having a tough life, if something bad has happened to you, you must have done something bad to deserve it.

It goes like this: We reap what we sow. God is a judge. If you have bad circumstances, it must have been bad behavior on your part. This is really deep in us. You know that goopy song in the middle of *The Sound of Music*, where Captain von Trapp has met Maria and they realize they love each other and they're going to have each other and they're going to be happy? They sing a song, and the song is, "Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good." Remember that?

He says, "Somewhere I must have done something good or I wouldn't be having this wonderful life." Of course, the implication is if you're having a bad life, somewhere in your youth or childhood you must have done something bad. There are three huge problems with this assumed answer that the relationship between suffering and sin is a tight one and that if you're having a hard life you must have done something to deserve it.

First, it creates tremendous pride and self-righteousness on the part of the people who are having a good life. We take credit for it. There have been psychological studies that show people want to believe it's the sufferer's fault, that we all have a psychological bias when we see someone in trouble to say, "Well, they probably weren't careful. They probably should have done this. They didn't do due diligence," or something like that. We want to believe, to some degree, it's the sufferer's fault. Why? It assures us that that couldn't happen to us, because we're not like that.

Secondly, it's not true to the facts. It's simply not true to the facts. There are plenty of good people who live miserable lives, and there are plenty of tyrannical people who prosper and die happily in old age in their sleep. The point is that it's not true to the facts, and it's incredibly cruel to the suffering person.

Jesus rejects the premise. Jesus rejects the idea. He says, "Neither. Neither this man's sin nor his parents' sin. This blindness is not the result of somebody

having done something wrong.” But if you’re going to understand what he’s saying here, what Jesus’ view of suffering is, you have to put this right alongside a parallel spot in the book of Luke. There’s another place where Jesus was asked a very similar question.

There was some discussion going on in Luke 13 about a couple of terrible incidents. In Luke 13, Jesus and his disciples were talking about the fact that there was a group of people who were killed at some public event. We’re not quite sure what happened there. There was also a group of people who were killed when a tower suddenly fell on them. They were next to a tower, and the tower fell down. (You needed a Department of Buildings back then, but they didn’t have it.)

Anyway, down comes the building and everybody is killed, and the question to Jesus is if they were worse sinners because that happened to them. There it is again. That’s the assumption of Job’s friends, by the way, in the book of Job. They come and say, “Job, you’re having a bad life. You must be doing something wrong. Repent, and get it right with God. Examine your life. There must be something you’re doing wrong.”

So they say, “Look. They’re having a bad life. Were they worse sinners?” and Jesus says, “No.” This is Luke 13. Then he adds, “But repent, lest ye likewise perish.” If you put the two together, here’s Jesus’ incredibly nuanced and rich understanding of suffering. First of all, he’s drawing on what the Bible says in Genesis 3 and Romans 8. The Bible says God did not originally create the world with suffering in it. He created a paradise.

He did not originally create a world filled with death and suffering and disease, but when the human race turned away from God, everything in the world stopped working properly. Everything is wrong. The world doesn’t work properly. Death comes in. Suffering comes in. All these bad things come in. The world doesn’t work. Therefore, there is a sense in which the human race is getting the world it deserves. We turn from God, and we have a world that doesn’t work right.

There’s a sense, therefore, in which sin in general from the human race causes suffering in general. That’s why Jesus could say, “Repent,” because we all deserve to have towers fall on us. Don’t say, “Oh, what are those bad people? They had a tower fall on them.” “Yeah,” he says. “Right. Repent, because you could have a tower fall on you, and it would be perfectly okay.” What he meant was, in general, the human race deserves to have a tower fall on it. That’s the world we have.

Even though Jesus agrees that sin in general causes suffering in general, he denies the idea that individual suffering is necessarily caused by individual sin, that your individual suffering necessarily comes from individual sin. Just like God rejects it at the end of the book of Job, Jesus rejects it here. To say sin in general causes suffering in general but sin in particular is not necessarily the cause of suffering in particular is amazingly different than any other view I know, and I’ve studied a lot of them recently.

It's rich and nuanced. Why? Here's what it's saying. On the one hand, if you believe Jesus' view, the biblical view, it gets rid of self-pity and anger. Bad things happen and you don't get angry at life. You don't get angry at God. You know that we're in the world we deserve. On the other hand, when bad things happen to you, you don't start to beat yourself up and say, "I must be living in a bad way. Something must be wrong. It's all my fault." You don't just beat yourself up.

What does Jesus say then? Why is the man blind? This is the right answer. It's mysterious. God has his purposes, but the point is God has work to do. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." We'll get back to that in a second. Do you see that? "All things work together for good to those who love God."

What it's saying is you may never see it. You may never understand it. It's mysterious why you might be suffering. You may never see it. It's not necessarily the result of something you've done wrong, but even though you may not know what the purposes are, God is at work. God is working in this.

If you have that view ... I tell you, that's about the only way I know to get through it. You can't, on the one hand, just get filled with anger and upset. In other words, you either can go through life when suffering happens saying, "I hate thee," or you can go through life saying, "I hate me," but neither is right. That's what we learn from the disciples.

2. *The Pharisees*. The main point of the passage, though we'll see it's related, is spiritual blindness. We particularly understand this when we learn at the end of the chapter Jesus Christ charges the Pharisees with spiritual blindness. They come. They don't like the man born blind. They say, "Wait a minute. This guy Jesus did this. Are you sure you were really blind? Were you really, really born blind?" They go and talk to his parents. Yes, he was born blind.

Well, how could this be? They show that they're very hostile to Jesus. They're very upset that Jesus has done this miracle. They're very hostile, and at the very end Jesus says that they're spiritually blind. What that means is just as the feeding of the 5,000 symbolized Jesus' ability to deal with our spiritual hunger, the healing of the man born blind symbolizes Jesus' ability to deal with our spiritual blindness.

Now what is spiritual blindness? At one level, without even getting too spiritual, I think we understand that there is such a thing as sight that's not literal. For example, when an 18-year-old starting to apply to colleges begins to realize, "Man, the college I get into and how well I do in college is going to be, to a great degree, setting the course of my life," suddenly the 18-year-old realizes back three years ago, when he was 14 or 15, or something like that, and he didn't see the point of all the study ...

He didn't see the point of studying this subject. He didn't see the point of grades and all that. Now he realizes he was an idiot and his whole grade point is lower than it should be. So the 18-year-old says, "What a fool I was. What an idiot I

was. Now I have this record that's not as good, and I really don't know if I can get into this school. Oh my goodness." What's he talking about? He's not talking about a lack of physical sight. He's saying, "I didn't see." A lack of wisdom.

More than that, years ago, one of my brothers-in-law picked me up at an airport. We got into the car and he buckled his seat belt. It was a surprise to me, because generally over the years ... I used to goad him over the fact that he never used to buckle his seat belt. He buckled his seat belt. I said, "Hey, I see you're into safety now." He said, "Yes, well, I had an experience." I said, "What?"

He said, "Well, I went to see a friend of mine in the hospital who had gone through a windshield and had, like, 120 stitches in his face and somehow, for whatever reason, ever since then I've been buckling my seat belt." We talked a little bit about this. I said, "That's kind of interesting. Did you learn something new there? Was it something you learned that you didn't have before? Was there any new information you got? Were there more statistics you got about it?"

"No," he says, "it just came home. I realized I was being dumb. I realized I should do it." Look at that word *realize*. What does *realize* mean? It means it got real to me. I knew it abstractly. I knew it, but I didn't see it. I thought about it, but I didn't see it. What that means is it wasn't real to me. Therefore, we could talk about sight as being literally seeing things, but we can also talk about sight as the perception of reality.

Now what is spiritual blindness in the Bible and what is spiritual sight? This gets us into the very subject of eternal life. Jesus says, "I can give you eternal life." Do you know what that means? It means we're dead. In some way we're spiritually dead. We're physically alive and we're physically seeing, but we're spiritually dead until he gives us his life, and we're spiritually blind. Why? Because they go together.

To have life means to be able to sense your environment. Any form of life has the ability to sense some of the environment. A plant, which we might call a lower form of life than animals or humans, can sense the environment, can't they? They have sensors. Not too many. They don't actually have sight. They don't have hearing, but they can sense light and darkness, obviously. They can sense heat and cold.

They can sense their environment to some degree, but animals are a higher form of life, which means because they have more senses they can see things coming. The plants can't see things coming. By the way, if you approach your plant with pruning shears and the plant shies away, it's not from this planet. Just remember that. On this planet, plants can only sense their environment to some degree.

Animals, however, can sense more of their environment. Human beings can sense even more. You say, "What do you mean?" Well, I think most all of us believe that human beings have senses beyond the five senses. For example, do you think there is such a thing as justice and injustice, tragedy, right, and wrong?

Do you believe that? Do you think those things are there? It's because we have a moral sense. We have other senses that the animals don't have. They can't sense the difference between justice and injustice.

So what we say is every higher form of life, you might say, is able to sense more of their environment, to see more of reality. So what does it mean to get your spiritual sight? What does it mean that you're spiritually blind and by the Holy Spirit you get spiritual sight? Until the Holy Spirit opens your eyes spiritually, you can't see other things out there in the environment, and the two things you can't see are the *reality of sin* and the *reality of grace*.

Here's a perfect example of it in the Pharisees. This is the second interrogation. This is in chapter 9. They summon the man who was born blind after going to his parents. His parents assure them he really was born blind and it's not a farce. So they come back and they are talking to the man born blind, who's not blind anymore, about Jesus. They say, "We know that this man, Jesus, is a sinner." The man previously blind replied, "Whether he's a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I once was blind but now I see."

They asked him, "How did he open your eyes?" He said, "I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" They hurled insults at him. "You are this fellow's disciple, maybe. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses. As for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

The man answered (kind of brilliant rhetoric), "Well, now that is remarkable. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. God doesn't listen to sinners. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth. How dare you lecture us?" And they threw him out.

What you have there is spiritual pride. "You're a sinner. We're not sinners. We're disciples of Moses. How dare you lecture us? What do you know?" Let me talk to you about sin and pride. When the Holy Spirit opens your eyes, it's not like you didn't know that something was wrong with you. In fact, there are plenty of people who were raised in the church and heard that they were sinners and agreed.

There are plenty of people without spiritual sight raised in the church who tacitly agreed, "Yes, I'm a sinner. I'm flawed. There are bad things." It's only when the Holy Spirit opens your eyes that you *realize* you're a sinner. It becomes real to you. You begin to see, for example, the depth of the corruption of your motives. You always give yourself credit for doing a lot of good things until you begin to see your motives.

The Holy Spirit enables you to see your motives aren't what they should be. There's all this pride and self-righteousness, a desire to control other people, a desire to feel better about yourself, a desire to try to get God to bless you. You begin to realize, "Even the motives for the good things I've done are terrible." You

also begin to realize you're not in control of your life.

When you spiritually start to see, you realize, "I thought I was in control of my life. I am driven by fears. I am driven by lust," and I don't necessarily mean sexual lust. "I'm needy. If this doesn't happen, if that doesn't happen, it just drives me crazy. I realize that I'm out of control in many ways. I thought I could run my life, and there's no way I could run my life without side help."

This is called *conviction of sin*. This means you may have agreed that you were a sinner in some kind of general way, but now it comes home. You begin to see it. It becomes real to you. Along with that always goes the beauty of grace. Oh, you may have thought in your head, "Yeah, I know Jesus Christ died on the cross for me." You may even have believed that. I mean, you can grow up in a church without spiritual sight. People do that all the time.

But when sin becomes real to you, grace becomes real. It becomes brilliant. It becomes beautiful. It becomes not just an abstraction. When you see it, suddenly it changes you. Remember my brother-in-law said, "Well, I saw it, but I didn't see it. I knew it, but I didn't know it. Now I do." This is absolutely critical to understand. Have you had your spiritual sight given to you?

Almost anybody who has spiritual sight knows they are still to some degree, and have been in the past, deeply blind. That's the reason why at the very end Jesus says two little things about spiritual blindness that are extremely important to understand before going on to what to do about it. At the very end of the passage, Jesus makes a strange statement, and it's overheard, and then he makes a strong statement.

This is verses 39–41 of chapter 9. Jesus says, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees overheard him saying this and said, "What? Are you saying we're blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin, but since you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

Jesus is saying two extremely interesting things about spiritual blindness. The first is a kind of reversal. He says, "I came into the world, that those who see would be blind and those who are blind would see." What he means is something pretty powerful. He doesn't mean literally that people who have spiritual sight would lose it, but here's what he's saying.

There are brilliant people out there. In fact, a lot of them live in New York City. You write great books. You lecture. You're experts. You're very savvy in many, many ways. Jesus says the people who are the most brilliant or the most successful or whom the world most advantages, when it comes to the gospel, are at a great disadvantage, and the people who are the most disadvantaged by the world, when it comes to the gospel, are the most advantaged.

What? Yeah. The gospel is that you are a sinner saved by grace. That's what your spiritual sight opens your eyes to: that you're a sinner and you can never save yourself, that you need to be rescued by the sheer grace of God and

because of what he did through Jesus Christ. That's the gospel. If that's the case ... think. That means the people who are saved are not necessarily the good people but the ones who admit they're not good and that they need a savior, and the people who are lost are not necessarily the bad people but the proud people.

Therefore, the more brilliant you are and the more successful you are, the greater disadvantage you're at, because when the gospel comes along and says, "It doesn't matter how brilliant or how stupid you are in IQ. It doesn't matter how successful or what a failure you are. You're all sinners. You're all saved by grace. You're all beggars needing grace. You have nothing to recommend yourself. It's sheer grace ..."

That is not nearly as difficult, humanly speaking, for a person who has failed or fallen to admit, but it's the Pharisee. It's the successful person. It's the brilliant person. It's so much harder for a brilliant person to admit, "I am blind." It's so much harder for a successful person to admit, "I am spiritually bankrupt." Jesus says this blind man, because he's blind, because he's suffering, that's how God is going to do his work.

Why is this man suffering? "That the work of God might be done in him." That's Jesus' answer. Generally speaking, unless trouble has come into your life, it's pretty tough to come to grips with the gospel, to even give it a second look. I think this is perfectly right and fair, isn't it? The gospel is such that the people advantaged by the world are at a disadvantage. The people who are disadvantaged by the world are at advantage.

The second thing he says ... They said, "Are you saying that we're blind?" He says, "Because you say you're not blind, yet you are." What that means is something pretty simple. It's pretty easy to see. If you're having trouble with your sight and you won't go to a doctor, that's the only thing that will destroy your sight.

The doctor might be able to retard it or might even do something to arrest the change, but the point is if you have a problem with your sight and you won't admit you have a problem with your sight, that you don't need glasses or you don't need a doctor, you don't need anything, that's the only kind of problem with your sight that has no remedy. Therefore, Jesus is saying, "The deepest blindness is blindness to your own blindness."

There is no greater blindness than to be blind to your own blindness, which means I can actually test you right now. If you do not know what I'm talking about at all, if you say, "I am not spiritually blind. I don't know what you're talking about. I can't look back at a time in which I was spiritually blind and now I see. I don't know what you're talking about ..." The only blindness without a remedy is a blindness you're blind to. It's the deepest kind of spiritual blindness.

3. *The man.* Now how do you deal with it? How is it healed? We can look to the man. This man has been physically blind and now he's physically seeing, but if the whole sign, the whole miracle, is about the fact that Jesus can also cure the

spiritual blindness, then it only makes sense that this man would not only have his physical blindness cured but also his spiritual blindness.

So it's not a surprise when Jesus says, "You have now seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking to you. I'm the Son of Man," and then the man said, "Lord, I believe." That makes sense. He's getting faith. Then it says, and I'm so glad it does, "And he worshiped him." If they hadn't added the word *worshiped*, I don't think we would have really gotten to the heart of the issue of spiritual blindness and spiritual sight.

First of all, it's astounding that a Jewish man would worship another standing human being. I doubt very much that this man understood why he was doing it. Certainly he didn't have a well-developed theology. I know he would never have said, "I'm kneeling before the second person of the Trinity." I'm sure he wouldn't have said that, but he knew, he sensed the deity, and he worshiped him. It's astounding.

This is the ultimate healing of spiritual sight. Do you know why? Because worshiping the wrong thing is the ultimate cause of your blindness. Therefore, worshiping the right thing, God himself, Jesus, is the only way to cure the spiritual blindness, and it will only be cured in time as you get to be a better and better worshiper.

This is a little quote I've been using when I talk about the relationship of faith to work. Some of you may have heard me use it, but it's particularly helpful when it comes to the relationship between worship and sight. This is a man who is an author and a writer, and this was actually taken out of the *New York Times* last year. He was talking about how difficult it was when his whole life was revolving around his writing.

He needed to be a good writer. He wanted to be a good writer. It was the main thing he lived for. It was his god. He talks about the fact that because of that, it distorted his sight. He says, "When good writing was my only goal, I made the quality of my work the measure of my worth." He's saying, "I wasn't just out to write well. This is who I was. This was my identity. It was my hope. It was my salvation. It was how I knew I was going to be a worthwhile person."

He says, "When good writing was my only goal, I made the quality of my work the measure of my worth. For this reason, I wasn't able to read my own writing well. I couldn't tell whether something I had just written was good or bad, because I needed it to be good in order to feel sane. I lost the ability to cheerfully interrogate how much I liked what I had written, to see what was actually on the page rather than what I wanted to see or what I feared to see."

Do you see that? He says, "When the most important thing in my life was my writing, I couldn't see it. I was too scared to admit if it was bad. I was too scared to admit that it wasn't good. When I saw other people who were writing better, I couldn't admit how well they were writing." In other words, because writing was the most important thing to him, it completely put him into denial, deception. He

was blind.

I want you to know that if you say, "Well, I'm going to clean up my life and be a good person, and then I'm going to go to church and I'm going to live like Jesus, and then God will bless me and take me to heaven," guess what? You're not going to be honest about yourself. You won't be able to see your flaws. You won't be able to see your sins. You'll be getting more spiritually blind. If somebody criticizes you, you'll go to pieces. You'll say, "No, no, no." You'll shift the blame.

If you live for your moral goodness, you'll be blind about yourself. If you live for your children, you'll be blind about them. If you live for anything, it puts you into spiritual darkness. You can't see things clearly. You can't see yourself clearly. You can't see them clearly. You can't see the world clearly. Therefore, it's only when you begin to worship in such a way that God becomes the supreme beauty and joy of your life. He becomes the most important thing. His love for you is the measure of your worth. He is the thing that most satisfies you.

That's the only way to clear it up, and the degree to which you worship and the depth to which you give God your heart, to that degree you will find your sight clearing. You'll see yourself. You'll see reality. You'll see things. You say, "How can that happen?" That's the cure, but how does that happen? It only happens when you see something that happened on the cross. You can't just tell yourself, "Okay, I have to worship. I have to sing louder. I'll go to more services." No, no, no. Your heart has to be engaged.

You say, "Well, how can I engage my heart?" You can't just work on your heart. You have to see something. Here's what I want you to see. When Jesus Christ was on the cross, darkness came down. Remember that? An eclipse. But it wasn't just a physical darkness. He also said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He was being plunged into spiritual darkness. He was losing the light of the Father's love and face that when he was on earth he had always had.

Jesus had perfect spiritual sight. He could see into people's hearts. He sensed the reality of God the Father all the time, but not on the cross. He was being cut off. He was being plunged into spiritual darkness. Why? Luci Shaw, Christian poet, some years ago wrote a little poem called "Mary's Song." It's ostensibly about pregnant Mary thinking about the baby she was carrying, Jesus, and reflecting. The last lines of the poem go like this:

*Blind in my womb to know my darkness ended,
Brought to this birth
For me to be reborn,
And for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.*

He has to be torn if we're going to be mended, and he has to be plunged into darkness. "Blind ... to [see] my darkness ended." He did that for you. If you see him doing that for you and you even begin to say, "Thank you, Lord," you've begun to worship and your sight has begun to clear. Let it happen. Let us pray.

Our Father, we ask that you would help us recognize that our sight isn't what it should be, that only through faith in Jesus Christ does our sight begin to clear up and only through worship does our sight completely clarify. We want to see more and more of spiritual reality. We want to understand the world that is really out there, and we know that's not going to happen unless we worship you.

So we pray, Lord, that even here at the end, even as we stand and sing, you'd begin to move us into a deeper level of worship for the rest of our lives, so that we can also say, "Once I was blind, but now I see." In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Questions About God

Questioning Christianity—February 27, 2014

We were talking about how Christianity makes sense. We've all along said the way we come to our beliefs is through a combination of emotional, social, and rational thinking and sensing. Things make emotional, cultural, practical, and logical sense. We're not brains in vats. We're whole people, and we make our decisions about beliefs with reference to those different aspects of our being.

However, I'd say up to now we've spent more time on the emotional and cultural, and this week, next week, and the following week we're going to be hitting a lot more of what you might consider the classical arguments for and against belief in God or the Bible and Christianity. In fact, that's my three weeks.

This week I'd like to ask the question, "Can we believe in the existence of God?" next week ask the question, "Can you trust the Bible?" and the following week ask the question, "Can we have faith in Jesus Christ?" I want to look at the arguments for and against on each of those three questions. So this is a little more what you might consider the traditional stuff.

Because of that, I have way more stuff than I can get to, partly because I know the kinds of questions that come up at a time like this. I'm not going to say everything I probably ought to say, partly because I think it would be tedious for me to go longer than I usually go, and I'm not going to. I'm going to leave it up to you to say, "Hey, how come you didn't answer this or say something about this?" You ask that question and we'll try to get to it.

The overview is ... *How does one come to belief in the existence of God?* If you don't believe in God, I think it would at least be helpful for you to know how a person does come to belief in the existence of God. Since so many believe in God, it would be good for it not to be a completely opaque process to you.

I think you come to belief in the existence of God through seeing three things: *the faith it takes to doubt it*, *the problems you have without it*, and *the beauty you see within it*. I would like to first of all talk about the faith it takes to doubt God (the objections and arguments *against* believing in God), the problems you have without it (the main arguments *for* belief in God), and the beauty you see within it (the story belief in God always comes in).

1. *The faith it takes to doubt it.* I'm going to try to make the case that the four or five biggest objections to belief in God have their own hidden faith premises in them that are less well grounded than the belief in God itself. In other words, over the years I've come to see the main objections, the main arguments against the existence of God, are themselves based on leaps of faith that are even less well grounded than belief in God.

That's the reason none of these are conclusive. I think all of the arguments that say, "God couldn't exist because ..." are inconclusive. They don't accomplish what they want to accomplish. Here's what I mean. I'm going to give you five. Perhaps the biggest argument against the existence of God is, "I can't believe in a God who would allow such evil and suffering in the world," or "There can't be an all-powerful, all-good God who would allow evil and suffering in the world." I'm going to try to show you three problems with this objection.

The first is that to say there can't be a good and powerful God who would allow evil and suffering ... That objection is based on two hidden premises. They're usually hidden. These are faith premises. First, why couldn't there be some good reason God might have for allowing evil and suffering? We all know that sometimes we let things happen or do things that on the surface look pretty bad, but we have good reasons for letting it happen or good things for doing it.

I'll give you a perfect example. If you're 40 years old and you have a 5-year-old child and the child does something and you say, "Sorry, you have to stay in your room," the child goes nuts and says, "Daddy, why? Why are you allowing such awful stuff to happen to me?" At a certain point you have to say, "I could explain it to you, but I'm 40 and you're 5 and you wouldn't understand."

That's trivial, perhaps. You say, "You're trivializing evil and suffering." The idea is it's possible that someone greater than you could have a reason for allowing something to happen that you can't imagine, and to say there couldn't be a God who allows evil and suffering is to assume there couldn't be a good reason for that God to allow evil and suffering to continue. He couldn't have any good reason. Why would you believe that? That's a belief. Right?

In fact, there's probably a hidden premise behind that. The premise might be, "Because I can't think of any good reason God could have for allowing evil and suffering, there can't be one." Everybody would recognize that as a logical fallacy. Because I, human being, can't imagine any good reason God would have for allowing evil and suffering to continue, it couldn't be. That's a non sequitur. It doesn't fit.

Somebody has a story about that. There are a couple of Christian philosophers who tell this story. If you were to look into a pup tent and not see any St. Bernard dogs in there, it's very likely there probably are no St. Bernard dogs. If you don't see one, they're probably not there. Why? Because St. Bernards are big and you would almost certainly see it. If any of you have ever lived in the Great Lakes area or been to the Great Lakes area, do you know there's a little tiny gnat called the "no-see-um"?

They're so tiny they go through the screens and bite you. They're awful. So if you were to look into the pup tent and not see a St. Bernard, almost certainly there's no St. Bernard there, but if you were to look into a pup tent and not see any no-see-ums, that doesn't mean there aren't any no-see-ums in the pup tent. Why? Because even if they were in there you couldn't see them, because that's what a no-see-um is like.

If you say, "I can't believe in a God who would allow evil and suffering," what you're saying is that if there were any good reasons God could possibly have for allowing evil and suffering it would be more like a St. Bernard than a no-see-um. It would be something I would be able to think of. Why believe that? That's just a leap of faith.

If you have a God transcendent and infinite enough to be mad at because he doesn't stop evil and suffering, then you have to have a God big enough to have a reason you can't think of. You can't have it both ways. I sometimes get mad about, "Why all this stuff?" but if I have a God big enough to be mad at, I have to have a God who's big enough to know something I don't know; therefore, that can't disprove his existence.

Let me just say one quick other thing. If you say, "Look at the violence in the world. I can't believe in a God who would allow violence and the strong eating the weak and all this awful stuff." Fine. But if you get rid of God because the world is an unjust place, you now don't have any basis for saying the world is an unjust place, because nature is red in tooth and claw. Violence is the way we got here. Violence is the way we evolved. Violence is the way the world probably came into existence.

What's really weird about denying God on the basis of the injustice of the violence of the world is once you get rid of God the basis on which you object to the God goes away. The whole idea, "I can't believe in God because the way the world is wrong ..." Well, if there is a God, evil and suffering is a problem. I believe in God; therefore it's a problem for me, because I don't know why he allows it.

If you don't believe in God, evil and suffering is a bigger problem for you, because you have no basis for complaint and outrage anymore. This is just the way the world is. How could you say there's something crooked about nature unless there was some kind of straight edge, which was supernatural, by which you're judging that nature is crooked? One last thing. Only Christianity teaches

that God himself came down into the world in the form of Jesus Christ and experienced suffering. There's not a single other religion that says that.

I actually think, as a pastor, that what most people need is not answers, so much, for why God let this happen; they just want a way of feeling that they can get through it. If I know that God, in order to save us, in order to rescue us, was willing to come down and get involved in our suffering and pain, then even though I don't know what the reason *is* that God is allowing evil and suffering, I do know what the reason *isn't*.

If Jesus Christ came and died on the cross, if God came and suffered, I don't know what the reason for suffering is, but I do know what the reason for suffering isn't. It can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he doesn't care. If you object to the existence of God on the basis of evil and suffering, you have to do so on the basis of these leaps of faith: God couldn't have a reason you can't think of, and the world is broken even though there's no God.

A second objection to the existence of God, or at least to the existence of the Christian God, is the objection that you can't have just one true religion. This is a big objection that people have to the Christian God. Christianity says, "We are the true religion." We do say that. Hopefully not the way I just said it. With a little more humility. Anyway, we do say we have the true religion. On the other hand, we're not the only religion that says we're the true religion, just to point that out. A whole lot of religions say, "We're the true religion." "No, no, we're the true religion."

A lot of people object to the whole thing. In fact, a lot of people in New York City object to the whole thing and say, "All religions are equally valid ... or *most* religions. Obviously not the ones that require child sacrifice, but most religions are equally valid, and you can't assume there's just one true religion. Any religion that says, 'Our God is the true God and we have the true religion ...' I just can't believe in that."

Let me ask you to think about something for a minute. Under what conditions could most of the major religions all be equally valid? What would those conditions be? One condition is if there was no god and, basically, our beliefs were totally subjective. That's one way in which they could all be equally valid. They're actually all equally wrong. There really is no god and we all have our own subjective feelings and beliefs. That's one way it's possible.

So possibly all religions could be equally valid if there's no god, or all religions could be equally valid if there's a god who doesn't care what you believe, some kind of impersonal force that doesn't really care about different beliefs. The different religions contradict each other, so the only way they could be equally valid, even though they make very contradictory claims, is if there's no god or there's a god who doesn't care.

Those are the only conditions under which all religions could be equally valid. You have an impersonal god or you have a god who doesn't care or you don't

have any god at all. Do you realize what you've just done? When you say, "All religions are equally valid," you can only do that from a stance of belief in a particular kind of god that's different from the other religions. If you say, "Well, I believe all religions are equally valid," what you are actually doing is saying, "My belief in spiritual reality is better than yours."

You talk to a Muslim who says, "We have the one true faith." "Oh, that's narrow-minded," you say. "I believe all the faiths are equally important and equally valid." Do you know what you're doing? You're saying *your* take on spiritual reality is right and *his* take on spiritual reality is wrong, which means you're doing the very thing you just told him he's not supposed to do. It's impossible not to. Every single time you open your mouth about spiritual reality, if you say anything about religion or belief in God at all, it's an exclusive claim.

What you're saying is, "I think it would be better for people to think like *this*," or "I'm right and you're wrong." That's exactly what you said Christians aren't supposed to do. To say, "No one's take on spiritual reality is right or wrong; they're all equal," is to say, "My take on spirituality is right, my particular Western, religious, pluralistic view of things is right, and all the rest of you are wrong," which means you're doing the very thing you just forbid, which means you are locked into a very hypocritical, self-contradictory cycle.

Let me give you one example of how this works. Have you heard this story? "All religions see part of the truth." That's another way in which you could say all religions are equally valid. "Oh really? All religions see part of the truth?" "Yes. No religion has all the truth. All have a part of it." Here are two illustrations. One illustration is every single religion is a different path up the mountain. They're going in different directions, it looks like, but when they get to the top they all come to the same place: to God.

Or the blind man and the elephant. Here are six blind men and they come up to an elephant and they're feeling it. One blind man has ahold of the trunk. "An elephant is kind of flexible but thick." The other blind man has ahold of the tail, saying, "Well, it's flexible but kind of skinny." Another blind man has ahold of a leg. He says, "I don't think it's flexible at all." Doesn't that explain they're all different paths to the top of the same mountain; they're all seeing part of the elephant?

The only way you could know that all religions only see part of the truth is if you see the whole truth. The only way you could know that all religions are like the blind men, each seeing part of the elephant, is if you think you see the whole elephant. The only way you could possibly know that all the religions get to the top is if you're already at the top, which means you are claiming the kind of exclusive knowledge you're saying nobody else has.

What this world needs right now is not somebody saying, "Everybody is right. All religions are equally valid. No religion is the true religion," which is a way of saying, "My religion is the true religion." By the way, when more secular people, talking as if they're more inclusive, talk to religious people like that, being

completely blind to this incredible faith assumption about their own ability to see religious knowledge even better than anyone else, it's actually quite infuriating. It does not help world peace.

Since everybody has exclusive beliefs, what you need more than anything else is a set of exclusive beliefs (because we all have them) that make you open to people who are different than you, that make you humble and respectful toward people who are different than you. I argued the third week that Christianity, at least potentially, because it's based on a man who died for his enemies, praying for their forgiveness, did not retaliate and did not repay evil with evil, loved his enemies to the death, and all that ...

Potentially, Christianity is a set of exclusive beliefs, because, by goodness, all beliefs are exclusive, but it gives you some real reason to respect and love people who differ with you. So let's not try to say we're going to have world peace only when everybody gets rid of this idea that they have the truth. Everybody thinks they have the truth. Even the people who say, "Nobody has the truth" think they have the truth or they wouldn't have said that. So that objection falls on its face, because there are these hidden assumptions of faith in it.

Let me give you a third. This, again, is an objection to the Christian God in particular. Christians say you have to believe in Jesus to be saved. Many people find that absolutely something they can't swallow or digest. What they say is, "If you're saying you have to be saved through believing in Jesus, what about all the people who never even had a chance to hear about Jesus, never even had a chance to think about it? People who were born before Jesus lived and people who have lived without ever hearing about Jesus."

Even today there are people who are living and dying and never hearing about Jesus. So to say you have to believe in Jesus to be saved means your God can't be just. I can't believe in a God like that. To say that Jesus is the only way to be saved means the God of Christianity is not a just God. Those two things can't be true: God is just and you have to be saved through faith in Jesus." How do we respond to that? Well, there are two levels.

First of all, you have to understand the internal reasons Christians say you have to believe in Jesus to be saved. Here's the main internal reason. When I've talked to people who say, "I think it's so narrow to say you have to believe in Jesus to be saved ..." Actually, this question came up before in one of the other evenings. They say, "I think good people from any religion or non-religious people who are good ... I think all good people can be saved and go to heaven."

That sounds very inclusive, but what you've just done is ruled the entire Christian faith out, because the very heart of the Christian faith is nobody gets to heaven by being good. Your goodness is not sufficient. In fact, your goodness is usually done for bad motives and, therefore, ultimately, no one by being good could possibly merit salvation. That's the essence of Christianity. Therefore, you have to be saved by grace. Why? Because Jesus Christ was not just another prophet coming to point the way to how you can live a good life and save yourself.

Jesus Christ is God come to save you, God come to go to the cross and take the penalty for our sins and satisfy all the requirements of salvation in our place so that we receive it freely by grace. That's the gospel. When you say, in the effort of being inclusive, "I believe that all good people can be saved," you say, "Well, that means no Christians can be saved." Christians utterly deny that. What you're doing is basically tearing the guts out of our faith and refusing to let us believe what is the very essence of our belief. That's not very inclusive.

Now maybe you can see why we have to believe, since we believe salvation is by faith ... We think that's, in many ways, the most accessible kind of salvation out there. Any religion that says good people have to be saved, you realize there are an awful lot of people who will never be good because they've had terrible broken homes or they came up in poverty or they had awful parents. To say only good people can be saved is by no means fair.

In some ways, to say, "I believe all good people, no matter whether they have any faith or what faith ..." That sounds very democratic. Actually, it's quite exclusive. It's really trying to say those people who can pull themselves together can be saved and nobody else can. That sounds exclusive to me. Then you say, "Well, how *do* you justify both of these propositions? People can only be saved through faith in Jesus Christ and his grace and God is a just God. Show me how they could both be true, since so many people die without ever hearing about Jesus."

The philosophers are going to tell you when you have two propositions that don't look like they could both be true, you need a story that depicts how they both could be true, even if you're not totally sure the story is true. That sounds a little bit weird, but I'll give you an example. (If your name is Ethel you're going to hate me for this, but this is a fictional illustration.)

Let's imagine that everybody knows that Ethel is completely irresponsible. She's a nice young woman, but you never give her anything to do. She forgets things. She never does anything on time. She's almost dangerous. She leaves the heat on. She leaves the oven on. She's a sweet girl, but don't give her anything to do. She's very irresponsible.

Now we find out that Sally left her 4-year-old at Ethel's house overnight for Ethel to watch. A bunch of Sally's friends and people who also know Ethel say, "I just don't see how Sally can be a responsible mother. Anybody who takes her child and lets Ethel watch her overnight is just completely irresponsible."

Then somebody says, "Wait a minute. Sally is a single mother and she has two children and the younger child has asthma. What if in the middle of the night the younger child had an asthma attack and she had to take her to the emergency room and she just had to drop the 4-year-old off with somebody? It wasn't a great idea, but it was better than this or that." So you're sitting around saying, "Oh, okay. Well, if that happened ..." Suddenly you realize, "Well, maybe she wasn't irresponsible."

Now are we sure that's what happened? No. But this is what the philosophers would say. As soon as you come up with a story, and in that story, which could have happened, both of these statements could be true, that Sally is a responsible mother and Ethel is an irresponsible babysitter and that a responsible mother let Ethel watch her child and still be responsible ... Once you have a story by which it *could* be true, you say, "Well, even though I don't know if that's what happened, I can see that maybe there's some good explanation."

Let me give you one like that for God and Jesus. It's called *middle knowledge*. I want you to know right off the bat I doubt it's true, and I'll tell you why. The middle knowledge story goes like this. God knows everything. Does he not? He knows the end from the beginning. So what if God, who can do this, looks down the corridors of time and knows exactly what every single human being would do with their free will in any possible circumstance?

What if he looks at this person and says, "If this person is born in Tibet in the fifth century and never hears about Jesus Christ, that person will never believe in Jesus Christ, but I happen to know that if I had this person born in Indianapolis, living right across the street from First Baptist Church in 1980, I also happen to know this person would never accept Jesus Christ as Savior. So I'm not going to have anybody born without hearing about Jesus who I know would have received Jesus Christ if they had been born in a situation where they would have heard."

That's called *middle knowledge*. That way God is absolutely just and yet salvation is only through Jesus Christ. Now the reason I don't believe that is I'm pretty sure that's not how free will works in the Bible; therefore, I don't buy it. But do you see what I just did? When I hear that story, though I've never bought the story, I realize, "Well, you know what? How dare I say that there couldn't be a story that at the end of time I'm going to hear ...?"

Right now, I myself don't see how it's fair, but I also am not sure I could imagine every possibility. In fact, it would be extremely easy for me to imagine, since some people have come up with good stories, even though I don't agree with them, that there probably *is* a story. Why couldn't there be a story? Why should I stay away from believing in Christianity just because I can't think of what that story is? Surely God has good reasons and good ways of being just in that, and I just don't know how they could be done.

All I do know is salvation is by grace. It's not by good works. It's not by summoning yourself together. All I know is I need to be able to offer salvation as a Christian minister to anybody, no matter what your record, no matter how messed up you are, no matter how weak-willed you are. It's so important for me to be able to do that. That seems very fair. I don't know how God could be just about the people who never heard, but I figure there are stories that might account for that.

The fourth objection to the Christian God is Christianity can't be the true religion in light of the record of Christians ... all the injustice, all the intolerance, all the

violence. Now there are quite a number of things you could say. By the way, you may have heard Christians say this. There are a bunch of ways I could respond, and maybe you're not going to like the one response I'm about to give you and you may want to come at me. I have other things I could say. However, let me just tell you one.

Virtually all of the criticisms of the Christian church I've ever heard use Christian standards to critique the church. What that does is confirm Christianity but condemn inconsistent Christians. It certainly doesn't disprove Christianity or the Christian God. Let me give you an example. John Sommerville, who taught history at the University of Florida for many years, had a little mind experiment he used to do with his students. He was trying to help people understand how different the Western world is than it was, say, 800 years ago.

He says imagine you're walking late at night in a back alley and a little old lady who's practically blind is walking along with a great big purse with jewelry and bills sticking out of the top. You know you could grab that thing and she would never know who you are and there's absolutely no way you would ever get caught. For the sake of the mind experiment, imagine that you could rob her and never be caught.

He says, "Now I have three questions. Choose one of these. A) you think you should do it. B) you should not do it because ... C) you should not do it because ..." Here's what the two *because*s are. Let's imagine a shame and honor culture. Let's imagine the European cultures before Christianity came. Let's imagine much of the Eastern shame and honor culture. The reason people in those cultures would not rob the little old lady is that it would not comport with your honor.

An honorable person wouldn't do that. You couldn't respect yourself. Other people wouldn't respect you. It would show that you're a weakling. Because you want to have a high self-image of yourself as an honorable person, because you want to maintain your honor and dignity, you won't do it. C is you won't do it because you'd be violating her rights. She's a human being. She has feelings. She has rights. You should not steal the purse for her sake.

So A) you should steal the purse; B) you should not steal the purse for your sake and the sake of your honor; C) you should not steal the purse because she has rights. Everybody in the class always chooses C. Then he says, "Do you realize that whether you think you're a Christian or not you have been utterly Christianized?" He says shame and honor cultures value pride over humility, dominance rather than service, courage over peacefulness, glory rather than modesty, and loyalty to one's own tribe rather than equal respect for all.

He says when the Christian monks first came to Europe with the idea that you should forgive your enemies ... This idea of forgiving your enemies and not repaying evil with evil but overcoming evil with good does not come up in any other religions. It doesn't come up in any other culture. Other cultures talk about a lot of different things, caring for the poor and things like that, but no culture has

come up with that.

When Christian missionaries first went anywhere in the world into the shame and honor cultures, everybody thought, "This is absolutely crazy." He says when the old Anglo-Saxons and the Germans and the Franks and all that heard the idea that every human being, no matter how low, no matter how weak, no matter how poor, has dignity and they're your neighbor and they're made in the image of God and you need to care for them and you also need to forgive even the enemies, they said, "Society will just blow up."

"Society is based on the idea of fear. You have to respect each other. You have to know that if you wrong me, I'm going to come and destroy your whole family, because I'm going to have my revenge. This idea of loving one another and forgiving enemies and everyone having rights ... Society will be a mess." John Sommerville says if you think that's crazy, that shows you have been thoroughly Christianized.

His point is that we do not realize that when you look at the Christian church and look at the slavery, look at the oppression, look at this, look at that, in all of those cases you are using Christian principles. You may think, "They're not; they're just common sense." No, they're *not* common sense. None of this stuff, loving the poor ... Peter Brown is one of the great historians of antiquity. He has been at Princeton University for years.

He says the Christian idea that you should love the poor was a completely new idea in the history of the world. The ideas of loving the poor and forgiving your enemies are definitely Christian ideas, and if you think they make perfect sense now, if you think they're common sense, they're only common sense because they're *not* common sense; they came from the Bible. They came from Christianity in particular, the Christian understanding of the Bible.

So let's criticize Christianity for all this injustice, oppression, intolerance, and violation of rights ... You have to do what Martin Luther King Jr. did. He did not go to Southern white people and say, "You bigots! Don't you know that everything is relative, that the Bible really isn't true, that there really is no God and you need to get out of your religion?" He did not do that.

He said, "You're not being consistent with the Word of God you say you believe. 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' " Go read his stuff. He never told the Christian churches that were oppressing black people that they ought to give up Christianity. He would say, "You need to get consistent with it. You're violating your own principles." So the very idea that Christianity isn't true because of the inconsistency of Christianity doesn't wash.

Do you see the faith it takes to doubt it? To doubt Christianity because of oppression means you're assuming by faith, whether you know it or not, Christian ethics. To believe God can't exist because of evil and suffering, God couldn't exist if there's just one true religion ... In every case, you've smuggled all kinds of amazing leaps of faith into your objections, which are less well grounded than

belief in God itself. You say, “Okay, well then tell me, how is belief in God grounded?”

2. *The problems you have without it.* I want to give you three classic arguments for the existence of God in brief, but first you have to understand how arguments work. Richard Swinburne, who was a professor at Oxford University for many, many years and wrote a lot of books on why he believed in the existence of God, says most people when they hear about proofs and arguments don’t realize how it works.

Look at science. How do we have the axioms of physics we have right now? He says the axioms of physics are “proven” as long as they are the best explanations for what we see. We see particles reacting like this. We see energy and particles. We see all this stuff reacting like this. An axiom of physics is proven if it explains what we see better than all alternative axioms. As long as it explains what we see, then we say, “That’s the most rational of all the axioms.”

So if somebody says, “I think *this* is true, I think *this* is true,” let’s just see ... Do you understand that? Basically, scientific theories are proven by their explanatory power. Now they’re always changing, because data comes along later on and changes things, but nevertheless scientific theories are basically confirmed through explanatory power. The best arguments for the existence of God do the same thing.

What they say is if you don’t believe in the existence of God, you have three problems: explaining the fine-tuning of the universe, explaining moral obligation and human rights, and explaining the reliability of your cognitive faculties and reason itself. The fine-tuning argument, which you might call the *matter argument*, then the *morality argument*, and then the *mind argument*. Think of it like that: *matter*, *morality*, and *mind*.

A. *The matter argument.* The matter argument says the fine-tuning of the universe is a bigger problem for people who don’t believe in God than it is for people who do. God explains the fine-tuning of the universe. Not having God doesn’t really explain it. If you don’t believe in God, then you’re going to say, “Well, the fine-tuning of the universe, if there’s no God, probably shouldn’t be true, but I’m going to live as if it is.”

The fine-tuning of the universe doesn’t prove God; it just shows that belief in God is probably more rational than disbelieving in God. What do I mean? Well, the fundamental regularities and constants of physics, like the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces ... For organic life to exist, every single one of these values has to fall into an extremely narrow range. It’s almost as if you had 100 dials and organic life could only happen in the universe if every one of the 100 dials was turned exactly to the place where it is.

What that means is the universe looks as if it was fine-tuned for organic life. The real question is ... *Could that have happened by accident?* The answer is of

course it *could* have happened by accident, but it's not very likely. For example, in every book by the new atheists, Dawkins and Dennett and Hitchens ... Every one of them deals with the fine-tuning argument, which proves, by the way, it has some weight. Some of the best philosophers who believe in God have developed it pretty well, way better than I'm doing it right now.

There's an interesting article by MIT professor Alan Lightman (I don't think he's a believer in God) in *Harper's Magazine*, so it was a pretty prominent article, called "The Accidental Universe: Science's Crisis of Faith." In it he says the fine-tuning argument is so strong that most scientists believe in the multiverse thesis: at the big bang there was an infinite number of universes that happened all at once, and we just happen to be in the one that grows organic life.

In other words, the big bang created a zillion universes, and we just happen to be in the one that created organic life. Lightman actually says there is not the slightest shred of evidence that there is such a thing as the multiverses, and yet so many scientists believe in it because it seems to get them out from under the fine-tuning argument. In other words, you either have to take a step of faith to believe there's a God behind the universe or you must take a step of faith to believe there's not.

Alvin Plantinga, who's a Christian philosopher, tells this story to show how unlikely this is. The idea of the multiverse is, "Yeah, yeah, okay. The chances of the world being exactly the way it is to create life is not likely to happen unless there are zillions of universes all at once and we just happen to be in the one where it happened." Here's what he says. Imagine a man down in Texas dealing himself 20 straight hands of four aces in the same poker game.

Everybody would assume he was cheating and they'd start to get out their six-shooters, but suddenly the guy who dealt 20 straight hands of four aces to himself says, "Wait a minute, guys. I know it looks suspicious, but what if there is an infinite succession of universes so that for any possible distribution of poker hands there's one universe in which this possibility is realized? We just happen to find ourselves in the one universe where I always deal myself four aces without cheating. Why couldn't that be the case?" Well, they're going to shoot him.

The reason is that nobody would assume that without intelligent manipulation you could deal yourself 20 hands of four aces. The chances of the universe being fine-tuned for organic life are far more remote than the chances of dealing four aces 20 times. If there's a God, the fine-tuning of the universe makes sense. If there's not a God, it seems very unlikely. What you are saying is, "Well, I'm going to believe as if the fine-tuning of the universe is true anyway." The fine-tuning of the universe doesn't prove there's a God, but what it does show is it's more reasonable to believe in God at that point.

B. *The morality argument.* The morality argument goes like this. If there is no God, then it makes sense that there would be moral feelings, but how do you account for moral obligation? We talked about this in the second week. If you have moral feelings because of evolution or because of social construction, that's

one thing, but if there is no God, how would you say that gender equality, for example, is a universal truth? That I need to insist on *this* culture in *this* part of the world, “You have to have gender equality.”

They don’t feel like it’s a value. They don’t have a moral feeling that gender equality is important. Do you have the right to say they’re being unjust? You say, “Yes.” Why? If there was a God, then you could have a basis for saying there’s moral obligation. If there’s no God, then you have your feelings and they have their feelings. What makes you say your feelings trump their feelings? You could use your economic power to take the poor country down, but you still are basically just saying, “There is no God, and if there is no God there’s no basis for universal human rights, but I’m going to act as if there is.”

Alan Dershowitz of Harvard some years ago wrote a book on human rights, and he said originally human rights grew up in a society where we all believed in God and, therefore, we’re all children of God or we’re all in the image of God or something like that. He says here’s the problem we have. If there is no God, where do you get human rights? He thinks there are really only three possibilities. One is you could say, “We create human rights. We pass laws. If the society says gender equality is a moral value, then it is.”

He says the problem with that is the whole point of human rights is that a minority can go to a majority and say, “You must honor our dignity,” but if human rights are created, that means they’re created by the majority, which means they can be taken away. He says human rights have to exist. They have to be discovered. They can’t be created. If they’re created, they’re of no use, because they have to be used by minorities against majorities.

Secondly, maybe we get it from nature. Maybe human rights is something we can see in nature. Have you ever read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard? She went out to try to observe nature by a brook somewhere out in the mountains of Virginia, thinking, “If I get near nature, it’s going to get me closer to something.” She saw how nature really is. She watched a great big bug sting a frog and then stick its stinger down into the frog’s skull and suck it dry till it was just a little shell.

She says nature is no basis for deciding how human beings should treat each other. Dershowitz says the same thing. He says, “Okay, if we don’t believe in God and we don’t believe human rights can be created and we don’t believe we can get it from nature, that means that even though we have no idea where human rights come from, we just have to believe in them.” He even admits it. He says, “If there’s no God, then there really is no basis for it. We just have to believe in it anyway.”

C. *The mind argument.* This is the least convincing in a nutshell but the most convincing in the long run. One of the problems with the evolutionary hypothesis ... A lot of you have pushed me on this. It’s true many people believe in God, but that could be evolution, that our religious sense is something that evolved because it helped us survive. So we sense God, but that doesn’t mean it’s there. It just helped us survive.

Other people say, "Maybe we have these moral feelings, but they evolved. We feel this is right and we feel there's moral obligation, but that's because it helped our ancestors survive. There's no moral obligation. We feel it. Our moral sense evolved; that doesn't mean there really is moral obligation. Our religious sense evolved; that doesn't mean there really is a God."

Then we turn around and say, "Well, what about your brain? What about your reason that you're using right now? You're telling me we can't trust our religious sense because it doesn't tell us what's true, only what helps us survive; we can't trust our moral sense because it doesn't tell us what's true, only what helps us survive; and now you're going to tell us we can trust our rational sense? We can trust our logic? We can trust the line of argument that's gotten you to the place where you don't believe in God?"

If there is no God, your brain was selected not to tell you truth but only to help you survive. Therefore, you cannot trust anything your mind says. You may at first say, "Oh, I don't like that idea. That's silly. That's stupid." I want you to know there are a number of philosophers, Christians and non-Christians, who think that's actually quite powerful. If there's no God, you can't trust your mind, including the mind that tells you there's no God, which means not believing in God is self-defeating.

3. *The beauty you find within it.* I'm just going to have to wait for the next couple of weeks. You're going to have to come back. Basically, there is no such thing as an abstract idea of God out there. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism ... Belief in God never comes without a story about what's wrong with us, what will put us right, what our deepest hopes are, what our deepest problems are.

You'll never believe in God just by doing what I just did, which is just going through the arguments. If you believe everything I've said so far, all this means is God is probable, in general, but that's not going to get you home. We have to go on and look and see which of the stories various religions tell about God is the one that's most compelling. We'll look at that later.

Female: Now is the time to text and email in your questions. We look forward to hearing what you all have to ask. All right, first question. Tim, you said that what you have just shared might help people think God is at least probable, but people are pressing in to that and want to ask, "Well, then, what do you have to say to people who recognize that neither God nor atheism is provable and simply choose to be agnostic?"

Tim Keller: I must say I don't think it's rational to be an atheist. It depends on how you define these words. *Atheist* usually means you believe there can't be a God; there is no God. I don't think you can prove a negative anyway. However, I think agnosticism is perfectly rational. If you don't go to the emotional and the cultural, I can see why you can be agnostic. Here's the reason why.

Some of the philosophers who believe the fine-tuning argument and the moral argument and the mind argument, and there are others ... By the way, some of

these, if you studied them in history of philosophy, are the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, the ontological argument, the moral argument ... There are these various arguments that have been used by Aquinas and have been worked through by Descartes and Immanuel Kant and other people like that.

I think when they're all done, what they are is probabilistic, which means it doesn't get you all the way to faith. I think the main answer to that is something Pascal says, which is you may be agnostic about God, yet you *are* going to assume moral obligation. You *are* going to assume human rights. You *are* going to assume your cognitive faculties work. You *are* going to assume the regularity of nature. You *are* going to assume the validity of logic.

If I had more time, I could show you that if there is a God, they make sense. If there's no God, you can just say, "Well, I'm going to act as if they're true," even though, frankly, a disbelief in God leaves you to not expect any of them to be true. You certainly have the right to be an agnostic, but there's a little bit of smuggling going on. You're smuggling into your life a lot of certainty and confidence in moral values and things you really don't have the right to.

Secondly, in the end, nobody can get all the way to certainty with only reason. Let's just say you're an employer and you're trying to hire somebody for a new job. You would use your reason to choose what you think is the best candidate. You would look at the résumés. You would talk to their references, and all that. But can you be 100 percent sure this person is the right person for the job? No.

You can only with your mind reason to the point of probability. Then you have to commit to get to certainty. I have to bite. I have to risk my capital. I have to hire the person, bring him in. You know how hard that can be if the person is not the right person. It's very difficult. It costs you money, it costs you grief, it costs you relational capital, and all that sort of thing. That's the way it is in every other area of life. You can never get all the way to certainty on these big things.

Same thing with marriage, by the way. You can reason your way to probability on marriage. There are a lot of people who would like to be married. There are a lot of people who say, "I just haven't found the right person," and as a pastor I know they're looking for 100 percent rational certainty before they marry. That's impossible. With your mind you can only get to probability, but it takes commitment to get to certainty. It shouldn't be any different with God.

So I would say agnosticism is reasonable. I wouldn't say it's not, but I would also say it's a bit hypocritical and, ultimately, it's probably treating God as if he's different than anything else important in life, like love and work and marriage and things like that. You can only go to probability with your mind. You have to get to certainty with your emotions and your life.

Female: This person agrees that multiple religions cannot all be correct because they contradict each other, but, "Would you please give examples of the differences between the Abrahamic religions, the Bible, Qur'an, and Torah?"

Tim: They are all so different, though. In one way, Christianity is more like Islam, because you have a personal God, whereas in Buddhism you don't. So Christianity seems like it's Abrahamic. It's true, it is. As you know, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all look back to the Old Testament. They look back to the Hebrew Scriptures. They look back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

On the other hand, what's really weird is if you go to Buddhism, Buddhism is all about the heart. It's all about what is wrong with your soul, why you're suffering, craving, trying too hard to get satisfaction. It deals with tranquility. It deals with the inwardness. Islam doesn't do that. So in some weird ways, Buddhism is very different than Christianity, because it has an infinite but not personal god.

Islam is much more about submitting the will. It's much more oriented toward how you behave. It's all about behavior. In fact, even though, of course you're supposed to submit on the inside too, what they're much more concerned about is doing what Allah's will is and submitting your will to Allah. Christianity is quite a bit different than Islam and it's quite a bit different than Buddhism, but it's similar to each in other ways too.

Christians and Jews will always be kissing cousins. Two-thirds of the Christian Bible is the Jewish Bible. The difference is Christians look back into the Jewish religion (Jewish leaders and thinkers have resented this for years) and we see all the foreshadowing of Jesus and salvation by grace, and they just don't. So we are extraordinarily close to Jews and yet extraordinarily far away too; much closer than the other religions and yet, at the same time, have some irreconcilable differences as well. So those are some of the contradictions and similarities.

Female: This is the kind of question that blows your mind to even think about it, but it's really interesting to me. "Like the chicken and the egg, where did God come from?"

Tim: This is an argument that's called the *cosmological argument* that I didn't even get to. As it was, if you noticed, I spent too long on everything and too little on the arguments. The cosmological argument goes like this. Everything in this world appears to be contingent. *Contingent* means it's dependent on something for its existence. There's nothing that exists without being dependent on something else. So how could the world itself have just always existed when everything about the world is dependent on something else?

The *cosmological argument* is that there must be some non-contingent being that caused everything else to happen, because if everything you see is contingent on something else, which is contingent on something else, which is contingent on something else, at the very bottom you can't just say, "Well, there's something that is not contingent, something that depends on nothing else, something that exists all by itself without dependence on anything else." Well, that would be God. It has to be.

There are people who say, "Well, there's an infinite digression ..." This is where

the philosophers love to go, and you can get a good PhD or two on that. This is the cosmological argument. Everything in this world is contingent; therefore, there's nothing about this world that could be non-contingent. Something non-contingent must have started the world and everything in it. That's called the *cosmological argument*. God is the uncaused cause. If you say, "What caused God?" well, I don't know, but whatever that would be, that would be the real God.

Anything that is the uncaused, non-contingent being that started the whole thing rolling would be God. By the way, William Lane Craig is a philosopher who's developed something called the *Kalām*. Believe it or not, in medieval Islam there was a particular version of the cosmological argument developed, I think around the same time Aquinas was developing his, that is unusually strong. If you Google William Lane Craig and the existence of God, you'll find versions of his reworking of *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* online. It's very good.

Female: This person is curious about the nature of God. There are multiple questions in here, but the essence is understanding the nature of God. "Does God have a body? Is there a gender? Is he physically like us? Is he separate from Christ? And what about the Holy Spirit?"

Tim: The question sounds like you're asking me to answer that from inside the Christian story of God. I tried to say at the end that belief in God in the world isn't an abstraction. You don't have just sort of general belief in God. It always comes with a story. From inside the Christian view, God is tri-personal but singular. Christians don't believe in three gods in three persons or one god in one person but one God consisting of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are, in some sense ... The Bible uses masculine terminology, but I don't know of any Christian who believes that necessarily means God has a gender. Now Jesus Christ ... When God became incarnate he had to become a human being, and human beings are all gendered, so he became as a male, but when it comes to saying God has a gender, we wouldn't do that.

The Bible uses the language. The Bible says God is a king. It really means he's like a human king. It says he's a father. It means he's like human fathers, but, obviously, he's infinite and, therefore, there are other ways in which he's not like. But God is tri-personal, and God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit know and love each other. The three persons are equal, and they've known and loved each other for all eternity.

Saint Augustine's teaching on the Trinity was so helpful to me. Augustine says there's a side of us that says, "That's crazy. How could there be a God who's three in one? That doesn't make any sense. It boggles the mind." But he says the alternative is that love is not the meaning of life. If Buddhism is right and God is impersonal, then love is basically an illusion (Buddhism teaches that) or it's a passing thing that's only here as long as we think of ourselves as individuals.

If, on the other hand, the Muslim God is true, which is a single person, then God

did not know love until he created other beings, whether angels or human beings or whatever. Why? Because you can't have love without more than one person. In every other approach, God was not love primarily; God was power before he was love. God created things and then brought in beings and love comes in next.

Augustine says the Christian understanding of God is deeply personal, because God has always been personal, unlike Eastern religions, but God has also always been loving. Love is intrinsic to who he is. It didn't come in later. It was there before he was creating. If you believe God created and then after that comes in love because he was unipersonal, then power is more important than love, but if you believe God was love before he created, then love is more important than power. It's all in Augustine and it's brilliant and he's right.

Female: "You focus exclusively on intentions with little regard for the outcome. What is wrong with the morality of selfishness if it leads to greater happiness and more positive outcomes for more people? Why be guilty of selfish intentions?"

Tim: That's a big question. Most people in ethics say deciding whether a behavior is right or wrong is ... There are three parts to it at least. By the way, I'll never get all the different views of this straight. First of all, there's the motive. For example, I'm helping the little old lady across the street, which in itself is a good action. The form of the action is right, but inside I'm proud or I'm trying to get people to admire me or I'm a politician and I want people to think I'm a really compassionate person when actually I'm not.

A bad motive means it was a bad action, even though the form of the action was good. So there's the motive for the action, there's the form of the action, and then there's the outcome. Yes, sometimes the right action, a good action, brings about a bad outcome, in which case you should refrain from it. For example, it's possible to not technically lie and yet deceive people. If the form of the action is right and yet the outcome is you're deceiving people, then that's wrong anyway, in spite of the fact that you stayed in the letter of the law. The intention was wrong, and then the outcome was wrong.

This is one of the reasons Christians believe you're saved by grace. There are different forms of ethics that would say the form doesn't matter, only the outcome. It sounds like you're saying that. I think there are great problems with that. Here's the reason. Why take the godlike position that you know what the outcome will be? Over the years, I've had many younger people say, "I know what I did was illegal or against what my parents said or against what the Bible said, but I thought it would bring about a good end."

The point is how do you know what the end is going to be? Also, how do you get to define human flourishing? There's a certain hubris about saying, "I can do things most people think of as immoral because I'm trying to bring about a good end." How do you know what the result of your behavior really is going to be? When you're younger, you have no idea what the results are going to be. By the time you get to my age, you have a little better idea.

Technically, what if we lived to be 200 years old? Probably when I get to 200 I look back at my 60-year-old self and think I was a jerk, because you can always go back about 20 years, and the way you were then you were making all kinds of stupid mistakes. If you think the only way I have to decide what is right or wrong is what the outcome is, you realize that as you've gotten older you got smarter and you look back and say, "Wow."

Christians would say if the form says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not lie," you stick with the form, and you don't decide, "Well, I think I can do that, because it'll bring about a good end." Now there are exceptions, believe it or not. I just can't get into it because time keeps running by. Christians would say the motive could make the action wrong, the form of the action, if it's against the law of God, could make the action wrong, and the outcome could make it wrong if it's bad for people too.

That's the reason Christians feel you have to be saved by grace: because virtually everything you're doing is wrong. It brings about humility. Once you understand the grace of Jesus, you don't go around feeling like a mess all the time. When the love of God is real enough to you that you're feeling affirmed by his love, you can then actually admit how much of what you do has bad motives to it, is duplicitous. You can admit just how weak a person you are. It certainly keeps you from ever feeling superior to other people.

Female: "At the beginning of your talk you encouraged us to imagine that God might have good reasons for some of the suffering we see in the world, but can we blame God for allowing suffering?"

Tim: I would say those go together. I'm reading the book of Job right now, because I try to read through the Bible every year, and I always get to Job right around now when it's dark and cold. Job does a wonderful job of protesting, getting angry, being very upset, saying, "God, this feels so unjust. Please give me an explanation. Please do something."

He's very open about his feelings. He doesn't feel like, "Oh no, I have to be respectful." He doesn't get it. He doesn't understand it. It doesn't feel right, but in the end he doesn't just say, "So I'm not going to believe in you." He says, "You have all wisdom. No one is righteous in your sight. I have nowhere else to go but to stay with you."

What's interesting about Job, when you get to the end of the book of Job, God vindicates Job, even though he spent the entire 40 chapters, practically, complaining and yelling and screaming about how bad everything was, sometimes saying to God, "Would you appear before me and give me some answers? If you would appear for me, I have some questions for you." He's very honest and outraged.

At the end of the book, God shows up and vindicates Job and says, "You did very well," and he castigates his friends who were criticizing him. The first time through it I said, "How could this be?" The point was that Job never stopped

praying. All of his bellyaching, all of his yelling and screaming was not into the wind or to his friends. It was to God.

He had this balance of knowing he didn't know enough to blame God. He just knew he didn't know enough to blame God. How dare he blame God? At the same time, he complained to God virulently, and that balance is something you see in the Bible. It's not like Goody Two-shoes, you know, stuff all your feelings, nor is it "You must be evil, and I can't believe in you." It's a balance.

Female: You spoke about grace today, and along with the questions coming in I also have a list of some of the questions that have come in previous weeks, and I really like this one and think it's appropriate. "Wouldn't it be unjust for God to disregard the merit of people's efforts and reward grace randomly? If the teacher is handing out grades randomly regardless of how well we did, who will bother studying?"

Tim: That is a great question. There's a place where Jesus tells a parable where a man hires a group of men to labor in his fields in the morning, and then he goes out at noon and hires another bunch, and then he hires another bunch just an hour before knock-off time. When they're all done, he gives every single one of them the same wage, and they're all really freaked out about it.

Basically he says, "Listen, you agreed to work for a denarius." It's interesting. He doesn't really explain it other than to say, "I have the right to be gracious with what I'm doing. You in the morning agreed to a denarius, and you in the afternoon agreed to a denarius, and if I want to be generous and pay the guy who only worked two hours a denarius, it's mine to do." Jesus is actually trying to say, "I'm more gracious than you, so you're complaining?"

People say, "Well, you're being unfair to the people who work very hard." From the inside, that's not how it feels, I want you to know. To be a Christian, you have to see that an awful lot of the effort you made to be good was poorly motivated and kind of shoddy and very often superficial. Ultimately, when you come all the way into the center, you do not feel better than the people who have had more broken-up lives.

Those of us who did live kind of Goody Two-shoes sort of lives don't resent the people who came in after having been in jail or done pretty bad things or that sort of thing. However, the other side of the question, which is really important, is why live a good life? I had a Christian professor who said to me, "Once you tell them about the gospel of grace, how are you going to get them to do their homework?"

If I take away the fear of punishment, if I say God loves you and accepts you no matter what, unconditional love ... If when I take away your fear of punishment you lose all your incentive to live a good life, that means the only incentive you ever had to live a good life was fear. You need to go get another incentive. You need to go out and say, "I want to do this for the love of my neighbor. I want to do this for the love of my God." That's the only reason to be good anyway.

If you're saying, "Well, once I find out that God is just rewarding people left and

right freely, it gets rid of all my incentive,” what was your incentive to start with? It wasn’t a good incentive. In fact, most of us who lived good lives before we became Christians realize that all the incentive we had for all those good lives was fear and pride. We don’t look at it as all that valuable morally, and we don’t see ourselves as more wonderfully worthy somehow than people who have lived lives of cruelty and addiction.

Female: “Why does God offer no evidence of the supernatural? The multiverse argument that you discussed doesn’t come from closed-minded skeptics. It comes from curious natural creatures who are using the evidence we do have to draw the best logical, scientific conclusions? So why does God offer no evidence of the supernatural?”

Tim: You know, whoever asked that question, would you stick around and come up to the fifth floor to explain that a little better? I think I’m probably not completely following it. I would say that the resurrection, which we’re going to get to week after next ... There’s a lot of historical evidence for that, and that’s evidence for the supernatural. So I think there is, and maybe you’re thinking of something else, so come talk to me.

Female: “I’ve never felt that God is personal and never understood how he could become personal. How can you have a personal relationship with God who we cannot see, hear, or touch?”

Tim: Years ago I was in a debate, basically. They didn’t call it a debate. There was a group of Christians and a group of Muslims who met together. We all met either in a mosque or a church. We went back and forth. It was very interesting. They were called Meetings for Better Understanding, and we always had a Christian speaker and an Islamic speaker.

It wasn’t a debate, but the Christian and the Muslim speaker would speak on a common subject, and then we’d respond to each other and take questions. We really tried to keep the temperature turned down as far as we possibly could. They were really great meetings. It was back in the 1980s. I learned so much.

The one time that was most notable was when we talked about images. Muslims do not believe in any images for God ... no paintings, no statues ... nothing at all, because nothing is worthy of Allah. So they made the case for that. In the Old Testament, of course, it also says human beings should not create an image. The Old Testament is also against paintings and images for the same reason: these things are not worthy. It’s not for us to create images that make God more palpable and more concrete. It’s not up to us to do. So the Old Testament and Islam really agree.

When you get to the New Testament, though, when you get to Colossians, chapter 1, it says that Jesus Christ is the *eikon* of God. Jesus Christ is the image of God. It’s the word *eikon* in Greek. What it says is human beings may not create a visible personal representation of God, which would be extremely helpful, because we could then relate to him, but God can do it. God has the right

to create his own image, to create his own physical representation, and it's Jesus Christ. That's the New Testament claim. That's the Christian claim.

Christianity says if you didn't have Jesus Christ, it would be extremely hard to think of God as personal, but if you watch him walking through the pages of the Gospels, acting in very surprising ways, God becomes personal. Jesus is not somebody you could have really thought up. He surprises you all the time. He's never acting the way you think somebody would act, and it's the surprises that come because he's perfect.

It would take a perfect human being to imagine a perfect human being, and since none of us is perfect, our understanding of what a perfect human being would be like is kind of fuzzy, but when a perfect human being actually came to us because he was God, you start reading about him, it's just striking. So I would say it would be impossible to relate to God as a personal being if I didn't have him in Jesus Christ, but that's the Christian claim.

Just to end the story, that night I thought, "Hey, there were a lot of questions." The next week the Muslims called us up and said, "Would you do it again? Would you send Tim Keller back to give that talk on images and we'll have a different Muslim speaker next month and we'll do the same." I said, "All right." Then the third time after that, they called back and said, "Can we do it a third time?" They had another Muslim speaker. We didn't have any idea what was going on.

Eventually, they told us it created a problem, because the Christian idea of a personal God in Jesus Christ was so attractive. It got out from under the idea that we can create our own images, which, of course, would be wrong. But the idea that God could create his own image so we could relate to him as a person, so he's somebody who could really be embraced and loved, was so attractive they kept feeling like, "We have to do a better job of defending our faith," so they kept having me come back and tried to put somebody ... It wasn't a debate. It was just trying to present God in a personal way. That's kind of interesting.

Out from the Grave

Seeing Jesus—March 2, 2014

John 11:18–44

¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if

you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

For the last couple of months, we've been looking in the gospel of John at these accounts of Jesus' miraculous signs. That's what John calls them. John says in his gospel that there are quite a lot of miracles Jesus did, but John particularly chose these seven miracles that he called *signs* because he believed they particularly revealed who Jesus was and what he came to do. The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and climactic sign (and we'll explain why it's climactic) and probably the most famous.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, sisters and a brother ... Jesus especially loved them. In the very beginning of the chapter, the message that comes about Lazarus' sickness was, "Lord, the one you love is sick." Down here in verse 36 it says the Jews said, "See how he loved him." He was well known to be very close to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. There was a particular friendship there. It was a special love.

Jesus is away when Lazarus gets sick and is dead by the time Jesus gets there. Everyone is in mourning and everyone is grieving, and that's when the account begins. So let's see what we learn here under the two headings I've already mentioned. What do we learn about *who he is* and *what he came to do*? His person and his work. We learn about who he is, his person, when he's with the sisters in the first part of the account, and we learn something about what he came to do, his work, in the second part when he's with Lazarus.

First of all, ***who he is***, with the sisters. Martha comes out and says, "**Lord ... if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Then, when Mary comes out, she says exactly the same words. "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Two women in the very same situation, the same kind of grief, and they even use the same words, but Jesus' response to the two of them is radically different.

One commentator I read said, "This is not fiction, because no fiction writer would have ever imagined this kind of disjunction." It's absolutely counterintuitive that two women, grieving in the same way, in the same situation, saying the very same words, would get two completely different responses. With Martha, Jesus basically argues. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. It's never too late. I'm here now."

With Mary, not only doesn't he argue, but he doesn't say a thing. With Martha, in a sense, he stands against the flow of her heart. He resists her sorrow and calls her to hope, but with Mary, he just enters right into the sorrow, right into the flow of her heart. He's sort of pulled in with her, and all he does is weep. He doesn't say a thing. Just weeps, just grieves with her. What does this mean?

It's completely counterintuitive, but it's more than just something counterintuitive. It's not just a counterintuitive curiosity that some eyewitness remembered, even though it was an eyewitness oral history. It's not just a curiosity. I think it's an

insight into who Jesus is. It's a profound insight, because with Martha he's claiming to be God, and with Mary he's showing himself to be human. In other words, he's the God-man. The encounter with the sisters, with the women, shows him to be the God-man.

So first of all, with Martha, what does he say? He doesn't say, "I have access to divine power, and I can raise this man from the dead." He says, "*I am* the power that gives everything life." He doesn't just say, "I'm the resurrection." He says, "I'm the life. I am life. I am the source of all life." Only God is that. With Martha, he's giving her a bracing response and he's, in a sense, arguing with her and standing against her and claiming to be God.

With Mary, he's showing himself to be human, to be God in the flesh. He's showing himself to be a God who is completely human. What we have here, in spite of the claim of deity, is a real man: weak, weeping. His love for them pulls him into their devastation. So along with the power of deity we have vulnerable humanity. He is a human being and, therefore, he feels the horror of death. If he was only deity, he would not feel the horror of death and the grief of losing love.

So there what we have is Jesus Christ, fully divine, fully human, the God-man. Now at one level, this is mind-numbing. This is the doctrine of the hypostatic union: that he's fully God and fully man. What we could do, if we wanted to, is get out, say, Philippians 2 and parse every part of it and notice that Jesus Christ, though he was God, emptied himself of his glory, but not of his deity, and assumed a human nature. We could go into all that.

It is a little bit mind-numbing, I suppose, but at a service of worship, before the Lord's Supper, I would rather show you that even though it might numb your mind, the idea that Jesus is both fully God and fully man is exactly what your heart needs. It's exactly what it needs ... in two ways. First of all, it shows him, because he's both God and man, to be the perfect Wonderful Counselor. With Martha, he gives her a bracing response. He confronts her. With Mary, he just enters in and gives no advice at all and just supports her and loves her and grieves with her.

I'm a pastor, so after all these years, I've done a fair amount of counseling. All of us who do any kind of counseling, as time goes on, we come to recognize how severely limited we are, at least in the range of people we can help. It's kind of a grief to anybody who's a counselor. There's a limited range of the people we can help. Why?

Some people need confrontation. Some people need nothing but support. Some people need what Jesus gives: the ministry of truth, which is what he gives to Martha. Sometimes people just need the ministry of tears, which is what he gives to Mary. People need them sometimes at different times in their lives.

If you give confrontation to someone who needs support or support to someone who needs confrontation, or if you give confrontation at the time they need support and support at the time they need confrontation, you harm them. The

problem is all of us human counselors are limited in how well we can do that. Do you know why? We all have habitual temperaments. We tend more to truth or tend more to tears.

For various reasons ... background, genetics, who knows what ... there's a limited range of people we really can help very well. But not Jesus, because he's infinitely high and infinitely low. He's deity and utterly human at once. Therefore, he inhabits the entire spectrum of what people need, and because he's infinitely high and infinitely low and infinitely wise about how he deploys his highness and lowness, he is the only perfect counselor.

He's the only one who can give you exactly what you need when you need it, if you look to him. That's the reason why you have a passage like this in Hebrews, chapter 4: "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Do you hear that? "Tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." There's the balance.

He's not just a sinless God who doesn't know what it's like to go through what we have gone through, has never felt the terror of life. So on the one hand, we don't just have a sinless God who hasn't experienced what we've experienced, but, on the other hand, we don't have somebody who's just like us, who's no better than us. How can someone like that help us? We have the Wonderful Counselor. He's infinitely high and infinitely low at once, the God-man.

Here's the other way in which his being both deity and humanity meets the need of our hearts: *he's an absolute beauty*. Saint Augustine may be the greatest theological mind of all time. One of the things that is so brilliant that has reverberated through Christian theology and ministry ever since is his idea that the fundamental problem of the human heart is what he would call *disordered loves*.

That means our loves are out of order. That's our problem. That means if you love anything more than God, whatever that thing is, you will crush it through your expectations and it will break your heart. Spouses learn that if they don't love God more than they love their spouse, they won't love their spouse well.

If your spouse is your main source of love and meaning and hope, your main thing in life, then, on the one hand, it means you will be too angry when your spouse messes up. You'll crush your spouse under your expectations. On the other hand, you'll be too afraid of your spouse's anger to confront and tell the truth. You will not be able to love your spouse well unless you love God more. Our loves are out of order.

Yesterday, we had a singles' conference here, and that point was made in various ways. Afterwards, I stood down here and talked to people for a good hour. I got a lot of good questions, but an awful lot of them were along this line: "Okay, I'm supposed to love God more than anything else. All right. How do I do

that? How in the world do I just love God more than all of the other things I love?"

Then I said something like, "Well, it's a process." "Okay, fine. It's a process. But what is the process? Thank you very much, Pastor, but tell me what do I do." I can't remember what I said yesterday. I hope it was helpful to you, if you're here, but as I was preparing for this today, I realized, "Oh my goodness, wait. What will draw your heart out toward God ..." God is an abstraction, but Jesus Christ, and especially Jesus Christ the God-man, is not.

Jonathan Edwards, years ago, preached and then published a sermon called *The Excellency of Christ*. It is based on the place in Revelation where it says that Jesus Christ is both a lion and a lamb. He is the lion who is a lamb. He's the lamb who is a lion. His thesis is that Jesus Christ, because he's both God and man, combines diverse and usually opposite excellencies and glories in one person and, therefore, it makes him of surpassing beauty.

It's because he's both. It's because he combines the highness and the lowness together and all of the attributes that go with it that make him not an abstraction. God, to some degree, is an abstraction, but Jesus Christ is not. Not as you see him moving through the pages of the New Testament. A couple of writers put it something like this:

"Despite his high claims, he is never pompous, and you never see him standing on his own dignity. He is tenderness without weakness, strength without harshness, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, unhesitating authority with a complete lack of self-absorption, unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, enthusiasm without fanaticism, holiness without Pharisaism, passion without prejudice. Nothing he does falls short. In fact, he is always surprising you and taking your breath away, because he's incomparably better than you could have imagined for yourself. Why? These are the surprises of perfection."

I think Edwards is absolutely right. When you see those things brought together, the highness and the lowness, the power and the humility, the greatness with no pomposity, it's attraction. It attracts you. You feel it, do you not? You can't look at the sun directly without it burning out your eyes, so you have to look at it through a filter, and then you can see the beauty of it. You can see the flames.

When you look at Jesus Christ ... Do you see what he says in verse 40? You're looking at the glory of God through the filter of a human nature. Only there can you see the absolute beauty, and this will draw your heart out and reorder your loves. It's his highness and his lowness, his deity and his humanity together that does that. So first of all, we see who he is with Mary and Martha: the God-man.

Then, *what he came to do*, with Lazarus at the tomb. What did he come to do? Well, the first thing we know he came to do is fight for us. There is no translation that seems to be quite willing to take the plunge here. In verse 33 it says, "... **he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.**" Then in verse 38 it says, "**Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.**"

The Greek words here are words that generally mean angry. In fact, one of the words literally means to bellow like an animal, to roar like an animal. It says he's coming to the tomb angry, furious. B.B. Warfield, a rather austere older theologian who was at Princeton in the late 1800s and early 1900s, wrote this about this text: "Jesus advances to the tomb not weak and sniveling, but as a champion preparing for conflict. John uncovers the heart of Jesus as he wins our salvation, not in cold unconcern but with fiery wrath against our enemy."

What's interesting is he's angry, and you ought to notice what he's not angry at. First of all, he's not angry at the family. He's not like one of Job's friends. He doesn't show up and say, "Well, I don't know why he died so young, but you must have done something bad." He's not angry at the family, but here's what's interesting. He has just claimed to be deity. He doesn't just say, "I have the power to raise this man from the dead." He says, "I am the source of all life. I am the power that gives everything life."

He has just claimed to be God, but guess what? He's not mad at himself. Here's suffering and evil, and he's not mad at God. No. Why not? We talked about this last week, so we can't go into it again. He's not acting as if the human race doesn't deserve the world we have, because when the human race turned away from the one who created us and sustains us every second to say, "We're going to be our own masters, our own saviors, our own lords," the world stopped working the way it should.

Genesis 3 and Romans 8 tell us about this. The world doesn't work. Suffering, evil, death, disease ... all of the things that were not originally part of God's design are now here. So Jesus is not mad at them, and he's also not mad at himself or God or acting as if this world isn't what the human race deserves, but he is mad at death. He is mad. I like that. He's not a Stoic. This isn't Greek stoicism, saying, "Well, death is inevitable. You can't let it get to you."

He's not even doing the evangelical Christian kind of stoicism. "I'm just praising the Lord. It's really hard, but I'm just trusting him." He's mad. He's mad at our enemy. He's raging against the dying of the light. Here's the problem. If it's true that evil and suffering and death is actually the death sentence of the human race, a sentence on how we've been living, how can Jesus Christ do anything about this sentence, if we deserve it?

How can he destroy death without destroying us? It's what we deserve. The answer is this miracle shows not only that he came to fight for us but also that he came to die for us. You say, "Where does it tell you about dying for us?" This is the turning point in the book of John. I said this is the climactic miracle. Of the miraculous signs, this is the seventh one. John, chapter 1–11, is all about Jesus' life, but starting here, John 12 to the end, is all about Jesus' death. This is the turning point. This is the hinge.

Kathy was pointing out the other night that in a favorite movie of ours, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, that epic about Jesus in 1965, even the movie makers

realized it was at the resurrection of Lazarus ... It all comes together. It's sort of the turning point in the movie. Before the gates of Jerusalem, there are three guys, saying, "A man was dead, but now he lives. I was crippled, but now I walk. I was blind, but now I see." It all comes together here, and then they decide they have to kill him.

In fact, if you read the rest of chapter 11, you immediately see what happened. This is too visible a miracle. This is too public. This is too decisive. Verse 53 says, "**So from that day on they plotted to take his life.**" This is the thing that sealed his doom. It was too much. He had gone too far. His enemies said, "Now he has to die." This was the turning point. Do you know what that means? You know that Jesus knew what he was doing.

Jesus knew the only way to get Lazarus out of the grave was to put himself into it. Therefore, Jesus also knew that the only way to stop our funeral was to cause his own. He had to go to the cross. Jesus Christ knew that the only way he was going to save us was if the inexorable jaws of death closed upon him like a vice and he experienced all the wrath of divine justice on sin and took what we deserved. Unless that happened, we could not be saved.

So when he said, "Lazarus, come out!" he was signing his own death warrant, and he knew it. These folks spoke better than they knew. "Behold how he loves him." See that? They just looked at his tears and said, "See how he loved him. Look at how Jesus loved him." You and I can look at Jesus saying, "Lazarus, come forth," and say, "Behold how he loves us. He would do this for Lazarus? He's not just doing this for Lazarus. He's doing it for us."

Let me just leave you with four very practical implications and applications of this remarkable account. First, don't be mad at Jesus for your suffering. A lot of you are in pain right now, and it's very easy to say, "Jesus, why are you letting this happen?" Jesus is not mad at himself; he's mad at death, and he has come to do something about it. Of all people, Albert Camus says this:

"The God-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the '*Lama sabachthani*' ['My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'] and the frightful [struggle] of Christ in agony."

Do you know what he's saying? It is hard to know why God is letting you go through the evil and suffering you're going through right now, but when you see that Christianity is the only faith in which God actually comes down and involves himself in suffering so that someday he can end all suffering and evil without ending us, what this means is, though you do not know what the reason for your suffering *is*, you do know what the reason for your suffering is *not*. It's not that he doesn't love you. As Albert Camus said (and if Jesus and Albert Camus agree, it must be right), don't blame Jesus for your suffering.

Secondly, all love is going to entail suffering. Jesus cannot save and love Lazarus without hurting himself. Of course, Jesus is doing the ultimate salvation; therefore, he's going through the ultimate suffering, but at all levels, it works like this. All love is a substitutionary sacrifice. All real love entails you suffering, you dying in small ways so that others can live. You see it at all levels. Think about parenting for a second.

You have children come into your life. If you want to, here's your privacy, your comfort, and your convenience. You could just make sure you only spend as much time with your children and only do things for them that comport with your privacy, convenience, and comfort. In other words, you could just spend as much time with your children as suits you, in which case your children will grow up to be an absolute mess. They'll grow up needy. They'll grow up in trouble. There will be all kinds of trouble.

Therefore, it's them or you. You can kiss goodbye, for many years, your privacy, convenience, and comfort and they'll grow up strong or else you can hold on to it and they'll grow up weak. What's it going to be? You can weaken yourself so they'll become strong or you can stay strong so they'll become weak. Don't you realize what's going on? You have to die that they may live, essentially. Die to some things.

You may just have somebody in your network of friends, let's say. You don't particularly like them that much, but they're kind of in there. Suddenly, they go through some horrible thing. Some terrible thing is happening in their life. It's awful. You know that if you show interest they're going to glom on to you and want to talk about things, and you're going to come out feeling so drained because all you're doing is listening to them. On the other hand, they're feeling better. They're coming up, because somebody finally cares and is listening. Meanwhile, you're being drained.

Guess what? It's them or you. You can hold on to your convenience and privacy and comfort and let them sort of die in their loneliness or solitude or you can kiss that goodbye and help them come together. It's them or you. There is no way to really love people without suffering. Jesus shows it at the macro level, but it happens at the micro level. Reconcile yourself to that, because look at what he did for you. If he did this for you, why couldn't you do it in little ways for others? That's the essence of the Christian life.

Thirdly, if he really is this powerful and great and he has really done this for you, you need to take the limits off of your allegiance to him that you have on. Let's be honest. All of us say, "Oh, I'm living for Jesus," but all of us have limits to just what we're willing to do. Even if he was just this great ... When I became a Christian, in my early years, the kind of books I read, like John Stott's *Basic Christianity*, always made this point, and other speakers always made this point.

They said if you have just a prophet or a sage who gives you wisdom on what you should do, that's one thing, but when you have someone who says, "I'm

God" and then says, "I've come to die for you," you can't respond to such a person mildly. You either have to run away as fast as you can or you have to give him absolutely everything, because he deserves it. Absolutely everything. He deserves it twice. He deserves it once as your creator; he owns you, but then he deserves it, if possible, doubly as your redeemer, because he gave up everything for you.

If he's that great, you shouldn't just be dialing him up every so often when you have a problem. As one of my teachers once said, if the distance between the earth to the sun, which is 92 million miles, was just the thickness of one sheet of paper, then the distance from earth to the nearest star would be a stack of papers 71 feet high. Just the diameter of our galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high, and our galaxy is just a little speck of dust, virtually, in this enormous place called the universe.

According to the Bible, Jesus Christ holds this together with the word of his power ... his pinkie, as it were. Then he came and died for us. Is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your personal assistant? Is this the kind of person you bring into your life as a consultant and you call him when you need him; otherwise, you're just very happy to go along your own way? No. You take all the limits off your allegiance and you live for him utterly.

Here's the last thing: don't let the fear of death control you. For example, you say, "Well, I don't think I'm that afraid of death." All right, listen. Don't say, "Oh my goodness, oh my goodness! I've never gotten *here*. I've never gotten *there*. By now I should have had the career, and I'll never have the career I want. I've never been *here*. I've never seen the Alps. I'll never have a family. I'll never be married."

Do you know what that is? That's fear of death. Death won't trump anything for you if you're in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "I am the life. It's all in me." Don't say, "Oh, I'm dying now and I'm never going to see the Alps." You don't think there are mountains in God? You don't think that in him there are, to an infinite degree greater, the things you see when you see majestic mountains? You don't think that in God there's family, there's love infinitely greater than any spousal love? You're going to miss out on nothing, nothing at all, because he is the resurrection and the life.

So don't let the fear of death, either covertly or overtly or in any way, cow you or control you. You know the "Dialogue-Anthem," that great poem by George Herbert, in which Christian and Death are having a dialogue? Christian speaks, then Death speaks, then Christian speaks, and then Death speaks. The very last interchange goes like this. The last thing Death says is:

These arms shall crush thee.

The last thing Christian says is:

*Spare not, do thy worst.
I shall be one day better than before;*

Thou so much worse, that thou shalt be no more.

At the first level, that's Jesus Christ talking. He says to death, "Come on! Destroy me, and you'll only be destroying yourself." There's a whole book written called *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. When death killed Jesus Christ it basically signed its own death warrant. But guess what? Now that's also you, the Christian.

If you're in Jesus Christ and you see death coming at you, you can say, "Spare not, do thy worst," meaning, "The worst thing you could possibly do to me is the best thing you could do to me. You may think you're going to unmake me, but you're only going to make me. You think you're going to make me worse? You're only going to make me better." What Jesus Christ says is, "I am the resurrection. I am the life. I am rebirth. I am life, and don't be afraid; I've overcome the universe." Let's pray.

Father, keep us from being afraid of death at any level. Keep us from putting limits on our allegiance to you. Prevent us also from blaming you for our suffering. In all these ways, work in our hearts and lives through this tremendous display of what you did for us. First, O Lord Jesus Christ, you emptied yourself of your glory and assumed a human nature and became the God-man, and then you went to the cross for us.

Because of that, we can live life with confidence, and we also have to live life in submission to you. We pray that all these great things that could be ours, if we truly appropriate by faith what you've done for us, *would* be ours to your glory and to our joy. We pray that you'd help us now, as we do the Lord's Supper, work these things into our hearts at a new level. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Questions About the Bible

Questioning Christianity—March 6, 2014

We're near the end of our series of seven sessions. These last three sessions are hard for me, and I'm going to tell you why. If you can sign up for these groups, it would be a great idea, because these last three weeks I'm trying to look at the macro questions. Last week, "Can we believe in God?" this week, "Can we trust the Bible?" and next week, "Can we have faith in Jesus?"

We're looking at all of the objections, arguments, and counter-arguments for belief in God, arguments and counter-arguments about trusting in the Bible, arguments and counter-arguments about Jesus and who he is, and there are so many of them I'm not doing justice to them. I'm running through them. Last week I particularly felt I was just zipping through them.

I'm trying to get to all the various issues, do as much as I can to show you there has been a lot of great discussion and there are actually some really great answers to many of the questions you may have heard or you may have, but we can't really do justice in these last weeks to all the issues. Therefore, I would urge you to consider being part of a group which is going to meet for another eight weeks and process these things.

It's probably a better way to do it. It's always nice to have some talking head up here you can respond to, but probably the best way to work through all of these things is in a community of other people that you feel like you can go back and forth with and argue with and counter-argue to. But tonight I want to talk about whether we can trust the Bible.

Last week by talking about God I was being kind of generic. Even though I'm a Christian minister and I'm a Christian, I'm talking more about God in general, but by going into the Bible this week and talking about Christ next week, I'm trying to home in on questions more around the truth or untruth of Christianity.

When it comes to trusting the Bible or not, I think there are three basic objections to the Bible's authority. Most people, unless you're Richard Dawkins, think there are a few good things in the Bible. Most people think there's some great stuff in it or some good stuff in it, but for three main reasons so many people today feel like, "We can't really treat it as authoritative, because there are some parts of the Bible that are seriously wrong." By the way, these aren't all equal for everybody.

Some people say we can't really trust the Bible because science disproves a lot of the things the Bible says. Secondly, many other people say, or sometimes the same people also say, we can't trust in the Bible because of cultural values. The Bible is regressive. Culture has moved on. The Bible has a lot of values in it we have grown beyond or gotten beyond, and we can't follow the Bible in those areas. Thirdly, there's the question of history. Many years ago, people thought everything in the Bible was historically true, but now we know a lot of it was legends and stories and it's not necessarily historically reliable.

So we can't trust it *historically*, *scientifically*, and *culturally*. Under each of these three, unfortunately, there's a ton of other kinds of questions. I'm going to take a half an hour and survey them and try to give you at least some idea of why I think there are actually great answers to these objections. I do think you can trust the Bible. I might as well go on record here at the beginning. I do think you can trust it.

1. *The Bible and science.* There are two objections under this issue. One of them is we can't trust a lot of the Bible because it's filled with stories about miracles, and science has disproved miracles. That's one way to put it. Science has proven that miracles don't happen. Or maybe you want to be a little milder and say there's just no scientific evidence for miracles at all. So how can we trust the Bible with all of these accounts of miracles? Let me give you four responses.

The first response is science could never prove a miracle even if a miracle

happened. Why? Empirical science is based on two assumptions. The first is the regularity of nature. Science can never establish anything that can't be replicated. If somebody says, "*This* happens and *this* happens," how are we going to scientifically prove that? You have to be able to replicate it. Under the same circumstances, it has to happen again. Otherwise, it's scientifically unproven.

Replication. If you say, "We have discovered that if you put *X* factor in mercury it boils at *this* temperature at *this* altitude, but if you have the *X* factor out it doesn't boil," how are we going to prove that? You have to replicate it. Miracles are by definition not replicable. For a moment, let's grant that a miracle really happened. Let's grant that God has actually done a miracle right in the presence of a scientist.

You can't prove anything if you can't replicate it, and a miracle by definition is an interruption of the natural and normal way things happen in the world. The other thing, by the way, is that science not only has to replicate it if it's going to prove it but science always assumes a natural cause. You know that.

If I was in front of a bunch of scientists and I had one missing finger, because years ago I lost a finger, and I said, "I'm going to show you a miracle," and a voice came out of heaven, "I heal thee, Tim Keller," and right in front of everybody my finger grew back, would that prove there was a miracle? Of course it wouldn't. They would just assume, because they're scientists, that even though we don't know how it happened, there has to be a natural cause. That's their job.

They would never say, "This has been proven." You can't say that every natural cause possible has been tested out, because you can never know that. In other words, if miracles really occurred, there would be no way to scientifically prove them. So to say that science has disproved miracles is impossible. Even if miracles existed, science by definition couldn't disprove them.

Thirdly, logically, the only way you could be sure miracles can't happen is if you were sure there was no God. I tried to show you last week that all arguments that argue it's impossible to believe in God fail. They might have a lot of power in them. They may be true to a great degree, but to actually disprove the existence of God is impossible. If you can't disprove the existence of God, then you can't disprove the existence of miracles, because if God exists, then miracles can exist. If you can't disprove God, you can't disprove miracles.

One last thing. To say miracles can't happen is not a scientific statement; it's a philosophical statement. You have the right to it. It's an act of faith. It's a statement of faith. I have *my* statements of faith, so there's no reason why you can't have *your* statements of faith, but don't say it's a scientific statement. It's a philosophical statement. Sometimes it can get you into some trouble. C.S. Lewis talks about an interesting incident from ancient history.

Sennacherib, who was the emperor of Assyria, an overwhelmingly powerful empire, invaded Israel and besieged Jerusalem. It was an overwhelmingly large

army, and yet it's a historical fact (everybody admits this) that within a few days after surrounding Jerusalem it went home with its tail between its legs.

Second Kings 19 says that what happened was God sent angels down and the angels went through the camp and slew many, many soldiers, and that's why they left. Herodotus, who was a Greek historian and not a believer in God ... Everybody is trying to figure out why this happened. He had heard that Sennacherib's army was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of the whole army the night before. This is what C.S. Lewis says:

"When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib's invasion was stopped by angels [1 Kings 19], and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of his army [Herodotus, Book II, Section 141] ... Unless you start by begging the question [and philosophically assuming that miracles cannot happen], there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the [action of angels]. But mice just don't do these things."

Unless you say angels can't exist, there's really nothing irrational about angels acting like that. If God tells angels to go slay a bunch of invading armies, angels do that sort of thing, but mice don't do the things Herodotus said. Scientifically you're going to say, "It wasn't the mice, obviously, and it wasn't the angels. I don't believe in angels. So who knows?" It shouldn't trouble you, but it's interesting that if you philosophically rule out the possibility of miracles, as we're going to see next week, there are a number of things in history that are really hard to account for.

Lewis is trying to say sometimes to not agree to miracles makes you have to come up with theories of how this or that happened that are extraordinarily difficult to believe. We'll look at that next week. Miracles. There's no particular reason why miracles can't happen. You can't say miracles can't happen.

The second basic objection from science to the Scripture is the issue of creation and evolution, particularly the account of creation in the book of Genesis. The objection goes like this: "Science disproves what the Bible says about creation in Genesis, chapter 1. Genesis, chapter 1, says that God created the earth in a few days, pretty much like this, and only a few thousand years ago, and if you try to get out of it by not taking Genesis 1 literally, then why do we need to take *any* of the Bible literally?"

The idea is that science has proven evolution. Evolution doesn't fit in with Genesis 1. If you try to get out from it by saying, "Well, we don't take Genesis 1 literally," then why take anything in the Bible literally? Therefore, why believe the Bible? Let me give you three answers to that.

First, this whole idea about taking the Bible literally or not is a bit of a red herring. For example, in Judges, chapter 4, it tells us about how Deborah and Barak led an Israelite army to fight against the Syrians led by Sisera. So you had the Israelites and you had the Syrians, and Syria was oppressing the Israelites, and they basically rebelled and had this big fight and the Israelites won and Sisera is

defeated and killed. That's Judges, chapter 4.

As you read it, it looks like a regular historical narrative. When you get to Judges 5, though, Deborah sings a song about the battle. In Judges 4, there's an account of the battle. In Judges 5, Deborah sings a song about it. When you read the song, it's obviously poetry. Hebrew poetry has certain characteristics. Rhyme is not one of them. For many people today, poetry means rhyming, though you know it doesn't have to.

Hebrew poetry never rhymed, but it did have parallelism. It would say the same thing over and over again. There's parallelism, repetition, and a number of things that were the marks of Hebrew poetry. When she sings about the battle, there are marks of Hebrew poetry, and there are a lot of metaphors used. At one point, for example, in Judges 5, it says the stars in the heavens came and fought against Sisera.

So the Israelites were fighting against the Syrians, but the stars in their courses came and fought against him and defeated him. Okay, question. Read Judges 4. Read Judges 5. Are you going to take Judges 4 *and* Judges 5 literally? Judges 4 says nothing about the stars coming. Judges 4 sounds like a rather normal battle. Judges 5 gets all of these kind of supernatural elements involved.

It's not a problem for reading the book of Judges. It's very easy to tell that whoever wrote Judges intended Judges 4 to be a historical account and intended Judges 5 to be the record of a wonderful song, which, of course, used metaphors the way song and poetry does. There's really no problem. Judges 5 must not be taken literally. Why not? Because the author didn't want you to take it literally. Why not? Because it signals that it's poetry at every level.

There are a lot of places in the Psalms, for example (which is, again, a lot of poetry), where it talks about the mountains skipping and the hills decking themselves and singing for joy. Everybody knows you don't take it literally. Now is that terrible? "Oh my goodness! We're not taking the Bible literally." Say I write you a letter and say, "My boss was so upset I just could have killed him." The next thing you know there are police at the door.

They say, "We understand that you have made a death threat against your boss." You'd say to your friend who called the police, "Uh, why did you take me literally?" "Well, I have to take you literally. I'm trying to take you very seriously." Look. What you want to know is the author's intent. It's not always easy to tell. Let's face it. Sometimes you can't tell, but generally speaking, you know when the author is speaking metaphorically or not.

In the Bible there's not that much trouble, but there are a couple of places where, frankly, it's not that easy to know what the author's intent is. One of them is the book of Ecclesiastes. I'm not going to go there, and don't ask me any questions about the book of Ecclesiastes tonight, because you don't really care and I don't want to get into it. I know that. You would just be throwing that in just to make me squirm.

The trouble with Genesis 1 is if you read it as a Hebrew scholar (and Hebrew scholars *have* been for many years), it has some of the marks of poetry and, in another sense, it has some marks of a historical narrative. It doesn't seem to be straight-out poetry. It doesn't seem to be straight-out historical narrative. There's a lot of repetition, but there's no parallelism.

In other words, parallelism and repetition are the two marks of Hebrew poetry. What that means is there is a question, a big question, about whether or not you should take Genesis 1 literally. In no way, when I say that, does that jeopardize somehow the authority of the rest of the Bible or make the rest of the Bible obscure.

Here's a second thing to tell you. People say, "But doesn't the Bible teach that the world wasn't created very long ago?" I say, "Oh yeah, really? Where does it say that?" "Well, there are these genealogies in the Bible, and if you add them up, the genealogies go back to Adam and Eve and it's only like 5,000 years ago. So the Bible is wrong."

Well, one of the problems, of course, is that Hebrew scholars have told us for years that the genealogies are not complete. When the Bible says, "John begat Joe," you and I tend to think that John must be Joe's father. John begat Joe. Right? The trouble is the word *begat* literally means generated.

Therefore, John could be Joe's grandfather or great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather. The lines are being traced, but not everybody is in them. Therefore, the genealogies are in no way to tell us how old the earth is. Genesis 1 does not necessarily say the earth was created in six 24-hour days.

Here's the third thing. What it means in the end is that I don't think the Bible necessarily tells you *how* God created the earth. It tells the meaning of the creation. It tells you that God *did* do it. It does mean that evolutionism, the idea that we can account for absolutely everything in the human person through evolution, that everything about your brain, everything about your moral intuitions, everything about your desires, are nothing but the product of natural selection ...

Anybody who believes in God would reject that, I think, because we do think we have a soul and we have the image of God and that God has given us those things. I think there's a lot of room for discussion on how he has done it and how long ago he has done it and what processes he has used without necessarily contradicting the Bible, because the Bible doesn't go there.

One man named David Atkinson in his commentary on Genesis puts it something like this: "If 'evolution' is elevated to the status of a worldview of the way things are that explains everything, then there is direct conflict with the biblical faith, but if 'evolution' simply means a level of scientific biological hypothesis, it would seem there's little reason for conflict between the implications of Christian belief in the Creator and the scientific explorations of the way in which, at the level of biology, God has gone about his creating processes."

2. *The Bible and cultural values.* Here is where things get hot. I want to talk about three areas where people say, “Oh, we can’t believe in the Bible because ...” One is holy war, one is slavery (the idea is that the Bible condones slavery), and one is homosexuality. Before that, I need to lay down a general. This is extraordinarily important.

If you find that there is something in the Bible that just offends you ... You say, “It just offends me. I can’t believe in Christianity, I can’t believe in the Bible, because there are some things in the Bible that are culturally offensive to me. They’re regressive. They’re awful.” Let’s just talk high level for a second.

I have talked to people like this for years, especially in New York, who have said, “Well, I can’t believe the Bible because this offends me” or “I find this thing outrageous” or “This is just unacceptable.” First, are you sure you’re understanding what the Bible teaches? Several times I have talked to people who said, “The Bible is so regressive.” I said, “Like what?” They said, “Well, the Bible condones polygamy.” I said, “Really?”

“Yeah, the Bible supports polygamy.” I said, “Okay, where?” “Well, look at the whole book of Genesis. Abraham has more than one wife. Isaac, Jacob ... they all have multiple wives.” Robert Alter, Jewish expert on biblical literature, wrote a book some years ago. He taught at Berkeley for years. He’s a remarkable expert in Hebrew literature, Hebrew narrative. He wrote a book called *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, which is a classic.

He says if you read the book of Genesis and you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and you read the stories of their lives and how they did have children by multiple women and multiple wives and you see how absolutely miserable they are, and all the fighting, jealousy, anger, lying, and deception ... Anybody who thinks the narrator, the writer of Genesis, was promoting polygamy does not know how to read a story.

Anybody who can say, “Look at all these Old Testament saints,” clearly you haven’t really read the story. Maybe you’ve read a little piece of it. How do you decide what a text is saying? You have to read it. If it’s a narrative, you need to ask, “Okay, what is the narrator trying to get across?” In no way can you get out of the Old Testament that the writers of the Old Testament are promoting polygamy as an okay thing. That’s just one example. Sometimes people say, “I’m offended,” and I’ll say, “I don’t think the Bible says that.”

By the way, secondly, sometimes you get offended by an intramural Christian teaching. What I mean by *intramural* is there’s Orthodox, there’s Catholic, there’s Protestant. Then there are Baptists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians. I know this is very confusing. Sometimes you run into some Presbyterian Christian, and they are trying to talk to you about Christianity, and they’re going to load a lot of their Presbyterian beliefs into their talking about Christianity. You might get really offended and upset about it.

Sometimes I’ll talk to somebody and they’ll be saying, “I don’t like this,” and I say,

"Well, I believe that too, but most Christians don't believe that, so there's no particular reason why you have to reject all of Christianity just because you reject that." For example, I'm a Presbyterian. I believe in some forms of predestination. Some people say, "I can't believe that." I say, "Okay. That's okay. Most Christians don't believe that either. Please don't make that one of the central things. It's not in the Apostles' Creed. It's not one of the main things."

So first, if you get offended, maybe you misunderstood the Bible. Secondly, if you get offended, maybe you're just offended by that particular aspect of Christian teaching, but it's not part of the gospel, the central message. It's not part of the main thing, and don't worry about it. Here's the third thing. Would you do a thought experiment with me for a minute? Just like what I did with miracles.

Let's assume for a minute that the Bible really is the Word of God. Let's assume it's not the product of any one human being or even a bunch of human beings. Let's assume for a second that it's not the product of a particular culture. Let's assume for a second that God inspired human beings to write what he wanted them to write. Now if it's a product of not one culture but God, then it would have to offend every cultural sensibility somewhere.

If it only offended Western people and didn't offend Asians, that would be a really bad sign. If it only offended Asians but not Western people, that would be a bad sign. For example, some years ago I was talking to a friend who said he had tried so hard to win his grandfather to faith in Christ, and his grandfather said, "Let me ask you a question." His grandfather had been through a war. His grandfather was quite unhappy with a particular other country.

He said, "Are you telling me that people from that other country who did all that oppression, all that nasty stuff, all that awful stuff in the war, that if one of them, even after a whole lifetime of violence and oppression, if they repent and ask for forgiveness they won't go to hell?" My friend said, "Yes." His grandfather said, "Well, I can't believe in any kind of religion that would let anybody from that country out of hell." He wasn't kidding. He was oppressed. He was very serious.

To you and me, as Western people, the idea of forgiveness, the idea that God would forgive you no matter what you've done, does not sound offensive, but in a shame and honor culture, which we talked about last week, it is absolutely crazy. The idea that you're supposed to forgive your enemies ... You're supposed to forgive them seventy times seven, the Bible says.

No matter what a person has done, even if they've been a hit man for the mob and have been killing people left and right, if they ask for forgiveness they get forgiven. You and I might be a little queasy about the hit man for the mob, but by and large we like the idea. People in other parts of the world find that utterly repulsive, and they say, "That offends me. I can't believe in Christianity."

Now here, much of what the Bible says about sex and gender is offensive. I'm going to get to this in a minute. I want you to see that we're extraordinarily offended, but here's what I want you to see. If the Bible really is God's truth, it

would have to be offensive to you somewhere. It wouldn't make sense that it would make sense at every point. In other words, if it's offending you right now, if anything, it's a sign of its truth.

If you do the thought experiment, if the Bible is really true, the Word of God, it has to offend you somewhere. So here's my question ... *How can you reject the Bible because it offends you?* It doesn't make any sense. One person wrote it this way: "To stay away from Christianity because part of the Bible's teaching is offensive to you assumes that if there is a God he wouldn't have any views that upset you." Does that belief make sense? Let me help you with that. No. I don't think so. I don't think you think so either. Let's take a look at the three offensive parts of the Bible: *holy war*, *slavery*, and *homosexuality*.

A. *Holy war*. There are a lot of places in the Old Testament where God does say to the Israelites, "Go and wipe out that group of people." There are places like that, especially when they're going into the Promised Land. That really gives us chills, and not good chills. Oh my goodness. Here you have it sort of being condoned in the Bible, and certainly people who believe the Bible would say, "If you have God on your side, then you'll feel like you can do holy war too, that you can wipe out the infidels."

Well, here are three or four things that are very important. You have to read the Bible as a whole. It is by no means fair to go take one chapter somewhere ... If you wrote a novel, wouldn't you want people to read the whole novel? Wouldn't it be awful if people only read the middle three chapters and then wrote an Amazon review? You would say, "Wait a minute. No. It's a story." Well, the Bible has a narrative arc too. Here's what you need to remember.

First, in the Old Testament, often when God tells Israel to wipe out a group of people he says, "Because they're brutal, because you are going to be an instrument of my justice." That still gives us the willies, but what he's really trying to say is, "I'm punishing that group of people because of their violence, and I want you to be the rod of my justice." Okay, that still scares us.

Even at that early stage in the Bible, it's interesting to see that God ordinarily says, "You cannot take any plunder. You can't take the cattle. You can't take the money. You can't take anything. Why? Because this is not an act of imperialism. You're not supposed to be just enriching yourself at the expense of other people. You're not supposed to be enslaving them. You're supposed to be an instrument of my judgment." So even at that early stage, you have that sense of judgment. If that's all there was, I'd be upset too, by the way.

Secondly, when Israel starts taking slaves, when Israel is oppressive, he starts to war against them, because God is not a tribal deity. God is on nobody's side. God is on the side of good. He's against injustice, and if you start to do injustice he comes against you. Thirdly, near the end of the Old Testament, the Jewish prophets, because Israel was always being oppressed, were longing for a messiah who would come and fight against evil.

In Daniel 7 there's a prophecy of this great figure who's going to come. He's called the *son of man*, and he's going to come and war against evil. He's going to be a warrior against evil. Jesus appears, and he calls himself the Son of Man. His disciples say, "Here's the Messiah," so they expect he's going to start to sharpen his sword. Instead, he tells people to love their enemies. That's all through the Sermon on the Mount.

He spends all of his time not politically, not raising an army or raising a war chest or running for office or anything like that. He spends all of his time healing people all over the place and caring for people. Then at the climax of his life, when people come after him to try to arrest him and execute him, one of his apostles takes out his sword, and Jesus says, "Put your sword down. He who lives by the sword dies by the sword." He goes to the cross and forgives his enemies. He dies forgiving his enemies.

Why? Because he knows he's overcoming evil with good. He *is* the divine warrior. He *is* coming to overcome evil with good, but if he had come with a sword in his hand and put down the Roman oppressors for the Jews, all that would have done was created a little bit of social justice for a few years in one little spot. By going to the cross, Christians believe, he came to destroy sin and death itself. He came to pay the penalty for our sin so that someday he can come back and end all of evil without ending us.

What that means is that Jesus Christ now has changed the idea of what it means to war against evil. In Romans 12 and many other places in the New Testament, we are told over and over because of what Jesus did Christians are supposed to overcome evil with good. How do we overcome evil? How do we defeat evil? By loving our enemies. By forgiving our enemies. By overcoming evil with good. A scholar wrote this:

"The Bible as a whole has a coherent understanding of divine warfare. In early times, God's opposition to evil was expressed in the world through military action toward brutal people groups, whose violence had to be stopped, but in Christ, God's opposition to evil is elevated to a whole new level. There is no contradiction between a supposed New Testament loving God and an Old Testament wrathful God. The deepest longings of the Hebrew Scriptures for a divine warrior who destroys evil is fully realized in Jesus Christ, the suffering Savior, who overcame evil with good. Now we walk in his footsteps as Christians."

B. *Slavery*. I will make very short shrift with this. This wasn't something I heard years ago. I'm old enough now to know that these various objections to Christianity kind of wax and wane. In the last 10 years I've had many people say, "Well, the Bible is wrong about slavery; it's probably wrong about other things." I say, "What do you mean it's wrong about slavery?" "Well, it condones slavery."

One of the problems we have is translation. For example, in the Hebrew Old Testament the word for *slave* or *servant* is the word *ebed*, but let me tell you

something about what the Bible says about slavery. First of all, if you fell into debt, you had to sell yourself into slavery until your debt was paid. Secondly, slavery through kidnapping was a crime punishable by death (Exodus 21:16).

The only slavery that was allowed is not what you and I would call slavery; it was indentured servanthood. You fell into debt. There was no bankruptcy. You had to work for somebody else. You were their slave until you paid off the debt.

Involuntary slavery through kidnapping was not allowed (Exodus 21:16). If you strike a servant and he loses a tooth, he has to go free (Exodus 21:26). If you kill a slave, it's a capital offense.

Slavery was never for life. At the very most it could be seven years (Deuteronomy 15:1). If a slave came to a master with a wife, the wife had to be taken and released with him. The master was never allowed to break up a family. The so-called slave had the right to go to court and sue his or her master in pursuit of rights (Job 31:13–15).

Here's the most interesting thing. Deuteronomy 23 says, "If a slave flees from a master, it's wrong for you to try to return him or her," because if the slave has run away from a master it is likely because there was abuse. Therefore, it says if you find a runaway slave, you must not send him back, but whatever town he chooses to live in, you must help him live there. Contrast that with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in America, where it said if you find a fugitive slave, if you don't return them, you're liable.

If slavery is not based on race, it is not permanent, the slave has rights, the slave can sue, the slavery never lasts longer than seven years, if you hit him and knock out his tooth he goes free, if he runs away you're not allowed to return him because it means abuse, kidnapping is always wrong ... Does that sound like slavery that you and I know? No, it's not really slavery.

It *is* slavery, because we actually don't have anything like this anymore, but one of the problems is in the Bible slavery is not African, race-based, permanent slavery where the whole person is the property of the master who can do whatever he wants with him. That is actually forbidden by the Bible because of kidnapping, because of all these other things. Therefore, the Bible doesn't condone slavery. It condones something.

Many places have had indentured servanthood before. We don't have it in our capitalistic system. We have bankruptcy and things like that. In fact, even before bankruptcy we had debtors' prison. In other words, we got rid of the indentured servanthood way of dealing with debts. For you to look at what the Bible says and see the word *slave* ... There are places where it says, "Slaves, obey your masters." "Oh, there we go. The Bible is wrong about slavery; therefore, it's wrong about other things." No.

C. *Homosexuality*. I would like a little sympathy, because nobody anywhere in this country can say anything about this subject at all without creating a social media firestorm and getting a lot of people really upset. Let me just say this. First,

I do think this is one of the places where what the Bible teaches is offensive to our culture. I took a fairly long time to try to show you that you shouldn't be too put off by that.

The Bible says, "Here's Jesus Christ. Here's what he said he was. Here's what he said he did. Here's the evidence for the resurrection." You can't say, "Because I don't like what the Bible says about sex or gender, Jesus couldn't be raised from the dead." Does that make sense? No, of course it doesn't. You have to get things in perspective. You have to say, "All right, what Tim is about to say probably is going to upset me or offend me, but that doesn't necessarily mean, therefore, Christianity is a crock." It can't, because it's going to offend somebody somewhere.

I wish my friend's grandfather wouldn't have been offended by the idea of forgiveness no matter what the crime, but he was, and he let that keep him from seeing anything else in the truth. You could say, "Well, that was kind of narrow-minded," but what makes you think our culture is more right than his culture? You may think so, but don't forget your grandchildren and great-grandchildren are going to think at least three quarters of the things you believe right now are stupid. You know that.

You don't know what those things are. Some of the things you feel right now ... All smart people, all sophisticated people believe this, and that doesn't fit in with the Bible. At least three quarters of those things are going to be seen by your great-grandchildren as stupid, just like you think that man's grandfather was wrong. You mustn't take your cultural sensibility and say, "Therefore, Christianity can't be true." I tried to show you that if Christianity is true it would offend you somewhere.

Now 99.9999 percent of all people, Christians and non-Christians, Richard Dawkins atheists and Pope Francis, believe the Bible says that homosexual acts are sin. Every time it's mentioned it's a prohibition and heterosexual relationships are held up. In other words, everybody I know, both people who don't like the Bible and who do like the Bible, people who do like Christians and don't ... Almost everybody has always said the Bible says that's wrong. I think so too.

There are very few people who think you can get out of the Bible that it's not. I know most of them live in New York City. They're a very small number spread out across the world and across history. And that's offensive. I have to say two other things, and they're very important. One is basically the Bible doesn't so much knock homosexuality. It doesn't mention it that often, as people often point out.

I think it has a remarkably exalted view of sex, because it says the sex act has two purposes. The first purpose is a way of giving yourself completely to somebody else. It's a way of saying to someone else, "I belong completely and exclusively to you." It's not a means for self-fulfillment; it's a means of self-donation. It's a means of creating a community that lasts called a *family*. It's like the glue. So it's not a way of getting fulfillment; it's a way of giving yourself.

It's almost a sacrament in the sense of what you're doing physically has to represent what you're doing with your entire life, and that is being vulnerable to a person. The Bible would say if you're vulnerable physically with somebody but you're not vulnerable by marrying the person, in other words by committing yourself emotionally, socially, financially, and legally ... If you're only going to be vulnerable physically and not vulnerable in every other way, the sex is not doing what God made sex to be. Sex is a way of giving yourself to somebody.

Secondly, sex is a way for the diverse glories of male and female to be reunited and mingled. There's a certain incompleteness. There are certain unique beauties and glories that each gender has that the other one doesn't have, and sex is a way of re-mingling those. Homosexuality is only ruled out not because the Bible is down on homosexuality so much as it doesn't fit in with this exalted view of sex.

Lastly, the parable of the good Samaritan teaches we're supposed to love our neighbor, no matter who the neighbor is. Jesus gives a story about a Samaritan who finds a Jew beaten in the road and vulnerable, and instead of just leaving the Jew, instead of riding over the Jew ... All Samaritans were enemies of the Jews, and the Jews were enemies of Samaritans. They hated each other. Yet the Samaritan comes and picks the man up and bandages up his wounds and takes him to an inn and heals him. Recuperation is at his own expense.

In other words, what he's saying here is, "It doesn't matter who your neighbor is. It doesn't matter what your neighbor's belief is. If you're a Christian following me, you have to love your neighbor, no matter who your neighbor is." Any Christian who has abused gay people or is just cold to gay people is contradicting that parable, and there's no excuse for it. No excuse at all.

Christians need to own the fact that there has been that history of marginalization and take responsibility for it and do absolutely everything they can to bring the church's attitude much more in line. I think that's what the pope is trying to do. He's trying to say the attitude has to be in line with "Who is my neighbor?" It doesn't matter who my neighbor is. I'm supposed to love my neighbor, and I'm also supposed to work together with my neighbor to make this city a great city regardless of whether a person believes like me or acts like me or not.

3. *The Bible and history.* I told you I was going to get to "Can you trust the Bible historically?" That actually fits into next week, because when we start talking about Jesus Christ, right away the question is, "How do you even know who Jesus is? After all, you can't trust the Bible, because the Gospels are filled with legends."

We'll start with that, and then we'll move into the other things about how we know who Jesus is and what he taught. Right now I'm going to end my time on the Bible, because I know I have thrown the stone into the bush and there are all of these snakes coming out. The real question is, "Will I be able to kill them all before the night is out?"

Female: Now is your opportunity to respond with questions for Dr. Keller. The first question about the Bible is ... I've actually wondered this myself and had something like this question asked in the past. "God is so different in the Old Testament and the New Testament: cruel and harsh versus kind and forgiving. How do I know which is the real God?"

Tim Keller: If you were asking me questions about science or history, I'm kind of an amateur, like a lot of you are, but when it comes to understanding the text of the Bible, that's the one area ... That's my job: to read the Bible. I do not grant that the Old Testament God is more wrathful than the New Testament God. When Jesus dies on the cross, he wouldn't be dying on the cross if God was just shrugging at sin and evil.

In the Old Testament, God judges sin and evil. *Bang!* In the New Testament, the judgment comes down on Jesus so that by believing in Jesus we're pardoned. It changes the landscape. It's the reason the New Testament appears to be so utterly different. I already gave you one example of that. I even gave you a quote. The New Testament transmutes the idea of warring against evil into overcoming evil with good. We have a hymn we sing called, "Lead On, O King Eternal." The last line goes like this:

*For not with swords loud clashing
Nor roll of stirring drum
With deeds of love and mercy
The heavenly kingdom comes.*

"Not with swords and drums, but with deeds of love and mercy." Paul actually says in Romans 12, following Jesus Christ ... Jesus overcame evil by loving people, dying for people, returning not evil with evil but evil with good, and not answering violence with violence, and that's how we overcome evil now. You say, "That's not in the Old Testament." Well, I think it is.

The Old Testament was looking for a God who would overcome evil, and Jesus changes that. The Old Testament God believed in judgment. Well, Jesus wouldn't have gone to the cross unless there was a need for judgment. The cross means he was getting the punishment we deserve. It's not like the Old Testament God punishes people and the New Testament God says, "Oh, it doesn't matter. Let bygones be bygones. Boys will be boys. Hey, who am I to judge?"

Well, then there's no reason for Jesus to die on the cross. He went to the cross because there was a penalty to pay. Also, the Old Testament is filled with foreshadows of Christ. So I wouldn't grant that. I think the Bible is a coherent whole, and I think you could see that as you read it. Therefore, there's only one God, and I think that's the God you should look to, not try to choose between the two.

Female: "Can a homosexual be a Christian?"

Tim: Of course. Short answer. What makes you a Christian is you believe in

Jesus Christ. The trouble, of course, is that if you read Michel Foucault, who was gay, who was the great postmodern French philosopher ... He wrote a book on the history of sexuality in which he says up until 180 years ago you would never talk about homosexuality as an identity. Foucault says the idea that homosexuality is an identity, that "I am gay" or "I'm homosexual," is a new idea and it will probably go away. Homosexuality is a behavior.

The Bible talks about behavior. It doesn't actually talk about homosexual as an identity. We're simply saying that if you want to live the Christian life and you find yourself attracted to someone of the same sex, you should not act on that. There are people, like W.H. Auden, who was, you might say, a homosexual Christian ... He believed what the Bible said and tried very hard to adhere to it and he constantly talked about not being able to adhere to it.

If somebody says to me, "I'm a Christian, but I'm not living the way I think I should be living. Am I really saved?" The answer is you are not saved by your behavior; you're saved by your faith in Jesus Christ, but as time goes on, if you don't follow him, you will lose a certain amount of assurance that you have really believed. So I would say to anybody your salvation is based on faith in Christ. The reality of that faith will eventually show itself in the way in which you live.

Depending on how you define *homosexual*, the answer is "Sure." There are many people who say, "I'm not acting on it. I'm following Jesus Christ, but I'm still homosexual because I have the feelings." There are other people who would not use the word for themselves anymore. I don't know how you're using it in the question, and that's the reason why it's a little difficult for me to give a perfectly good answer. That's the reason why I've danced a little bit with the question.

The short answer is you're not saved by being heterosexual and lost by being homosexual. You're saved by being a Christian, by believing in Jesus. You're lost if you reject the idea that you need a Savior. That's the key. Then whether or not you're living the right way, eventually that should shake out, but ultimately it's not how you live that saves you; it's what you believe.

Female: "Does the Bible teach gender inequality and condone patriarchy?"

Tim: I didn't go there, partly because there was just not enough time. You could make a pretty good case ... I think you can see it in the New Testament. Rodney Stark, a historian who wrote a book called *The Rise of Christianity*, says that male and female had an equality inside the Christian church that made the rest of the surrounding Greco-Roman world look pretty bad. Women had more rights, you might say. They had more scope for their gifts.

Also when the Bible talks about male and female ... There's a place in Galatians where it says in Christ there's no male or female. That is to say, God considers not just the men the people who have salvation and their wives are saved through their husbands, or something like that. The real problem with that question is you're probably trying to say, "Does that mean there can be no distinctions?" Modern Western individualism generally says there can be no

distinctions inside a marriage and there can't be any role distinctions inside the church.

I don't think that's what the Bible teaches, but I would say that even if there are role distinctions, there's still equality. If my wife considers me the head of the home, and she does ... We have come to mutual agreement, by the way, of what that means. Nevertheless, there's no doubt that she feels I treat her as an equal in every way. I do think that means that even if there's role differentiation the genders are equal. Now because you didn't ask any more questions than that, I'm going to stop.

Female: A question trying to flush out the idea of grace. "The idea that you will be forgiven for anything you do just doesn't make sense. A person can be awful all of their life, then decide to believe when they're 80 years old, and that person goes to heaven, while the non-Christian who has done good works all their life does not go to heaven. How do you explain that?"

Tim: I've alluded to this in the past. Christians believe the idea that your salvation is dependent not on whether you're good or bad but whether you admit your need for a Savior, you admit that you're not good, you admit that you fail in many ways, you admit that there's a streak of self-centeredness in you, you admit that even the good things you do tend to be self-righteous.

We would say traditional religion says the good people are saved and the bad people are lost, but Christianity says it's the humble people, the people who admit they're not good, who are saved and the proud people, who say, "Hey, I'm a good person," who are lost. There's a famous parable. In Luke, chapter 18, Jesus talks about a Pharisee who goes up to pray and says, "Father, thank you that you've made me a good person, that I'm not like this tax collector here." The tax collector looks up and says, "Father, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Jesus says, "I tell you, the tax collector went home justified and the Pharisee did not." That's Christianity. You say, "Well, that's unfair." Well, I have to tell you that because of what I know about people's backgrounds, the idea that everybody, if they just summon up their willpower, can live a good life ... I don't believe it. Some people have really broken backgrounds. I'm old enough to see an enormous difference between people who grew up with really great, loving parents and people who did not.

It's a huge advantage to your ability to cope and your sense of your own well-being and your self-regard to have doting parents compared to people who just never had anything like that. You know that. It's huge. Do you think that creates a level playing field? Do you think that creates equality, that everybody is equal and those of you who try hard to live a good life should go to heaven, and those of you who have screwed up and been cruel and nasty all your life are lost?

I don't think that's fair. I think the fairest possible way to have a religion and a basis of salvation is to say, "All you have to do is admit that you're not so hot, that you're not great, that you're not good, that you need a savior," and the people

who are not allowed in, as it were, are the proud people who say, "Hey, I shouldn't have to beg for charity. I shouldn't need that. I should be able to get in on my merits."

They're the ones who go home not justified. I think that's more fair. That's all. I think it's way more fair than to say everybody is bound to live as good a life as possible, because I see that some people find that extraordinarily difficult. There's no level playing field.

Female: Next is a question of the credibility of the Bible. "The authors of the books in the Bible are long dead and there is no way the writer's intent can be verified, so how can we be sure that they did not misunderstand something or take something down incorrectly?"

Tim: That's a great question. There are some parts of the Bible that you do spend time wondering, especially narrative. If Paul says in one of his letters, "You must only have one spouse," it's not too hard to tell what the author's intent is. That is to say, polygamy is wrong. If you're reading the book of Genesis, as Robert Alter says ... The book of Genesis is a story. It's a narrative. It's not law. It's not proverbs. It's not case law. It's not didactic. It's a story.

To discern the intent of a storyteller is a little harder. Now I think it's right in saying you can't read the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and come out thinking the narrator thinks polygamy is a good idea. I think he's right about that, but that's a little bit more indirect. The fact is that I would agree that there are parts of the Bible that are extraordinarily clear and there are parts of the Bible that are matters of interpretation. However, the most important parts of the Christian faith are based on the most clear and repeated statements in the Bible.

A lot of people think, "If I become a Christian, it means I'm going to be told exactly what I have to believe." The fact of the matter is there are a lot of areas of debate, and they're usually debates over texts in the Bible. The central stuff, which is what the Bible is based on ... the deity of Jesus Christ, the necessity of him going to the cross, what it means to believe, and that sort of thing ... is actually quite easy to discern in the Bible. There's really no doubt what the authors mean, but there are plenty of places where there's room for disagreement.

Female: "Given how massively interpretation has changed and how tied it is to our culture, under whose authority should we interpret and why?"

Tim: That's one of the reasons a lot of people are Catholic. The Catholic approach is to say that the magisterium has the right to tell you what the Bible says. I'm a Protestant. Protestantism would say, "Well, that sort of puts the magisterium between you and God." That's how we would say it. See, this is an intramural debate. What we would say is that I have the Bible and it is my responsibility to interpret the Bible, but not individualistically. I have to interpret it individually but not individualistically.

You say, "What do you mean by that, Tim?" I'm glad you asked. What I mean is

that I'm not supposed to do it in isolation from history. There are a lot of things I hate about the Internet, but one of the great things is it is not very hard for you, at this point, to find out what the early church fathers thought about Mark 9:28, what the Greek fathers, what the Latin fathers thought about it, what the people thought about it in the fifth century, the sixth century, the seventh century, what African theologians think about it.

It's not very hard for you to get an idea about what other Christians over the centuries and in other countries are saying about that verse and how they're reading it. That can sometimes correct you, because we all have cultural blinders on and we all are creatures of our own time. So if you're willing to say, "In the Bible I think God is speaking to me, and it's my job to try to interpret it properly, as a way of following God. I want to know what he wants for my life, and the way I find out is in the Bible ..."

I shouldn't be interpreting it individualistically without reference to what other people say. Otherwise, I might be self-deceived. So generally, when I find I'm interpreting it in a way that most other interpreters have interpreted it over the years, I feel like, "Okay, that's good." Occasionally, I might think other people are wrong, but, again, you're going to see the main pillars, the main foundational truths that Catholics and Protestants and everybody believe about Christianity, are rooted in the most obvious parts of the Bible and the parts of the Bible where there has been enormous consensus across the centuries.

When I read the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, 1,500 years ago, a man in Northern Africa, and I see how he reads the Scripture, very often I'll say, "Huh." First of all, it's amazing the commonalities. When I read the confessions of a man who lived in Northern Africa 1,500 years ago and I see the struggles he's struggling with and the things he's seeing in the Scripture, it's amazing to me how much it's like my own Christian faith. In fact, to me it's one of the marks of the truth of Christianity that this guy is not completely alien to me at all.

Yet there are places where I see, as an ancient man, a premodern man, him reading the Scripture differently than I do, and that's great, because what that makes me say is, "Is he right or am I right?" It helps me to be self-critical. You just simply have to be willing, in a sense, to read the Bible in community. That doesn't mean necessarily people you know. It can be people who are long dead, but you need to read it in community, not individualistically, and you still have to read it individually.

Female: "There are many other books that are considered inspired in many people's opinions, so this question points out that every religion has their own texts of beliefs. What makes the words of the Bible rise above all the others?"

Tim: Yeah, I probably won't get to this next week, so I'd better talk about it. First of all, the reason I believe the Bible, why I take it as authority, is negatively the objections ... I just went through most of the objections. "It's culturally regressive. Miracles can't happen. Science has disproven the creation accounts." I've tried to show you that none of those arguments succeed.

Those are arguments that are saying, "You can't trust the Bible because ..." I've tried to say, "Well, if miracles are real, if the Bible is inspired, if these things were true, none of these objections would ..." In other words, science couldn't disprove miracles or if Christianity was really true it would have to be culturally offensive. So cultural offense is not a reason not to believe, and science is not a reason not to believe.

So first of all, negatively, I don't have any reasons not to believe the Bible. Positively, though ... There are a lot of things in the Bible that when I was a young man in particular I said, "Good night," but when I read the Gospels (the Gospels purport to be historically reliable accounts of Jesus' life), I then had an opportunity to decide, "Do I believe in Jesus? Do I believe he is who he said he is?" I looked at his claims. I looked at his actions. I looked at the claims of the resurrection.

Once you decide yay or nay, that determines what you think about the Bible. Here's the point. If Jesus is not the Son of God raised from the dead, who cares what the Bible says? If it's wrong, if you don't believe in that, why freak out about what anything else it says? On the other hand, if I do believe that Jesus is the Son of God raised from the dead ... He accepted the authority of the Bible. It's so clear. He breathed it. He bled it. He quoted it.

One of the last things he cried out from the cross he was quoting the Bible. So if I believe in Jesus, then I take the Bible. If I don't believe in Jesus, I don't need to take the Bible. I don't go to the Bible and come up with a list of, "Here's why I believe the Bible; here's why not." I have to deal with the objections to the truth of the Bible and trustworthiness of the Bible. Then I have to get to Jesus and decide what I believe about him.

In other words, Christ and the Bible stand or fall together. If I believe in him, the Bible comes with it. You can't follow Jesus and not trust the Bible, because it was what he built his whole life on. You just can't follow Jesus without trusting the Bible. On the other hand, if you don't believe in Jesus, there's really no reason to agonize over this or that biblical teaching. There's no reason.

Female: You mentioned the popular view of sex that the Bible has. Some people want to know more about that.

Tim: Is that word *popular* ironic?

Female: Yes, that was ironic. Sorry.

Tim: Oh, New Yorkers, you're so ironic. Okay.

Female: The questioner wants to know, "If you give yourself over fully by being vulnerable both physically and in every other way with a short-term partner, why is that a problem if you eventually do the same again with a husband or wife?"

Tim: This whole format is I'm just treating things so briefly. I told you before I'm not doing justice to any of them. All of these things need more discussion. That's

one of the reasons I'm hoping that a lot of you will be in these groups. If somebody says, "Oh, I'm going to give myself completely to them; I'm just not going to marry them ..." Okay. Well, why aren't you going to marry them? How could you say, "I'm giving myself completely to you, but I'm not marrying you"? It sounds to me like you're holding on to your independence.

It sounds to me like you're saying, "Well, I don't want to get married because then ..." There's no way to give yourself completely to a romantic partner without marrying them. If you say, "Well, I have; I just haven't gotten married yet," yeah, okay, we'll see. Go get married tonight, and then we'll see whether you've really given yourself. You might be kidding yourself. "Well, honey, let's go to bed, because I've given myself to you completely. We'll get married someday. I've really given myself to you completely." Okay, let's go get married, and then I'll know.

I wouldn't trust myself to say I've given myself completely without being married. That's the reason why the historic Christian teaching is that sex is for marriage. I think I said that, but maybe I didn't make it that clear. I would say, no, you can't give yourself without getting married; therefore, sex is for self-donation within marriage. Sorry. To talk about these massive subjects so quickly it's difficult to say it all very well.

Female: You talked about how you can't just read part of the Bible but need to consider the entirety of it, and people have the question, "How were the books of the Bible chosen and compiled?"

Tim: The *Canon* is a word that means the accepted books. There are 66 books of the Bible. Ever since *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown came out ... You have to remember it is fiction. In there the idea is that you have these earlier gospels that show Jesus as a wonderful wandering minstrel, a prophet of love, and later on gospels and other accounts came up that showed him as this deity, and when Constantine came into power he brought together a group of people and said, "These books are in the Bible because they fit in with what I believe, and these books are out of the Bible." It was an imperial power play.

If you read that and get your idea of how the Bible was formed, it's completely wrong. Don't forget it is fiction. Even Dan Brown wouldn't claim that it's the way it happened. It just made for a really good yarn. Every book of the Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament except the book of Esther, which means the New Testament writers accepted the Old Testament canon, which was put together by the Council of Jamnia in 90 BC.

Jesus and the apostles tell us the Old Testament was their authority. That's why Christians trust that. The real question is ... *Why do we accept what's in the New Testament?* Almost all of the books of the New Testament were instantly understood to be Scripture by the church. They were circulated amongst the churches and were accepted as Scripture, as divinely inspired. Why? Three things.

First, if they are written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle. The apostles were trained by Jesus himself, so if an apostle wrote a book, one of the Twelve or Saint Paul ... An apostle was someone who had an eyewitness to the resurrection, met the resurrected Christ, was personally taught. They were accredited.

So if an apostle or an associate of an apostle wrote a book of the Bible, that's how they could be sure that this was Jesus' teaching. Jesus trained Peter and met Paul. Mark was an associate of Peter. Luke was an associate of Paul. Anyone who wrote a book of the Bible who actually knew Jesus or knew someone who was trained by Jesus was considered authoritative.

The fact is that there are a couple of books of the Bible, like Jude and 2 Peter ... There have been some controversies about whether they should be in the Canon or not. Some of you might be shocked that I even tell you that. Generally, there was debate in the church as to whether it was really written by Peter or not. Finally, the early church decided it was and put it in.

You say, "Well, how do we know if 1 Peter is really part of the Canon?" Well, I trust the Holy Spirit working in the church, but here's the point. No major doctrine of the Christian faith is only supported by one or two verses and one or two books. All of the major doctrines of the Christian faith are based on multiple texts across the whole Bible.

Therefore, there's really no issue of, "What if we missed a book? What if that stupid early church missed a book? What if there's a 3 Peter out there and it's in my grandmother's attic and we're going to find out about it? What if 2 Peter is not really written by Peter?" Relax. Just relax. The early church decided which books were authoritatively and genuinely apostolic. They were much closer to the time than we are.

If we can't go on what they said, there's no way we're going to figure it out now. If God let them make a mistake ... I'm not sure why he would have, but if he did, it doesn't really change things, because all the basic Christian doctrines are based on multiple texts; therefore, there's really no doubt that the teaching of the Christian faith came from the apostles who were trained by Jesus himself. There's really no doubt about that.

Female: Unfortunately, that's all the time we have left for questions. There are always far more questions than we have time for. That's why we're so glad to be able to offer *Questioning Christianity* groups that we hope you will consider joining. They're starting the first week of April and will go for eight weeks. They're going to be peer-led discussion groups meeting in apartments throughout Manhattan. You can learn more and sign up even tonight on the fifth floor.

Again, if you're somebody who is skeptical and has a lot of questions still that you'd like to process with other people, just like you've been doing throughout the course of this series, we invite you to consider joining. Also if you were brought by a friend, bring your friend along too. The topics that will be discussed are

going to be, in many ways, from Tim's book *The Reason for God*. Tim, can you give us a highlight of some of the topics they might expect to explore?

Tim: I'm looking at a list of topics you will cover if you get into the groups. They're largely topics we've covered here, only it gives you more chance to process them and work through them. "Is the Bible a myth? Has science disproved Christianity? How can you say there's only one way to God? What about other religions?" I like this one. "What gives you the right to tell me how to live my life?" Don't hit me.

"The Bible seems to be filled with so many rules. Is it? Why does God allow evil and suffering? Why is the church responsible for so much injustice? Why are so many Christians I know such hypocrites, especially the one who brought me here?" Anyway, I want you to know that over the years my own thinking has been as much helped by relationship as by content. In other words, yeah, I read books, as you can tell, and I read arguments and try to weigh them, but very often it's in relationships, as you give and take, that things get more clear.

Very often, a friend or even an opponent might say something that will make you think of something you never thought. You thought you had worked this out for years, and suddenly ... Or maybe the night you have the discussion your mind is open because of something else that happened to you and some light comes in that wasn't there before.

I really suggest, if you can, be in one of these things. Nobody is going to be just telling you what to believe. Coming here and listening to me talk has to be hard for some of you. This will be a lot easier. In other words, there won't be somebody up on a pedestal talking, literally, down to you. It'll be a place of give and take, and I really hope a lot of you will sign up.

Female: Before we let them go, Tim, can you give us a word on what they can expect for our last and final night of *Questioning Christianity*?

Tim: Last week was, "Can we believe in God?" This week was, "Can we trust the Bible?" Next week is, "Can we have faith in Christ?" We're going to take a look at who Jesus is and how you come to believe in him and what his claims were and the resurrection and whether you can trust what the Bible says about him. That's all next week.

Scripture

Knowing Jesus—March 9, 2014

Luke 4:1–13

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’ ”

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’ ”

⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; ¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’ ” ¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

The Word of the Lord.

This is a very famous passage about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. He's assaulted by the Devil, and then how he deals with it through the Word of God, through the Scripture, the use of the Bible. It's what we're going to look at here tonight. We're going to be looking at how this Scripture actually functions in our lives, but there's way more to say about that than we can do here.

In fact, I'm glad later on, actually later this spring, we're going to get back to this subject, but here we learn in a very practical way, when you are being assaulted, when you're in the wilderness, how do you handle the trials, the difficulties, and the temptations? We're going to see how Jesus uses the Scripture and how we can, too.

Let's look at it this way. First, we're going to learn *the depth and complexity of evil*; secondly, *some of the strategies of evil*; and thirdly, *how to defeat it using the Scripture*. The depth and the complexity, the strategies, and the defeat of evil.

1. *The depth and complexity of evil.* This story, this account, is about the Devil, it says in verse 2. “... **where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.**” We're in New York City, and for some of you who are listening, I think you're saying, “Do you really expect we should today believe in the actual existence of a devil? Do

you really expect that?" My answer is, "Yeah, I wish you would believe in a devil." In fact, I would go so far (I would stick my neck out so far) that I would say it's dangerous not to believe in the Devil.

To illustrate what I'm trying to say, I'm thinking about a pretty sad chapter in American history. In World War II, our president was Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), and FDR, like most people, especially most leaders and most educated people in the middle of the twentieth century, had the modern view that evil was always the result of some kind of psychological or sociological condition, that evil always had a natural explanation, that if people or nations were violent or cruel or evil it was because either they were desperate for better living conditions or it was because they were mistreated.

If you wanted to deal with evil, what you needed to do was have enlightened social policy, education. You needed to bring about economic prosperity. You needed to create a just society. Then people would live together peacefully and they would live together generously. Because of that view of evil, FDR and many other American leaders did not believe the early reports of the Holocaust or what became the Holocaust. They did not believe the reports of what was going on in Nazi Germany until they came to see it was true. They didn't take any steps at the time.

Near the very end of FDR's life and near the end of World War II, of course, there is a true story about when FDR would go up to his weekend house in upper New York State, he went to a church on the weekends, and he spoke to one of the young ministers there about the fact that he was reading Christian theology. He was reading Kierkegaard, at least, and some other Christian philosophers and theologians about original sin and about the Devil.

He said to the minister that finally he was coming to understand, because he said he didn't understand how the most educated country in the world practically, a culture that gave us the research university, that invented modern scholarship to a great degree, so cultured and so educated, how could *they* do such evil? It just seemed impossible, but then he actually said, by reading about original sin and about spiritual and supernatural evil, he was beginning to understand.

Whenever you get into the place where you think you can reduce evil to biological, sociological, or psychological factors and, therefore, we can fix it, we can control it, and we can manage it, the results are deadly because there are aspects to evil that go beyond things like economics. They go beyond the social. They go beyond the psychological. It's not manageable, it's not controllable, and when you think you can do it and you can fix it, you're in for not just disappointment but in many cases tragic, tragic, tragic missteps.

The biblical doctrine that there are demons and that there is a devil is actually not naïve but, frankly, it avoids naiveté about evil. Not only does it teach us about the depth of evil, we also are learning here about the complexity of evil, I said. There are many people who think, if you really believe in a devil, like the Bible says, then you have a simplistic view of evil, that you always think, "The Devil made

them do it." You're not always understanding all of the nuances, and I would like you to see, no.

The way the Bible understands the demonic, the way the Bible understands the Devil actually brings you into a more nuanced and more complex and more sophisticated understanding of evil than I think modern people have. How so? Even take a look here. We're going to look at these temptations in a second, but in every case, you don't see Satan trying to put Jesus in a headlock and saying, "You are going to obey me!"

Oh, no. He's going inside. He's using psychological factors. He's using physical factors. He uses his hunger. "Aren't you hungry? Let's turn these stones into bread." He's using the fact that he had come in order to be King. Jesus came into the world to be King of the world. He's the rightful King of the world, and Satan is saying, "I can arrange that."

He's going inside and using psychological factors. He's using physical drives, and he's trying to create a kind of alliance between himself and those inner things. In other words, evil, even here in this text, you can see is complex. For example, this is not simplistic. In Luke, chapter 22, verse 3, it says Satan entered into Judas. I was reading this the other day. It said Satan entered into Judas, and then he looked to betray Jesus. What does it mean Satan entered into Judas? If you think the Bible is simplistic, you think, "Well, he was possessed," like in the movie *The Exorcist*.

I guess three or four days later, after Satan entered into Judas and he was trying to betray Jesus, I can imagine a couple of disciples walking along saying, "Hey! Have you noticed anything different about Judas lately?" The other disciple says, "Yeah! Sometimes his head turns completely around, he vomits green stuff at you, and he talks in all of these strange voices!" The other disciple says, "Yeah! What's up with that?"

Is that what happened? Of course not. That's not what you see in the text. What you see is Judas' envy and resentment he gave into on the inside became a foothold for something quite evil on the outside and took him someplace that, maybe, he didn't even really want to go. Listen. Ephesians 4:27. "**Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.**" Isn't that a strange statement?

To let the sun go down on your anger means to hold a grudge. It means not to deal with your anger. To let the sun go down means to hold a grudge. You say, "Well, that's not so bad." Well, no, if evil was nothing but psychological. If there were no other dimensions to it, maybe it wouldn't be so bad, but what we're told here is if you nurture spiritual darkness in you, even by just holding on to a grudge, it gives an opportunity for the supernatural darkness outside to create an alliance and to take you places you may not want to go.

If you lock your emotional dungeon, sort of doubly locked and doubly deep, you might find yourself surprised that you just can't seem to let go of the anger and

you find it lets you do things you wouldn't really want to do. First Timothy 3 says, "Don't promote a new believer too quickly into leadership." Why? Because it says he might become conceited and fall into the trap of the Devil. Not just conceited. Not just he kind of gets a big head. That's used by the forces of darkness in the world.

Hebrews, chapter 2, verse 14 says, "As long as you're afraid of death, you're under the power of the Devil." Interesting. Anyway. Here's the point. According to the Bible, evil is not simple at all. It has a physical aspect. It has a social aspect. It has a spiritual aspect. It has a sociological aspect.

When the Bible talks about the world, the flesh, and the Devil, the *world* means you're sinned against. It's a social aspect. You're sinned against by all sorts of individuals and classes and systems in society, but at the same time, the *flesh* means you also have a self-centeredness. You're sinned against and you sin, and those things are bad, but there's not just sin inside you and sin outside you. There's sin above you. There is someone orchestrating it all. There are forces that are trying to intensify and complexify and make the relationships between the various aspects of evil magnify the whole.

I only believe, unless you bring in the demonic, you can really come to grips with how it is so often that the whole of evil is greater than the sum of its parts.

Hannah Arendt went to see the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in the early 1960s. I think it was 1961. Adolf Eichmann had been a major Nazi war criminal who was hiding out, and they found him, and they brought him back to Israel. He had done tremendous evil, and when he was being tried, Hannah Arendt was there and she was shocked at what she saw.

She wrote an essay about it called *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, how banal this man was. It said, "This to me doesn't seem to me like a monster." He is a small-minded little guy. He wanted to do well. He didn't care about other people. All he was trying to do was move ahead, but he was small and he was cowardly. All he did was say, "I see nothing. I know nothing." That kind of thing. Yet, he did enormous evil, and he didn't seem like a monster.

No. The sum of evil is always greater than the parts. If you are old enough to know a very evil social system like racial segregation in the south of the United States, if you are old enough to have been there and know that and know the kind of devastation it caused to so many people ... Yet, if you actually talk to the individuals who were in the system who supported this system, none of them seem like such bad people. Why?

The magnification. There is a chaos in your heart, and there is a chaos in the world. There is a spiritual darkness inside, and there is supernatural darkness around, and the supernatural darkness and personal, supernatural evil of the demonic magnifies the evil inside of us and makes the world a much worse place than it would be otherwise. Do you understand the depth and the complexity of evil? The Bible does. I hope you have the worldview of the Bible. I'll get back to that. You're all getting very serious. I'd better give you some hope.

2. *The strategies of evil.* One of the things that's interesting about this passage is it's very famous, but if we look at it, we're going to see some of the strategies of evil. How does evil mess you up? How does it take you down? How does it ruin your life? How does it happen? How does the demonic work?

First of all, I'd like to show you one main strategy and then a couple of, you might say, weapons that evil has. A main strategy and a couple of weapons. The main strategy is ... What do all of these temptations have in common? They all have in common that they are good things that are being held up to Jesus not bad things. Satan is not asking Jesus to break one of the Ten Commandments.

He is not saying, "I want you to commit adultery," or "I want you to lie," or "I want you to steal." Martin Scorsese thought the last temptation of Christ was Mary Magdalene. Satan didn't get the memo, or even if he had gotten the memo, he would have known, "Give me a break. I know how to really destroy the Messiah. I know how to really destroy a person. Don't give me that."

I'm not trying to say adultery is fine, and I'm not trying to say lying is fine, but notice he is not going after Jesus in that way. He's not saying, "I want you to do bad things." What is he doing? He's taking good things and holding them up. What are the good things? First of all, he says, "Aren't you hungry? Let's use your miraculous power to turn these stones into bread." Is there anything wrong with bread? Is there anything wrong with food? No!

Look at the second thing. He says, "I can give you all of the kingdoms of this world." Maybe for you and I that wouldn't be quite fair or right. I'm not sure you and I are cut out to be king or queen of the world, but Jesus was. In fact, Jesus had come to be King of the world, so the second thing he offers him is also for Jesus a very good thing.

The third thing, of course, is what he's asking for. He says, "I want you to trust God for your safety, and I want you to see the whole world. I want the whole world to see how you trust God and how God is faithful to you." He takes him up to the top and says, "Throw yourself off this pinnacle and let the world see the miraculous way in which God bears you up."

Are these bad things? No, but in each case, Jesus would have to disobey God to get those things. First of all, you say, "What's so disobedient about turning the stones to bread?" If you read the Gospels, you know Jesus never did anything like that. He never said to the disciples, "Oh, it looks like it's raining. Watch!" Then he snaps and suddenly there's a roof over their head or something like that.

Jesus never uses his power for himself. He only uses his power and sacrificial service for others, because that's the mission. That's what he came to do. He came not to accrue power but to give it up. He came not to be served but to serve and to give his life. Therefore, this is a complete, complete denial of that way in which he was supposed to use power.

Secondly, what's wrong with getting all of the kingdoms of the world? Well, the

only problem is Satan is saying, “I can get you the kingdoms of the world without you going to the cross. I can get you the kingdoms of the world without suffering.” Of course, that was part of the mission. What he was saying was, “I can give you this, but you’d have to disobey God, of course. I can give you this. You have to disobey God, of course.”

Even the last thing where he’s saying, “I want you to be a spectacle. I want you to show the world how great you are” and all of that sort of thing, again, what he’s really trying to do is he’s trying to knock Jesus off of his mission, so here is the point. Of course, those of you who come to Redeemer know this is one of the main themes of the Bible, it’s one of the main themes of the preaching, yet I think this is the starker way we can put this. You’ve heard me say this before. I think this is the most vivid and stark and almost frightening way I can put it.

Any good thing that becomes more important than God ... That’s what Satan is trying to do. He says, “These are good things. Don’t you want these things?” Of course, if you have to disobey God to get them, you’re making them more important than God. Any good thing that is more important than God to you will become a demonic force in your life.

You’ll be aligning yourself with the forces of evil and destruction. If you take any good thing and you elevate it so it’s really more important than God ... For example, I’ve had plenty of people say to me over the years, “I believed in God and I went to church, but then I asked for this and I asked for that and he didn’t give it to me, so I said, ‘What good is it to serve God if he won’t even give me those things?’ and I walked away.”

In other words, what are you saying? “I had this in my life, and I had God in my life, and when I couldn’t have both, what went? I decided to get rid of God. If God’s not going to let me get this ...” In other words, “This is more important than him.” Honestly, friends, everybody does this unless you realize you do this, unless you stop doing this ...

I’m not talking to people (say, some of you who are really messed up and you might fall into the clutches of the Devil) ... I’m saying this is the trajectory of all of us. Unless you see that you’re in this trajectory, you’re going to be giving demonic forces free play in your life. If you put your children over God, if your children are more important to you than God, if a spouse is more important to you than God, if a career is more important, or even some great political or social cause ... It’s a great social cause, but it’s more important than God. If you don’t have success in it ...

Here’s how it becomes demonic. Anything that is more important than God is going to ruin your life. It’s going to drive you. You’re becoming an addict. You’re actually already enslaved. You have to have it. If career is more important than God ... “My career has to go well.” If children are more important than God ... “They have to be okay. They have to!”

And you’ll do anything to make it so, including stepping on people, breaking the

law, doing things immoral or illegal. You'll be filled with anger and bitterness toward anybody who gets in your way. Oh, my. Anything more important than God ... Any good thing made more important than God becomes demonic, and that you can see in the way in which Satan assaults Jesus.

Also, we learn here two weapons Satan uses (two specific weapons). The two weapons are temptation and accusation. One of the problems, I think, is the English word here that translates the Greek word that probably should be translated *test*. It says for 40 days he was tested by the Devil.

The Greek word here really means to put pressure on somebody, real pressure to try to break them, but the fact is the things Satan is doing to Jesus are not strictly only temptations. Jesus is being subject to both temptation and accusation. What is that? *Temptation* is what you think. It's an enticement to do something wrong.

Generally speaking, temptation works through overconfidence. The Devil tempts you by saying, "Everything will be okay. Just do it. It will be okay. Nobody will know, or if they do know, you can do this and you can do that. God will accept you. It will be all right." Basically, temptation is overconfidence and playing down the holiness of God. "Well, yes, it's probably wrong, but who knows? Other people believe this and that about it. Do it." That's temptation.

Accusation is completely the other side. In accusation, Satan comes to you and says, "Look what you have done! Look at what a failure you are! Look at how awful! God cannot love you anymore. How can you even look at yourself in the face in the mirror?" What you have to do is realize these two things are almost opposite. In one case, you're being made overconfident. God is seen strictly as love but not as holy. "God will accept you. Go ahead and sin." In accusation, God again is being made one dimensional. He is being seen only as a holy judge and not as a forgiving Father.

Actually, Thomas Brooks, a seventeenth-century Puritan, wrote a great little paperback, which you can get fairly inexpensively, by the way. It's out there. It's called *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*. A nice long title. In it, he talks about the fact that very often temptation and accusation go hand in hand. It works like this. It's a one-two punch. One-two punches are very devastating.

The temptation goes like this. On your way into sin, Satan is saying, "Don't worry. Don't worry. God will forgive you. God will forgive you." The minute you sin, he turns and says, "And you call yourself a Christian? God will never have anything to do with you now. One time too many. Go find some little hole somewhere, you shameful thing, and just curl up in a ball and die." First, "Everything will be fine. You're fine. It's okay. Don't worry about it." As soon as you sin, "You wretch!"

Some of you know what I'm talking about. Some of you know very, very well what I'm talking about. There is somebody out there who does not like you and you can't see him and he does these things, and he's doing them to Jesus, because on the one hand he's saying, "Don't you want this? I can make you king." On the

other hand, he keeps saying, “If you’re the Son of God ...”

Huh? Twice he says, “If you’re the Son of God ...” What do you mean, if you’re the Son of God? “Are you sure God really loves you? How do you know? Don’t you think you ought to prove it? I’m not sure. Are you really sure?” He uses both temptation and accusation on Jesus. He’ll use both temptation and accusation on you, but the main thing he’ll try to do is try to get you to take something good and make it a supreme thing, make it a God substitute. Then it will become demonic in your life.

3. *How to defeat evil using the Scripture.* What are we going to do about this? It’s obvious what Jesus does in every case. He uses Scripture every time. It’s very striking. I want you to see why the way to defeat the Devil, the way to defeat evil is through the *means* and the *message* of Scripture. The means and the message.

The means is the Scripture itself. Jesus quotes Scripture every time, and he uses the Scripture to answer the things Satan is saying. I’ll get to that in a second. He quotes Deuteronomy 8 and Deuteronomy 6. Very carefully, he quotes them, and he’s always doing this when in times of extremity, when in times of crisis.

Whenever he is in times of crisis, he always gets out the Scripture, and the most obvious place is when he’s on the cross and he’s dying on the cross. Do you know he quotes Scripture from the cross? “**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**” is a quotation from Psalm, chapter 22, verse 1, and the last thing he says according to the gospel of Luke, “**Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit,**” is actually a quote from Psalm 31:5.

A thought experiment for a second. Most of the time, when you’re with people, you are aware of who you ought to be and how you ought to be, so you pull yourself together and you try to be the person you ought to be or the person you wish to be or the person you’re expected to be. Don’t you do that as much as you can?

But if you’re in agony, if you are in pain, if you’re in a crisis, if you’re looking at death in the face and you’re screaming and crying out, you’re not trying to be whoever you think you ought to be. You are just being who you are. At that point, whatever is in you is just coming out. The real you. There’s nothing else. The real you is coming out.

When Jesus Christ was in these times of crisis, and especially when he was in this astounding crisis when he was screaming in the agony of pain, what was coming out? Scripture, which means he was completely and thoroughly permeated and saturated with Scripture. It shaped his life. It nurtured him. It was his meat. It was his drink. It was his blood almost. He was literally bleeding Scripture when he was speared and nailed. It was that crucial to who he was. It was that crucial to how he thought. It was that crucial to how he felt.

That’s the reason why he automatically, when crisis hits, goes to the Word of God, and it guides him, and it empowers him. That’s Jesus, but he doesn’t

simply, by the way ... It's not just the means of Scripture. It's the message of Scripture. Jesus is not just waving the Book at Satan, and Satan backs off like a vampire, hissing.

There's nothing magic about the Book. It's not like, "Well, if I want to be safe from Satan, I'll just put Bibles all around me, and I'll stand there. Then Satan can't get to me. If he comes near and he tries to get in there, he starts to burn there." Like all of those horror movies like *Fright Night* and things like that.

No. No. Jesus Christ knows it's the message of the Scripture. That's the reason why, for example, in verse 8, he says, "**It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'**" He's not just quoting any old Scripture. He's not just waving a book at Satan. He's saying, "You're lying. You're telling me if I put this thing ahead of God, everything would be okay, and I want you to know idolatry will destroy."

Here's what he's doing. Satan cannot hurt you. In fact, nobody can hurt you unless he can get into your heart false beliefs and lies. What makes you what you are, what determines how you think and how you feel and how you act is what your main beliefs are about God, about yourself, your main commitments and hopes about life, about right and wrong. Whatever your most fundamental beliefs are (the things you believe), that is what determines who you are, and you know that to some degree.

If years ago your father said, "You're never going to amount to anything," you may think, "Well, I don't believe that. I'm trying to make my way." Yet, you know to some degree why you're driven. You're upset. You get so upset about this and that. Why? Because you know that belief is down in there, and you haven't been able to get it out, and that's having an impact on how you live. Right?

Nobody can hurt you unless they can get some main belief down, some idea down into your heart that your heart believes, and Satan can't hurt you a bit unless you believe his lies. If he comes along and he whispers to you, "If you're thin and if you have a great career, then you'll be okay. Otherwise, you're going to hate yourself and people are going to look at you funny."

In other words, he comes and puts these things down deep into you, and you are not able to do anything about them unless you do what Jesus Christ did, which is he was so saturated with the Scripture that the Scripture went down in there and showed those lies to be what they were, and the number one lie is that you can save yourself, that you can prove yourself.

Why is it that Satan did not try to get Jesus to break the moral law or the Ten Commandments? He didn't mind if Jesus Christ was a moral example. He didn't mind if we look to Jesus as our example and say, "I'm going to live like Jesus, and then everything will be okay," because as long as you're trying to save yourself, as long as you're trying to say, "If I do this and if I do that, then God will bless me, and I'll feel good about myself." As long as Jesus is only your example, Satan has you right where he wants you.

You'll be insecure. You'll be afraid. You'll always be trying to prove yourself because deep down inside you're going to believe the lie, and the lie goes something like this: "I'll only be loveable, I'll only be significant, or I'll only be secure if I can get this or I accomplish this." The thing Satan wanted to stop Jesus from doing at all costs was to go to the cross. He said, "I'll give you the kingdoms, but don't go to the cross," but he did go to the cross, and because he went to the cross ...

That was the big test. The real test was in the garden of Gethsemane when it was dark and there was nobody around, and he knew he was about to have to drink the big cup of divine wrath, and he was supposed to take our punishment for us. That was a test. He didn't want to do it, but he said "Thy will be done," and he went to the cross.

If you see him not as your example but as your Savior, dying for you, that's the one thing the Devil does not want you to see and doesn't want you to understand, because if you see Jesus Christ going to the cross for you, that ends your temptation. Why? Because you see your sin is so serious that Jesus had to die. Your sin is not a light thing. Jesus gave his life. Why? He had to. Why? Because sin is so serious.

Satan knows, if you see that and it gets down deep into your heart, it's going to be hard for him to tempt you, but also, when you see that Jesus Christ died for you so even when you screw up God still loves you, there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ, then that's the end of the accusation, too. If that just sinks down into your heart, the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is passing the test not as your example but as your substitute, as your Savior ... Three things.

First, are you somebody who actually doesn't believe in the Devil or supernatural evil and you think all evil is basically a matter of natural, social, and psychological conditions? I urge you to change your worldview.

Secondly, if you say, "I'm a Christian," yet basically you haven't seen the radical, costly grace of Jesus Christ and it hasn't sunk in how completely accepted you are because of what Jesus Christ did and what enormous cost he bore in order to save you, then you are still going to find temptation and accusation still has an awful lot of power over you.

Thirdly, friends, if Jesus Christ did not think he could handle life without knowing the Scripture, do you think we can? If Jesus Christ didn't think he could handle life without memorizing and meditating on and having the Scripture just dominate his thoughts ... He knew it inside out. It knew him inside out. If Jesus didn't think he could handle life without it, what makes us think we can? How are you doing here? Jesus Christ said, "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will [never] pass away.**" Let's pray.

Father, thank you for helping us. Thank you for giving us what we need. You've given us your Word. You've given us your Spirit. You've given us everything we need in order to handle the assaults of evil, but we are not using them as we

should. We pray, then, you would help us because it would heal our hearts and it would glorify you and it would bring honor to your name, so please accomplish this in our lives, for your name's sake. We ask it through Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.

Questions About Jesus

Questioning Christianity—March 13, 2014

Some of you have joked with me a little bit that even though the topic is “Does Christianity make sense?” we’ve had some nights together that I’ve hardly mentioned Christianity at all or talked about God. I started by trying to make a case that life without God is harder than most people think, at the least. Then we tried to move into “Is it rational to believe in God?” I was trying to make the case not only is it rational but actually, in many ways, God explains the world better than disbelief in God. We tried to make a case that believing in God is perfectly rational.

However, last week and particularly this week, in a full-throated way, I’m basically trying to talk to you about Christianity. I said these last three sessions were on “Can we believe in God? Can we trust the Bible? Can we have faith in Christ?” So tonight is, “Can we have faith in Christ?” Frankly, another way to ask the question is, “Why believe in Christianity?”

Again, I can’t believe I’m going to try in about a half an hour or so to lay out all of the reasons, but let’s give it a shot. I suppose if somebody asked me, “Why should I believe in Christ?” or “Why believe in Christianity?” I would say because of *his claims*, because of *his resurrection*, and because of *his message*. So let’s just take a look at those three.

1. *His claims.* The issue about claims is this. Huston Smith wrote a book ... I don’t think it’s as popular anymore, but when I went to high school and college everybody read it. It was called *The World’s Religions*. It’s a great book, a very fair, evenhanded treatment of all the great world’s religions. What I always found interesting about that book is he says of all the founders of the great religions of the world, Buddha and Jesus impressed their contemporaries so much they didn’t just ask, “Who are you?” but they asked “What are you?”

Buddha gave what most of us would consider a rational and good answer, which is, “Oh, I’m not God,” which we think anybody in their right mind should say. Jesus did not give the sensible or rational answer at all. He did not only say, “I am a god. I am a godlike being. I am an avatar expression of the divine principle of the universe.” He said, “I am the God of the Bible. I am the God of Israel. I am

the God who created the world. I'm the God who preexisted the world, who's infinitely transcendent over the world."

In fact, just to rub your noses in it, here's a little list of the things he said. I'm not going to give you the references. It would be tedious. I'm just going to read them to you. Jesus assumed authority to forgive all sins. Only God can forgive sins. That's what everybody said. Only God can forgive sins. He says, "Well, I can." Jesus claimed that he alone could give eternal life. Jesus claimed not only to bring the truth but to *be* the truth. "I am the way, the truth, the life."

He assumed the authority to judge the whole world. He said he's going to come back and judge the living and the dead. He claimed that we will be judged in the end primarily on our attitude toward him. He said, "To know me is to know God. To see me is to see God. To receive me is to receive God." He also claimed the right to receive worship. There are a number of places in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, where angels appear.

When angels appear, whoever is seeing them always falls on the ground, and the angel always says, "Get up. Don't worship me. I'm just a creature like yourself." When people fall down and worship Jesus, he doesn't say anything. He just takes it. Then, of course, he actually does directly claim ... When he called himself the Son of God, people understood he was claiming to be equal with God. There are a couple of places where it said because he called himself the Son of God they tried to kill him.

In ancient times, if you were the only son of the father, then you were equal to the father. Why? Because you were going to get everything the father had. That was just the way it was done. If you were the only son, you got everything the father had. You're equal with the father. You're an equal in status. You're an heir, and so forth. So for him to come along and say, "I am *the* Son of God" ... not *a* son but *the* Son of God ... everybody there knew what that meant.

I've talked to people here who often say, "Well, Jesus never said he was God. He said he was the Son of God." Yes, he did. When he says he's the Son of God he was saying he was equal with God. There's a great place in John, chapter 8, where Jesus is talking to some people who are pretty unhappy with him. They were saying, "We don't need you. Who do you think you're talking to? We're children of Abraham."

Jesus looks at them and says, "Before Abraham was, I am." They immediately tried to kill him. They picked up stones and tried to execute him. Do you know why? Well, if Jesus had said, "Before Abraham was, I was," that would have been weird enough. If he was saying, "I'm older than Abraham, I preexisted Abraham," that would still be some kind of supernatural claim.

But when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus, chapter 3, when Moses asked, "Who should I say is sending me? What's your name?" God, out of the burning bush, said, "Tell them I Am has sent you." The word *I Am* is just the Hebrew word *to be*, but it really means, "I am self-sufficient."

When God says, “I am, I always am,” he’s saying, “There was never a beginning for me. There will never be an ending. You’ll never be able to say about me I was. There never was a time you could have said about me ‘He will be,’ because I am that I am. I’m dependent on nothing for my being. Everything is dependent on me.”

Jesus has the audacity to say, “Before Abraham was, I am,” which isn’t good grammar, but he was deliberately using the divine name that God gave to Moses in the burning bush and taking it on himself. That’s why they immediately wanted to kill him. There is absolutely no doubt that Jesus Christ claimed to be God.

That creates a conundrum, because unlike Muhammad, unlike Buddha, unlike all of the other religions of the world ... All of the other religions of the world have a founder who says, “I’m here to tell you how to find God.” Now they are somewhat different. The eightfold path of Buddhism isn’t the five pillars of Islam.

Nevertheless, in some ways they’re parallel, because they’re all saying, “Here’s how you can find God.” Jesus comes along and says, “I’m God, and I’ve come to find you.” The audacity of that claim, the magnitude of that claim, pushes you away from doing what we desperately want to do as Western people. We want to say all of the different religions are all different ways up the mountain to God. We talked about this a few weeks ago, but I’m trying to press you here.

When Jesus made those claims, he was essentially pushing you. C.S Lewis has a couple of famous places where he says if what Jesus is saying is true, then you have to make him the supreme point of your life, but if not true, Jesus’ claims are those of a megalomaniac compared with whom Hitler was a most sane and humble of men. Lewis is the one who says, “Here’s the trouble.” Jesus Christ makes these claims and pushes you.

You can’t just say, “What a nice guy” or “One more prophet” or “One of the ways to God.” No, no. If what he’s saying is true, then he has to be the way, the truth, and the life. He has to be the way to find God. He’s God himself come in human form. If he’s not right, then he’s not one more way to be a good person in life, like one more religion. It’s really all or nothing. The claims have made it all or nothing with him. Now how do you respond to that?

The first way many people respond is, “I still like to think of just his teaching.” Many people have told me over the years, “I really respect Jesus’ teaching. I just cannot buy that thing about his claims to be God. I just can’t. I don’t believe it. I see him as a good teacher, as a wise man. I read the Sermon on the Mount. Turn the other cheek. Forgive your enemies.”

We’ve talked about this before. The idea of forgiving your enemies and making peace and overcoming evil with good is a very unique Christian understanding. People say, “That was wonderful. I just don’t buy the stuff about God. All I want to do is take his teaching.” There are two problems with that.

The first is his teaching is based on his claims. Anybody who says, “I don’t want

to deal with the claims. I can't accept him as God. I just want to take the teachings ..." That shows you don't know much about the teachings, because the teachings are based on it. For example, if I walk over and punch Mike right in the nose and Sam says, "Tim, that was a terrible thing you did, but I forgive you," Mike is going to say, "Excuse me, Sam, but that's really not your place to do. He hit me, so if he's going to be forgiven, I have to do it."

You can only forgive sins against you. Right? No other religious founder ever offered to people complete forgiveness for their sins. "You believe in me, and all of your sins are forgiven." In fact, in our informal time upstairs we've been having over the last few weeks, just talking afterwards, numbers of you have come up and said, "This idea that it doesn't matter what you've done in life, that if you ask Jesus' forgiveness you're forgiven, and it doesn't matter if you killed people ..." A lot of people are struggling with that.

By the way, that's only offered in Christianity. You don't see that kind of forgiveness. "It doesn't matter what you did in life. It's over." Do you know why Jesus could say that? The only reason Jesus can forgive you for all of your sins is if, in a sense, all your sins are against Jesus. Only Mike can forgive me for hitting him in the nose, because I hit Mike. But Jesus actually can also forgive me for hitting Mike in the nose, because if Jesus is the God who created us all and who keeps us all going all the time, whenever I sin I always sin against Mike *and* Jesus.

There's a place in Psalm 51 where David has just murdered somebody to get his wife, and when he's cut to the heart and begins to repent, he says to God, "Against thee have I sinned." When you read that you say, "Wait a minute. He killed Uriah. He sinned against Uriah. He sinned against Bathsheba." Yes, he did, and he does need to ask their forgiveness. Of course you do. The point is because God owns us, because we are God's, he can forgive us too, and he needs to forgive us, because we have wronged his people. We wronged somebody made by him.

The only reason Jesus Christ can offer forgiveness in such a blanket way, so free, such incredible grace, is because all sins are against him. Buddha would never say that. Muhammad would never say that. None of them would ever say that. So as soon as you talk about forgiving and forgiveness and enemies and all this stuff, and you say, "Well, I don't want the claims; I just want the teaching," that shows you probably don't see how the teachings and the claims are of one. They're of a piece. They're warp and woof of each other.

The other thing that's wrong about this is to say, "I just think of him as a wonderful moral teacher; I don't believe he was God." This is where C.S. Lewis pushes us a bit. He says, honestly, anybody that says stuff like this cannot be a nice moral teacher. He's crazy. If you ever heard a man saying, without irony, absolutely seriously, something like ... This is from C.S. Lewis. "I have always existed." That's bad enough. "I created the world. I'm ultimate reality. I will return at the end of time, and your fate will depend on your attitude toward me."

How would you treat that person? You say, "Well, that's fine, but I really like the fact that he wrote a really great biography of ..." You can't just bracket out that. How can you trust anything he says? How can you consider him in any way a source of any kind of wisdom? Because of his claims, you can't treat him as a nice guy or a moral teacher or something like that. He's either a legend, a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. Maybe some of you have heard that. That's the reasoning.

He's either a legend ... In other words, maybe he never made these claims, but if he did make these claims, then he's a liar or a lunatic or the Lord himself. There are no other alternatives for you. Now there are problems with all three of those. I'm going to go through this quickly. Was he a legend, so he never really claimed to be God? That is what a lot of people say. Was he a liar? Was he a lunatic? You say, "Well, maybe he was." None of those things make much sense to me. Here's the reason why.

First of all, let's talk about the legend. Last week I told you I didn't get to everything I wanted to do on the Bible, but here we go. It's very common for people to say that Jesus never really claimed to be God, that he was really a wonderful teacher of love and wisdom, and later on legends grew up about his claims to be God. When you read the Bible, you really don't know if you're reading historically what Jesus actually said or did. You're reading the legends written down by the leaders of the Christian church in the early days who put down there what they wanted.

In fact, there's a very influential body of scholarship that says the biblical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the New Testament, was really an oral tradition that was passed along for many years around the church. The churches developed stories about Jesus that answered the problems they were having. So let's say there was some dispute in the church. Well, somebody came up with a story about what Jesus said, and that answered the dispute.

So as time went on, in order to meet the needs of the various churches, stories about Jesus became developed and kind of got crafted and were put together, and after many years, the leaders of the church wrote them down and put them in the Bible as a way of accruing their own power. They chose those texts that supported their leadership and their authority and their doctrine; therefore, it was kind of a power play.

That was all fictionalized and popularized in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. If you ever read that or saw the movie, that was the whole idea. Jesus was *this*, but actually the Bible depicts him as something very different. The powers that be fabricated those stories, and it helped them in their power, and that's how you got the Bible. There are really terrific reasons why none of that is true. Let me just give you four really quickly.

First, the New Testament documents we have were not written down late enough to be legends. They're too early to be legends. The Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were all written within 30 to, at most, 60 years after the events of

Jesus' life and death. The Epistles, Paul's writings, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and those writings, were written only 15 or 20 years later.

Both Paul's writings and all the Gospels say that Jesus claimed to be God, that he died on the cross, and that he was raised from the dead and many eyewitnesses saw him. All those three things. So these things were already written down and circulating around just a few decades after Jesus' death. Let me tell you why that makes it hard to say those are whole-cloth fabricated legends.

Forty-three years ago, Bucknell University, where I was at school at the time, played University of Pennsylvania in football at Franklin Field. I was in the marching band. It was the first time I'd ever been on artificial turf. This would have been 1970, I think. So I was there. I'd never been to Franklin Field. It was really cool. I used to watch Philadelphia Eagles games at Franklin Field, because they used to play there.

I remember that fairly well. What if today a story came out saying that over Franklin Field in 1970, at a game between Bucknell University and University of Pennsylvania, flying saucers appeared in formation, and *this* happened and *that* happened. I happen to know that in spite of the fact that some of you think of 1970 as the same as 1870 or 1770, there are probably a lot of people alive still who were there.

You don't remember everything about something that long ago. You'd remember if there were flying saucers. As long as you have living eyewitnesses around, you can't just in a whole-cloth way write that something was happening. For example, you can't just write that on the Golan Heights in a particular year Jesus Christ fed 5,000 people miraculously, and everybody in the whole community was there. You can't write about that.

You can't write about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. You can't write about these highly public things, get them down on paper, when a lot of people, even opponents, people who didn't believe in Christianity at all, had been there. You can't just write those things down. It's very, very difficult. In other words, the New Testament documents are way too early as written documents to be whole-cloth fabricated legends.

Secondly, the content of the Gospels is way too counter-productive to have been creations made to accrue power for the leaders. That's very much *The Da Vinci Code* thing. I've read this too, that the New Testament documents were crafted by the winners. History is written by the winners, and it was crafted by the winners. There are a lot of problems with that. Look at the book of Mark, which we know was written pretty early. Almost everybody says it was written like 20 or 30 years after.

The book of Mark was written when Peter was still alive, and Peter was one of the main leaders in the Christian church. The book of Mark says that Peter denied Christ three times before the rooster crowed. In fact, in the book of Mark,

when everybody is saying to Peter, "Weren't you with this guy who's on trial now?" and he was trying to save his skin. He was scared. He lied over and over again. In the end, he cursed Jesus publicly in order to prove that he was not one of his disciples.

The only possible reason that would be in the book of Mark, when one of the great leaders of the Christian church was still alive, is if Peter wanted it there. Why would any leader want that in the Bible? Nobody would want it there. Also, it couldn't be there without his permission, which, by the way, shows he had a radically different identity than you and I would have apart from the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

The fact is that doesn't help the leaders. The reason it's in there is because it happened. There is no good reason for that to be included in there unless it happened. It doesn't help Peter. It doesn't help the church. Do you think it helps the church to be telling people, "Our best leaders were all a bunch of cowards"? In fact, the apostles look horrible in the Gospels. Have you read the Gospels? They all look like jerks. They're completely clueless all the time.

In no way do the Gospels really help the early leaders of the church. Why are there all those awful stories about how stupid the apostles look unless they're true? All the eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who were the first eyewitnesses? Women. Women's testimony was not admissible evidence in either Roman courts or Jewish courts, because women were held in that kind of low regard.

Now that might infuriate you, but the fact of the matter is no one would make up a story about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and put the eyewitnesses all being women unless the eyewitnesses really were women. There's no possible reason you'd make a thing like that up. There are all kinds of reasons why the theory that the Gospels were put in there in order to help the leaders of the church just doesn't work. I'll give you one other quickie.

The early church had a lot of conflict over whether the Gentiles who became Christians coming in needed to be circumcised. Did the Gentile Christians need to adopt the Mosaic rituals and laws? It was an area of tremendous problem in the first ... The early church was Jewish and Gentile, and they often didn't get along. There's nowhere in the Gospels where Jesus says a thing about it.

If the Gospels were being created or fabricated, as it were, in order just to simply help the leaders of the church by putting words in Jesus' mouth that solved issues and disputes, surely they would have done it. The reason there's nothing in Jesus' mouth about circumcision is that he never said anything, and the early church did not believe they had any right to make up words of Jesus at all.

I'll give you more. I said the Gospels are too early to be legends, and they are too counter-productive in their content to be legends. Also, their literary form is no way legend. They are written as an oral history. C.S. Lewis, who did know literature, has a little interesting place in one of his writings where he says, "I

have been reading epics and legends and ancient literature all my life.” He was a professor at Oxford and Cambridge in medieval and renaissance literature, so he knew something about legends and myths and epics. He had been reading them all his life.

He says, “If you think the Gospels are written as legend, you don’t know anything about legends.” He says modern realistic fiction was not invented until about 300 or 400 years ago. For example, when you read *The Iliad*, you don’t read, “The night before the battle, Achilles stood at his tent. He saw the water going down the tent pole, and it reminded him ...” That’s not the way *The Iliad* reads. That’s modern realistic fiction. “He went to the door. He heard the creak of his shoes. He turned the ...”

People can write fiction at that level of detail now, but you didn’t back then. Legends were high. They were kind of remote. They had very little character development. In other words, they were very sketchy. Why is it that when Jesus Christ in John 21 ... This is after his resurrection. He calls out to the disciples in the boat, “Put your nets down on the other side,” and they put the nets down on the other side and get this enormous catch of fish.

It’s a miraculous catch of fish, and they realize it’s Jesus and come running in. When they get it in, the text says there were 153 fish. What does that mean? Is that symbolic? No. Somebody remembered there were 153 fish. People who were there remembered that story. If you were there, you’d remember that the rest of your life. You met the risen Christ, and all that. C.S. Lewis says legends were not written with little things like 153 fish. You just didn’t do it.

Richard Bauckham, professor at University of St. Andrews in Scotland, who was a historian and New Testament professor there for many years, wrote a book called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. What he says is if you know anything about ancient literature, you’ll know the Gospels are written as eyewitness accounts. What does he mean by *eyewitness accounts*? The accounts have, first, many irrelevant details that don’t help the plot and don’t help characters; they’re just remembered.

Irrelevant details, highly selective fixing on unique elements, limited vantage point, not the omniscient vantage point of a fiction author. He says it has all the marks. Here’s one more. I really need to press you on this, because if you buy the normal idea ... This is the only area, by the way, in which I’m an expert. You realize that whenever I talk about science or anthropology or philosophy I might sound smart, but I’m an uneducated amateur. This is something I know.

In Mark, chapter 14, it’s talking about Jesus Christ on the road to Calvary. He’s carrying the cross and he’s falling down. Some of you know how that works. We’re told that because he kept falling down, the soldiers grabbed a guy out of the crowd to carry the cross for Jesus. His name was Simon of Cyrene. It says in the text, “They chose Simon of Cyrene,” and then it says, “He was the father of Rufus and Alexander.” Then the narrative just goes on.

What? Who are Rufus and Alexander? Richard Bauckham says Rufus and Alexander do not appear anywhere in the text. They're not characters. Why would they be there? It's very typical that when people were writing historical accounts, eyewitness accounts, they were putting the names of the living eyewitnesses in the accounts so people could check with them. There's no reason for Mark to write this account and say, "He was the father of Rufus and Alexander" unless the readers knew who Rufus and Alexander were. You and I don't, but they must have been prominent people and could be consulted.

Bauckham says all through the New Testament Gospels you see signs of this idea. That's the reason why in John the soldier whose ear is cut off by Peter in the garden of Gethsemane is named Malchus, but in the other places where his ear is cut off his name is never used. Bauckham says that's because he was an eyewitness source. Otherwise, why would you put the name in there?

All I'm telling you is not that I can prove the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God. What I can tell you is there is a tremendous amount of evidence that the New Testament is basically reliable history and that the things Jesus said and did that are recorded in there, you can assume something like that really happened. Particularly, that he claimed to be God.

Now where do you go? I just said he's either a legend, a liar, a lunatic, or a lord. I just tried to say it's not enough to say, "Well, he never claimed that; he was a legend." You say, "Okay, maybe he was a liar and a lunatic." Here's the reason that's a problem. "Maybe he was. He was just a liar and a lunatic. Crazy people claim to be God all the time." Yeah, but they do not start religions that grow to two billion people.

That's not a joke. There have been a lot of people who started religions that did very well. *Big* religions. You know them all. There are a lot of other people who tried to start religions and claimed to be God. They said they were divine this or divine that. The people who claimed to be God did not have very successful religions. Usually they had a little coterie of dysfunctional people around them who worshiped them, but basically it never got off the ground.

So you had people who claimed to be God who never were able to convince anybody they were, and then you had people who did not claim to be God who started these great religions, but you only have one person in this category: a man who not only claimed to be God but convinced people he was. That has never happened before. It's important for two reasons.

First, remember that Eastern religions believe God is a kind of impersonal force in everything. So it's not all that weird to say to a group of Hindus, "I'm god." What would they do? They would say, "Okay, maybe. Let's see." Because I'm an avatar. The idea of God is that you could be manifest through a human being. It's not a big deal.

But to say to a group of Jews, "I'm God; before Abraham was, I am; I'm the Judge of all the earth; I'm the way, the truth, and the life ..." These are people

who believe in a high transcendent God. These are people who won't say the name Yahweh. They won't even write the name Yahweh. The last people on the face of the earth to believe anybody is God. How is it possible that thousands of those people came to believe he was? Two things must have happened.

The first thing is his actual life must have been unbelievable. In other words, his moral character must have matched his claims. Nobody else's has been like that. It must have. There's no other way to explain it. By the way, somebody has also pointed out ... If you read the New Testament (and I hope you will), you'll see that even though his claims were enormously high, his actual behavior was amazingly humble.

That's one of the weird things about him. In fact, it's one of the things that I think has been the most convincing to me. An old Scottish minister wrote it like this: "He has infinite highness and infinite humility. Despite his high claims, he is never pompous. You never see him standing on his own dignity."

He has tenderness without weakness, strength without harshness, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, unhesitating authority with a complete lack of self-absorption, unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, enthusiasm without fanaticism, holiness without Pharisaism, passion without prejudice. Nothing he does falls short. In fact, he's always surprising you and taking your breath away. He's incomparably better than you could imagine for yourself. Why? These are the surprises of perfection."

How do you say a guy who lived like this and who convinced the hardest group of people in the world that he was God did that? The answer is he couldn't have acted like a liar or a lunatic. These were people who were living with him. People who say, "I'm god," you live with them a little bit and you know they're not. Everybody sees what you're like in the morning. How could you pull that off? But he did.

It comes down to this. Bono was being interviewed some years ago and said he believed that Jesus was God. His interviewer said, "You're kidding." He says, "No, it's not far-fetched. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot [of good things] to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius.

But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off that hook. Christ says, 'No. I'm not saying I'm a teacher. Don't call me teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet ... I am God incarnate.' And people say, 'No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet we can take. You're a bit eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey; we can handle that. But don't [keep saying you're God incarnate]! Because, you know, we're going to have to crucify you.' [...]

Either Christ was who he said he was ... or a complete nut case. I mean, we're

talking nut case on the level of Charles Manson. [...] I'm not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside down by a nut case, for me, that's far-fetched."

2. *The resurrection.* There are the claims. All by itself, that would make him a difficult ... The idea that he's either a legend, which means he didn't make the claims, but if he did make the claims, then he's either a liar, a lunatic, or he's the Lord ... It doesn't make much sense that a person who lived like that could be a liar or a lunatic.

So, on top of that, the resurrection. Here's what I can tell you about the resurrection. Relatively brief, but it's very important. Many people say the very idea of the resurrection grew into a legend because, originally, Jesus died and his followers just desperately wanted him to be alive again, like all normal followers, so they sensed he was really with them. They sensed he was present with them.

As time went on, this sense that he was with them turned into stories that he had been physically raised from the dead, and eventually they were written down and eventually became part of the Bible. There was really no empty tomb, and there really were no eyewitnesses to a physical resurrection. Those were legends that grew over the years from that original desire that our Messiah would still be with us, but there are very strong arguments against that theory.

First of all, the accounts of the eyewitnesses are too early. When Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, which he wrote 15 years after the death of Jesus Christ ... There's no doubt about this. First Corinthians is a very early document. Paul said that 500 people saw Jesus Christ risen from the dead all at once. He says, "Some of them have died, but most of them you can consult with right now."

You can't write a public document that is circulating around in the churches during the Pax Romana, when it was fairly easy to go from place to place, and say, "If you want to, you can go back and talk to them right now." Christianity would never have gotten off the ground unless those eyewitnesses existed. Those eyewitnesses *did* exist. That empty tomb *was* there.

You say, "Well, maybe it was just wish fulfillment." Keep something in mind. Some of you who are Jewish know that Jews have always been divided over the afterlife. There are some Jews who believed that at the end of time there would be a resurrection, but N.T. Wright, in his great book on the resurrection ... He's a tremendous historian and scholar. He says that if you understand first-century Judaism, you would know that the idea that an individual person in the middle of history could get resurrected was just unthinkable.

Some Jews (not all) believed at the end of time there would be a resurrection and God would make everything right, but the idea that one individual could be raised in the middle of history and death and disease and everything else go on the way it normally went on was just unthinkable.

N.T. Wright points out that there were a couple dozen messianic pretenders

during the time of Jesus. In the decades before Jesus and the decades after Jesus, there were quite a few Jewish figures who said, "I am the messiah," and almost all of them were executed by the Romans. They kept a lid on things.

Not a single other one of those messianic figures had a group of people who started saying, "He has risen from the dead." Why not? It wouldn't have occurred to them. In fact, even if you say, "Well, maybe it was a hoax; maybe they stole the body ..." Why would Jews steal the body and tell people he was raised from the dead when not only would they not even think about it but they knew nobody would believe them?

Nobody would believe them. Again, it's the Jewish worldview. You and I tend to not believe in the resurrection because we have this scientific, materialistic worldview, but the Jews didn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus for equally strong reasons, even though different reasons. Their worldview was every bit as much against it. To think they were just superstitious people in the past who believed in the supernatural, you don't know a lot about first-century history.

Here's my question. Have I proven the resurrection? Here's what I can tell you. There was an empty tomb and there were hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus Christ risen from the dead. That's what they said. That, I think, is pretty historically secure. Christianity would never have gotten off the ground. The earliest documents all said it. "There are hundreds of eyewitnesses. Go talk to them."

That doesn't prove it, but there was an empty tomb and there were hundreds of eyewitnesses amongst Jews who would not have believed that sort of thing unless something happened to them. You say, "Well, maybe there was a hallucination." Well, people don't have hallucinations in groups of 500.

"Well, maybe it was a hoax." I tried to explain, as much as I could, why would you pull off a hoax when you had no belief that anybody would believe you? Then don't forget that the people who said he was risen from the dead and saw him risen from the dead died for their belief, happily.

I'd like to put the onus on you. You say, "I just don't believe in the resurrection." Okay. What is a historically possible alternate explanation for the birth of the Christian church? If you rule out the resurrection, explain all the eyewitnesses. Explain the fact that thousands of Jews completely changed their worldview almost overnight about a human being being the Son of God, about there being a resurrection in the middle of history.

Worldview changes can happen over a generation. People write back and forth and they debate, and slowly things change. We all see that. Overnight? You explain it. You say, "Well, I just can't believe in a resurrection. It's impossible." Now you're doing philosophy, not history. You have a philosophical presupposition that says miracles are impossible, and even though you can't explain the historical phenomena, you're going to hold to it. Okay. That's okay. Obviously I haven't proven it. You can't prove hardly anything in history. There's

always a certain amount of uncertainty.

3. *His message*. If you see the claims and the resurrection and you begin to say, “Oh my goodness, maybe he is,” I still think in the end it’s his message. I have to give you the message pretty briefly. Again, this is one of those few areas that I’ve been talking to you about that I have a little experience in. It kind of goes like this.

A lot of people say, “Look, I don’t believe in God, but I’m a good person. I’m a very good person.” Well, imagine an older lady who has one son, and she loves him very much. She has no money, but she sweats and works two jobs and does everything to put him through college. While she’s raising him, she teaches him three things: care for the poor, work hard, and always tell the truth. Then she puts him through college.

When he gets out of college, he hardly ever writes her. He never comes to see her. He acknowledges her existence, sends her a Christmas card or something like that, but basically doesn’t give her the time of day. But if somebody says, “You don’t talk to your mother?” he says, “Ah, but here’s the important thing: I’m a good person. I care for the poor, I work very hard, and I always tell the truth. That’s what really matters. Not that I have a relationship with her; just that I do what she told me to do.”

Would you think that’s fair enough? No. You would say, “This is not right. You owe her. She did everything for you. Your relationship with her is broken. You have to make that relationship right.” If there is a God, you should be living for him. If there is a God and he made you and he’s keeping you alive every minute, it’s not enough that you’re just a good person. I’m sorry. If there is a God, you need to have a relationship with him. If you aren’t giving him what he’s due and caring for him and loving him and serving him, that’s not okay. That’s guilty.

So there’s a problem. There’s a guilt. There’s a debt. There’s a barrier between us and God. Let me tell you what Jesus says. Dorothy Sayers was one of the first women to go to Oxford University, and she was a writer of mystery and detective fiction in the early twentieth century. She wrote stories about Lord Peter Wimsey, who was her detective hero. He solved crimes. He was an aristocrat, but he was also single and he was very lonely.

Halfway through the Peter Wimsey novels and stories, suddenly a woman shows up and comes into his life. She’s tall, not particularly attractive. She’s one of the first women who ever went to Oxford, and she writes detective fiction. They fall in love and get married. What do you think happened? Dorothy Sayers looked into the world she had created and fell in love with the man she had created. She wrote herself into the story, because she saw how unhappy he was, and she fixed it.

Aw, isn’t that sweet? Do you like that? Isn’t that sweet? That’s what God has done. Jesus Christ looks down into the world. He sees us making pretty much a mess of things. This is the Christian gospel. He sees there’s a barrier between us and God that has to be dealt with, so he loved us. He didn’t leave us to stew in

our own juices, and he wrote himself into the story. He went to the cross and took the debt, the payment ... I said there's guilt here. He took the guilt himself. God, in a sense, paying his own debt.

Now what this means is you are saved ... We keep saying this. If you believe in him, it's not a matter of "What do I have to do in order to be saved?" No. Jesus has done everything for you. He's God who has come to do whatever you required. You believe in him and you're accepted. I've had people say, "Well, if you're really just forgiven and completely accepted no matter what you do, what is your incentive for living a good life?"

If you're not afraid anymore, you're not afraid of going to hell or you're not afraid of being a bad person ... If you're completely loved and all fear is gone, why would you want to live a good life? I always say if the only motivation you had for living a good life was fear, you ought to go get another motivation. There's gratitude, for goodness' sake. Isn't that a better motivation?

I want you to think of something. Here's a little old lady and she needs help across the street. I help her across the street. Then I go home and say, "Lord, didn't you see what I did? Please take me to heaven, because I'm a good person and I take little old ladies across the street. I did a good deed." Who did I do it for? I did it for me. Did I do it for her? No. I wanted money in my account with God.

Until you realize you're saved by grace, that you've been saved strictly because of what Jesus Christ did, that you've been accepted and it has nothing to do with anything you have done but it's a free gift, until you realize you are saved not by anything you do but simply because of the grace of God through Jesus Christ ... Believe it or not, until you know that your good deeds won't save you, your good deeds aren't good. They're actually for you. They're selfish.

You're not doing them for God. You're certainly not doing them for other people. You're doing them for you, for your self-esteem, for your self-image. It's really weird. Until you see you're a sinner who deserves to be lost but you're saved by grace, the good deeds you do are basically for yourself. Actually, you're not good. Until you see you can't be saved by being good, you'll never be good. Not until you see you've been saved in spite of not being good do you start to get good.

If you say, "Wow, that's weird," that's Christianity, and it's liberating. Jesus Christ is claiming to be your Lord, but ... An awful lot of people tell me, "I'm just afraid that if I give myself to God he'll kind of control my life." The answer is if he was just a kind of abstract god, yeah, I know. But this is the God who came to earth, died on the cross for you, made himself weak, made himself vulnerable for you.

When God says, "Make yourself vulnerable to me, serve me, put your happiness in my happiness so that what makes me happy makes you happy," he's only asking you to do what he has already done. He already did that for you, and there is no other religion that claims that that happened. I'm trying to show you the beauty, what I consider the inner consistency of the message, the

resurrection, and the claims.

Female: All right, everyone. Last chance tonight to send in your questions in response to what Tim spoke on this evening. I love this question. It reminds me of the time I saw the very graphic film *The Passion of the Christ* with a graphic portrayal of the crucifixion. I remember bringing a friend, and afterward she just exclaimed, "Why was *that* necessary?" kind of alluding to the death. The question is, "If God is all-powerful, then why can't he forgive me without Jesus dying?"

Tim Keller: Wow, that's the question, isn't it? I think I can answer it kind of abstractly. I'd like to go into our own psychology for a second. There's no such thing as just forgiving. I can explain that philosophically and even legally, but I'll start psychologically. Well, let's do economically. Let's just say somebody comes to your house and they get kind of wild and rambunctious and are kind of full of themselves or maybe they had too much to drink, or something like that, and they knock over a lamp of yours that cost \$75 and break it.

They say, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." You say, "No, forget it." There are a couple of things that can happen. Either you make them pay ... They want to pay, you make them pay, so you get \$75 and you get your lamp back. The other possibility is that you forgive them. I'm talking forgive economically; I'm not talking about your heart. I hope you're not that angry about a lamp. Let me just talk about economic forgiveness.

You could forgive the debt and just say, "No, don't. I'm not going to do it." What happens then? Does that really mean the debt goes off into the air? No. Either you have to pay the \$75 yourself and go buy another lamp or you pay \$35 and get a crappier lamp or you go without a lamp, which means now you're paying the price in the sense of lower illumination and poorer eyesight and having to go get new glasses sooner.

The point is either the person who wronged you pays or you pay. There's no such thing as just forgiving. Somebody has to pay. You can even see that economically. It's also true, I think, emotionally. If somebody hurts your reputation, they say something very bad and it really hurts your reputation, there are two things you can do. One is you can hurt *their* reputation by getting your reputation back. You can go to all of the people he lied to and say, "He's a liar." You're making him pay. You get your reputation back at his expense.

The other possibility (again, I'm not saying the rightness or wrongness of this) is forgive him, which is to say, "I'm not going to tell people what he did, and I'm not going to hurt his reputation. I'm going to forgive him." In which case you've lost your reputation. It's going to take a while for you to get it back. All I know is that when the Bible says that God is a just God and though he wants to forgive us he can't simply forgive us without there being a cost, frankly, since that's true in every other area of life, I don't know why I would question it here.

My guess is since we're all made in God's image, his own reality ... "I'm a just God. I cannot just overlook sin. I'm a God of justice. I can't just shrug at it."

Certainly, if you were the victim of injustice and some judge said, "Hey, just let it go," you'd say, "No, that's not justice." So if we know in every area of our lives that you can't just forgive, that even if you forgive there's a payment ...

Forgiveness is great. I'm all for forgiveness, but there's a payment. God can't forgive us unless there's a payment. He has borne that payment himself on the cross. That's why all the blood and guts.

Female: You mentioned how it would be very difficult for someone to make up the Gospels. This question asks, "For us laypeople in the audience, what do you actually see if you see someone risen from the dead? I mean, how do you know this isn't just a figure of speech that was subsequently embellished in the writings 15 years later?"

Tim: Paul is saying this is not a legend. He says people saw him with their own eyes. When he says, "If any of you reading this have any doubts, most of the people who saw Jesus alive were still alive. They're accessible. Go to see them." Does that sound like an embellishment to you? That sounds like a claim, a simple historical claim. That's not a legend that grew up, the legend of the eyewitnesses, because none of those documents were private documents. Again, that gets us back to what we talked about a little bit last week with canonicity.

The New Testament documents, when they were written by an apostle, when Mark wrote something, Luke wrote something, John, Peter, Paul ... These were documents that were circulated and read in the churches, so these were public documents. So to make a historical claim and to challenge the people listening to go check the claim out ... The eyewitnesses in the text were like footnotes.

Richard Bauckham says that when you and I write a document, we need to footnote it. We need to say where our sources were. "We didn't just make this up; there's a historian who says this. We didn't just make this up; there was a scientist who found this. We didn't just make this up." That's what a footnote is. "We didn't just make this up."

He says in oral histories what you needed to do to show you hadn't just made it up was to put the name of the eyewitnesses in there so they could be consulted. That was what Paul was doing. So that's not an embellishment. That doesn't prove they actually saw Jesus risen from the dead, but I think it does prove that hundreds of people thought they had. Don't forget they were Jews and were not prone to believe in a human Son of God or a resurrected Lord.

Female: The next question is asking you to review something you've talked about in a previous session. "Could you review again why it is that Jesus is the only way? I sense truth in your arguments but still question the 'only-ness' of Jesus."

Tim: There are several ways to come at that question, which is a nagging question. We don't want to be exclusive. I'd say, first of all, the fact that Jesus' claims are almost infinitely higher than the claims of Buddha, Confucius,

Muhammad ... He's not saying, "I'm showing you the way to God." He's saying, "I am God." In a way, that means he is either *the* way or he's no way at all. The nature of the claims is a big part of what irritates people about Christianity.

I always try to say, "Look, we Christians who say Jesus is the only way ..." Please don't get me wrong out there in cyberspace. We kind of can't help it. We're stuck with this Savior who claims to be the only way. Did I really say that? I don't mean that. I don't mean that I resent it at all. What I do mean is when you've decided, "This is the Son of God; he was raised from the dead; I believe in him," and he says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life ..." Not "I *have* truth" but "I am the truth." He makes these astounding claims.

Either he is *the* main way to find God (he would have to be the superior way, I think) or else we decide he's not who he says he is, and then he falls off the map. He's not one more wonderful sage because of his claims. I think it's really all or nothing with Jesus. Christians are drawn by the beauty of Jesus and the power of his claims to saying he's the only way.

It's not just because of the natural smugness of the human heart to say, "We have the knowledge, and you do not." I know it's hard not to think that's what Christians are doing. Frankly, I do know Christians that I think that *is* their motivation, but if you come right down to the claims of Christ, that's the reason we say he's the only way: because he kind of doesn't give us any alternative.

Female: You talked a lot about how so many people in the Gospels saw Jesus living and resurrected. The question is, "Are there historical documents or records of Jesus and the resurrection outside of the Gospels?"

Tim: There are other documents that talk about Jesus outside of the Bible, and there are other documents that talk about the claim that his followers believed he was raised from the dead, so there actually are, but there's nothing like the accounts. If you mean, "Is there some non-Christian account of the resurrection?" No.

We've put together a further reading list we'll get back to in a bit. There's one book by a guy named Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, and there are other books on that list that would help with that. There are some Greek and Roman contemporary sources that talk about Jesus actually living and where he lived and his followers, but they're rather high level. They're brief.

Female: "Why would you give yourself to God if the eventual goal is to get into heaven, which seems essentially selfish?"

Tim: Well, I'd like to come clean and say I think in the beginning everybody comes to faith selfishly. To start with, you usually have a problem and you're trying to get some relief. That's okay. Why not? If you're feeling guilty and you would like some forgiveness, if you're feeling weak and you'd like some strength, if you're feeling meaningless and you would like some meaning ... It's just like being hungry. If you're hungry and you're looking for some food ... I guess that's selfish. It is certainly a first step.

Frankly, I think in marriage you start to get into this. To start with, you want the person to like you. Then you want them to love you. Usually you want them to like and love you because either you're attracted to them physically or they have other ways in which you would just love to be with them and it would make you feel fulfilled. There are all sorts of selfish reasons originally to get married. Why else would you be married? It's not altruism. You have all kinds of passions and things.

I want you to know that eventually (this is in a book I wrote on this subject) you come to the place where you love the person for who they are, and it doesn't matter necessarily whether you're getting fulfilled or not right now.

Originally, you tend to love people for what you get out of it, and hopefully, eventually, you move past that to the place where you're loving them for who they are in themselves, whether you're getting something out of it or not. That's real love. To start with, you come with a fair amount of self-interest, but eventually the beauty of who he is and what he has done kind of drops a lot of that out and you start to get sold out for him the way you would want somebody to be sold out for you.

If you were married and you had a little bit of money and suddenly you lost all your money and your spouse said, "Bye. I'm divorcing you," you would say, "You didn't love me for me; you loved me for my money." The answer would be, "Yes, that's right." In the beginning, you tend to go to God because he's rich, but eventually you just have to love him for who he is. I think that's possible. It does happen. Never perfectly, but it does happen.

Female: This next question is one of these questions that is kind of meta, asks you to kind of think about the perspective of God.

Tim: A meta question?

Female: Well, the kind of question that sometimes makes my brain hurt when I try to think about it. It says, "If God loves us and knows us at our core and knows what we think and do before we think and do these things, why did he even put the Tree of Knowledge in the garden of Eden?"

Tim: I don't know.

Female: That's what I would say. So, next question.

Tim: By the way, I was actually told when I was in theological graduate school that that's an unanswerable question. When you get down to the very origins of things and you're trying to figure out wisdom and motive and things like that, I do think at a certain point you draw a veil of discretion over it. There is one theologian who said, "Where God has not opened his holy mouth, I dare not open mine."

Female: I think part of the question, and I've actually had friends ask me this as well ... If God put the tree there and allowed for that free will, then why are we at

fault for the bad decisions we make?

Tim: Oh, well, he didn't coerce us. This is where the problem of evil becomes a problem. It is a real problem. There must be some greater glory and good that God is going to bring out. I think we talked a little bit about this before. I do know a couple of things. If there was never any evil or sin in the world, there would never have been such a thing as courage. There would never have been such a thing as sacrifice. Somebody said this years ago, and I remember thinking, "Oh, that's interesting." Aren't courage and sacrifice good things?

Honestly, I've been through this so many times over the years. I made an argument two weeks ago that evil and suffering doesn't disprove God unless you are sure that God couldn't have a good reason for allowing it. There's no way that anybody could be sure ... If you have a God big enough to be mad at for evil, you have a God infinite enough to have some reasons for allowing it that you can't think of. You can't have it both ways. But that's a very negative argument and some of you, obviously, are not very satisfied with it.

What I just tried to say is you can't say there can't be a reason, but you're saying, "Okay, well, what *is* that reason?" Now you're pushing me. The closest thing I know is the idea that somehow the eventual glory and joy will be greater, infinitely greater, unimaginably greater, for having allowed this, but it just seems weak. Whenever anybody has ever pushed me or whenever I've tried to push myself into coming up with scenarios, they fall short.

I think I've told you this story. When my children were little, we moved to New York. We took them away from everything they knew, everything they loved. They were pretty young. Of course, now they all have grown up here and they're all Yankees fans and I have two grandchildren here. Looking back on it, they would say, "Of course you had to do it. We were just kids. It looked like enormous anguish and suffering for us at the moment. From our perspective as a 6-year-old, 8-year-old, and 10-year-old, it was inscrutable and excruciating and horrible."

You might say, "Are you telling me that you're likening genocide and horrible suffering to a crying child?" The answer is, "Yeah, sort of." I'm just saying that surely, even though I was in my 30s and my children were 8, 9, or 10 years old, the 30 years between us was enough that I couldn't even begin to explain it to them. I couldn't say, "When you're 20 years old you'll be happy. You won't even remember this."

The distance between us and God has to be infinitely greater, and my guess is that the dynamic will be the same thing, that somehow God will say, "When you were on earth I couldn't have explained it to you; you had no concept of it," and when you actually see the reasons, you're going to say, "Oh my gosh, of course." But I don't know what they are.

Female: "Sometimes people talk about how Jesus didn't really say he was actually God, so can you describe some of the words Jesus used to claim to actually be equivalent with God himself?"

Tim: I mentioned the one direct claim is when he said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” I kind of went through the list there a little bit. We have a tendency to think that when he says, “I am the Son of God,” that that’s not really a claim to be God, but it is. You just have to understand the parlance. There’s a place in Matthew 11 where Jesus says, “No one knows the Father but the Son.” That could sound like, “I’m a prophet, and I’m the best prophet.”

But then he turns around and says, “And no one knows the Son but the Father.” Most commentators and people who understand something about ancient texts say that is an astounding statement. It’s saying that the Father and the Son’s knowledge of each other is mutually exhaustive. No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son. It’s saying both of them are infinite. “It takes the heavenly Father to know me.” It’s an amazing claim.

There’s a place where Jesus actually was saying, “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” Just casually. He’s just going by and he says, “Yeah, I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” I guess the disciples were sitting there going, “What?” He makes so many statements about being ancient, about existing before the dawn of time, coming back to judge the earth, forgiving all sins.

The reason they kept constantly trying to stone him and kill him for blasphemy is the statements he made ... If he had just said, “I am God,” which is what a lot of English-speaking, Western people want to see in the text, what kind of God would that be? Are you talking about the Eastern god, which is in everything, or are you talking about one of the Greek or Roman gods like Zeus who can come on down and be ...

When he uses all the terminology of Old Testament Israel to say, “I am the I Am, I’m the Judge of all the earth, I’m the Holy One, I’m the Son of God,” it’s unmistakable. He’s actually saying, “I am the God of Israel.” That’s the reason he was slain. If anybody says, “I don’t think Jesus really claimed to be God,” the answer is, “Why was he killed?”

In every one of the Gospels he’s asked, “Are you the Son of the Most High? Are you the Son of Man who’s coming with the angels in heaven?” and Jesus says, “You said it.” Then they tear their robes and say, “We don’t need any other witnesses. That’s blasphemy. He’s claiming to be God. Let’s kill him.” So that’s what happened.

Female: We are almost running out of time, but this is something that might help summarize some of the other questions I’ve gotten. Kind of, “Okay, maybe I like some of what I’m hearing.” This question just plainly asks, “Okay, so what does it mean exactly to be a Christian?”

Tim: If you mean, “How do you become a Christian?” or if you mean, “What does it mean to live like a Christian?” I would say two places. One is there’s a verse in John, chapter 1, where it says, “As many as received him, as believed on his name, he gave the right to become sons of God, who are born not of a father’s will but of the Holy Spirit.”

What it's saying is that it's possible to say, "Father, I recognize that Jesus Christ died for me, so I believe in him now. I rest in him." By the way, that doesn't mean coming up with perfect faith without doubts. It means basically saying to the Father, "Accept me because of what Jesus did, not because of anything I do."

The Bible says if I have faith from the heart, at that point I'm adopted. I become a son or daughter of God. I'm brought into the family and I'm forgiven. It happens instantaneously. But probably, if you want to know what it means to *live* as a Christian, I think I would probably go to the place in 1 Corinthians 6 where it says, "You're not your own; you're bought with a price."

What that means is once you realize what God did for you, you now live for God and your neighbor, not yourself. Frankly, every part of being a Christian is a derivative of that one verse, I think. I don't live for myself anymore; I live for my neighbor and I live for God. That's basically it, but as you may guess, that's a big issue, a big question. There's a lot to say.

Female: I think because of the time already that is going to be the last question for tonight. As always, this Q&A session and even just a mere seven weeks is not necessarily enough time to get to everybody's questions. We've been getting so many every night. That's why I want to take a moment to remind you all that tonight we're having sign-ups for *Questioning Christianity* groups that are going to be starting.

They're eight-week groups that are going to be starting the first week of April that will give you all an opportunity to continue this conversation and dialogue. The groups are simply peer-led discussion groups that are meeting in people's apartments throughout Manhattan, and they're going to go over content like we've been discussing tonight with people who are asking the same questions like you are.

They're actually going to dive into topics that are in Tim's book, *The Reason for God*. Those topics are things he did discuss during the series, such as, "Why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? How can Christianity claim to be the only way?" and so on. Beyond that, Tim mentioned he put something together for you all, and he's going to share it with us.

Tim: It's a further reading list. On the front page I put five basic books that I think would be great books to read, and then after that I broke it down into most of the other topics we've talked about or touched on, and you have a lot of further reading there. Let me just say something about the five basic books. If you're trying to get a handle on Christianity, it's deadly to read a book that's not compelling. If you pick up any one of these five books on the front ...

The five books are C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, for example, which I think is the single best book presenting both the beliefs of Christianity and the truth claims of it and arguments for it. However, Lewis was an Oxford don. These were radio talks through the BBC in Great Britain during World War II, and he demands that you follow long sequences of logical argument, which actually we're not trained

to do much anymore.

It's brilliant. It's in a class by itself. Princeton University Press right now has contracted with scholars to put out a series of the 10 greatest Christian books. Somebody just put out a book on the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, and things like that. It shows *Mere Christianity* as one of the greatest Christian books ever. There's a scholar who's writing a whole book on the book *Mere Christianity*. But it's not for everybody.

There's a book by Francis Spufford called *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*. It's a new book. It's written by a British author. Very funny, very eloquent, very ironic, very colloquial. It's especially good for people who think it's practically unthinkable that they'd ever become Christians and that all their friends would consider it utterly unthinkable. It's actually quite an interesting book.

There's a book by John Lennox, who's an Oxford professor, called *Gunning for God*. He's a debater. If you like a kind of feisty, debating tone, where he's saying, "Take that! Take that!" If you're an Internet infidel, if you're somebody who likes to spar with people, that's the book. My book *The Reason for God* is there. The trouble with it is it's awfully long. It's the longest book up there. I felt very embarrassed. I need to go back and rewrite it. Like by 100 pages it's the longest book. I said, "Who do I think I am? Two hundred more pages than C.S. Lewis?"

There's a book by John Stott called *Basic Christianity*, which is usually not your best first book. It's usually after you're starting to say, "Hey, there's a lot to this, and I want to get down more into what Christians actually believe." I put little annotations on there, but if you start one of those books and you really don't find after two chapters it's getting you, don't go through it just because I told you to.

In other words, don't plow through it. Pick up another book. Find one you kind of like, and let that be your first book, and let the other books supplement that. It's always good to find one book that's your friend, a book where you feel like, "This person really understands me." So that's that.

Can I just say something personal real quick? I have learned a lot from you. I hope you've been changed. We've been changed by having you these seven weeks. We tried to create this learning community. We don't want to be a church that doesn't believe anything. Religious institutions that just say, "Oh, it doesn't matter what you believe" and don't have beliefs and don't promote beliefs are not strong communities.

Communities have to have common beliefs. We also don't want to be the fortress that most religious communities are, so that people who come in are either confused or offended by everything, don't understand what's going on, and if they ask questions are told, "There's the door."

So we're trying to create a different kind of community that we think in our culture today, considering how fragmented it is and how much anger there is between various different groups of people and different sets of beliefs ... We feel like it's

a public service if we can create a church that is more like what you're seeing here. So I think we have been changed by this. When I say *we*, me personally and the leaders.

I see a lot of things that I say that I think are really persuasive until I talk to a couple of you and I say, "Well, maybe it wasn't. I guess that wasn't as smart as I thought it was." On the other hand, I think the leaders of the church who have been here are saying, "This is the kind of church we want. We want a community like this with a lot of people who really are friends, who don't share all the beliefs but really feel included in many ways."

That's not an easy thing to do: to be true to our beliefs and not be a church that doesn't believe anything, but at the same time to be very welcoming, as welcoming as we possibly can, to people who question us and make us better in our own responses. So thank you for bearing with us and helping us.

Mission

Knowing Jesus—March 16, 2014

Luke 5:4–25

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." **5** Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." **6** When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. **7** So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" **9** For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, **10** and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." **11** So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

12 While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

13 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him.

14 Then Jesus ordered him, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” **15** Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. **16** But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

17 One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. **18** Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.

19 When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. **20** When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” **21** The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

22 Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? **23** Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? **24** But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”

25 Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

On the weeks leading up to Easter, what we’re doing is we’re looking at the book of Luke, and these weeks are often called *Lent* in the history of the church. During this time, we’re looking at the things or, maybe we could say, the resources Christianity gives us to live life in a very hard-to-live-in world. It’s a hard place to live. Christianity gives us resources. There are various words and names for them. Sometimes they’re called *means of grace*. They’re ways of helping us live in a world that is actually not that easy to live in.

We looked at the Bible and Scripture last week. We’re going to look at prayer, but this week we’re looking at one that might not immediately spring to your mind as a source of strength. Jesus sends us into the world. The Latin word *sent* is *missio*

(mission). When Jesus calls us he sends us into the world to serve others, which we see here, and we're going to see how he does it and why he does it.

That's not immediately what you usually think of as a resource God gives you to live life in this world, but it actually is. Yes, it's true, by the way, serving other people is draining, but it's not only draining; it's also strengthening, because if you come to see that you should be living for your brother or your sister or your neighbor's fulfillment rather than your own fulfillment, paradoxically and ultimately, that becomes very fulfilling. It's a very fulfilling life.

Let's take a look and see what it is we're told here is our mission. If you're called to Jesus, how does he send you out? In what ways does he send you out? He sends you out in three ways. First, *he sends us with our faith out into our work*. Secondly, *he actually asks us to take our faith out to the marginalized of society*. Thirdly, *he asks us to go out and help change people's hearts toward God*. Our mission, should we decide to accept it, is to take our faith out into our work, out to the marginalized of society, and out to help people change their hearts toward God.

1. *He sends us with our faith out into our work*. There are three incidents here, and that's what we're going to do. We're going to look at each of the instances to see in what way this tells us about mission. The first is in verse 4 to 11 the miraculous catch of fishes where we're learning something about how faith changes our attitude toward our work.

Jesus tells the disciples to cast their nets again. Peter is very, very skeptical. Not only is it the wrong time of day (those of you who do some fishing know that dawn or dusk would be the best time of day to fish), but also it was the wrong day. It was a bad day. They hadn't been catching anything.

But they do what Jesus says, and they not only have a big catch of fish ... From what we can tell, it's a miraculous catch. The ships were actually sinking under it. These were professional fishermen, but it probably was the biggest catch they had ever seen in their lives. It was the biggest haul of fish they had ever seen in their lives.

When Peter realizes Jesus has done it and it was his power, he falls down, and he says, "**Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!**" Yet, Jesus says, "**Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.**" And he calls them to follow him. It says, "**So they pulled their boats ... left everything and followed him.**"

What do we learn from this? Two things. First of all, *when you meet Jesus Christ you experience a self-quake*. That's a lot like an earthquake except it's the self that is in upheaval. "What do you mean a self-quake?" First of all, if you get near someone who is extremely smart ... If you think you're smart but you get near someone who is much smarter, it's painful. It's painful, but if you don't just think you're smart but thinking of yourself as smart is a very important part of your self-image.

It's a very important part of your identity. Thinking of yourself as smart is a very

important way in which you feel like you're a significant person, so if being smart is part of your identity and you get near a person who is way smarter than you, it's not just painful; you will experience psychological dislocation, a disorientation, because your self-image is breaking up. This is one of the reasons why identity in college is so fluid, because you may be the smartest kid in your high school and you go off to a school in which you're below average, and suddenly you're having a self-quake.

What about with God, though? I mean, I've had people over the years tell me things. They say, "You're a pastor. Fine, but I feel so much closer to God when I'm out in nature, when I'm on the lake or looking at the mountains." I say, "Oh, really? How does it feel when you draw near to God out there on the lake and in the mountains?" They say, "Oh, peaceful."

I say, "Okay. Well, let me ask you a question. If there is a God, he would be infinitely beautiful. Wouldn't that make you feel ugly? He would be infinitely wise. Wouldn't that make you feel stupid? He would be infinitely good. Wouldn't that make you feel flawed and sinful?" In the Bible, when people get near the real God, that's exactly what happens.

When Isaiah gets near God, in Isaiah 6, what does he say? "**Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips ...**" What happens when Job gets near God? What does he say? "I heard of you with my ear, but now I see you with my eyes, and I repent. I despise myself. I repent in dust and ashes."

What does Peter say? Does he say, "Wow, this is incredible, Lord"? No. "Get away from me." In the old King James, "**Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.**" "Go away." That's right. That shows you're drawing near to the real God. Why? Because when people come into contact with Jesus, they experience a self-quake, but the self-quake is actually a change in identity because two things happen. You see two moves.

The first move is suddenly Peter gets a real picture himself. When you get near Jesus, you begin to realize you have curved in on yourself. You may have thought of yourself as a good person, but when the gospel starts to dawn on you and you start to draw near to Jesus, you begin to see you are very small, you are basically very self-centered, that even the good things you have done tend to be self-centered.

You begin to see yourself as a small, curved-in-on-yourself, self-centered person, and you might say your self-image starts to break up. The idea of yourself being an unusually good person or even maybe a religious or moral person or an accomplished person starts to break up. But the other move is ...

What does Jesus say? He says, "Yes, stay away. You are a sinful person." No. What does he say? "Don't be afraid. Come with me. I want you to be my partner." This is grace. This isn't just charity, by the way. This is undeserved grace, but he's not just treating us like charity cases. He's saying, "I want you to help me

with what I'm doing. I want you to be my loved partner."

That gives you a radically new identity. When that new identity comes, here's what we see in this little part of the passage. It changes your attitude toward your work. By the way, it's interesting to know that even though these guys are professional fishermen, Jesus has the audacity to tell them something about how to fish. He says, "Hey! Throw the nets over there," or "Throw the nets down again."

He doesn't say, "Well, you know, I'm a spiritual guy and you guys are out there doing your secular work, and I have nothing to say about that. I'm only going to help you in your private, inner life." No. He tells them something about their work. Then, we're told they pulled up their boats on shore, left everything, and followed him.

At first, you might say, "Does this mean when you become a Christian you have to leave your job and go off into full-time vocational professional ministry?" No. The Bible does not teach that over all. Many of the great heroes of the faith were not in ministry. Do you remember Joseph from Genesis? Do you remember Daniel? Do you remember Esther?

These were all people God called and used in a mighty way, but they were in what you would call *secular jobs*. They weren't ministers. They weren't prophets. They were administrators and government officials and leaders. No, no. The Bible never says that, but I want you to see what's going on here.

First of all, what is it they leave? It says they left everything. You say, "Well, they left their nets. They left their boats." Odd, but they also left the catch. Keep this in mind. That was a load of loot. That was probably the most successful single day they had ever had, and they left enormous profits on the beach or in the boat for other people. Can you imagine? All of this fish and they walk away calmly. There must have been a rush for the boats. Every other fisherman said, "Wait a minute! This will be enough to feed my family for a year." They left the profits.

What does this mean? When you have a new identity in Jesus, when your self-worth and your self-image are now based in Jesus, what it means is the profit and success is not as crucial. They're not as important. What this means is, if Jesus is your identity and it's going to be unethical or you have to do something unethical or illegal in order to get the profit, you're going to walk away from it, or if Jesus is your identity and you even just have to trample on somebody (just be ruthless, just be unkind) in order to make profit, you're going to walk away from that, too.

But it will be worth it. Why? Because it's not as important. It's not as important. It's not the big thing. In fact, let me press you further. If Jesus Christ is your identity, it changes your attitude toward every aspect of your work. Why is it, by the way, so many English names are things like Baker, Fisher, Smith? Those are jobs, but they became identities.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a physician. He was a pastor, also, a preacher in

Britain in the mid-twentieth century. He had a lot of colleagues. He went to med school. He was a physician. He had a lot of colleagues. At one point, he was actually lecturing to the Christian Medical Society in London, and he made a very sardonic statement.

He said, “I have to tell you. To be honest, I have a lot of friends who, when they die, you’re probably going to have to put on their gravestone this: ‘Born a man; died a doctor.’” What he was trying to say is it’s great to enjoy your work, but when your work becomes your identity, when your success and your ability and your work becomes the very thing that makes you feel, “This is how I know I’m good about myself,” you’re a slave. Why?

Because if the main thing about yourself is your work and your career and your success, if your work becomes your identity, then success will destroy you by going to your head, and failure will destroy you by going to your heart. Success will destroy you by going to your head (it will make you arrogant, and it will make you overconfident), but failure will make you feel, “I’m nothing at all.”

When we were doing an open forum in the downtown congregation earlier this year, it was an improv group that was doing it, and the head of it was a Christian. The head of the Christian improv group was asked a question during the Q&A. Improv is frightening because you go out there on the stage in front of a group of people. You’re given a theme. Then, you have to make up things. In other words, you have no lines.

It’s frightening enough to be an actor to go out there and deliver your lines in front of an audience, but if you go out there as an improv ... Somebody was saying, “How do you deal with that?” He said, “Well, I’m a Christian, and Jesus died for me on the cross. That means he has done all of the important things, so now I can just have fun.”

Did you follow that? He said, “I’m not trying to get out of my work what only Jesus can give me. I’m not out there trying to prove myself. I’m not out there feeling, ‘If I do a bad job, I’m a failure as person.’ Why? Because my work isn’t my identity anymore.” That’s a pretty strong statement. Are you recognizing that?

Here’s what this means. If Jesus Christ is your identity, if you’re not trying to get out of work what you can only get out of Jesus, then what this means is sometimes you can put your nets down. How so? If Jesus isn’t your identity and your work is your identity, you won’t be able to put your nets down even to relax. You won’t be able to put your nets down even to go on vacation. In fact, you’ll really never go on vacation.

You won’t be able to put your nets down (that is to say) in order to give your family and your children and your spouse enough time. No. You’ll always be at it. You’ll always be at it, but see how different it is if you have a fishing beyond your fishing, if you have a wealth beyond your wealth, if you have an art beyond your art.

When Jesus Christ says, “Fishing is great, but I have a spiritual fishing I want you

to do,” basically what this is saying is, unless your real meaning in life, unless your real wealth, unless your real art is something beyond the work, the work will strangle you. You’ll never be able to lay it down. You’ll never be able to walk away from it ever. You’ll never be able to walk away from it sometimes, meaning, “I’m not going to make as much money, but I’m not going to be unkind. I’m not going to be unethical. I’m not going to be ruthless.” It won’t be in perspective.

This does not mean in any way that once you become a Christian you have to walk away from any kind of work and just go into ministry. What this does say is it will radically change your understanding of work, the way in which you work. Therefore, you need to take your faith out into the workplace. You need to take your faith out into the way in which you do life in every area in every public sector. That’s just the first thing. First of all, mission is you don’t just keep your faith locked away in private. You take it out into your work.

2. *We are sent out to the marginalized on the margins of society.* The second story is a very, very moving story, especially if you do a little bit of research to think about the historical context. The second story is the healing of the leper. Let’s do the context. When the Bible talks about *leprosy*, it’s talking about a series of debilitating skin disorders and physical diseases.

It was more than one thing. In those days, someone who was stricken with leprosy or some form of leprosy was not simply sick. Because of the fear of contagion, they were sent away. They were not allowed to live in the towns. They were not allowed to live in the city. They were sent out, and they were not allowed to have jobs. They were not allowed to be part of the economy.

Therefore, any leper was not just physically sick; they were also absolutely poor and impoverished, they were absolutely emotionally isolated, and they were not allowed to go to worship either, so they were spiritually cursed. What are we told here? “**While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’**”

One of the things the commentators point out is, “What is a leper doing in a town?” Lepers were not allowed to be in towns; therefore, this leper must have heard Jesus was in town, made a mad dash against all of the laws and against all of the rules into town, saw Jesus, ran, and fell down before him. You realize he’s taking his life into his hands. To have a leper come in the middle of the town? He knows the chances are nobody is going to touch him. What they’ll do is they’ll probably stone him.

Here is what is so moving to me. “**When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’**” He doesn’t say, “You have to make me clean before they kill me!” No. “**... if you are willing ...**” You see the humility. You see the trust. See the remarkable trust and respect for Jesus, but see what Jesus does. He doesn’t just say, “I am willing. Be clean.” “**Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ And immediately the leprosy left**

him.”

Because we've been going through the book of John looking at the miraculous signs, here's one thing we know if you've been coming lately. Jesus does not need to touch this man in order to heal him. Jesus didn't need hocus-pocus. He did it differently every time due to the needs of the person who was sick, but we know Jesus could heal with a word from a distance. In fact, Jesus could heal without a word from a distance, so what's he doing?

It's very, very possible this man hadn't touched another human being in a long time, and Jesus is doing a couple of things here. The first thing is he is not only healing him physically, he is seeking to heal him emotionally, but more than that he's bringing him back into community. He's bringing him back into community. He's saying, “Come in. Be part of the human race again.”

This is one of the themes of the book of Luke, and I think as we go through Luke in these few weeks I'm not sure we're going to be doing it enough for you to see it, but one of the most moving things about the book of Luke is how often Luke brings in what are called back then *social outcasts*. He's constantly having Jesus deal with lepers, with tax collectors.

A lot of people say, “What is up with the tax collector thing?” Because when you and I think of tax collectors, we're not excited about tax collectors but we don't quite see them the way they were seen then. These were collaborators. Tax collectors were Jews who were collaborating with the occupying army.

If you think you know anything about the French and Norwegian collaborators with the Nazis when those countries were under Nazi occupation, do you know anything about how they were regarded and how they were seen? Do you get the idea? There are lepers. There are tax collector/collaborators. There are Gentiles. Jesus is always dealing with pagans and foreigners. He's also constantly dealing with women, and particularly, *women of ill repute*, so called.

He's always reaching out, and he's touching them, and he's bringing them into community. He's receiving them. In fact, so many of the people who Jesus reaches out and pulls into community become leaders. Matthew, one of his disciples, was a tax collector/collaborator. Peter, of course, denied Jesus three times. Was it a terrible moral failure? Mary Magdalene, evidently, had demons cast out of her. You might say a former mental patient. Yet, these are the prominent people. These are the leaders, and Jesus reaches out and says, “I'm willing. Be clean.”

Two implications of this story. The first is a very practical implication. Jesus seemed to be attracted to the people at the margins of society, people on the outskirts, people who the world thought of as losers, people excluded from the centers of power. Are you a Christian? Then we should be, too. We should sense ourselves being sent out to those margins.

Be careful, because if you're a New Yorker, right away you say, “Oh, great! I love this social justice thing. I was trained to do this. I'm so glad you Christians are

with the program!” If you gave me just 10 minutes to do a little bit of historical argument, I could tell you Christianity created that program. Peter Brown at Princeton University who is a tremendous historian of antiquity says, “The idea of loving the poor, not just giving alms here and there but loving the poor, is a Christian idea. It came from nowhere else but Christianity.”

It’s not just that we should be caring about the economically and socially marginalized. I’ll put it this way. New York is filled with people who want to help the poor, but in their own actual use of time (the people they hang out with), you just want to be with the cool kids, you want to be at the hot spots, you want to be as high up the A-list as you can possibly get, and you are way too observant of whether the person next to you is someone who would be helpful for you to know.

We’re not talking here about networking. Networking is basically a self-interested way of hanging out with the people you want to hang out with because it makes things happen for you. Christians should be anti-glitz. You should love your neighbor, which means you turn to the person who happens to be in your path, to the person who is next to you, and you don’t care how many social media followers they have. You don’t look it up. You don’t decide, “This is a person I need to spend time with.” No, no.

You go out to the marginalized. Maybe not even to a person who is socially or economically marginalized but a person who is not very glitzy, a person who is rather socially awkward, a person who seems to have a lot of problems, and you’re willing to be drained by that. First of all, this is telling us Jesus is willing to go out to the margins, but here’s another thing.

This brings up a big question we have to answer by going to the last story. Do you realize how crazy it is that Jesus Christ touches this leper and says, “Be clean”? Throughout all of history, everything we know about in science and everything we know about in religion goes like this: if the clean touches the unclean, it becomes unclean. If you’re healthy and you touch something infected, you get infected.

Throughout all of history, if someone is morally clean and you touch something morally soiled ... I mean, this is what all of Old Testament religion is based on. In fact, all religion is based on this. If you want to stay pure and spotless and clean so God can accept you, you have to stay away from the soiled people, you have to stay away from the tainted people, and you have to stay away from the dirty people, but Jesus Christ touches the leper and says, “You’re clean,” and there’s no indication Jesus had to go through the ceremonial cleansing rites.

This is astounding! Jesus is saying, “I’m the first person in the history of the world who when I, the clean, touch you, the unclean, you become clean. I don’t become unclean.” Jesus is saying, “I don’t care how soiled you are. I don’t care how tainted you are. I don’t care how defiled you are. If I just touch you, you’re clean. I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what you’ve done. I don’t care what your record is. Though your sins be as scarlet, they will be whiter than snow.”

Jesus is saying to you, “If I just touch you, in a stroke you are clean. I am not one more prophet here to tell you how to make yourself fit for the presence of God. I come to make you fit for the presence of God. I am cleanliness. I am fitness.” How could that be? The answer is here in the last one.

This last story is certainly worth an entire sermon on its own, and if you've been around for a number of years, you know we've sometimes treated this story. What you have here, and this is the top-level approach to it, is you have a group of men who bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. They actually went up to the roof and lowered him down. There are a lot of interesting parts to this story which we can't look at right now, but it says,

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, ‘Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, ‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ So he said to the paralyzed man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’ Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.”

The features of this are pretty clear, and it really answers the question I just raised about how Jesus could do this. First of all, what's intriguing to see is, though this man is being brought to be healed of his paralysis, Jesus, first of all says, **“Friend, your sins are forgiven.”** Here's what this means.

He says, “You have two paralyzing diseases not one. You have something paralyzing your body, and it's a terrible, horrible thing, but the only disease that can really kill you, that can really destroy you forever, that can really destroy your life forever for all eternity, is the fact you're not right with God. You have sins between you and God, and I'm going to remove that barrier and make you right with God,” and so he does.

Jesus can heal you psychologically, he can change your social relationships, he can even heal you physically, but unless you get that right ... In fact, everything else is based on that. It's only the new relationship with God, it's only the being pardoned, it's only knowing that you're his delight, it's only the humility, the repentance, and the reception of that love that makes you right with God that is the basis for all of the other transformations, and this, in a sense, is the basis for all the other mission. You have to get this right.

However, interesting. Jesus says it's hard. “What do you mean, hard?” Jesus knew what they were thinking and says, **“Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’”** Now that seems like a trick question, and it is a bit. In fact, commentators and Bible teachers and pastors and preachers have been working

on this for years.

Which is harder? It's pretty clear, I think, the Pharisees know you might be a magician (you might have supernatural power from whatever); therefore, you might be able to heal someone (that's pretty amazing), but to forgive sins is an astonishing claim of power and authority.

Jesus says, "Right. Which is easier?" He says, "I want you to know healing this man is going to be proof that I have the authority to forgive his sins; therefore, healing the man is easier. If you want to know the answer, healing the man is easier." What's hard, what's incredibly hard, not for the man and not for you and me but for Jesus, is how that forgiveness is procured and how Jesus' salvation is so powerful that he can make you clean in a stroke. Not years of your purifying yourself and purging yourself of sin, but in a stroke, how it can happen.

The answer, of course, are these famous texts (1 Peter 2:24). "**'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the [tree] ...**" And my favorite, 2 Corinthians 5:21. "God made him sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Think about this and then walk back through the passage with me.

Second Corinthians 5:21: "God made him sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him," which means he became what we are and took the punishment we deserve. He became what we are so we could become what he is. He became what we are and took the punishment for our sins so we could become what he is and get the reward he deserved.

Do you know what that means? He can heal this immobilized man because he himself was immobilized on the cross, nailed. He can bring that leper in because he was crucified outside the gate. He was crucified outside the gate. He became a pariah. He became the leper. Do you know what? Those disciples could leave their nets. They could leave everything because Jesus Christ left everything. He left his Father's throne. He left all of his glory. He left his divine prerogatives, and he came to earth to do all of this for us.

That's the reason why his salvation is so powerful. That's the reason why he can heal in a stroke, he can make clean in a stroke, and he can forgive in a stroke, because it's a stroke for us. It's easy for us, actually. We receive it; yet, it's all because it was infinitely hard for him. End. Let me just suggest three things.

First, *trust Jesus*. Do you know why you should trust Jesus? Have you noticed he forgives this man's sin and the man hasn't asked? Do you see any place where he says, "Lord, forgive my sins"? He doesn't ask. He just forgives him, and we know throughout the Bible, God doesn't forgive sins unless you repent. He doesn't forgive your sins unless you repent.

Do you know what this means? Jesus Christ must have sensed the fragmentary, imperfect, unexpressed desire for forgiveness in this man's heart and responded to it. So passionate is Jesus Christ to give us his grace. He is so eager to forgive us. He is so eager to bless us that he responds to a fragmentary, imperfect, unexpressed desire for forgiveness. You don't have to get your act all together for

him! “I have to surrender just right.” No! Just turn to him. Can’t you see how you can trust this man? You can trust this man.

Secondly, *this new Christian identity, this idea that I know who I am in Christ and profit doesn't matter, success doesn't matter, what people think doesn't matter* is astounding that you only get it in stages, because one of the most interesting contrasts in the Bible is in Luke 5, the first time Peter has this miraculous catch of fish through Jesus' power, and what does he say?

“Depart from me. Get away from me.” But go to John 21, and we will see this later on this year, when Jesus is on the shore and they’re out in the boat, and Jesus says, “Throw your net on the other side,” and they have a miraculous catch of fish. What does Peter do? He runs as fast as he possibly can to get near Jesus. In Luke 5, he’s trying to get away from Jesus; in John, chapter 21, he’s trying to get near Jesus. Why?

Because it takes time for what we believe to sink in. I mean, it’s one thing for you to say, “This year, I’m a new creature in Christ,” but your heart is still going to respond the old way. Somebody is going to say something to hurt your reputation, and you’re going to turn on them as if you’re the old person, because the old person is still, to a great degree, there. It takes years for it to really sink in. Take the years.

Lastly, *this is a public faith year*. This is a year in which we’ve been talking about, “We want to take our faith out, out of the walls here, out of our own private world, out into the world in all of these ways,” so let’s do it, even though a church that cares for the marginalized and still calls people to repentance and faith believing in Jesus Christ and who is seeking to have our faith engage the way in which we do our work in the public spheres, we’re not going to look like any particular kind of church. Some people are going to say, “That’s too liberal. That’s too conservative.” It doesn’t matter. Let’s be public with our faith. Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for showing us these three stories, quite a panoramic view of what it means to be in mission. We thank you that you have been so willing to take us with all of our weaknesses and flaws and say to us, “I want to be partners with you. I want you to come out into the world with me and do with me the things I’m doing in the world.”

O, Lord! Make us fishers of people. Help us to know how we can help others come out of the darkness into the light like you have brought us, and we pray you would make us agents of reconciliation in the world in all ways. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.

Worship

Knowing Jesus—April 13, 2014

Luke 19:28–40

- 28** After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.
- 29** As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, **30** “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. **31** If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ”
- 32** Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them.
- 33** As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” **34** They replied, “The Lord needs it.” **35** They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. **36** As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.
- 37** When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: **38** “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” **39** Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” **40** “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

This is God’s Word.

Of course, every Easter all of the churches of the world celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the Sunday before Easter, for centuries now, the church has also spent time observing the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem just days before he was crucified. It’s called *Palm Sunday*. You may notice, though Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all give us an account of this event, Luke doesn’t mention the palms. It talks a lot about everything else. Matthew and Mark talk about the branches. John actually mentions they were palm branches.

What does that mean? Waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna”? This is how you treated a triumphal entry of a king. If your king went out to battle and he defeated his enemies and he was coming back in triumph, that’s how you welcomed him, and on Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, people welcomed Jesus Christ as King. What does Palm Sunday mean? That’s what it means.

It means Jesus is King, and it’s important for us to see that’s not just an abstract proposition. If you want to understand the gospel of Luke, many people have

seen the gospel can be divided roughly into thirds. The first eight chapters target your mind because it's about who Jesus is and it helps you understand who he is. There's another middle eight or nine chapters that target the will, and it's actually telling us what it means to follow him, what it means to be a disciple of him.

The last seven chapters or so go after the heart because it tells you how to have an existential encounter with him through understanding what he came to do, and the very beginning of that last section is right here. I'll get back to this at the very end. I'll show you what this means, but basically, Palm Sunday is about this: you can't know Jesus Christ unless you know him as King.

He can't change your life, transform your life, or come into your life unless you understand him as King. You can't even understand who he is unless you understand him as King. Let's look at this passage and let's notice from this passage that it teaches us he's, first, *the true King*; secondly, *the weak King*; and thirdly, *how he can be your King*. He's the true King, he's the weak King, and how he can be your King.

1. *The true King*. Verses 37 and 38. **"When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'"**

Notice in your Bible there it's indented. What that means is that is a quotation, that the people who are praising Jesus and claiming him as King are quoting from the Old Testament, from the Hebrew Scriptures, and they're quoting Psalm 118, verses 25 and 26. If you go back there, you'll see this was the acclaim of the Davidic king, and all of the Hebrew Scriptures looked forward to a Messiah. They looked forward to some royal figure who would be in the Davidic line, who would be in David's line, who would come and put everything right.

They are proclaiming him not just to be a king; they are proclaiming him to be *the King*, the one who comes back and puts everything right, the Messianic hero. Even though it's extraordinarily important to understand Jesus in light of what the Old Testament says about the Messiah, I think it actually helps us a bit to realize this is actually a very powerful idea that has been there in not just the Jewish Scriptures but in so many of the legendary traditions of the world. It shows it's a human hope. It's not just a Jewish hope.

In the 1400s, Sir Thomas Malory pulled together all of the older legends about King Arthur and Camelot and the Round Table into a classic book called *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which means the death of Arthur. One of the things it mentions in that book is, when King Arthur died, it says they put on his tombstone, "Here lies Arthur *rex quondam, rexque futurus*," which means, "king once, king in the future," or as T.H. White, who wrote that novel, *The Once and Future King*.

If you even look at modern fantasy fiction as well as a lot of ancient legends and

traditions, the idea of a messianic hero or, especially, a king who you think is gone who comes back and puts everything right ... *everything right* ... is very, very, powerful. It's all over the place. It's a human hope; it's not just a Jewish hope, but it hasn't always served us well, this hope.

My mother's father, my grandfather, was an Italian immigrant, so the whole family was Italian immigrants, and I remember growing up in the 1950s. I know some of you are gasping. You say, "Is anybody still alive from that era?" Growing up in the 1950s as a little kid when we used to go down to that place, when World War II was still very much a vivid memory that all my Italian relatives talked about Mussolini a lot, and the reason was they said, "He was a guy who promised he could put things right."

There was so much chaos ... *so much chaos* ... in Italy, and here was a guy who came and said, "Give me the power, and I can put everything right." He was looked at as a messianic figure, and they gave him the power, and it was a disaster. It's partly because of those kind of stories as well as the simple fact that the history of human kings is an abysmal history of tyranny that we in America got started, but now it's pretty much worldwide the idea that we do not need kings. We do not need kings or monarchs. We don't need that. Everybody has the right to decide how they ought to live.

Kathy and I have a friend, a British minister, named John Guest who, in the 1960s ... This is just a great story he used to tell, and I tell it, too. In the 1960s he was trying to figure out American culture. He had moved to America to do a ministry. He went to Philadelphia, and he went to Independence Hall, and he went to the Liberty Bell and was looking at all of this.

There was a place in Germantown where he went to a store that had a lot of old historic Americana. It had lots and lots of antiques and things from the Revolutionary War era including lots of placards and signs and slogans that were used during the Revolutionary War era. One of the things that struck him, especially as a British citizen, was one sign that said, "We serve no sovereign here." That's America. "We serve no sovereign here."

He came to grips with the idea that Americans really were the first ones who said, "We don't need monarchs. We don't need kings. We don't need anyone who should be in authority over us. We have authority over our own lives." Yet, and yet, in spite of the fact we say that ... *in spite of the fact we say that* ... do you realize the few royal families that are left in the world are the biggest celebrities? We just go gaga over them.

Not only that, stories about kings and princesses and princes outsell realistic fiction. There's realistic fiction and there's fantasy fiction. The fantasy fiction is filled with messianic heroes, filled with kings and queens. It's filled with it. That stuff outsells realistic fiction 20 to 1, 50 to 1, and even in places like America where there are no kings, we turn people into kings and queens anyway.

C.S. Lewis in a very famous essay some years ago put it like this. He says,

"Where [we] are forbidden to honour a king [we will] honour millionaires, athletes or film-stars instead: even ... gangsters." Then he says, "For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison."

Whey he says, "... deny it food and it will gobble poison," some of you know if a person is really starving, absolutely starving, sometimes even though their mind tells them one thing, they will grab things they know are wrong or bad for them and eat things that will kill them. He says, "Spiritual nature, like [physical] nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison." What is Lewis saying there? That's a remarkable statement.

What he's saying is you can tell yourself you don't need a King, but you do. Spiritually, you do. What does he mean by that? What does it mean that spiritual nature? How does it work out? Two levels probably, and I'm speculating, but let me give you one level. At one level, the reason why I think he's right when he says, even though we all say we don't need kings and we don't need anyone in authority over us and we are our own masters and we are in charge of our own lives, the simple fact of the matter is you're not, and I'll tell you why you're not.

You have to live for something. You have to live for something. Something has to give you meaning in life. Something has to make you feel, "My life has significance." There has to be something you're looking at to say, "Because I'm doing that or because I've accomplished that or because I'm living for that, now my life has some meaning or I feel like I'm a good person or I feel like my life has some value."

You have to live for something, and whatever you're living for, it does not serve you; you serve it. You're not in control. It has authority over you. You've crowned something or you can't live. Listen to me. If you want to have meaning in life, you have to live for something, and whatever you live for to give yourself meaning in life, you have to crown it.

If you're living for your career ... "That's how I know I'm a successful person." You've crowned it. That career is driving you. It's in control of you. If something goes wrong or a trouble is happening in that career, you melt down. Why? It's punishing you because you're failing it. It's oppressing you. It's a lord. It's a master. You've crowned it.

It's the same thing for your relationship. If you're living for your children, they're your masters. You know that. Come on. Some of you know that. If everything hinges on them being happy, you're not your own. You don't belong to yourself. Political cause. It doesn't matter. Whatever you're living for, it does not serve you; you serve it. You've crowned something. Spiritual nature will be served.

It's also possible, I think, the fact that we are so fascinated with kings and so fascinated with messianic heroes and we tell stories about them, and even though there are lots of old stories about them we continue to create new ones ... Every new blockbuster is practically a movie about some messianic hero. This is just a guess (just a speculation) but think about it. It could be the reason we

crown kings psychologically and the reason we crown kings and queens culturally is because it's a memory trace. It's a memory trace in you and me.

The Bible tells us before the breaking of the world, the human race stood in the presence of a true King, a King of absolute glory and splendor, and his justice and his power and wisdom, his compassion, his nobility, and his beauty was like the sun shining in its full strength, but we lost him because we said, "We're going to be our own saviors. We're going to be our own lords. We're going to be our own masters."

The Bible tells a story about how, as we were thrown out of the garden of Eden, as we lost that king, there was a prophecy. You can find it in Genesis 3:15. It's very cryptic, but there was a prophecy, and the prophecy was, though evil has come into the world (the Serpent, the Dragon) ...

The story is Adam and Eve listened to the Serpent. They turned away. We lost that true King, and everything in the world broke because we were meant to stand in the presence of that true King and to serve him. Then everything was perfect, but as soon as we became our own kings, everything in the world broke, and as the world was breaking and as we were leaving the garden, there was this prophecy.

The prophecy said, "Someone will come ..." A descendent of the woman, it says. As the man and woman were being thrown out, "Someone will come, and he will trample on the Serpent, and even though he will be wounded, he will triumph. Someone will come and will deal with the great Serpent, the great Dragon of evil and suffering in the world (evil itself), and he will come and be terribly wounded. He will suffer terribly, but he will triumph."

All the leaves of the Bible are rustling. They're just rustling. If you just read it through, all the leaves of the Bible are rustling with the whisper and the rumor that the King will come again, that he will come back, and it's in us, I think. It's a memory trace in us. It shows up in the legends of the world. It shows up in our fantasy fiction today. It shows up, of course, most clearly in the Old Testament prophecies, and this is him.

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes, who is the King, who comes in the name of the Lord." He has come back. He is the true King. We're all looking for a King. We can't help it. We're crowning something, but this is the one we were meant for. That's the first point.

I immediately need to deal with your panic, because modern people are panicked by the idea that they're going to lose control of their lives. Panicked! This is the reason why, in New York, people won't even register for the conference until 10 minutes before. Because they want to keep all of their options open. "Who knows? Maybe something cool will come up at the last minute. Oh, my word! I need to be in charge of my life. If I sign up for the conference and I send the money in, I've lost control of my Tuesday morning."

We're that panicked. We're that afraid of losing control. We don't want to make

plans, so modern people are so afraid of losing control, and as soon as we start talking about the fact that Jesus is not just this warm fuzzy who comes into your life and makes your life better but he's the King and you must give him authority, everybody starts to panic. Here's what I'd like you to consider. First, what I've already said, which is you're not in control of your life. That's an illusion.

You're already oppressed. You're already driven. You're already serving. You're not in control of your life. Becky Pippert, in one of her classic books, puts it very beautifully, saying something like this. "Whatever controls you is your lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please." You do not control yourself; you're controlled by the lord of your life.

Secondly, I would go so far as to say your problems are because the things you have crowned in your life are oppressing you. For example, if you're living for your career, if you're living to fulfill the expectations of your parents, if you're trying to prove yourself by your appearance ... In other words, your appearance matters to you so much that if you gain some weight you feel absolutely horrible. All the things that are wrong with you are because you are serving things that are oppressing you. You've crowned something that's not the true King.

It's not what you were built to serve. All of your problems are coming from that, and you say, "Well, I want to change my life, but I don't want to lose control." You've already lost control, and the only way to change your life is to get the true King, because this is the only King who is not just true but he won't oppress you. Why not? He's ...

2. *The weak King.* What do I mean by that? In every single one of the accounts of Palm Sunday, there is a lot of emphasis put on getting the donkey on which Jesus rides into Jerusalem. It says here in verse 30 he says to the disciples, "**Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there ...**" That was a colt of a donkey.

"... which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" say, "The Lord needs it." [...] As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They replied, "The Lord needs it." They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along ..."

First of all, why is Jesus going to all of this trouble to get the foal or the colt of a donkey to ride in on? One reason is because Zechariah, chapter 9, says the Messiah will come like that. Zechariah 9:9 says, "**Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**"

First of all, Jesus is trying to fulfill Scripture, which is another whole sermon. I'm not going there. In other words, Jesus cared about Scripture so much every single part of his life he made sure came under the Scripture, but what's most important here is to see the paradoxical nature of this riding. Do you see how

paradoxical it is?

You can even see it in Zechariah 9. It says, "... your king comes; righteous and having salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey." That's the point. This isn't the steed of a king. No triumphant king comes back in riding on a little colt of a donkey. That's something a child rides on or a hobbit or Sancho Panza. Kings ride on war horses, and Jesus is deliberately riding in on this little thing.

Can you imagine the disciples for a minute, by the way? Imagine the disciples. Jesus comes to the disciples and says, "Hey! I'm going to ride in to Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds." Do you know what the disciples are going to say? They're going to say, "Yes! Finally! Finally, you're getting with the program! Good! That's great! You're going to ride in." He says, "I'm going to ride in on *this*." All the disciples say, "You're kidding! You're going to be a laughingstock. We need to hire an image consultant. You've lost control of your message." Do you know what Jesus is going to say?

"No. I am absolutely in control of my message. That's why I'm riding in like this. I do not come with the power the world expects the Messiah to come with. I'm not like all of the other legends, frankly. I'm not like all of the other ideas. All of the other messiahs are superheroes. They come in with power.

I'm not coming with the kind of power that will actually heal the world. I come not to bring judgment; I come to bear judgment. I come to go to the cross in weakness and suffering. Why? Because if I came in on a war horse and started killing some Romans, breaking some skulls, all I would be able to do is bring a limited amount of freedom to a few people for a few years.

But I'm coming to take the divine wrath on human sin that the human race deserves because of all of its rebellion against God and its mistreatment of our neighbor and all of the things human beings deserve. I'm taking the divine wrath on human sin that the human race deserves on that cross so I can forgive you and so someday the world can be put right and evil and death can be destroyed forever."

Because he's a weak King, you can trust him. He will not oppress you. This is the reason we're afraid. We're just afraid of losing control. We're afraid. We want Jesus to come in and help us, but we don't want to lose authority or control or self-authority, but you've already lost authority, and Jesus is the only, only King who won't oppress you for two reasons.

First, he's a Redeemer. He dies for you. If you're living for your career and you fail in your career, you will hate yourself the rest of your life. Do you know the reason why? Because your career will punish you forever. Why? Your career can't die for your sins. Frankly, it's the same thing if you live for your children. Frankly, it's the same thing if you live for a political cause. If you live for something, it's going to drive you, and if you ever fail it, it will just destroy you inside. It's an internal thing.

But Jesus is the Redeemer. He's the one King who can really forgive. He's the

one person who, if you live for him and live for him supremely, he forgives you. In that essay, Becky Pippert says, "... he is the only one in the universe who can control us without destroying us. [...] The last breath Jesus breathed on this planet was for you. [...] And the great and joyful paradox is that ... he makes us more ourselves than ever before."

By the way, I'd just like to point something else out. It's not just that he frees you because he's your Redeemer, because he's the one King who can really forgive you fully, that every other thing you serve will not, but secondly, he's also your Creator. Remember. We talked about this. We were created to be in his presence. You know, like a fish was made for water, and if the fish is out of water, it's dying. If you put the fish back into the water, everything is fine.

We were made for the water of serving him. Not just believing in him and going to church and serving something else, but serving him, really making him the supreme authority in your life. When you do that, it's like getting back into the water. In fact, there's a little sign of it here. Notice this colt has never been ridden before. That means it's so young no one has ever ridden on it.

Those of you who know anything about animals like this know something. The first time you get on an animal that has never been ridden, it doesn't just say, "Okay. Where do you want to go?" No. It freaks out. It always does. You have to kind of break it. You have to kind of work on it. Here we have Jesus getting on this animal that has never been ridden, and he just rides in. I believe it's a miracle.

My friend Don Carson, who has written a commentary on Matthew, puts it like this, and it's very lovely. He says, "In the midst, then, of this excited crowd, an unbroken [young] animal remains [completely] calm ..." Why? He's under the hands of the one who calms the sea. Thus, the event points to the peace of the consummated kingdom.

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

You were made for him. Things become what they really should be under his hand because he's the Creator. He's the maker. You can trust him. You need to trust him. So first, he's the true King. Secondly, he's the weak King, so you can trust him. He dies for you.

3. *How can you make him your King?* Three ways. They're all indicated in the text. We'll be really brief, but here they are. *You have to worship him, you have to obey him, and you have to expect great things from him* or you're not treating him as the King.

First, *you have to worship him*. Of course, that's what it says. It says they began to joyfully praise God. Jesus' kingship leads people to joyfully praise God. This is such a big subject, but it's in a nutshell. Why is it we're here? This is not a

classroom. Why have we been singing? Why do we use so much music here? Why is that I'm not lecturing you? I know how to do a lecture. I'm a professorial type. You can tell that. Right? But this isn't a lecture. This is a sermon. Why?

Let me see if I can put this in a nutshell. The things you serve are the things which capture your imagination. I should put it this way. The things that capture your imagination are the things you serve. The things you daydream about, the things that fill your heart, the things that excite you, the things you love, those are the things you serve.

Archbishop William Temple years ago said, "Your religion is what you do with your solitude." What he meant by that was, when you don't have anything else you have to think about, if you're standing on a street corner waiting for a bus and you've left your cell phone at home ... See, nobody has solitude anymore, but just imagine you left things at home and you have nothing to do. You're just alone with your thoughts.

I know some of you say, "What does that mean?" It's possible to be alone with your thoughts. What do you think about? What do you like thinking about? Where does your mind go? That's what you serve, the thing you most love. If you lose a job or you lose a relationship yet you spend your time daydreaming about the beauty and the greatness of Jesus (you know how to pray, you know how to meditate on him, and you know how to sing his praises), your imagination has been captured. You have learned to worship him.

Not just believe in him in some abstract way. You worship him. If you lose that career or you lose that relationship, it will be tough, but it won't be the end of the world, but if you're always daydreaming about your career and what you're going to do and you're always daydreaming about your relationship and how everything is going to be right because Mister or Miss Right loves you and you lose that, it's over. Why?

Because you crowned that; therefore, you've let your imagination be captured by that. Therefore, you're actually worshiping and adoring that, and if you lose that, it will punish you badly. If you want to treat Jesus as the King, you need to learn how to worship him not just believe in him. Do you know how to worship him? Do you worship him?

It's something you do privately and something you do corporately and publicly like we're doing right now. It's extraordinarily important. It takes years to have your imagination captured with him. First, if you want to treat him as a King, worship him.

Secondly, *obey him*. Notice how it starts off. "**Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They replied, 'The Lord needs it.'**" That's it. No explanation. That's a picture of obedience.

I had one of my sons who was always saying, "Dad, I'd be happy to obey you if you'd just explain to me why." I used to always say, "I'll be happy to explain why

you should obey me. I'm 40 years old, and you're 10." What I meant by that was, "If you only obey me because you understand why I'm telling you to do this, then that's not obedience; it's agreement, and you haven't ceded authority at all."

This is where we get back to the Bible for a second. What this means is if Jesus Christ himself submitted everything in his life to the Bible it was because he was obeying his Father when he was on earth. That means you obey what the Bible says or you obey God's will whether you get it or not. Jonah was told, "I want you to go to the capital of the enemy country and preach to it so they can turn, and I won't destroy them."

In other words, here's Jonah, an Israelite, and here's Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Assyria is the great enemy. It's going to destroy Israel, we're afraid. Basically, God comes to Jonah and says, "I want you to go on a mission that might save Assyria and Nineveh from my wrath," and Jonah doesn't understand how in the world that is going to help Israel. Because he didn't understand why God was telling him to do that, he disobeyed. He ran away. Hence, the book of Jonah.

If Jesus is going to be your King, then you have to obey him unconditionally. You have to obey him even when it doesn't make sense to you or else he's not your King. He's just someone you're agreeing with. He's your consultant.

Thirdly, *you have to expect*. "**Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples!' 'I tell you,' he replied, 'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'**" That is not hyperbole. Do you know why? Because we're told when the King comes back ... Romans 8 tells us when we turned away from the true King and we lost the true King, the world broke, and as beautiful as the world is right now, it's a shadow of what it's going to be when the King comes back.

Romans 8 says nature is on tiptoe eagerly waiting for its King to come back. This is Psalm 96 and Isaiah 55. "... **the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.**" "The trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes to rule the earth." This is what's going to happen when he comes back fully.

He's not coming back fully if today you give him authority. That healing power is not full. It's not perfect. There is still suffering in this world, and there will still be suffering in your life, but boy! You can expect things. You have to be able to expect things because he's the King of all things.

If he becomes the King of your life, then you will start to be aligned with the fabric. You'll be going with the grain of the universe now. Got it? You'll be going with the grain of the universe, and the King of the universe is your Savior, and he loves you, and he wants to bless you in every way that's not bad for you. What does that mean? You can expect things. That's the reason why John Newton has that great little hymn about coming to God in prayer.

Thou art coming to a King,

*Large petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and pow'r are such
None can ever ask too much.*

If you have low expectations, you're not treating him as a King. If you don't obey him unconditionally, you're not treating him as a King. If you don't let him capture your imagination and learn how to worship him, you're not treating him as a King. In Matthew 11, Jesus says, "**Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.... for I am gentle and lowly in heart ...**"

That's wonderful, isn't it? "I'm so gentle. I love you, and I want to give you all of that." Then he says, "**Take my yoke upon you ...**" which means, "You have to obey me." He's saying, "I can't be your Shepherd, your lover. I can't be your caregiver. I can't do all of these things unless you make me your King, because that's who I am." You can't say, "Come in, Tim; stay out, Keller." I'm both. I need to come in all at once. You can't say, "Come in Jesus as my caregiver; stay out as my Lord." He's both.

That's the reason why, by the way, they were so upset. They said, "Rebuke your disciples!" Why did the Pharisees do that? Because Jesus was forcing everybody's hand. By coming in that publicly, he was forcing them. He was saying, "Crown me or kill me," and that's what they did. They killed him. He was forcing their hands. He says, "I will be in your life as a King, or I won't be in your life at all." That's how you meet him. That's how you have your life changed. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that on Palm Sunday we can see through worship we can crown our true King and begin the healing process in our lives. We ask that you would help us do what the crowd did that day, though they had no idea what they were doing. Teach us how to acclaim your Son as the King of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Clothed With Power

Knowing Jesus—April 20, 2014

Luke 24:36–49

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." **37** They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. **38** He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? **39** Look at my hands and

my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.⁴⁴ He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

The Word of the Lord.

Easter is too marvelous for words, but we’re going to have to take a crack at it. Luke, chapter 24, is one of the four accounts of the resurrection in the four gospels in the New Testament, and Luke 24 covers the entire day. The first verses talk about what happened in the morning when the empty tomb was being discovered. The middle of the chapter talks about Jesus appearing after his resurrection to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. That happened in the middle of the day. It’s in the middle of the chapter.

The last part of the chapter, the part you just had read to you, talks about what happened that evening when Jesus appeared to his disciples, and in that meeting, he said a number of things. Let’s draw them out. Here are three things we can learn about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from what happened that night.

1. *The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a paradigm-shattering historical event.* It’s very common today to say, “Well, the stories of Jesus’ resurrection are wonderful stories, but they didn’t really happen. They didn’t literally happen. We shouldn’t try to read these passages literally. They were written to symbolize the kind of life we should live. They were written to symbolize, even though as dark as things get, there’s always a dawn. As bad as things get, we must always live in hope.”

There’s one minister, by the way, who, when he preached at Easter, he entitled it *Emmaus Never Happened; Emmaus Always Happens*. See that? What he’s saying is, “The resurrection and the road to Emmaus, these stories didn’t actually happen, but they symbolize a way to live that we can live now. We can live with

hope.”

Okay. Let's take that theory. If that's the reason why Luke wrote this, then what was Luke trying to tell us about how to live by this incident? Jesus said, “**‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.**” Okay. What are we supposed to learn about how to live from that? Avoid fatty foods. What could that possibly symbolize? What lesson in how to live life could that possibly symbolize?

The answer is it doesn't symbolize anything. It couldn't symbolize anything like that. Why did Luke write it? It's evidence. It's evidence. Jesus wasn't hungry. Verse 41: They didn't believe. He appeared to them, and they didn't believe, which makes perfect sense. If this happened, of course, he appears. They don't believe, and he says, “All right.”

“**‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.**” Do you know what he's trying to do and why Luke is telling us this? He's trying to say, “I am not a symbol. I am not a phantom. I have flesh and bones. Look at me! I'm eating. This is really happening, people.” That's what he's saying.

It's a historical event. I don't have the time to show you all of the reasons why you cannot read these accounts as symbolic representations of principles of living but, rather, you have to take them as they are, which what they are is historical accounts in full cry claiming Jesus Christ was raised from the dead in time and space and history.

There are a whole lot of things about the passages that tell you they were not written as legends. They can't be taken as legends. One we often mention, which I think is fair to mention, is if you read every single one of the accounts in the Gospels, women are the first eyewitnesses. We know the ancient readers would have been very prejudiced against women as the first eyewitnesses because they had such low status.

Therefore, there's no plausible reason why these accounts would have the women as the witnesses unless they were. There's no plausible reason why they would have been included if you were making them up, and there are many, many, many other examples of why you have to take these things as historic records and historic accounts not as symbols.

What does that mean? Just this. This is a paradigm-shattering historical event. Why? Because historic events, facts, are always paradigm-shattering. We want to believe this, and we want to believe this, but here's the fact. It's very inconvenient. We wish it wasn't there, but there it is, and it shatters our paradigms.

What do I mean? Well, for example, is your paradigm this life is all there is? When you die, that's it, so you'd better just live your life the best you can, but when you die, that's it. This life is all there is. This shatters that paradigm. It says, “No, that's not true.” Is your paradigm, “Well, I don't know if there is a God or not,

but if there is a God, he or it is remote and I don't have to deal with him"? No. If Jesus was raised from the dead, that shatters that paradigm. He has come to you, and he wants you to deal with him.

If your paradigm is, "All religions are basically alike. They're all alike. They basically all teach you should live a good life and love people," this shatters that paradigm. It says, "No. If Jesus Christ is the resurrected Son of God, then salvation comes through him." People are always saying to me, and probably to you, "Well, there are parts of the Bible I just don't accept. There are parts of the Bible I struggle with. I feel like they're regressive, and I just can't be a Christian because there are many things in the Bible I don't like."

Well, if Jesus was raised from the dead, your feelings about those parts of the Bible are not relevant. Historical facts are often inconvenient, often discouraging, but you can't dismiss them, so if Jesus was raised from the dead then you're just going to have to deal with the things the Bible says you don't like. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a symbol. It is a paradigm-shattering historic fact. We learn that from the very beginning where he's eating the fish and he's saying, "A spirit doesn't have flesh and bones."

2. *The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the key to understand the message of the entire Bible.* In the middle, he says, "The law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms are all about me." Verse 45 says, "**Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.**" What do you mean then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures? Huh? He had been with them for years. Why didn't he teach them this before? The answer is not until they saw him risen from the dead could they understand the message of the whole Bible.

You say, "Why is that?" Well, let me show you, and let me give you a case study: the apostle Paul. Paul, before he became named Paul, was Saul. He was a Jewish theologian. He was a religious leader. He knew what we would call today the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, inside and out. He knew the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms inside out. When he heard the claim that Jesus was the Messiah, he thought it was crazy! Most Jews thought it was crazy. Why?

Well, it's understandable. The Hebrew Scriptures are all about a Messiah coming, but the word *Messiah* means anointed one, means chosen and loved by God, so whoever the Messiah was, that Messiah would be blessed by God. God would support him, God would be with him, but this Jesus Christ was crucified. He was hung on a tree. Wasn't he hung on a tree? The Romans and the Jews both said only the lowest of the low were hung on a tree. The book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament says, "Cursed is he who is hung on a tree."

When Jesus was dying, didn't he cry out, "**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**" Didn't he cry out that God had abandoned him? "How could he be the Messiah? God would not abandon the Messiah. God wouldn't curse the Messiah. He would bless the Messiah. He would be with the Messiah, so what kind of fools do you take us for?" the Jews said. The idea that Jesus Christ could

be the Messiah ... He couldn't be the Messiah. He was cursed. He was abandoned. What kind of salvation could he bring?

Then, on the road to Damascus, Paul met the risen Christ. The divine glory flashed around him. He heard the great voice, and he said, "Who are you, Lord?" and to his absolute astonishment, his eternal astonishment, the voice said, "I am Jesus." He was struck blind, if you remember the story, and he ended up spending several days in Damascus just thinking about what had happened until he was healed.

He became a great preacher of the gospel, and he began to immediately preach all of the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms all pointed to Jesus Christ, which means, when he was blind and he had that time to think, he was thinking. Do you know what he was thinking? This is a little speculative, but it must have been something like what I'm about to tell you. We know it because of the way in which he preaches for the rest of the New Testament.

He's sitting there saying, "Wait a minute. Jesus is risen from the dead. I saw him! So God vindicated Jesus. He blessed Jesus. God was with Jesus. He is the Messiah. But wait a minute. What was he doing dying on the cross? What was he doing being cursed and abandoned on the cross? He couldn't have been being cursed and abandoned for his sins; he must have been for someone else's sins."

Then, suddenly, probably, Paul started thinking through everything else in the Bible he knew. "Look at the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is all about the Messiah. The first half of Isaiah is about a strong, kingly Messiah, but the second half of Isaiah is about this suffering servant figure who suffers for the sins of his people. Wait a minute. How could they both be the same person?"

Oh, wait a minute. Jesus, who was a suffering servant, died for the sins of his people and then resurrected Lord. What about all of the Old Testament sacrificial system of the tabernacle and the temple and all of the sacrifices? How could the blood of bulls and goats and animals and lambs atone for sin? Well, they really couldn't unless they were pointing to something.

Oh, to this. What about Jeremiah and Ezekiel? They prophesied for a new covenant, that someday God would make a new covenant with his people and the Spirit of God would be put right into us and we would know him personally. We wouldn't need high priests anymore or sacrifices or temples anymore. How could that be?

Oh. Oh. Jesus. What about the promise to Abraham in the Old Testament? God comes and says, 'Abraham, I'm not just going to bless you and give you descendants, but through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed.' How could that be? Through Jesus." Paul expected a strong Messiah for the strong.

He expected a Messiah to come and get together an army and to break skulls and do things, and the strong who followed him and who were faithful and were

good and virtuous, they would be rewarded with salvation. He expected a strong Messiah for the strong, but when he saw Jesus was risen from the dead and, from the vantage point of the resurrection, rethought everything else in the Bible, the whole Bible started to hang together to make sense.

It was a weak Messiah who was going to come in weakness and go to the cross and die, as our substitute, die in our place, take our sins upon him, and die in our place, so those who admit they're weak and those who admit they're sinners, that they need to be saved by sheer grace, can receive that salvation.

You see, only when you understand the resurrection does all of that make sense. That's the reason why it says, "**Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.**" That's when he taught them. Do you understand this? Have you learned this? Do you see the resurrection is the key to understanding all of the Scripture? All of it.

3. *The resurrection is the strongest message of hope possible.* It's the strongest message of hope for the world possible because, in the last part of the passage, we see Jesus saying, "I'm going to send you into the world." With what? Here's the message. "**The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you ...**"

This is the great message that he's sending people out with, and it's a message of hope. Why do I call it a *message of hope*? Let me show you. First of all, hope has to do with the future. Right? That's what hope is about, the future. Here's why this is the strongest possible message of hope. Jesus' resurrection shows us *the future is there, that it's personal, that it's certain, and that it's unimaginably wonderful.*

First of all, *the future is there*. What do I mean? Even back in those days, there was one of the great Greek philosophers named Epicurus who said, "When you die, that's it. There's no future beyond this life." Of course, today many people say that. "When you die, it's over." It's like clicking the on/off switch. You're just not there. Nothing to be afraid of. There's no pain. You're just gone. There's nothing. In other words, there's no future beyond this dark, difficult life.

Our life is nasty, brutish, and short. Is there any future beyond the darkness, the fragility of this life? Epicurus and many people today say, "No. There is no future," but if you believe the eyewitnesses to the resurrection, if you believe Jesus Christ was risen from the dead, then you know you are not just dust in the wind, and you know you're not just a stone that has fallen to the bottom never to be seen again. The future is there. That's the first thing, but not all. The second part of this message is not just that the future is there. The resurrection doesn't just tell you the future is there but ...

Secondly, *the future is personal*. Back in those days, and today, there are many people who say, "When you die, you continue. Of course, you continue, but you

live on in the earth, or you live on in the all soul.” One version of saying you do continue is *The Lion King*. Don’t you remember *The Lion King*?

“Yes, you die, but then you become part of the circle of life because you become part of the soil, which fertilizes the soil so the plants can grow. Then the animals eat the plants, and we eat the animals. Then we die, and we become part of the circle of life. When you die, you continue. You continue. You’re part of the circle of life.”

Eastern religions put it a little differently. When you die, you become part of the All Soul. Other people say you’re stardust. You become part of the dust. “We’re stardust. That’s what we’re all made of.” All right. Generally, when people say, “You continue. You become part of the great circle of life. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” Really? Let’s be honest.

The deepest desire of your heart is not just to continue; it’s to love and to be loved. The deepest desire of your heart is to love and be loved, and it can only happen if you’re a person. Persons can love. Only persons can love. Therefore, to say, “When you die, that’s it,” or “When you die, you become part of things but you’re not personal,” or “When you die, you become part of the circle of life,” do you think that’s any kind of solace?

Listen. If that’s true, if there is no future or there is no personal future for you, then here’s what death is doing. Death is taking, if you live long enough, almost every person you care about, every loved one away from you, and then when you die, it strips you of your ability to love and be loved. In other words, death has the ability to strip you of everything that matters to you, and we’re not supposed to be afraid of it?

There’s no solace in saying, “We continue,” or “When you die, that’s it. There’s really nothing to be afraid of. You don’t feel anything.” Nothing to be afraid of? There’s no solace in that unless Jesus Christ was risen from the dead, and he was. Notice what he says. He says, “**It is I myself!**” See that in verse 39? “It is me! I’m not just part of the life force. I still have my personal identity. It’s still me. It’s the one you knew before, and now I know you now.”

The one thing you want more than anything, the thing your heart wants more than anything is to love and be loved and to know you’re going to love and be loved in the future forever, and the thing you most want will never be taken away from you. That’s the deepest need of your heart, and unless you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that need goes unfulfilled. We’re not done. It’s one thing to say the future is there and the future is personal, but the resurrection also tells me …

Thirdly, *this future is certain*. There are religions that say, “Yes, you can live in heaven personally, but you have to be good. You have to be virtuous. You better live a good life.” We go, “Oh, my goodness! Oh, my goodness! What about that? Who’s living a good enough life?” But the resurrection is proof that when Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin, he did it. He did it.

If there's a law that says, "If you break this law, you must go to prison for five years," when you're done with the five years, they let you out. Why? Because you fulfilled it. You paid it. When Jesus Christ went into death and he was raised, what does that mean? He paid it. It's like a receipt.

Kathy and I love to go to Costco in Queens on the East River. It's sort of where Long Island City and Astoria come together. I'm not sure which it is. It's a great little place. It's a great spot. We go to Costco. When you go toward the door with the merchandise, there are a couple of staff people who say, "Stop." Then you have to say, "Here's my receipt. Let me through."

They look at the receipt. They say, "All right. You may go through." Actually, in reality it's more cordial than that, really. You just hand them the receipt, but here's the point. They want proof you've paid it all. Of course, the resurrection is a gigantic receipt, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, that it has all been paid, and the future is not just there and it's not just personal, but it's certain.

Lastly, *the future is unimaginably wonderful*. This is where the resurrection of Jesus Christ (like I said) is the greatest possible message of hope. It's not just saying there is a future and not just saying the future is personal (we don't just continue) and not just even saying it's certain, but it's not just a spiritual future, actually.

Other religions will say you go and live in heaven forever and you have this bliss, and this bliss is a consolation for all of the suffering you've had and a consolation for the life you've lost, but the resurrection is about bodies. Jesus says, "It's really me! I have flesh and blood. Look! Give me a fish. I can eat." That's the future. The future Christianity offers, the end result of Jesus' salvation, is a new heaven and a new earth, a renewed material creation.

What this means is the resurrection means not just that you get some kind of spiritual consolation for the life you've lost but you get the restoration of the life you've lost. In fact, you get the restoration of the life you never even had but wanted. Jesus didn't just get his old body back; he got a new body. You don't just get your old body back. In the resurrection, you get the body you always wanted, and you get the life you always wanted.

Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "The Raven," is about this raven that keeps saying over and over again, "Nevermore." People debate about what it means. It's a dark poem, obviously. It's Edgar Allan Poe, but the idea behind, "Nevermore," is that is in a nutshell the tragedy of life. There's a kind of death in the midst of life you experience more and more as time goes on, and that is when you lose something in this life, it seems irretrievably lost. The irretrievability of life is a kind of death in the midst of life, and as the years go by, it just crushes you.

Things you've lost will never come back. You have opportunities you missed. You'll never get them again. You lose your youth. It will never come back to you. You lose a relationship. It will never come back to you. Kathy knows probably the

time in her life in which she was happiest was two weeks a year when she went with her family to a little cottage on the shores of Lake Erie. All through her childhood and into her adolescence and beyond that, the two weeks of the year in which she was the happiest (the happiest times of her life) were at that cottage.

Not some years ago, Kathy and I went by to see the site, and not only are the cottages gone but the beach is gone. That part of the beach is eroded. There's this sense of irretrievability, but listen. Not if the resurrection is true. The resurrection means not just a consolation but the restoration and not just the restoration of what you had but the life you always wanted but never did have.

Some of you are saying things like, "I always wished I was married, but now I'm not going to be married," or "I'm never going to have the happiness and the bliss other people I've seen had, so it's gone. It's over. It's never going to happen to me." If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true and you believe in him, you are not going to miss out on anything, because the future is unimaginably wonderful.

Do you believe Jesus Christ was raised from the dead? If you don't, yet you see, I hope, right now there is no greater hope possible. The human heart wants this and there is nothing that can answer the deepest needs of the human heart other than the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and even if you don't believe Jesus was raised from the dead, you should wish he were raised from the dead.

You should want that he was raised from the dead, and if you don't want it, I don't think you are in touch with your own heart. This is the hope your heart needs and wants, and the hope will not disappoint you, because Jesus Christ is risen indeed. Hallelujah! Let us pray.

Our Father, thank you for giving us this wonderful hope, the hope of the resurrection of Jesus. Make us able to bask in it today, to soak in it today. Let it sink down into our hearts so we have a poise and a joy that just doesn't go out. Change us with the hope (that's the purpose of it) until we experience it in its fullness and we see you face to face. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Encountering the Risen Jesus

Following Jesus—April 27, 2014

Mark 14:27–31; John 21:15–19

27 “You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ **28** But after I have risen, I will

go ahead of you into Galilee.” ²⁹ Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not.” ³⁰ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.” ³¹ But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.

John 21:15–19

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” ¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”

He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

The Word of the Lord.

At Easter, Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus that changed history, but the resurrection isn’t supposed to just change history; it’s supposed to change us. It’s supposed to change you and me. Paul, years after the resurrection, met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and it revolutionized his life. Though we’re not to expect visible and audible phenomena around this, the New Testament everywhere says we should also expect to encounter the risen Christ. That’s how your life is changed.

How does that happen? How does that work? What does that mean? Peter is a kind of paradigm case study for us as we consider that question, because we have this story here of what happened to Peter right before the death and resurrection of Jesus and how the resurrected Christ sat down with him at a fire by the Sea of Galilee, and after his life had fallen apart, how the risen Christ put it back together.

The first part of this story you just heard read to you. Jesus said, “**You will all fall away.**” Peter says, “Even if all of the rest of them fall away, I will not.” Jesus then comes back and says basically, “Do you really want to say this, Peter? I mean, really, Peter, you will fall away.” Peter then says, “**Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.**”

At the end of chapter 14 of Mark, which we didn't read, you know how this played out. Jesus is arrested. He's taken to trial. When he's up in the trial being tried for his life, Peter has followed along to try to see what's happening, and this is what we read at the very end of chapter 14 of Mark.

"While Peter was below in the courtyard warming himself by the fire, one servant girl of the high priest came by. 'You were with that Nazarene, Jesus,' she said. He denied it and went out into the entryway. She said again to those standing around, 'This fellow is one of them.' Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, 'Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.' He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.' Immediately the rooster crowed. And he broke down and wept."

How do we meet and encounter the risen Christ the way Peter eventually did at the Sea of Galilee? Of course, again, Peter meets the risen Christ visibly and audibly. Paul meets the risen Christ visibly and audibly. We don't. Yet, there are principles here we can learn. Here are the four principles we'll learn here.

If you want to encounter the risen Christ, *you have to believe in the resurrection's reality, you have to understand its achievement, you have to submit to its pattern, and you have to live its life*. Unfortunately, it's almost comical I'm going to try to cover all of those principles so briefly, but let's look at each one of those at least briefly.

1. *You have to believe in the resurrection's reality.* You have to believe that it's real, that it really happened. Many people say, "These resurrection stories are wonderful, but you shouldn't read them literally. You should just take them symbolically. They point to things like hope. The resurrection of Jesus basically points to the idea that no matter how dark things get there is always hope."

But if you want the resurrection to be a life-transforming power and not just a feel-good factor ... For example, every time you watch *The Princess Bride* you feel good. It's a feel-good factor. Don't you feel good? You just feel better. If the stories about Jesus' resurrection are just a feel-good factor, think of them as symbolic, but if you want it to be a life-transforming power, you have to believe Jesus' resurrection really happened.

Think about it for a second. Just think about it. Here are two people who are both dying of cancer. One of them thinks the resurrection stories are symbolic; the other one believes Jesus really was raised from the dead and through belief in him we are really going to be raised from the dead. Which of those two has far greater resources to face death with poise? Think of the resources that belief in the resurrection gives you if you're not maybe facing death but just a life of suffering.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who is a pretty well-known Christian author, is a quadriplegic. This is what she says about the resurrection. She says, "I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from

the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling.

Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal-cord injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds.”

Imagine two people, both working against injustice in life, and of course, you never make that big of a dent in it. Imagine one person believes when you die you rot and eventually the sun is going to die and nothing is really going to make a difference in the long run versus a person who believes in the resurrection and who believes there's going to be new heavens and a new earth. Therefore, every effort against suffering and injustice and death will eventually be completely successful and fulfilled.

Vinoth Ramachandra, a Sri Lankan Christian, says something to the effect of, “Christian salvation lies not in an escape from this world but in the transformation of the world. Everything good and true and beautiful in history will not be lost forever but will be restored. You will not find hope for this material world in any other religious system or philosophy of humankind. The biblical version is unique. That is why, when some ask, ‘Isn’t there religion in other faiths?’ I always say, ‘What salvation are you talking about?’ ”

Not this salvation. Not salvation that gives you a new spinal cord. There is no other religion, no other philosophy that promises ordinary life is going to be restored. If you were here last week, remember how Jesus ate a fish. Here’s the risen Christ appearing to his disciples. Everybody is shocked and he says, “Do you have anything edible? Give me a fish,” and he eats it. Why?

What’s that about? He’s trying to say, “I’m talking about a salvation that no one else claims.” No one else promises salvation that gives you a new spinal cord back. That means we’re going to dance and not just float. We’re going to dance on the earth again. That is an astonishing resource, an unparalleled resource, for facing life with poise.

In other words, if you want to have the resurrection change your life, you have to believe it happened. You say, “How does that work?” Well, that’s a long process, of course. Listen. No one comes to settled or assured belief in an answer to any of the big questions. Who are we? What are we here for? What’s life about?

Those are the big questions. Nobody comes to an assured and settled belief about answers to those big questions without a process, and to come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ that really happened in history is a process, and we can’t go through the whole process now. I actually believe all Christians, especially in the Western world, cannot just say, “Well, I was raised believing that.”

If you really want to have a life-transforming belief in it, you’re going to have to do the hard work because it is questioned. People are going to question it

everywhere. You need to do the hard work by looking at the internal and external evidence, the objective and subjective material, but we can't do that now, but I can give you a start, because this very story we're reading here is an extremely good place to start.

Why? You can't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ unless you believe the accounts about the resurrection (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the gospel accounts). You can't believe in it if you think they were legendary or you think these things never really happened, but if they're eyewitness accounts, if they're eyewitness history about things that really happened, that's a great place to start.

This story is strong evidence that the Gospels are eyewitness accounts. How so? Look at the story. First of all, it's a remarkable story. I don't know of any story of a more spectacular failure than this, do you? First of all, Peter says, "I will never forsake you." Jesus says, "Okay, Peter. Calm down. You don't really want to make an oath here. You really don't want to do it."

He says, "Even if all the rest of ..." Who falls away? He's in the middle of a bunch of disciples, and he says, "Do you see all of these other people? They don't love you like I do. If they all fall away, not me." Twice he says it. He says, "**Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.**" He is taking a public oath that he would never forsake or deny Jesus Christ, even if it meant death.

From what I can tell, within hours he is doing the very thing he promised and swore he would never do. Not only that, he does it three times. If he had only done it once, he could always say, "I don't know what got into me. That wasn't the real me. I was upset, or I got caught off guard. That wasn't the real me," but if you do it three times in a row, it's the real you. It's the real you. That's who you are.

You are, as Martin Luther says, *homo incurvatus in se*. You are man curved in on himself, radically self-centered. You talk about nobility, you think you are noble, you think you are compassionate, you think you are a person of integrity, but when it comes right down to it you're for yourself. The deepest part of your heart just says, "Me, me, me, me! What's good for me?"

He is revealed to himself, but here's maybe the worst thing he does. Remember what I read you. It's not in the part that was read to you, but at the end of chapter 14, they say, "Weren't you one of these guys with this guy who is being tried for his life?"

"No."

"Yes. Surely you were."

"No."

The third time they say, "Surely you were one of those people who came here with him," and it says, "**He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'**" That's pretty remarkable. He

called down curses. Let me just tell you a couple of things about the Greek words that are used here.

First of all, when it says he called down curses, the reason they're translating it that way is the word for curse here is a transitive verb which means it doesn't just say he cursed, but it means he cursed someone or something. It's a transitive verb. There's an object to it. He cursed someone or something. Who? Himself? No, because it's not a reflexive verb. If he was calling down curses on himself, it would have been a reflexive verb.

Who is he calling down curses on? He's trying to deflect suspicion. He's trying to show he knows nothing about this person. "I have no idea who this guy is." What it looks like he did was he cursed Jesus Christ in public as a way of saying, "No disciple could curse his master in public. I don't know this guy."

This is one of the most horrendous, egregious betrayals of loyalty that has ever been written, and the minute the rooster crows, and Jesus had told Peter he would betray him and deny him before the rooster crowed, the magnitude, the immensity of what he has done breaks in on him and he just completely breaks down and weeps.

Well, a compelling story, isn't it? However, it's more than just that, because Richard Bauckham, who is a very prominent professor of history and Bible at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, a very well respected scholar, says this story is extraordinarily strong evidence that this really happened, that this is not a legend. Why?

First, one of the things we're going to have to realize, and this is hard for us to understand, is we live in a very relativistic and individualistic culture where people are constantly saying, "I blew it! I blew it!" They're going on TV shows and saying, "I blew it." They weep and everybody says, "Oh well." This is not like that, where everything is okay. Right. Sure. Sort of. Not really. We don't really trust them, but they have no problem with it.

This is a shame and honor culture. This is an ancient culture. Some of you have come from shame and honor cultures and you know to dishonor your people, to break an oath, to put yourself over the needs of your family or your leaders or your master here is a violation, a grievous thing, a shame that can never be remedied. In those shame and honor cultures that could never be remedied.

Richard Bauckham points out, if you are making this up, if you believe the stories you often hear ... "Oh, yeah. The Gospels. They were written by the winners." Have you heard that? "The Gospels. Yeah, they were put together by the leaders of the early Christian church who were trying to create a movement, and they were trying to get authenticity for themselves and for their authority and plausibility for their movement, so they put these things together. They compiled some legends. It didn't really happen. It was really promotional material for the Christian movement."

They would never put this in! If that was the case, this would not be in there! You

would never say the most significant leader of the early Christian movement did something like this. “A complete betrayer, a total coward with no honor at all, no integrity at all, and by the way, this our leader. He’s our CEO.” Is that what you put in your promotional material? Is that in your annual report?

Richard Bauckham says, if this was made up, this would never have been put in. It would have completely discredited the movement in the eyes of the average person reading it. Therefore, it was not made up. This really happened. This is eyewitness testimony. Ah, but here’s the other thing.

Whose eyewitness testimony must it be? This is what Richard Bauckham says in his book about that. He says, “... no one in the early church other than Peter himself would have dared ... to highlight the weakness and failure of the most revered [and significant leader in the Christian movement] with the candor Mark’s narrative does.” Did you hear that?

Richard Bauckham says this must have come from Peter himself or it would not be in there. Nobody would have made it up. It happened, but even if it happened, it would not be in there unless this was Peter’s eyewitness account. Bauckham goes back through the gospel of Mark and says, “You’ll never see anything that happens in the gospel of Mark in which Peter is not present.”

In other words, this is an eyewitness account from someone who was right there, and it’s Peter who is deliberately letting himself look this bad. You can argue he looks worse in the gospel of Mark than in any of the other four gospels. It is pretty remarkable, very remarkable, but it just shows something. This stuff happened. This isn’t legendary. This stuff happened.

2. *You have to understand the achievement of the resurrection.* It’s not enough just to believe the resurrection happened like some great big magic trick. That’s not going to change your life. You have to understand what the resurrection accomplished and, particularly, how it relates to the cross.

In order to do that, you have to almost stand back from the gospel of Mark because Mark tells us the meaning of the resurrection mainly by showing us through his literary artistry. Many commentators have pointed out the literary artistry. Mark, chapter 14, shows us two men, both being interrogated, both being, in a sense, on trial, and both in danger of losing their lives.

You see, Jesus Christ is being tried. He is being questioned. He’s being asked questions, and his life is in danger, but so is Peter. Peter is being tried. Peter is being questioned informally, of course, and Peter’s life is in danger. Do you see the artistry there? It’s happening at once, but that’s where the similarities end, because Jesus is being questioned by all of the powers of that society, and Peter is just being questioned by a female domestic at a fire, privately.

Jesus Christ, in the face of all of this, tells the truth courageously and dies for it, and Peter, in the face of all of this, tells lie after lie after lie to save his own skin. There’s the contrast, and do you know what that means? If Jesus Christ came to earth as an example, if that’s his primary reason to come, if he came to say, “I’m

going to show you how you need to tell the truth and you need to be true to the truth and you need to be courageous and you need to tell the truth no matter what even if it means dying ...”

If Jesus Christ came as a moral exemplar so we could summon up all of our willpower and live like him, if that’s what he came to do, he’s a failure. In fact, he’s worse than a failure. He makes our failure look worse because his standard is so high we can’t reach it. It crushes us, and it failed Peter.

Why? Peter did everything he could. If you really want to use all of your possible willpower, take an oath in front of a bunch of people. “I’m not going to smoke anymore. I’m not going to drink anymore. I’m not going to do *this* anymore. I promise. I swear.” You get a bunch of people together. “I promise.”

That’s called *accountability*, and you know it does help the willpower, doesn’t it? It kind of gives you some backbone. Surely, if you’ve done that, if you promised in front of a bunch of people to not do something, you probably won’t do it, but in the end ... *in the end* ... Peter couldn’t do it. He promised with all of his might, and he couldn’t do it.

If Jesus Christ came primarily as our example, he was a failure, but he didn’t. He came as our Savior. He came as a substitute. He didn’t come to sacrifice his life courageously just as an example. He came to do it as a substitute. He came to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died. The reason why he was saying to Peter, who said, “I will never forsake you,” and Jesus was saying, “Don’t you understand? Everybody is going to forsake me. Even my Father is going to forsake me.”

On the cross, Jesus cried, “**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**” Why? It was the plan. The plan was for Jesus Christ to live the life we should have lived, die the death we should have died, and take our penalty upon himself so we can be saved by sheer grace, not by living up to an example.

That’s the reason Paul says in the book of Romans, “Jesus Christ was raised for our justification and raised for our salvation.” How so? The resurrection proved the cross worked. If the penalty for breaking law *X* is two years in jail and you break law *X*, you go to jail for two years, and when you’ve completely fulfilled and satisfied the penalty of the law you get out. Why are you out? You’re out because the law has no more claim on you because it has been paid. Right?

If Jesus Christ dies because the wages of sin is death, the wages of our sin against God and our neighbor is death, but then he sprung (he’s let out), it means he completely paid for everything you and I owe, and that’s the reason why the cross is like a receipt. If you go to a Costco or you go to a Big Lots store or one of these great stores and you buy all of this stuff and then you head for the door, they won’t let you out unless they look at your receipt. Why? You have to prove it was all paid for.

The resurrection is your proof that it was all paid for. That’s the reason why written into the foundation documents of the Christian church is that it’s not

strong people who are saved, strong people who summon up all of their strength and live like Jesus. Then you know you're a good person. Then you know God will bless you.

That is not how Christianity works at all. That's how all of the other religions work (something like that). Right in the very foundational documents of the Christian church, we have the number one leader being the biggest failure. Saved through grace alone. Until you understand that's how the resurrection functions and the cross functions, saving us through grace through substitution, the resurrection will not change your life, but that's not all.

3. *You have to submit to the pattern.* If you want to work this salvation into your life to have the resurrection really change you, you have to submit to the pattern. What do I mean by submit to the pattern? Death and resurrection is now the way you grow. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you believe he died for your sins, and you ask God to accept you for Jesus' sake, then the Holy Spirit comes into your life, and for the rest of your life there is now a death-resurrection pattern to how you grow.

There is this seeming death. It feels like a death to repent, to admit, to declare bankruptcy, to say, "I have nothing," and then to be filled with forgiveness. It feels like a death to repent. It feels like a death to admit what you've done is wrong, that you're so needy. It feels like a death not to shift the blame but to say, "Yes, I'm a failure. I was wrong," and then to have the grace of Jesus Christ come in.

What that does is bit by bit by bit it reorders your heart. When I say reorders your heart, I'm thinking about Saint Augustine, who we often allude to here. Saint Augustine believed what was wrong with your heart and my heart is that our loves are disordered. What that means is we love things, but our loves are out of order.

For example, what if you love your career and your reputation first, and then you love your family and friends second, and you love God third? Your heart is disordered, because God should be first. Actually, your family and friends and relationships should be more important than power and status and money. If your loves are rightly ordered, then you live the life you ought to live. If your loves are out of order, that's the reason why you have all of the problems you have.

If God and his love is number one in your life and you get strongly criticized, it hurts, but if your reputation is your number one love and you get criticized, it devastates. If God is your number one love and you have a career reversal, it hurts, but if your career is number one and you have a career reversal, you're devastated.

Therefore, your bitterness and your anger and your out-of-control emotions and your anxiety all come from the fact that God is not your primary love, but through the death and resurrection, through the pattern of the death of admitting you've done wrong and the resurrection of forgiveness and grace, bit by bit by bit you see more of the wonder of his grace and bit by bit his love becomes more

real, his love becomes more real, and your heart is being reordered. That's how it works.

There's no greater and more famous example of that than what Jesus does on the shores of the Sea of Galilee meeting Peter to begin to heal him. Peter has ruined his life. Yet, Jesus starts to restore him. How? Take a look at the last part here. First of all, it says, "**When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter ...**"

Wait. Do you know why they were eating? They were eating because when Peter comes in and sees Jesus, Jesus has made a fire, and he is cooking fish so they can sit down and eat. Let's see what Jesus now does. First of all, he makes Peter sit down at a fire. Do you remember the last time Peter was at a fire? He was denying Jesus. Do you think it was deliberate? Sure, it was deliberate.

Imagine Peter seeing the Lord who he denied and betrayed, who he so egregiously betrayed. He's coming to see Jesus, and Jesus says, "Hey! Let's sit down by the fire." Peter says, "A fire? Are you trying to rub my nose in it? The last time I was at a fire, my life was falling apart." But that's where Jesus takes him. To a fire.

Then, he says, "**Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?**" What's the *more than these*? He's going back to the place where Peter said, "Yes, even if all fall away ..." Originally, what Peter was saying was, "Lord, you know all of these other disciples around? They don't love you like I love you."

Jesus comes and says, "So, Simon Peter, do you love me more than all the rest of them?" It's interesting that Peter won't go there. He doesn't say, "Yeah, Lord, I love you more than all the rest of them." He knows better now. He knows better now. All he says is, "Lord, I love you." Okay.

"Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' [...] The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time ..." What's going on? First of all, he takes him back to a fire. Secondly, he reminds him of his braggadocio, saying, "Do you remember how you said you loved me more than all the rest of them? Do you?" Thirdly, he asks him over and over again, "Do you really love me?" Why three times? Because he denied him three times.

He's making Peter relive all of that agony. You might say he's rubbing his nose in it. You might say he's taking him by the scruff of the neck and saying, "Look at what you've done!" Actually, he's letting Peter experience a death, the death of his allusions of self-sufficiency, the death of the allusions of denial and blame-shifting.

He's not making any excuses. Every single time, basically, when Jesus is asking him, "Do you love me?" Peter has to say, essentially, "Lord, I am a moral failure. Lord, I am a moral failure. Lord, I am a complete and total absolute failure." He is experiencing a death, but ... *but* ... every time Peter says, "Lord, I am a total moral failure," which when he says, "I love you," he's basically saying, "I agree. I

blew it. I did it. I'm a failure."

Every time he says, "I'm a failure," Jesus says, "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep." The word he uses there for *feed* or *take care of* is a Greek word. It's the Greek word *poimainō*, and it's a word that means shepherd. What's so intriguing about shepherds is shepherds were, on the one hand, extraordinarily tender and patient with the little sheep and the little lambs, but they were also absolutely in charge. A sheep herd is not a democracy. The shepherd says, "Let's go." The shepherd is extremely directive.

Therefore, every time he says, "I want you to be the shepherd of my sheep," he's saying, "I want you to be tender, and I want you to be humble, and I want you to be strong, and I want you to be powerful. Tender and strong, humble and bold, but I want you to be the leader." Because, of course, the word *shepherd* also means pastor. It's the same Greek word as the word *pastor*. "I want you to be the leader of my flock. I want you to be the leader of my flock." Do you know what Jesus was saying?

"Nothing makes you more effective in the lives of other people and nothing equips you more for the right kind of leadership than your failure plunged into a sea of my grace. There is nothing else that gives you the kind of self-knowledge. There's nothing else that gives you the humility. There's nothing else that gives you the tenderness, but there's nothing else that gives you the boldness, because now who cares what anybody thinks?"

Who cares about your reputation? I love you, and nobody can tell you anything you don't already know about yourself. You know the worst about yourself. You're not under any illusions. Finally, you can be a leader, the right kind of leader." In other words, what Jesus is saying is, "You are going to be the main leader of my church not in spite of the fact you were the biggest failure but because you were the biggest failure."

How do you like that? Nothing, nothing like the death and resurrection of repentance and forgiveness. Your failures plunged into the grace of Jesus Christ make you more effective in people's lives. Nothing makes you more effective than that. If you submit to that pattern and you see it operating in your life, you will develop resurrection life.

4. *You have to live its life.* What is resurrection life? That's actually a big subject, too, but from the text here are the two things we get. Tenderness and strength. That's in that word *poimainō*. "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep. I want you to be the pastor of my flock," which means to be the pastor, tender and strong.

Let's look at those two things. There is nothing like the resurrection life that will make you more tender and humble than you were and more strong and bold than you were. Let me just tell you a couple of stories. One is years ago I was listening to a recording of a sermon by a British preacher on John 21, on the restoration of Peter (the feeding of my lambs and taking care of my lambs).

It was by Dick Lucas. Dick Lucas, for many years, was the rector of St. Helen's Bishopsgate in the center of London. Dick told a story. Dick is, I think, in his 90s now. Dick told this story of something that must have happened 40 years ago. Here's what he said. Forty years ago or so, he was invited to The Stony Brook School, which is a Christian boarding school out on Long Island, to come for a week and speak for three or four days every day in chapel, so he went.

After he spoke the first time, to his absolute horror, the headmaster got up and said, "Reverend Lucas will be here all week speaking in chapel all week, and if any of you would like pastoral counseling or spiritual direction from Reverend Lucas during the day, you can get out of class and go see him. You have permission to get out of class to go see him."

He shuddered for two reasons. First of all, that was an enormous encouragement for students to go see him, but secondly, and you have to know Dick Lucas ... Don't forget. Here's a man in his 90s. Dick Lucas was a lifelong bachelor, a true Oxbridge English gentleman, for whom children were, to put it mildly, a trial. He did not know what to do with them at all, and the idea they were going to come talking to him just filled him with dread, but come to him they did.

He said he especially had a stream of girls aged 12 to 15 coming in and unburdening their hearts with this great problem. It went like this. "... and he doesn't even know I exist." Dick says, over and over and over again he had to just stifle the desire to blurt out, "For crying out loud! You're 14 years old. In six months, you won't even remember the twit's name. Stop your blubbering. Suck it up, woman!"

He said, "I'm an Englishman. I'm a bachelor. Somebody take me to a pub. Somebody take me to New York City to see the latest play. Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He said one morning during the week he was doing his devotional reading, and he came to John, chapter 21. He said he read the place where Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my lambs," and he said, "It knocked me flat," because he realized Jesus was not saying, "Feed my cats or my dogs," because actually you get something from cats and dogs. They cuddle you or they nuzzle you or they say, "Can I get your slippers?"

You get nothing from lambs. He realized what Jesus was doing. He realized, "Unless I admit I'm a moral failure who is completely saved by grace, I won't have the desire, I won't have the compassion, I won't have the patience, and I won't have the eagerness to listen to people and to care for people, little lambs as it were, from whom I'm getting no psychological, emotional, cultural, or relational payoff."

He said, "If I really believed I was a sinner saved by grace, if I really, really had gone through the death of repentance and realized I could only be saved by grace, if I was really reveling in what Jesus Christ had done for me, I'd be able to handle these little lambs," and so will you. If you have trouble having compassion on people who are hard to love, go here. It's your fault. Go here. There's

tenderness.

The other part of resurrection life I already mentioned was courage. The other side of having yourself completely remade through the death and resurrection pattern of repentance and grace so that more and more all that matters is what God has done for you and that more and more all that matters is his love, at a certain point you don't care what happens to you or what people say about you.

It doesn't matter. You become more and more courageous, and if you want to see an interesting example of that, Jesus says to Peter at the very end, "**Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted ...**" In other words, when you were younger, you were in charge of your own life, "**... but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.**"

What is that? Well, you have to know to stretch out your hands in Greek was an idiom for crucifixion. It was a metaphor for crucifixion. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. You know, it's a little bit ironic in a way, isn't it, because to have your arms stretched out is actually a posture of love, of vulnerability, of embrace, and of openness, isn't it?

It's also how you get crucified, and Jesus said, "Peter, someday you are going to love your sheep so much that you're going to die for them, too, just like I died for mine." This is what we know. History says this is what happened. Tertullian tells us, under the Neronian persecution in the 60s of that century Peter was taken and executed through crucifixion.

What he said was, according to Tertullian, "I don't mind dying. That's all right." See the courage? He said, "But, please, crucify me upside down." Have you heard that? "Crucify me upside down." Do you know why he said that? This is what Tertullian said. "Because I'm not worthy to be crucified the way my Savior was crucified for me."

That's the secret of courage. Why? Here's the secret of courage. Nothing I can be called to do is anything like what Jesus Christ was called to do for me. Don't you want this kind of humility and tenderness, compassion? Don't you want this kind of courage and boldness? All right. Let Jesus take you to your fires and sit down with you. You know what I'm talking about. You have some fires you need to go to with Jesus and let him sit down and heal you. Let us pray.

Our Father, may the resurrection power that Paul talks about ... Your servant Paul says, "Even though the physical resurrection is off in the future, I want to know the power of his resurrection now." We want to know the power of Jesus Christ's resurrection in our lives now. We know how it can happen.

We have to be converted, but then we have to continually die more and more to sin and live more and more to righteousness through repentance and faith and grace, reordering our heart's loves so we can feed lambs so we can both lead and we can also follow, so we can be tender and we can be incredibly tough.

Give us this resurrection life through Jesus. It's in his name that we pray, amen.

Our Birth: Cosmic

Following Jesus—May 4, 2014

1 Peter 1:3–12

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care,¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The Bible says, in Ephesians 2, when we unite with Jesus Christ, his resurrection power comes into our lives. It says we have been raised with Christ already. It's a

spiritual resurrection. In Philippians 3, Paul says, “I want to know him and the power of his resurrection.” Even though we are Christians who believe we’ll be resurrected in our bodies at the end of time, there is already a spiritual resurrection that happens to us now.

What does that look like? What kind of life is that? That’s what we’re going to actually explore for a number of the next few weeks at Redeemer by looking at these early chapters of 1 Peter (1 Peter 1 and 2 and, actually, some of 2 Peter, as well). I realized as I was getting ready to do this with you, some of the most important verses and passages in my life are here in 1 Peter.

Look at this first chapter. We’re going to go through and notice Peter says something happens to you when you become a Christian, and by marching through the text we’re going to see *what happened, where it happens, how it keeps happening, and why it happens*. We’re just going to march right through. Let’s go.

1. *What happened.* Here’s what happens to you when you become a Christian. **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth ...”** The first thing it tells us, and it’s very significant, is we experience the new birth. That’s what happens to us, and it’s to us.

Peter is writing to a church. He doesn’t say, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given some of us new birth ...” People today, especially in New York ... I’ve talked to people who say, “Oh, yes. I understand born-again Christianity. It’s a type of Christianity for people who need a kind of cathartic experience. If you’ve had troubles in your life, I can understand why you’d want to have some kind of deep, emotional experience. Born-again Christianity is for a kind of person. It’s a type of Christianity. I get that.”

But Peter is saying, “No, it’s not a type of Christianity. The new birth *is* Christianity.” He’s saying us. Who is us? Christians. He has given us ... He can talk to an entire church and say, “Every one of us has received the new birth.” Why? Because if you haven’t received the new birth, you’re not a Christian. It’s not a type of Christianity. It’s Christianity. If you haven’t experienced the new birth, you’re not a Christian.

What is the new birth? This is the good and bad part about these epistles. Peter is bringing up a subject which he doesn’t give us a lot of answers. You have to go to John, James, and a lot of other places, but in a nutshell, let me tell you what the Bible says about what the new birth is. It’s a new vitality and it’s a new identity.

The reason why the metaphor is used ... Being born physically is one thing; being born spiritually is a way of talking about what happens to us spiritually. It’s like being born. Being born again. How so? It’s like being born spiritually because there’s a new vitality and a new identity.

First of all, *a new vitality*. By that, I mean when you become a Christian, there is

an implantation of a new kind of life. Spiritual life comes into you. It's 2 Peter, chapter 1, verse 4 that says we are partakers of the divine nature. It means God puts his Spirit in us. God puts his lifeblood in us, his very nature in us. The two things I want to tell you about that are, on the one hand, sometimes that can be subtle. It doesn't always have to be dramatic, but on the other hand, what comes into you is stupendous.

I think it's very important if the Bible says every person who is a Christian has to experience the new birth, we need to immediately say there are an enormous number of varieties of how that can happen. We must not decide there is one kind of conversion experience that everybody has to somehow toe the line with.

Let me give you three very famous examples to show you how different these things can be. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a preacher in the center of London for many years in the twentieth century. He preached at Westminster Chapel. Westminster Chapel was this big church at Buckingham Gate. It was right outside of Buckingham Palace right in the middle of London.

He tells this story in his preaching lectures. One Sunday night, there was a man so despondent he was suicidal, and he was walking through the streets of London on his way to the River Thames to throw himself in. He was going to find a bridge and walk across the bridge and throw himself in. He was that suicidal.

As he was going (this is a true story, by the way) along, it was a Sunday night and Westminster Chapel had Sunday night services. The windows were open, and he heard the music, and it gave him some kind of hope. He said, "I think I'll go in," so he went in, sat down, heard the Word of God preached, and eventually, he became a Christian.

That's pretty dramatic. Right? "I was on the way to kill myself. Then I went by a church and I went in. I heard the Word of God and I was converted." That's dramatic! Very dramatic! However, another story. C. Everett Koop, who just died recently (he was in his 90s) was the Surgeon General of the United States in the 1980s. He was also a brilliant doctor at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. If I remember correctly, he was the first person to successfully separate Siamese twins, I think, but he was just a brilliant doctor.

He was not a Christian believer, but his wife dragged him to the evening services at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia where Donald Grey Barnhouse was the preacher many years ago. It must have been in the 40s or 50s or something like that. This is what he tells happened to him. He remembers when he began going to hear the preacher in the evening services that his wife dragged him to, when he listened to the sermons it was like almost nothing he heard that he liked. Virtually everything he thought was stupid.

He said he didn't believe hardly anything the guy said. He realized about a year and a half later, after continually being dragged by his wife, he believed pretty much everything the guy was saying. He looked back and asked, "What happened?" He realized very slowly ... *very slowly* ... bit by bit by bit, one

argument made sense. "Okay. I guess I believe that." Another argument made sense. "Well, I guess I believe that."

Bit by bit, he came to believe more and more of the Christian faith until he realized about a year and a half later that, actually, he believed. He really believed. He was praying. He had given himself to Christ, but if you would ask him, "What day or what week or even what month?" he couldn't tell you. Somewhere, the new life came in, but he couldn't even tell you when.

One more example ... a pretty famous example, and interesting ... is Billy Graham's wife, Ruth. Billy Graham, of course, was the master of the dramatic, "come to Jesus," born-again experience. "The busses will wait for you." The story is that Ruth experienced almost what C. Everett Koop experienced only as a little child.

She found as she grew up she heard the stories about Jesus, and at the age of 3, at the age of 5, at the age of 8, every time she could understand a little bit more, because she had gotten older, what she understood she embraced bit by bit, so somewhere (I don't know) at 12 or 14 years old or something like that, she realized, "I profess faith." She believed it. She could never remember when she didn't believe it.

On the other hand, she could remember when she didn't get it. At some point, bit by bit by bit, it grew together. Therefore, she never really could remember a time in which she didn't believe and she experienced a new birth. When? What year did it happen? At age 5? Age 8? When did it happen? She doesn't know, but she experienced a new life.

You see, I'm telling you that because it is crucial to realize, because of what I'm about to tell you, that in spite of what I'm about to tell you the new birth can be dramatic or it can be incredibly subtle, and you must not insist it always happen in a certain way, but let me tell you what's coming in to you.

I'm going to do a little Greek on you. There's a word in the Bible (*palingenesia*). It's a word that means regeneration. You can even see the word *genesis*. You can see the Greek word *generate* in there. *Palingenesia* means the ancient regeneration. Paul says in the book of Titus when we're born again, we experience regeneration, which is another way of saying rebirth. Regeneration.

He uses the word (this is in the book of Titus) *palingenesia*. If you go to Matthew 19:28, Jesus says, "... at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne ... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."

Jesus is saying someday he will come back and he will sit on his throne and everything will be put right. He calls it the *renewal of all things*, of all things. God's power at the end of time when Jesus Christ comes back will come down, and everything stained and deformed about this world will be wiped clean. All suffering will be gone. All death will be gone. All deformity will be gone.

Everything sad will become untrue. All tears will be wiped away.

Think of the power that is going to be exercised at that minute to make everything in the world perfect! The renewal of all things ... Guess what word Jesus uses there. He says, “... **at the renewal of all things** [at the *palingenesia*] **when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne ...**” The *palingenesia*, which means at the great regeneration of all things.

Paul has the audacity to use the same word, and this is what most commentators and theologians understand Paul to be saying. The tremendous power at the end of time that is going to make everything new actually comes into your life now. First installment, down-payment, foretaste, but that's the same power that's going to renew the world at the end of time. It comes into your life now through faith in Jesus Christ.

Do you know the power to change you have? I want you to know, everybody in this room who has experienced the new birth, you're putting up with stuff you shouldn't put up with including me, too. Give up your small ambitions. The potential to change things in your life that are hard to change ... You have it! The *palingenesia* is in you! That's the reason why this metaphor is used. The new birth is a metaphor that, not only when you become a Christian you get new vitality ...

Secondly, *you get a new identity*. How so, the new identity? It's a little bit like when a person is born. You have a new person, right? In many ways, when you become a Christian, it's you, but it's not really you. You're almost like a new person because the changes, eventually, can be enormous. Very often, it starts small, just like babies start small. Babies start at just a couple of pounds in some cases. The new life starts small, but the possibilities for change are enormous. It's almost like becoming a new person.

The story is told, supposedly, that Saint Augustine, the great theologian, had been a very licentious guy, kind of a wild and crazy guy, before he became a Christian. Then he became a Christian, and one day he was walking along the street, and one of his old mistresses came up and threw herself at him. He was polite, evidently, and he was courteous to her, but he wasn't doing that. He wasn't going there.

She was stunned by his change, and she looks at him. It suddenly occurred to her, “Maybe he didn't really recognize me.” She says, “Augustine! It's me!” Augustine says, “Yeah, yeah! I see, but it's not me.” “Those things don't define me anymore,” he was saying. “Those things don't drive me anymore. I'm really somebody else. I'm not somebody else, but I am.” He has given us new birth. That's what happens to us.

2. *Where it happens*. What makes this change so great that Augustine could even say, “It's not really me anymore”? The new birth operates in your hopes. The reason the new birth changes you so much is it changes your hopes, and if you change your hopes you change everything. Look here. It says, “**Praise be to**

the God and Father ... he has given us new birth into a living hope ...”

Isn't that interesting? What does that mean? That's what we're going to look at. We're born again, which is like a huge change. Why? Because we now have a living hope. We're born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and into an inheritance that can never perish or fade or spoil, kept in heaven, imperishable. A living hope.

What does that mean? It means a lot. If you can change a person's hope you can change everything in their lives because, whether you know it or not, the course of your life is being set by what you hope in the most. That's why the new birth is so radical, because it gives you an imperishable hope and takes you off the perishable hopes you have. Let's talk a little bit about this. What do I mean by hope?

First of all, what I mean by hope is *hope is actually a desire and an expectation*. Everybody has certain desires. We want meaning. We want significance. We want security. We want purpose. We want to feel like we're important. We want to feel like we're secure. We have those desires. Then you have to decide what will fulfill those desires.

What will fulfill your desires? You need to look up there and figure out what that is, and whatever it is you believe in that will fulfill those desires, whatever it is you believe in that will fulfill it, you're building your life on that. You're setting your heart on that. You're setting your hopes on that.

There are a whole lot of things you can do. There are a whole lot of things you could invest in and say, "This will fulfill my deep desires." There are clusters of them. There's career and money and accomplishment and status. That's one cluster. Another cluster is love, romance, finding that right person, building a family, beauty, or maybe sex. It's another whole set of things that you can say, "That will fulfill my hopes. That will fulfill my desires for significance and security. I'll set my hope on that."

Another is political causes or social causes or trying to make the world a better place or that sort of thing. Then there are smart people who diversify their portfolio. Honestly, very often, if you build your whole life on your career and you have a career reversal, or you build your whole life on your family and somebody in your family is not doing well, or you're building your life on this or that, some people say, "I'm going to diversify the portfolio. I'm going to invest in a lot of these things."

Nevertheless, all of us, everybody's heart chooses something to believe in that will fulfill those desires. You might believe in God, but you're building your life on some of these things. These are your hopes. That's what hope is.

Secondly, I want you to see *we are unavoidably hope-based creatures*. The Bible says in the book of Proverbs, "Hope disappointed makes the whole heart sick ..." Your entire well-being is all based on your hopes. Let me give you an example. This has been proven, by the way, empirically.

If you have two people in a room ... Let's just say you put person A here and person B here, in identical rooms (identical conditions, identical situations), and you give them a task. "Put this in this," or "Do this." They have the same job. Then you tell one of them, "When you're finished with this, I'm going to pay you \$100." You tell the other person who has the same job in the same conditions, "When you're done with this, I'm going to pay you \$10,000."

They're working. It's kind of tedious work. They take a break, and they go out. One person says to the other one, "Isn't this tedious? This is awful. I'm ready to quit." The other person says, "Oh, not tedious! No! It's fine. It's all right. I have no problem with it." Because one person thinks, "At the end of the day, I'll get \$100." The other person thinks, "At the end of the day, I'll get \$10,000."

Studies have shown you experience your present in completely radically different ways depending on your hope. They're having the very same experience, but because their hopes are different, one of them can hardly bear it and the other one is whistling while he works. Why? Hope. You see how radically it affects you?

Very often, frankly, over the years whenever I have counseled couples, Christian couples, if the career isn't going well, very often the money isn't doing well, very often the husband says, "I'm just falling apart," and the wife says, "There, there, honey. We need to trust the Lord." But if there's something wrong with one of the children, the wife is saying, "It's the end of the world," and very often the husband is saying, "There, there, honey. We need to trust the Lord."

The reason was because, very often, though they both cared about money and they both loved their children, very often the wife had built her hopes for her significance, her security ... Her meaning in life was, "Will my children be okay?" Though the husband loved the children, his hopes were actually more invested in his career. Even though everybody believes in Jesus, we all believe, our hopes are different, and it really sets the course of our lives.

When you're born again, however, everything changes. What changes? The things you used to look at as your hopes, you begin to pull your heart off of, and now you have an imperishable hope. Your career is perishable. Your children are perishable. Everything else is perishable, but not this hope, and this hope is so powerful that the more you really set your heart on it ...

By the way, this takes time, as we're going to see. The Lord's Supper tonight is a way of actually investing more in your hope. It's a way of just saying, "Okay. I'm going to pull my heart off of these other things. I love these other things, but this is my hope. This is really what I'm building my life on."

The text tells us (many places in the New Testament), if you build your life on this future hope, even the foretaste of that, at the end of time, the love you've always been looking for from your parents, you're going to get in the arms of your Father. The love you've been looking for from your spouse, you're going to get in the arms of your ultimate spouse, Jesus Christ.

The significance you've been trying to get from your job or your achievements or your art or your political causes or whatever, you're going to get when the triune God says to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Even the foretaste ... We don't have that yet, but even the foretaste of it is stronger than the aftertaste of any other worldly hope.

Can I say that again? Even the foretaste of it, even the anticipation of it that you get in prayer or you get in worship, even the anticipation of it, knowing what it's going to be ... Even the foretaste of our imperishable hope is more exciting, more fulfilling than the aftertaste of having built your life on all of these other things, and that's where the new birth happens. It changes your hopes.

3. *How it keeps happening.* I don't mean the new birth actually keeps happening to you. You're either born again or you're not. I don't mean that, but I mean the life that comes with the new birth grows. How? There are a lot of ways to do it. I don't want you to think this is the only way, but 1 Peter is particularly good at talking about something. One of the best ways ...

In fact, one of the main ways all people grow into their hope and become more Christ-like, become more buoyant, live more loved, become more joyful is through suffering. Look at the next verses. Verse 6: "**In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.**"

What is that saying? Here's what it is saying. Look at the first sentence. "**In all this you greatly rejoice ...**" In other words, you're rejoicing in your hope. A Christian is somebody who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, realizes, "The stuff I've been looking for here, here, and here is in there. It's in Jesus. It's in the Lord. I'm not going to rest my heart's deepest hopes and faith in anything but that."

To rejoice in what you have, to rejoice in that, he says, "You're doing that now. You're greatly rejoicing." Present tense. Then it says, "... **though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.**" I think, actually, the English translation mutes this a little bit, but look carefully.

The words *suffer grief* mean you are in agony. It's a strong word that means you are in pain, but notice what he says. You are rejoicing. Isn't that present tense? "**In all this you greatly rejoice ...**" Present tense, even though right now you are in pain. It doesn't say, "You used to rejoice, but now you're in pain." It doesn't say, "Because you're rejoicing, you're not really in pain."

It says, "You're crying out in pain. You're in agony. You're feeling your hurt; yet, you're still rejoicing." They're both present tense, and if that's true, he says, when you're crying out in pain, you still go look at your hope. You still go look at it. You still do everything you can to remind yourself of what you have coming in spite of the pain now. That's like putting gold into a fire, and you become a person of

greater poise, of greater joy, of greater faith. You become like gold.

You say, "How is that the case?" I can tell you. Think about what we just said about the hopes. If you build your life on anything more than God, suffering can only destroy you. If you build your life on your career and you lose your career, you are destroyed, because your life is based on that. If you build your life on your children and something happens to your children, you are destroyed, because you have no other life but your children.

If you build your life on anything but God, suffering will just destroy your life, but if you build your life on God, then suffering will just drive you deeper into your real joy. It will just drive you deeper into your real hope. It will show you what your real hope is through prayer, through fellowship with other Christians, through wrestling and struggling.

You'll find as time goes on, the suffering, as bad as it is, is driving you into your real joy, and when you come out the other side, you're going to be more stable, you're going to be stronger, you're going to be more poised, and you're going to be more buoyant than you ever were before. That's not the only way, but one of the main ways this new life that comes to you in your new birth continues to grow. Build your life on something more than God and suffering will destroy you. Build your life on God and suffering will just drive you more into your joy.

4. *Why it happens.* Why is this all possible? Put it like this. How can Peter say if you're a Christian, your hope is imperishable, kept for you? See all this stuff he says. It's a living hope, and it can never perish. It's imperishable. It can never spoil, never fade, kept in heaven for you. How can he say that to us?

We fail each other, we fail God, and we will fail each other, and we will fail God. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind." That's what God wants from you. You and I have never done that, and we will not do it. How in the world, then, can Peter promise us a hope that doesn't perish?

This is the essence of it all. The problem with every other kind of hope is it perishes. Every tree here is coming down. You know that story. I've told you that story. Haven't I told you? Maybe I haven't. It's been a while. The lumberjack went into the forest, and he saw a mother bird making a nest for her eggs and chicks up in one of the trees. He knew he was taking that tree down, so what he did was he took the side of the ax and started pounding on the tree so the poor mother bird was getting all shaken up till finally she fled over to another tree.

She started making her nest there, but he was going to be taking that tree down, too, so he went over there and started banging on the tree trying to shake her up until, finally, she said, "All right." Then she went to another tree. He started banging on that tree. Certainly, this bird felt like, "What is this man doing persecuting me? What is wrong with this man?"

Finally, she flew to a high rock and started making her nest there. Then the lumberjack left her alone. The moral of the story is every tree in this world is

coming down. Sometimes God shakes you, and you say, "Why is God persecuting me?" But he wants to get you to build your nest in the rock, because every tree in this world is coming down.

How is it possible for us to believe we actually, then, have this imperishable hope? Every other hope is perishable. That's our problem. We keep losing things. The older you get the more you'll see that. When you're younger, very often, you just don't really believe it. You believe, "If I get in this school I want, and if I get the job I want, then I'll be happy."

You do not understand how deep your desires are. Your heart has desires for something that nothing in this life will ever satisfy. You don't understand the greatness of your own soul. You don't realize just how deep those desires are, and the best thing God can possibly do for us is shake us up, because he says, "I really want you to have an imperishable hope. Every other hope is perishable."

How can it be imperishable? How can God guarantee when we don't live like we should live? We don't deserve that. Why aren't you worried we're going to lose that just like every other hope? Here's the reason. At the very end, it says,

"Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.... those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."

What is the gospel that the prophets revealed that the apostles preached? What is the gospel? That Jesus Christ suffered. He came as Messiah, not in triumph but in weakness, to suffer. That's the reason why your hope is imperishable. Because Jesus Christ perished in your place. Your hope, my hope is imperishable because Jesus Christ perished.

He came and took the punishment we deserve, so God could forgive us, so now it's not based on our performance anymore; it's based on his performance. Your hope is imperishable. That's why we can know it's there. Your hope is imperishable because Jesus Christ perished. Your glory in the future is assured because he emptied himself of his glory completely.

Isn't it amazing it says angels long to look into these things? Do you realize angels have been around for thousands of years, millions of years, maybe billions of years? We don't know, but here's what's interesting. It says there angels never get tired of thinking about and looking at the gospel, what Jesus Christ did for you. Wouldn't you think they'd figure it out by now? Wouldn't you think at this point to keep looking at the gospel would be boring? Why wouldn't the angels say, "Oh, yeah, the gospel; I've known about that for a million years"?

It says angels even long. The word *long* is a strong word. It means to lust for something. Their tongues are hanging out. There's nothing greater for an angel than to look at what Jesus Christ did to save humankind, and every day they see

a new glory. Every day they see a new application or implication. Do you? That's how you're going to heal your heart of the existential spirit we have until we rest our hopes in the living hope, in the imperishable hope. Keep looking at the gospel. Look at it over and over again. That will heal your heart. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the hope you have given us, the living hope we are born into. Now, as we continue to worship together, stir up our hopes. Help us see what you've done. Teach us how to look like the angels do at the gospel until we're changed more and more into the likeness of your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, amen.

Our Identity: Joyful Exiles

Following Jesus—May 11, 2014

1 Peter 1:1–2; 2:9–12

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, 2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

First Peter 2:9–12

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

This is God's Word.

After Easter, we look at the question ... *What is the resurrection life?* Because Ephesians 2 and Philippians 3 talk about the fact that, even though Christians, of course, are not yet bodily resurrected and raised from the dead at the end of

time, which is what we believe will happen, but right now we still are, according to Ephesians 2, raised with Christ and, according to Philippians 3, we know the power of his resurrection. His resurrected power is in our lives now.

What does that mean? What does it mean to live that kind of life? What we're doing in the weeks after Easter is we're taking 1 and 2 Peter and we're looking at it for answers to that question. What kind of life should we live now in light of the resurrection of Jesus? Last week, we looked at one very important theme we get out of 1 Peter, which is the new birth.

You can't understand what it means to live the Christian life without the new birth, but now we're going to look at another theme, a very important theme, without which you can't understand how to live the Christian life in this world, so what I want to do is I want to look at this theme this way. First of all, let's look at *the theme itself (how we're supposed to live as Christians), the test by which we know whether we're living that way, and the power by which we can live that way*.

1. *The theme.* What is this theme that tells us how to live lives as Christians that we're going to look at this week? The answer is it's the theme of being exiles, because in verse 1, it says, "**To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces ...**" He's talking to all of the people he's writing to. In other words, the Christians are the exiles.

Interestingly enough, the word *scattered* there in verse 1 is the word *diaspora*, which is the word that's usually used for the Jews because of the Jews who were not living in their homeland. Peter applies it to Christians, and he says, "We're all exiles." Then, down in verse 11, which we'll get to in a second, he says, "**Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles ...**"

Christians are exiles, and we're to live as exiles. The Greek word used there, as is often the case, as you know, can't be completely conveyed by any one English word, so the word *exiles* isn't bad, but the actual Greek word refers to a very particular kind of person. I think the word *exile* is too general. If somebody is trying to get away from being put in prison in one country, you run to another country (you're in exile), but that's probably not the best way to understand it. The word *parepidēmos*, which is the Greek word here, is best translated resident alien.

Some of you, probably, are resident aliens at a literal level. Here's what a resident alien is. On the one hand, you're not a tourist. You're in another country, a country you're not a citizen of, but you're not a tourist. You live here. You're here on a resident passport or you have what we call a *green card*. You're part of society. You are a functioning part of society. You have a job. You're here. You know the language.

You're not like a tourist who comes and somebody is doing all of the translation and you're detached and looking at all of the exotic things. No. You're a resident. You're here. You have a job here. You're a part of society. You know the language. You're fluent. You have friends and neighbors who you are in

relationships with. On the one hand, you're residents (you're not tourists), but on the other hand, you're still not a citizen.

You're a citizen of your home country. You haven't assimilated. You haven't given up your citizenship; therefore, if you're a resident alien, even though your neighbors like you (you can speak the language and they like you), they still think you're kind of weird, because you don't share all of their values. You don't share all of their customs. You're still different, and it also, by the way, means because you're not a citizen, you don't enjoy all of the privileges of full citizens, and lastly, you're here on a passport, which means you're not expected to stay forever.

That is the word (it's a very, very specific kind of word) Peter uses for Christians. We are resident aliens. We are not tourists. We are engaged. On the other hand, we're not citizens. We're citizens of heaven; yet, we are residents here, and we are engaged to love our neighbors. That is the balance.

What does that mean? What are the implications? I'll give you two implications of this word for how you live the Christian life. One implication is that we are pilgrims here, and this is a related word we don't talk about enough, I think, certainly in the modern church. We are pilgrims. Being exiles means we're not home. We're on our way home, but we're not home.

This is extraordinarily important for you to know because it's right of us to stress the great things that happen when you become a Christian. The minute you become a Christian you know you are wholly pardoned, you're completely accepted, and loved. In fact, we'll get back to that. That's a very transformative recognition or realization, but when you become a Christian, ultimately, you haven't arrived. You've just begun.

When we talk about the Christian life being a pilgrimage and we talk about Christians being exiles, what this means is your Christian life will never be all that completely satisfying. You will struggle. Things will never be just right. You'll always feel, "I haven't been able to get on top of this or that." There will be emptiness. There will be struggles all during your Christian life.

Do you know why? Because even though you're a Christian and even though you're loved, you are not home. You're not home. What's home? You can't understand what it means to be in exile unless you understand what home is. That's not an easy thing to define, but let me try. Kathy and I were recently on a trip. We went to Asia and Australia with Redeemer City to City. We do church planting in other great cities of the world. We were in places like Hong Kong and Sydney talking to church planters and pastors. It was quite exciting.

For many, many weeks, we were on the road, and they took care of us pretty much, but when you get home and you get into your bed, *your* bed ... There is no bed like your bed. Do you know why? Because you work very hard. Especially, the longer you have a home the more you work to have a bed that's exactly ... *exactly* ... like you like it. Not too hard. Not too soft. Not too squishy. Not too much this. Not too much that.

Over the years, “I hate that bed. I hate that bed. It gives me a backache.” Finally, you get your bed just the way you like it, and it’s not just the bed. We stayed in some very nice hotel rooms, but you know I’m very tall and Kathy is very short, and there were a lot of things in those rooms that weren’t where they should be. At home, the longer you’re in a home the more you painstakingly make it fit you, fit your height, fit your weight, and fit your emotions. Home is where everything fits.

You’re not really home. Do you know why we’re not home? We’re not in ultimate home, because ultimate, real home would be a place in which everything fit the deepest longings of your soul: complete love, complete rest. The Bible is so filled with stories to tell you you’re in exile, because, of course, you have the story of Abraham. The people of God begin in exile. “Abraham, leave your country.” The people of God were in exile in Egypt. Then they were exile in Babylon.

You say, “That’s Israel.” Yes, but Israel is a microcosm of the human race, because do you know what the Bible is about? Where does it start? In Genesis, what does it tell you at the beginning? We’re in exile. We lost Paradise, and this world is no longer home. It’s filled with death. We’re always losing loved ones. We’re always losing love. Evil is always on top of good. This does not fit. This doesn’t fit us at all! This world is not home.

If you don’t believe in God or the Bible, the irony of that is, because you think this world is all there is and this is the only world that ever could be, you don’t know why you’re so unhappy. You’re in exile, and you don’t know it. If you think this world is the only world that could be, and we have evolved to fit this world … Isn’t that how evolution works? Natural selection, adaptation to the environment.

Well, I want to know, then, why are we so unhappy? If this is the only world, if this is home, if this is really home, why are we so unhappy? Why can’t we handle death? Why isn’t death like, “Oh, who cares? I love that person with all of my heart. They died. So what?” That’s the world, and if you were adapted to this world, it wouldn’t bother you, but it does. Do you see that? You’re not home. This place doesn’t fit you. You’re not home.

The Bible says the reason is because we were created for fellowship with God, and if you want to know where true home is, it’s in the arms of God and in the face of God and in the presence of God. That’s the reason why Psalm 90 says he is our dwelling place, and Isaac Watts writes a hymn about that saying God is our eternal home.

We’re told someday God is going to, in a sense, return. His presence will cover the earth the way the waters cover the bottom of the sea, he will get rid of death, he will get rid of suffering, and he’ll make this world a home again. He’ll fix everything. That’s home, and until then, everybody, even if you’re a Christian, even if you’re a great Christian, you aren’t home. You’re not home.

Therefore, you’re always on a pilgrimage. Things will never be what you want them to be. Life doesn’t fit. The world doesn’t fit. There will be some better times,

and there will be some worse times, but you're on a pilgrimage homeward bound. You're on your way homeward, but you're in exile. You're a pilgrim. You're on a journey, and you will never really understand your own life until you understand that. That's the first implication of being exiles, that we're pilgrims. I don't know why in the world, if this world is really our home, we'd be so unhappy here.

Secondly, the word *exile*, and this is what I want to explore more now, also tells you something about how you should be relating to the world around you, to the society and the culture around you. This word *exile* is a wonderful word to tell you how you live in a place like New York City if you're a Christian. How do you do it?

The answer is not withdrawal and not assimilation and accommodation. We're not identical to our neighbors; yet, we are deeply involved in loving our neighbors. Miroslav Volf, at one point, talks about the fact ... People say, "Why is this true?" Miroslav Volf, in his book on identity, says, "When you become a Christian, of course, suddenly ..." In traditional cultures, your identity is largely grounded in your family and, therefore, in your race and in your blood.

In Western cultures, your identity is probably more grounded in your career. "I'm a good lawyer," or "I make money," or "I'm an artist." It's grounded in your career, and the minute you become a Christian, now the source of your value, the source of your security suddenly becomes far more deeply rooted in Christ.

It doesn't mean you stop being a lawyer. It doesn't mean you stop being Anglo or Asian or Hispanic or African-American or whatever. It doesn't mean you lose the one identity. It's just another one comes in that's deeper, so in a sense you have both, asymmetrical. In other words, if you're Chinese and you become a Christian, you don't become a European Christian. You're a Chinese Christian, but you're a Christian.

As Volf says perfectly, I think, he says, "Christians can never be first of all Asians or Americans, Croatians, Russians, or Tutsis, and then Christians." Christians take a distance from the idols of their own cultures because they give ultimate allegiance to the God of all cultures, so "... when they have responded to the call of the gospel ..." This is helpful. "... they have stepped, as it were, with one foot outside their own culture while with the other remaining firmly planted in it." See? Resident aliens.

Christianity is not flight from one's original culture but a new way of living within it ... *within it* ... because of the new vision of peace and joy in Christ. The same thing happens if you're a lawyer or if you're an artist. No longer is your primary identity in being an artist or being a lawyer or being Chinese or being European or being whatever. You have one foot in and one foot out, but the deepest is your identity in Christ, and that makes you a resident alien. It means you're different and, yet, you're the same, but you're not one and you're not the other altogether. That's what it means to live as exiles.

2. *The test.* The other thing we learn here is there's a test given to you as to whether you actually are living as exiles. That's how we should live, but how do

you know if you are? There's a test. Do you want to see the test? When I was in school, I hated tests. I said, "I know the material. I read it. I listened to the lectures. I don't need a test." But they gave me tests anyway, so I'm going to give you a test because misery loves company. Here it is.

Verses 11 and 12. Let me distill out the essence of the thought. "**Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to ... Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**" There it is.

For a moment, I'm going to put aside, "What does it mean to live a good life?" But the point is, if you're in exile and you're living a good life as an exile, two things will happen at once. Notice they're happening at once. Look carefully. "**... though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**"

It doesn't say, "If you really live good lives, they'll only glorify God and they're not going to accuse you," or vice versa. Here's what it says. If you're living the lives you ought to live, first of all, you will be accused. You will be misunderstood. You will offend the people around you. They will think you strange. They will think you sometimes dangerous.

On the other hand, they will also see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. What that really means is some people in every culture, if you're living like you should, will be really upset with you, really offended, and really angry, and other people are going to see the beauty of God in you and come to Christ.

What does it mean, then, to live a good life? If you're living as you should, if you're living as exiles and you're living a good life, that means you will be extraordinarily offensive and incredibly attractive at the same time, and that is your test. You won't just turn people off; you'll also attract them. You won't just attract people; you'll also turn them off ... at the same time.

By the way, let's test this out. What does it mean to say good lives? The reason we know something about what this probably means is that Peter is actually quoting Jesus, or at least he's alluding to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount, he has just finished talking about persecution.

He says, "You're going to be persecuted," at the end of the Beatitudes. Then, he turns and starts talking about being salt and light. When he gets to the light, he says, "You are the light of the world; therefore, let your good deeds shine forth so ..." Almost the same words. "... so that the pagans may see your good deeds and glorify God."

He's actually saying the same thing Peter is saying, or you might say Peter is saying what Jesus said, and that is, if you are living the life you ought to live (good deeds), you will be both persecuted and, at the same time, you will attract people. You'll be offensive and attractive at once. You'll be outrageous and

compelling at the same time. You'll be persecuted; yet, your church will grow because you'll be winning people to Christ.

Ah. You say, "Well, then, what are good deeds?" When Jesus said it, it was very clear. The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was explaining what it means to live the Christian life, and he's basically saying, "If you live like this, you will be both offensive and attractive." What's in the Sermon on the Mount? I can't go through all of it now, but I can tell you this. Let me just do a little history lesson.

We know there were at least four things the early Christians exhibited to their non-Christian neighbors because they lived the Sermon on the Mount that were both offensive and attractive. Do you want to know what those four things were? *Forgiveness, generosity to the poor of all races, the ability to cheerfully take suffering and death, and sexual chastity* (sex only for marriage).

In those four ways, Christians were radically different than their neighbors, and they were, in some ways, offensive and strange and, in other ways, compelling. We'll just do a little background here. First of all, *forgiveness*. It's a little hard for us today to understand this, but the Greco-Roman world was a shame-and-honor culture. In shame-and-honor cultures, it was understood that social stability depended on people fearing and respecting their neighbor as men and women of honor.

What did it mean to be a man of honor in an honor-and-shame culture? It meant, if you wronged him or anyone in his family, he would take vengeance because he was a man of honor. The family's honor was at stake. In other words, a man of honor or a woman of honor, if you wronged them, if their family was wronged, they would come and take vengeance, and that was considered to be the way in which societies kept together.

You lived the way you should live because you had fear and respect of everybody around you. Christians came along and said, "Turn the other cheek. Forgive seventy times seven. Don't repay evil with evil, but overcome evil with good." Nuts! Crazy! Society would fall apart. Yet, it's also kind of attractive, all of that graciousness and forgiveness.

Secondly, *generosity*. Christians were not just generous to their own poor but to the poor of other nations, other nationalities. Again, in an honor-and-shame culture and in a traditional culture, you basically got your identity from your family and, therefore, from your tribe and your blood. Though you did take care of your own people if they fell into poverty, you never took care of somebody else's, and Christians took care of all sorts of people, all of the different races. They had never seen anything like that.

The reason Christians did it was Christians believed what the Bible says about the *imago Dei*, the image of God. The Bible teaches all human beings are made in the image of God; therefore, every human being, regardless of race, regardless of social class, regardless of capacity or talent, has a foundational, enviable dignity.

That idea had not gotten out into the world yet. Historians will tell you the very idea of human rights basically comes from this Christian, biblical idea of the *imago Dei*. Martin Luther King Jr. certainly believed that. He ran with that. It was the basis for an awful lot of what he did. Of course, back then, this idea of everybody made in the image of God was not known; therefore, for Christians to come along and take care not only the poor of their own race but of other races, too, was crazy.

Thirdly, Christians could *face death and suffering with cheerfulness* because they believed in the future resurrection. Their neighbors belonged to a culture that did not give them that resource. Fourthly, *sexual chastity*. The Greeks believed the body wasn't all that important. What mattered were the mind and the soul. Therefore, sex was just seen as a bodily appetite. No big deal. They understood it just as a way of getting pleasure.

The Christians came along and said, "No, no. Sex is a way to make a full, total life commitment to one other person." They had this high view of sex. Therefore, it was only for marriage. Again, all of these things were, on the one hand, rather offensive to a lot of the people around the Christians.

This idea of sexual chastity and generosity to the promiscuous or to anybody, practically, and this approach to suffering and approach to forgiveness, on the one hand, it was very outrageous and sometimes offensive and kind of nuts, and on the other hand (come on), kind of attractive, too. Forgiveness, graciousness, loving all the poor, the ability to handle suffering, and watching people die with smiles on their faces, as they're singing hymns? The pagans couldn't figure it out.

Do you see what's going on? You know what happened. Historically, the Christians were persecuted, they were killed, and they grew like crazy. They were both offensive, and they were attractive ... to the max. This principle that, in every culture, any group of Christians who live according to the Sermon on the Mount and who live the way Jesus wants us to live will be both offensive and attractive but in different ways is a universal rule.

For example, today in the Middle East, they'll look at the way Christians believe about sex and marriage, and they'll say, "That's fine," but then they'll look at forgiveness and they'll look at how quickly we restore people after they have fallen, and when they look at how we treat our enemies, because they are shame-and-honor cultures they say, "That's crazy! That's wrong! That's weak!"

Here in Manhattan, it's the other way around. In Manhattan, people like the idea of forgiveness. They don't quite know how to do it, but they like the Christian idea of forgiveness. They don't do it, but they sure like the idea, but what we say about sex and marriage, they consider just crazy, offensive, and maybe dangerous.

Do you know what that means? It means, if the Bible really is not the product of any one culture but it really has come down from God, then it would have to, in

every culture, offend you somewhere and attract you in other ways, but in different ways. You'd be offended in different ways and attracted in different ways, but the universal is if you're a Christian in your culture you will be offensive and attractive.

How are you doing with that test? Think about it, would you? How are you doing with it? I would have to say most Christians are either offensive but not very attractive, because they're always talking about their Christianity, they're talking about their Christian faith, and they're getting a lot of pushback or, in some cases, they're attractive but not offensive, because they're just keeping a low profile and they kind of go along with whatever everybody else is saying or, in most cases, we're neither offensive or attractive.

Listen carefully. This is a little bit of a train of reasoning. People who are offensive and not attractive are a little bit like Jesus in the sense that they are denouncing the moneychangers in the temple and denouncing the Pharisees, and people who are attractive but not offensive are a little bit like Jesus in that they are attracting the moral and social outsiders.

In both cases, if you're offensive but not attractive or attractive but not offensive, you're a little bit like Jesus but not all of the way, but if you're neither offensive nor attractive ... If nobody is attracted to your Christian faith, if nobody is attracted to your character *and* nobody is offended or upset and you never take it on the chin for Jesus (you're not offensive or attractive), you're not like Jesus at all. Think about it.

Let's go further. To be truly offensive takes courage. To be truly attractive takes enormous, melt-in-your-mouth compassion. Gentle with doubters, merciful to your opponents. To be offensive takes courage. To be attractive takes compassion, but courage without any attractiveness is probably not real courage. It's self-righteousness. You like to tell people off. Attractiveness without courage is not really love or compassion. It's really cowardice.

How are you doing with this? Are you offensive and attractive or maybe neither? Do people come to you and want to open up and talk about their problems? Okay. That's a good sign. Do they talk to you about your faith? That's a good sign. Do you ever take it on the chin? Do you ever really get in trouble because of what you believe? That's a good sign, too, but what if you only have one sign and not the other or neither? Then, you're failing the test.

3. *The power.* If it's true it takes tremendous courage and tremendous compassion in order to live the way we're called to live as exiles, where do we get the power for that? Where do we get that? The answer is you have to see two things. There are two things. First, you have to see that you're a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's special possession. That is a classic, enormously rich series of four statements or four ways of talking about the Christian church.

If you are a Christian, you are part of a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy

nation, and God's special possession. I do not have the time, and some of you are saying, "You're not going into that now, are you? Really? We'll be here forever," and you're right, so let me just talk about the beginning and the end.

First of all, you're chosen people. An old teacher of mine, Ed Clowney, had a wonderful way of preaching on this. He used to say, "First of all, if you're a Christian, notice you're not the choice people; you're the chosen people." Do you know the difference? *Choice people* means you're spiritual, you're virtuous, you're hard-working, and you're diligent. You know, you're choice. But it doesn't say that. It says you are chosen. You're just chosen.

What does that mean? Well, Ed would go to Deuteronomy 7, where God is talking to Israel when he says, "I did not choose you because you were the greatest of nations. In fact, you were the puniest of nations. However, because I loved you, I chose you." Ed said, "Did you hear that? Do you know what that is? That's circular reasoning." God is saying, "I didn't choose you because you were virtuous, because you were hard-working, or because you were spiritual. I didn't choose you and love you because of those things. I just loved you because I loved you."

It's circular. "I didn't choose you for this, this, and this; I chose you because I loved you, which means I don't love you because you're all of these things. I just love you because I love you because I love you." We say, "Well, that's kind of circular, isn't it? That's kind of weird." Ed says, "Yes, it is, and that's the only way real love works." He says, "Try it out in your marriage."

This would be your illustration. Your spouse comes to you someday and says, "Honey, do you love me?" You say, "Of course, I love you." Then, the spouse comes back and says, "Why?" When your spouse says that, there are a couple of ways you can answer. The one is you can say, "Well, you have all of these great virtues. You're very, very physically attractive. You are a terrific tennis player. You make money. You have a good career."

I want you to know the conversation is going downhill fast, if you don't know that. Who wants to hear that? Who wants to hear? "What if I lose my job? What if I put on weight? What if I have surgery and I can't play tennis?" Here's what you need to say. Here's what you need to say, and I hope you can. You need to say, "Honey, I must admit there are these various traits you had that attracted me to you at first, but now I love you just because I love you." That's called *unconditional love*, and it's the only love we can possibly live with.

Because we're chosen by grace, because we're chosen by sheer grace, not because we're choice, you can run to the last of these four statements where it says you're God's special possession. That's a term that means you're his treasure. It's a word that really means your most precious possession, like that heirloom or the jewelry your great-grandmother left you that you have in your jewelry box, and you know it's actually worth as much as everything else in your whole apartment put together, and you probably ought to put it under lock and key.

That's the sort of thing we're talking about here, because actually, the first time this term is used is in Exodus 19, when God speaks to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai and says, "Even though I own the whole world, you are my treasured possession." That's like saying, "I have galaxies. You talk about rich people? I have galaxies," says God, "but none of them mean anything to me like you do."

Do you know you're loved like that? Do you know, because you are chosen by grace, you are loved like that? Have you grasped it? Has it grasped you? Has it really hit you? I'm telling you, until this is an existential reality to you, you will not have real courage. You'll have swagger, maybe, and self-righteousness and braggadocio, but you won't have real compassion. You'll go out there to serve people so you can feel good about yourself, so you can feel like a good person, but you'll be using the people you're serving. You won't be actually serving them.

Until you know you're this loved, you'll be doing everything in order to feel better about yourself. Not real courage. Not real compassion. Not really offensive and not really attractive at the same time. You need to know you're this loved. Do you? If you said, "Gee, I'd love to be that sure. I don't know that I am. I'd love to be. How can I be that sure? I know this in principle. I believe I'm loved by God, but how do I actually know that?"

It's the second thing you have to see, of course, and this is what you have to talk to yourself about. Verse 2. How did you become a Christian? Why can you be a Christian? How can you be loved like this? Because ... Look at verse 2. You were chosen by the Father. We just talked about that. You were sanctified by the Spirit. That was last week.

Here's the real reason: because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ, which means (think about it like this) Jesus was the ultimate exile. He was home. I mean, he was in the bosom of the Father. He was home. Yet, he left home. He came to earth, and even here on earth, do you ever see a gospel story or any gospel account that talks about Jesus being at home?

"Jesus was at home eating, and they came in and said something." Do you ever see that? No. Why not? He says, "**Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.**" He was exiled from his home in heaven, and even here on earth, he wandered. He wandered. Why?

This is what he came to do, and then he was crucified outside the gate outside the city. He was the ultimate exile. "**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**" He was homeless. He lost his home. He was exiled. He took the exile we deserved. He got the exile we human beings deserved so we could be brought into home.

Only when you see him dying that big death for you will you really have courage. You know how, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* there's a big battle. It's both in the book and in the movie. One of the hobbits, Meriadoc, is in the middle of the battle, and he's utterly, utterly frightened and panicked for his life. He's crawling around in the mud. He's even afraid to look up. There are all of these huge, evil

warriors around him. He's afraid for his life, and he's just running scared.

Suddenly, he looks up, and he sees Eowyn standing in front of the biggest of them all, standing ready to die before the biggest of the evil warriors. In the book it says, "The slow kindled courage of his race awoke, and he looked at her, and he said, 'She should not die alone.' " That's how you get courage. Then he got up and did his great deed.

Look at Jesus the next time you're afraid. You're afraid of speaking up? You're afraid of doing something courageous? You're afraid of opening your mouth? You're afraid of identifying with him? You're afraid of doing something you know you should do but you're going to take it on the chin? The next time you're afraid, look at Jesus and say, "He should not die alone." He died the big death for you. Why aren't you willing to die a little death? So somebody kills your reputation. He died. He had the great death. Look at him and say, "He should not die alone."

Look. When Kathy and I moved here 25 years ago, and some of you were here (I know), remember how the parks were filled with homeless people. What was a shame about that was that parks are wonderful places, but they can't bear the full weight of a person's whole life. They're not places to go to eat, sleep, bathe, and do the other things you do at home. In other words, parks are great places, but they're not home, so they can't bear the full weight of the human life. Therefore, they became foul.

I'm here to tell you, if there's anything that is more important to you than Jesus Christ and his salvation, if you're relying on anything more than him, if you love anything more than him, if you're trying to get your significance and security out of anything more than you are trying to get out of Jesus Christ, those things you're relying on and looking to, whether it's career or family or whatever, are good things, but they're not home. It will never bear the full weight of your soul. If you do that, you'll always be wandering and never find home. It will always be winter and never Christmas.

Here's what you need to do. You need to say, "Lord Jesus, I want to live for you because you were exiled for me. Bring me home. Father, accept me because of what Jesus has done." Then, bit by bit as the years go by, though you're still a pilgrim, you'll experience in prayer, you'll experience in worship, you'll experience foretastes of home, foretastes of his love, foretastes of his presence.

And you'll slowly find the homesickness (the *heimweh*) of your heart slowly but surely cured, and you will know someday you're going to wake up, and you're going to say, "I'm home at last! This is where I belong. This is the land I've been looking for all of my life, though I never knew it." Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you we can know, if we believe in you and rely on the salvation of Jesus Christ, we are on our way home, and we can have foretastes of home even now. We can forgive, and we can be generous, and we can be chaste, and we can be able to handle suffering and even death.

We can live lives that, to some degree, will offend our neighbors; yet, we can still

pour ourselves out and love them, and we'll know we'll be both offensive and attractive, and that's fine because, oh my word, Lord, your Son Jesus Christ was so beautiful, and when he was lifted up on the cross, he drew the world to himself; yet, he was also persecuted and betrayed and forsaken.

Father, we pray you would teach us how to be pilgrims here, how to live as joyful exiles. We pray you'd help us to live this resurrected life because, in the end, this is what our heart wants the most. Help us. It will glorify you, and it will satisfy us. Help us be the people you've called us to be. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Our Call: Holy Living

Following Jesus—May 18, 2014

1 Peter 1:13–17

13 Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. **15** But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; **16** for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” **17** Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

The Word of the Lord.

The Bible says that when we become Christians we don't just turn over a new leaf. We're spiritually raised with Christ, it says in Ephesians 2. In Philippians 3, Paul says, “I want to know the power of his resurrection.” Jesus Christ's resurrection power comes into our lives. That's quite a statement, and we have to ask ourselves the question, “What does such an empowered life look like?”

In these weeks after Easter, that's what we're doing. We're asking that question, “What does a spiritually resurrected life look like?” We're looking at 1 and 2 Peter. We're taking passages out of these two epistles, because there are so many important themes within these two particular epistles that are crucial to help us understand what it means to live the Christian life.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the new birth and the newness of life that brings. After that we looked at the idea of being exiles, or resident aliens, and pilgrims, which means we're supposed to be both offensive and attractive at the same time. That was also another very important theme that helped us

understand what it means to live the Christian life now.

Today we come to a well-known, very important theme and one we have to come to grips with: *holiness*. We're called to be holy. It's very, very prominent. "He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do." This is actually a difficult term to get ahold of. In our modern culture, both the word *sin* and the word *holiness* are almost never used anymore except ironically. We talk about "sinful chocolate."

If you actually start talking about sin and say, "People are sinners. This is sin. We need to be holy ..." If in contemporary society you start talking about sin and holiness and you're not talking ironically and you say, "You need to be holy; you need to stop sinning," people get very quiet and very upset that anybody would take these words seriously and not ironically. But we need to take it seriously. It's obvious that we need to take it seriously. So let's ask the most fundamental questions ... *What is holiness? How does it grow and develop in us? Why is it possible to be holy?*

1. *What is holiness?* Let's look at verses 15–16. "**But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'**" It's perfectly right when you and I think of holiness to think of morality. The Ten Commandments. As God is faithful, so you shouldn't lie or commit adultery. As God is loving, so you shouldn't kill. You shouldn't steal. Almost always when we think of holiness we think of right living, moral living.

That's perfectly true, because to be holy certainly means that. It doesn't mean less than that, but I want to show you it means a lot more than that. The concept of holiness is way, way more than that. If you want to understand what holiness is, you should notice the quote. Peter quotes. "... **for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'**" That's a quote from the Old Testament. He's quoting Leviticus.

There are a lot of reasons why it's strange to have Peter quoting Leviticus, but he's quoting Leviticus. There are four or so times in the book of Leviticus that God says something like, "Be holy, because I am holy." What's important to understand, though, is the book of Leviticus is not talking so much about holy people. It doesn't give you the Ten Commandments. It's not laying out all those things, like Deuteronomy and Exodus do. It's talking about holy *things*.

If you go to the book of Leviticus, if you go to the context from which Peter is talking, you're going to see there are all sorts of things that are called holy. Tables are called holy. Utensils and pots are called holy. Right there you begin to realize that holiness can't mean morality, because what does a moral table look like? More frightening, what does an immoral table look like? Would you want to eat at an immoral table? No, it doesn't work.

It forces you to ask, "What does the word *holy* mean?" The Hebrew word originally means separate, set apart. Right away you begin to realize why God can say, "I'm holy." He is utterly apart from all other beings. He is totally unique. He's in his own category. He's set apart. He's totally separate. He's unique in his

superlativeness. There is none like him. In one sense, when God says, "I am holy," he means, "I am utterly set apart. There's no one like me. There's nothing like me."

Then what does it mean to have a holy table or a holy pot? The answer is it has been set apart for God's exclusive use. If you have a table, you're eating three meals a day on it, but you want your table to be holy, you don't read it the Ten Commandments and try to get it to behave differently. You give it to the priests, they take it into the tabernacle, and now it's only used for the fellowship offerings and for the other things. It's only used for God and for worshiping God.

Right there you begin to realize when Peter quotes Leviticus to tell people how they should be holy the implications are this is not less than but going beyond morality. Let me read you one great commentator. One person commenting on 1 Peter brings it out. I'll read it carefully, because you'll see how he reasons. This is a commentary on this passage in 1 Peter.

"Of course to be holy means moral behavior, but these words in Leviticus 11 [that Peter quotes] are not given in the context of moral commands and prohibitions to people but the context of ceremonial restrictions dealing with clean and unclean things. For belonging to God, living on his terms, reserving ourselves for him, delighting in him, obeying him, honoring him ... these are more fundamental than the specifics of obedience we label morality."

There's your definition. What makes the table holy? It belongs to God. What makes you holy? Not just that you're moral but that you belong to God. Now let's think out the implications. There are tremendous implications.

A. *The core of holiness is intensely personal.* It's possible to be moral for a lot of reasons. You can be moral out of a sense of duty. You can be moral because it makes you feel good about yourself. You can be a moral good person because you are fulfilling social and family expectations. Or you could just be a pragmatist. Honesty is the best policy. You could just be saying you should be moral because it's good business to be moral.

If you're moral and truthful, you don't get caught, you don't get sued as likely, and all that sort of thing. You might just be practical. In all those cases, what's going on? You're being moral, roughly speaking, for selfish reasons. There's another approach. It's possible to be moral and not belong to God, because belonging to God has to do with the heart.

There are very few people in my life (and probably in yours) that I could actually say, "Your claims of love are so great on me that I really belong to you. I really can't live my life the way I want. I belong to you." In my case, my wife and my children. The claims of love are so great I belong to them, and because I belong to them there are a lot of things I do that I would rather not do, perhaps, if I didn't have this love relationship.

In other words, to belong to God means I want to delight in him. Let me read you the list. To belong to God means to live on his terms, reserving ourselves for him,

delighting in him, obeying him, honoring him. I'm doing it because I want to, because I *need* to, almost, because of my love. It's an intensely personal thing. By the way, do you see why it's not enough to be moral? It is not enough in God's eyes to be moral.

I've had many people say to me, "Oh, you're admitting, then, you can be moral without believing in God. You're saying without believing in God you can still be moral. Okay, so why do I need to believe in God in order to be moral?" As if that's the big thing: to be moral. Let me give you an example. To take the relational out ... Imagine a woman. She's kind of a poor woman in many ways. She's a single mother. She has one son. She loves her son. She teaches him how to live.

She says, "I want you to always care for the poor, I want you to always tell the truth, and I want you to always work hard." Charity, honesty, and industry. Care for the poor, always tell the truth, work hard. She, of course, does everything for him. Even though she doesn't have much in the way of marketable skills, she works her fingers to the bone in order to raise him and put him through college without any debt.

The minute he gets out of college, he gets that degree, he gets a good job, he calls her and says, "Well, Mom, I'll probably send you a Christmas card now and then. I may talk to you now and then, but I really don't want to have much to do with you. I don't really need you." "Why?" she says. "Well, I always take care of the poor. I'm honest. I always work very hard. I'm doing all the things you want me to do. That's what's important. Why do I have to have a relationship with you? I really don't want to talk to you anymore."

Would you think that's okay? Of course you wouldn't think it's okay. You would find that repulsive. That would be horrible. If there is a God, you owe him everything and you should sense that you belong to him. For you to say, "What's really important is that I'm moral," it's like that guy saying, "What's really important is I'm doing what you're saying, Mom. I don't need to have a relationship with you."

If there is no God, that's one thing, but for you to say, "I don't need God. God isn't important. I have what's really important. I have morality ..." You're not holy. In fact, God looks at someone who is moral but not holy and has to feel considerably worse than that mother did. First of all, what's intriguing about this quote out of Leviticus, the understanding that holiness is to belong to God, not just simply to be moral, is it gives you the core of holiness, which is intensely personal.

B. *You have a principle for applying holiness to all of life.* What's the opposite of belonging to God? To live for yourself. So what does it mean to be holy? To be moral? Sure. There are a lot of rules, but more than that, it means to no longer live for yourself. That's the principle of holy practice. That's the principle of holy living. You no longer live for yourself but for God and your neighbor.

There's a place in the Bible that perfectly puts this principle of holiness. It's 1

Corinthians 6:19. “**You are not your own; you were bought at a price.**” There it is. You’re bought with a price. (We’ll get back to that in a second.) You’re a recipient of free grace. Therefore, you are not your own. You’re not living for your sake; you’re living for God’s sake, for your neighbor’s sake. You’re not living for yourself; you’re living for God or your neighbor. This goes across the board.

It’s extremely interesting that Peter would quote from Leviticus when you consider, if you read the book of Acts, if you know something about Peter’s life, that God had to practically clobber Peter over the head to say, “It’s not necessary to keep the Levitical ceremonial laws.” Because he was Jewish, you had all these rules about how you ate, how you dressed, and he was saying, “Gentile Christians need to do this too or I can’t be with you.”

God gives him a vision and says, “No, no, no. In Jesus Christ all those laws about what you eat, how you dress … Those things have been all fulfilled in Christ. You are clean and acceptable in him.” It’s intriguing that Peter would quote Leviticus when it took him quite a while to get the message that all of those ceremonial regulations are now fulfilled in Christ. Why is he going back to Leviticus? Because the principle of holiness is the same: that every part of your life has to be holy. There is no part that shouldn’t be holy, and to be holy is to belong to God.

The particulars of Leviticus are fulfilled but not the basic principle. For example, go to Ephesians 6. In Ephesians 6, there’s a place where Paul is talking to people about how they do their daily work, their daily job, on the job. Is there any commandment that tells you in the Ten Commandments how to do your work? No, there’s a commandment about resting, but not about work. Here’s what Paul does.

He says, “When you’re doing your daily job, don’t work for your boss.” He calls it, “Don’t work according to eye service.” Don’t work for your boss, and don’t work for yourself. If you’re working for your boss, then you will only work hard when your boss is noticing. In other words, when your boss isn’t there, you won’t. When your boss is there … You’ll basically only do what you have to do to give your boss a good impression of you.

If you’re working for yourself, you’ll only do what’s necessary to make the money or to make more money. What if you’re working for the Lord? What if your main motivation is to say, “I notice you seeing me, Lord. I want to please you. I want to use my gifts in the best possible way. I want to do an excellent job. I want to help other people. I want to care for your creation.” In other words, what if you’re working for the Lord?

If you’re working for the Lord, you work much more diligently, much, much more conscientiously, much, much more cheerfully, because you’re not living and dying as to whether you get accolades from your boss. It transforms your work. Why? Because you’re not living for yourself. You’re not working for him. You’re not working for yourself. You’re not working for her. You’re not working for the boss. You’re working for God.

If you apply that to every single area of your life, if you don't treat classes and races of people who have oppressed your class or race for your sake or their sake but for God's sake, as people in the image of God ... The reason Peter quotes from Leviticus is he has figured this out. To be holy means you belong to God; therefore, you don't live for yourself. That principle of not living for yourself can be applied everywhere, even places where there are no moral rules. That's what holiness is.

2. *How does it develop?* Isn't that something? The more I've thought about this ... It's comprehensive, and you say, "Oh my word! How in the world do you grow ...?" Obviously, holiness is not something you can just switch on. How does it develop? Well, it develops three ways: *mind*, *will*, and *heart*. Those are also here in the passage.

A. *The mind.* Look at the very beginning. "**Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed ...**" Let's unpack that. First of all, it's obviously talking about something you do with your head. The intellect is engaged. It says "minds that are fully sober and alert." The word *sober* is an interesting word. It means to be very judicious. It means to be extremely reflective and careful.

It's actually a word that would characterize the mindset of a scholar. You know how scholars are. A lot of footnotes, careful definitions, a lot of qualifications, very careful, very reflective. The other word ... If any of you have ever read this in the old King James Bible, where it says minds that are not only sober but alert. Literally, it says in the Greek, "Gird up your mind." It's actually a pretty vivid metaphor.

In those days, men and women wore flowing robes. Everybody did. Not only the women but also the men. When you had to do something that was very active, if you had to run someplace or if you had to work somewhere, you would pull up all your skirts and tuck them in your girdle, which is your belt. Therefore, to gird up your loins was a way of saying, "Get ready for action." To gird up your mind is a vivid metaphor that means though you should be thinking and thinking (you're fully sober), you should also be thinking unto action.

You should be thinking out the implications of your faith very carefully but to the end of action. That's, for example, what Paul was doing in Ephesians 6. In Ephesians 6, which I think is fascinating, he was sitting down and saying, "Okay, let's think out the implications of what it means. If you're not living for yourself but for God, how does that transform your work?" He's thinking it out. It's a brilliant and insightful piece that has helped people for centuries now.

Peter here is saying that's what you have to be doing. To be holy is not first a matter of the will. You have to think. You have to think intensely. You have to use all of your mind. "If I believe this ..." Look. "... **the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed ...**" That's talking about the fact that at the end of time Jesus Christ is going to come back and he's going to make everything

new. He says, "Think about the implications of that constantly. What does it mean to live for him?"

Let me give you another example of this. In Philippians, chapter 4, Paul says you should have the peace of God in your heart. You shouldn't be anxious. You should be trusting God. You belong to him, so just trust in him. You shouldn't be anxious and upset all the time. He says, "Let the peace of God guard your heart." Then he says, "So think on these things. Think on these truths, these things you believe as a Christian." That's very close to here, where it says, "Set your hope." On what? *Set your hope* means get your hope, get your confidence, get your peace by thinking what you actually believe about the universe.

So put it like this. Are you a Christian? The Bible says God made this world to be a perfect paradise, a place of perfect love and glory, but because we turned away as a human race, everything is broken, but God in the form of Jesus Christ has come into this world and, at infinite cost to himself, died on the cross, so that someday he will return and make everything right again. Do you know what that means? It means that no matter what happens to you it's going to be okay. If you believe on him and you die, you'll be with him.

The worst thing that could happen to you (death) is the best thing that could happen to you, and at the end of time everything is going to be right. Everything is going to be okay. Do you have peace right now? Do you have hope? Do you have confidence or are you anxious? It's because you're not thinking. If you're a Christian and you believe this stuff and you're going around constantly under stress and anxious, it's because you're not thinking.

The idea that, "Well, you Christians have faith, but I'm a thinker ..." That's an incredibly self-serving little narrative that says, "Well, yes, I know people believe all this Christianity stuff, but I'm a reasonable person. I'm a thinker." Paul and Peter, the whole Bible says, "Nuh-uh. Listen. You will not be holy, you will not have peace, you will not be able to live the Christian life unless you think." Think! It's a lack of thinking that gives you a lack of peace. It's a lack of thinking that gives you a lack of holiness. Think! That's the first thing. It engages your entire intellect. Christians ought to be the people who are most willing to think.

If you talk to a typical New Yorker and ask, "Well, what do you believe?" they say, "Well, I believe this life is all there is. I don't think there's a God. I think this is it." You say, "So you believe that love is a chemical, basically. The feeling of love is an illusion. It's just a chemical reaction that helped your ancestors survive. When you die, that's it, and eventually nobody is even going to be around to remember anything you've ever done, because the sun is going to die. So nothing you do in the end makes any difference and love is an illusion and when you die you rot."

Very often a New Yorker will say, "Well, if you're going to think about it like that, of course you're going to be depressed, but I don't think about it all the time. I just try to live one day at a time." In other words, you don't believe in God and you're telling me that you are getting your peace by *not* thinking out the implications of what you believe about the world? Well, Christians are different. We get our

peace *from* thinking out the implications of what we believe. You have to use your head.

B. *The will.* You have to engage the will, of course. I have to get here. Verse 14: **“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.”** What this means is, yes, there is a bottom line here. To be holy means you obey. Notice, by the way, it says, “Don’t conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.” He’s talking to Gentiles who didn’t know the law of God, didn’t know the Ten Commandments or any of that, and now they do. Because they do, he says, “Now you must conform to this.”

So there is a matter of the will. There is an engagement. But even here, even in this passage, where he says, “As obedient children,” he doesn’t just say as obedient *subjects*. As obedient *children*. He’s talking about the kind of unconditional, absolute trusting obedience that children give to parents they rely on in love. To really give you an idea of what I mean here by this kind of obedience, here’s a little story from the Old Testament.

Second Samuel 23 tells about the fact that when David became king, the Philistines were really worried that David was going to turn Israel into a strong nation, so as soon as he was crowned king they invaded. They were trying to destabilize the nation of Israel. They came in and invaded. David was forced to flee into the wilderness. He had his handpicked men with him, his mighty men. They were kind of an elite group of soldiers around him.

The Philistines occupied big parts of the country, including Bethlehem, which was David’s hometown. He was out in the wilderness, and certainly David was feeling pretty downcast. One day he was hot, I guess, and he was tired and discouraged, and in the midst of his men he said, “Oh, if only I could just drink one cup of water from that wonderful well by the gate of Bethlehem.”

It was not a command. It wasn’t even a request. It was just sort of a sigh and a hope. Partly because, of course, he was from Bethlehem and he knew what great water it was and he was probably hot, but also he was longing for the day in which he would again be king of his entire land and would be able to go where he wanted. So he was just longing for that.

Three of his mighty men looked at each other and didn’t say a thing. They stole away and put on their swords and armor and got a water jug. They fought their way through enemy lines, down to Bethlehem, got to that well, drew the water, probably one guy drawing the water while the other two were fighting everybody off, and at the risk of their lives fought their way back. They come in front of their king, David, and give him the water.

He is absolutely stunned. He knows they risked their lives. Essentially, they gave their lives, because when they went to do that he knew that they knew they might not come back. They’d actually given up their lives. They were only lucky that they still had them. They gave them up. Do you know what he did? He poured the water out on the ground before the Lord and said, “I’m not worthy of this kind

of devotion."

The men felt, I'm sure, very honored, because the king said, "Your devotion is so great even I, the king, am not worthy," and he poured it out. It means a lot of different things, but here's what I want you to see. If you are really devoted to somebody, if you really love them, if you belong to them, if you would do anything to delight that person, honor that person, then there's really no difference to you between a command, a request, and even a sigh.

You don't look at all the rules and regulations and think, "Which ones do I have to keep?" If somebody comes to me here in New York and says, "Pastor, I'm really trying to obey the Bible; I'm really trying to obey the law of God" (it's a rarity for somebody in New York to come up to a pastor and say that), and I say, "Great." He says, "I'm thinking about this tithe thing. You know how the Bible says you're supposed to give away 10 percent of your income to charity and other things?"

"Yeah."

"Well, here's what I need to know. Do I have to do this before or after taxes? It seems like before taxes wouldn't be really fair. I think after taxes would be better."

Oh my word. How far are we from *this*? What are you doing? What are you asking? "What do I have to do?" What do I mean what do I have to do? Look at how far that is from these three men. Anything that would bring joy to the heart of the one they were devoted to. Anything at all. They went way beyond the commands. They went way beyond the requests.

They were guessing, pretty much. If you are to be holy, you not only belong to God and stop living for yourself and start to live for God and others and think all that out, you also not only obey the things you do know but look for other ways to please him. You do it out of delight. It doesn't even feel like obedience, but it is.

C. *The heart.* The thing it says at the very end of the passage is this: "**Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.**" This creates a little bit of a dilemma, because this term *fear of God* ... "Live in the fear of God." It's one of the main themes of the Bible, and it actually constitutes another important theme that we need to unpack at length if we're going to understand what it means to live the Christian life.

That comes up again in another passage in a couple of weeks; therefore, I'm not going to give you a full-throated understanding of what it means to live in the fear of God, but I can give you at least enough clues to make my final point. This is the heart of what will motivate you and create that desire in you to please him and delight in him and give yourself to him.

The word *fear* means not to be scared that you're going to be destroyed. In fact, you can even tell that from this verse. Notice even though Peter is talking about judgment day ... Ooh, judgment day. Wow. Impartial judgment day. It's your Father who's going to be the judge that day. Isn't that something? "**Since you**

call on a Father who judges ...” Fathers can be pretty strict. Fathers have standards, but fathers don’t destroy their children. Fathers love their children.

So this doesn’t mean to be scared that you’re going to be destroyed on the last day, but here’s what it does mean. The word *fear* in the Bible means internal awe and wonder. It means not just doing things you have to do because you have to do them out of a sense of duty, but awe and wonder at something. Your heart is engaged with something. What is it?

Verses 18–19: “**For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.**” Your heart needs to be filled with awe and wonder, looking at the fact that Jesus Christ’s blood, his sacrificial love, has been shed for you. That’s the key.

Just for a moment think about this. In John, chapter 17, verse 19, Jesus is praying to his Father the night before he dies and he makes this amazing statement that ties all of the things together we’ve been talking about. He says, “Father, for their sakes ...” Looking at his disciples. He’s about to die for them. “For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they might be sanctified.” Jesus says, “I sanctify myself, that they might be sanctified.”

What is sanctity? That’s holiness. “I sanctify myself.” Sanctity, holiness. What does that mean? Does Jesus mean, “I’m going to become moral”? Of course he’s not saying, “I’m going to become moral.” He was already moral. He was perfect. What does he mean when he says, “I sanctify myself”? “I give myself away. I set myself apart. I’m not going to live for myself; I’m going to live for them. I’m going to die. I’m going to be tortured. I’m going to be lonely for them.”

There’s a sense in which he says, “I’m giving myself away for them, for their sakes.” So ... what? So that we might be sanctified. Uh-oh. He loves us and he wants us to know the joy and freedom of not living for ourselves anymore. The claustrophobia of living for ourselves, the crampedness of it, the narrowness of spirit, the infinite regress of spiraling down on yourself, saying, “I’m not getting what I deserve. What about him? What about her? What about me?”

Jesus says, “I love you so much I want you to know the freedom of being so flooded with love that you don’t need that anymore. You don’t do that. You don’t live for yourself. You live for God. You live for others.” What he’s saying is, “I’m giving myself away.” When you see him doing that, you might say,

*See from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.*

The precious blood of Christ, more precious than silver or gold. When you sense the preciousness of it, when you see the ocean of that love and stand on the shores, as it were, and think about it ... To the degree you see him giving himself away for you, sanctifying himself, to that degree you’ll be able to give yourself away to him. It’s as simple as that.

When you see him sanctifying himself, living for you, you'll be able to live for him. To the degree you see what your sin cost him, to that degree you will be holy. In the Old Testament God's holiness is awesome, but in the New Testament God's holiness in Jesus Christ giving himself away is gorgeous. So look at it until it makes you holy. Let's pray.

Father, we ask only that you'd make us holy, as you are holy. I guess for us today the idea of being holy sounds cramped. It sounds stuffy. It doesn't sound like much fun. It's actually worse and better than that. It's not just a matter of saying no to certain things and living by certain codes. It's giving ourselves away out of love, out of devotion.

It's saying, "Your wish is my command. Your sigh is my command." It's belonging to you because we see that you gave yourself away for us. You sanctified yourself so that we might be sanctified. Lord, help us to live this sort of joyful life of self-giving because you joyfully gave yourself away for us. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Our Cross: The Path of Suffering

Following Jesus—June 1, 2014

1 Peter 1:6–9; 3:13–18

6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. **7** These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. **8** Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, **9** for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

First Peter 3:13–18:

13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? **14** But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." **15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Each week we're looking at how Christians can grow into Christlikeness, and each week we're looking at something from the book of 1 or 2 Peter. We're looking at the different conditions, contexts, instruments, ways, and means through which we grow into Christlikeness. The one we come to tonight is actually one that is probably the main theme of 1 Peter: going through trials, troubles, difficulties, and suffering is one of the main ways in which we grow into Christlikeness.

Now let's take a look and see what these two passages, one from chapter 1, one from chapter 3 ... There are actually more than that, because, as I just mentioned, the book of 1 Peter is probably more about suffering than anything else. It might be the only book in the New Testament that is actually completely devoted to the subject of suffering. Job is the other one in the Old Testament.

So let's see what we learn here. I'd like to pull out three things: the inevitability of suffering, the good potential of suffering, and the disciplines you need to practice during suffering if you're going to have those good outcomes. So *the inevitability of suffering, the good potential of suffering, and the disciplines of suffering*.

1. *The inevitability of suffering.* The first thing I want to press is a little obvious, maybe, but important. In verse 6 it says, "**In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.**" You *have had to* suffer. Now to say *have had to* is kind of an awkward English construction, but it's getting across a Greek term that simply means it's necessary. It's necessary that you suffer. Peter is not simply saying that suffering is possible but that actually it's inevitable.

We live in a broken world, and from a number of points of view (I'll give you three really quickly), we should expect suffering and not be surprised by it. In fact, in chapter 4, verse 12, of 1 Peter, Peter actually says to his Christian readers, "Don't be surprised when suffering comes upon you, as if it's something strange." You should be prepared for it, because if you're not prepared for it, you're not ready for life.

New Yorkers, by the way, in particular, think, "If I just do everything just right, if I push all the buttons, if I get the right consultants, if I really have my act together, I can put together this designer life." I don't care how hard you work. I don't care what kind of manager you are. I don't even care what kind of powerful person

you are. You cannot stop bereavement, physical illnesses, financial reversals, personal betrayals. Those things *will* happen to you and they will cause searing pain.

Why is it inevitable? Think about Jesus. He was the perfect man, and yet, without complaining, he suffered terribly for some greater good. Jesus Christ suffered terribly, and he was a good man, a perfect man. He suffered terribly to bring about God's redemptive purposes. Why do you think you and I would be any different? What makes us think we would be exempt? Americans, by the way, are particularly bad at this. Dr. Paul Brand, who was a very well-known British surgeon, spent half of his life practicing in India and half of his life in America.

He said, "[In the United States] patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it." There's a man who would know. He says Americans are considerably more traumatized by suffering. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that for a lot of Americans, two-thirds of the pain they suffer when they suffer is shock at the fact they're suffering.

There's the thing that has happened to you, and then there's the shock that, "Why is this even happening to me?" Dr. Brand said when suffering comes upon Americans they're just traumatized by "What in the world is going on?" We don't expect it. "Don't be surprised when suffering comes upon you, as if it's something strange," Peter says. Think of the nature of the world. It's broken. Think of Jesus. Think of God. Be ready. It's inevitable.

2. *The good potential of suffering.* Even though there are a lot of things the Bible says about suffering, what I want to do tonight is just take the image Peter gives us, because it's a fascinating and fruitful image to meditate on. In verse 7 it says, "**These [trials] have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.**"

The image he's using is a furnace. Gold goes through a furnace and is refined. It's purified. What he is proposing is that just as when gold goes through fire it becomes something greater, so our faith when it goes through suffering can become something wonderful as well. He makes a brief point about the fact that your faith is far more valuable than gold, because even gold that is refined by fire eventually goes away with everything else in the world.

Nevertheless, there's an analogy. Faith is like the gold. Suffering is like the fire. How so? Well, here's what little I know about goldsmithing. I don't know much, but I learned enough to figure out this illustration. You put gold through a fire. It softens it, it melts it, but the fire cannot kindle it. It doesn't kindle. It doesn't go to ashes. It doesn't destroy it. What the fire *does* do is takes the impurities in the gold and does something to them.

The fire can't really touch the gold that much, but that's not the purpose of putting gold through fire. It's trying to deal with the impurities. When you take gold out of

the ground, it always has impurities in it, things that are not gold. If you want pure gold, you want to get the impurities out. What I understand is when you put the gold through the fire, what the fire does is it makes the impurities separate from the gold so that the goldsmith can skim them off.

There are impurities in the gold, and the fire affects the impurities in particular, makes them visible, raises them to the surface, and they can be skimmed off and taken out. That's an extremely interesting metaphor, because then the question is this. When we suffer, it does something to our faith. What does it do? How is gold like our faith? The answer is our faith has a lot of impurities in it. "What do you mean, impurities?"

We have faith in God. We have faith in Jesus. We have faith in our salvation. We believe all these things, and yet the way most Christians actually live is though we say we believe in God (and we do) and we say we believe in Jesus (and we do), the things we *really* trust, our career, our romantic relationship, our family ... These are good things, but we overinvest our hearts in them and they become the real things we trust. That's where most of our problems come from. Let me give you an example.

Some years ago, I heard a man give a testimony of his conversion in front of a Christian conference. He was speaking in the year 2009, and he was talking about a conversion experience that had happened to him four years before, I guess around 2005. Here's what he said. This man had been a very successful fund manager, so he was pretty wealthy. He had been very successful in investing.

In 2005, evidently, he'd had a really bad year and he was really rattled by it. He was talking to some Christian friends who were trying to talk to him about Christ. He says, "Oh, I don't have any faith. I wish I had faith. That would be nice. You guys have faith, but I'm not that kind of person. I have no faith." They said, "Really? You don't have any faith?" If I remember, they said something like this.

They said, "You know, you *do* have faith. What is your meaning in life? What do you look to that enables you to feel safe in the world? What is the source of your self-esteem and your self-worth and your self-image? It's your money and success. That's what you put your faith in. You have enormous faith. It's your meaning in life. It's your hope. It's your self-worth. You've invested your heart in these things."

The problem is you're having a bad year, and that's the reason you feel so fragile. Do you know why you're feeling so fragile? Because your faith is in something that's fragile, because everything in this world is fragile." It was very interesting to him and it was actually quite eye-opening to him. He thought about it, and evidently there was a process. He looked at Christianity, he thought about it, and he became a Christian.

He gave his testimony four years later in front of this group of people, many of whom, by the way, were also people in the investment community. This is 2009.

Some of you remember how bad that year was. This is what he said. I was there. I wrote this down (maybe not verbatim but pretty close) because it was so striking. He said, “I’m giving you this testimony because four years later I am in a field that we used to call wealth management. I guess nowadays all we can call it is sort of wealth survival.”

Then this is what he said. “I have lost an enormous amount of money this year, and here’s what I want you to know: I’ve never been happier in my life. If the great recession had happened four years ago when my faith was in something else, I know where the vodka bottle is and I would have driven myself right into the ground.” You could have heard a pin drop in that room. He said, “I have lost an enormous amount of money this year, and here’s what I want you to know: I’ve never been happier in my life.”

What happened? He went through a relatively mild fire. He had a bad year in 2005, and it showed him what he really believed in. The fire brought out what he really believed in, and he realized, “Wait. If that’s what I really rest in, I’m in trouble.” So later on in 2009 a vastly more terrible recession happened, and what happened? His faith resulted in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ was revealed.

It’s like this. You may think you believe in God, but when suffering comes it separates out the impurities in your faith and you see, “It’s really my reputation, it’s really my success, it’s my wealth, it’s this person in my life, it’s my approval, it’s power, comfort, control, or whatever. These are the things I’m really believing in, and that’s the reason why I’m up and down and up and down, why I’m so anxious, why I’m so angry.”

When suffering comes, it brings out the impurities in your faith. It shows you how little you really believe in God. His love is not tangible. His power is not tangible to you. If it really was, if your faith was what it should be, you could handle life, but you’re not. So when the suffering comes, when you’re in the fire, it brings out those impurities. There are only two things you can do at that point.

First, you can say, “God, you’re not enough. I cannot live without these things. I have to have my wealth. I have to have my health. I have to have my beauty. I have to have my popularity. I have to have these things. I *have* to. You’re not enough.” That’s one thing you could say, or you could say what Jacob said when he was wrestling with God in Genesis 32. Do you remember that? He’s holding on to God and he says, “I will not let you go till you bless me.”

What that means is that in suffering you get ahold of God and say, “I want you to be my real wealth so I don’t go up and down all the time over financial wealth. I want you to be my real beauty. I want you to be my real love. I really want to know you in a way I haven’t known you before, because then I can handle life. But right now I’m so fragile.” In other words, the impurities come to the surface and you skim them off and take hold of God. That’s why suffering, like a furnace, has tremendous potential to turn you into pure gold. See it?

The question comes up then, “Okay, so you’re saying that when suffering comes I need to take hold of God; it can really refine me ...” Oh yeah. In fact, somebody once said if you handle suffering properly, here are four things that happen. Suffering humbles you and gives you far more self-knowledge than you had before. You’ll know yourself in a way that non-sufferers have not.

Secondly, it will teach you not to idolize or overinvest your heart in many things. You’ll be a lot freer. You’ll be a lot happier. You’ll have a lot more poise, because you’re not resting your whole life in all of these things that have to go right. Thirdly, it greatly enhances your intimacy with dependence on and experience of God’s love and presence. Fourthly, it just makes you far more wise, compassionate, and generally more useful in the lives of others, especially those who suffer. You’ve been there. You can help others. That’s turning you to gold.

3. *The disciplines of suffering.* Now how does that happen? When you’re in the fire, what do you have to do? What do you mean, “take hold of God”? Well, there are three things I’d like you to see that the text talks about. (There are probably more, but I’m sticking with the texts I have, 1 Peter 1 and 3.) These are the disciplines you have to practice when difficulty and suffering come if you are going to have the suffering turn you into something good instead of just break your heart.

A. *Don’t be stoic; cry.* You say, “Where do you get that?” Well, right at the top. Verse 6. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great British preacher, preached a sermon on this very verse many years ago. It was in a book of his sermons that had a big impact on me in my youth. Verse 6 is an intriguing verse. It says, “**In all this you greatly rejoice ...**” He’s talking about verses 1–5, and verses 1–5 are talking about, basically, the stuff we have as Christians. We’re born again to a living hope. We have the hope of the resurrection to come, and all that.

So he says, “You greatly rejoice in your Christian benefits.” Then it says, “Now for a little while you have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” First of all, look at this. “Suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” The trials are the circumstances. Bad things are happening to you: relational betrayals, financial reversals, illnesses, bereavement. Bad things are happening to you, but it’s not just that bad things happen to Christians. You suffer grief in those bad things.

The phrase *suffer grief* mean you hurt. It’s a phrase that means agonizing pain. So Christians, even though they’re rejoicing in what they have in Christ, at the same time ... Notice it’s two present tenses. “In these you greatly rejoice ...” That’s the present tense. “... and yet you’re in searing pain.” That’s the present tense. It doesn’t say, “Well, since you’re rejoicing, you’re really not that unhappy, because you’re rejoicing in Jesus.” Nor does it say, “Because you’re in pain, you’re not rejoicing in Jesus.” They’re happening together.

Now let me just take a minute or two to try to drive this home. An awful lot of Christians think what it means to rejoice in the Lord during suffering ... They basically think of that as a form of stoicism. The Greek Stoics felt (and it’s not just

the Greek Stoics; a lot of shame and honor cultures had the same view) that if you're a strong person and suffering happens, you just don't let it get to you. You keep a stiff upper lip. You don't let it make you weep and break down.

That's not the Bible. That's not Christianity. That's not healthy either, by the way. That's not what you see here. What it's saying is that even though you're rejoicing, you are in pain. I've had people say ... I've asked, "How are you doing?" I'm a pastor, and I guess they think they're supposed to give me a Christian answer. They say, "Well, I'm just rejoicing in Christ. I'm not letting it get to me."

Wait a minute. Read the book of Job. Just read the book of Job. Bad things happen to him. His children die and all of his finances are wiped out, and we're told he tore his robes and cried out and fell on the ground. All through the book of Job he's constantly complaining. He curses the day of his birth, and he's constantly challenging God. He says, "God, if you would just appear before me, I have some questions for you."

You and I, reading it, would say, "Boy, he kind of lost it in there a few times." He's constantly pouring his heart out, saying some of the most awful things. I mean, just searing pain. At the end of the book, God vindicates Job and says, "Job, you were faithful to me," and we go, "What?" That's because we tend to think that Christianity is stoicism. Here's the point: Job never walked away from God. All of those horrible things he said, all those searing expressions of pain, he was doing it to God. He was pouring his life out to God.

In the end God says, "You were faithful to me." Why? He doesn't expect you to be doing stiff upper lip. It's not Christian. It's not right. The Stoics say, "Don't let it get to you," but read the book of Job, read the book of Jeremiah, read the Psalms, and listen to Jesus Christ crying out from the cross. Stoicism is one thing, but the cries of the sufferers resound through the pages of the Bible, even from the cross itself.

I've had people say, "Well, I hear Christians talk about how when you go through suffering it's like a refining fire and it can strengthen your faith, but all I know is I'm just in pain." Those two things happen together. That's what the fire is: the pain. It's not either/or. When people say to me, "I'm just not letting it get to me," well, you're not even letting yourself go through the fire, I guess. That's like self-hypnosis. That's not courage. So first, when you hurt, hurt. Don't be a stoic; cry.

B. *Keep a clear conscience.* Go down to chapter 3, verse 16. "**... keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.**" Chapter 3 is talking about suffering. Now admittedly, it's talking about a particular kind of suffering. Chapter 3 is talking about what happens when you're persecuted for your faith. Maybe you're being thrown in jail. Maybe your goods are taken away from you.

It's a very serious kind of suffering, but it's a specific kind. We could spend time in a sermon talking about that particular kind of suffering, but I'm not going to do

that tonight. I would like to just draw out the principles for all kinds of suffering. This principle, “Keep a clear conscience in the midst of suffering so you don’t give the opponents ammunition,” is extremely important.

In this situation, it’s saying let’s say you’re being wronged, you’re being betrayed, you’re being attacked. Don’t become cruel. Don’t become violent. Don’t lie. Don’t cheat. Don’t do bad things. Keep your conscience clear. That means continue to live the Christian life. Obey God. But it works across the spectrum. This is one of the things that can destroy you in suffering, and you have to avoid it: self-pity.

Self-pity enables you to do bad things just to console yourself, and you feel like you deserve it. I remember some years ago talking to a man who had had a great financial reversal. He was in such pain, so he had an affair. He slept with a woman who wasn’t his wife. The reason he did that, even though he had always been a very moral upright-type person, is in the midst of his suffering he said, “After all I’ve been through, I deserve this.” That’s self-pity. “I deserve this.”

Of course, then he not only had his career fall apart but he had his marriage fall apart. That didn’t make things any better now, did it? No. See, these two things don’t seem like they go together. On the one hand, don’t keep a stiff upper lip. Yell and scream and bite the rug and cry out and pour out your heart. Don’t be a stoic; cry. On the other hand, keep your conscience clear and obey.

This is, for example, what Job did. These two things together is what we don’t know how ... We either fall apart and just do whatever we can to medicate and numb ourselves and console ourselves or else we keep a stiff upper lip and stay disciplined. No, no. They go together. Job screamed and cried out in agony, and at the same time he never walked away from God. He continued to pray.

When I say, “Keep your conscience clear,” I don’t just mean, “Don’t have an affair.” Of course don’t have an affair, but just pray every day and read the Bible every day and go to church. A lot of people, because they feel horrible and everything is so bad, they just stop doing the things you’re supposed to do as a Christian. Don’t do that. Don’t be a stoic; cry. On the other hand, keep your conscience clear and obey God.

C. *Look at Jesus Christ himself.* Down here in verse 18 it says, “**For Christ also suffered ...**” There it is. Christ also suffered. “... once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” We’ve been talking about furnaces. Let me tell you another story about a furnace you probably may know of. In the book of Daniel, chapter 3, it tells us about three Jewish young men, exiles in Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

They had been told that there was a law that everyone had to bow down to an idol. They refused to do it. The king of Babylon was furious with them, so he said to his soldiers, “Take them and bind them and throw them into a fiery furnace.” The fiery furnace was heated so hot that when the soldiers threw them into the fiery furnace, the soldiers perished. The heat was so great that the soldiers died.

King Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, goes up to this high place to look

down and see his prisoners. He expected to see them writhing in pain and wreathed in flame. Instead, he can't believe what he sees. He turns to the people next to him and says, "Didn't we throw three prisoners bound into the furnace?" They said, "Yes, O King." He says, "I see four men walking around unbound and unharmed in the fire, and the fourth one looks like a son of the gods."

In the Old Testament there's this figure called the Angel of the Lord. Not *an* angel of the Lord ... *the* Angel of the Lord. When that figure shows up in the Old Testament, he speaks as God, he embodies God, and most of the Old Testament commentators and theologians believe it's a pre-incarnation manifestation of Jesus himself.

The point is simply this. When Jesus walks with you through the flames, when Jesus goes through your furnace with you, all that comes off are your shackles, your bonds, the things that addicted you, the things that controlled you, the things that drove you, things that were too important to you. If Jesus is walking with you through them, you won't be harmed. You'll come out pure gold, free.

You say, "What does that mean? How do I look to Jesus in my suffering? How do I rely on Jesus?" It's simple. "For Christ also suffered." We are the only religion that says God actually came into this world and knew suffering. Aristotle, the philosopher, says it would be impossible for there to be a friendship between a god and a human being. Do you know why? They don't have anything in common.

Speak for yourself, Aristotle. Here's what we know as Christians. God in Jesus Christ took on human likeness and he knows our suffering. He knows death. In fact, on the cross ... oh my goodness ... unimaginably, on the cross, Jesus Christ even learned what it's like to be lost. For he said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He can be our friend. He can be with us. Do you know why?

When Jesus Christ went to the cross, he went into the ultimate furnace. He suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. That was the ultimate furnace. It was like hell. He was completely abandoned by God. He got everything we deserve. If you see him going into the ultimate furnace for you, then you can know he's in your furnace with you. Then you can rely on him.

You can say, "If you did that for me, O Lord Jesus Christ, I can do this for you. If you suffered infinitely for me, then I can suffer finitely for you. I'll obey you. I'll cry out, but I'll obey you and I'll look for the things in my life that need to be changed. I'll just hold on to you, and when it's over, I know you'll bless me."

Joni Eareckson Tada, the Christian lady who has been in a wheelchair for many, many years and knows a lot about suffering ... She's also a writer, and she says, "Jesus is worth trusting. Period. End of argument. After all, when they hang you on a cross like meat on a hook, you have the final word on suffering." Jesus says, "Trust me in suffering." End of argument. Do it and you'll come out like gold. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us this assurance. O Lord, everybody in this room is either on their way into a time of trouble or on their way out of a time of trouble or they're in it right now. We're all like that. So we pray, Lord, in the little furnaces, the big furnaces, you would teach us what it means to look to your Son Jesus Christ, to keep our conscience clear, yet to cry out and to hold on to you, knowing that by trusting you, Lord Jesus, because you went into the great furnace for us, we know this is going to change us more and more into your likeness, giving us a self-knowledge, giving us a strength and joy, giving us a compassion for other people, giving us more intimacy and prayer with you. Give us these things through your Son Jesus Christ, O Father, for we ask them in his name, amen.

Our Power: Spirit-Filled Living

Following Jesus—June 8, 2014

2 Peter 1:3–11

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.¹⁰ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble,¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is God's Word.

Every branch of the Christian church teaches that when you put your faith in

Jesus Christ you receive the Holy Spirit. Many churches in the world observe today as Pentecost Sunday. It's very appropriate for us to be looking at a passage like this, even though the Holy Spirit is not actually mentioned in the passage. The teaching that is given here is one of the most important passages in the Bible to teach us about spiritual growth.

Ultimately, living the Christian life is not actually a matter of willpower and self-effort. Because of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have the potential for radical and organic growth, character change. You can see it, as we will be looking here in a minute, where it says you should be adding to your faith goodness, to that knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance.

It's talking about moving from selfishness to unselfishness, from enslavement to freedom and self-control, from foolishness to wisdom. It's talking about change, inward character change, spiritual growth. What do we learn from this passage about that? Quite a lot. In fact, I'd like to point out five things. According to this passage, spiritual growth is *possible, gradual, essential, practical*, and ultimately *wonderful*. Let's go through those.

1. *Spiritual growth is possible.* Let's take a look at verses 3–4. "His divine power has given us everything we need for godly living, so that through him you may participate in the divine nature." These are stupendous statements, and just to throw into relief how stupendous they are let me just say I would be rich if I had a dollar for every time I heard somebody over my lifetime say, "People don't really change." I'd be rich.

I would be 10 times richer if I also got a dollar for every time I quietly assumed that toward other people and even toward myself. That people really don't change is, I think, a working assumption for most of us, and verses 3–4 radically contradict that. Verse 4 says ... He's speaking to us. He's speaking to Christians who have believed the promises of the gospel. It says through them we participate in the divine nature. That is an astounding way to put it.

We get the Holy Spirit, yes, but this is helpful to put it like this. We participate in the divine nature. When you are conceived, the DNA of your ancestors is implanted into you. The genetic material of your ancestors is implanted into you. When you're born and you live your life, that DNA essentially plays itself out in the rest of your life, making you what you are. When you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not just a nebulous force that is with you. He is the third person of the Trinity. That's God come into you.

Therefore, when you believe, the very DNA of God is implanted in you and the rest of your life is an outworking of that DNA, which makes you the person you will become. Because we're being told the very DNA of God has been implanted in you when you believe in Jesus Christ, that's the reason Peter can say this most convicting and yet most hopeful verse, verse 3. It's maybe the most devastating and most hopeful verse at the same time in the New Testament. Look at what it says. "**His divine power has given us everything we need for**

a godly life ...”

Do you want to hear the devastating aspect of that? There are no excuses. Peter is saying, “Don’t tell me you don’t have what you need to live as you should. You absolutely do. What more would you want? You have the divine nature. No, you don’t need some kind of esoteric knowledge that you don’t have yet or some mystical experience. You have it, if you are a Christian who believes and has received the Holy Spirit. You are a participant in the divine nature.”

So the devastating part, the incredibly convicting part is Peter saying, “You already have everything you need to live exactly as you know you should. Don’t tell me you don’t have that.” The hopeful aspect is there is no wound so deep in your life that it can’t be healed. There is no brokenness so great that you can’t be repaired. There is no habit so binding that you can’t be freed from it.

2. *Spiritual growth is gradual.* This takes a little bit of pressure off of us. When you hear you have everything you need to live as you ought, that doesn’t mean right away. We all go, “Phew! Tell me more about this point. This is a good point. I want to know more about this.” Okay, let me bring that out.

It says it’s not enough just to believe. You have to add to your faith goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly love, and love. Then it says, “If you possess these qualities, they will keep you from being ineffective.” That’s not what it says. It says, “If you possess these qualities in increasing measure.” It doesn’t say that all these things come at once. You grow. They’re gradual.

The Bible uses a lot of metaphors for what it means to live the Christian life, and they are all gradual. The reason we have to press this is because the United States is the most impatient culture in the world today and in the history of mankind. Honestly. I’ve been getting around a little bit more this year, and you realize that even by European standards, Americans are so impatient. We want it done, and we want it done now.

This is the reason why there are wonderful cell phone companies that have gone into the toilet, lost billions of dollars, because some other cell phone came along and did what the first cell phone did three seconds faster. We say, “Oh, who needs that? I want the other cell phone. Three seconds. I need that three seconds.” We are really impatient.

So when Americans or people who have been acclimated to American culture hear the promise, “Christianity can really change your life. The Holy Spirit can really change your life. You have everything you need to live life you ought to,” we go, “Yeah, that’s for me.” We hear that promise through our American grid, which is utterly out of whack.

All growth is gradual. Look at every single metaphor the Bible uses. For example, here’s 1 Peter 2, verse 2. Peter says, “Like newborn babes, drink in the spiritual milk of God so that you grow up into your salvation.” That’s a very typical image. When you become a Christian, though you may be physically an adult, you are a

baby. It says spiritually, like newborn babes, drink in the spiritual milk so that you can spiritually grow up into your salvation.

Now let's think about that. How fast does a baby grow? American parents are always very much impatient. You can throw all the milk you want down the poor baby's throat. Obviously, if the baby does not have good nutrition the baby will fail to thrive, and that's bad. But no matter how much you feed them, no matter how much you put stuff in there, they're only going to grow up so fast.

No matter how much you do, 5-year-olds will never be six feet tall and they won't play for the NFL and they won't be able to do calculus, no matter what. I don't care how many great Manhattan preschools you put them through. They're not going to do calculus when they're 5. They're not going to be six feet tall. They can only grow so fast, and it's very gradual. You say, "So I should lower my expectations." No. Do you understand what growth can do?

Americans overestimate what they can get done in a year and underestimate what they can get done in five years. Let me show you what I mean. Imagine you had an acorn and took that acorn, went outside on 83rd Street, chose one big slab of concrete in the sidewalk, and said, "I'm going to break this concrete apart with this acorn." So you get down on your knees and you take the acorn and start hitting the concrete.

Now a couple of things will happen. The second thing that will happen is some official from New York City will come and take you away, probably, but the first thing that will happen is your acorn will completely be demolished. It will be completely destroyed, because there's no fast way for an acorn to destroy a piece of concrete, but there *is* a way for an acorn to destroy a piece of concrete. Plant it. Plant it under a sidewalk.

There are cemeteries, for example, or other places ... Have you ever seen these big oak trees that come up? It takes decades and decades, but when they come up they just roll anything over that was on top of them, even pieces of sidewalk. Have you ever seen sidewalks being pushed up? It's not the acorn so much as the power of growth in the acorn that can actually destroy that piece of concrete.

That's the reason Jesus can use illustrations like, "If you have faith the grain of a mustard seed, you can move mountains." The reason we do not see more radical change in Christians' lives, especially American Christians' lives, is nobody gives it the time. Nobody keeps at it. Nobody does a long obedience in the same direction. Nobody sees the astounding possibilities of change over a long period of time. We want it now. We want it dramatically. We want deliverance. But spiritual growth is gradual.

3. *Spiritual growth is essential.* What I love about this passage is that there is *this* side and then there's *that* side. There's on *this* hand and then there's on *that* hand. It's incredibly balanced. Look at verses 10–11. If I read it to you quickly, you're likely to get the wrong impression from it, but we'll look at it a little more carefully.

“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” It says, “If you do these things,” and that’s talking about verses 5–8. If you grow, if you develop these virtues, if you develop these character changes …

It looks like it’s saying that God looks at you and sees that you are worthy of heaven, and because of all this growth and change in your life, God receives you into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Except look at verse 10. A very important word. It says, **“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election.”**

What’s *election*? We’ve talked about this other times, but Christians are not choice people. Choice people are the best, the people who merit God’s favor. Chosen people are not choice people. Chosen people are just chosen, people who just receive God’s grace. When Peter says, “I want you to grow to *confirm* that you’re saved by grace,” that’s the key. Here’s what this means.

Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the other Protestant Reformers all stressed a very important doctrine. They said the Bible teaches you’re justified by faith alone. You’re saved and pardoned and accepted by God by faith alone, not by your good works. You are saved because you have faith in what Jesus has done, not in what *you* have done. Not a bit of faith and a bit of works, good works and good deeds. No, you’re saved by faith alone.

But they always put it like this. While you’re saved by faith alone, you’re not saved by faith that *remains* alone. You’re saved by faith alone, not works, but you’re not saved by faith that remains alone. It *will* result in a changed life. Here’s why. How can you come to grips with someone who gave himself utterly for you without you giving yourself utterly to him?

If you really believe that you are saved strictly by the costly grace of God, the grace that cost Jesus Christ his life, what is that going to do? You have a lot of desires in you. I have a lot of desires in me. I have selfishness. I have pride. So do you. There’s hardness of heart. But in the end, there will be a desire to delight the one who did that that all of those other desires cannot overwhelm. In the end, you will want to change. You will desire to change, and you will.

Do you see what I mean by the balance? On the one hand, Peter is saying, “You’re saved by grace. You’re called. You’re chosen. It’s all by grace.” But how do you know you really believed? Don’t assure yourself that you’ve believed and you’re saved by faith alone if year after year after year you never change, because anyone who has really grasped the grace of God will have a desire to please the one who did that that all of the other problems and desires in our hearts will not be able to extinguish or overwhelm. It will out. It will surface. It will have its way.

That’s the reason I say growth in grace is not only possible and gradual but it’s

essential. It has to be there. I'm not trying to put extra doubts in your mind, but, on the other hand, you don't want presumption and easy believe-ism either.

4. *Spiritual growth is practical.* That is to say, there are things you can do. I've already used the metaphor of an acorn. An acorn has this enormous power. Do you realize that out of one acorn not only can come an enormous oak tree but then other acorns? Somebody once said one acorn could cover the world with wood. It has that kind of power in that acorn, but it has to be fertilized. It has to find the right spot to release the power.

So what does that mean? What sort of things? What do we have to do practically in order to grow in grace? Look at verses 5–7. There's way more in here than I can take out, but here's what I'd like you to see. First of all, it does take our intentional deliberate effort. It won't happen automatically. It says, "**For this very reason, make every effort to add** [this and this and this]." Basically, make every effort to grow. That's not "Let go and let God." That is "Make every effort." It's diligence. It will not happen automatically. It takes intentionality.

Secondly, this word *add* ... Make every effort to *add* this to this to this. Peter has deliberately chosen a Greek word that means to invest. In fact, this is a word that was used in ancient Greek language to describe people who backed artistic and especially theater productions. If you want to write a play and put on a theatrical production, you need patrons. You need people who will invest, who will financially back the production.

In those days it was the same as it is today. That's the word Peter deliberately uses, which is really interesting. That tells you a lot. First of all, an investor is not just a contributor, not just somebody who gives at the office a little bit here and a little bit there. An investor risks. An investor puts up a lot of capital. Therefore, one of the things we're being told here is you need to make your own personal growth in grace a major priority, but it also means there's a price.

Investors pay a price. They take a risk. They think the return is worth it (and it certainly is), but they pay a price. In fact, I'd like you to see there are at least three prices. There are more things I could show you than this. Years ago, when I was probably 23 years old, I went to an Episcopal church in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, where J.I. Packer was speaking on growth in grace. I still have the notes from it. How do you grow in grace?

There are more than these three, but let me just show you there are three prices you have to pay. There are three practical disciplines you have to engage in. Let me just mention them and then go through them. First, you have to pay *the price of time with God (the way of conversing)*. Secondly, you have to pay *the price of vulnerability to other people (the way of exchange)*. Thirdly, you have to pay *the price of submission to God's will (the way of acceptance and suffering)*.

Those are all in here. There are actually others in here, but they're the only ones I have time for. I've never forgotten them. I think these are the three things you have to do to release the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a magic

bullet; it's a magic acorn. It's not a quick fix; it's a deep fix. But if you do these three things, it can change anything. Here's what those three things are.

A. *The price of time with God (the way of conversing)*. Verse 3: “**His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him ...**” Verse 3 says our *knowledge* of him. Down in verse 8 it talks about not being ineffective in our *knowledge* of our Lord Jesus Christ. When the Bible talks about knowing God or knowing Christ, it's not talking about just information dump. It's not just talking about cognition.

It's not simply saying you're going to know *about* God or you're going to know *about* Jesus or you're going to get more Bible knowledge, or something like that. No, no. What it's talking about is *knowing*. That's relational. This is a simple fact. You have no relationship with someone unless you're spending time with them. Actually, usually time alone with them.

You have no real relationship with people unless you're spending time with them. Therefore, the first price you have to pay (and it is really expensive) is you have to win the daily battle to spend time alone with God every day or you don't have a relationship. You don't know him. You can say you know him and say you believe in him.

I mean, I have people in my life I used to know. If you ask me, “Do you know that person?” I'd say, “Yeah, I know that person personally,” but if I haven't talked to them face-to-face or even communicated with them in 20 years (and when you get to be my age, there are a lot of people I used to know that I haven't talked to in 20 years), I don't really know them anymore. Not really.

You don't know God unless you're paying the price for time alone with him to interact. When you read the Bible, you're hearing from him. When you adore and confess and examine yourself and thank God and petition and lay your needs in front of him, that's prayer. You're speaking to him. When you're hearing him in his Word, he's speaking to you. When you're praying, you're speaking to him. That's the way of conversing, and you have to pay the price. You have to win the battle of time every day or else ... sorry ... your acorn is just going to stay an acorn.

B. *The price of being vulnerable to people (the way of exchange)*. This phrase *mutual affection* that comes up twice here is actually the Greek word *philadelphia*, which means brotherly love. You've heard of the “city of brotherly love.” I don't think we stop and understand the power of this. A big part of growth in grace is sibling friendship. *Philadelphia* means sibling friendship. If you have a sibling, a brother or sister, that person is someone you know extraordinarily well. You have an enormous amount of common history, an enormous amount of common experience.

Then there are your friends. *Philos* is the Greek word for friendship. It's not erotic love, which is romance. It's not *agape* love, which is serving other people. *Philos* means friendship. It means having a lot of things in common. We've talked about friendship in the past. Here's what happens. What if you have a sibling who is

your best friend in the world too? Do you realize how powerful that is? That is what we're being told should be your relationship with your spiritual friends, your brothers and sisters in Christ.

You have to have some people in your life ... Hebrews 3:13, one of the most astounding verses in the Bible: "Exhort one another daily or you'll be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Every one of us, our biggest sins hide themselves from us. We're deceived by our own sin. Do you have people in your life who have the right to daily, regularly come because you've given them a hunting license, because you've given them a warrant (and they've given you a warrant) to come and tell you what's wrong with you?

Do you have people like that? Do you have people deputized, or are you the kind of person nobody would dare do that to? Then your acorn is going to stay an acorn. You can just kiss spiritual growth goodbye. That's not sibling friendship. That's not the way of exchange. Speaking the truth in love, bearing one another's burdens, counseling one another, confessing sins to one another, building each other up. All those "one another" passages.

Now the reason I said you have to pay the price of being vulnerable is that if you enter into these relationships, the kind of relationships you have to have if you're going to grow in grace, at certain points you are going to get hurt. You *will* get hurt. People will abuse the right you gave them. It will be hurtful and you'll weep. That's just the price you pay. If you pull yourself in and make yourself so private that your heart can't be broken in these relationships, then your heart becomes unbreakable and hard.

C. *The price of submission to God's will (the way of acceptance and suffering).* The third discipline for spiritual growth is what I just called the *way of acceptance*. You have to pay the price of submission to God's will. Under duress, under suffering, you accept God's will and say, "Thy will be done." See the word *perseverance*? Perseverance is a huge part of growth in grace. Why? Let me give you a definition of *perseverance*.

It means that when you suffer, you stay put. What do I mean by that? That's everything. When you suffer, if you stay put, if you bear up, if you stand your ground, if you do all of the things God was requiring of you and that you were doing before you started suffering, if you stay put in suffering, it's going to turn you into something great.

For example, Job. Before all Job's suffering, he was a praying man. He regularly sacrificed and prayed. He was a man who prayed. Then in came all the suffering. What kind of suffering? All of his children died, all of his money was wiped away, and terrible diseases came upon him. You think *you* have trouble. So there's Job. As soon as all this happens, we spend chapter after chapter listening to Job do many things.

First of all, he screams and yells and tears his clothes and falls on the ground and curses the day he was born. He's complaining and griping and questioning

God. At one point he says, “I wish you could appear in front of me, because I have some questions for you.” He’s after God. You go, “Wow.” You’re reading all this amazing stuff he says to God. He’s really angry, really upset, going over and charging God with being unfair.

You get to the end of the book and God vindicates Job and says, “You were faithful to me, Job,” and you say, “Did I miss something?” No, you didn’t. Or maybe you did, because here’s the point. Before Job’s suffering he was praying, and after Job’s suffering he was praying. All that biting the rug and screaming and charging God with incompetence and cursing the day he was born was in prayer. He didn’t stop praying. He processed all that in prayer.

Here’s the point. Before your suffering, are you studying the Bible every day? Are you going to church? Are you obeying the Ten Commandments? Okay, after your suffering, keep that up and you will be amazed. Here’s what we do. When suffering comes, we get into tremendous self-pity. Bad things are happening, so we don’t feel like going to church. We don’t feel like obeying.

I knew a guy some years ago who had tremendous financial problems, and in the midst of his financial troubles he had an affair. I remember he told me, “I felt like, considering all the other things that were going wrong with me and everything I was suffering, I deserved this.” That’s fatal self-pity. “I deserve this.” So what did he do? He didn’t stand his ground. He did not stay put. He started doing something that under ordinary circumstances he wouldn’t have done.

Then, of course, he blew up his marriage on top of blowing up his career. It didn’t make things better now, did it? I’m not talking about having affairs, although don’t have an affair. What I’m talking about is if you are suffering, persevere. What does that mean? Just do what you were doing before. If you were reading the Bible, read the Bible. If you were praying, pray. If you were going to church, go to church. If you were obeying the Ten Commandments, obey.

If you stay put, that pressure will turn your little coal heart into a diamond. Coal turns into a diamond under pressure. In that fire, your ore will become beautiful gold. Almost never do we really grow in grace unless these three things are happening. Pay the price. Invest. It’s worth it. Pay the price of what? Conversing with God, time alone with God. Pay the price of vulnerability and intimate fellowship, sibling friendship, spiritual friendship with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

Lastly, pay the price of saying under tremendous stress and suffering, “Thy will be done” and just standing pat, staying put, not retreating, holding your ground. Do you know what the capstone of all this is? “Add to faith goodness, to goodness knowledge, to knowledge self-control.” We could go through, and every one of those is interesting, but it climaxes in love. Why does it climax in love? Because that’s freedom.

Love is the ability to put your own happiness in someone else’s happiness. Before you become a person of love, all that matters is everyone serves your

happiness. You have your goals. You have things you want. Other people need to serve your happiness. Guess what? They never will. You spend all of your time being sorry for yourself, being unhappy, self-absorbed, looking at yourself, feeling like things aren't fair.

A person of love is someone who puts your happiness in other people's happiness, meaning you're only happy if they're happy. You're only happy when they're delighted, when they're thriving, when they're flourishing. Honestly, that is freedom. That only comes if you grow in grace through these practices.

5. *Spiritual growth is wonderful.* Why did I use that word? I think, ultimately, everything I've said, you could miss the forest for the trees. Yes, okay, I have to spend time conversing with God, but what am I going to converse with God about? Yes, I need to be ministering to my brothers and sisters in Christ, but what am I going to be exchanging? What am I going to actually be talking about?

It tells us here the key to it all is to be filled with awe and wonder and to have your heart melted because you're remembering something. You're always remembering and not forgetting something. What is it? This is verse 9. Whoever does not have these things ... In other words, if you're not growing, here's why. You've forgotten how you were cleansed from your past sins. How were you cleansed from your past sins? The blood of Jesus.

What this means is simple. You have to constantly remember the fact that you have been saved by grace through the costly blood of Jesus Christ. That, ultimately, is the content, the substance, the heart of what you're talking to God about, what you're talking to other people about, and how you're able to stay put under suffering. Why would you stay put under suffering? Why would you trust God under suffering?

You're just going to say, "Well, I need to stand put. I need to trust God under suffering, because then I'll grow in grace." That's all abstraction. "Because God is holy, I need to trust him." Yeah, that's true, but that's an abstraction too. Look at Jesus Christ cleansing you from your sins by dying on the cross. Look at what he's bearing for you. Remember that. Don't forget it. If you remember that, you'll be able to bear up for him. You say, "If he's bearing all that suffering for me, infinitely more, I can bear this suffering for him." That's the key.

Years ago, in the morning, I read a Bible passage. It was in the Old Testament where God is telling the children of Israel, "Be good to the aliens and the immigrants among you." In Israel there were people who were non-Jews. They were either refugees or immigrants. They were aliens in a foreign country, and God says, "Even though they're not Jews, you be good to them, because you were aliens and strangers and immigrants in Egypt, and I brought you out."

A few hours later, I was in a line at a grocery store, and the line was going so slowly ... If you think Americans are impatient, New Yorkers are the most impatient of all Americans. It was going so slowly we were all grumbling to each other in line. We're saying, "What is the matter with her?" We were looking at the

cashier. She didn't seem to know what she was doing. I was grumbling, "What's going on?"

As I got a little closer, I came to see that she was someone whose English was so bad she was just making a lot of mistakes, and I started to think, "Why did they even give her that job? If she doesn't have the language skills to do the job, then she shouldn't even be there. This is what's taking all my time." Then I suddenly remembered. "Hmm, be kind to the aliens and the immigrants among you. Why? Because what do you think *you* were? You were alienated, but I saved you. I brought you out."

As soon as I remembered that, it just melted me. Why? Because I was thinking, "Wait a minute. I've been saved. I was an alien. God brought *me* out. God was kind to *me*." The reason I was grumpy was I had forgotten. What helped me grow at that moment was I remembered. "Whoever does not grow in these ways is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins."

Here's the ultimate way you'll be able to remember and not forget that Jesus died for you. When Jesus was up on the cross and said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" do you know what he was actually saying? He was actually saying, "My God, my God, why have you forgotten me?" When I was a teenager, the thing I most dreaded, because I wasn't a very outgoing kid, was that when I missed a group or a class ...

In other words, if something was happening and I would miss a week or two, I would come back, and I could tell nobody knew I had been gone. I'd been forgotten. You feel so dehumanized when you realize nobody cared that you were gone. They're nice to you when you're there, but when you're not there they don't even remember that you're not there. They completely forgot you. It's very dehumanizing.

Well, think of what Jesus went through. Why is it that on the cross God, as it were, forgot Jesus? That doesn't mean God can forget anything, but he turned away from Jesus Christ. Jesus was forgotten. Why? Because Jesus gets what we deserved. We spend all of our time forgetting God. We owe him everything. He created us. He redeemed us. We should be thinking about him all the time. We should never forget him, but we do forget him.

What would be the just deserts for people who have forgotten God? We should be forgotten. Instead, Jesus Christ gets what we deserved. He was forgotten so that God can say, "I will never forget you." Isaiah 49:14–16: "You have said, 'Why has the Lord forsaken me?' But can a mother forget the baby who nurses at her breast? Yea, she may forget, but I will never forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands." Look at the palms of Jesus' hands. Nail prints. Because Jesus Christ was forgotten, God will never forget you. If you remember that, it'll turn you into something great. Let's pray.

Our Father, we ask that you would help us through all the spiritual disciplines that

will enable us to grow that we will see that at the heart of it all is to remember what your Son, Jesus Christ, did to cleanse us from our sins, and we ask that you would grow us in grace. That's what we most need and will glorify you. Help us to take all these great promises we've talked about tonight and apply them to our lives through your Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Our Walk: The Freedom of Submission

Following Jesus—June 22, 2014

1 Peter 2:13–17; 4:1–5; 5:5–11

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority:
whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority,¹⁴ or to governors, who
are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who
do right.¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the
ignorant talk of foolish people.¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your
freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.¹⁷ Show proper
respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the
emperor.

First Peter 4:1–5:

1 Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the
same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.² As a
result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires,
but rather for the will of God.

3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to
do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and
detestable idolatry.⁴ They are surprised that you do not join them in their
reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you.⁵ But they will have to
give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

First Peter 5:5–11:

5 In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders.
All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,
“God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”⁶ Humble

yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

The Word of the Lord.

In the first and second epistles of Peter, we've been looking at how we live the Christian life. The Christian life is not just turning over a new leaf. It's a lot more radical and gradual than that, a lot more transformative and powerful than that. We've been looking at a number of themes and concepts in 1 and 2 Peter that are very helpful to unlock the power and meaning of what that means.

For example, we looked at the new birth. We're born again. We looked at being exiles, that we live as exiles. We looked at the concept of holiness, the concept of spiritual growth. Now, today, in these passages we've culled together out of 1 Peter, we learn another extremely important concept for understanding the Christian life: the freedom of a Christian.

Notice in verse 16 of chapter 2 it says, "**Live as free people ...**" That's really a theme that runs all the way through the New Testament. Martin Luther, who was the spearhead of the Protestant Reformation ... One of the three or four short tracts or essays he wrote to start the Reformation, which really did change the world, was called *On the Freedom of a Christian*. It's a fairly short tract or essay. You can get it online. In the very beginning of the essay he basically says:

"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. These two theses seem to contradict each other, but both are Paul's own statements, who says in 1 Corinthians 9:9, 'For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all.' "

This paradox that Christians are free through submission, free through service, free through obedience, free through submission to liberating authority ... This Christian understanding of freedom is at complete loggerheads to what the culture tells us. Actually, because we live in the culture, I would say most of us as Christians have trouble understanding it ourselves. So let's take a look and see what we can pull out of these diverse verses in 1 Peter about this subject. True Christian spiritual freedom: *what it is, what it brings, and how it can grow in you*.

1. *What it is.* Right away, we see the way the word *freedom* is used in the Bible is

just so different than the way we use it here. For example, look at verse 16. “**Live as free people ...**” That’s the beginning of verse 16. Then at the end of verse 16 it says, “... **live as God’s slaves.**” That’s clearly the same thing. “Live as free people. Live as God’s slaves.” Or I could say Peter is saying, “We *can* live as free people *because* we’re God’s slaves.”

In fact, if you look at that whole first paragraph, you see that what Peter is saying is, “Submit yourselves to every human authority, whether the emperor or to governors.” In other words, he says, “Serve others.” This is very close to what Luther said: Serve others. Submit to others. Give yourself to others. Why? because you’re free. Why? Because you’re a slave to God. Because we are slaves to God, we are absolutely free, which means we can serve others.

Right away we say, “What?” Here’s the reason we’re confused. The culture defines *freedom* in what we could call completely negative terms. You’re free if you’re free *from* ... free from constraints, free from restrictions. Our Western culture defines freedom as mutually exclusive from commitments or promises or obedience. To the degree I’m obeying someone, to the degree I’m serving someone or keeping a promise, to that degree I’m not free. Why? Because it cuts off my options.

If I’m serving someone or if I made a promise, that means because I promise *this* I can’t do *this*, which means I’m not free, because our modern understanding of freedom is freedom *from*, freedom from any restrictions. The more options I have, the more things I can choose, the more free I am. Here we’re told you’re only free if you are a slave of God, and we say, “How could that be?”

The answer is that statement makes no sense unless you recognize two assumptions. There are two premises or assumptions operating here, and they actually run out through the rest of the New Testament. The first assumption of the Bible is that *there is no such thing as negative freedom*. There is no such thing as anybody who’s free from all restraint or constraints. The Bible assumes that everybody is a slave to something. That’s one of the main themes of the Bible.

There are two passages that will show you this if you dig into them. One is Romans 6, which essentially says you can either be a slave of self, of ego, of sin, or of God, but there’s no third alternative. Or you can just look at the first of the Ten Commandments. “I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Notice you either worship God, the true God, or you’ll make something else into a god. There’s no third alternative.

By the way, it’s not only the Bible that says this. For example, Euripides, one of the ancient Greek authors, says no one is wholly free. You are a slave to wealth or to the law or to the people you are seeking to please. Hear that? That’s simple. No one is really free. You’re a slave to wealth or to the law or to the people you’re seeking to please.

Is that an overstatement, “Nobody is free. Everybody is a slave”? I don’t think so.

What he's saying is everybody has to live for something. You have to live for something. If there are any things in your life that give you meaning and purpose that if they were taken away you would feel like, "What's the use of going on?" those things are the controlling spiritual authority of your life.

If you're living for something, that's what you have to have, and if something threatens it or it looks like you're losing it, you go crazy. You go nuts. You feel like, "Maybe my life is over." What does that mean? That is your spiritual authority. You have to have it. Therefore, essentially, it's driving you. Everybody is living for something, and whatever that is you're enslaved to it. If you say, "Well, gee, that seems like an overstatement," no.

The famous Charles Dickens novel *Oliver Twist* has in it a prostitute with a heart of gold, Nancy. Nancy is in an abusive relationship with the very evil, violent man, Bill Sikes. Nancy stays with this man even though he beats her. She is so dependent on him for her sense of self-worth and for her security that she stays with him even though he abuses her. Of course, *Oliver Twist* was turned into a Broadway musical and then eventually into a movie called *Oliver!*

In the musical, Nancy sings about her abusive relationship. It's one of the most excruciating pieces of musical theater you could ever listen to. If you want to, you can go home and watch it on YouTube probably somewhere. After he hits her, she sings, and she says things like this:

*I'm sure that he needs me ...
As long as he needs me
I know where I must be
I'll cling on steadfastly
As long as he needs me.*

Here's an abused woman singing on Broadway. I guess back in 1964, or whenever they did it, they weren't thinking about it. It's excruciating, because you say, "Why in the world would that poor woman give that man such power over her? Why would he be so important to her she lets him do that?" After 25 years of being a pastor in New York City, I would say the average man or woman I've met in New York has the same relationship to his or her career that Nancy had to Bill Sikes.

You have to have it. This is how you feel. "I'm trying to make it in this. I'm trying to do this." You let your career abuse you and beat you up and do all sorts of things, but you just have to have it. Look. Everybody is living for something; therefore, everybody is addicted to something. Everybody has something that's driving them. Everybody is a slave to something. That's the first assumption of the Bible, and I think it's true.

There's a second assumption. If it's true that everybody is a slave to something, that nobody is truly free in the modern sense ... negative freedom, free from any restrictions ... then *if you're committed to something, you're restricted*. Any commitment brings restriction. So if you're committed to a great career ... oh my

goodness, all the restrictions. You busted a gut in order to get into the graduate school so you could get the job and, boy, you've been restricting yourself all over the place. You're not free.

I remember having a conversation years ago with somebody like this. "I'm completely emotionally free. I like to date people. I like to have little flings with people, but as soon as they get serious, I'm out of there, because I am free. No restrictions on me. I want to be able to be where I want to be, live where I want to live, go where I want to go. No restrictions on me." I said, "Well, that's not true. You have this enormous restriction."

The person said, "Why?" I said, "You are so committed to your independence that you cannot get into committed relationships. You have to get away from them. You're restricting yourself from them. 'Verboten. Verboten. Look out.' See, everybody is committed to something that gives you meaning in life; therefore, everybody has restrictions. You are submitting to all kinds of restrictions."

Well, then what's freedom? Freedom is finding the liberating restrictions. For example, a person my age sometimes goes to the doctor and the doctor says, "You need to go on a very strict diet or you're going to die of a heart attack." So I say, "Ooh, I don't want to hear that. So what's on the diet?" So the doctor gets out a diet. "You can eat *this*, *this*, and *this*, and then you can't eat these twenty thousand things over here. Here are four things you can eat, and here are twenty thousand things you can't eat." You say, "Ooh, I don't like that."

Well, if the doctor is smart (if you're a doctor out there, by the way, you can use this advice for free in your patient education), the doctor could say, "Well, you know, there are restrictions either way. You can have unlimited eating now." No restrictions. *Whee!* "Then you'll have the restriction of soon being in a hospital with tubes all over you and maybe die." That's bad. "Or you could have the restrictions of the diet now and then live a long and healthy life."

Which set of restrictions would be the liberating set? Do you see? In other words, there are restrictions either way. Which restrictions liberate? You say, "How do you decide which restrictions liberate?" Well, it's the ones that fit your design. What the doctor is trying to say is the way in which you're eating is violating your nature. You need to bring the way you eat in line with how your body is built.

For example, let's say you buy a car and the car says diesel fuel only. What does that mean? It means you're restricted. It means you have to only buy diesel fuel. "Oh, the diesel fuel is so many cents a gallon more than gasoline. I'll put in gasoline." No. If you do that, you'll destroy the car. If you put diesel fuel into the car, because it's built for diesel fuel, it'll whisk you around and give you great fuel mileage. What you're doing is finding the restrictions that fit the design.

Now how does this relate to spiritual stuff and God? Oh my goodness. You can see. When I was a brand new Christian in my early twenties, I read a little book by Charles E. Hummel called *Becoming Free*. It had a huge impact on my thinking and preaching. In fact, this sermon, to a great degree, is completely

indebted to that little book.

In it he uses this illustration. He says imagine a fish. The fish is in the water. "Ah," the fish says. "I hate being confined and restrained to the water. That's not fair. I don't like this restriction. I am free." I don't know where the fish got his education, but anyway, the fish got some kind of education and got the Western cultural idea of freedom as being negative freedom, freedom from any restrictions, freedom from any constraints.

So the fish says, "I've never been out there on the land. I'm going to go out on the land." He gets up on the land, and the next thing you know, what's going on? He's flopping around and gasping and dying. Why? Because the fish isn't designed for the land. That's not what his design is. He has no legs. He has gills. He's just not designed for it. But put the fish back in the water. With a flick of his tail, he's darting around like lightning. Why? Because he's in his environment, the environment he was built for.

When he's restricted to the water, he's free. All of his potential is released. All of the things he couldn't possibly do on the land he can now do in the water. Listen. If you believe in a God who created all things, he created you for himself. What that means is the only true water for your soul, the only element that is not an alien place for your soul is full service to him. Be his slave. Unquestioning obedience. Unconditional obedience.

When I say, "Lord, there are a lot of other things in my life, but you have my primary allegiance," I'm jumping back into the water. You may say, "I believe in God," but if your allegiance ... We're talking about God's slaves. What does that mean? It bothers us to even hear the word, but it's talking about allegiance, not just belief.

If God is your main allegiance, your main hope, your main happiness, then you are becoming free, but if there is anything in your life that is a higher allegiance than God ... I see this all the time with people. People say, "I prayed to God for this to happen. It didn't happen, so I've had nothing to do with God."

What does that mean? That thing you were praying for was your highest allegiance. God was a negotiable means for an end. You didn't get it. God is gone. What does that mean? God is not your highest allegiance. If there's anything you're living for more than God, you're like a fish in an alien environment, gasping, flopping, dying spiritually. Now that's what freedom is. Freedom is finding the liberating restrictions of the true spiritual authority of God himself.

2. *What it brings.* Now what does that actually look like? How does that work out? How does that roll out? What does this spiritual freedom bring? There are three things I think we can pull out of these passages. We brought a bunch of passages together. They say a lot more than just what we're bringing out here, but in order to get to this theme, I brought them together. Here are three things that true spiritual Christian freedom brings into your life. Three kinds of freedom.

A. *Freedom from uncontrollable, enslaving emotions and desires.* Uncontrollable. I'm not saying negative emotions. Everybody has negative emotions. Jesus was a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. I'm talking about uncontrollable, enslaving emotions and desires. What do we mean? Well, in this second paragraph from chapter 4, look at verses 2–3. When you first read this, you're probably not going to get the right impression.

“As a result, they ...” He's talking about Christians in verse 1. We've turned away from sin. Verse 2: **“As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.”** That phrase *evil human desires* is a Greek word that shows up constantly in the New Testament when it talks about how Christians change. It's the word *epithymia*. It means an epi-desire or an over-desire.

In fact, in verse 3, when it talks about debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry, you probably think Peter is saying, “Now that you're a Christian, you shouldn't go to these terrible parties anymore.” It might be that as a Christian you should stay away from some parties you were going to before, but even here the word *lust* doesn't really mean sexual lust. It's the same basic idea.

Christian freedom frees you from over-desires. It frees you from desiring things so intensely it drives you. It's one thing to want to be healthy. That's fine to be healthy. What's a hypochondriac? That's a person with an epi-desire for health. A hypochondriac is a person who's miserable and makes everybody around them miserable, because they're always seeing things that really aren't there. It's an over-desire. It's an epi-desire for health.

We've already talked about the same thing happens if you do it for anyone else. There's nothing wrong with romantic love, but an epi-desire for romantic love ... There's nothing wrong with wanting a career, but an epi-desire for a career ... These things create emotions, because when something threatens those things, the emotions are uncontrollable. Here are two examples.

Some years ago I watched a movie. It's kind of an old movie. It has been out a long time now, but it was a movie called *Dad* and it had Jack Lemmon as the grandfather, Ted Danson as the father, and Ethan Hawke as the son. Ted Danson had left the family years before. At one point, because Jack Lemon, his father, is sick, he gets back into connection with his son, Ethan Hawke, who's grown now.

At one point they're having a discussion, and Ethan Hawke finally has the courage to say to his father, “Why did you leave us?” At first, Ted Danson makes excuses and says, “Well, your mother was jealous of my career.” Then finally at a certain point he looks into the ground and says, “Making money made me feel like a man.”

What he was saying was, “My identity was so built up in making money that even though it looked like it might get in the way of my relationship with my wife or my relationship with my children, I had to keep making money. I couldn't stop,

because I would be emasculated. I wouldn't feel like myself." Ah, what is that? That's an over-desire. That's an *epithymia*. You have controlling, mastering, addictive desires for things. Good things, but now they control you.

Or even this. I don't think this is unfair. Here's Nancy. Here's Bill Sikes. If Nancy's highest allegiance was to God and Bill hit her, she would say, "Bill, I would love to have a love relationship with you, but you're going to jail." But since Bill Sikes was Nancy's salvation, was her highest allegiance, was her greatest source of significance and security, when Bill Sikes hits her she says, "I must have done something to deserve it." Why? Because she's blind, because she's addicted, because she's in denial, because she has to have the salvation.

B. *Freedom from the fear of circumstances*. We could have an entire sermon on just the fact that in chapter 5, verse 6, we're told, "**Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.**" There have been many, many good sermons just preached on those two verses. I can't do that, but here's what I can say.

As part of the freedom you have in Christ, you don't have to be controlled by anxiety anymore. It doesn't mean you don't get anxious. It doesn't mean you don't worry, but it doesn't have to take you out. It doesn't have to absolutely paralyze you with fear. Why not? I don't usually tell examples like this, but it was such a vivid one. Last week, Kathy and I were in England and I preached at a small village church. There were 70 people there, almost all older people. It was really a delightful time.

At one point I used an example that as I was doing it I wondered whether it was too hard, but I went ahead and did it. I was talking about the fact that years ago I listened to a recording of a sermon by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, an old British preacher. He was preaching on Jeremiah, chapter 2. The name of the sermon was *Broken Cisterns*.

It was about the fact that in Jeremiah, chapter 2, God speaks to the children of Israel and says, "Why are you trusting the Egyptians? Why are you trusting the Assyrians? Why are you trusting in your military might? Why are you trusting in your economic prosperity? Trust me. Anything else but me that is your number-one allegiance and hope is just like a broken cistern."

Now what's a broken cistern? Those of you who grew up in rural areas know a cistern isn't a well. A cistern is a holding tank for rainwater and other kinds of water. On a farm or in many places, the cistern is where you got your water for cooking, for drinking, for bathing, and everything else. But if you had a crack at the bottom of that cistern, if the cistern was broken, if there was even a little hairline fracture, you could go out one morning and the water would be gone. It would have just gone down into the ground, and then you'd be dry.

God is saying in that chapter, "Anything but me is basically a broken cistern, even good things. Even if you live for your family it's a broken cistern, because they're

going to die. If you live for money it's a broken cistern, because it goes away. Everything but me is a broken cistern." Then Lloyd-Jones, who tended to be a kind of hard guy anyway, turned and said, "Even if you are living for your spouse ..."

There's nothing wrong with loving your wife or loving your husband, but if your husband or your wife is the main thing in the world, one of you is going to see the other one in a coffin someday. Then he said, "How will your god, your savior, your hope, help you at that moment?" When your god is in the coffin, how will your hope be able to help you when your heart is breaking? It can't. Only God can be your hope. Only God can be your allegiance.

Afterwards, I talked to an older British woman who came up to me, and as soon as she began telling me this I said, "I can't believe I did this to this woman." She says, "You know, my husband just died 16 months ago. I saw him in a coffin." I'm sitting there thinking, "Oh gosh, what did I do?" She says, "I suddenly realized today I've lost all my hope, but I'm a Christian. That doesn't have to happen. Even something like this does not have to destroy my life. I really have to think about this."

It doesn't mean you shouldn't fear the death of your spouse. It doesn't mean you shouldn't be anxious about something like that, but there's anxiety and there's anxiety. There's fear that destroys you, fear that paralyzes you. If God is your highest allegiance, then you are actually free from the paralyzing fear of circumstances, from uncontrollable and enslaving emotions.

C. *Freedom to serve people*. Unless you're a slave of God, you're not free to serve other people. This is chapter 2 again, verses 13 down to 17. What's interesting here is it's talking about a whole lot of social contracts. It says, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority." That's citizenship. Then down in verse 17: "Show love for the family of believers." That's membership. You come into a church, and now you're supposed to serve other people. "Show proper respect to everyone."

All through here we're being told, "Live as free people because you're a slave of God by serving other people." Now you say, "How does that work? Why do I need to be a slave of God in order to serve other people?" Francoise Sagan, who was a very well-known French woman,, a writer, an intellectual, was interviewed many years ago for *Le Monde* magazine. The interviewer was asking her about how she felt her life went.

She says, "I've been well satisfied with my life." "Oh," the interviewer says, "then you've had the freedom you wanted. Is that right?" Then she says, "Well, I was obviously less free when I was in love with somebody, but fortunately not in love all the time. Apart from that, I've been free." Here you have a true modern woman who has completely internalized the Western understanding of freedom. That is, you're free when you are absolutely free to choose. There are no restrictions on you. You can live where you want, do what you want, be where you want.

What she said was she's basically been free except when she was in love, but fortunately she's not in love all the time. What is that a recognition of? First of all, this is a recognition that you lose your freedom the more in a love relationship you are. The deeper that love relationship goes, the more you just can't live the way you want. You can't make the choices. You have to confer. You have to consult.

She was absolutely right. If you're talking about freedom strictly in terms of negative freedom, freedom from all restrictions, freedom from any hampering of my choices, then love and that kind of freedom are absolutely mutually exclusive. The more you are in love with somebody, the more in a love relationship you are, the less free you are. But wait a minute. Hang on. Stop. When do you most feel joy? When do you most feel alive? When do you most feel like a fish that just got thrown back into the water? When you're in these love relationships, right?

So wait a minute. If it's really true that freedom and love are two different things, so that fortunately we can't be in love all the time; otherwise we would lose our freedom, that's not right. No, it's not right, and here's why it's not right. Because the Western definition of freedom is basically selfishness. The concept of freedom that is the assumption of all the newspapers and magazines, the assumption of all the academics, the assumption of our entire culture, is selfishness.

Selfishness is the antithesis of love, yet love is the fuel that our engine, the human soul, was built to run on. Love is the water that our human soul was meant to swim in. Therefore, it is only when God liberates you from selfishness, only when you say, "Not my will but thine be done ..." That's the beginning of changing the selfishness which is endemic to your heart and which eats up and destroys love. So the Christian freedom not only brings freedom from enslaving emotions and from absolute fear of circumstances, but it brings you the freedom for love.

3. *How it grows in you.* I happen to know that you and I, even those of us who are professing Christians, even those of us who have been Christians a long time, don't have a lot of this freedom in our lives. We are still not all that free from enslaving emotions. We are not that free from paralyzing fear of negative circumstances. Frankly, we're not that free from selfishness that is like an acid in our love relationships. We're not free from these things.

So we need to grow in this freedom. How? There are two practical things I think you can get out of this text, which I'll only briefly say, but they're profoundly important. The two ways for you to grow in this Christian freedom is *don't be afraid of making promises* and *look at Jesus Christ on the cross*.

A. *Don't be afraid of making promises.* If you look carefully, Peter is constantly saying, "Make promises." For example, in chapter 5, verse 5, it says, "**In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders.**" Isn't that interesting? What does that mean? Make a promise. When you join the

church, you make a promise. Ooh, restricting our freedom. Uh-oh. Well, make a promise.

By restricting the selfishness of living any way you want, when you make promises ... One of the things you're doing when you make a membership vow is you promise to serve others and promise to live as a Christian and promise to care for the church. Basically, you're promising to love God and love your neighbor. Even when you become a citizen, by the way, you make promises. When you become married you make promises.

Don't be afraid to make the promises that teach your heart how to move away from the selfishness that Western culture suggests is real freedom (but which isn't) into love. Lewis Smedes wrote an article some years ago on the power of promising. He was thinking about marriage, and it was really an article about how people say, "Well, I don't want to get married, because that limits my freedom." He says, "No, no. The only way for you to really be free is to learn the power of the promise." This is essentially what he says:

"When I make a promise, I bear witness that my future with you is not one I was stuck with through the fateful combination of X's and Y's I was dealt out of my parents' genetic deck. When I make a promise, I testify that I was not routed along some unalterable itinerary by the psychic conditioning visited on me by my family.

When I make a promise, I declare that my future with people who depend on me is not predetermined by the mixed-up culture of my tender years. I am not fated. I am not determined. I am not a lump of human dough whipped into shape by the contingent reinforcement and aversive conditioning of my past.

Oh, I know as well as the next person I can't create my life *de novo*. I am well aware that much of what I am and what I do is a gift or curse from my past. But when I make a promise to anyone I rise above the conditioning that limits me. No German shepherd ever promised to be there with me. No laptop computer ever promised to be a loyal help. Only a person can make a promise, and when he does, he is most free." Don't be afraid of making promises.

B. *Look at the cross. "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude ..."* What attitude? Listen. Here's what it's going to take to give higher allegiance to God. You have to trust him. That's where the freedom comes from. The more I trust God, the more I'm committed to him, the more I'm his trusting servant, the more I say, "Thy will be done," the more I get all these other kinds of freedom. How could I do that? I have to see what he did.

Luci Shaw, Christian poet, years ago wrote a poem called "Mary's Song." It's about Mary thinking about Jesus in her womb. The poem imagines Mary thinking about Jesus after Gabriel had said, "Hey, the one in your womb is the Son of God." This is how she speaks.

Breath, mouth, ears, eyes

*he is curtailed
who overflowed all skies,
all years.*

*Older than eternity, now he
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed
to my poor planet, caught that I might be free,
blind in my womb to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth
for me to be new-born,
and for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.*

Do you hear that? “He is curtailed who overflowed all skies, all years. Native to earth as I am, nailed to my poor planet, caught that I might be free.” There it is. He was utterly free. First of all, he confined himself by becoming human. Then he confined himself by going to the cross. Jesus Christ lost all the infinite freedom he had so that you and I could be free. Trust him. If you trust him, you’ll get into the Christian freedom. We’re free from guilt and condemnation, free from enslaving emotions, free from being afraid of what the world thinks anymore, freedom from the fear of death. Freedom. Let’s pray.

Our Father, thank you that wrestling with what the Word of God says we come to understand real freedom and real liberation. It is not what we’ve been told in our world that freedom and liberation are. It is so different, Lord, that it takes all of our concentration just to keep it straight. We live in a world that calls freedom slavery and slavery freedom.

We pray that you would straighten us out and help us to see that through Jesus Christ we can know the truth and the truth will set us free. We pray, Lord, that you would give us the freedom that you offer here, because it will glorify you and it will make us all we need to be in this world. So now we ask for these things and we ask that you’d grant them for Jesus’ sake. In his name we pray, amen.

Our Vocation: Lay Ministry

Following Jesus—June 29, 2014

1 Peter 2:4–10

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices

acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.⁶ For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”⁸ and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The Word of the Lord.

We’ve been looking in these weeks after Easter at what it means to live the Christian life in the books of 1 and 2 Peter. Today we again come to one of those themes that is crucial to understand what it means to live a Christian life. To live a Christian life is way more than just turning over a new leaf, kind of like New Year’s resolutions, trying to live a little better. No, it’s much more transformative and radical than that.

The only way we’re going to come to grips with what it means to live the Christian life is to look at some of these remarkable themes and concepts, especially that we find in these two books. Today we get to several, but they’re very linked. We’re going to see that if you’re a Christian you are a living stone in the temple of the Holy Spirit. You are a holy priesthood called to do sacrifices to the Lord, because you’re related to the cornerstone, Jesus Christ. Now that’s an image. It’s temple imagery ... priesthood, cornerstone. What does it all mean?

Let’s break that down. I want to unpack that. Let’s do it under these three headings: *what we are called to be, what we’re called to do, and how we can be enabled and empowered to do it*. What we’re called to be: a spiritual house, a temple. What we’re called to do: as a priesthood of all believers, offer acceptable sacrifices. How are we going to be enabled to do that? You have to relate to the cornerstone. Come to him, the living stone.

1. *What we are called to be.* Here’s what it means to be a Christian. Among many other things, it means that you, like living stones, are being built *into* (it’s a word that means to be fitted together) a spiritual house, a house of the Holy Spirit. We’re being made a temple. Let me give you a summary of the entire storyline of the Bible in terms of one theme: the presence of God. Seeing him and knowing him face-to-face.

The Bible says God created us for his presence. He created us to know him face-

to-face. That's what we were built for. In the garden of God, in the garden of Eden, God walked with Adam and Eve and they knew his presence. They had a face-to-face relationship with him. Can you imagine the joy and the love of knowing the infinitely holy and happy God face-to-face? The Bible says when the human race turned away from God ... we wanted to be our own masters ... it broke the relationship. When it broke the relationship with God, it actually also deeply broke us.

When we turned away from God and said, "We want to be our own masters," now the very thing we were built for we can't bear. We can't bear the presence of God. We don't deserve it and we can't bear it. We can't bear the truth of it. We can't bear the glory of it. Because we can't bear the presence of God and we also don't deserve the presence of God, the presence of God was removed from the world, and that's the reason why everything broke.

That's the reason why we live in a world of disease and injustice and violence and suffering and death. Everything broke, but God decided not to leave us in this. He planned to rescue a race of people, the human race, that doesn't want ... We don't want the presence of God and we can't bear the presence of God and we don't deserve the presence of God, but God did not leave us to stew in our own juices. Instead, he had a plan.

In the early days of the Old Testament, we see occasionally God's presence episodically comes down. It comes down to Abraham. It comes down to Jacob. You remember there's a place in Genesis 32 where Jacob meets God. The stairway to heaven, and angels ascending and descending. He meets God. When the vision is over, he calls that place *Bethel*, which means the house of God. Now it really wasn't the house of God. God didn't really live there. His presence wasn't really there. It had only been there briefly, and yet he called it *Bethel*.

The presence of God didn't live anywhere. It came down episodically. Then we get to Moses and the children of Israel and the great covenant God makes with the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. When God enters into a covenant relationship with the children of Israel, he says, "If you are in covenant with me, if you're faithful to me, now I will dwell in your midst. I will put my name in your midst," and they built the tabernacle, later on the temple.

In the center of the tabernacle, there permanently dwelt the presence of God. It was characterized by the *shekinah* glory cloud, this cloud of glory. At night it was like fire. In the daytime it looked like a cloud. It was there over the ark of the covenant and the Holy of Holies. Even though no one could get near it, no one could come in and touch it ... Only the high priest could even go into the Holy of Holies once a year. When Moses said, "I want to see you face-to-face," God said, "No, it'll destroy you."

Nevertheless, under Moses, now God's presence permanently resides in one space, in one place, in the midst of the people. During this time in which God dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple, there are these promises. The prophets

talk about them. They're strange, actually. Isaiah 4:2 says, "In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and all in Jerusalem will be holy. Then the Lord will create over all of Jerusalem and those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a flaming fire by night; over all the glory."

That's a strange prophecy. It sounds like everybody is going to have the Holy Spirit. Everyone is going to have the glory of God on them. There's going to be a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night over *all* the people of God. How could that be? The very end of the prophecy of Zechariah ends like this. I always love this.

Zechariah 14:20: "On that day 'holy to the Lord' will be inscribed on the bells of the horses and on every pot in Jerusalem. Every pot in Jerusalem will be holy to the Lord Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them." Now I know you're reading that saying, "Say what? What was that?"

When God dwelled in the tabernacle, when his holiness, you might say, was confined to this one space, his glory, his presence was there, anything that was in the tabernacle used for the sacrifices, used by the priests, any utensil, any pot had an inscription put on it, "Holy to the Lord," and no one could use it for anything else but that. That pot was now permanently in the tabernacle or in the temple. It could only be used for that.

Zechariah says, "The day is coming in which 'Holy to the Lord' will be written on the saddles and the bridle pieces of your horses, and on every single pot in every kitchen in Jerusalem it'll say, 'Holy to the Lord.'" Again, it's saying someday the holiness of God, the glory of God, will break out and it won't kill people; it'll empower people. Isn't that amazing? Well, when is that going to happen?

Who is the Branch? When Jesus Christ died on the cross, the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom. The veil separating the Holy of Holies from everyone else, protecting, as it were, the world from the power and glory and presence of God, was ripped. What does that mean? Here's what it means. John, chapter 1, says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Moses says, "I want to see your glory." God says, "No, it'll destroy you," but in Jesus Christ we see the glory. Second Peter, chapter 1, verse 3, says when we become Christians we partake of the divine glory. It's happening now. Because of the work of Jesus Christ, because he has forgiven our sins, when you believe in Jesus Christ, the glory of God, the Holy Spirit, comes into you in a way that the Old Testament saints would be astounded by.

We don't see him yet face-to-face. There's a place in 1 John, chapter 3, when it asks, "What are we going to be like at the end of time?" What he says is, "We don't know what we will be like, but we will be like him, because we will see him as he is." When we actually see him with our actual eyes, our literal eyes, face-to-face, finally, then suddenly we will be free of all of our defilements and flaws

and everything that's wrong with us and we'll be all that we were meant to be again.

Even now, even though we walk by faith, not by sight, we're partakers of the divine nature. The glory of God has broken out into our lives in a way that the Old Testament saints and Moses and Abraham could not even imagine. If you become a Christian, you are living stones in a temple of the Holy Spirit. Now what does that mean? That's the issue. What does that actually mean?

It means two things, and we're only going to look at the second one. We talked about the first one earlier on. The first thing it means is if the glory of God is in you, that means you can change anything about yourself. Anything about yourself that's wrong can be fixed. That's one thing. We talked about that some weeks ago. There's not a sin in your past that can't be cleansed. There's not a wound that can't be healed. There's not a bad habit that can't be broken.

There's absolutely no end to the kind of power for change that you have within you, but we're not going there, because that's not what this text is talking about. What this is saying is the Holy Spirit comes into Christians as we are fitted together. Do you see that word? It says you are being built *into*. It's a word that means to be fit together like living stones, and as we're fitted together, we have access to the holiness and power of God.

One of the commentators on 1 Peter, looking at this chapter, says, "The imagery of the living stones being built into a single unit implies the significance and purpose of individual Christians cannot be realized apart from community with other believers." You have access to this incredible glory as you're fitted together with the other living stones. It doesn't say God inhabits each stone, even though in a certain sense that's true, but that's not the point here. It's saying God inhabits us. We have access to his presence as we're fitted together.

What does that mean? It means a couple of things. Let me give you a couple of ideas. First, you can just sit down in the privacy of your own home and say, "God, change me." You stay out of church, maybe show up at church every so often, take notes, get inspired, but basically you say, "God, change me. I don't really want to be part of a church. I don't want to be part of a community. I've been hurt in the past. The church is so flawed. Lord, now I have a relationship with you, just change me in the privacy of my own apartment, please."

The answer is you didn't get to be the mess you were all by yourself. You didn't become the mess you are through your own choices. Some, but not mainly. It was through relationships. It's through your family. It's through your society. It's through your relationships that you have the problems you have.

Therefore, it makes perfect sense that God would say, "I'm going to come into your life, and I'm going to change you as you come into the church, as you are fitted together with the other people around you, as you are a living stone in a building, as you have people above you, beside you, below you, pressing you, supporting you, just walking together with you." It's as you come into the

community of the church that you access the glory and presence of God.

Let me give you one more example. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a British preacher who preached in London in the middle of the twentieth century. For many, many years, even though the technology was available, he refused to let anybody record his sermons. Eventually he agreed, and we're all very grateful. I'm very grateful. In fact, you ought to be pretty grateful, because, to a great degree, my preaching is a result of listening to hundreds of recordings of David Martyn Lloyd-Jones' sermons. So we should all be glad that he agreed.

The reason he was resistant is extraordinarily important and theologically right. He said if you listen to a sermon in the privacy of your home or your car or walking along a pathway, it is not at all the same experience as when you sit in the gathered people of God, when you sit in a congregation where God is present because of the work of Jesus Christ to a degree that the Old Testament people would find unimaginable.

You're sitting in the presence of the people of God, where God is present because of the work of Jesus Christ in an astounding way, and you've been singing and praying and seeking the Lord together, and then you hear the Word of God preached to you. He says that is a profoundly different experience than if you listen to it as you're walking along somewhere. It will not shape you if you're listening to it by yourself as if you're here, because God is present. Why? Because we're fitted together here.

You say, "Okay, I get it. Psychologically it doesn't have as big an impact if you're walking along, because you can be distracted by other things." Well, maybe that's part of it, but the real answer is theologically. The sermon can either be a product that you consume or it can be a participation, something you give yourself to.

There's no way you can say, "Well, I get just as much out of it listening to it, when I can stop it and take notes, as I could if I was actually there." No, you can't. Not if you understand this text. Not if you have a theology. Not unless you come to a worship service and sit and become totally inert, passive, and distracted the entire time and just wake up to take notes on the sermon. Yeah, I suppose that might be the same.

Do you understand? Let me read this to you again. "The imagery of the living stones being built into a single unit implies that the significance and purpose of individual Christians cannot be realized apart from community with other believers." That's what we have become in Christ: living stones in a temple of the glory and Spirit of God.

2. *What we're called to do.* What are we supposed to do, then? What are we called to do? "... to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." What does that mean? Look. There is input and there is output. Let's talk about the human body. You need input. You need to eat and drink and sleep. That's input. I'm building up my batteries. Then

you exercise and work. That's output.

If I have output and I don't have input, that's bad. I'll wipe myself out. On the other hand, we all know if you have input and you don't have output, if you're just eating and sleeping and you're not exerting yourself, that's bad too. If you really want to thrive as an organism, input and output. Same thing spiritually. *Input* means someone is ministering to you. You're being instructed. You're being encouraged. You're being counseled. You're being supported. You're being loved. You're being served. That's input.

What is *output*? You doing that. You instructing. You encouraging. You serving. You volunteering. You being trained. You ministering. Input and output. What does it mean to be a priest? Well, it's interesting that in the earlier stage of redemptive history, which is the Old Testament, when God's glory is confined to a physical space, there were priests, but the priests did everything and the people were pretty passive.

It was the priests who offered sacrifices. In fact, if you, as a non-priest or a non-Levitical person, decided you were going to build an altar in your back yard and offer sacrifices, you'd be executed. It's in the Old Testament. "No, no. You're not a priest. Only the priest can do this." So in a sense, the priests did everything. They did all the ministry, and the people were quite passive. They stood around and watched. The priests did all the work.

Suddenly we're told in Hebrews, chapter 13, "**Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.**" Who is the writer of Hebrews talking to? All Christians. Who is Peter talking to? All Christians. We all do sacrifices.

This is what has happened. Jesus Christ is the priest to end all priests and he's the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. He gave himself. He atoned for our sins once for all. He's the priest who mediates the presence of God to us once for all. There's a sense in which because Jesus Christ is the priest to end all priests and the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, all of us now become priests, because we're all empowered. We all have the presence of God.

Therefore, we're empowered to do ministry, which is a pleasing sacrifice to God that God particularly honors. Actually, Hebrews 13 gives you two kinds. It says, first of all, the fruit of lips that confess his name. When you sit with a very discouraged, unhappy, grieving person and simply share out of your heart Christian truths about God and Christ and love and grace, or if you teach in Sunday school or if you just share your faith with a friend who doesn't believe ...

In other words, if you ever confess Jesus' name, if you do it through instruction, through counseling, through encouragement, through evangelism, through all these various things, that's not just busywork. God sees you as a priest. He empowers you as a priest to do that. It's a pleasing sacrifice to him. He accompanies it. You're being empowered to do that. The other thing it says is

extremely interesting. It's not just words that are ways to do ministry. It also says, "**And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.**"

There are ways to share the gospel in word, but there are also ways to share the gospel in deeds. That's why we have deacons and deaconesses and then we have preachers. There are still specialists. I'm confessing with my lips Jesus' name. I'm instructing. I'm evangelizing. I'm counseling. I'm doing it right now. In other words, it's my job. I'm a specialist. Deacons and deaconesses are also specialists. They go out and do transportation and help the poor and they do all these various things. Why? Because they are sharing the gospel in deed. They're specialists.

All of you are generalists. There's a place in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 11, where Jesus says the most astounding thing. He's talking about John the Baptist and he says, "You know, John the Baptist was a great guy. In fact, there has never been anyone born of a woman till now greater than John the Baptist," which is astounding. In other words, he's saying there has never been a greater man in the history of the world than John the Baptist.

Then he says, "But the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." What that's saying is the humblest Christian, the weakest Christian has the Holy Spirit and understands the gospel in a way that John the Baptist did not. Therefore, you have the ability to change lives that John the Baptist did not have. The least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. We're all priests.

What this means is two things. Everybody has a gift. Chapter 4 says, "Every Christian has a spiritual gift. Use it." This means you have certain talents. Everybody in this room, if you're a Christian, you have certain talents. You have certain life experiences. You have certain aptitudes. You even have certain things you suffered that make you as unique as a thumbprint, as unique as a snowflake, with regard to ministry.

What I mean by that is there are some people who pretty much only you can reach. There are some hands that pretty much only you can hold and comfort. There are some needs that only you will resonate to and even see and meet. Do you know what this means? It means you're not here by accident. If you live in New York City, if you're coming to Redeemer, if this is the church you're coming to, you're not here by accident. There are some needs only you can see. There are some hands only you can hold. There are some people only you can reach.

If you are only doing input, if you're only coming here and taking and you're not giving, you're not volunteering, you're not being trained, you're not serving, it means there are some things God wants this church to do in this city that it's not being able to do. In his providence, you're here because there are certain things only you can do. We're being fitted together. If we're not fit together as a priesthood of all believers, then we're not the church God wants us to be. And guess what? We're not.

Large churches have a big problem in this area. Redeemer, as far as large churches goes, is actually quite good at getting people involved. Nevertheless, in large churches there are always a high percentage of people who come to get and not to give, come to take. Here's the reason why. I understand it.

First of all, big churches have talented staff, talented programs, and it's natural to say, "You don't really need my money. Look. You built this building. You don't need my money. Obviously you have people here of means, and you don't need my gifts. You have all kinds of programs. You don't need my money. You don't need my time." That's deadly, because if you're here it's because God says, "I'm fitting you together here, and you should be part of the priesthood of all believers."

To think, "You don't need me; I'm not here long enough," or "I'm kind of busy ..." If you're too busy or too timid or maybe too selfish to do output as well as input, it's bad for you. It's bad for the church. It's bad for the city. By the way, Redeemer is at a stage in its own history that we have to consider this. Redeemer in the past has been one big central church, and it was largely built around the big show, and it was quite a show.

We are transitioning into being multiple churches, all in their neighborhoods, reaching their neighborhoods, and in the future the priesthood of all believers will be central to what makes Redeemer tick, much more so than it was in the past. You're all priests. You're all here to offer up holy sacrifices. We're all being fitted together. You are needed, and God is calling you not just to do input but output, to minister.

3. *Where we get the power to do this.* Some of you are saying, "You're really pushing me here." Where do you get the power, the motivation, the freedom, the confidence to do this? It's really clear here. Come to him, the living stone. Look at that first sentence. **"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."**

There it is. As you come to the living stone, Jesus the cornerstone, you become living stones in the temple. It's as simple as that. If you relate to Jesus Christ as your cornerstone, you will then have all these things, this power to change lives, this power to change your *own* life. In other words, the power is this. Do you relate to Jesus Christ as the living stone, the cornerstone? You say, "Well, how do you do that?" Okay, there are three ways to relate to Jesus the cornerstone, three ways to get this power.

A. *He has to be your foundation.* The cornerstone wasn't just any stone. It was the foundation of the foundation. Think about it. A cornerstone, first of all, has to be perfectly chiseled. Its lines have to be perfect. Why? Because all of the other stones in the foundation projected off of the lines of that first stone. If that stone wasn't a perfect right angle, or something like that, the whole foundation would

be messed up. Not only that. The cornerstone had to be strong. It couldn't crumble, because if the cornerstone crumbled the foundation would crumble. So the cornerstone is sort of the foundation of the foundation.

It is not enough for you just to believe in Jesus. I daresay there are people in this room who don't believe in Jesus Christ, and I'm glad you're here. This is New York. There are always people here who say, "I'm not sure I believe in Jesus," but there are also a lot of you who say, "I believe in Jesus," but he's probably not the foundation of your life. He's not the operable foundation of your life. Something else is. What do I mean by that?

Everyone's identity has layers. For example, my grandfather was an Italian immigrant to this country. I never met him. He died before I was born. From my understanding, he was quite proud of being Italian. He was a butcher. He was a mushroom farmer. He did a whole lot of things, but the fact was that, living in America, his Italian-ness was what gave him his main identity. My mother, however, came along and she went to nursing school and became a trained, registered nurse. She was extraordinarily proud of that, and rightly so.

She knew she was Italian. Being Italian was part of her identity, but it was nothing like my grandmother and grandfather's identity. It was part of it, but what was really her identity was, "I am a trained professional." She accomplished that. In other words, there are layers. For her, her job was much more foundational than her ethnicity, and for my grandfather, his ethnicity, his national background was much more. What is at the foundation of your identity?

At the very beginning of the second *Lord of the Rings* movie, Gandalf falls into what seems to be a bottomless abyss with this terrible demonic monster, the Balrog. We see them going down into this abyss, fighting with each other. It comes down thousands of miles into what Tolkien calls in his book the "uttermost foundation of stone." The bottom of the bottom of the bottom of the world. The uttermost foundation of the world. That's where they wrestle to the death.

Every human heart has an uttermost foundation, and Jesus Christ has to go there or he's not your cornerstone. If you become a Christian and, let's just say, you're African you don't become Chinese. You become an African Christian. Being African is still part of your identity. When I become a Christian, I don't stop being white. I'm still quite a white guy, as many of you have often reminded me, but I'm not white like I used to be. I'm a Christian first and I'm white second.

You're a Christian first and you're Asian or Hispanic or African second. What happens is the experience of sin, the experience of grace, the experience of love, becomes more important, more foundational than your accomplishments as a lawyer or your racial background. It's one of the reasons why Christians should be the leaders in getting across racial barriers, because your whiteness just isn't as important to you as it was.

We shouldn't be driven by our jobs, because being a lawyer or being a doctor just isn't important anymore. You're a Christian first and you're everything else

second. You're a Christian first and you're an abused child second. That no longer has to rule your life. No matter what has happened to you in the past, the fact that you are loved in Jesus Christ becomes the foundation of your life. Is Jesus Christ your cornerstone? Is he your foundation? You say, "Well, how does he get there?"

B. *He has to be precious to you.* "... **rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him ...**" That word *precious* is a powerful word, especially in Greek. To me, the illustration ... I got this from Charles Spurgeon, the Baptist preacher, years ago. Imagine that you get word that you're dying and your family is around you. You only have a couple of months to live, and everyone is so absolutely distraught.

Suddenly, someone comes in and says they just discovered a medicine and if you take it you will be cured. Everybody says, "You're kidding. Yeah!" The person says, "It's very expensive ... so expensive that in order to buy it and be cured you're going to have to sell the house you've lived in all of your life that you love so much and go into a small apartment. You might not want to do that."

The family would say, "Are you kidding me? Yeah, the house meant a lot to me, but that medicine is so precious to me now, because I thought I was dead. We all thought I was dead, and now I'm going to have a normal life with my family. I hate to lose my house, but that medicine is so precious to me now that other things that used to seem valuable are expendable." Jesus Christ has to become so precious to you that everything else in life is expendable or he cannot be your cornerstone. You say, "Well, how can he become that precious?"

C. *See him rejected for you.* He was rejected. He was rejected by his friends. He was rejected by his Father. He was despised and rejected when he went to the cross and died for your sins. Why? Why would he be rejected like that? I'll tell you why. There's only one answer: because you were precious to him. You were that precious to him.

When you see yourself being that precious to him that he'd be rejected for you, that will turn him precious to you and that will make him your cornerstone. If he becomes your cornerstone, you will be empowered to be a priest. You will be empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Noel Paul Stookey, member of Peter, Paul and Mary, had a cute little call and response chorus he wrote back in the 1970s he used to sing. It was called "Building Block." Here's the chorus.

*The building block that was rejected
Became the cornerstone of a whole new world.*

You say, "I thought the text says he's just the cornerstone of the church." If you go to the end of the Bible ... The new heavens and new earth, the New Jerusalem coming out of heaven ... There's no temple in the city of God. Why? Because the whole world has become a temple. The whole world has become the place of the glory of God, which means the building block that was rejected

became the cornerstone of a whole new world. Don't you want to be part of that? I do. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you that we have been made living stones, and we ask that now you would enable us to become the priests that we should be and be fitted into a holy spiritual house. I pray, Lord, that the people who are here today, the churches we are part of, that we would truly accept our role as ministers so that we can really help our church to be everything you have called it to be in that particular place and time. Father, empower us as we meet with you over your Table. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Patience

Growth in the Spirit—August 17, 2014

James 5:7–12

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. **8** You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. **9** Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. **11** As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. **12** Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.

The Word of the Lord.

This summer we've been looking at the fruit of the Spirit. The *fruit of the Spirit* is the term the Bible uses for a set of character traits. The most famous list is in Galatians 5, which goes like, "... love, joy, peace, patience ..." Patience is the character trait we're going to look at tonight. We live in a culture that doesn't value patience. It's almost a culture of impatience.

If you have a computer that powers up in five seconds, and another computer comes along and does all the same functions but powers up in three seconds,

you realize the first computer will be out of business pretty soon. The producers will go bankrupt. If a company can get something to you in three days, but another company comes along that can get it to you in two days, the first company will go out of business.

In a sense, the economy cultivates and encourages impatience. We punish anyone who can't give us that extra three seconds we desperately need when we're powering up the computer. New York City, by the way, is the epicenter of impatience. We are very, very hurried. A niece of ours lived with us this summer. She had never lived in New York before.

She came home one day saying, "New Yorkers run up escalators." I said, "Yeah ..." She said, "Well, that sort of defeats the purpose. The whole idea is the escalator does it for you." I said, "Oh, yes, escalators are wonderful the world round, but for New Yorkers, they're too slow. I want to be up there faster than the escalator takes me, so up we go."

I heard an ad on WNYC, which is the local New York public radio station. The ad started like this. The woman said, "I'm a New Yorker, so I don't like to wait." Then she went on to sell whatever the product was, but I was working on a sermon on impatience and I heard her say, "I'm a New Yorker, so I don't like to wait," and I said, "There it is."

We live in a culture that doesn't value patience. Of course, all ancient cultures did. They said, "Impatient people are shallow and haven't taken time to think about things. Impatient people are reckless, make stupid choices, miss all sorts of opportunities." Isn't that right? Certainly by the time you get to middle age, almost all of us have some painful memories of places where our impatience really brought about a pretty big loss in our lives. So yes, patience is important, even though we live in a culture that doesn't really value it. (I'll get back to that.)

This passage will tell us about how we can get patience. It's written by James, who was the biological brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem. In this part of the letter, as you just heard read, he is exhorting patience. As we read it, we're going to learn certain things. We're going to learn *what patience is, why it's so crucial, and how you develop and grow it.*

1. *What patience is.* Notice this passage is basically divided into two small parts. The first two paragraphs each use a different word and illustration for patience. Verses 7–9 use the illustration of a farmer. Farmers show patience because they plant and don't expect harvest right away. Farmers, of course, also can't reap too soon, and so forth. So it's an example of patience.

The Greek word used in verses 7, 8, and 9 is the word *makrothymeō*, which literally means long-suffering. An example of the opposite of long-suffering or the lack of this aspect of patience is immediately mentioned in verse 9: grumbling.

"Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters ..." Grumbling is a lack of patience. Don't grumble.

What's grumbling? When people are frustrating, disappointing, and disillusioning

to you, how do you respond? Grumbling is a response you sometimes do outwardly, but in many cases you do it inside. Grumbling is responding to people who disappoint and frustrate you with resentment, negativity, and cynicism. Why is that a failure of long-suffering? Why is grumbling a lack of patience?

A. *Patience with difficult people.* One reason is grumbling means you've given up on people. Instead of continuing to love them, pull for them, and care for them even when they frustrate you, you give up on them, write them off, and stop pulling for them.

This is really important to see. Most of us, I think, recognize a real grudge. Most of us recognize when we hate or are mad at somebody. It's a terrible thing, and if someone frustrates or disappoints us and we get angry and have a grudge, that's one thing. That's bad, of course. It's also a lack of patience.

Grumbling is something much broader, subtler, and more common. Therefore, it's much more dangerous. Grumbling means because of the way in which a person has frustrated, disappointed, disillusioned, or infuriated you, you've just written them off. You're detached. You're not long suffering or sticking with them. You're cynical and grumpy about them.

Is there anybody who, when you see them again, you say inside (not outside, you don't even let them see it in your face), "Sigh ... Him ... Her ..." That's a serious lack of patience. You've given up on them. In other words, it's a serious lack of love. That's why impatience is wrong. So first of all, this aspect of patience is patience with people. Patience is when people are frustrating and disappointing to you, and you don't give up on them. You forgive and are gracious to them.

That's not all patience is. The second paragraph shows us another aspect of patience. "**Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience ... take the prophets ...**" It's a different example, and we're not really sure which prophets he's thinking of, but then he gives you one. He says, "**As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.**"

Job is the example here, not the farmer. Job, of course, was a Biblical character whose problems were not so much about how he was being treated by people. His problems were how he was being treated by life and God. He didn't experience difficult people as much as tragic circumstances. There was a disaster that wiped out all of his wealth. There was another natural disaster that wiped out his children. Then he got a disease, and he lost his health. He lost his wealth, children, and health, and he's screaming and crying out. That's Job.

This kind of patience is a different Greek word. Notice the English translators reflect the fact that it's a different word by using a different English word. Here, it's talking about perseverance. "**As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance ...**" This Greek word is not the word *makrothymeō*, which means long-suffering. This word for

patience is the word *hypomonē*, which literally means to hyper-stand in place.

Hyper-stand in place? Let me give you an example. It would be like being in a battle, and your commanding officer says, “You stand right there and occupy this position. No matter what they throw at you or how fierce the attack, you cannot retreat, give ground, or even lose a step, because if the enemy gets past you, everything is lost. The town is lost; the army is lost ...” Something like that. You have to stand there, fight, and not give in no matter what. That’s *hypomonē*, hyper-stand.

B. *Patience with difficult circumstances*. When circumstances are terribly disappointing and infuriating and life goes wrong, patience is to unflinchingly live the way you had ought to live, do the things you had ought to do, and be the person you had ought to be anyway. It’s to hyper stand, to stay put, and to not give up.

So the two aspects of patience according to the book of James are *patience with difficult people* (responding to difficult people with forgiveness and grace) and *patience with difficult circumstances and the will of God* (responding when circumstances are difficult with courage and trust).

Why does James make this such a big deal? It is a big deal. I would think by now, at the common sense level, most people would be thinking, “Okay. Patience is a good thing. Impatience is a bad thing. Being impatient, you can make some stupid mistakes. At the practical level, I would like to be patient.” But James doesn’t just treat impatience as something impractical. He depicts this as a terrible evil and sin.

Notice it says in verse 9, “**Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!**” He brings in judgment day. He says we’ll be condemned for our impatience. You say, “Gee whiz, what is impatience? Is it that bad?” Yes. Here’s why it’s so serious.

Using the definition we’ve already developed, every single day (in fact, almost every hour), you’re going to meet frustrating, disappointing, disillusioning, and infuriating people and circumstances. You’re going to be very frustrated and disappointed every day with something. Sometime it happens not only every day but every hour.

When that happens you have to respond in your heart. There’s only one of two ways to respond when disappointments happen. Either *you can trust God* or *you can trust yourself*. You can either trust God’s timing, schedule, and wisdom or you can trust your assessment, schedule, timing, and what you think should happen. You can respond to the difficulty either by trusting God or trusting yourself.

The first thing way you can respond is *you can trust God*. Here’s what that sounds like in your heart. On the one hand, if you trust God when terrible, really frustrating bad stuff happens, you have to talk about God to yourself. You have to say, “The Lord knoweth. The Lord is wise and good. I would never have chosen

this for myself, but he has. He knows what he's doing, and I don't."

In one of her books, Elisabeth Elliot writes this about what you say to your heart. You're not going to be this eloquent, but this is the basic thing you have to say when bad things happen. "God is God. Because he is God, He is worthy of my trust and obedience. I will find rest nowhere but in His holy will that is unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what he is up to."

Bad things happen to you, but here's what she's saying. You should say to your heart, "If I don't learn to trust God in this, I'll find no rest. Only if I believe God knows what he's doing and is wiser than me ... He knows infinitely. I don't know what should happen."

Impatience is a huge lack of humility. You need to humble yourself and say, "I don't know, but God knows. God is God, and I will find rest nowhere but in his will. That will is infinitely, immeasurably, and unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what he is up to." You can speak to your heart like that, and you'll get calm, peace, and rest.

The other thing you could do when bad things happen is *you can trust your own wisdom*. Instead of trusting God and his assessment and wisdom, you can trust what you think should happen and what you think everybody deserves. You can trust your wisdom and schedule rather than God's. You ask, "What does that sound like?" I'll tell you one thing. When bad things happen, you don't say internally, "I'm going to trust myself."

Trusting yourself internally sounds like, "Not again! That's not fair! I can't believe it! I deserve better than this. What in the world do they think they're doing?" You say, "Wait, that's my normal internal conversation." Yes. Of course it is. You know what everybody deserves, what should have happened, and exactly what has to happen. Otherwise, it's just a disaster.

In other words, every time something bad happens (every day or maybe even every hour), you have to decide whether you're going to respond with trusting God's wisdom or your own wisdom. That leads to something. Trusting God eventually leads to rest, calm, peace, and the ability to forgive. If you give in to self-trust you become eaten up with resentment, self-pity, cynicism, anxiety, restlessness, and ulcers and heart attacks eventually.

2. *Why this is so crucial.* Do you see why this is so important? Every day and almost every hour, you have to start down one path or another to those various end states. And it's invisible. Notice the place here in verse 8: "**You too, be patient and stand firm ...**" This translation uses the phrase "stand firm." Literally, it says establish your *kardia*, your hearts.

In other words, this happens in the heart. It doesn't happen out in the world. The grumbling generally doesn't even show on your face. The cynicism, self-absorption, and self-pity because of all that's going wrong generally doesn't happen outside, yet those little decisions everyday are pushing you down one way toward more self-absorption, unhappiness, and self-centeredness.

It's what C.S. Lewis calls the hell of eternal autobiography, constantly looking at yourself and what you're getting. "I'm not this, and I'm not that. People aren't giving me what I should have. I don't know, maybe I'm a failure." You're always thinking about yourself. Do you see why this is so important? Whether you're going to be patient or impatient with the circumstances today is a battle for your soul, and it's happening inside.

I must tell you one other thing. Your heart is not on your side. You say, "Yes. That's right. I have to be patient or impatient. It's a big battle." Your heart is not neutral. It will naturally go in the direction of self-pity, of being sure you know best what should happen. Your heart doesn't have the humility. It will take you down to this horrible end state.

No one has ever depicted that horrible end state of impatience better than C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*. *The Great Divorce* is a fictional book I refer to often because there are so many interesting little case studies that are great sermon illustrations. It's a story about a busload of people from hell who go to the outskirts of heaven.

The people who are now in heaven that the people from hell knew on earth come out and invite them to come up to heaven. In general, the people from hell don't even want to go. They refuse to go, for various reasons. Lewis does not believe this happened or will happen, but it's a wonderful device to say certain things about the human heart, and they're very penetrating.

You see all these conversations. These two narrator types in the book are going around and commenting on the various cases. Here's one case which I think, for our purposes tonight, is very, very important and interesting. There's one woman from hell who meets up with another woman from heaven. The woman from heaven comes down to try to invite her to come to heaven, but she never even hears the invitation to go to heaven because she won't stop talking.

"Oh, my dear, I've had such a dreadful time, I don't know how I ever got here at all, I was coming with Elinor Stone ... and we were to meet at the corner of Sink Street; I made it perfectly plain because I knew what she was like and if I told her once I told her a hundred times I would not meet her outside that dreadful Marjori-banks woman's house, not after the way she'd treated me ... I've been dying to tell you because I felt sure you'd tell me I acted rightly; no, wait a moment, dear, till I've told you-I tried living with her when I first came and it was all fixed up, she was to do the cooking and I was to look after the house and I did think I was going to be comfortable after all I'd been through but she turned out to be so changed, absolutely selfish, and not a particle of sympathy for anyone but herself ..." And then she keeps walking out of earshot.

The two commentators heard that conversation, and they speak to each other. The first one says, "I am troubled, Sir, because that unhappy creature doesn't seem to me to be the sort of soul that ought to be even in danger of damnation. She isn't wicked: she's only a silly, garrulous old woman who has got into a habit

of grumbling ..." The answer came back, "The question is whether she is a grumbler, or only a grumble."

"How can there be a grumble without a grumbler?" The answer came back, "[You've had this experience] ... It begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. [...] Ye can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine."

He's saying self-pity and anger feed on themselves, and eventually you get to the place where you can't hear anything other than your own eternal autobiography. Lewis is saying it's bad enough in this life. You can see people getting more and more miserable, locked in the prison of being self-referential, self-absorbed, self-centered, always unhappy, and impatient with everything because "I never get the things the way I want them to go."

Even in this life, you can become a pretty miserable person, but what if, when you die, your soul keeps on going? That's what the Bible says, and that's the way it is. Eventually, it will be hell, and your heart is already inclined in that direction. Our hearts are not on our side. There are two things that can happen every single time a bad thing happens to you: you can trust God or you can trust yourself, and trusting yourself is a path down to this, and your heart is going there unless there's an intervention.

3. *How you develop and grow patience.* What are we going to do about it? How can we develop patience if it's that important? I want you to see three hints here on how you can develop patience. You develop patience in the present by looking to the past and the future.

First of all, *you develop patience in the present*, but where? Our illustration here is Job. Job learned perseverance and patience because he was suffering. I must say, from what I can tell, about the only way to learn patience is when something taxes you or some suffering or difficulty comes upon you.

You don't learn patience in suffering just by being stoic, keeping a stiff upper lip, and saying, "I'm not going to let it get to me." That's not learning patience. That's hardening your heart. That's not developing a humble, loving, and peaceful heart. It's just trying to steel yourself. No, no. If you want to see how patience is developed in present suffering, look at Psalm 77 sometime. It's not one of the more famous psalms at all, but it's a really instructive psalm.

The psalmist starts off by talking about all the problems he sees, but then suddenly he says, "But I will meditate." He's freaking out, but then he says, "I will meditate," which means, "Troubles are happening, but I will process them through prayer and meditation. I'm going to think about the truth of God until I get patient." You say, "What truth?" Okay, let's move on.

Secondly, *we must also think of the past*. In particular, I'm talking about the cross. If you want to learn patience, look at Job, but also look at the ultimate Job, the

one to whom Job points. He's our example. Job was an innocent sufferer ... sort of. When I say sort of, I mean Job wasn't perfect, but he was better than most.

You could put it like this. Job was living a better-than-average moral life, but he was experiencing a worse-than-average circumstantial life. In other words, his circumstances in his life were worse than average, but his morality and virtue were better than average. He had a right to complain. He says, "That's not fair," and it wasn't fair, and he wrestled with that. You might say he was a relatively innocent sufferer. He did not deserve the life he had.

Only Jesus Christ is the true Job, because Jesus and Jesus alone is the only absolutely, perfectly innocent sufferer. Only Jesus lived a perfect life and was totally innocent. Only Jesus loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and only Jesus loved his neighbor as himself fully and perfectly. So only Jesus Christ deserved a great life, and he got a terrible life.

He was misunderstood, poor, rejected, betrayed, and denied. Finally, he was arrested on trumped-up charges, tortured, and killed, and even his Father abandoned him. But through all of that agony and pain, he was perfectly patient. He was the only innocent sufferer. Jesus is the true Job who really deserved a great life and got a terrible life, and during that whole time he was perfectly, absolutely patient.

You might say all the forces of darkness, evil, and hell were coming down on him, and he stood his ground. It's almost like he knew we were behind him, and if the darkness and evil got past him, we would be lost. So he obeyed. He said, "Not my will, but thine be done." There's patience. He was honest. "My Father, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done." There's patience.

He stood his ground ... hyper-standing. All the forces of darkness come down, and he didn't flinch an inch. He went to the cross and obeyed his Father. On the cross he cried out, "**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**" That's not, by the way, a defiant complaint. That's just the agony of lost love.

Why did he do it? Why was he perfectly patient? Read the book of Job. Job learned patience by the end, but throughout the rest of the book, he's plenty impatient. He was insulting and railing against God ... Oh my word. Job only learned patience at the end. That's the reason why, even though he was blessed, you notice it says he was blessed because the Lord was full of mercy. He didn't get rewarded. He didn't earn that.

Why was Job forgiven for his impatience? Why can you and I be forgiven for impatience? When Jesus Christ went to the cross, he died for our sins and took the punishment we deserve. That's the general. Let me give it to you more specifically. Jesus Christ, through his perfect patience, atoned for our impatience, so that the Father can be endlessly patient with us, never giving up on us, letting us down, or pulling back from us, even when we fail him.

You talk about long-suffering. Look at Jesus Christ. Talk about holding his ground

even when all the forces of darkness were coming down. Take that and meditate on it. When troubles are happening to you, think of this. Jesus Christ was perfectly patient when God was abandoning him, and he did it for me, so that I could be patient in these situations for him.

If you see Jesus Christ saving you through his infinite patience and undeserved suffering, the true and ultimate Job, that will make you into someone who can be patient and not be afraid of being thrown away if you're impatient. No, no, no. Jesus, through his perfect patience, atoned for your impatience so that God can be infinitely patient with you to the end. No matter how you live, even when you fall down, he will be patient with you, because Jesus did that. If you meditate on that it will send you down the right road toward that right end state.

Whenever I say patience means you are forgiving and gracious to difficult people and also courageous and trusting of God in difficult circumstances, I've had people ask, "How do I do that? Why should I trust a God who allows such suffering in the world? Why should I trust him?" Because that's the essence of patience. Joni Eareckson, a Christian quadriplegic writer who suffered a lot, says, "... Jesus is worth trusting. Period. End of argument. After all, when they hang you on a cross like meat on a hook, you have the final word on suffering."

This God did not stay in heaven and just look down and kind of plan our lives for us. He comes into the world. He's hung on a hook like a piece of meat on the cross. He knows what our suffering is like. He loves us and cares about us. Don't say you can't trust him. Look at Jesus Christ trusting God under infinite pressure for you. That'll make it possible for you to trust Jesus Christ when you're under finite pressure.

Finally, *meditate on what he's going to do in the future*. Here's how you develop patience. When troubles happen, you meditate and pray. Meditate first of all on what Jesus Christ did in the past but lastly on what he's going to do in the future. He's coming again. Be patient, because the Lord is coming. That's an encouragement because we know how it ends.

I'm going to make a confession to you, and I know some of you are going to be mad at me, but then I'm going to defend myself with God. When I'm reading a novel, I like to read the ending before I read the novel. I want to know who's alive, who's dead, and how things work out. I don't like the suspense. If I know how it ends, then as I read the novel, I can handle it. I don't get upset or nervous.

Some of you artist types say, "That's terrible! We work hard to craft these narratives. You need to read it ..." Here's my defense: God does it too. You say, "What do you mean God does it too?" He tells you that in the end, he's going to come back and heal the whole world. He's going to resurrect you from the dead and make everything right. If you trust in him, all the deepest desires of your heart will be fulfilled on that day. Every injustice will be put right.

He tells you the ending of the novel so you can handle the suspense of the middle part. Yeah, it's tough and difficult, but you know, in the end, justice will be

done and you will be fulfilled. That's the reason why he says, "Be patient, because the Lord is coming." Think of it like this. Do you want to be patient? I'm trying to show you patience is of the essence. The struggle between patience and impatience is a battle for your heart every day. If you want to have a happy life, you need to learn to be patient. How do you get patience?

Look at God the Creator, and let it humble you, because *impatience is a lack of humility*. Say, "I don't know." Second, look at God not as Creator but as Redeemer, atoning for you through the cost of the cross. That warms your heart into love for God and others, because *impatience is also a lack of love for God and other people*. Thirdly, look forward. Get enough hope. Realize everything is going to be okay in the end, because *patience is also a lack of hope*.

God is Creator, God is Redeemer, and God is the coming-again World Healer. Meditate on that when you're in your troubled times, and you'll become a person of patience. One of the ways you can talk to your heart, by the way, is to meditate on a hymn by William Cowper. Memorize it so you can say it to yourself. Let me read you the last part of it.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

Let's pray.

Our Father, we need patience, but we see patience is hard-won. It takes fighting. It takes reminding ourselves about you being the Creator, Redeemer, and World Healer. We have to look to the past with Jesus Christ being the true and ultimate Job, the only really innocent sufferer whose patience saved us.

We look at that and think about the future and our blessed hope, and we know if we bring all these things to bear on our hearts we can learn patience and keep ourselves from moving down into the hell of eternal autobiography. We ask you would help us in all these ways. We ask you would make us patient people,

looking to the one who was patient for us and with us, Jesus Christ. It's in his name we pray, amen.

Goodness

Growth in the Spirit—August 24, 2014

Micah 6:6–8

6 With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The series we've been doing this summer has to do with the fruit of the Spirit, a set of Christian character traits. The most famous list is in Galatians 5, where Paul lists them as "... **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness ...**" This week, we're taking a look at the one called goodness.

I'm not sure anybody in our culture thinks right now in our time in history people are becoming more and more good. There are a lot of ways to describe what's going on in society, but almost nobody says people are becoming more good. The last two weeks in the *New York Times*, there have been two interesting articles. One last week was entitled "Web Trolls Winning as Incivility Increases." Today, the lead editorial was entitled "Dealing with Digital Cruelty."

Both articles have to do with Robin Williams' suicide. His daughter's social media sites were bombarded with gruesome pictures. She just said, "I'm off Twitter." Those articles were not just triggered by that one incident, even though that was the occasion for the article. The point is this kind of behavior is very widespread. If you read the articles, there are all sorts of theorists and academics weighing in on this.

The main takeaways are, first of all, there's a lot of darkness in the human heart. The human heart is capable of tremendous cruelty and evil. Secondly, if anything pulls the social pressure away that keeps that down and hidden, it explodes. The anonymity of the Internet is one way in which awful stuff happens. What's wrong

with people? Well, they're just people. On the Internet, the anonymity makes it possible to do the things that otherwise you wouldn't feel like you could do out of self-interest.

Another example of that is the great novel by William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*. I don't know if any of you ever read that or saw the old black-and-white movie, but it's what happens when a group of very, very civilized English schoolboys are shipwrecked on an island. There, where all the social pressure of civilization is off, the natural human nature, the will to power, and the capacity for cruelty comes out.

No wonder C.S. Lewis says what humans beings need is not improvement; we need redemption. We don't need to become nicer people. We need to become new people. When the Bible uses the word *goodness*, it means something like that. It's much more radical than what the English word *good* usually denotes, which is some kind of bland niceness.

I'm not going to be talking about goodness until near the end of this sermon, because I want to show you if you want to understand what the Bible means by *good* you have to first ask an extremely important question. In the course of answering that question, finally you come to see what is good.

This famous passage out of the Old Testament book of Micah starts with a question. According to the Bible, this is the greatest question anybody can ask. That's in the very beginning. After that there are two wrong answers, and after that there's the right answer. Let's break the passage down and move through it like this. *The great question, the wrong answers to the question, and the right answer.*

1. *The great question.* The first half of verse 6 says, “**With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?**” To come before God, or anyone, in Semitic terminology meant to stand in relationship to them. To come before someone meant, “I’m in a relationship with you.” Micah asks, “What shall I do to stand before the exalted God?” The question is, “How can I have a relationship with a transcendent, exalted God? How can I come into his presence? How can I know him?”

All ancient cultures believed behind the immensities of the natural universe was an even greater immensity, the ultimate mystery, a divine, transcendent, ultimate, absolute power. All ancient cultures believed we were small before that power, that God is eternal, and we are mortal. “**He has shown you, O mortal ...**”

God is immense, and we are small. God is infinite, and we are finite. God is pure and holy, and we are flawed. God can see the end from the beginning, he can see all things in time and space, and we can only see a little bit. Therefore, all ancient cultures believed there was a transcendent, divine power behind the universe. It was huge, and we were small, and there was a gap or chasm between us.

That's the reason all ancient cultures had temples. Nobody believed you could

just connect or talk to the divine transcendence. There was a gap, a chasm. The distance had to be mediated by priests, sacrifices, rituals, and things like that. Nobody thought you could just snap a finger, talk, and somehow have a connection with the great transcendence. There's this gap we have to bridge somehow.

We, today, are the first culture in the history of the world to completely lose a sense of that distance between us and the transcendent God. We've completely lost the idea of a distance, that there's some kind of gap. Most people in America, for example, believe in God. Only 2.4 percent of the population say they're atheist. Another 3 percent or so say they're agnostic.

So a little over 5 percent of the population say they don't believe in God, and 95 percent do, yet sociologists have studied especially the religious views of younger Americans, and it's overwhelmingly obvious when you read the studies the idea of a transcendent, inscrutable God to whom we owe everything and he owes us nothing, a God who's infinitely holy and sovereign and has a right to do with us as he pleases ... That God is not in the concept of the average American.

We believe in God, the sociologists say, but the idea of there being a gap or chasm (God is transcendent, and something has to bridge and mediate that distance) is out there. Everybody says they believe in God, they believe in a spirit of love, they believe in a God they can talk to anytime, and God helps them.

The ancients would have looked at modern people's understanding of God, and they would have said, "You're crazy, and you're also being logically inconsistent. Think about this. Do you believe there is a God who created the world?" The average American would say, "Yeah."

"Well look at that world! Look at the oceans and mountains. Look at the overwhelming fire at the heart of the planet. Look at the stars and infinite number of galaxies. Look at the immensities and infinities of all the universe. If there is a God who created and sustains that every second, is that the kind of person you can just talk to, who you can just go in to with a little bit of meditation? Is this the kind of God who somehow owes you to let your life go well? Would you look at all that universe and conclude God was just a warm, fuzzy spirit of love? Nonsense."

The question Micah asked is, by and large, kind of incomprehensible to the average American, but not to most people in the world today or in the history of the world. The question is, "How in the world can I have a relationship with this exalted God. If there is a God, he is exalted. How can I, finite, flawed, and limited, come into a relationship with this great, exalted God?"

2. *The wrong answers.* The two wrong answers are in the second half of verse 6 and verse 7.

A. *The first wrong answer* is basically, "**Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?**" That's a rhetorical question.

The obvious answer here is no. Even in English, you can tell that.

The first thing he's saying is all the wealth in the world would not suffice as a burnt offering. What's a burnt offering? Notice it says, "**Shall I come before him with burnt offerings ...**" One-year-old calves were very expensive meat, because calves are very tender, but thousands of rams would be even more expensive of an offering, and 10,000 rivers of oil in today's currency would be billions of dollars. But rivers of oil? It's almost like he's saying, "If I could bring you all the wealth on the planet, would that suffice as a burnt offering?"

Burnt offerings in the Old Testament sacrificial system were not ways of atoning for sin. Burnt offerings were a way of giving your life. So Micah is saying, "What if I just gave my whole life? What if I said, 'Here's all my wealth, all I am, everything. I'm going to live for you and surrender to you.' Would that suffice? Would that merit a relationship with the exalted God?" Of course, the answer is no. By the way, New Yorkers need to see this, because they tend to believe everybody's got his price, everybody can be bought. Micah is saying, "Not God."

B. The second wrong answer seems like a really outrageous question. "**Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?**" Here he isn't talking about a burnt offering. It's very clear this is a sin offering. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, when you sinned and did something wrong, you brought a sin offering in order to atone.

If you've ever wronged somebody and feel tremendously guilty about it, you go and say, "Is there anything I can do to put this right, to atone for what I've done?" If what you've done to the person isn't enormous, sometimes it's actually quite possible to pay the price and atone for your sin. If you've cost them something, but it's possible to pay for that, you can make up for it and atone for your sin.

As you know, even at the human level, there are all sorts of ways in which you can really hurt somebody and sin against them, and there is no price you can pay to undo the damage. But here, first of all, Micah is saying, "Let me come up with the most unimaginable, terrible pain I can think of. How about the pain of losing your firstborn child?"

He's saying here, "Even if I would submit to the kind of pain voluntarily, all the greatest personal pain and agony in the world would not atone for my sin." The sin against an infinite God is an infinite debt. God has not only created you, but he keeps you alive every second, which means you essentially owe him your entire life millions of times over. How many seconds have you had in your life? Because we live as if we own ourselves, which is a form of plagiarism at least, and maybe treason by human standards, our sin is too great for us to atone for.

Therefore, the two wrong answers are as follows. "Is there a way I can just surrender my life and live for him? Would that do it?" No. All the wealth in the world wouldn't serve as a burnt offering. "Is there any kind of pain I can inflict on myself in order to atone for my sin against God?" No. All the personal pain and agony in the world would not atone for the sin. This means there's nothing you

can do to merit or warrant a relationship with this exalted God. I think it's actually something the average person still doesn't believe.

The average person says, "Well, some of the sociologists have said when they study what young Americans believe about religion, most of them say, 'If I live a good life according to my own standards, and God sees I'm trying my very hardest, then I really believe God will answer my prayers, love me, help me, and all that sort of thing.' So they don't believe this. Micah says, "No, this doesn't work. You don't understand how big God is, and you don't understand how flawed you are."

3. *The right answer.* We still have this question: "How can we come before and have a relationship with this exalted God?" The right answer is in verse 8. Some of you are saying, "I can't believe you got to the third point so soon. I know you, and I time you. This is really early to come to the third of three points." This is a long point, dears.

Verse 8, which is one of the most famous verses in the Bible, says, "**He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**" I went to Bucknell University, and that was inscribed in huge letters on the back of the Rooke Chapel when you first went onto the campus.

I saw it every day, practically. "What does the Lord require of you? Just to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." As it is, up there on the back of the Rooke Chapel at my university, sort of contextless ... Not knowing anything else about the Bible, it looks like it's saying, "Hey. Hey, you don't have to be religious. You don't have to do all these offerings and things like that. Just try your best to live a good life, be merciful, maybe pray, and walk humbly with *your* god."

Contextless means everybody has to decide what god you believe in. "You have your god, and I have my god. Just walk humbly with *your* god." That's the reason it was up on the back of the chapel. Taken out of context, the verse says, "You figure out what you think about God and what you think is right and wrong. Live according with that, and that's all that's necessary."

Have you ever had anything you said taken out of context? Do you know how infuriating that is? If you said something, and they say, "Well, you said ..." "Yeah, I know, but I also always say this," or "If you read the rest of the paragraph ... If you take that out of context, you're twisting the words. You need to put it into context to understand the true sense of what I mean."

It's very upsetting, and I think it's very unfair to do this. Let's take a look at the context of this verse, and then we'll go and look at the text itself. The context tells us how to get this relationship with God. The text tells us how to conduct this relationship. What do I mean by the context? Look at the rest of the Old Testament.

Micah is an Old Testament prophet, and if you think, "All this is saying is you

don't need to do all these sacrifices and religious observances. You just try your best to live in the way you think is right," first of all, that's denying one of the main messages of the Old Testament, which is you do need atonement for sin. It's not enough just to try to live a good life.

In that famous verse in Isaiah, the prophet says all your righteousness, your very best deeds, are like a filthy rag before God. When God brought the people of Israel together at Mount Sinai, he said, "You're my people now." He brought them out of Egypt. He delivered them with his mighty hand. He saved them and brought them to Mount. Sinai.

He said, "I'm now going to constitute you to be my people. I'm going to give you two things: The Ten Commandments, which is the Law of God, and the tabernacle and all the sacrifices." The Ten Commandments was the way in which God wanted them to live. He gave them the tabernacle because he knew they *wouldn't* live that way.

He knew nobody was going to love God with all his or her heart, soul, strength, and mind and love his neighbor as himself. Therefore, there needs to be atonement for this sin. You can't read verse 8 as saying you don't need atonement for your sin. Verses 6 and 7 are simply saying *you can't* do the atonement. But the atonement has to be there. You can't simply say, "Well, I'm going to try my best." No. So the first context is the Old Testament says there must be sacrifice for sin. There has to be atonement.

The second thing is, if you go to the New Testament, verse 8 says, "Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." That's the Old Testament version of the two Great Commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus is always saying, "I can summarize the whole Law in two Great Commandments. It all boils down to this: Love God (walk humbly with your God) and love your neighbor as yourself (do justly and love mercy)."

But in the New Testament, whenever Jesus brings up the two Great Commandments, he never does it in order to say, "See, just try your best, and that'll be fine." When he talks to the rich young ruler in Mark 10 or the lawyer in Luke 10, these are people who think they're pretty good. Jesus wants to show them they need grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

So he says, "Well, what does the Law require? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus always gets those two things out to show you you're not fulfilling the Law. The Lord requires those two things, and if you think you come even close to fulfilling those requirements, you don't understand.

In the early eighteenth century, the young men who were the leaders of what would eventually become the Methodist movement (Charles Wesley, John Wesley, and George Whitefield) were trying very, very hard to live according to the Law of God, especially the law of ... See, the Ten Commandments tend to focus on behaviors like don't kill, don't steal, etc. Then it gets down to "Don't

covet,” which, of course, goes into the heart.

When Jesus sums up the commandments, he doesn’t just say, “Live this in this way.” Of course you’re not supposed to kill, steal, or commit adultery. What he’s actually saying is, “I want you to love God so much that you’ll never covet. I want you to love your neighbors so much you love them as if they were you.” When you begin to think out the implications of what those commandments are, you say, “Yes, that’s what God requires,” but there’s no way you can fulfill that requirement.

Here’s a set of questions a couple of the early Methodists used at night to look back on their day to see whether or not they actually loved God with their whole hearts and loved their neighbor as themselves. I’m only going to give you a third of them, because you wouldn’t be able to bear it. Imagine thinking back on your day in a very specific way and asking these questions to yourself.

“Have I not only prayed today, but been fervent in prayer? Have I practiced God’s presence at least every hour, speaking directly to him? Have I, before every deliberate action or conversation, considered how I might do it with God’s glory in mind? Have I given thanks to God after every pleasure or any good thing I’ve experienced?

Have I avoided proud thoughts? Have I avoided comparing myself to others? Have I always admitted when I was wrong swiftly and happily? Have I thought ...” Did you hear that? *Thought.* “... or spoken unkindly of anyone? Have I sought to center each conversation on the other person’s needs, or did I turn it always toward myself and my interests? Did I ever twist the truth to look good? Have my words today been honest, few, wise and apt, and calm and warm?

Have I harbored lots of anxious thoughts, or have I cast them all on the Lord, completely trusting him? Have I wasted my time, or have I used it well for the benefit of those around me or my own spiritual or mental growth?” He broke off, because they could bear it no longer. That’s just the beginning of thinking specifically about what it would mean to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.

That’s what Micah is saying. That’s all the Lord requires of you. That’s also spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount. You’ve heard me say this before, but I’ll say it again. Anybody who says, “Well, I’m not really a believer in God. I think what really matters is you live a good life. I just try to live according to the Sermon on the Mount.” Of course, that shows you haven’t read the Sermon on the Mount.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say, “Anyone who has read the Sermon on the Mount will cry out, ‘God, save me from the Sermon on the Mount, because there’s no way I could possibly live like that.’ ” If you put this in context, you see your sin must be atoned for; it just can’t be atoned for by you. You’ll also see this is simple. Of course this would be what God requires, but there’s no way you can fulfill the requirement.

Here's one more thing you have to understand if you want to put Micah into context. This case study, this illustration: "**Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression ... for the sin of my soul?**" Some of you might have gone, "Eww. What a horrible idea. Well, it's just a rhetorical device trying to show us ..." Well, it's not.

When Micah uses this illustration he's looking all the way back to practically the beginning of the Bible, and he's looking forward to the end. This is the thread that shows you where Micah fits into the narrative arc of the whole Bible. Back in the Old Testament Mosaic law, there's a very curious requirement. That is, the Old Testament law says the life of the firstborn of every family is forfeit because of the family's sin. Therefore, a ransom or payment had to be paid to the tabernacle.

None of the firstborn died. What that means is the life of the firstborn is forfeit in every family, and only if the life of the firstborn is ransomed and a sacrifice is made can his life be spared. Here's what we don't understand, because we're individualists. I told you this was going to be a long point, because I'm trying to help you understand the context of this passage.

We are an individualistic society. The idea that the firstborn son got all the inheritance in old times seems very inequitable. Maybe it was, but don't forget, this is before we had money. You didn't really have money. You did have *shekels* and things like that, but by and large, things weren't liquid. The assets of a family were the land, the buildings, the livestock, and that kind of thing.

The only way a family could maintain its position in society, whatever position that was, was if you didn't divide that up amongst the children. In other words, the firstborn son became the head of the estate and cared for all the siblings and so on. Therefore, in a certain sense, the firstborn son represented the hope of the family.

When it said, "The life of the firstborn son is forfeit, and you have to pay a ransom," that was God's way of saying, "The wages of sin is death. Because of your sins, you all deserve to die." The firstborn son, in a sense, was the federal head, the representative of the family, and therefore, "You all deserve to die, but I will accept a ransom, or sacrifice." See? Sin is atoned for. It was a symbol for the fact that the wages of sin is death.

This is the reason one of the most famous stories of the Bible happened the way it did. When God came to Abraham and said, "Take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go up on the mountain, and offer him there as a sacrifice." It was excruciating and agonizing for Abraham, but he didn't say, "What are you talking about?" What he thought God was doing was calling in the debt. "For the sins of the family the firstborn would die."

In other words, it wasn't a crazy idea for Abraham. It just was an agonizing idea, that, for whatever reason, God seemed like he was calling in the debt. He got to the top of that mountain, and he stretched his hand out to sacrifice his son, and you know how the story goes. God says, "Stop. Do not slay the lad. Now I know

you love me, for you did not withhold your only son, whom you love, from me."

It's a wonderful story with a happy ending. Abraham gets Isaac back. He's no longer an idol of his heart. You may know how that story goes. The real question is, "Why did God decide not to take the payment for the sin of that family through taking the firstborn's life?" We know why not. This verse connects not only to the past but also to the future, to the end of the Bible.

When we get to the New Testament we know the reason God does not require your life or my life, the reason why he can forgive us. The reason he doesn't require the life of the firstborn was because God the Father himself, as it were, walked up the mountain at Mount Calvary. Jesus was so alone. He offered up his firstborn son, and there was nobody up there to say, "Stay thy hand." Jesus Christ, God's firstborn, died on the cross for us.

It was the atonement that couldn't be done any other way. When you see Jesus Christ dying on the cross, we can all cry to the Father. We can take the same thing God said to Abraham and send it back to heaven: "Now we know you love us, for you did not withhold your only Son, whom you love, from us."

Only when you connect this passage to the beginning and the end of the Bible (the Old Testament and all that stuff about the ransom of the firstborn with Abraham and Isaac to where God offers his own firstborn son so we do not have to die) can you know how to have a relationship with God.

Here's how you can go before the exalted God. Pointing to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ saying, "Father, accept me because of what Jesus has done." Now you see what the phrase "your God" means. "To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with *your God*." It doesn't mean what the average person sees walking by Cooke Chapel in Bucknell University. They say, "See, you have your god, I have my god."

Oh no. When God spoke out of the burning bush, spoke out of the fire in the mountain, and brought the children of Israel together at Mount Sinai, he said, "Because I have already saved you by grace." Notice he didn't give them the Law and then save them. He didn't give them the Ten Commandments and then bring them out of Egypt. He brought them out and then gave them the Ten Commandments.

We don't get saved because we obeyed. We obey because we've already been saved by grace. When he got them there, he said, "Because I've saved you by grace, and now you're my people, and I'm your God, you can call me 'your God.'" This term "your God" means you're in a covenant with God by grace alone. Here are three things describing what a relationship looks like if you understand you're a sinner saved by grace who now can go into the presence of the exalted God.

A. *Do justice*. Act justly. This word, *mishpat*, is almost always connected in the Old Testament to four vulnerable classes: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. It's astounding that one of the three things the Bible tells us should be

marks of believers in God is you should be deeply committed to helping and caring for the most vulnerable classes in your society. To *act justly* means to care for the poor, the immigrant, the marginalized, and the most vulnerable classes.

B. *Love mercy*. That's so powerful because the word *mercy* is the Hebrew word *checed*, which is the word that's usually translated steadfast love. It usually refers to God's love. His steadfast love is his counter-conditional love. He doesn't love you because of who you are or what he's getting out of the relationship. He just loves you. Period.

When it says we are now supposed to characterized by mercy, it doesn't just say we're supposed to act justly and live mercifully. It says we're supposed to *love* mercy. We're supposed to love people whether we're getting anything out of it or not. We're committed to people even if we're upset with them. Even if they're letting you down, we do not give up on people. We stay in relationships with people even if those relationships drain us.

C. *Walk humbly with your God*. The phrase *to walk* is an important metaphor in the Bible. When you walk, two things are happening. You're having a relationship because you're talking with somebody, and you're going someplace. Therefore, many people over the years have said walking with God means three things. *You're exposed and totally accountable, you're befriended and totally loved, and you're growing and gradually changing.*

First of all, when you're walking in a vital relationship with God, *you're exposed*. When you're walking with somebody, they can see everything you're doing. Don't try to hide it. To be exposed and totally accountable means you expose every single part of your life to God. You don't just let God into part of your life. You're not one way in public and another in private. You bring him into every part of your life. That's what it means to walk with God.

Secondly, *you're befriended and totally loved*. Walking in the Bible is a metaphor for intimacy. It means you have to have a two-way prayer life. You have to sense him speaking to you through his Word. You have to have an actual, palpable sense of his love in your life. To walk with God is to have an experiential prayer life.

Thirdly, *you're growing*. Walking means progress. You're changing. You're happier and more peaceful than you were a couple of years ago. You have more self-control. You're growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, humility, faithfulness, and self-control. Goodness is not just niceness. It's newness.

C.S. Lewis says, "He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into ... a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly ... His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less." Get a vision for newness of life. Let's pray.

O Father, we see what it means to be good. It doesn't mean just to be nice, and it certainly doesn't mean just to try our best to live the way we think is right. It means to have a relationship with you, the exalted God, through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and then to have our lives transformed so that we do justice, love mercy, and have a vital relationship with you. Help us to apply these words to our lives. You're putting your finger on the lives of everyone listening. Help them with your Holy Spirit to respond. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

The Great Question: Are You the One?

The One Who Gives You Rest—September 7, 2014

Matthew 11:1–6

1 After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. 2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

4 Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

It's the beginning of the new ministry year, in some ways. What we usually do in the very beginning of the new year is a short series, a couple sermons, in which we look at what Redeemer is about, what the West Side congregation is about, what our message is, and what our vision is.

If most organizations are asked, “What are you about? What's your message? What's your vision?” they usually put up a slide and give you a series of bullet-point propositions. Christians do believe in certain propositions, but Christians can't start there. What we are about, what our message and vision are, primarily is not a proposition or set of propositions but a person. We do believe in propositions, but they're all about the person, Jesus.

In the next two weeks, we're going to start by looking at the beginning and the end of Matthew 11, a great place to look and ask ourselves the question, “Who is

Jesus?" Why Matthew 11? Notice the first verse: "**After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.**"

The people who have tried to understand the structure and organization of the book of Matthew have noticed the break here. After the first ten chapters, in which Jesus Christ has been instructing his disciples (it says after he had finished doing that), and after he's been preaching and presenting who he is to the world and his disciples, starting in chapter 11, you see a series of responses by different individuals and groups of people to what Jesus has said about who he is.

Their responses and his response to their responses, over these next few chapters, sort of deepens our understanding of who Jesus is. The beginning and end of Matthew 11 are two great places to go to come to grips with who he really is and, therefore, what Redeemer is about. Let's take a look at this interchange between John the Baptist and Jesus.

By the way, this is perfectly relevant to New Yorkers. What we're going to see is John the Baptist is suffering. He's in prison. Things have gone wrong for him. His life has taken a bad turn, and as a result, he's saying to Jesus, "I'm having trouble believing in you. Are you really the one?"

Notice what Jesus says in verse 6: "**Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.**" Older translations say, "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me." We're going to get back to that in a minute, but that's a perfectly good translation. That means John has begun to get offended by Jesus.

Tell me, how up to date does this sound? Somebody saying, "You know, it's hard for me to believe in Jesus because of all the evil and suffering I'm experiencing. Besides that, there's a lot about Jesus that seems very offensive to me." Does that sound up to date? That's every other New Yorker.

Since it's that relevant, let's see what Jesus' remarkable answer to this question is. Let's walk through the passage. Verse 2 tells us *John's condition*. Verse 3 tells us *John's question*. In verses 4 and 5 we'll see *Jesus' credentials*. In verse 6 we'll see *Jesus' challenge*.

1. *John's condition.* Verse 2: "**When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him ...**" John was in prison. The question, of course, is a doubtful question. "**Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?**" Let's take a look at who is talking and expressing these doubts.

First of all, this is the man who one time said, "**Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.**" John the Baptist had seen Jesus Christ and said, "This is the Lamb of God who's taking away the sins of the world." Only God could have told him that. Only divine revelation could have revealed that to him.

This is also the man about whom Jesus is about to say later in this chapter and

elsewhere in the Gospels, “**Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.**” Until the present time, Jesus says, there has never been a human being any greater than John the Baptist.

Here’s one of the greatest people who’s ever lived. Here’s one who’s been specially anointed by God with divine revelation to understand who Jesus Christ is, yet when he gets in trouble and is facing execution, everything has gone wrong for him, and he’s in chains … When he experiences darkness, he starts to doubt. “Are you really the one?”

What are we learning from this? First of all, it means anybody can doubt. If he can have doubts, anybody can have spiritual doubts about Jesus. That means it’s not necessarily a sign of moral or spiritual defect to have doubts. It’s especially not, according to the Bible, when you’re suffering and struggling with terrible troubles that have come into your life.

John the Baptist is, you might say, the latest in a very long line of people: Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, the psalmists (especially the ones who wrote Psalms 39 and 88), and others … There’s a whole list of places in the Bible where people fall into terrible suffering and difficulty, and, to some degree or another, you can look at their prayers (look at Job and the Psalms), and they’re basically saying, “I’m having a lot of trouble believing in you.” Yet there they are in the Bible.

Here’s the first lesson. What we learn from verse 2 is Jesus Christ does not look at John the Baptist’s doubting and say, “How dare you doubt me? After all the divine divine revelation I’ve given you, after everything you’ve seen, how dare you doubt me?” He doesn’t do that. If you look at all these frank and terrible cries of despair and doubt Job, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and the psalmists in Psalms 39 and 88 say, you see God is actually pretty understanding with doubts.

Derek Kidner, a commentator on the Psalms, looks at some of these places in the Psalms where people are crying out. Psalm 39 ends this way: “Look away from me, God, so I can get a little bit of comfort before I die.” Psalm 88 says, “Darkness is my only friend; you’re not.” That’s how these psalms end. Derek Kidner says (I love this), “The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to [God’s] understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate.”

My point is that *Redeemer has always wanted to be a place where we could put out a welcome mat saying “Doubters welcome.”* There are lots and lots of churches that, if you express doubts either overtly or implicitly, they look at you like, “Don’t … don’t say that. No, no, no. You can’t doubt. You have to believe.”

Look at Jesus’ attitude, though, as we go along. On the one hand, he doesn’t say, “How dare you?” On the other hand, he doesn’t acquiesce the doubt. He doesn’t let John the Baptist go. He challenges him, as we’re going to see. He pushes back.

We want to be a place where we can say, “We understand how hard it is to

believe here in this time and age, and we're patient and, in fact, gentle. Besides that, we know what it's like to not believe and to be assailed with doubts." I don't know of any thoughtful believer that doesn't have at least periods of time in which the doubts come. So first of all, anybody can doubt. It's not a sign of moral or spiritual defect. Redeemer wants to be a place where doubters are welcome and treated the way Jesus did.

2. *John's question.* I won't spend long on this either, because it's not the main point, but I think the very question, the way it's phrased, is very intriguing for modern people. He says, "**Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?**" "Are you the one?" Of course, he's asking, "Are you the Jewish Messiah? Are you the Jewish Messiah we expect to come help us throw off the yoke of foreign oppression?" In the context, it's very clear what he's asking.

It's intriguing because he doesn't use the word Messiah there, the Greek word *Christos*. He just asks, "Are you the one?" In some ways, those of us who would like to say, "Well, I'm not looking for the Jewish Messiah, so this doesn't really count for me," need to see the relevance of this. He asks, "Are you the one, or should we look for someone else?"

Recently, I was talking to a man whose job it is to counsel college students. He said he thinks 80 percent of the college students he counsels are all torn up over whether they will ever find "the one." They're spending lots of time meeting people, and though they don't say it out loud, inside their little heads they're thinking, "Are you the one?"

Who's the one? The one who will make everything okay? The one who will help me with my terrible, low self-esteem? The romantic love partner that'll get everything right? He says there's an increasing number of young people who think it's impossible to ever find "the one," but the fact they're so angry about that shows that's what they're looking for.

You can see it, of course, in the pop songs. "Without you, baby, what good am I?" "You're my meaning; I can't make it without you." We can laugh at that, but that is uncomfortably close to what our hearts today actually say. We "messiah-fy" romantic love. I do think, by the way, New Yorkers are more cynical about romantic love than most places, but you messiah-fy career. Notice John the Baptist does not say, "Are you the one, or isn't there any?" He says, "Are you the one, or should we look for another?"

He implies if I don't make Jesus Christ my Messiah, I'm going to have to make somebody or something else my messiah. You have to live for something. There has to be something you think will infuse your life with meaning, safety, and significance. You messiah-fy whatever that is. It drives you. There is a certain sense in which you can't escape this. Nobody can escape the search for a messiah, no matter how cynical you think you are.

Even if you're so hard-bitten and cynical, you're probably messiah-fying your

cynicism by saying, “If I could just stay as hard-bitten and nihilistic as I’d like to live, everything will be okay.” No, you probably won’t be able to. “Are you the one, Jesus? Because if you’re not, I’m going to have to go look for another Jesus.” Let’s take a look at what Jesus says: first of all, the credentials he lays out, and secondly, the challenge.

3. *Jesus’ credentials.* Verses 4 and 5: “**Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.’**” This is a marvelous and penetrating answer. To understand how marvelous and penetrating it is, let’s look behind John the Baptist’s question.

It’s interesting he doesn’t ask, “Are you the Messiah?” He asks, “Are you the one?” Actually, he has called Jesus the one before. In Matthew 3:11, he calls Jesus the one who is stronger than me, the strong one. There is a strong one coming. Why would he say he’s the strong one? Because he and everybody at the time understood the Jewish Messiah would be a strong man who would surround himself with and come in strength.

His job would be to bring judgment on evil, oppression, and injustice. The only way to do that is to be strong. Therefore, if Jesus is the Messiah, he would be at least surrounding himself with strong people, exercising his strength, and leading some kind of popular political or maybe even military uprising. How else are you going to bring judgment on evil? You have to be strong.

It’s very clear Jesus isn’t anything like that. Jesus himself is surrounded by and only seems to spend time with weak people, which he admits right here (we’ll get to that in a second). Most commentators think John the Baptist has a more ... There’s a case of paradoxical weakness close at hand.

He’s saying, “I was your herald, and I’m in prison. If you’re the Messiah, and I’m the herald of the Messiah, why am I about to die? Why am I being squashed like a bug? If you’re the Messiah, you and the people around you who proclaim you and lift you up should be strong, but look at us. Everything’s going wrong. We’re in weakness. How could you be the Messiah and be surrounded by weakness?”

Jesus’ answer is remarkable. First of all, it’s a radically biblical answer. Technically, this is not a quote from any place in the Old Testament, and yet, it’s almost a summary of the Old Testament. He says, “Go back. I am healing the blind, cleansing the leper, raising the dead, healing the lame, and preaching good news to the poor.”

When he says that, he’s not just talking about his own career. This is Isaiah 35: “**... your God will come ... Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.**” By the way, we sing Psalm 35 (put to music by Isaac Watts):

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,

*Your loosen'd tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come,
And leap, ye lame, for joy.*

There's also a reference here to Isaiah 61, which says when the Messiah comes, "The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captives and the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus is almost forcing John the Baptist to say, "Think of your Old Testament. Think of your Bible. The Messiah *will* be spending time with the weak. He will go to the blind, lame, and poor. That's what the text and all the prophecies say." More than that, he's also evoking in John the Baptist's mind, and it should be in our minds, the pattern in the Old Testament of people who brought deliverance. You might say small-scale saviors; Jesus is the great Savior.

Let's look at the small-scale saviors. For example, Elijah and Elisha raised the dead, healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, and cared for the poor, but Elijah did not raise some popular uprising. He was always a fugitive. He was always being rejected and running for his life. Go to Joseph, who delivered his family, but first, he was buried in slavery and prison for years before God raised him up.

Think of David. He was buried in the wilderness, running from Saul for his life, until God raised him up. Jesus is saying, if you think about it, the messianic salvation the Bible has always predicted has always flowed to the weak and the messiahs, his forerunners, have always been rejected.

That's not all he's saying when he says, "I hang out with the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the poor." He's actually showing the contrast between the world's understanding of religion and salvation and his own. John the Baptist had slipped into the world's because he thought salvation would come through a strong Messiah pulling the strong and moral people together and giving them his help.

Jesus is saying, "I welcome and hang out with the weak. I only work with the weak, the blind, and the poor. My salvation is not strong salvation for strong people who are worthy of it. No. My salvation comes through weaknesses. It is only for weak people who know they're not worthy of it and trust me for it."

This is extraordinarily important. I've spent quite a bit of time hoping I can say this as poignantly as I should. Luke 6 says, "**Blessed are the poor ...**" But Matthew 5 says, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit ...**" That's no contradiction. Jesus loves the people who are literally weak, lame, blind, and economically poor. He loves them and cares for them, and people who are walking in Jesus' footsteps care about them too.

Here's what's interesting. Even for those who are not literally blind, lame, and poor, Jesus says, "I will only work with you if you are spiritually blind, lame, and poor. The only people I bless are the poor in spirit. I especially like to bless the poor, but even if you're not poor, I'll only work with you if you're poor in spirit."

Everybody has some moral sense that they don't live the way they should, but here's how everybody looks at it. If you could take your moral life and put it down on a piece of paper, you would have debits and assets. Isn't that right? You'd have debits. There are things you've done wrong. I don't think there's anybody on the face of the earth who doesn't say, "There are some things I've done wrong and some places I owe."

But everybody says, "But I've also done good things. I have assets. It's not like my balance sheet is totally unbalanced. I have assets, and I have debits. When I was younger, I had more debits than I had assets. Now I think I have more assets than debits. If there's a God, yes I need help. Of course I need forgiveness, but I also have things I think deserve a certain amount of respect here. If there's a God, I would hope he would see and give me the help to overcome my debits and live a life worthy of his love and blessing."

That is not, in any way, how Jesus Christ conceives of reality. The Bible says no one is righteous, no, not one. No one seeks for God. All your righteousness is a filthy rag. Some Christians are nice, by the way. Some Christians are great baseball players. If you're a great baseball player and become a Christian, you're still a great baseball player. If you're a nice person and become a Christian, you're still nice. Why wouldn't you be?

But being a Christian isn't becoming nice. The difference between a Christian and anybody else is a Christian says, "I have no assets. Yeah, I've done good and bad things, but the good things I've done for bad reasons." You're becoming a Christian when you begin to see the motives. "Even the good things I've done I did to get God to bless me. I did them to put him in my debt and get some control over him. Did I do all these nice things for other people? No, I did them for myself, so I could respect myself, and they would respect me."

In other words, a Christian is someone who, as his or her mind opens with the help of the Holy Spirit, sees, "I have no assets. I'm spiritually poor and bankrupt. I have nothing. I have no leverage. Therefore, I not only can't save myself, but I can't reform myself, and I need to be saved by radical grace."

As soon as you get there you begin to realize you do not need a strong Messiah. You need a weak Messiah. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "John the Baptist, listen to me. I did not come in strength to bring judgment. Do you know what that would have meant, John? Haven't you read Psalm 130? 'O Lord, if you marked or kept a record of sins, who would stand?' " That's a rhetorical question. Nobody would stand.

"If I came strong, to bring judgment and summon all the other moral, strong people to be worthy of my salvation, there wouldn't have been anybody left. You want me to come in strength, John the Baptist? I didn't. I came in weakness to bear judgment. So I came not with a spear in my hand but with a spear in my side. Haven't you read Psalm 22? 'They lay me in the dust of death, they cast lots for my garment, and they pierce my hands and my feet.' "

There's a sense in which Jesus Christ is pointing all the way ahead to the end of his life. As he was going to the cross, he was blindfolded. They beat him black and blue, saying, "Prophesy, Messiah. Who hit you?" They treated him like a leper, a pariah. They crucified him on a garbage dump outside the gate.

Though he was spiritually rich, Paul says, he became utterly spiritually poor so that by his poverty we might become rich. Jesus became lame, rejected, and poor, so that we could become rich. Jesus is pointing to his salvation, saying, "My welcome of the weak is not a sign I'm not the Messiah. It's a sign I *am* the Messiah. I did not come strong to bring judgment. I came weak to bear judgment and take what you deserve, so those of you who know you're spiritually poor, blind, lame, and undeserving of salvation, can get it."

4. *Jesus' challenge.* This is a very important challenge. He doesn't end there. He says, "**Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.**" I already mentioned this, but the word he uses there is the word *skandalizō*. He says, "Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me." Older translations say, "Blessed is the one who takes no offense in me."

I think the NIV translators should have gone with that. It's a very up to date word. People are constantly getting offended today. What the word *skandalizō* means is to be offended so you don't believe. People are constantly saying, "I find Jesus or Christianity so offensive I can't believe it." Jesus actually gives you a beatitude here. He says, "Blessed is the one who does not get offended by me." I think we can break that down into two things.

A. *He's saying he's offensive.* You don't warn somebody not to be offended by you unless you know what you're about to say is offensive. If you say, "Listen, I'm going to tell you something. Don't be offended," that means, "What I'm about to tell you is offensive." When he says, "Blessed is he who does not take offense at me," what he's saying is, "I am offensive."

I was raised in a Lutheran church, but when I went off to college, I wasn't really sure whether I'd be a Christian or not. It was sort of up in limbo. I do remember some college professors who were saying, "Well, there are a lot of things about Christianity we can't believe, but the one thing we can accept is Jesus Christ was a great, moral teacher who taught us to love our neighbor."

I liked that, because that's not very offensive. Then I read two little books, *Basic Christianity* by John Stott and *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, that changed not only my life but also your lives (if you come to Redeemer). I've been channeling those two books ever since. Be careful what you read when you're 20 years old.

John Stott said if you really want to look at Jesus' teachings, he's always talking about himself. He says he's going to come judge the world. He says he equal to the Father. He says all sins are against him, and only he can forgive. He says he lived before Abraham; he's eternal. He says, for example, you must hate your father and mother if you're going to follow him, which means he demands loyalty and love so intense that all other loyalties look like hatred by comparison.

Over and over he says these things about himself, which is why C.S. Lewis says that's why, when people met Jesus, they never responded, "Oh, what a nice teacher of morality and love." They either hated him, ran away from him frightened, or fell down and worshiped him. They always responded to him in an extreme way.

I want you to think for a moment. When Jesus says, "I know I'm offensive," why are those claims offensive? What is so offensive about saying, "I'm the Savior of the world, the Lord of the universe." Why is that offensive? It's mainly offensive because of what it implies about us. That's why we're offended.

If Jesus says he's the Lord of the universe, that means you're not competent to run your own life. You're not going to make your own decisions. He has to do that. On the other hand, when he says he's the Savior of the world, that means you can't save yourself. You're a hopeless sinner, and unless he atones for your guilt, you're damned.

The reason Jesus Christ is so offensive is not exactly because of what he says about himself. It's because of what that implies about us. Jesus' claims say, "You're a sinner. You need salvation. You need a master and a lord." That will offend every human being on the planet, but especially in New York.

By the way, to say Jesus was this wonderful teacher of love makes nonsense of history. Why was he executed if he was this wonderful teacher of love? Why would you put to death Mr. Rogers? Some of you don't know who he is because it's been a while. Mr. Rogers was the host of a children's television program, and he always started out by saying several things. One of them was always, "I like you just the way you are."

I want you to know there are a lot of Christian books today that are doing everything they possibly can to turn Jesus Christ into someone who only affirms, kind of a "Mr. Rogers" Jesus who only says "I like you just the way you are." But here's what's so wonderful and offensive about the gospel.

Jesus is really saying to you, "Yes. My salvation and grace can come to you just the way you are ..." Because you don't merit it. That's wonderful. "... but even though my salvation and grace can come to you just the way you are, it only comes to people who aren't satisfied with the way they are, because they're weak. They know they're poor, blind, and lame. When my grace comes into your life just the way you are, it then gives you a power to act on your holy discontent about the parts of your life that need to change." So Jesus is offensive.

B. *Don't take offense with him.* He says, "Blessed is the one who doesn't take offense in me." The word *blessed* means absolute fulfillment. Saint Augustine says we have a god-shaped hole in us. We're trying to fill it with other things, and only this will fulfill you. What is it?

If you really want this great blessedness, first of all, *you have to wrestle with the offensiveness of Jesus.* If you don't feel the offensiveness of Jesus or see him as

offensive, you haven't come to grips with who he is. You've turned him into a "Mr. Rogers" Jesus or something like that. The real Jesus is incredibly offensive, because he says things that imply you have to completely be sold out for him, lay it all down in him, and rest on him alone.

Secondly, *you have to take on yourself the beauty of what he did for you*. It's offensive to admit you're spiritually blind, poor, leprous, and dead, but it's wonderful to see he became those things freely in order to redeem you. If you have a small view of your sin, you may even believe Jesus died for you, but it won't electrify you, change you, or fill that god-shaped hole.

If you have a big view of your sin, his love and mercy becomes electrifying and moving. "I can't believe he did that for me." That's what fills you with blessedness. See his offensiveness, but then overcome that offensiveness by what he did for you on the cross, and you will be blessed. Let us pray.

Our Father, thank you for giving us a glimpse of who Jesus is and who we should be as a church that lifts him up to others. We ask you would increase that blessedness in us as we take you at your word, Lord Jesus, and think about your death in a way that melts, molds, and shapes us. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

The Great Promise: Rest for Your Soul

The One Who Gives You Rest—September 14, 2014

Matthew 11:25–30

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. **26** Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. **27** All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **30** For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is a very famous passage. “**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**” One of the commentaries I read when I was preparing this said this passage takes you right into the heart of what Christianity is all about. It’s one of the reasons why, in the very beginning of every ministry year in September, we try to choose a couple of texts like this that help us remember who we’re serving, what we’re about, and who we’re lifting up.

It tells us a lot about Jesus and what he offers. It’s about rest for the soul. We’re going to learn from this text three things about that deep, inner rest. This is not just rest for the body. It’s rest for the soul. We’re going to learn *why we need rest*, *what rest is*, and *how to get rest*.

1. *The need for rest.* It starts by saying, “**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**” Right away, the question is ... *Is he talking about a discrete group of people?* Is he talking about hurting, burned-out people, and the rest of us are more normal and don’t need it, or is this something for everyone? It feels like such a solemn statement that it certainly seems like an offer to everyone. How do we understand that, then?

Horace, the Roman poet, said, “... no one lives content....” It’s hard for younger people, in particular, to believe that. Most younger people think, “If I get professional success, find somebody to love, and do good in society, I’ll get content. I will feel this deep satisfaction and peace in my life. I’ll be happy with my life, and I’ll be happy with myself.”

As you get older, you realize even if you do get professional success and love and are doing good for the world, our discontent is a lot deeper than we think. Some people’s lives go better, and some people’s lives go worse, but even those of us whose lives go better realize, “As the years go by, I’m still looking for something.”

Horace said, “... no one lives content ...” Wallace Stevens, a more modern writer, says, “[Even] in contentment I still feel the need of some imperishable bliss.” He means as you get older, even when you’re enjoying something, what tends to ruin the enjoyment is the thought, “I’m going to lose this.” For example, in a love relationship, you might say, “The person is going to leave me, or they’re going to die.”

As you get older, you realize everything seems to go away, and life is constantly taking things away from you. He says, “The older I get, the more I can’t be content with anything. Even as I’m enjoying it, I can’t help but think, ‘This is going to perish and go away.’ It ruins my enjoyment of it.”

People say to Wallace Stevens, “Well, don’t be morbid. Live in the moment. Enjoy it for now.” He’s saying, “No, no. That’s like an animal that lives by instinct. I’m a human being, and I want to think. The more I think about it, and the older I get, the more I realize everything is going to be taken away from me, and the harder it is for me to be content.”

Henrik Ibsen, the great Norwegian playwright, says when you take away the “life lie” of anyone, they lose all their happiness. The life lie is an important theme in a couple of his plays. You can look it up online. What he means by the *life lie* is everybody spends their years being happy in anticipation.

In other words, most of us can deal with life because we say, “Someday I will be happy. I’m not now, but there’s a possibility I’ll be happy.” The *life lie*, according to Ibsen, is when you say, “If I find Mr. Right or Ms. Right … If I get the professional success … If I could just get this done … If I could make enough money …”

You tend to say, “If I could just get to this place in life, then things will be okay.” You think this or that is going to make you happy, and then you get there and find out it doesn’t. When the life lie is taken away, you lose all your happiness. Jesus is saying, “I’m the only one who can give you the deep inner rest you’re looking for in all these other things. I’m the only one.”

What does he mean by rest? Does he just mean fulfillment in general? Probably not, because he says he will take your burdens off you. **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened ...”** Later on in Matthew 23, he says, “The teachers of the law tie heavy burdens and put them on your shoulders, but they cannot practice what they preach.”

He’s talking about a kind of religion the teachers of the law put on people. The burdens were, “If you do all these commandments and regulations, then God will love you, bless you, take you to heaven, favor you, and hear your prayers.” Jesus says that’s an incredible, crushing burden. You have to live up. Every day, you’re never sure you’re being moral, religious, or good enough. It’s a terrible burden.

You say, “Well, fine. I’m not an orthodox Jew. I haven’t bound myself to all of the Mosaic ceremonial laws, rules, and regulations.” Some years ago, in 2003, Judith Shulevitz wrote a great article in the *New York Times Magazine*, which she later turned into a book, called “Bringing Back the Sabbath.”

Even though she’s a Jewish woman writing and trying to tell the workaholic Manhattanites, “Taking time off is great,” she knows the biblical idea of Sabbath goes beyond just taking a day off to get rest. She says, “Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work.... the machinery of self-censorship [must] shut down, too, stilling the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach.”

What she’s saying is, “Even if you aren’t an orthodox Jew, we all have inner self-censorship or self-reproach, the eternal murmur.” Everybody is trying to live up to standards. You may be living up to your parents’ expectations. That can be a crushing burden. Maybe you have a church, synagogue, or some kind of religious background that fills you with guilt even though you’re trying to get over it. You still feel guilty, because you aren’t living the way you were raised.

Maybe the reason you have this restlessness, this constant inner murmur of self-

reproach that you're not living up well enough or achieving enough, is not your parents or your church background. Maybe it's just because you moved to New York City. Do you know the history of the Darius colonies? Massachusetts was founded as a place to go live. People in Europe said, "We want to find a place where we can live life and practice our religion and way of living freely." People started Virginia and South Carolina to live.

New York City was started as a trading post. It's a place to make money. People did not originally come here to live. They came here to work hard and make money, and we have not escaped our history. This is a place that is not set up to make it easy to live. It's set up, basically, for professional success, for work.

Some years ago (not too long ago), I read an account in the *New York Times* by a young writer who was trying to make it in New York. The competition, the expectations, and the emphasis on success and work were driving him crazy. In a great line that shows he actually might be a good writer, he said, "I made the quality of my work the measure of my worth."

He was being crushed under the need to live up. "Am I writing as well as this person over here? Why can't I get my essay in this or that publication?" Judith Shulevitz says you don't have to be an orthodox Jew to have a deep inner restlessness, a *burden*. We're all trying to live up. We have this "eternal inner murmur" of self-reproach and self-censorship. Jesus says, "I'm the only one who can actually give you a solution to that."

Scientists tell you if you sleep all night but don't get a couple hours of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, you wake up exhausted. Jesus says, "You're taking time off, you're taking breaks, you're going on trips, and you still can't get the deep, spiritual, inner rest, the REM of the soul. Only I can give you that." He's saying that to everybody in the world, not just the Jews of that time or the religious people. "Only I can give you complete rest from the machinery of self-censorship, the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach."

2. *The character of this rest.* Jesus is going to tell you what it is. He's going to tell you something that, in our culture, is absolutely counter-intuitive. You couldn't make a more outrageous statement, in our society, than what he's about to say. Let's ask Jesus, "What is this rest?" He says, "**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ...**" "**Come to me ... and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ...**" It's a synonym. "... and learn from me ... and you will find rest for your souls."

Most of us haven't been raised on a farm, though somebody here probably has. A yoke was something you put on a beast of burden (a mule or an ox), and they carried wagons or plows. The yoke itself wasn't a problem, but every yoke attached you to a burden. That's why he can say, "All of you who are burdened, come to me, and take my yoke upon you."

This is astounding, because he doesn't just say, "Come to me, believe in me, and pray to me, and I'll take all your troubles away." He says, "You must yoke yourself

to me.” Jesus isn’t making this up. It’s not a new idea. When Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you,” he’s saying, “Be my disciple.”

In the old days, when you decided to follow a teacher, you were said to be yoked to the teacher. Here’s the reason why. If you’re in New York City and want to take a couple of courses, you take the courses, you may show up, you get to know the teacher, and the teacher grades your papers. It’s just one part of your life.

In those days, when you wanted to be a disciple of a teacher, you went to live with the teacher. You served the teacher, you lived in a community with the other disciples, and the teacher completely dominated your life. That’s the reason why the terms *yoke* and *burden* were apropos. Jesus is saying, “I want you to come and let me be the complete master of your life. I want you to center your entire life around me. I want you to let me dominate your life. That’s how you’ll find rest for your soul.”

If he had just said, “**Come to me ... and I will give you rest,**” I think we all would have imagined some kind of spiritual experience, right? But then he says, “What I mean is, take my yoke upon you. Become my disciple. Let me dominate your life. Give up your right to self-determination. Give up your right to live the life you want. Let me completely dominate your life, and then you’ll find rest for your soul.”

That’s so astounding in our culture, because our culture says, “You must not give authority over your life to anyone. You must be the master of your own life. No one has the right to tell you how to live or what is right or wrong. You have to decide that yourself. You have to stay in control. You need to be absolutely free. You can’t possibly become a Christian and lose your ability to decide what is right or wrong for yourself. No way!”

It sounds crazy for Jesus to say, “If you want inner freedom, to no longer be proving yourself, to be at complete peace with yourself, to be happy and satisfied with your life ... You’ll never get that inner freedom unless you let me be the Master and completely make me Lord.” We say, “That’s crazy. The only way to be free is to be free.”

The answer to that is in there, but it’s not that easy to see unless you emphasize a word. If you hear Jesus saying, “Take my yoke upon you,” it sounds like it’s saying, “If you want to be free, you need to lose all your independence and let me be Lord of your life.” Modern people say, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Read it like this. “Take *my* yoke upon you.” Don’t forget, he’s saying, “All of you are *already* burdened. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened.” He’s saying everybody is restless because everybody is burdened. You’re already yoked to something. Jesus is not saying, “You’re independent; give up your independence and come to me.”

Political freedom is a great idea. We need to be politically free. Self-determination is right, but nobody is spiritually free. If you think you’re spiritually free, you’re not. Jesus says you’re already yoked to something. You say, “What

are you talking about? I'm a free person. I decide what is right or wrong for me." Well, yeah ... What have you decided to live for? You have to live for something, and whatever you decide to live for you're yoked to. You're not free anymore. You have to have it.

Let's just say you're living for some love relationship, a spouse or partner, and the main joy and satisfaction in your life is that person. Do you realize you're yoked to that person? Do you realize you're being mastered by that person? If that person's love and happiness is the main thing in your life, you'll be emotionally overdependent on them. You won't be able to take criticism from them because it'll devastate you, and you won't be able to give criticism to them or be honest with them because you can't take their anger. If they have a problem, you can't take it.

"Oh, okay," you say, "I heard that. Codependence is bad. Okay. I'll live for my career. I won't be emotionally dependent on anybody. I will be a self-sufficient person." If you are living for your career, you are not a self-sufficient person. You're yoked to your career. You make the quality of your work the measure of your worth. That's burnout. That's terrible.

You say, "Well, maybe I'll live for my children." By the way, those of you who don't have children don't realize how incredibly easy it is to live for your children. I've had many people look me right in the eye and say, "Pastor, you know, I live for my children. If I didn't have my children, I wouldn't have any good reason to live." You're destroying your children, then.

If you're living for your children, either they're doing everything they can to get away from you because you're dominating their lives, or, worse than that, maybe they're not trying to get away from you, and you are dominating their lives. You're living your life through them, and they never grow into independent, self-sufficient adults.

You say, "Well, all right, I shouldn't live for my children, love and romance, my spouse, or my career. I will be a good person. Maybe I'll even be religious. I'll read the Bible and pray. I'll clean up my life and help other people." You can decide to make the quality of your morality, whether liberal or conservative, the measure of your worth.

If you feel like, "I'm living a good life, I'm living up to my standards, and I'm better than most people," then you become a self-righteous bigot, people will hate you, and you deserve it. Or, if you're not living up to your standards, you'll hate yourself, flagellate yourself, and beat yourself up. In other words, your soul will be either shrunken or frozen.

You are not independent or in control of your life. You're living for something, and you're yoked to it. We should be politically free and independent. Political self-determination is very important, but spiritual self-determination is an illusion, and it's fatal if you try to get it. You think you're in charge of your own life, but you're being driven by career, pleasure, love, romance, or something.

Jesus says, “Take *my* yoke. If you yoke yourself to me, I’m the only Master who will forgive you when you fail me and satisfy you when you embrace me. The only way for you to be truly free is to let me be your Master. Otherwise, something else will be, and you won’t be free.” Got that? That is so absolutely basic to understanding what the Christian life and message is about.

If you say, “Boy, the idea of making Jesus Christ my Lord and Master, so that I have to do only what’s in the Bible, and I can’t live my own life … Wow, that’s suffocating and horrible. I want to be free to live the way I want to live,” you are in the veil of illusion. I’m not Buddha; I’m Tim Keller, but it is an illusion. It is not true, and you need to see the truth.

3. *How to get this rest.* Jesus says, “You need it. I’ve got it.” How do we get this inner peace? Interestingly enough, it’s up here, but you probably may not be looking at it. The center of gravity of this passage is obviously verses 28–30. It’s so lovely, soothing, and wonderful, and you tend to miss what came before. Look at verse 25.

“At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.’ ”

In verses 20–24, which weren’t read, what you have is Jesus warning certain towns which had rejected the messengers of the gospel. Then he turns in verse 25 and says, “Who is it that does receive my salvation? Not the wise and learned, the self-sufficient, or the people who feel like they have it together. It’s little children who understand the gospel, receive and get revealed to them the truth of the gospel, and enter into my rest.”

What does it mean to become little children? This is a very common way that Jesus talks about becoming a Christian. For example, Matthew 18:3 says, “Unless you be converted and become little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” To come to Jesus, to become a Christian, to be converted, and to become his little child are all synonyms.

To see why he would use “become a little child” as a synonym, you have to think about the metaphor. If you go through the rest of the Bible, you realize it doesn’t mean you become like a child in every way. You don’t become childish, for example, but there are two characteristics of little children that are analogous to the two things you have to do to become a Christian and, therefore, receive this rest.

My wife and I are grandparents now. We have two granddaughters under the age of 3. Even though we raised our children, as time goes on, you forget what little children are like. We are being re-acquainted and are recapitulating that, so I can give you this illustration with a certain amount of authenticity.

A. *You have to admit your spiritual helplessness.* Little children know they’re

helpless. Oh, dear, they know they're helpless. The older granddaughter is 3 years old, but she's probably the size of a 5-year-old, and I happen to be the age of a 63-year-old, because I'm 63. All I know about my granddaughters, especially Lucy, the 3-year-old, is they're always saying, "Up! Up! Carry me. Carry me." When I'm 63, and you're the size of a 5-year-old ... "I can't go across that bridge. I'm tired. I'm tired. You have to carry me."

Little children know they're helpless. They act helpless, and they pretty much are helpless. When Jesus says, "You must become a little child," this is actually a very hard thing to do. You have to swallow your pride. You have to be somebody who knows you can't be like the wise and learned. You can't say, "Well, I've done good things, but I've done bad things, so I need a little help from God." No, no.

A Christian is somebody who says, "I've done bad things and good things, but the good things were done for bad motives in general, and therefore I need complete grace salvation. I need forgiveness. I can't save myself or make good my debt. I can't earn my salvation or pull myself together. I need grace. I am spiritually helpless." That is an extraordinarily hard thing for modern people to say, but that's the first thing you have to do. To become a little child, you have to admit your spiritual helplessness.

B. *You have to believe Jesus Christ loves you and forgives you, and you have to rest in his love.* Little children are exceedingly confident that you love them. You can be with a little 1- or 2-year-old, and they are just a pain to be with. They're crying, they want this, and they want that. You give them that, then they don't want it, and they throw it away. They're just ruining the last hour. They're being incredibly difficult, and you're trying to have a conversation ... They outgrow this eventually.

But no matter how big a pain they've been, they always turn to you like *this*, and they just assume you love them. "Up! Ball! Ice cream!" It's astounding. Parents know this, too. The kid is supposed to get up at 6:00. It's 4:30, and you go in there. You got to bed kind of late, you've had four hours of sleep, and your child is up. You have a long day of work ahead of you, and you say, "I can't believe my child is up at 4:30."

You're so unhappy and angry, and you're trying to remember that little Vulcan maneuver Mr. Spock does where he puts it on your shoulder, and you fall asleep. This child has ruined your day, and yet she's looking up there saying, "Daddy! Up! Ball!" No matter how awful they've been, they're sure you love them. That's the second aspect of being a Christian.

I've seen plenty of people who come to admit they're sinners, they need God, and they've screwed up, done very, very badly, and really messed up their lives, but when you turn to the second part, which is you have to believe you're a sinner and you have to believe Jesus Christ loves you and forgives you, and you have to rest in his love," a lot of people just can't go there. They say, "I just can't believe Jesus loves me." Therefore, you're not a little child yet.

How do you get there? Jesus himself says, “I want you to take my yoke upon you. I want you to let me be Lord of your life, and I won’t abuse you. I know you’re afraid if you give up your independence I’ll abuse you, but I am gentle and humble in heart.” That little addition in all of that, “... **I am gentle and humble in heart ...**” is critical to understanding the salvation of Jesus Christ.

If you were here last week, you heard the beginning of Matthew 11. In the beginning of Matthew 11, John the Baptist is *offended* by Jesus because of his weakness. John the Baptist said, “I thought the Messiah was going to be a strong man, that he’d put together at least a political movement, or maybe an army.

The job of the Messiah is to bring judgment on evil. Because you’re supposed to be bringing judgment on evil, why in the world aren’t you a strong person? Why are you gentle and humble and surrounded by weak people? Why do you hang out with the poor and the oppressed? Why aren’t you with the strong?” He was offended.

I won’t go back into the beginning of Matthew 11, but his answer is, “I have come in weakness, because I did not come as Messiah to bring judgment. If I brought judgment on evil, nobody would be left. If you knew your own heart ... I didn’t come in strength to bring judgment, I came in weakness to bear you judgment, your punishment.”

If you want to become a little child, watch Jesus Christ going to the cross and notice something. Compare him to the other Christian martyr stories. Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burned at the stake for their faith. If you’ve been to Oxford, you know there’s a monument there where they were burned at the stake.

As the flames were licking up, and they were starting to get charred, I think it was Latimer that turned to Ridley and said, “Don’t worry, tonight we’ll have a merry supper with the Lord,” or something like that. There are lots of stories of Christians who went to their deaths in peace, clearly filled with rest. They were at rest because they knew God was with them, and they knew they were going to be with God.

Jesus Christ did not go the cross that way. Think about when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, with the bloody sweat and agony, or when he was on the cross, crying out, “**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**” He had no rest on the cross. He was cosmically restless, because God was not with him.

God was abandoning him, because he was taking the penalty and punishment our sins deserved. He was getting a taste of the cosmic restlessness we deserve, so that, because he paid the penalty for our sins, he can turn to us and say, “Come now, I took your restlessness, and I can give you my rest.” It’s not achieved or something you earn. It’s just something you receive as a gift.

You become like a little child when you say, “Lord Jesus, if you would die on the

cross and lose not just your physical peace, but your spiritual peace, and experience that cosmic infinite restlessness and agony of soul, all for me ... If you would do that for me, I know you won't abuse me. I can take on your yoke, because you are gentle and humble in heart. You died for me."

The minute you not only admit you're helpless but also finally rest in his love, assured of his love, you take off the great burden. The burden of having to prove yourself falls off your back. Jesus is saying, "If you try to rest in your own works in order to prove yourself to God, your parents, New York, or whatever, you'll never have rest in your heart, but if you rest in my work, you will have rest indeed."

You can lay all that doing and performing down. As the hymn goes:

*Cast your deadly "doing" down—
Down at Jesus' feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
Gloriously complete.*

Do you have a burden of guilt for something you did in the past? Here's another hymn:

*The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Savior's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.*

As Paul says in Philippians 3, "[I want to] **be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ ...**" God now looks at you and sees you righteous in Christ. He sees an absolute beauty. There's no more proving of yourself.

That's how you receive this rest. That's how you destroy, for good, that internal self-censorship, the constant eternal murmur of self-reproach: "You're not good enough. You're not good enough." Don't say that. "My Savior's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view."

Finally, you're free. Except you're yoked. Don't forget this: To be a Christian is to receive this free salvation, but then you're supposed to be a disciple. Jesus wasn't just talking to the people then. To be a disciple means learning the Bible, learning to pray, living with the other disciples, and being accountable.

If you just show up at church, and you're not seriously being instructed in the Bible or in any kind of accountable Christian community, if you're not a disciple, you're not having this peace of God worked into every corner of your life. "**Come to me, all you who are [already] weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For [only] my yoke is easy and [only] my burden is light.**" Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for this astonishing offer, promise, and invitation. I pray there

are some people here tonight who realize they have never taken up this offer. I pray they would get through the painful process of admitting their helplessness, of being willing to give up the illusion of self-determination and spiritual independence, and come right into your arms. Give us the freedom that comes from letting you, O Lord Jesus, be our Lord and Savior. Give us your rest. Make us your disciples. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Family: Our Father

The Prayer of Prayers—September 28, 2014

Galatians 3:26–4:7

26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians, chapter 4:

1 What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.

4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

For the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at the subject of prayer. Let me just start off by saying something kind of outrageous. If you're a Christian, prayer is the key to everything you should do and be. You say, "That's a little bit over the

top.” Well, all right. Let me just give you a little list. You can’t know yourself unless you know how to pray.

It’s in prayer that you actually are able to see yourself for who you are, because you sense being in the presence of a holy God, a majestic God. Only the perspective that comes from sensing yourself in the presence of a great God and sensing his searchlight on your heart ... Only in prayer do you ever really see who you are. Otherwise, you’ll live in delusion. We all have the person we wish we were, and we often go on thinking that’s who we are until prayer. Only through prayer do you actually get self-knowledge.

Secondly, only through prayer can you change yourself. Saint Augustine said that what really makes you who you are is not so much what you think or even what you believe but what you love. For example, you may say, “I believe in Jesus Christ,” but what you really love is the idea of making a lot of money. What really controls you, who you really are, is what captures your imagination and what gets you passionate and what drives you and what delights you and what you love.

If it’s true that it’s your loves that really make you who you are, there’s no way to change those unless you change what you worship. It’s not enough just to change what you think or even change what you are actually doing. Not even changing your behavior. It’s changing what you love, and that comes through prayer.

Thirdly, you can’t know God without prayer. There’s a difference between knowing about God and knowing God. To just know about God, know stuff about God, that’s one thing. To know God, to have a personal relationship with God ... How does that happen? It happens through prayer, because prayer is communication. You don’t know somebody if you don’t communicate.

Here’s one last thing. Read the book of Psalms. You’ll see the psalmists are facing all the sufferings and troubles of life. They’re facing serious illness and financial reversal. They’re facing relational betrayals and grief and loss. They’re facing all these things, but how do they handle it? They pray. That’s how you get God’s strength: through prayer.

You won’t be able to access God’s strength without prayer. You won’t be able to change yourself without prayer. You won’t be able to know God without prayer. You won’t be able to know yourself without prayer. That’s just the beginning of the list. I think my list could go on. Is that enough for an introduction? Prayer is the key to everything you need to do and be as a Christian. So how do you do it? That’s a good question.

In the movie *Gravity*, Sandra Bullock plays an astronaut who’s stranded in space and she thinks she’s going to die. At one point, when she thinks she’s going to die, her character says, “I’ve never prayed. Nobody ever taught me how.” That’s probably not true. The reason it’s probably not true is that she has probably heard the Lord’s Prayer. Do you know what the Lord’s Prayer is? It’s Jesus’ answer to the question, “How do you pray?”

The Lord's Prayer is probably the set of words that has been spoken the most in the history of the human race. Almost certainly more people have said the Lord's Prayer than have said anything else. It's extremely well known and it's out there and it's Jesus' own answer to the question, "How do you pray?" In fairness, the reason it doesn't help most of us is that every single phrase in the Lord's Prayer is actually drawing on a whole swath of biblical teaching.

When it says, "Thy kingdom come," what's the kingdom? When it says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," what's that? When it says, "Our Father," which we're going to look at tonight ... In other words, every time Jesus says, "Say this when you're praying. Pray this way ..." Unless you know a lot about what the Bible says about what it means to call God a father or a lot about the kingdom, you basically can't use the prayer, the model, the Lord's Prayer.

Therefore, the more you know about the biblical material behind that particular phrase in the prayer, the more rich and powerful your prayer gets. There's almost a sense in which when Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer he was saying, "Read the Bible, master the Bible, know all the biblical doctrine, and then essentially pray it." Virtually, the entire Bible is in the Lord's Prayer, compressed and turned into adoration, petition, confession, and thanksgiving.

What we're going to do over the next few weeks is each week we're going to take one phrase from the Lord's Prayer. It doesn't mean every week we're going to go back to Matthew 6 and read the Lord's Prayer. What we're going to do is we'll name the phrase, whether it's "Hallowed be thy name" or, tonight, "Our Father," and we'll go to some other place in the Bible that gives us access to the strain of biblical doctrine and teaching that is required if you're going to pray that part of the prayer.

So tonight, why did Jesus say, "When you pray, always ..." It's the first thing. He says, "Our Father." This is the basis for all the rest of the prayer: knowing that God is your Father, treating God as a Father, recognizing that you are his child. What does it mean to pray, "Our Father"? It's much more complicated than you think.

We're looking at the passage that was just read. There are other passages we could have gone to, but what's intriguing to me about this passage is that in verses 4–5, when it describes everything Jesus Christ came to do, you might say the climax, the reason he came, the purpose of his salvation, was that we might receive adoption to sonship. We can pray "Our Father" because we've been adopted into the family of God.

Let's look briefly at *the gift of adoption*, *the meaning of adoption* (what it means to be adopted), *the reason we can be adopted*, and then *how it applies to prayer*. I'm going to try to go through the first three fast so we have a little more time on the prayer, which means we can't really get into this doctrine of adoption too deeply.

1. *The gift of adoption*. It says here, "**So in Christ Jesus you are all children of**

God through faith ..." In other words, all human beings, by virtue of being human beings, are not children of God. It says Jesus Christ went to all this trouble, this salvation, in order that we would be adopted. It's only in Christ Jesus, verse 26 says, that we're children, only through faith.

Some people say, "Wait a minute. That's pretty narrow-minded. I thought all human beings were God's children." In a sense that's true, and even the Bible says that's true. In Acts, chapter 17, where Paul is preaching to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, he says we (he's talking about all of us) are God's offspring. There certainly is a sense in which you can say since God created all human beings that he's our Father for all of us.

You can say Henry Ford is the father of the automobile or you can say Thomas Edison is the father of the lightbulb. If you invented your own killer app, you could say you're the father or the mother of that app. It's perfectly fair to say she's the mother or he's the father of that particular idea, but Paul is talking about something else.

Have you ever heard somebody say, "You were never a father to me"? Do you know what that person is probably saying? "You were never a father to me." What that probably means is, "You were my biological originator. You did bring me into existence, but you did not have a relationship with me that a father should have. You never truly loved me and cared for me. In your relationship to me you weren't father."

That's what Paul is talking about here. He's trying to say, "Sure, all human beings were created by God, and, in that sense, you might say God is father to all of us, but if you want a truly father/child relationship with the God of the universe, that only comes through Jesus." By the way, can I just point one thing out quickly? Notice up here in verse 26 it says, "**So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God ...**"

If you have an older translation, you'll see it says ... What the Greek word says there is, "In Christ Jesus you are all *sons* of God." The modern translation wants to be a little more gender sensitive, so it doesn't say *sons*; it says *children*, because he's talking to men and women. You know what? There are a lot of places in the Bible where I think it's good to turn the male pronoun into a more generic pronoun, because it *is* talking to men and women, but it doesn't work here.

Paul is actually saying something very radical. Adoption, then and now, is a legal institution. Today, when you adopt a child, there are all sorts of legalities. In those days, it was also a legal institution, but it was virtually always done when a man who had an estate didn't have someone to inherit it. When you had a man who had a great estate and had a lot of money and didn't have anyone to inherit the estate, he would adopt someone to become his heir.

That person would become his son and would inherit the estate. It was never done for women. Women were never adopted to be the heir of the estate. Men

were adopted. That's why to be adopted literally meant you were adopted into sonship. You were now the son and heir. Women weren't adopted. Paul has the audacity here to take a legal institution in which only men participated and turn it and say, "This is what God does for us. He adopts us. He makes us his heirs. He adopts us into his family," and he applies it to all Christians.

He says, "So in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, men and women, Jew and Gentile." Immediately he says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female." To say to women, "You have an equal share in the inherited glory through Jesus Christ, you have equal access to the love and commitment of God," was a radical thing.

In some ways, by trying to be sensitive, the English translators actually ruin the radical nature of what Paul is saying. He's trying to say, "You know what? Women, out in the Roman world you can never be sons, but in the Christian church you can be. You are heirs. You are equal." That's the gift of adoption. It's a gift. It's not something that's there automatically. It's a gift. It has been procured by Jesus Christ.

2. *The meaning of adoption.* We've already begun to hint at it. There are three things it means. There are actually more than three things, but there are three things here, and it's enough to give you the gist. To be adopted meant then, and it also means spiritually now, you get *an inheritance*, you have *unconditional access* to the parent's love and protection, and you get *a new name or identity*.

A. *An inheritance.* If you are adopted, then and now, it means the child who's adopted becomes an heir of the wealth of the parent, which means, for example, if you invented a killer app and you sold your business and now you're a billionaire because you took the risk and you had the smarts and you did all that, you earned it.

If you adopt a child, that child is also wealthy. That child didn't do anything to earn that money. It's the child's legally. We're told here in chapter 4, verse 7, "... **since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.**" What does it mean to be an heir of God? It's one thing to be adopted by a billionaire and now you're wealthy automatically, guaranteed, nothing you earned or deserved.

You didn't do it. You didn't take the risk. It's just yours. Legally, you're united to the family, and now you have part of that wealth. That's one thing, but what does it mean to be in Christ Jesus and, therefore, a child of God? What is God worth? What does that mean? Here's one little glimpse of this. Romans 8 is a parallel passage to Galatians 3. In Romans 8, Paul says:

"The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' [...] Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ ..." It sounds just like this. Then Paul pushes ahead and gives us an implication, a glimpse of the future that's not in this passage.

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.... the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

That goes by fast. It took me years of reading this before it began to sink in. Here's what it's saying. Our inheritance is glory. We're going to get the glory that Jesus Christ secured. What is glory? Whenever Ezekiel or Isaiah gets a vision of glory ... All I know is this is guaranteed. This isn't achievement. This is not something that if you live a good life you'll get. No, no. This is guaranteed.

Sometime in the future, if you're a child of God, you will become glorified. That means you'll be so endowed with, so infused with, such unimaginable degrees of majesty, perfection, bliss, wisdom, greatness, beauty, and blessedness ... It will come down on us so powerfully that we're told that the created order ... That's nature. That's the mountains and the oceans. Nature right now is in a state of decay. There's suffering. There's death in nature. It's broken.

We're told that when the glory comes down on us, the freedom and glory of the children of God will be so explosive it will envelop the entire created order and it will heal the created world, nature, of everything that's wrong with it. We'll bring the world with us. Our glorification will be that incredible.

This is beyond anything you have ever wanted, because it's way beyond the greatest thing you could ever imagine for yourself. You have no idea how happy you're going to be. You have no idea how beautiful you're going to be. You can't imagine. You can't even get near it. It's guaranteed. It's automatic. You didn't earn it. You didn't deserve it.

Let me ask you a question. Do you have any idea how consoling this is, how sweet this is, and how, if you are even able to walk around every day with just a molecule of the sense of the reality of that future assured glory, how that would make you able to handle things? There are a lot of things we face. There are a lot of pressures we face. There's a lot of suffering, a lot of darkness, a lot of difficulties, but you should just think about this.

If this was real to you at all through your prayer life, if you ever got a whiff of the reality of it, if you ever get to the place where you hear this ... I'm hoping it's happening a little bit right now as I'm trying to describe it. I'm not doing a great job, but if you're even beginning to go, "Wow," hold on to that, because that's what we have coming. We're heirs.

If you are his child, God has made you an heir. That means it doesn't really matter what your boss thinks about you. It doesn't matter if somebody slices up your reputation. It doesn't matter whether you have a chronic ailment. It doesn't matter if you put on 10 pounds. What are you upset about? Look at this.

If you have a trillion dollars in a Swiss bank and somebody picks your pocket of

\$5 here, do you go berserk? Yet a lot of us do. Somebody criticizes you, something goes wrong today, your reputation has been a bit besmirched, and you melt down. Either you're not a child of God or you are and you have no idea what that means, if you let it melt you down.

B. *Unconditional access*. You have a relationship in which you have access to the love, the time, the attention, and the protection of God unconditionally forever. It says here, “**Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’**” By the way, it’s interesting to watch people who know something about language try to figure out how you translate *Abba*.

The problem is we don’t exactly have a word like it. It’s an Aramaic word, and it was actually a word used by children to talk to their parents, and it’s a word that then later on they used as adults. It’s not quite like *Daddy* or *Mommy*. It’s more like *Mama* or *Papa*. In the Southern United States, very often, even when you’re grown up, you may still call your mother “Mama.” It reminds you that you were a child, but at the same time it’s not “Mommy.”

It’s a little bit hard to translate this word *Abba*, but what it does mean is “Because of who I am, because I’m your child, I have an access to you that nobody else in the world does.” You may have a great boss. Maybe he or she is very kind to you and is trying to develop you and seems very committed to you and really wants you to succeed, but let me tell you something. Your boss is not a parent. Your boss is not a guardian.

When you adopt a child, you are the child’s legal guardian. You’re responsible for that child. You need to protect that child. That child is your responsibility. The protection, well being, and care of that child is your legal responsibility, as well as your emotional desire. No matter how good your boss is your boss is not your guardian. If you keep coming in late, if you screw up, at a certain point your boss has to say, “You know, I really like you and I really care for you, but you’re out of here. Terminated.”

Parents don’t do that. If you have three children, which I have … I can just tell you as a parent, over the years, when one of the children is acting up or having trouble, you don’t terminate the child. If anything, your heart gets more engaged with the child. It’s kind of weird. Right? No, it’s not. You’re the parent. Have you ever heard of the War of Jenkins’ Ear? I’m betting you haven’t. If you have heard of the War of Jenkins’ Ear, you need to please write a note to the office of Redeemer and we will give you a cash prize.

The War of Jenkins’ Ear, which started in 1739, was because there was a British ship that was attacked by a Spanish ship. It was an act of piracy, completely unprovoked. The Spanish ship attacked the British ship, took it over, and in the ensuing battle the captain of the British ship, whose name was Captain Jenkins, had his ear cut off in the battle. He saved his ear, and it was put in a bottle of liquor and sent to Parliament.

There it was taken out and displayed in a session of Parliament, and an account was read of what had happened. As a result, Parliament declared war on Spain in 1739. Over an ear? Yeah, because an attack on a citizen of the crown is an attack on the crown. That's just national solidarity. You know that family ties are even stronger. Isn't that right? When Saul was persecuting Christians ... He was killing them. Then Jesus showed up on the road to Damascus and appeared in glory and Saul fell to the ground.

Do you remember what Jesus said? "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Not *them* ... *me*. Do you know what he's saying? You know what family ties are like. If you attack one, you attack all. Basically, what this means is that God is unconditionally committed to you. You have his attention. You have his ear. You have his time. You have his love. He is legally and personally unconditionally committed to you forever. It's an astounding thing.

C. *A new identity.* This new identity, according to the Bible, means you're no longer a slave; you're a son. "**Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts ... So you are no longer a slave, but God's child ...**" Alain de Botton, French philosopher, wrote a book called *Status Anxiety*. He said there are really two kinds of societies. He says you have traditional society in which you get your self-worth and significance by fulfilling a social role. You're a good father or mother, a good son or daughter, a good member of the tribe.

In traditional society, the family means everything. The community means everything. Your individual freedom doesn't mean anything. What your job is is to fit in and be the good son and be the good daughter. Traditional societies have a lot of moral rules. He says what that means is in traditional societies people are always being crushed with guilt, because you're never a good enough son or daughter. You're never living up to your parents' expectations. You're just crushed with guilt. There's no freedom there; you're just crushed with guilt.

Ah, he says, so let's go to Western society, an egalitarian, individualistic, meritocratic society, where you decide who you want to be and then go for it. He says we're not crushed by guilt; we're crushed by anxiety. He calls it *status anxiety*. You have to be good. You have to make the money. You have to look good, because what you're anxious about is how you look. In traditional society, you can wear any old thing, because what really matters is you're a good son or daughter, but in Western society you need to look good. You have to impress people.

Notice what it says. "In Christ you're children of God, and all of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." What does that mean? Baptism doesn't save you; it identifies you publicly. Alain de Botton says if you're in the Western world you're crushed by anxiety. You're trying to live up. You're trying to be good. You're trying to get into the best school. You're trying to keep your figure. You're trying to do all these things. It's so important to look good.

If you go to traditional society, then you're crushed with social expectations and

guilt. Ah, but do you know what Paul is saying here? If you're getting your self-worth from your performance, one way or another, of course you're a slave, but what if you know that God is no longer your boss, no longer your employer, but your Father, that you're accepted, that you're loved? You're free. You're not a slave anymore. You're free.

Here's the reason why. When you want to do the thing you ought to do and are built to do, then you are absolutely free. There are plenty of times in which you need to do something, even though you don't want to do it, but it's the right thing to do. Of course. That happens often. But when you're doing that, you're feeling kind of constrained. Here's real freedom. Real freedom, ultimate freedom, is when you desperately want to and delight to do the thing you ought to do and are built to do.

3. *The reason we can be adopted.* How can that happen? How can you have this inner freedom? If you see how it is that you receive this adoption. This adoption was given to you as a gift. How? Verses 4–5 are a wonderful summary of the gospel. See what it says? “**But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman** [he became human], **born under the law, to redeem those under the law ...”**

What does that mean, *under the law*? You and I owe God. He made us. We should be living for him, but we're not. We owe that, and we can't make good on our obligation. Jesus Christ comes in and becomes a human being. He fulfills the obligation we owe. He comes under the law. He lives the life you ought to live. He loves God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He loves his neighbor as himself. Then at the end of his life, he redeems us.

Do you know why? The word *redeem* is a very specific Greek word that means to pay the price that secures a slave's freedom. Do you know how he paid that price? On the cross he lost his prayer. Whenever Jesus Christ talked to God anywhere in the Bible, except once, he always called him “Father.” He didn't say, “Lord Almighty.” He says, “Father,” over and over. He sometimes even calls him, “Abba,” showing he has this intimacy, showing he has this confidence. Jesus Christ's prayer life is always marked by, “Father, Abba.”

Only one time does he ever talk to God and not call him “Father,” and you know where that is. It's on the cross. He's still loving God. He says, “**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”** He's still loving God. “My God.” He's still obeying God. “My God.” But he doesn't say, “Father.” Do you know why? Because the Father is not being a guardian. The Father is not protecting him. The Father is not showing his love. The Father is not there for him. The Father is doing what fathers are not allowed to do. He's abandoning Jesus Christ.

Why? Because Jesus got what we deserve. He got cast out of the family so we could be brought in. He paid the price we deserve to be paying, that we owe. Jesus Christ lost the sonship he deserved so we could have the sonship we don't deserve. He was cast out. He paid the ultimate price so we could be brought in.

When you see him doing that, you want to please him finally. You're not obeying God just because that's the only way ... "I don't want to do it, but if I'm going to get to heaven, if I want to get my prayers answered, I just have to do it." No, no. That's not freedom. Here's freedom. William Cowper's hymn:

*To see the law by Christ fulfilled
And hear his pardoning voice
Transforms a slave into a child
And duty into choice.*

When I see that he did that for me so I could be his child, that makes me a child, not just legally but really. Now I want to please him. Now I want to do something for him. "Transforms a slave into a child and duty into choice." It's something I want to do, and now I'm free.

4. *How it applies to prayer.* Do you realize what it means to pray, "Our Father"? It's not just a warm cuddly feeling, that you say, "I'd like to call God 'Father.'" As soon as you say, "Our Father," that's coming in Jesus' name. Some people point out that the Lord's Prayer doesn't end "In Jesus' name," but it doesn't have to end "In Jesus' name" because it's in the first words, "Our Father."

Now you know, because I took you into the rest of the Bible, that you have no right to go to God and say, "Our Father" unless Jesus Christ had done all that he did for you. So even to say, "Our Father" is to say, "Lord, I don't deserve this. This is astounding. It's amazing. The cost that Jesus Christ bore in order for me to come like this with complete confidence is something that moves me."

If you're praying, "Our Father who art in heaven," you won't be able to get past "Father" without it melting your heart down if you understand what it means. Think about this. Jesus prayed, "Our Father." Why? He was perfect. He was a perfect son. He deserved God answering every prayer and listening to him every time. Now Jesus says, "When you pray, pray 'Our Father.' Why? Because I died for you, and now you're in Christ Jesus."

When you believe in Jesus Christ, you're brought in, as it were, and when God hears you, he sees Jesus. He treats you as if you deserve what Jesus deserves, the attention he deserves, the love he deserves, the regard he deserves. How much does he deserve? Everything. That's how God treats you now. To pray "Our Father" means, on the one hand, to come with humility. Never come to God saying, "Well, God, I've lived a pretty good life, so you need to give me this."

If you come like that, you're not coming in Jesus' name. You're not coming to God as a Father. You're forgetting the fact that this is undeserved. In fact, if you have even the slightest hint in your heart that God had better give you what you're asking for now, because actually you've lived a pretty good life and you deserve this, God can't give that to you. It would be the worst thing for you. It's not safe to give it to you.

I've talked to so many people over the years as a pastor who said, "Well, I lived a

pretty good life, and then I asked for this and God didn't give it to me, so I walked." How could God possibly give you something when, when you got it, it would just confirm you in your trajectory away from God into self-sufficiency, into pride, into arrogance? He couldn't give it to you. To pray "Our Father" means "I don't deserve this."

Secondly, to pray "Our Father" means "I know you're going to hear me." Even if he doesn't give you exactly what you asked for ... If you're a parent you know this. You ache for your children to be happy, and when you can't give your child what the child wants and the child starts to cry, you die inside and you try to figure out some other way to give them, in another form, what they were asking for. Don't you think God is going to do that?

There has to be absolute humility to pray "Our Father," but also total confidence, shameless confidence that God is hearing you and is going to take your prayer and do something incredible through it, even if it's not exactly what you asked for. Lastly, intimacy. "Abba, Father." The Holy Spirit comes into your heart. What that means is that if you're a child of God, then you have the possibility, in prayer, of having experiences of God's nearness, joy, and love that you haven't even begun to tap into.

Thomas Goodwin, the seventeenth-century British Puritan, tells a story. He said he was walking along and there was a man and his little boy walking along. At one point, the father turned around, picked the son up, and said, "I love you." The little boy hugged the father and said, "I love you too." Then he put him down and they kept on walking. Thomas Goodwin said, "Was the child more legally a son in his father's arms than when he was on the street? No. But he was experiencing his sonship."

When the Bible says the Holy Spirit comes into your heart crying "Abba, Father," it means it's the Holy Spirit's job to give you a sense of closeness with the Father, to give you a sense of the reality of his love, so that you really sense his embrace, so that you sense his kiss. We're all settling for too little in prayer. We're settling for too little of the experience that the Holy Spirit has been sent into your heart to give you.

To pray "Our Father" is to pray with humility, to pray with confidence, to pray with shamelessness, to pray with joy, and it's to pray with the expectation that there is a love to be shed abroad in your heart that you haven't even begun to experience. So ask for it. Let's pray.

Our Father, tonight we realize what it took for us to be able to say, "Our Father." It thrills us. It shocks us to be able to say, "Our Father," and it immediately begins to empower the rest of our prayer. If we start our prayer saying, "Our Father," fully cognizant of what it took for us to be able to enter into your presence with that kind of confidence, that begins to actually pick our prayer life up and electrify it and empower it, and all of these things that are dependent on prayer in our lives begin to flow in.

Please, Father, help us to learn how to pray. Teach us to pray, and give us all of the benefits and greatnesses that would be in our lives, as individuals and as a church, as a body, if we learned it. Teach us this fall. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

Awe: Hallowed Be Thy Name

The Prayer of Prayers—October 5, 2014

Psalm 63

**1 You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.**

**2 I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.**

**3 Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.**

**4 I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.**

**5 I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.**

**6 On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.**

**7 Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.**

**8 I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.**

**9 Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.**

**10 They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.**

**11 But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glory in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.**

This is the Word of the Lord.

This fall, we're looking at the subject of prayer. We're taking the Lord's Prayer, which is Jesus' own instruction to the human race on how to pray, and each week we're taking one of the phrases and looking at the teaching in the Bible that helps us understand what that phrase means and, therefore, how we can actually make good on it in prayer. Tonight we're going to look at "Hallowed be thy name."

Hallowed is an old English word that means to treat something as sacred, to treat something as holy. If you go back to Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, or anybody who has ever tried to explain what this means, they say it means to treat God as being as glorious, as holy, as infinitely, majestically beautiful as he really is, to treat him as glorious and as great as he actually is. John Calvin, in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, when he gets to "Hallowed be thy name," says it is to have your entire heart captivated with wonderment for him.

So "Hallowed be thy name" means to praise and adore. It means to be captivated, astonished, to be melted with grateful joy for who he is and what he has done. We're here tonight to talk about how to do that. How do you praise and adore God? We're looking at Psalm 63, a very famous psalm about praise. Verse 4 says, "**I will praise you as long as I live ...**" It's all about praise, but it tells you quite a lot that is very specific about praise.

For many years, I always felt I didn't really know how to do it, because nobody ever gave me specifics. Well, here are five aspects ... Not steps, though I'll show you that I'm trying to give them to you in a logical order, in some ways. Five aspects to praise and adoration. They are *thinking, expressing, appraising, beholding, and resting*. You have to do all five if you're going to praise him, if you're going to hallow his name.

1. *Thinking*. The first thing you see here is that David ... It's a psalm of David. I'll explain a little more about when this happened. This is a psalm of David. David doesn't just say, "You're great." He breaks it down. He analyzes it. He enumerates the glories. He does this analysis. The old word for this is called *recollecting*. He doesn't just say, "You're great." He says, "I see your power. I see your glory. I see your love." He's breaking it down.

All praise starts like this. You break it down into specifics. You enumerate and list the glories of God. You go on and on about all of the different ways in which he's glorious. You don't just say, "You're great." Do you know why? Because praise is very linked to love. When you fall in love with somebody, your mind goes into overdrive about what's great about the person, and you're specific.

Do you know Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnet 43"? Very famous. "How do I

love thee? Let me count the ways.” That is the language of love. Not, “Oh, you’re great.” It’s, “Let me count the ways.” You get specific. You go into detail. You know that great classic, wonderful, well-done comedy movie *Groundhog Day*? The character played by Bill Murray is someone who has to have the same day repeated over and over and over again.

During this time, he falls in love with the character played by Andie MacDowell. He, of course, has actually spent years with her, years of days, in which he has seen everything he loves about her, whereas, on the other hand, she doesn’t realize that has happened. At one point, he tries to say something about he loves her, and she says, “You don’t love me. You don’t even know me.”

Then suddenly he looks at her and says, “You like boats, but not the ocean. You like a lake in summer in the mountains. You’re a sucker for French poetry and rhinestones. You’re very generous. You’re kind to strangers and children, and when you stand in the snow you look like an angel.” It’s riveting, because he doesn’t just say, “I love you.” He says, “Here’s what I love about you.” He’s listing. He’s analyzing it. As you go through the list, your heart expands and the loved one’s heart expands. That’s praise.

The first thing you have to do is to break it down. You have to have 10 things, 100 things. You don’t just say, “I praise you, God, for being a God of love.” You say, “I praise you, God, for being a God of costly love, because it cost you so much to give me your love. Undeserved love, wise love, tough love, unconditional love.” Every one of those things is a different aspect, a different wonder. You’ll never learn how to praise unless you think it out, unless you do recollection, unless you analyze it.

2. *Expressing.* It’s not enough just to see God’s glories. You have to articulate them. You have to declare them. You have to express them. He says, “My lips will glorify you.” He says, “With singing lips my mouth will praise you. In your name I will lift up my hands.” He’s not just simply thinking about God’s glory; he’s expressing it. You notice he’s expressing it musically. He’s expressing it publically, overtly. He’s also expressing it corporately, because he’s talking about praising God in the congregation.

Now one of the things that’s maybe not what you might think is the book of Psalms does not say it’s enough just simply to praise God in your heart, though of course that’s praising God. You’ve thought it out, you see his glories, and now you tell him directly about his glories, and that is praise. You can do that in your heart, but it’s striking how the Bible talks about how important it is to do this skillfully.

Do you know how many places the Bible talks about praising God with the harp and with the timbrel, praising him in the congregation with music? Then it says, “But play skillfully. Do it well.” It has to be great music, not bad music. You can praise him with your lips, but it has to be eloquent. Why? There’s no way to understand praise, I don’t think, especially what the Bible says about praise, unless you read an essay by C.S. Lewis.

It's a chapter in his book *Reflections on the Psalms*. One of the chapters is called "A Word About Praising." I often cite it. If you've done any research in this area, other people cite it all the time, because it's so seminal. In it he tells about how when he first became a Christian he was really put off by the fact that God is always asking people to praise him. He's inviting people. "Praise me. Glorify me." You say, "Gee, that's pretty conceited."

If you're talking to a woman, for example, and you're talking a little while, and suddenly she says, "Enough about you. Don't you think my dress is beautiful? Don't you think I look great in it?" you might say, "Yeah," but then you want to get away, because she's conceited. Why should we treat God any differently? Lewis actually ended up saying that when he went through that phase where he thought God was conceited to be asking us to praise him, he said, "I didn't understand how praise works."

This is what he says in there. I'll paraphrase and then read you a quote. He says what he didn't understand is that when you enjoy something that joy always spontaneously overflows into praise. If you listen to some music you enjoy, you grab someone and say, "Listen to this," or if you find some beautiful landscape, you grab somebody and say, "Look at this." You praise it, and you want them to praise it too. You want them to say, "Wow, that is great." Why?

Lewis says he never realized (until at a certain point he did) that if you enjoy something you have to praise it to others. It's almost a visceral desire, a need to praise it to others, because, he says, expression of praise completes the joy. Here's the quote: "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation." God, in commanding us to glorify him, is simply inviting us to enjoy him. You can't get *at* the joy until you get *out* the joy.

Do you see what he's saying? He says it's not like I enjoy something and then I praise it. You enjoy it *by* praising it. In fact, your joy is completed *as* you praise it, and the better your praise, the better the joy. Have you not noticed that you feel joy or admiration for God, and one of the ways you experience that joy is when you sing a great hymn? Why? Because usually the words say it better than you can say it.

Because the words say it better than you can say it, through those better words, because you're praising God well, you're enjoying him better. Why do you think so often when I'm preaching I will suddenly break into and quote a stanza out of a hymn? Notice I do that? In fact, I'm going to do it later today. You can thank God I don't actually try to sing it to you, but the reason I quote it, the reason I cite it, is because it praises God better than I can.

The more excellent our praise, the more eloquent the words, the more incredible the music, the better we express praise, the more we actually enjoy God, the more our hearts are engaged and the more he's honored. This is the reason, by the way, why asking for excellence in worship is not the New York snob factor. It's

not like, “Of course we want excellent music. We’re New Yorkers. The food is great. The music is great. Everything is great here.” It’s not a snob factor.

The Bible actually says, “Praise him with a timbrel. Praise him with the harp.” You can go to Psalm 33 and other places. It says, “Praise him skillfully.” The joy comes out, and the better it comes out, the more eloquent, the more fitting the expression of the praise is, the more God is honored and the more your heart is engaged, the more joy you have. That’s the reason why God says, “Glorify me, because I want you to have the joy you won’t have otherwise.”

3. *Appraising*. By the way, the word *appraise* has the word *praise* in it. Did you notice? What does it mean to appraise? It means to add up its value and compare it to other things. If you’re going to appraise a painting or appraise a piece of land, you’re going to compare it to other paintings or other lands. If you’re going to appraise a home, you’re going to compare it to other homes. This is what’s happening. Where does it say that? Verse 3: **“Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.”**

Let’s talk about this. These psalms have headings. If you read them in the Bible, you see psalms have headings sometimes that describe who wrote it and the situation. In this case, it says, **“A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.”** He was running for his life. He was being hunted down. His life was on the line, and he comes in and has an experience of God’s power and glory and sees his love and says, “It’s more important that I have God’s love than it is for me to stay alive physically.”

“Your love is better than life.” Do you know what that means? What he’s doing is thinking out the implications of what he sees. It’s not just, “You’re a God of great eternity and power and love.” What he’s saying is, “If you are that, then why am I afraid? It doesn’t matter if I die here.” In other words, he’s getting courage. Paul says in Acts 20:24, “Neither do I count my own life dear to me, that I may finish my course with joy.”

What he’s actually saying is, “It’s necessary for me to have the love of God. It’s not necessary for me to live. It’s perfectly okay to lose my life as long as I have this.” He’s actually thinking out the implications of the greatness he sees. He’s aligning his whole life. To praise God means to treat him as if he’s as glorious as he is.

You see his glory, you express it, and then you bring everything, not only your mind, not only your emotions, but your life in line with that. You say, “If he’s really that great ...” Look at the place in the Psalms where it says, **“The Lord is the stronghold of my life ...”** Then it says, **“... of whom shall I be afraid?”** He’s appraising. “If God is this strong, why am I afraid?”

Don’t just praise him for being a God of love. Say, “If you really are this loving, why am I afraid?” Don’t just praise him for being a wise God. Say, “If you really are that wise, why am I so upset with how my life is going? You know best.” If you praise God for being merciful, don’t just praise him for being merciful. Say, “If

you're really that merciful, why am I still feeling guilty for this thing I did in the past?" That's what David is doing.

Praise means not just with your mind enumerating all God's greatness and then with your heart and mouth expressing it, but then appraising and saying, "Well, if he's really *this* and if he's really *this*, if he has the ultimate wealth, the ultimate health, the ultimate love, then all of these other things I'm looking for to give me what only God can give me are not so important. I'm not as upset now about my career. I'm not as upset now about my relationship. I'm not as upset about those things."

Saint Augustine says what really makes you what you are is not so much what you say or what you believe or even how you behave. It's what you love. If you're a driven workaholic, if you are constantly getting into destructive relationships that you can't get out of ... All of the things that drive us and that we say, "I don't know how to change this ..." It's because our loves need to be reordered. If it's really true that what makes you what you are is not what you think or what you do so much as what you love, then it's only through adoration that you'll ever change.

Adoration changes what you love, what captures your imagination, what delights you, what turns your crank. In the midst of all of your adoration, you say, "Wait a minute. All of these things I'm looking for to give me what only God can give me aren't as important anymore. They don't have to drive me. They don't have to tear me apart anymore." Do you see how absolutely life changing adoration is?

4. *Beholding*. If you have done the thinking and expressing and if you've also done the appraising, then (and usually *only* then) you can do the beholding. There's a very famous phrase here. "**I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. [...] I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods ...**" What he's doing here is lapsing into sensory language. When he says, "I beheld your glory," it probably doesn't mean he actually had a vision.

It's possible that he actually had a vision of brightness that he saw with his physical eyes, but there are other places in the Psalms that talk about, "After death I will see you face-to-face." This is probably not talking about that. He is saying, "Because I know your power and glory and love, but I actually experienced your power and glory and love." The reason he uses sensory language ... He says, "It's not just that I know your love. Your love feels like a feast to me. It's satisfying. I don't just know that you have power and glory; I've beheld it."

What it means is sometimes praise (and, to some degree, praise *should* do this) gives you a sense of God's reality on your heart. Just like you can't understand praise without looking at what C.S. Lewis says about it in the book *Reflections on the Psalms*, I don't think you can understand praise unless you read Jonathan Edwards' great sermon *A Divine and Supernatural Light*. He uses a very famous illustration there, and I'll show you why it's so famous. It's justly famous.

He basically says, "I can rationally tell you that honey is sweet. In fact, if I am a good wordsmith, I can describe the sweetness of honey, to a great degree, and I can make arguments. I can give you rational knowledge that honey is sweet, but when you actually taste it on your tongue, the sensation of the sweetness of honey conveys a knowledge beyond what I could give you rationally."

What he says is you can rationally know honey is sweet without ever having tasted it and sensed it, but you can't actually sense the sweetness of honey without also rationally knowing that it's sweet. Then, of course, Edwards turns around and says it's one thing to have an opinion that God is holy. It's another thing to sense his holiness, to actually sense you're in the presence of his holiness, to see his perfection and then to see your flaws.

It's one thing to have an opinion that God is loving. It's another thing to actually sense his love shed on your heart with as much sensory reality as if you were in the presence of a human being who was hugging you and kissing you. Ultimately, your life will not change unless sometimes you get a sense on your heart. After thinking and expressing and appraising, sometimes you behold him. It can be light. It can be heavy. Sometimes it doesn't happen at all.

I'll tell you, the only way you will ever get into the place where your heart is free from a lot of its fears, a lot of its addictions, a lot of the things that drive you, will be only if you see God's beauty and sense his love on your heart. In fact, I'll go this far. The difference between a Christian and just a religious person is almost right here. There are other ways to show that. You know, I sometimes do that to you. I say, "The difference between a religious person and a Christian ..."

I think this is one of the key ones, because religious people pray, but they usually don't do a lot of praise. I'll tell you why. Religious people may confess. Why? The prayer of confession wants forgiveness. The prayer of petition wants whatever you're asking for ... help, health, protection. Praise wants God for who he is in himself. Most people don't spend much time in praise, because they're mercenary when it comes to God.

The reason God is not a reality that basically shapes your heart, because his beauty and his love makes all of these other things that drive you and all of your other fears go away because of his love ... The reason that doesn't happen is that most people, when they pray, don't spend much time in adoration. Why? Because adoration basically means, "I love you for who you are, not for what you give me."

Imagine you've just gotten married recently and your young wife says to you, "Honey, why do you love me? Why did you fall in love with me? Why did you marry me?" and you say, "Well, first of all, there were a couple of major business relationships I got into through you. There were a couple of incredible deals that happened because of doors you opened for me. Also, I want you to know I did a little bit of research, and you have a very, very wealthy uncle who loves you and who has no children, and he's old and sick."

"Wait a minute. What's going on here? You don't love me. You love what I give you." What does it mean to love someone? It means, "I love you just for who you are. Not for the things you give me, not for the status you give me, not for the sex you give me, not for anything but just for who you are in yourself." That's love. That's the only kind of relationship that actually will reshape your heart and cast out all of these other fears and things.

The love of God replaces the things you're trying to steal self-acceptance from through *this* way and *that* way. The love of God is that real to you. How do you get that? How does that really happen? I said it's the mark of real Christianity, not just mercenary religion, where you're asking God for things and he's giving you things, but where you are able to actually see his beauty and love him for who he is in himself. How does that happen? I'll tell you how it happens.

5. *Resting*. You have to have an experience of undeserved grace, salvation. You have to understand your salvation is by grace. It's undeserved. That is what turns God into someone not just who's useful but who's beautiful to you. Now where do you see that? In your Bibles it'll say at the top that this is a psalm of David when he was in the desert in the wilderness of Judah. That's why in the beginning he's talking about, "I thirst for you in a dry and parched land."

He was out in the wilderness running for his life. Why? All commentators agree his son Absalom had pulled off a coup d'état and was trying to kill him, and he had run into the wilderness. Can you imagine? Do you have any idea how he felt? David knew the reason his family was such an absolute mess was largely his fault. It went all the way back to the time when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed and then it came out.

His family was a mess. They all hated each other. One of his sons raped one of his daughters. One of his sons tried to kill another one of his sons. His family was a mess. It was toxic, and it was largely because of his own sins and his own foolishness. Now he's running for his life. It's very intriguing what he says at the very end in verse 11. He almost certainly went into the tabernacle, went into the sanctuary to pray to God, assuming God had abandoned him.

Why not? God seemed to have abandoned him, and he probably deserved it. Look at his sins. Look at what he had done. God had given him everything, and look at the murder he did. Look at all the horrible stuff he did. Now he was getting his just deserts. Yet when he gets in there, he says, "**I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life ...**"

The word *love*, some of you know from older translations ... Our NIV translation does not serve us well here. The Hebrew word here is a very important Hebrew word in the Old Testament, and it's usually translated *steadfast love*. "Because thy steadfast love is better than life, my lips will glorify you." *Checed*, the Hebrew word, steadfast love, means unconditional love, covenant love, committed love, undeserved love.

David, to his shock, comes in and God meets him. He has a sense of God's presence. His steadfast love is shed abroad in his heart, and he can't believe it. He says, "I'm astounded. After all I've done, why are you still with me? Why are you still blessing me? Why are you still loving me? It's undeserved. It's grace. But you are. Thank you." That's why verse 11 is so interesting. He says, "The king will rejoice in God." *He's* the king.

What does that mean? He's reasserting his identity. "God is still with me. I'm still the king. He's still with me." He has an experience of grace, and that's the reason he can praise God this way. Don't you know that you and I today have a far greater resource for that experience of grace than David? David didn't know why God could still love him in spite of his sin, but you and I know why God can still love us in spite of our sin.

David was a king who was driven into the wilderness because of his sins, and God did not abandon him. Centuries later, one of his descendants, Jesus the King, was driven into the wilderness, tempted by Satan, was crucified outside the gate. He was driven out not for his own sins but for our sins, and God did abandon him. "**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**"

Why did God abandon him? Because Jesus was getting the abandonment David deserved and that I deserve and that you deserve so that God will never abandon you now, because he took the penalty you deserve. He took the penalty for our sins. When you see him doing that, that is the experience. That is what makes God not just useful but beautiful, not just someone who gives you things but someone who becomes beautiful for who he is in himself. The beauty of God and the adoration and the sense of his love on your heart really can change you.

Simone Weil was a French Jewish intellectual during World War II, but she had migraine headaches. One of the ways she dealt with those migraine headaches is she would meditate on great poetry. She would read great poetry and meditate on every word. It was a way of dealing with her migraines. She was meditating on the poetry of George Herbert, the seventeenth-century metaphysical Christian poet. One of his poems is called "Love (III)." He actually had "Love (I)," "Love (II)," and "Love (III)."

In "Love (III)" he's depicting Jesus as an innkeeper and the human soul as a weary traveler. Jesus is asking the soul to come in and rest and eat, and the soul keeps saying, "No, no, no. I'm not worthy. I'm not worthy." At the very end of the poem, the soul says, "Let my shame go where it doth deserve." Jesus says, "No, I bore the blame, so I will serve. You must sit down and taste my meat." The soul gives in and says, "So I did sit and eat."

As Simone Weil meditated on Jesus Christ bearing the blame for our sin, *checed*, unconditional love ... She says something like, "I felt Christ come down and take possession of me. In this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination took part, but it was like the sight of a friend's face." She says, "It wasn't something I saw with my eyes, and I wasn't imagining it. There

was a reality that just took me over."

She experienced what David experienced and what *you* can experience. If you see him bearing the blame for you, dying on the cross for you, that turns God from a useful person we pray to for things to a beautiful person we adore for who he is in himself, and that will change the very shape of your heart. Of course, that's going to be in the future perfectly, but we can get some of it now. The great feast is in the future, in heaven, but there are a lot of hors d'oeuvres available now through prayer and adoration. As the hymn says ...

*The hill of Zion yields
A thousand sacred sweets
Before we reach the heavenly fields
And walk the golden streets.*

Let's pray.

Father, this is the foretaste of that great feast, and we pray that as we take the bread and take the cup you would meet us and you would teach us more and more how to hallow your name and change us thereby. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Hope: Thy Kingdom Come

The Prayer of Prayers—October 12, 2014

Luke 6:20–26, 46–49

20 Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. **21** Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. **24** But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. **25** Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. **26** Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

46 Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? **47** As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. **48** They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.

49 But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”

The Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at the subject of prayer each week. We’re taking a part of the Lord’s Prayer each week and going to some part of the Bible to help us understand the biblical teaching behind the phrase. When Jesus gave us his instruction on how to pray, the Lord’s Prayer ... The Lord’s Prayer was filled with concepts that you need to know the rest of the Bible in order to use in your prayer life.

What we’re doing each week is taking one phrase and going to someplace in the Bible that sheds light on what it means. Tonight, we’re looking at the phrase *thy kingdom come*. What does it mean to pray, “Thy kingdom come”? We’re going to look at this passage in Luke. There are two places ... Matthew 5 is a little more famous, the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, but Luke 6 is another place where he talks about the kingdom of God and the blessedness of the kingdom. “Blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom.”

These passages both tell us a lot about the kingdom of God. I want to show you what the kingdom of God is, what it’s not, what it’s like, how you enter it, and then we’ll apply it to how all that helps us pray, “Thy Kingdom come.” *What it is, what it’s not, what it’s like, how you enter it, and how that relates to prayer.*

1. *What it is.* Jesus says at the very beginning, “**Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.**” What does it mean to be the kingdom of God? When we Americans think of kingdom, we have a bit of a blur because we don’t have kings here. However, a *kingdom* is an administration. It’s a way of life. In fact, it’s a whole culture instituted by the new king.

Let me give you a suggestion. We don’t have kings, but we do have coaches. I want you to know that when a coach takes over a major college football or basketball team, that’s not a democracy. That coach is a king. That coach is not a president elected by the players; that coach is a king. That coach is exercising authority.

Here’s what we know about good and bad coaches. A bad coach comes in and

has rules. "Here's how you have to live." A bad coach sets up a corporate culture, attitudes, policies, vision, values, priorities. When a bad coach comes in, the bad coach's administration, as it were, and mores, customs, and rules and all that don't produce much.

With a bad coach, the players are fighting with each other. There's no unity. They're not playing up to their potential. But a great coach comes in. New rules. New priorities. New goods. These are the things we're after. New ways of looking at everything. The great coach comes in, and under that great coach's authority, what you see is the team gels. They play as a team. Unity. Every player plays beyond his or her potential.

Now what's the kingdom of God? It's God's authority. God is not just a great human coach. When you come under God's authority, under his rule, under his way of life, under his will ... When you seek his priorities, the things he says we should be after, you enter into his realm, into his kingdom, and you blossom, because you were built for serving him. You blossom and become everything you ought to be. That's the kingdom of God.

In this life, the kingdom of God is only partial. The kingdom of God is not here fully. When God returns and is here fully and there's no alternative to his kingdom, everything here will be perfect. That's the ultimate coach, you might say. There will be no suffering. There will be no death. There will be nothing wrong. Meanwhile, right now, it's here partially. You can enter in when you're born again. You can enter into his kingdom and begin to blossom.

That's what the kingdom of God is. It's entering into his realm. It's serving him and not anything else. If you serve anything else, even yourself, you're in the kingdom of this world and, basically, you will find no unity. Have you noticed the human race? The team is not playing well together. We're not playing up to our potential. We're not even close to it. But in the kingdom of God we realize our potential, there's unity, and so on. That's what the kingdom of God is. It's the realm of God. It's the rule of God.

We say, "Okay, well, what does it mean, then, to live God's way? What does the administration of the king look like? What are God's laws and his will?" Well, Jesus loves to teach by contrast. In this passage, he doesn't just give you the blessedness of the kingdom. He gives you the woes of the kingdom of this world.

Notice there are four groups that are blessed, because theirs is the kingdom of God. Then there are four groups Jesus pronounces a woe on from verses 24–26 by way of contrast. What he's actually doing is contrasting two operating systems, two kingdoms, and the priorities of God's kingdom and the world's kingdom. Jesus often does this. He loves to teach by contrast.

2. *What it's not.* Verses 24–26: "Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are well fed. Woe to you who laugh. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you." It's very striking for him to say this. Does this get your attention? "Woe to you when everything is going well in your life." That's not exactly what he's saying.

Here's why. Let me give you four names for these. These are priorities.

He says, "Woe to you when your priority is *power*," because that's what wealth is. Wealth gives you the power to do things you wouldn't have otherwise. The poorer you are, the less power you have. The richer you are, the more power you have. Basically, wealth is a matter of power. "Woe to you who have *material comfort*" (well fed). Everything is fine materially. You have plenty to eat. You have a great home. You have wonderful clothes.

Next is *success*. When it says, "Woe to you who laugh," it looks like it's saying, "Woe to you who are happy." That's not what he's saying. He's not pronouncing a woe on anyone who's laughing with joy because they're happy. This word *laugh* is a Greek word that means to gloat. That's very important. In fact, it's the key to understanding this whole set of things.

You know what gloating is. Gloating goes like this: "Ha ha! I have won and you have lost." Most of you have never been quite that overt, but inside your heart you have thought that. Here's gloating: "I win." That's very important. When he says, "Here are the priorities of the kingdom of this world: power, material comfort, success, and recognition or celebrity (everyone speaks well of you)," he's not saying these things are bad conditions, *per se*.

He's not trying to say if people speak well of you, if you're successful in business ... He's not saying that's terrible. No, no. The gloating thing is the key. He's talking about people who make this their kingdom. Power, material comfort, success, and recognition are their kingdom, their ordering principles, their rule of life, their operating system. In other words, these are the things they're after, and everything else has to serve them.

Who do you hang out with? Who are your friends? Where do you live? How do you spend your time? Who do you date? It all has to do with helping you with these things. It all has to do with power, material comfort, success, and recognition. Now this is New York City, and we are the capital of the kingdom of this world. These things are absolutely dominant.

You may believe in God. You may be religious or may be a moral person, but if these are the main things in your life, you live in the kingdom of this world. These are your ordering principles. These are the things that really determine how you spend your time. This is your operating system. Here's what Jesus says about people who live inside this realm. They're serving these things. These things are their masters. "Woe to you."

By the way, because we don't use the word *woe* that often ... It's kind of an old English word. If you're reading through here, you might be excused if you think, "Well, the first four times he says, 'Blessed, blessed, blessed,' but then he says, 'Woe, woe, woe ...'" We think of *woe* as "Cursed," but that's not true. When Jesus says, "Woe to you," he's not saying, "You're cursed."

Think about it. Have you ever heard anyone say, "Woe is me"? They're not saying, "I'm cursed." What they're saying is, "I'm sorry for myself." They're not

cursing themselves. "Woe is me." They're saying, "I'm so sorry for myself." That's actually what the word means. Jesus is saying, "Alas for you." Isn't this something? If you live for wealth and you get wealth, if you live for recognition and you get recognition, alas for you. "How terrible for you," is what Jesus is saying.

Now why would he say such a thing? See, when he says, "Woe to you who are rich and are well fed; you have received your comfort ..." If these things are your main goals, if these things are your priorities, then the physical comfort and material comfort you get is all the comfort you'll ever get. The deeper, richer, inward stuff you'll never get.

When I first got to New York, there was a woman who wrote for the *Village Voice*. She's long gone now as a columnist. She's not there anymore. Her name was Cynthia Heimel. There was one column I clipped out back in the late 1980s. For some of you, I need you to understand. It used to be that periodicals were put on paper, and paper is this thing that used to come from trees.

When you wanted to save an article, you had to take scissors, believe it or not, and you had to actually cut around it. Then you clipped it and you had it. (By the way, I still have this clipping, and it's not online anywhere, so this is a true clipping, not that little thing on your computer. That's not a real paper clip. We all know that. You just click on it.)

I have a clipping, and it talks about Cynthia Heimel who knew a bunch of movie stars back in the late 80s. She said she knew them when they were working behind the cosmetic counter in Macy's and were bouncers in the village clubs. Then they became famous movie stars, and then they became more unhappy than they were before.

In the column she says, "[That] giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything okay, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment and (ha ha) happiness, had happened. And nothing changed. They were still them. The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable."

Then she goes on and says this. Listen carefully. "When God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you he grants you your deepest wish and then giggles [merrily] when you suddenly realize you want to kill yourself." Outside of that little phrase *giggles merrily* ... God does not giggle merrily, but the rest of it is actually quite biblical. If you live in the kingdom of anything else but God ... In other words, if your king, if the main thing you're after, the main thing that rules your life is anything but God, it's going to distort your life.

The worst thing God could possibly do is let you actually have it, because then you'll know how empty it is. Then you'll know it won't give you anything like what you thought it would give you. Woe to anyone who's not living in the kingdom of God. I think this profile of power, material comfort, success, and recognition is remarkable. Jesus says, "This is the kingdom of this world. These are the normal

things people are after.”

3. *What it's like.* What does it mean to live in the kingdom of God? What does it mean to have his power in your life? What does it mean to come under his authority? How are you supposed to live? This is, again, just as striking, just as strange when you first read it. “Blessed are you who are poor; yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and insult you. You have the blessedness of the kingdom.” What?

At first, it looks like Jesus is saying that if you really want to have the blessedness of the kingdom you ought to seek these things. You ought to seek poverty, you ought to seek weakness, you ought to seek to be grieved, and you ought to seek to be excluded. Who has the kingdom? The kingdom is for the poor, the weak, the grieving, and the excluded. Does that mean you should seek those things? No, that's masochism. Besides that, if you look carefully, the first four are not really completely parallel to the second four. Do you see that?

Down at the bottom it says, “You're rich now, but later you'll be empty. You're well fed now, but later you will be empty.” But up here it says, “Blessed *are* you who are poor. Blessed *are* you who are hungry.” One little hint that you have to read this on multiple levels is it's not really saying just anyone who's poor is blessed, anyone who is weeping is blessed, because it says at the bottom, “Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, and insult you because of the Son of Man (for my sake).”

Here's what most commentators say. (I don't have time to give you all the background reasoning, but just trust me on this.) We are being given a description of the kingdom. The kingdom is for the poor, the weak, the grieving, and the excluded, but what does that mean? You read that at four levels, you might say. It means four things.

First, you have to be poor in spirit. You have to be spiritually hungry if you are to receive the blessings of salvation at all. In Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus gives this sermon again, and there he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Here it says just who are hungry. There he says “hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Here it says just poor. There it says “poor in spirit.”

What that means is it's multi-layers, but it means at least this: you're not a Christian unless you're poor in spirit. You're not a Christian if you're middle class in spirit. Now what is a middle class in spirit person? Spiritually, what does it mean to be middle class? I'll tell you what it means to be spiritually middle class.

Middle class people say, “I don't need your charity. I've worked very hard. I pay my taxes. I want my rights.” That's how middle class people feel. A middle class in spirit person says, “I've lived a pretty good life. I'm not perfect, but I've lived a pretty good life, and I believe God owes me a good life, or he certainly needs to answer my prayers.” That's middle class in spirit.

Poor people are looking for charity. They're looking for bleeding charity. They're looking for a handout. You're not a Christian until you realize that you are poor in spirit, until you are spiritually bankrupt, that you have not only done bad things, but even the good things you've done you haven't done for the right motive, and you need radical forgiveness.

Not until you're spiritually poor, not until you're spiritually hungry, because you believe what Cynthia Heimel told you, which is that the things of this world will never satisfy you ... Not until you are spiritually poor and spiritually needy will you turn to Jesus Christ as your Savior. Otherwise, you'll be your own savior. You'll be middle class in spirit.

Therefore, the blessings of the kingdom of God only come to people who are poor in spirit, who admit that they're sinners and they need radical grace. That's the first thing that means. To enter the kingdom of God and to be in the kingdom of God, to get the blessings of the salvation of the kingdom of God is you have to be poor in spirit. You have to be spiritually hungry. You have to grieve over your sin, spiritually grieving, and so on.

That's one level, but secondly, if you are truly poor in spirit, if you are truly aggrieved in spirit, if you're truly hungry, then you will have a tremendous heart for the literally and materially poor, hungry, excluded, marginalized, and oppressed. If you look at a poor person and say, "Why don't you pull yourself up by your bootstrap?" that means you're middle class in spirit

If you're a true Christian and understand you're saved by grace, you will know you didn't pull yourself up by your bootstrap. God came and saved you with his radical charity and grace. A real Christian is someone who ... You might be middle class. You might be well off. You might be an incredibly accomplished person, but before God, you know that you are spiritually bankrupt and you are only alive because of his intervening, undeserved grace.

Once you understand that, it changes your attitude toward everyone around. You don't just want to hang out with the powerful, the materially comfortable, and the successful. Your heart goes out to the poor and the grieving. It goes out to the messed up. It goes out to the excluded. It goes out to the oppressed. In fact, the Bible over and over says that's how you know you're a sinner saved by grace: because you care about those folks.

That's the second thing it means when we say the kingdom of God belongs to, is for the poor, the grieving, the weak, and the excluded. Why? Because through the gospel it creates a cadre of people who care about those folks and who reach out to them and draw them in. So first of all, why is the kingdom of God for the poor, the weak, the grieving, and the excluded? Because you have to be spiritually poor and weak in order to receive the blessings of the kingdom.

Secondly, it makes you care about and reach out to the poor, the weak, the grieving, and the excluded. Christian churches ought to be just filled with those people, because we draw them in, because we don't just want to hang out with

people who open doors for us and help us in our careers. We've been totally changed by the gospel.

Thirdly, if you do reach out to people like that, you realize that even if you are middle class, even if you're upper class, even if you are accomplished, even if your life is going pretty well, some of the suffering, poverty, and weakness of people around you will fall on you. Think about it. For example, the Bible says you should tithe. The Bible says you give at least 10 percent of your income away every year.

I'm not preaching on that. If you say, "What?" yes, it's there. I could get there for you, but I'll just lay this out here. If that's true, do you realize that if you really give your money away in biblical proportions you will be poorer? You won't live as well. That money you could have spent on yourself, you won't. There is a sense, therefore, that anyone in the kingdom of God is poorer than they would have been otherwise.

Everyone in the kingdom of God probably weeps more. Do you know why? Because even if your life is going well, you don't stay away from weeping people. You get involved with weeping people, and they drain you, and you're sad too. In the kingdom of this world, you're too busy for those folks. You're on your way up the ladder. Power, material comfort, success, recognition. You don't have time for them.

Besides that, you really can't afford to give too much of your metabolism to all of these hurting people, but if you're in the kingdom of God you give yourself away. You live sacrificially. The kingdom of God is not based on power and recognition and moving up the ladder. It's based on love, service, self-giving, and self-emptying. That means everybody in the kingdom of God is poor. Everybody cries more often.

Lastly, if troubles hit you, if weakness comes to you, if poverty comes to you, if suffering comes to you ... Christians, because they have the true wealth, because they have the true hope, are not destroyed by suffering. They're not overrun by it. They're not overcome by it, but instead they can actually rejoice in their sufferings. They can put their roots down deeper into God and know that through the suffering they will grow more in grace, joy, strength, faith, and a sense of God's reality than they would have otherwise.

Do you see the four levels? What does it mean to live in the kingdom of God? It means to be poor, weak, grieving, and excluded spiritually, then reaching out to those people and drawing them in, then experiencing some of that weakness yourself, and then finally being able to rejoice in actual weakness, because all things work together for good to those who love God. God walks with you through that suffering to turn you into someone like Jesus. That's what it means to live in the kingdom of God.

4. *How you enter it.* I'll be brief here, but you should always remember this. The Matthew list is longer than the Luke list. When you read the Beatitudes, you're

right in seeing (and most commentators say this) this is a description of a Christian. Christians are to be poor in spirit. Christians are supposed to hunger and thirst after righteousness. Christians should be peacemakers. (I'm talking about Matthew 5.) Christians ought to do all of these things.

The Beatitudes don't just describe Christians. They also describe what Jesus Christ had to go through to make you a Christian. I want you to think about this for a second. Why can Jesus Christ say, "You are spiritually rich now"? Do you know why? Because he, though he was spiritually rich, became poor. He was living in heaven. He was the glorious Son of God, and he emptied himself and became human, became poor. He was rich, but he gave up his riches and became poor so that we, through his poverty, might become rich.

Why can Jesus Christ say, "You will be comforted"? Because on the cross he was disconsolate. Why would Jesus say, "You will be satisfied"? Because on the cross he said, "I thirst." Why would Jesus say, "You will laugh and rejoice"? Because he was a man of sorrows. Why can he say, "You will be accepted. You'll be recognized by God. You'll be brought into the kingdom of God"? Because he was excluded.

"My God, my God, why hast thou excluded me? My God, my God, why have you cast me out?" I'll tell you why. Jesus Christ was reversing places with us. He, though he was rich, became poor, that through his poverty we might become rich. That's the reason we live in the kingdom the way we do. When we become spiritually poor, we become spiritually rich.

Not until we admit our spiritual bankruptcy do we have the riches of infinite bliss and absolute forgiveness and complete acceptance by him, having a meaning in life that suffering can't take away from you, having an identity so rooted in God's love that criticism and even your own failure can't uproot you.

Only when you become absolutely poor do you become rich. Why? Because Jesus Christ, who was absolutely rich, became poor. It's actually only through getting involved with the tears of the world that you find the joy of God. Why? Because Jesus Christ, who was God, left his joy and became a man of sorrows. Do you see? Reversal. Because God, Jesus Christ, reversed places with us, he gets what we deserve so we get what he deserves.

That's why we, in a sense, can live in a reversed upside-down kingdom. The world thinks we're crazy. The world thinks that things we value we should try to avoid, like suffering, poverty, and grieving. The things they're after we're kind of suspicious of. It's almost like we live in an upside-down kingdom, at least from the world's point of view. That's because Jesus Christ was turned upside down for us.

5. *How it relates to prayer.* So what do you do when you pray, "Thy will be done"? I would suggest that you keep four things in mind. Maybe not every time. Take turns. Tomorrow when you pray the Lord's Prayer in the morning, pray it one way. On Tuesday pray it the second way, on Wednesday pray it the third way, and on

Thursday pray the fourth way. I don't know what you're going to do on Friday. Be innovative. Here are the four things.

First of all, "Thy kingdom come" means "Lord, I want more and more people in the world to know the blessings of your kingdom. Thy kingdom come. Spread your Word. Spread the gospel. Thy kingdom come. Let more and more people know these spiritual blessings." The second thing is when you pray, "Thy kingdom come," you can also pray, "Let your justice be done." The kingdom of God is based on love, self-giving, and service.

When God is complete King of the world, there will no longer be oppression. There will no longer be injustice. There will no longer be people living for themselves. In a sense, there will be harmony and peace and no suffering or death. So when you pray, "Thy kingdom come," you're praying against the injustice, oppression, and violence in the world. You're saying, "Lord, make it right. Set things to right."

Thirdly, Saint Augustine said you should never pray, "Thy kingdom come" without saying, "And, Lord, let thy kingdom go deeper in me." Do you see that place at the end of the chapter where Jesus says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not the things that I say?" To some degree, we're all like that. We call him "Lord." By the way, "Lord, Lord," was a Semitic way of expressing passion. When you said, "Lord, Lord," that was a way of expressing emotion.

Jesus says, "You not only call me 'Lord,' but you're passionate and you sing worship songs and you're really excited and you sway with the music, but you're not obeying me in every part of your life." To pray, "Thy kingdom come" is to say, "Lord, help me to dig down deeper and put my foundation on you."

He says, "The man who says, 'Lord, Lord' but doesn't obey me is like a person who says they're basing their life on me, but they're actually basing their life on something else. The house of their life has not gotten all the way down to the rock." An awful lot of us are Christians and we say, "Oh yes, Jesus is my Lord," but, actually, our career or our family or something else is what we're basing our lives on.

When storms come, we feel jostled because, of course, we're not rooted. We're not founded on Jesus' love. It's on something else. So when you pray, "Thy kingdom come," Saint Augustine says to say, "Lord, let your kingdom go deeper in me. Don't let me say 'Lord, Lord.' Help me to be more obedient than ever. I obey you. I see these parts of my life that I want to obey you, and I give them to you now."

Lastly, praying "Thy kingdom come" is to hope, to look to the future. It's to look to the day when the kingdom really comes and makes everything right, when we're all resurrected and have our new bodies. To pray "Thy kingdom come" is a way of consoling yourself, because so often it's so hard here. To say "Thy kingdom come" means, "O Lord, I'm looking forward to that day. Lord, haste the day when faith shall be sight, the clouds rolled back like a scroll."

John Calvin has a little prayer he suggests praying every morning when you wake up. It says, “Lord, I lay down last night to sleep, and I rose this morning alive by your grace. Now keep me in the joyful remembrance of my final rising, because Jesus Christ laid down in death for me and rose for my justification.” Do you see what he’s saying?

“O Lord, all day, keep me in joyful remembrance. Fill me with joy at the thought that someday all this trouble I’m going through will be over. Keep me in the joyful remembrance of my final rising. Someday I’m not going to just wake up from the sleep in my bed; I’m going to wake up into my new body, all because Jesus Christ lay down in death for me and was raised for my justification. I can hope. I can live in the knowledge of that coming kingdom. Thy kingdom come.” Let us pray.

Thanks, Father, for giving us what we need in order to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” We ask that as we pray it, we would feel your kingdom power, we would sense your kingdom power extending itself through us and healing us of all that’s wrong with us. Teach us as a community and as individuals to say, “Thy kingdom come in us, in your world, in me.” We pray this in Jesus’ name, amen.

Struggle: Thy Will Be Done

The Prayer of Prayers—October 19, 2014

Matthew 26:36–46

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” **37** He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. **38** Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” **39** Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. **41** “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” **42** He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will

be done.”

43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. **44** So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. **45** Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. **46** Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

This is the Word of the Lord.

This fall, we’re looking at the subject of prayer. Huge percentages of people around the world say they pray and say they’d like to learn more about how to pray. Of course, Jesus’ instruction for the human race on prayer is found in the Lord’s Prayer. He was asked, “Teach us to pray,” and he gave us the Lord’s Prayer, but the Lord’s Prayer is of not much help to us if we don’t understand what all of the phrases mean.

Every part of the Lord’s Prayer ... “Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come” ... assumes a lot of knowledge about what the Bible teaches about that phrase or about that thing. What does it mean to pray, “Thy kingdom come”? What does it mean to pray, “Hallowed be thy name”? Unless you understand huge swaths of biblical teaching, you don’t understand how to use the model. If you *would* understand what all of those phrases mean, then your prayer would be infinitely enabled and empowered.

So what we’re doing each week is taking one phrase from the Lord’s Prayer and going to some other place in the Bible (not to Matthew 6, where we actually find the Lord’s Prayer, but to some other place in the Bible) that helps us understand that particular phrase. Today, we’re going to look at what it means to pray, “Thy will be done.” “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

This phrase is the only phrase that we have an example from Jesus’ own life to help us understand what it means to pray this. This is the one part of the Lord’s Prayer that we actually see Jesus praying in his life. See verse 42? “May your will be done,” or in the old King James, “Thy will be done.” We’re going to need every bit of help we can to learn how to pray, “Thy will be done,” because we’re going right into the teeth of our culture.

Alan Ehrenhalt, a very noted writer, in one of his books says something like, “Most of us in America believe a few simple propositions. Choice is a good thing, and the more we have of it, the happier we will be. Authority is inherently suspect. No one should have the right to tell others what to think or how to behave.” That’s right. He says we in America have certain maxim slogans we use. We get them out. These are self-evident truths. Everybody knows this.

What are they? That the more free we are to decide what is right or wrong for ourselves and have no one else tell us how to live our lives, the happier we'll be. That's the essence of American culture. Jesus Christ says every time you pray to God you need to say to him, "Thy will be done," which means we're going right into the teeth of our own culture, right into the teeth of probably everything you've been taught, if you've grown up here.

So what does it mean? To understand that, we look at Jesus' own prayer, "Thy will be done," and we need to see that he prays it in the midst of terrible agony. We're going to first reflect on the magnitude of that agony, then the immediacy of that agony, and then see how that helps us understand what it means to pray, "Thy will be done" in a life-transforming way. First of all, this passage about the garden of Gethsemane and the agony he's in. Let's take a look at it.

1. *The magnitude of his agony.* What do we mean by that? Well, it says in verses 36–37, "**Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane [the garden], and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.'**" As he was on his way to pray, it says (verse 37), "**... he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.' [...] Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground ...**"

What's going on here? It's surprising. We're told that as he was beginning to pray (verse 37), he began to be sorrowful and troubled. The word *sorrowful* means in agony. The word *troubled* means to be horrified and shocked. Something came down on him that shocked him, and his description of it from the inside is, "I feel like I'm going to die right here." "**My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.**"

Something began to happen, and it was absolutely stunning to him. He began to be in horror. He starts to pray three times, "Father, I don't want to do this." It's absolutely right. The reason I use the word *magnitude* to talk about this aspect of his agony is it's perfectly fair to compare Jesus, as he is going to his death, to many of his followers as they went to *their* death. Many of you have been in Oxford in England, the college town there. You know that at the intersection of the big St Giles' Street and Beaumont Street there is a martyr's memorial.

The memorial is there because of people who were burned at the stake there or nearby. Two of the people who were burned at the stake were Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. They were being burned at the stake for their faith. As the flames were coming up, Hugh Latimer was heard to say these very famous words, "Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out."

There are a lot of stories like that of Christians going to death, serving their God cheerfully, not afraid. "When death's cold, sullen stream shall o'er me roll." We just sang that. "Then, Savior, take me, bear me, a ransomed soul." A lot of other Christians have died better. They didn't have anything like the horror and the

shock and all this. They had much more inner peace and tranquility and they were much more poised.

It's true that Jesus prayed three times, "Thy will be done," but first he prayed three times, "I don't want to do this. Is there any way out of this? I don't want to do this." He's talking about this over and over. "I don't want to do it." We have to keep in mind that Jesus is not actually surprised at the idea that he's going to die. He has been telling people this over and over. Go into the earlier part of the book of Matthew or Luke or Mark or John. He's always saying, "I'm going to die. I'm going to die."

It's not like suddenly he says, "Oh my word! I *am* going to die." Of course he knew that. It was something else that came down on him, so amazing, so powerful that it pushed him into the dust. The Son of God is reeling. What was it? Here's the question ... *Why was it that Jesus Christ was nowhere near as poised and peaceful in the face of death as many of his followers?* The answer is none of his followers have ever faced a death like this. In fact, no human being ever faced a death like this.

What was unique about this death? He tells you. The cup. "Let this cup pass from me." In ancient times, the term *cup* could mean simply a suffering horrible ordeal, but in many cases it meant judgment. Do you remember how Socrates died? He was sentenced to death. How did he die? He drank the cup. He drank the cup of poison. The cup was a metaphor for fiery, suffering judgment.

That's also what it meant in the Old Testament. All through the Old Testament, whenever the prophets talked about the cup, they meant God's judicial punishment and wrath that human evil deserves. For example, in Ezekiel 23, Ezekiel is telling people that they have sinned against God, and he says, "You shall drink the cup of ruin and desolation and tear your breasts." Isaiah 54: "You will drink the cup of his fury and you will stagger."

That's what we see Jesus Christ doing: staggering, tearing at his breasts. What's going on? The judicial wrath of God on human evil is beginning to come down on him now. (We'll get to what I mean by *beginning*.) It's beginning to come down on him now, which means he's beginning to experience what he was going to experience fully on the cross, which was the abandonment, rejection, God withdrawing his presence.

The reason why, almost certainly, that's what's going on is you notice in verse 36 he says, "Sit here while I go over there to pray." As he was going to pray, he would have started praying. That's when it hit him. Bill Lane, who wrote a great commentary on Mark many years ago ... The same thing happens in the book of Mark and also in the book of Luke that tells about this. Bill Lane in his commentary on Mark was trying to explain why it is that as Jesus Christ began to pray horror came down on him. Here's what he says.

"The dreadful sorrow and anxiety, then, out of which the prayer for the passing of the cup springs, is not an expression of fear before a dark destiny, nor a

shrinking from the prospect of physical suffering and death. It is rather the horror of the one who lives wholly for the Father ... [and who] came to be with the Father for an interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him ...”

Jesus Christ, the only perfect human being, would have known the joy of the Father’s presence to a degree that none of us ever have experienced. Many people over the years have written accounts of what it’s like just to get close into the presence of God and sometimes actually sense his love on our hearts. There are some tremendous accounts in history. When Blaise Pascal died, they found sewed into the lining of his coat some experience he had of two hours just experiencing God’s love one night. It totally changed his life.

He wrote down what the experience was like and sewed it into the lining of the coat he always wore. Jesus Christ would have known that kind of joy every time he prayed, that kind of presence, that kind of love, in degrees that we would not have known, and now guess what’s happening? Why the horror? Why does he feel like, “I’m about to die”? Why is he in far more agony than any of his followers? Because God was withdrawing from him.

Latimer and Ridley and people like that were dying with a sense of his presence, but Jesus Christ sensed God’s absence. He was beginning to get a foretaste of what was going to come down on him on the cross, which is essentially the experience of hell, essentially the experience of eternal and cosmic abandonment. We were built for the presence of God, and Jesus Christ even more, because he’s the second person of the Trinity.

As he began to experience that being pulled away from him, he went into absolute agony. He was beginning to taste the wrath of God. That’s the magnitude of his agony. That’s why he is in such agony. Before moving on, let me just say something really quickly. Do you believe in the wrath of God or are you a typical New Yorker who says, “I don’t like to talk about the wrath of God and hell. Oh my goodness. I believe in a loving God.”

I want you to know when I was a young man and I was more prone to irritation, one time after a service here at Redeemer a woman came up to me and said that. She said, “You know, I love a lot of what you say, but I’ll tell you, I believe in a loving God, not a God who sends people to hell.” Because I was in a more irritable mood ... Very seldom should you say to people in private what you can say rather winsomely to a big audience like this. The very same thing when you’re standing in front of somebody in private is probably, at least, ill mannered.

I said, “Well, let me ask you this. You have a god of love who doesn’t get angry at people. What did it cost your god to love you?” She said, “Well, it didn’t cost my god anything.” I said, “Well, then that’s not love; that’s sentiment.” The more you understand the wrath of God, the more you understand the love of God, because the love of God, according to the Bible, was that he came and took that wrath himself.

The deeper your grasp of God's wrath on sin, the more wondrous is the cost he bore in order to forgive us and save us and, therefore, the more wondrous his love. The more angry a God at sin you have, the more loving a God and gracious a God you have as you stand at the foot of the cross. So here's the magnitude of Jesus' agony. He's beginning to experience the wrath of God.

2. *The immediacy of his agony.* Many, many commentators and theologians over the years have brought out what I've already brought out: that Jesus Christ died with far less inner peace than his followers. Why? Because he was taking the cup. He was sort of smelling the cup. Maybe he was even getting the first taste of it. He was staggered. It knocked him into the ground. Luke says that as he was praying blood came out of his pores, which is the mark of someone in shock.

That's the magnitude. What about the question of the immediacy? *Immediacy* means why is God letting Jesus Christ experience this now? Why not wait for the cross? The only theologian of the past who addressed this was Jonathan Edwards, the great eighteenth-century American philosopher and minister. Years ago, I read a sermon by him on the Lukian version of this text on the garden of Gethsemane.

It's called *Christ's Agony*. I've never forgotten that sermon. In fact, every time I've ever preached on this subject, you're going to hear echoes of what Edwards said. Why is it that Jesus Christ experiences, gets a foretaste, of this terrible thing now? Why now? The answer, according to Edwards, is the disciples are asleep. The Roman soldiers aren't here yet. He's completely alone. He's in the dark.

He says when you're on the cross and you're nailed and then the wrath of God comes down on you, there's nothing you can do about it. You say, "Oh my goodness. It's much worse than I thought." The Son of God in his human nature had never experienced anything like this, and that's why he's utterly shocked. That's what throws him onto the ground. If he had only experienced that on the cross, it would be too late for him to do anything about it.

He is free to leave. The disciples are asleep. He could just slip away. The guards aren't there. This is God's way of making sure that what Jesus Christ does is absolutely voluntary, is absolutely his own action, is an absolute act of love, not an act of compulsion. You know how he says in John, chapter 15, "No man takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord"? Well, this is finally happening. This is basically what Edwards says in his sermon on this. Think of how vivid this is. This is what's happening in the garden of Gethsemane.

"God brought him and set him at the mouth of the furnace, that he might look in and stand and view its fierce and raging flames and might see where he was going and might voluntarily enter into it and bear it for sinners, as knowing what it was. If Christ had not fully known before he took it and drank it, it would not have properly been his own act as a man, but when he took that cup, knowing what he did, so was his love to us infinitely the more wonderful and his obedience to God

infinitely the more perfect.”

It’s almost as if God was saying to him, “Here is the cup that you are to drink. This is the furnace into which you will be cast if they are to be saved. There is no other way. Either they perish or you perish. See how terrible the heat is. See what pain and anguish you must endure. Is your love such that you will go on?” Why should we be looking at that? Because Jesus Christ, in the dark, when no one is looking but God, when he’s told, “Here’s what you have to do,” does it.

Let me give you some high theology for a second, yet it’s so moving. The Bible talks about there being two Adams. Jesus Christ is the second Adam. Do you know the places where it talks about that in 1 Corinthians and Romans? Paul likes to talk about Jesus as the second Adam. Why? Well, Adam was our representative, and the things Adam did fell on us.

The first Adam was put into a garden, and God says, “Obey me about a tree,” the Tree of Knowledge. He says, “Don’t eat of the Tree of Knowledge.” Remember that? The first Adam was put into a garden and told, “Obey me about the tree,” and he didn’t. By the way, God said, “Obey me and you will live,” and he still didn’t. So the first Adam is put into a garden and God says, “Obey me about this tree and you will live, and I’ll be with you,” and he didn’t, and we didn’t.

The second Adam is also put into a garden, *this* garden, a dark garden, and God is also telling this second Adam, “Obey me about the tree,” only this time the tree is the cross, that horrible piece of wood. So the first Adam is told, “Obey me about the tree and you will live,” and he didn’t. The second Adam is told, “Obey me about the tree, and I will crush you to powder.” The first Adam is told, “Obey me about the tree, and I’ll be with you.”

The second Adam is told, “Obey me about the tree, and I will abandon you. I will cast you into hell. You have no idea the agony you’re going to experience when I completely withdraw from you and everything is taken from you.” No one has ever been asked that. In the history of the world, whenever God says, “Obey me,” he says, “No matter what happens, I’ll be with you. If you obey me, I’ll be with you.” He doesn’t abandon people who are obeying him. Bad things can happen, but he’s with you.

Here’s the only person in the history of the world who was told, “Obey me, and I will crush you to powder. I will abandon you,” and he *did* obey God. His love for us was infinitely the more wonderful and his obedience to God infinitely the more perfect than anyone else’s love and anyone else’s obedience ever in the history of the world. He did it for us. He did it for his Father. No one has ever been asked such a thing, and no one has ever done such a thing. He did it for us.

Edwards imagines what Jesus might have said and what Jesus did. So here’s the Father. He sets the cup down in front of the Son and says, “Look at this. Smell it. Look at the furnace you’re about to be thrown into. If you go into that, they’ll be saved. It’s the only way for them to be saved, but are you ready to do it? This is what it’s going to be. Are you ready for it?”

Edwards says, "Did Jesus say this? 'Why should I, who am so great and glorious a person, go plunge myself into such dreadful, amazing torments for people who can never requite me for it? Yea, why should I be crushed under the weight of divine wrath for those who will not even stay awake with me in the hour of my greatest need?' " That's a perfectly reasonable speech.

Why didn't Jesus Christ say, "These people aren't even staying awake for me. These people will never understand what I've done for them. Why should I, such a great and glorious person, plunge myself into such amazing torments? Why should I let this nuclear warhead of hell burst in my innards and destroy me for them?" But he didn't do that. What did he do? He said, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. I know you meant well." He's gentle. He's tender. He's kind. He's forgiving. He's loving, and he obeys, for us.

3. *What it means to pray, "Thy will be done."* Now having seen all that, what does that mean? Now do you see what it means to pray, "Thy will be done"? There is no way to understand what this means and there is no way you will buck your own culture unless you see Jesus Christ doing this for you. Here's what it means to apply this to our lives.

I want you to see that Jesus Christ is both a model and a power for integrity and trust, obedience and endurance. He's a model for perfect obedience and a model for incredible endurance, a model for both integrity and trust. Not just a model but also a power for it, which you access whenever you pray, "Thy will be done," thinking of him doing this for you.

First of all, what do I mean by *obedience* or *integrity*? Well, Jesus Christ is in the dark, and no one is seeing him. Only God. People aren't seeing him, and there is no payoff for him to obey. Not a single good thing is going to come out of this for him. He's just going to be in trouble. It's just going to be awful. "Obey me, and I will crush you to powder." And he obeys.

What does this mean? He's the same in the dark as in the light. Many of us cannot say that. In fact, almost all of us cannot say that. When we're in private, when we think no one is seeing, when we feel like there really won't be any consequences, we do things we would never do in public, we would never do in the light, but we do in the dark. Do you know why? Because we're not people of integrity.

We're one way in the light, one way in the dark. We're one way with *this* crowd, another way with *that* crowd. Why? Because our obedience tends to be self-serving. We tend to obey because of appearances, and we tend to obey because we see rewards, not consequences. Are you moral and good even when it doesn't pay, even when no one is looking? Are you the same in the light as in the dark? We are not, because we're not people of integrity.

Here's how you can become a person of integrity. Look at Jesus Christ being the same in the dark for you. Look at him. You're saved by his integrity. If you're a Christian, you're only saved because of the integrity he showed at this moment.

You look at that and say, "Lord, if you obeyed in the dark for me, even when there were no rewards and no one saw, I can do that for you." So first he's a model and a power for integrity.

Secondly, he's also a model and a power for *endurance*, for *trust*. Jesus Christ is trusting God. Oh, is he trusting God. He's trusting God in an amazing way. He's realistic. By the way, here's what's so wonderful about his model. He is totally emotionally realistic. He's not putting on a happy face. He's not saying, "Oh no, no." He's saying, "I don't want this." He's emotionally honest. He's pouring his heart out.

He's being very honest about how this is so difficult, and yet there is no doubt that in the end, no matter how much he doesn't understand ... It's so difficult, it's so hard, but "Thy will be done." Elisabeth Elliot has written better on this subject than anyone. She says, "I dethrone [God] in my heart if I demand that he act in ways that satisfy my idea of justice. It is the same spirit that taunted, 'If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.' There is unbelief, there is even rebellion in the attitude that says, 'God has no right to do this ...'"

"God is God. If he is God, he is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in his will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what he is up to." That's what you see in Jesus Christ. He is trusting God, even though he doesn't understand everything. Integrity and trust, obedience and endurance.

"Thy will be done" means, first of all, "I'm going to obey God whether I like it or not, no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the consequences." It also means, "I'm going to trust God, whether I understand it or not. I'm going to be honest. I'm going to scream. I'm going to cry out. I'm not in any way going to try to repress or hide or make nice how horrible I feel right now, but in the end, God is God, and I will find rest nowhere else but in his will, and that will is infinitely and immeasurably beyond my largest notions of what he is up to."

How can you learn to trust God like that? If you want that kind of final rest and peace, you have to trust God like that. You say, "Well, how can I trust God like that?" You only trust people all the way down if you know they absolutely love you all the way down and they would do anything for you, and that's what you have here. It is enormously restful to say, no matter what's happening in your life, "Thy will be done." Oh yeah, after you scream, but then you say, "Thy will be done." That's how Jesus Christ did it, and that's emotionally healthy, both ways.

It's emotionally healthy to yell, just like the psalmist. All through the Psalms he's yelling. "Why are you doing this, Lord? How can this be?" Then in the end you say, "But thy will be done." It's emotionally unhealthy not to scream, and it's also emotionally unhealthy not to say, "Thy will be done." Otherwise, you'll just be bitter and hard and angry the rest of your life, and the difficulties of life will have destroyed you, will have destroyed your humanity.

You have to say, "Let this cup pass from me" and "Thy will be done." You have

the model here. Not just the model but also the power, because when you see him doing this ... No one has ever loved you like this. There has never been love like this in the history of the world. There has never been anyone who obeyed God and had the full power of hell come down on him for you. This is the love you've been looking for all your life.

Here's what's interesting. I've had many people say to me, "Well, I can't get into a trust relationship with God, not because I don't trust him but because I don't trust myself. It's not that I can't just trust God. It's like I don't trust myself. I could never keep it up." What Jesus is doing here answers both those issues.

First of all, can you trust God enough to enter into a trust relationship with him? Yes. Look at what he has done for you. He would do anything for you. Of course you're going to trust a God who has done this. You say, "Lord Jesus Christ, if you handled the injustice you did, if you handled the horror you did for me, then I can handle my little cup for you. You took the big cup for me; I can take the little cup for you."

On the other hand, it also answers your problems about trusting yourself. You say, "Well, I don't think I could keep a trust relationship up." Well, guess what? Jesus comes in and says to his disciples, "I really need you to stay awake with me," and they fell asleep. Who do they represent? You and me. Does Jesus Christ say, "The deal is off"? "Hey, the deal is off, man. I'm ready to die for you. I'm ready to take your sins off you, let you live in heaven forever. Just please stay awake with me."

They fall asleep in the hour of his greatest need, and yet he still loves them. There's nothing you can do that will wear God's love out for you. There is nothing you can do that Jesus Christ's love can't bear. It has already borne everything for you. Do you think you can do something now to wear it out? It already took *this*. What do you think you could possibly do to get him to let go of you?

Now when you actually pray, "Thy will be done," thinking of what he has done, that'll make you more and more a person of integrity. It will make you more and more a person of endurance and trust and poise. When you pray, "Thy will be done," thinking of him ... You have to think of him. Otherwise, "Thy will be done" just seems like, "Why am I saying this? I want to live the way I want to live." Look at what he has done for you.

"Thy will be done" means, "I will obey you even if I don't agree with what you've said in your Word, and secondly, I will trust you even though I do not understand what you sent in my life." If you don't look at him when you're saying, "Thy will be done," you'll just get resentful, but if you look at him and you fall down and adore him for what he has done, when you get up you'll be like him, and you'll become a person of endurance.

There's that one place in *The Lord of the Rings* ... I won't say who it is, because a lot of you know who it is, but this is a perfect illustration of what happens. This is a little passage near the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. "But even as hope ...

seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength. [He] felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue."

Do you want to become like a creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue? Then pray, "Thy will be done," or as George Herbert puts it ...

*For my heart's desire
Unto thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.*

Thy will be done. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for showing us what your Son Jesus Christ did for us that will enable us to pray this most challenging part, perhaps, of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." It's the hardest thing we have to pray, and yet we've been given more help from the life of your Son for this particular petition than for any other part of the prayer. Turn us into creatures of stone and steel that no despair or weariness can subdue. Our hearts' desires unto thine are bent. We aspire to a full consent. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Reality: Forgive Us Our Debts

The Prayer of Prayers—November 2, 2014

Psalm 51

**1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.**

**2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!**

**3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.**

**4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.**

**5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.**

**6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.**

**7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

**8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.**

**9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.**

**10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.**

**11 Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.**

**12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.**

**13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.**

**14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.**

**15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.**

**16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.**

**17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**

**18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;**

**19 then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.**

This is the Word of the Lord.

This fall, we're looking at prayer, and we're doing it by looking at the Lord's Prayer. Each week, we're taking one phrase out of the Lord's Prayer and, to understand what it means, we're going to some other passage in the Bible to shed light on it so we can use it when we pray. Tonight we're looking at the place

in the Lord's Prayer where Jesus tells us to say, "Forgive us our debts," or "Forgive us our trespasses. Forgive us our sins."

We're looking at Psalm 51. It's maybe the most famous prayer of confession in the entire Bible. Not only is it famous as a prayer of confession but also the occasion is famous. As many of you know, it rose out of a very famous incident in the life of King David. David was attracted to another man's wife, so he had an affair with her. Her name was Bathsheba. In order to get her as his wife, he had her husband killed. He had him isolated in battle, and it was arranged so he would die in battle.

He had an affair with another man's wife, he had the man killed, and he then was able to take Bathsheba to be his wife. He thought all was well, that he had covered his tracks. Then the prophet Nathan came to David and told him a story. He said, "There was a rich man with a lot of sheep, and there was a poor man with one little lamb. The rich man, when he wanted to have a meal, instead of taking any of his own sheep, took that poor man's little lamb and slew it. What should be done to that rich man?" David said, "That man should die."

Nathan, in one of the most pointed pieces of application at the end of a sermon in the history of the world, said to David, "You are the man. That's you." His life blew up. He was exposed to the world. He was exposed to himself. Let me put it to you like this. What if I told you that there was a process and no matter how much you blew up your life, if you used this process, there would be a way to come out the other side, to get through it, or no matter how broken your life is, if you used this process, there was a way for you to come out whole.

Would you be interested? You say, "Of course I'd be interested." Well, here it is. It's what the Bible calls *repentance*. Here's how you do it. Psalm 51. You say, "Repentance? You mean just saying I'm sorry?" When you say that, you have revealed you do not understand the power of this kind of prayer, if you know how to do it. This kind of prayer, if you do it in an ongoing way, will finally enable you to change deeply from the inside out.

You know how many things are wrong with you. You know they're wrong with you. You don't like when anybody else tells you. In fact, you're really upset when anybody even seems to know, but you know there are things that are wrong with you that you just don't seem to be able to change. It just doesn't get any better. If you use this kind of prayer, repentance, this is the way, if you use it in an ongoing way, for you to change from the inside out, and if you're ever in a crisis (and you will be) in which to some degree you are to blame, this is how to put your life back together.

Now there's way too much here to cover. It's a wonderful and long psalm. We could crawl through it for weeks, actually. What we're going to do is mainly look at the first five verses, and we're going to ask these questions. *What one thing must you stop doing? What two things must you start doing? Where do you get the power to do those two things?* What to stop, what to start, and how to do it.

1. *What one thing must you stop doing?* It's in verse 5. "**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.**" The way that comes out in English it looks like the mother sinned. Right? "In sin did my mother conceive me." That's actually not the way the Hebrew works. It's really, therefore, a misleading translation, though actually it's a literal translation.

It's not talking about the mother doing something wrong. It's actually saying, "It's in iniquity that I was conceived," meaning, "This is the element in which I have always lived." What basically David is saying is, "At last I see that from the very beginning of my life I was like this." Derek Kidner, who's a great commentator on the Psalms, in his commentary on Psalm 51, says about this verse, where he says, "In sin did my mother conceive me," which is another way of saying, "I was born in sin; I've been sinful from birth ..."

That's what he's saying. "I've been sinful from birth. Sin is the element in which I have lived. I have always been like this. It has just now come out." It sounds very harsh, does it not? This is what Derek Kidner says. "This crime [of murder], David now sees, was no freak event: it was in character, an extreme expression of the warped creature he had always been [since he was little]." You say, "That's awfully harsh," but, no. Is it harsh? Well, it's real. It's realistic.

Whenever we get to this kind of teaching in the Bible, I usually have recourse to Saint Augustine's book *The Confessions*. In fact, I mention this incident so often that, in getting ready to talk to you today, I thought I'd better go back and reread it and make sure I understood it properly. I went back, and it's better than I thought. I can't give you everything I noticed when I was reading it the last couple of days, but Saint Augustine in Book II, which is like a chapter of *The Confessions* ... You can find this online, by the way. Just go look for Book II, *Confessions*.

He talks about the fact that when he was 16 years old, he and a bunch of teenagers broke into a pear orchard that did not belong to them and stole pears. He's trying to figure out, "Why did I do that?" The reason it's an interesting question ... He basically says, "I lusted to steal the pears, and I did it, compelled by no hunger ..." They ended up throwing it to the hogs. They weren't hungry. "... nor poverty, nor cared I to enjoy what I stole."

So here's the question. "I stole the pears, but why? Because a) I wasn't hungry and b) I don't like pears. So why did we steal the pears?" Here's essentially what he said. "Rather I joyed in the theft and the sin itself. My pleasure was not in those pears; it was in the offense itself. I liked it because it was forbidden." He sees that deep in his heart there is some kind of self-will or self-assertion ... He had no interest in the pears until somebody said, "Don't have those pears." Then he was really interested.

What is that? You say, "Well, that's just stubbornness. That's just willfulness." He says, "This is deep in the bottom of my heart, this self-assertion, this need to say, 'Nobody tells me how to live my life.' " If that's way, way down deep there and it has been there forever, that makes you quite capable of a lot of cruelty. More

recently, a Christian was writing about this very same subject. David sees a family resemblance between the common sins of his youth and murder.

He says, "When I look back and see the kind of person I was even as a child, and now I've murdered, but actually I'm in character." There's a family resemblance between what we would consider juvenile sins and murder. They're not two totally different things. That's actually what Augustine is saying. This one book I was reading recently ... This is an interesting line. Listen to this. This is a modern Christian writer who says, "Christians come to see what a murder has in common with persecuting the fat kid with zits."

When you're 8 years old or 5 years old or 16 years old, you persecute the fat kid with zits. "Oh well, that's the way kids are. That's not murder. That's not rape." Oh really? Christians have come to see, because they studied Psalm 51 and other parts of the Bible, that there is not a qualitative difference between that and murder. We have a tendency to say, "Well, yes, I'll cheat here and there, and sometimes I can be cruel and that kind of thing, but that's not murder. It's not this other kind of thing."

Wait. What David is saying, what Augustine is saying, what this guy is saying is instead of seeing a kind of infinite qualitative difference between you and a murderer, you need to see that it's actually a quantitative difference. It's a matter of degree, and it's circumstantial. In the right circumstances, that capacity for cruelty, which comes from that capacity of self-assertion and self-centeredness in every person's heart ... That capacity, if watered properly, can become murder, no matter who you are.

Here's a seed that's watered properly, and it becomes a great big tree. The right fertilizer, the right water, the right soil, and here's another seed that never becomes a tree. The seeds are the same. They have the same capacity. It's just one capacity has been realized more than another. Therefore, what David is saying is we are born in sin. We're born with this self-assertion, this self-centeredness. He says, "I'm actually only acting in character."

He's not minimizing it. Oh no. He's not saying, "Well, the murder wasn't so bad." What he's saying is, "I've always been this bad, and I never saw it." Now maybe you don't trust Psalm 51. Maybe you would trust BBC. BBC this summer ran a really great murder mystery. It was an eight-episode murder mystery called *Broadchurch*. There's an American version of it called *Gracepoint*. I promise ... no spoilers.

What it's about is a small town in which a boy is murdered. There are two detectives. One woman detective (in the BBC version her name is Ellie) lives in the town and knows everybody in the town and can't figure out how in the world anybody could have killed this boy, because she knew everybody in the town. There's nobody in this town who could do that. There's another guy, a guy from outside, who is a kind of hard-bitten detective. His last name is Hardy.

One day they have a real argument. She's basically saying, "There's nobody in

town who could do such a thing. I don't get it." Hardy says, "Anybody is capable of murder given the right circumstances." Right out of Psalm 51. "Anybody is capable of murder given the right circumstances." She looks at him and says, "No." She doesn't believe it. "Most people have a moral compass." He looks back and says, "Moral compasses break."

Actually, if you do watch the thing, you will know that whoever the writer was sides with David in Psalm 51. The whole purpose of the show is to show that anybody is capable of murder given the right circumstances, because that's what's in your heart. Why am I pushing this? Here's the thing you must not do: be in denial about your capacity ...

There's a place where God says to Cain in the very beginning of the Bible, because Cain is getting very envious and upset and angry at his brother Abel ... God says to him, "Sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is to have you, but you must master it." Isn't that amazing? He uses the illustration of sin being a kind of cougar or tiger or animal that's crouching at the door, hiding, but coiled and ready to spring.

This is God's way of saying what David is trying to say to you, and here's what I'm trying to say to you. You are capable of a lot worse than you can admit. You're capable of great cruelty. You're capable of great dishonesty. You are capable of terrible things that right now you would say, "I'm not like that. I'm not like that." Get out of denial.

I doubt very much that anybody in this room ... It's not really likely that you will ever be in the proper circumstances that what's wrong with you in your heart will lead you to murder. It's not impossible, but it's unlikely. But it's quite likely that you are going to do some really bad things in your life that will utterly shock you unless you get ahold of this particular truth from the Bible tonight. So the first thing you have to do is to get out of denial. Stop denying what you are capable of. That's the thing you must stop doing.

2. *What two things must you start doing?* There are two parts to repentance here. They're both equally important. I'm going to say them together right now. Even though they're equally important, some of you will notice I'm going to take a lot longer on the second one. It's because the first one, even though it's important and crucial, is not a foreign concept. I think you'll grasp it pretty quickly, but the second one is a foreign concept to most of us.

Even though I wouldn't say it's more important, I must say it is more difficult to grasp, and only if you have the two together will you have life-changing repentance. There's a kind of repentance that looks like repentance. You're crying and weeping. You're upset and angry at yourself and you're remorseful. You may even say, "I'm so sorry for what I've done." When it's all done, you're worse than you were before. You're just more upset, more angry at yourself, more angry at life, hard, and you don't change. That's what most people understand as repentance.

Then there's a kind of repentance unto life. There's a repentance that is life changing, character forming, and freedom engendering. That is to say, it brings freedom from the past so you don't feel tied to the past no matter what you've done. You're not tied through guilt. It brings freedom in the present. It means you're actually able to change and not do the things you tend to do wrong.

Life-changing, character-forming, freedom-engendering repentance, as opposed to what we usually experience, which is a kind of toxic remorse that makes us very upset and afterwards no better off. What are the two things you have to do in order to make sure you have repentance unto life, repentance that changes you? Here are the two things. The first one gets short shrift, the second one longer shrift. You have to have *a full clean confession of sin* and *a deep heart renunciation of sin*.

A. *A full clean confession*. Let's take a look. These two are both in verse 4, but we're going to move through verse 4 from the end of it to the beginning. “[I have] **done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.**” What is he saying here? I call this a full clean confession, because he is not blame shifting. He's taking full responsibility without qualification, full responsibility without excuse, full responsibility without blame shifting.

First of all, he says, “You are just in your judgment.” What he says is, “I deserve anything you give me.” Notice he also says, “I have done evil.” Not lapses. Not mistakes were made. He's not blaming his upbringing. He's not blaming his environment. He could blame a lot of those things, and he did originally. A lot of powerful men get into these kinds of crazy affairs, and afterwards they say, “Well, I felt like I sacrificed so much. Nobody sees what I have to go through, and you know what? I deserve this.” That's feeling sorry for yourself.

He's not doing that now. There are all sorts of ways of blame shifting. You can minimize. “Well, it shouldn't have bothered her as much as that. I'm sorry for what I did, but she's awfully sensitive.” There's relativizing. You say, “If you say what I did is wrong, fine, but a lot of people don't see it as wrong.” He says, “I have done evil in your sight. I'm not going by community standards. I'm not saying it can't be wrong if it feels so right. In your sight.”

I'm not relativizing it. I'm not minimizing it. I'm not making excuses. I'm not going to say, “Well, if you had my mother, you'd do things like this too.” No. Real repentance begins when blame shifting ends. I told you there's a kind of remorse, a kind of feeling sorry and you're so upset and so unhappy and you're weeping and you're miserable, and yet in the midst of it, instead of taking full responsibility, you're blaming other people and blaming your circumstances and you're so angry at this and that.

You're not really repenting; you're complaining. You're just complaining about how bad you feel. That's it. Maybe you have contributed to it, but you're also angry at everybody else around you. Some years ago ... I can't remember how

old I was. I think I was a teenager. I made a major mistake. We were in the forest, and at one point I was trying to get a log out of my way. I picked up the log, but instead of picking it up all the way, I just picked up one end of it. The other end was on the ground.

I threw it, I thought. I was trying to push it out of my way, so I pushed it. I just did *this*, and the log just came right down on my feet. It was on the ground, and I thought I was pushing it away, but actually it just fell. Because I didn't take the whole weight of the log on myself, I couldn't get the whole weight of the log off. Because I wouldn't take the whole weight on, I couldn't get the whole weight off.

If you don't take full responsibility for what you've done, without any excuses ... To say, "Well, yeah, *this* happened and *that* happened, and that might have been the occasion for the sin, but it wasn't the cause of what I did wrong. The cause of what I did wrong is I did it. A lot of things led to it, but that's the occasion. It's not the cause. I'm the cause. I did it." Only when you take full responsibility without blame shifting, without minimizing, without relativizing in any of those ways, when you confess, does it come off.

B. *A deep heart renunciation.* This takes a little bit longer to talk about. It's only because we don't know as much about this. In fact, when you first read what David says at the beginning of verse 4, it actually takes you aback. He says to God, "**Against you, you only, have I sinned ...**" What? First of all, let me show you that the heart is involved. Do you know why? Because he doesn't just say, "Against you I have sinned." He says, "Against you, you." You know in Semitic languages the doubling of the subject indicates passion, longing, and love.

David doesn't mourn over his dead son just by saying, "Absalom, my son." He says, "Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son." When you see that doubling, it's intensity of emotion, longing, and love. You don't just see Jesus on the cross saying, "My God." He says, "My God, my God." David is not just saying, "Against you have I sinned." That's a formal statement. It's a statement of fact. When he says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned," his heart is breaking. There's love he's expressing to God.

What do you think of this word *only*? At first sight it's shocking. It doesn't seem to make sense, because you could say, "Wait a minute." First of all, he sinned against this woman, Bathsheba, because she was a woman in a patriarchal society and he was the king and there was nothing she could do about it. There's actually almost no indication of blame in the accounts about all this given to her. He sinned against her by abusing power.

He sinned against the husband by having him killed, and he sinned against his entire people, because they crowned him as king in order to uphold the law, and now he's not doing it. He betrayed their trust. He sinned against all kinds of people, so how can he say, "Against you, you only, have I sinned"? The answer is this is Semitic hyperbole. He doesn't mean it literally any more than when Jesus said, "If you want to be my disciple, you have to hate your father and mother." That's Semitic hyperbole. It's a metaphor.

Just like if I say, “It’s raining cats and dogs” it doesn’t really mean there are actually cats and dogs coming down. It’s a metaphor. It’s hyperbole. If he says, “I want you to hate your father and mother to be my disciple,” what he means is, “Allegiance to me must be so much greater than allegiance to anyone else that it looks like hate in comparison to your love for me.” It’s a powerful hyperbole.

That’s what he’s saying here. Here’s what he means. “Yes, of course I have sinned against all these people, but it’s because, more fundamentally, I sinned against you. My sin against you was so foundational and so profound none of the other sins would have happened if I hadn’t sinned against you. In that sense, it’s my sin against you that is the actual reality here.”

What he’s saying is that under every sin there’s a sin, or you might say under all your sins, your individual, behavioral, active sins, there’s always a sin against God under the sins against other people. Martin Luther in his catechism looks at the Ten Commandments and points something out. The first commandment is, “Have no other gods before me,” and the other commandments, especially near the end, get into things like, “Don’t kill. Don’t steal. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t lie.”

He says you never break the other commandments unless you first break the first one. The sin underneath all other sins is you’re putting something in the place of God. You’re rejecting him. You’re trampling on him. You’re being ungrateful for him. This is what David is saying. He says, “Underneath all these other sins, the cause of it all is a sin against you.” So there’s a sin under the sin, and the sin is always directly against God.

Let’s take Martin Luther’s theory and apply it. Why do you lie, if you lie? You say, “Well, I’m not perfect.” I know, but what is the actual motivational structure? Martin Luther would say you wouldn’t lie unless, first of all, you put yourself in the place of God. You’ve decided how to live your life instead of listening to what he says you should do under those circumstances by looking at his law. More than that, you probably also have put something else in the place of God.

Are you lying to save your reputation? Then what people think of you is more important than what God thinks about you. You’ve put human opinion in the place of God. Are you lying in order to make more money in something? Well, in that case, the money is more important than God. When he says, “Against you, you only, have I sinned,” he is saying there is one level of sin, the objective level. “I broke the rule. I admit it. I take my punishment.” That’s not enough to really change the heart.

You have to look underneath and say, “But the real reason, the real heinousness, the real awfulness behind what I did up *here* was how I treated you. I’ve dishonored you. I haven’t loved you.” Let me give you two quick illustrations. The reason I’m pressing this and the reason this is so important is this is what actually changes you. Remember I told you there’s a kind of remorse that most of us go through? It seems like we’re repenting. We’re upset and we weep and feel

really bad and admit we've done wrong and say we're sorry for what we've done, and afterwards we're still the same.

One reason is we don't take full responsibility. In other words, repentance begins where blame shifting ends. But here you have to see that your main sin is always against God, and your main sin is not just against his law but his love, that you haven't just broken his Word but you have actually trampled on his heart. Only when your heart breaks to know that you've broken his heart does that actually begin to change you.

Some years ago, I remember counseling a couple of people in my church in Virginia. They were married and they were having marital problems, largely because the man was prone to anger and abusive language. Not physical abuse but very abusive language. His wife dragged him into counsel with a pastor, and I basically had to lean on him. He said, "Well, I guess you're right," but it was very clear he felt like she was being too sensitive. "I'm really no different than other guys."

He tried to put a lid on it, but he never did. He always said, "I'm sorry," but he never changed. Finally, one night he calls me up. She left. She was gone. He comes to see me in tears, saying, "I'm really sorry. I really, really see that I have done wrong. I have to stop. I have such a bad mouth on me. I have to stop it. I know I hurt her. I will change the way in which I speak. You have to call her and tell her."

All I did was I called her and told her, "Why don't you come, and the three of us will meet?" I didn't say, "Oh yeah, I'm sure he's changed." I said, "Let's come and let's hear him." She listened to him. He says, "I really am sorry. I'm really changed. I really repent." So she says, "Okay, I'll come back." She came back, and for about a month he was fine, and then he went right back to it, and she left for good.

Why? He was sorry for the consequences of the sin. He wasn't sorry for the sin. Do you know the difference between self-pity and repentance? This means everything here. In self-pity you're loving yourself. In self-pity you're saying, "This sin got me into trouble. That's why I'm so upset." Actually, you're sorry for the consequence of the sin, but you don't hate or are sorry for the sin, because that takes love.

If he loved his wife, he would have seen what it was doing to her. All he was bothered about was what the sin was doing to him. It was putting him through the shame of his wife leaving him. It was putting him through the incredible trauma of a separation and divorce. In other words, he was sorry for the consequence of the sin, not sorry for the sin, because he was loving himself, not loving her.

If his heart had really been engaged with her and he really saw what his sin was doing to her, he would have hated the sin and it would have changed him. What happened was there was external force put upon him, so without changing his heart he just complied. He just stopped it, but he hadn't actually changed. One

way to put it is life-giving repentance begins where blame shifting ends. Also, life-giving repentance begins where self-pity ends.

Self-pity looks like repentance. It's not. It's self-absorption. It's exactly the kind of self-absorption that Augustine said is at the heart of sin. It looks like repentance against sin. It's not. It's just being upset with yourself and upset with what's happening and upset *for* yourself. If you see that you haven't just broken God's law but broken his heart, that you've dishonored and grieved him and that that's the primary sin, then you begin to change.

Actually, David is doing that. A little later on he says, "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation." Look at what he means. He says, "I lost the joy of my salvation. I remember what it was like one time to be happy in you. You saved me," David is saying. "When I was in the wilderness and Saul was trying to kill me, you saved me." Salvation. "Then there was this and that problem and you saved me. Then these things went wrong, and you always brought me through and saved me. I had a joy in you, and I knew you loved me. I had a joy in you, but I lost that joy."

Therefore, here's what he's saying. "Before I committed physical adultery, I committed spiritual adultery. Why did I need her? Why did I want her caresses if I really had *your* caresses? Why would I need her affirmation if I knew *your* affirmation? Why is there this great suction coming out of my heart? Why the vacuum there? Because I lost you. When I look at your infinite love and all that you've done for me, for me to do this ... The reason I did this was I forgot you. I rejected you. I was ungrateful for you."

Do you see? Only when you see that your sin has grieved and dishonored God do you come to hate the sin itself. Not just hate what the sin has done to you but hate the sin, and then it loses its power over you. You change. Here's why.

3. *Where do you get the power to do this?* In the very first verse it says, "**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.**" When he uses the phrase *steadfast love*, that's the Hebrew word *cheeced*. The Hebrew word *cheeced* means steadfast love. It means undeserved and unconditional. Because it's undeserved, it's unconditional. Because you don't earn it, you can't unearn it.

That means it does two things to you at once. On the one hand, it humbles you into the dust and says, "You're totally unworthy, absolutely undeserving." On the other hand, it says, "However, it's unconditional. God loves you no matter what." So there's this mixture. In fact, Derek Kidner says what you see all through this psalm is, on the one hand, David senses his complete unworthiness; on the other hand, a confidence that he still belongs.

Now if you only feel unworthy and not confident in God's love, then repentance will not work on you. You'll just be beating yourself up, hoping that maybe God will have mercy. On the other hand, if you have confidence but not a deep sense of unworthiness, like that husband, you'll just feel self-pity and you won't change. Only if you are absolutely humbled into the dust and you say, "I'm completely

unworthy,” and at the same time are completely confident.

David had that. Why? He just had that, because all he knew was the grace of God was both undeserved and yet, at the same time, unconditional. That meant he was a sinner and he didn’t deserve anything, and yet he was absolutely confident. Now I’m glad David had that confidence, but we have something better. Not just a bare confidence, a promise that though you’re unworthy God loves you. We have something better.

When David’s son died ... His little boy died. The little boy who was born to him and Bathsheba died. He thought, “Oh, this is my son paying for my sins.” Nathan said, “No, your sin has been taken away. God has other reasons why it was wise to take this child away, but it wasn’t to pay for your sins.” We know that’s true. Do you know why? David’s son didn’t die for his sins. God’s Son died for his sins.

When David said, “Cast me not away from thy presence,” God didn’t. Do you know why? Because on the cross Jesus was cast away from God’s presence. When Jesus Christ said, “My God, my God,” what was he saying? “My God, my God, why have you cast me away from thy presence?” Everything David says here “Don’t do to me,” which God didn’t do to him, God didn’t do to him because God did it to his own Son in David’s place, in my place, in your place.

This is the secret. Do you know how you can really change? It’s not enough just to say, “God is a loving God and I’ve broken his heart,” and just thinking about that moves you so your sin loses its attractive power over you. No, that’s too abstract. When Jesus Christ was on the cross looking down at all of us, not only at the people he could visually see but all of us, everybody in this room ...

He looked out at all of these people down the corridors of time and saw us denying and betraying and over and over breaking promises to him, and yet, as Charles Spurgeon says, in the greatest act of love in the history of the world Jesus Christ stayed on the cross. He saw what we were like and he stayed. Remember he said to Peter, “I could call 10,000 angels like *that*, and it would be all over,” but he didn’t do it.

When you see Jesus Christ dying for you like that and you know the reason he died was because of the sins you do every day ... Think of this illustration. What if your spouse, your dearest friend, was shot dead by an arrow? Horrible. Then the person said, “Here’s the arrow. Maybe you want to take it home as a keepsake.” What would you say? You would say, “I never want to see that thing again. I don’t want to take it home and put it on my wall. I want somebody to burn it into ash.”

When you see Jesus dying on the cross for you, being cast out of God’s presence for you, taking all that for you, in spite of us undeserving, then you look at what you have done. You have a bad habit, you get angry, you use abusive language, you don’t tell the truth, you’re selfish instead of serving people, you tell a half-truth instead of a whole truth, you pay back instead of forgiving ... Every one of those sins is an arrow. They’ve gone into Jesus.

If you know what he really has done for you, to the degree you know it, to that degree you say, “I want nothing to do with it.” That’s renunciation. You’re not confessing the sin; you’re renouncing it. “I want nothing to do with it. Get it away. Be gone.” Then you change, but only if your heart is that engaged and only if you see what Jesus Christ has done for you on the cross.

I don’t care whether you’re at *this* end of the spectrum or *that* end of the spectrum. At *this* end of the spectrum, you’re too confident. You don’t admit how bad you are. I would say most people in the world right now listening to what I’m saying would say, “Gosh, this is kind of pessimistic about human nature.” Yes, of course it is, but I want you to know there are things in your life right now that unless you get on top of are going to hurt you.

Sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is to have you. There’s stuff in your life that will hurt you unless you hurt it. Be killing your indwelling sin or your indwelling sin will be killing you. On the other end of the spectrum there are people here who might be really, really upset because they feel like, “I’ve done some terrible things. I just don’t think God could possibly forgive me.”

Please remember that place in the Westminster Confession, the Presbyterian confession, that sums up biblical teaching by saying, “Just as there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation on those who truly repent.” Go and learn what this means. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the fact that now, as we take up the Lord’s Supper, we can actually do this. We can take up your *cheched*, your steadfast love. It humbles us and affirms us at the same time, and it helps us not only confess our sins but renounce and get freedom from those things in our lives that need to change. We pray that you would help us do that now through your Holy Spirit, thinking about what Jesus Christ did on the cross for us. In his name we pray, amen.

Battle: Lead Us and Deliver Us

The Prayer of Prayers—November 9, 2014

Psalm 73:1–3, 13–26

¹ Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;

I had nearly lost my foothold.

3 For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
and have washed my hands in innocence.

14 All day long I have been afflicted,
and every morning brings new punishments.

15 If I had spoken out like that,
I would have betrayed your children.

16 When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply

17 till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.

18 Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.

19 How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!

20 They are like a dream when one awakes;
when you arise, Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies.

21 When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,

22 I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.

23 Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.

24 You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.

25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.

The Word of the Lord.

This fall, we've been looking at the subject of prayer, and each week we're taking

one part of the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is so packed that every single phrase is actually talking about another kind of prayer, another way of praying. What we've been doing each week is going to some part of the Bible that gives you an example of that kind of prayer to help you know how to use each part of the Lord's Prayer.

So, "Give us this day our daily bread." That's where we have needs. How do you petition for needs? "Forgive us our debts." There you have guilt and shame. You have regrets. How do you overcome those? How do you get through those? Now, tonight, we're looking at, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." That's talking about the times in our lives in which you really feel like life is just a battle.

Temptation is a situation that brings out something in you that's bad. It brings out your flaws. There are times in which you feel like there are parts of your own life you're not happy with, and you feel tempted. There are two sides to it. "Lead us not into temptation" means, "Help me with the evil inside me." "Deliver us from evil" means, "When I'm assaulted from outside, help me with that."

There are flagrant temptations, like if you're tempted to have an affair with somebody who's not your spouse, or there are flagrant kinds of evil. You're in a town and there's an invading army coming and they're killing and pillaging and you pray, "Lord, deliver us from evil." What I want to show you tonight is an example of this kind of prayer. How do you pray when you're embattled? How do you pray when you feel like there are bad things inside you, bad things outside you, and you're just spiraling down? You're confused. You don't know what to do.

The prayer I'm going to take you to, Psalm 73, is a considerably more common situation. Let me show you what the problem is. Notice he says in verse 13, "**Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.**" That's one half of what's wrong with his life.

What he's saying is, "I've been trying to live a good life. I kept my hands pure. I'm keeping my heart pure." It's a way of saying, "I'm living a good life. I'm devoted to God. I'm loving my neighbor as myself. I'm helping the poor. I'm telling the truth. I'm living a good life, but everything is going wrong." He doesn't say what it is. He just says, "**All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.**"

Bad things are happening to him, really bad things. He's living as good a life as he can, and everything is going wrong. Notice verse 1 is ironic. He says, "**Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.**" Then he says in verse 13, "I've been impure in heart, but everything is going wrong. Why is God letting this happen?"

That's only one half of his problem, because the other half is verse 3, where he says, "**... I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**" The one part we didn't read is verses 4–12 in which he's looking at the people around him, and this is what he

sees. He says, "Their bodies are sleek. Pride and violence is their necklace. They are not stricken like the rest of humankind. They scoff and they speak with malice. These are the wicked: always at ease, they increase in riches."

What he's saying is, "I'm trying to live a pure life. Everything is going wrong for me." He sees a lot of other people out there who are corrupt, who are abusive, who are ruthless, who are greedy, and they're having a great life. What is the result? He says in verse 2, "**... my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.**"

In the Bible, to lose your foothold is a pretty serious thing. It's a metaphor, of course. If you're coming down a set of steps and you lose your foothold, you could get injured or die. If you're on a mountain path and you lose your foothold, you might be injured or fall to your death. There are other places in the Old Testament where losing your foothold is a metaphor for spiritual destruction. He's already losing his grip, because he says in verse 3, "I envied the arrogant."

Partly because of marketing, partly because all advertisement is based on envy, we don't see envy as terrible as it really is. The ancients did. It was one of the seven deadly sins. Here's what envy is. Envy is wanting somebody else's life. Do you know what that does? First of all, it sucks the joy out of the life you actually have.

It also undermines the impetus you have for living the life you actually have well, because you're looking at, "I would like to have *his* life or *her* life. I would like to have these other kinds of lives. Why don't I have the life *they* have?" That's envy. It sucks the life out of you. It sucks the joy out of you. It can make you very hard. It can make you very self-absorbed, very cynical, very skeptical of other people. You just are a miserable person.

That's what it means to lose your foothold. It's not only to spiral down into things like envy and anger, but also the implication, especially because of verse 1 ... He says, "God, you're supposed to be good to the pure in heart, but I've been pure in heart and you're not being good to me." He's on the verge of saying, "Maybe I'll just walk away from this good life, and maybe I'll just walk away from God."

Now that's the situation. Do you see why we chose this? Yes, there are overt temptations to embezzle from your employer or there are marauding armies that are coming toward your town, but generally speaking, this set of temptations is a lot more common. You're tempted to get hard. You're tempted to give up, to get cynical, because you're having disappointment after disappointment after disappointment in your life, and other people, who aren't trying as hard to live a good life, are having good lives.

What does that do to you? You spiral into despair. You spiral into a kind of depression. It's a spiritual depression too, because it just makes you doubt. "Why should I even follow God?" That's a very common thing, and I certainly, as a pastor, have talked to literally hundreds of people over the years who have spiraled down into that kind of despair.

What is the resolution? What is the solution? When life seems to be a battle like that ... temptations inside, evil outside ... how do you get through it? The answer is a particular kind of prayer. You'll see this right here. The turnaround is in verse 17. In verses 16–17 it says, "**When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood ...**" All commentators on this passage say this is the turnaround.

Do you notice something? Before verse 17, God is always spoken of in the third person: God. But after verse 17, God is spoken to in the first person. "You place them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. But I am always with you." When he goes into the sanctuary ... What does it mean to go to the sanctuary? It meant to go to Jerusalem and go into the temple and participate in the temple worship.

See, we're not talking here just about what you and I might think. A sanctuary might be, well, you walk around New York City and there are all these big beautiful buildings and sometimes churches. You can walk in. You can sit down in a pew. You can watch some light coming through the stained glass window, you have a little time of quiet, and then you pray to God.

Is that what he's talking about? No. He doesn't say a sanctuary. He says, "I went into *the* sanctuary of God." That's the temple in Jerusalem. There he participated in the full range of prayer. He would have participated in praise and singing. He would have participated in confession. He would have participated in all the full range of prayer. What corporate worship and prayer does is it brings you into the presence of God.

Instead of thinking *about* God, you actually deal *with* God. Instead of thinking *about* God ("Why is God allowing all these things to happen to me?") you actually deal *with* God and you say, "In light of who you are, why is this happening to me, and how should I be feeling about this?" This is where his life turns around. "Until I went into the sanctuary of God, I was confused. I was getting bitter. Then I understood."

So this is the prayer that Jesus says, "When you're in the battle, when you're in the trenches, when you feel like you're falling, when you feel like you're at the bottom of a hole, it's through prayer that you get yourself out." Now what does he actually do in prayer? There are four things. I'd like to spend the rest of our time looking at these four things. They all can only be done in prayer. Those four things are *he admits the worst, he sees the whole, he grasps God's grace, and he reorders the loves of his heart.*

1. *He admits the worst.* Go back to verse 13. It's a remarkable statement. "**Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.**" That is an astounding admission. In fact, Derek Kidner, who is a commentator on the book of Psalms and an Old Testament scholar, writes this about that verse: "To decide that such earnestness has been a waste of time is pathetically self-centered—what did I get out of it?—but the very formulating of

the thought has shocked the writer into a better frame of mind ...”

I think Derek Kidner is absolutely right. In some ways, the turnaround is when he goes into the sanctuary, but he probably doesn't go into the sanctuary unless he admits what he admits in verse 13. Do you see what he's saying about himself? Are you and I willing to say the same thing? When he says, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and in vain I have washed my hands in innocence,” here's what he's saying. When you say, “I did something in vain,” what you mean is your motive and your purpose has been thwarted.

If you say, for example, “I went and I tried to persuade her in vain,” you mean you tried to persuade her and she wasn't persuaded, so everything you did was in vain. When you say, “I was serving God, I was loving my neighbor, I was helping the poor, I was telling the truth in vain,” that means your purpose, the reason you were obeying God, the reason you were praying, the reason you were being good to other people, the reason you were caring for the poor has been for ... what?

If something is in vain, that means, “This is the purpose, and I didn't get it.” What was the purpose? Well, he's telling you. “My life isn't going well.” We don't know quite what that means, but almost certainly, “I'm not making money. My career is in trouble. My relationships haven't gone very well.” In other words, “My life isn't going well.”

Do you know what he's admitting? “I was not serving God for God's sake. I was not helping the poor for the poor's sake. I was not telling the truth for the truth's sake. I was doing it for *my* sake. I was doing it because I figured if I did all these things, then God would give me a good life. He has not given me a good life. Everything I've done is in vain.” That's the reason Derek Kidner says that's pathetically self-centered, shockingly shallow, unbelievably self-absorbed.

Kidner thinks, rightly, that even saying it out loud was enough of a shock, because it's right there that he begins to sort of move. I want to know whether you're willing to be as honest as he is. Do you know what he's saying? See, when troubles happen to us ... The troubles are real. Bad things have happened, and they are real sorrows, real griefs. You can lose a loved one. You can have a tremendous career reversal. These things are real griefs.

When those things happen, of course they're going to make you feel bad. Of course they're going to weigh you down, but if they destroy you, if you lose all hope, if you turn back from living the life you were living before, if you become cynical about people, if you become bitter, that's not because of the griefs; it's because of something going on inside you that you need to take responsibility for, which he's taking responsibility for.

Here's what he's willing to admit: that so much of his service to God was really not out of love for God; it was love for himself and using God. I do remember many years ago, when I was a new Christian, things weren't going well in my life, and I was having a very similar experience to this. I also had a kind of sanctuary

experience. I suddenly realized one of the reasons I was so despondent was not because of the reversals in my life (of course I should feel bad about those) but because the reversals were revealing something about my heart.

At one point, I almost heard God say this. (By the way, I want you to know, since I'm a Presbyterian, I *almost* heard God say this. I didn't actually hear God say this. I didn't hear a little voice, just to let you know.) As I was thinking and meditating, I almost heard God say, "Now we'll know whether you got into the Christian faith to get me to serve you or for you to serve me."

In fact, I'd go so far as to say every time you get into trouble, every time bad things happen to you and you wonder, "Why is God letting this happen?" I believe he's actually asking you the same question. I think the answer always is we like to talk about being devoted to God, we like to talk about all that, but honestly, to a great degree, we get into the Christian faith because we think it'll help us have a better life. We are, therefore, not so much loving God as using God.

We're not telling the truth for truth's sake. We're not serving God for God's sake. We're not helping the poor for the poor's sake. If bad things happen to us, we say, "I've been trying to live a good life. Why is God letting this happen?" Do you know why you're so upset? It's not a philosophical, "Why does God allow evil and suffering?" It's because you're having to admit, "The reason I've been living this good life is because I thought it would pay off, and it's not paying off."

Do you see what you're saying? Do you see that one of the reasons why you're miserable is because of that attitude? This man realizes that he's never going to get out of the hole he's in spiritually unless he admits, "My problem, my despair is not simply because of the bad things happening to me. It's also because, essentially, my goodness was really quite selfish and, therefore, wasn't really goodness."

Can you admit that? Can you hear every time you really get into trouble God saying, "Now we'll see whether all your good works were in vain, because basically you were looking for payoff. Now we're going to see whether or not you got into the Christian faith to serve me or whether you got into the Christian faith to get me to be a slave for you and do your will."

2. *He sees the whole.* It's very, very clear. In fact, we have several verses. In some ways, there's more copy on this than on any of the other steps. He says, "... till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." He's talking about the arrogant. He's talking about the wicked, the people who live these bad lives but are having great lives. He was envying them. He was upset with them. He was feeling self-pity.

Then he says, "Then in the sanctuary, in the worship of the people of God, I understood their final destiny. You place them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. How suddenly they're destroyed. They're like a dream when one awakes." Jump down to verse 24 for a second. "But afterward you will take me into glory." When he says, "I saw their destiny," and he says, "I saw *my* destiny,"

what is he doing? He's getting the big picture.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached a wonderful series of messages. He's a British preacher. Back in the 1950s in London, he preached a series of 11 sermons on Psalm 73. When he got to the sermon on this place where they go into the sanctuary, he said something like, "Going into the sanctuary, going into prayer, means you begin to see things as a whole, and you're reminded of things you have forgotten and ignored."

A good illustration of this would be something like this. Imagine you're on a hiking tour and you're under the trees and you think you're going in the right direction. You think you're not too far from your destination, and suddenly, as you're walking along, you notice there's an outcropping of rock over here, and you realize, "If I climbed up to the top of that rock, I could see above the trees and I could see where I was going."

So you climb up to the top, and suddenly you get your vantage point. You have a vantage point to see where you've been and where you're going. You notice, first of all, "I've turned too far south. I need to start to head north. Uh-oh. I'm actually nowhere near as close as I thought I was. It looks to me like there's my destination. I'll probably be another hour." In other words, the vantage point helps reorient you.

You can see the end from the beginning, and then you actually can understand where you are. Before that you really didn't know where you were, but you stand up and you see. That's prayer. Prayer gets you to that high place. Prayer always helps you see the big picture and you stop getting lost in the weeds. If you look carefully, here's what he's noticing. He says, "You put them on slippery places. They are suddenly wiped away, but you're going to take me into glory."

Here's what he's saying. This is actually hard, and yet it's wonderful. Everything in this life is going to be taken away from you. All the wealth, all the love, every good thing will be taken away from you. Those of us who are older know this existentially. Those of you who are younger know it intellectually, but you don't know it existentially. Every love relationship you have will be taken away from you. Every dollar you have will be taken away from you.

It will all be gone, because all things wear to an end under the sun at last. He's suddenly realizing something. If the only wealth and the only happiness and the only power you have is in this life, no matter how great it is, it's all going to be swept away. In fact, the idea of it happening fast ... Again, that's the sort of thing us older people come to realize: how fast life is.

When I was in my 20s, I was so tired of hearing people in their 60s say, "I can't tell you how fast life goes." Yeah, yeah, yeah. Then you get to be 60 yourself and you realize, "Uh-oh." We're being swept away. Things happen very quickly. We don't have very long. He's saying all goodness in this life is temporary. It's going to be taken away, and if money here, if power here, if prosperity here is all you have, you are to be pitied.

He's saying, "Why am I envying these people? I should be sorry for them. I should have compassion for them." When he says, "I will be received into glory," that's the only wealth that really works. It's the glory of God. It's friendship with God. It's the only thing you can't lose, the only thing that will last, the only real wealth, the only real power. What he's saying is, "Wait a minute. As soon as I start to look at the big picture, suddenly I've stopped envying."

By the way, look at the image about dream. He says, "When you awake, they are despised like fantasies." What is all that about? I'll tell you what it's about. Have you ever been in a dream and in the dream something seems very real? It might be somebody chasing you with a knife, and in the dream you're like *this*, and suddenly you wake up. You wake up and laugh. "I was so scared a minute ago, but suddenly I realize it's just a fantasy. It's just a phantom. I laugh."

This is an amazing statement. He's saying all power and all wealth in this world is like a dream. It seems very real when you're in the dream, but actually it's not. Do you know how life changing it would be for you to really believe and continue to believe what he is saying here? Every day, you walk out in the world, and the world says, "I'm the only reality. I'm the only reality." We get so scared if our career isn't so good or if somebody doesn't like us or if this is bad or we put on weight.

If you really believe this ... The only place you get this view that gives you such poise ... Everything here is temporary. The only wealth that lasts is what you've done for God, who you are in God, your relationship with God. Do you realize the freedom there would be from fear, freedom from envy, freedom from anger? Where do you get that? Only in the sanctuary.

I'm doing everything I can to make God real to you right now, but I tell you, you walk out there, and the world will start to come at you again. It's in worship. It's in prayer. It's in listening to the Word. It's in the Lord's Supper. It's in the sanctuary. It's in all these acts of worship and prayer that you get reoriented and you see the big picture. Otherwise, you tend to get lost under the trees. You get lost in the weeds.

3. *He grasps God's grace.* Now that he has seen the big picture, notice what happens in verses 21–24. It's lovely. "**When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.**" This is actually just an extension of verse 13. He's now admitting he is like a beast.

Do you know what that means? I think it means something like this. Love means meeting the needs of somebody else ahead of your own. Love means sacrificing for someone else, meeting their needs rather than yours. Love is always an action. Love is deliberate. Love takes thinking. However, selfishness is a reaction. Selfishness takes no thought. Selfishness is an instinct. Selfishness just happens naturally.

What does that mean? You have to be very human to love. You have to be very

personal. You have to be very thoughtful. You have to be very deliberate. You have to be extremely intentional. You have to remind yourself. You have to think. You have to be rational. You have to be very human. But to be cruel, to be selfish, to be envious, to be angry, to be resentful is just a matter of instinct. It happens naturally. In that sense, you're like a beast. You're like a brute.

What he says here is, "I now realize that I've been like that, and yet ..." See that word *yet*? "You've been holding me by the right hand all this time. You've never let me go." This is a recognition of God's grace, and this, by the way, is the definition of what it means to be a Christian.

A Christian, first of all, admits they're like a beast toward God, admits they've been trying to use him, that they don't really love him, even if they've followed him. A Christian is someone who sees their capacity for selfishness, cruelty, self-assertion, and self-will, sees their capacity for evil, and yet knows God hasn't given up on them, that God gives them his undeserved grace and mercy anyway.

Now the real question is ... *How does he know this?* Probably two things in the sanctuary helped him to see that, in spite of all that he had done, God was still with him. It was crazy, it was undeserved, but God was still with him. The joy of that. He realizes God's grace, that God never let him go. Probably two things in the sanctuary helped him see that.

First, probably just the experience of worship. He gets there. He realizes how he has been to God, and now he looks up, and suddenly he's still sensing God's presence. He's still sensing God dealing with him, and he just feels like, "Oh my goodness. That's wonderful." It might be more than that. If you went into the sanctuary in the temple of Jerusalem, you would have seen an altar caked with blood.

Even though the Jews didn't quite understand all those bloody sacrifices ... They didn't understand how it worked, but they knew it meant God was trying to atone for their sins somehow so he could still give them his presence, even though they didn't deserve it. So because in the sanctuary he sees the bloody altar, because in the sanctuary he senses God's presence, he says, "This is amazing. In spite of the way I've been, God loves me anyway," and he grasps the grace of God.

It's an exhilarating, wonderful, incredible experience, as I'll show you in one second. What's really great about this is this. What does it mean for you and me to go into the sanctuary now? I've hinted to you that for you to do what he did would be to pray. For you to do what he did might be to go to church. I'm all for going to church, by the way. I want you to know that.

Let me set the record straight. Go to church. It's a great thing to do. Come and worship and sing and praise and all that, but to really be accurate in the New Testament, how do you go into the sanctuary of God? How do you go to the temple of God? It's gone. The temple has been destroyed. So how do you do that? Not by trying to rebuild a building.

When Jesus Christ was throwing the moneychangers out of the temple, his critics

came to him and said, “What gives you the authority to do this in the temple of God?” Do you know what Jesus said? “Tear this building down, and in three days I’ll build it back up again.” He was talking about his death and his resurrection after three days.

Do you know what he was saying? “I’m the temple. I am the bridge between heaven and earth, and I am the final bloody sacrifice that will atone for sins.” To go to the sanctuary ... If you want to do what he did, if you want to, on the one hand, admit the worst, see the whole, and then realize he forgives you, realize that he has never left you, that he still has you by your hand ... It’s transforming to admit the worst about yourself and then to have him say, “But I still love you.”

The way for us to do that is not by going into some sanctuary, sitting down, and praying a prayer. To go into the sanctuary means to go to the gospel. It means to go to Jesus Christ. It means to say, “I see you dying on the cross for my sin.” In fact, think about it. When he says, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” what is he saying? “Father, I can’t feel your hand.”

There’s a sense in which Jesus Christ lost the hand of the Father. There’s a sense in which Jesus Christ was rejected. God turned his back on him. Why did the Father do that? Because Jesus was standing in our place and he was getting what we deserve. We do not deserve to have him hold our right hand, considering how we are, and yet he does. Why? Because Jesus got the punishment you deserve so that when you do the things you do, no matter how

...

I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what you’ve done. I don’t care whether you’re a hit man for the mob. I don’t care if you’ve killed people. If you come to God through Jesus Christ, he holds you by your right hand. It doesn’t matter how dark the dungeon. This is the shaft of light. That’s what it means to go to the sanctuary. Not just to pray in general, but to pray in Jesus’ name, to say, “Father, accept me because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross.”

4. *He reorders the loves of his heart.* You can see he was slipping, he was sliding, but now he’s standing. Now he’s climbing, and now he’s soaring, because at the end he says, **“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”** Do you know what the transformation is here? I’ll tell you what the transformation is.

In verse 13 he says, “In vain I have lived a good life, because I’m not getting the good things. I’m not getting prosperity. I’m not getting popularity. I’m not getting good things.” For him to say, “I’ve served you, but I’m unhappy because I didn’t get these things,” means, “I want these things more than I want you. These things are the real end. You’re just the means, God.” In verses 13–14, there are all of these things on earth that he wants more than God. Do you know what that does to you?

If the main thing in your life that you love is your family, that sounds very nice, but you’ll crush them under the weight of your expectations and they’ll always be

disappointing you. If the main thing you love in life is some person, some romantic interest or a spouse ... If the main thing you love in life is your success or your career, you're a slave. If you love anything more than God, it'll enslave you. You'll be a workaholic. You'll be up and down all the time. You'll be emotionally distraught. You'll be a slave of uncontrollable fears or anger.

What has happened here? "There's nothing I love in heaven and earth more than you. I love you most of all." God's love is the only love you can't lose. God's love is the only love you can't lose if you fail. God's love is the only love that if you die it gets better. That means only love of the immutable will bring tranquility. Only love of the immutable, unchanging, loving God will ever get you to the place where you can look out and say, "Bad things are happening to me, but my foot does not slide."

So because he has reordered his loves, because now he says, "There's nothing I love in life more than you," now he's okay. How did that happen? How do you do that? Well, I think it was because of the grace. When he saw God's grace, it made him love God more. But you and I ... More than just grace in general, we get to look at the cross.

The hymn you're going to sing in one second is a hymn called "It Is Well With My Soul" by Horatio Spafford. Do you know the story behind this? He wrote it in 1876. He lost all four of his little girls in a boat accident. He was a Chicago Christian lawyer. They were on a ship to England with his wife. The ship went down. She was fished out of the water unconscious, but all of the little girls were lost. They were drowned.

Later on, in fact, supposedly ... I don't know if it's true or not, but when he was actually on his way to England on a ship to bring his wife home, he wrote this hymn. He was dealing with his grief. I want to ask you a question. If he's dealing with the incredible tragedy of four little girls dying, why would he say ...

*My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought
My sin, not in part but the whole
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.*

Why would he bring that up? Why would this be of comfort to him? He's dealing with the tragedy of his daughters dying. Why does he say, "My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought; my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more"? Why does that help him deal with his trouble? Why does that keep him from spiraling down into despair? I'll give you two reasons.

First, when bad things happen to us, one of the things we say is, "Oh, maybe it's punishment." No. Look at the cross. Jesus got the punishment for you. Bad things may happen to you. We don't know the reason. God knows. But it's not punishment. Jesus got the punishment for you. "Well," you say. Bad things happen and you say, "Maybe it's not punishment. Maybe God doesn't care." No. Look at the cross.

What do you mean God doesn't care? The cross gives us a God who says, "I lost a child too," voluntarily, not involuntarily, to save you. Spafford is looking at the cross, and that reorders the loves of his heart. He says, "If you've done this for me, there is nothing in heaven or on earth that I love more than you." When you can say that, nothing will cast you down. Let us pray.

Our Father, we need to know how to pray during the battles of life, through the temptations of life, through evil, through bad things happening. How do we get through? This is the way. Teach us how to go into the sanctuary. Teach us how to admit the worst, how to see the whole, how to grasp your hand, the hand of your grace, and reorder our loves so that you are our strength and portion forever. Teach us how to do that in prayer. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Repose: The Power and Glory

The Prayer of Prayers—November 16, 2014

Psalm 27

**1 The Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?**

**The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?**

**2 When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.**

**3 Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.**

**4 One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.**

**5 For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;**

**he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.**

**6 Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the Lord.**

**7 Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.**

**8 My heart says of you, “Seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, I will seek.**

**9 Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.
Do not reject me or forsake me,
God my Savior.**

**10 Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.**

**11 Teach me your way, Lord;
lead me in a straight path
because of my oppressors.**

**12 Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.**

**13 I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.**

**14 Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.**

The Word of the Lord.

What we've been doing this fall is looking at prayer through the lens of the Lord's Prayer. Each week, we've been taking a phrase from the Lord's Prayer and trying to find some other place in the Bible that is an example of the kind of prayer that phrase represents so we can enhance and enrich our own prayer lives.

We come, finally, to the very last phrase in the Lord's Prayer, which is, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen." Is that just a rhetorical flourish? After all, it doesn't seem to be a prayer. It's actually more of a statement of fact, kind of a truism. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and

the glory forever and ever, amen.” But ancient commentators on the Lord’s Prayer have said, rightly, that this is a prayer of repose.

The Lord’s Prayer is quite a workout. You’re asking for a whole lot of things: daily bread, deliver us from evil, temptation. There are a lot of things you’re asking for, but at the end, you rest in God. You enjoy God. You’re not asking for anything; you’re enjoying God. In fact, you’re realizing that all of the things you’ve been looking for, all the kingdom and the power and the glory are already there in him, and if you have him, you have everything you need. Therefore, at the very end, the last part of the prayer is the prayer of repose.

Where do we get any examples of this sort of prayer in the Bible? We have one. It’s one of the most famous psalms in the Bible, Psalm 27. We’re going to see that this is exactly what that end of the Lord’s Prayer embodies. This is a psalm of David, telling about something that happens in his life, and the best way to get through it is to notice that in the very beginning he talks about what he’s facing. We learn *what he’s facing*, then *what he does about it*, then *how he does it*, and *why he’s confident it will work*.

1. *What he’s facing*. We can be brief about this, but it’s really important to see. He is facing fearful things. He says in the very beginning, “Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?” Why? “Because when the wicked advance against me to devour me, though an army besiege me, though war break out against me ...”

This is David. He’s a king. It’s unlikely that anybody in this room will ever have an army actually come and besiege you and try to overthrow you, though it’s New York and you might be a king or queen in disguise and you’re just hanging out, but by and large, we’re not going to face this. David is saying at one end of the spectrum, people are always trying to overthrow him. People are literally trying to devour his flesh, kill him, and take his throne.

At one end of the spectrum, he has armies trying to besiege him. At the other end is verse 10, where he says, “If my mother and father forsake me ...” We’ll talk about that later. Here he’s looking at the other end of the spectrum. Crushing emotional sorrows. Nothing is probably more crushing than to be rejected by your father and mother. At the other end, not emotional sorrows, but physical danger. David is showing us the spectrum.

These things may have happened to him. It looks more like he’s saying *if* they happen to him. The fact is they *do* happen. David is saying, “I have something that’ll help me face it.” This is the realism of the Bible. It’s all through the Bible. Ernest Becker, one of my favorite authors, says something like, “I think taking life seriously means that whatever is done must be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false.”

He says here’s real life. There’s a rumble of panic underneath everything. Are you ready to recognize the terror of creation? There’s this great line in *Macbeth* that goes like this: “Each new morn new widows howl, new orphans cry, new

sorrows strike heaven on the face.” Kathy and I spent last weekend with one of our best friends whose husband just died a month ago, and he was one of our best friends too.

She described to us what it was like to wake up the first morning after her husband died. The first morning, you wake up. You know how you always wonder, “Where am I?” and you suddenly realize he’s dead. “Each new morn new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven upon the face.” That’s life. That’s the terror of creation. There’s a rumble of panic underneath everything, if you’re smart enough to know what life is like.

That’s the realism of the Bible. Here’s what David is saying. “I can take the terror and the evil and the panic of life with utmost seriousness and still know I have something that will overcome it. I have something with which I can face it so that it will not overcome me.” That’s the reason he begins and ends with this confidence. “I have something.” What is it?

2. *What he does about it.* It’s the first half of verse 4. This is what’s going to help him handle all of life. **“One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life ...”** What’s he talking about? First of all, let me show you what he’s not doing. He’s not going in to God and asking about the army. He’s not going in to God and asking him to change circumstances, saying, “Please help me defeat the army or turn them away.” He’s not doing that. That never shows up anywhere in here.

That doesn’t mean it’s wrong, of course, because the Lord’s Prayer itself says you may pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” You may pray, “Deliver us from evil.” Think about it. Even inside the Lord’s Prayer, you don’t get to daily bread and to “deliver us from evil” until you spend a lot of time looking at God. He’s Father. He’s a heavenly Father. He has a name. He’s personal, but he’s holy. He has a kingdom.

In other words, you spend all this time looking at God before you ever get to circumstances. This is actually one of the main lessons you’re going to get if you really read the Bible and you ask yourself ... Every day you read another page and say, “What do I learn about prayer?” One of the main things we learn is it’s fine to pray about circumstances. It’s fine to say, “Lord, keep me from financial reversal. Keep me from ill health. Keep me from this. Keep me from that.”

There’s nothing wrong with doing that, but it’s not your main issue. It’s not your main problem. Bad circumstances are going to happen to you. What do you really need? Here’s what he says. “I want to dwell in your house. I want to see you, your beauty. I want to seek your face. That’s the one thing I want.” When he says, “I want to dwell in your house ...” He’s talking, by the way, about the tabernacle.

Notice down a little farther he talks about “Your sacred tent, your dwelling.” He also calls it the *house* and the *temple*. This is David, not Solomon, which means the temple had not been built yet, so he’s talking about the tabernacle. He says,

"I want to dwell there." He almost certainly doesn't mean literally dwell there. He's the king. The Levites and priests dwell there. He's not going to live there.

What does he mean, then? What does he mean by this term *one thing*? Then he says it again. "**One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek ...**" One of the Hebrew commentators I read, getting ready for this sermon, says in the Hebrew David is using a construction that is astonishingly intense. He's essentially saying, "One, one, one, only, only one thing I want." The commentator says it's a grammatical expression of an extraordinary singleness of purpose.

There's almost no way you could express singleness of purpose more intensely with any grammatical phrase than this. Here's what he's trying to say. He says, "I don't care what it takes. I don't care how long it takes. I don't care what it costs. I want unbroken fellowship with you, O Lord. I don't want to just know about you; I want to know you. I want to experience your reality. I want to see your face. I want to experience your presence. It's the only thing I need. If I have that, then everything is all right."

"I want to dwell in your house" means "I want the unbroken fellowship." One thing and one thing only. We're back to where we were last week when we were looking at Psalm 73. At the very end, there's a place I went over pretty fast when I was here preaching on it last week, but I'm very happy to be able to make the point at greater length now.

Saint Augustine was raised with the Greek philosophers. One of the things he knew the Greek and classical philosophers taught was that if you set your heart too much on anything in this world, you're going to be held hostage by that thing emotionally and you'll become enslaved to it. So if you live for your career or your family or your children or some lover ... If there's anything you really set your heart on, it's going to emotionally whipsaw you all the time.

If anything goes wrong with it, you're scared. If anything blocks it, you're angry. You'll be driven by it. The Greek philosophers said what you really need to do is achieve what they called *ataraxia*, which is a hard thing to translate, but it really means detachment. It's very much like Buddhism, actually. You need to realize that these are good things, but don't get too attached to them, because they're passing away.

In fact, one of the Greek philosophers said that when you kiss your little boy good morning, you should always say in your heart, "You may not live until next month. You're going to die soon." In other words, the philosophers said, "Just keep telling yourself, 'Hey, don't get too invested in anything.'" That's *ataraxia*. In other words, if you live for anything and invest your whole life in anything, if you love anything too much, you're going to be terribly disappointed and be up and down, so detach.

Augustine said that is so wrong and yet so right. It's so right, because any created thing, anything in this world that you live for, you're a slave to it. You're not free. Everybody has to live for something, and whatever you live for, that's

the thing you're going to have to have. You're going to have to have it to be happy. Therefore, if you live for anything, yes, it makes you a slave, but if you think the answer is to detach ...

Augustine says, on the one hand, that's incredibly selfish, that you would actually love less just to protect yourself. That's not just selfish; it's inhuman, because you're also hardening yourself. You say, "Well, sit loose to everything. Let's not get too attached." You become a little bit cynical. He says, "No, here's the only answer." This *is* the answer. You should not love your child less. You should not love your career less. You should not love anything less. You should love God more.

Not just know about God or believe in God but love him more and know his love. It's the love of God, the immutable, unchanging love of God, because it's not based on your performance. You can't lose it, and even if you die, it only gets better. That's the only thing that will bring tranquility. This is actually what it means to say, "Thine is the power and the glory forever, amen."

There's a great sermon, almost a frighteningly good sermon, a funeral sermon, that Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century Massachusetts pastor, preached once. It was printed up and you can read it. It's called *The Sorrows of the Bereaved Spread Before Jesus*. He was preaching at the funeral of a good man who had died and left young children and a wife. At the end of the sermon, he actually looks ... This is the sort of thing you really couldn't do anymore.

On the front pew, there are the widow and the children. He looks at them and says, "Now, children, you had a loving father, but now I tell you, get a father who cannot die." Then he looks at the wife and says something like, "You, the aggrieved, forlorn widow, now go get a husband who cannot die." Then he actually says, "As wonderful as that man was, the love you had in him was like a tributary, but in God you have the headwaters and, therefore, you actually haven't lost what you had in him."

There's another place where Augustine actually says if you're lazy, you're really looking for the peace of God in the wrong way. If you're ambitious, you're really looking for the glory of God in the wrong way. Everything you're trying to find here you can have in him. That's the reason Augustine actually says, "God alone is the place of peace that cannot be disturbed, and he will not withhold himself from your love unless you withhold your love from him."

The only possible way for you to really have peace and be able to face anything, face the loss of money, the loss of health, the loss of loved ones, is to say, "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory. You give me the only wealth I really need. You give me the only love I really have to have. Only if I'm in you do I have the health that means I know I'm going to be resurrected and last forever."

That's the reason why, basically, what David is saying is, "I want the kind of prayer life in which I don't just get things from God, where I'm saying, 'Please give me this, please give me this, please give me this,' so that my heart

continues to rest in those things, so I'm whipsawed back and forth with fear and anger. No. I'm not going into prayer in order to get things from God, though I might ask about things. I want to get God. Not things from God; I want to get God. That's the one thing I have to have. I have to have that kind of prayer life. I have to have that kind of fellowship. If I have that, then it doesn't matter what my enemies do."

3. *How he does it.* Let's be as practical as we can possibly be. How does he do this? What does it mean to dwell in the house of the Lord forever? In the second half of verse 4 he says ... “**... to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.**” Two things. So first of all, what does it mean to gaze on the beauty of the Lord? Well, the word *gaze* is trying to translate a Hebrew word. He could have just used the word *look*, but clearly he's using a stronger word.

The word for *gaze* means what you think. It means to stare. It means to drink it in. It means to look and look and look and burn what you're seeing into your mind so that it will always be there for recall or replication. Almost certainly, when he says, “I want to gaze on the beauty of God,” he's not talking about a literal vision of some kind of brightness that he would see with his actual physical eyes. Almost certainly not.

In fact, most commentators say he could use other words to talk about that. So what is he talking about? He's talking about the difference between an abstract understanding of God and an actual heart experience of God. For example, Daniel Steele, who was the first president of Syracuse University and a devout Christian, at one point wrote a friend of his about the renaissance that was happening in his prayer life.

This is basically how he described it. “Almost every week and sometimes every day now a pressure of his great love comes down upon my heart. The inner spot has been touched and my heart's flintiness has been melted in the presence of love divine, Jesus, the altogether lovely.” That's gazing on the beauty. John Owen, seventeenth-century British minister and theologian, talks about this. He's using archaic language, but listen. It's very penetrating and perfectly clear.

He says something like, “If we settle for mere mental notions about Christ as doctrine ...” Do you hear that? If we settle for just abstract mental concepts or notions of Christ as doctrine. “... we shall find no transforming power given to us. But when our affections cleave to him with full purpose of heart and our minds fill up with thoughts and delight in him, then change in character will proceed to purify us and sometimes fill us with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

Do you hear what he said? He's not pitting the feelings against the mind. He says what we're talking about here in gazing on the beauty of God is not just saying, “Well, I know God is wise. I know God is holy. I know God is loving.” To gaze on the beauty means ... He explains. On the one hand, he says, you don't just know it with your head. That's what he calls *mental notions*. He says, “When our affections cleave to him with full purpose of heart and our minds are filled with delight ...”

The intellect is filled with delight. You say, "I hadn't seen it like this." The mind is going a hundred miles an hour, and the heart is being drawn out. He says then sometimes (he didn't say all the time) we experience joy unspeakable and full of glory. When your heart's full purpose, full affections cleave to him, that's what we're talking about. Occasionally we use this. Jonathan Edwards says there's a difference between knowing that honey is sweet with the mind because you believe a report and actually tasting it.

What it means is you don't just believe the doctrine of God's wisdom. It becomes so real to you that you finally relax. He knows. You don't just believe in the doctrine of God's love. You feel the love. Romans 5 says it's shed abroad in your heart. You feel it so that you delight. You don't just know God is holy, but the sense of it is such that it really purifies you. You say, "I just can't live the way I've been living." That's what it means to gaze on the beauty of God. That's the one thing he says you have to have.

Now let's get practical. I know you're going to say, "Okay, you said be practical." All right. What does it mean to gaze on the beauty of God? I'll give you two things you have to do if this is going to happen to you. First, you need to praise him. Obviously, gazing on the beauty of God means, at least, you take time to praise him. You're actually going through what's great about him and you're telling him and you're appreciating.

By the way, it's how lovers work all the time. You're always telling each other what's wonderful about the other one. Do that to God. Praise him. Secondly, it also means to be satisfied. To find God not just useful ... "Lord, please help me get out from under this army. Please defeat the army or help me defeat the army." That's God as useful. He's powerful, yes; but to find God beautiful and not just useful is what we're talking about here.

Anybody can find him useful, but, frankly, only a person whose heart has been regenerated and born again by the Holy Spirit will ever find him beautiful. My best illustration ... Musicians always like this illustration. When I was an undergraduate in college, in order to get out and get a degree and get a job, I had to take a music course, music appreciation. You had to listen to Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, and all the various people, and then you had to be able to know them well enough that you could identify them if they played a snatch of the music. You had to identify it on a test.

Originally, I listened to Mozart in order to get a degree so I could get a good job. In other words, I listened to Mozart in order to make money. Today, something has happened to me. Now I'm willing to pay quite a bit of money to listen to Mozart. Why? Because Mozart has become a satisfying thing in itself. The music is satisfying. The music is pleasing. The music gives meaning. The music. It's not like, "Well, I'll listen to Mozart in order to ..." No, I just listen to Mozart. Why? Because it's beautiful ... to me. I don't know about you.

When God gets to the place where he's not just useful but beautiful, because

he's satisfying in and of himself ... You're not just saying, "Why haven't you done this? Why haven't you done that for me?" No, no. Just having him. That's what it means to say, "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory. In you I have the power. In you I have the glory I need." In fact, in order to not only praise him but find him satisfying, here is an exercise.

If I'm asking for a change in circumstances, if I'm saying, "Please give me good health or my wife good health," or if I'm praying, "Please keep this financial reversal from happening. Please keep us safe financially. Please keep us safe in health ..." Whenever I'm asking for something, I always remind myself that I already have in him the essence of what I need in that area. If I'm praying for my wife's health or my health, I have to realize the only sickness that can actually destroy me is sin, and Jesus has forgiven it.

I actually have the spiritual health. As a Christian, it's the only health you really need in order to survive forever. The same thing is true of wealth. As you're asking for things, always get to ... "Lord, give me power. Lord, give me honor. But thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, and if I have you, I have what I need. Now if you don't mind, I'd love to get some help over here." What you've started with is you're gazing on the beauty.

Secondly, seek him in his temple. That word actually means pretty much what verse 11 means. It's a Hebrew word that ... They often don't translate very well. "Teach me your way, O Lord." To seek him means to learn. He says, "I want to gaze on your beauty, and I want to learn your Word." You and I may think, "That's kind of strange." See, gazing on his beauty is more than just learning the truth of the Bible, but it's not less. In fact, usually they go together.

It's as you meditate on what the Bible says, very often, you see his beauty. In other words, you may be meditating on a text and you might say something like this. "If someone as great as this loves me like this, has saved me at infinite cost to himself, says he'll never let me go, says he's going to raise me at the end of time and he's going to make me perfect, why am I justifying this behavior? Why am I worried about this? Why am I this? Why am I that?"

See, you're moving from learning about his Word, seeking him, learning his way, to gazing on his beauty. They go together. It's the one thing you have to do. You have to find time for it. You have to make time for it. You have to say, "I don't care how long it takes. This is the one thing." Look at what he says in verse 6. "He will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent, and then my head will be exalted above my enemies. I will sacrifice with shouts of joy."

He's not so stupid as to think that if he goes into the tabernacle the enemies can't get to him. What he's trying to say is, "I'll finally be safe, because when I have learned to gaze on your beauty, when I have learned to seek you in your temple, when I have that one thing, when I have you and I recognize who I have in you, then I'm not worried about whatever happens. I'm just not worried. My head will be held high."

In 1850, an ill-fated group of six Englishmen left on a boat from England to try to go to Patagonia in South America to start an Anglican mission. On the way, they essentially were shipwrecked on an island very close by, and no other ships came by. Over a year's period, because of exposure, because of thirst, because of hunger, they died one at a time. There were six of them. This all happened on a little island, those of you who know South America, called Picton Island.

The leader was a man named Allen Francis Gardiner. He had been a ship's captain, but he went into the mission field. As he was dying, he was losing everything. He was losing his wife and his children. He was losing his health. He was losing his life. He was losing everything, but he was keeping a journal. He was the last one alive, and when they finally, later on, found all the dead bodies, they found the journal.

This is the last thing he said in his journal as he was dying. Stripped of everything, he said, "I am, by his abounding grace, kept in perfect peace, refreshed with a sense of my Savior's love and an assurance that all this is wisely and mercifully appointed." This is virtually the last thing he ever said. He said, "I'm just filled with a sense of my Savior's love, and I know that he is merciful and wise in why he's letting this happen." Almost at the very end, stripped of everything, he essentially is overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God.

Do you know why? Do you know how you can be like that? You say, "How could he say that? Why wasn't he mad? Why wasn't he scared? Why could he say such a thing? Why did he feel loved when everything was going wrong?" Because he had the one thing. "Thine is the kingdom. Thine is the power. Thine is the glory. I have it in you. If I have that, I have everything." His head was lifted up in spite of his enemies.

4. *Why he's confident it will work.* He starts off with confidence. "**The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life ...**" That word *stronghold* means a mountain refuge. At the very end, even though he has some nervousness ... If we had the time, we could go through verse by verse. It's clear that he has some concerns. Obviously he's imagining. He says, "Don't hide your face from me. Don't turn your servant away in anger. Don't reject and forsake me."

He's not saying, "My prayer life is always fine." He's saying, "In hard times, I'm still going to seek you," but at the end he says, "**I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart ...**" Here's what I want to know. Why is he so confident this will work? Especially, how dare he say, "You will hide me in the shelter of your sacred tent"?

The *sacred tent* is the tabernacle. It's where the *shekinah* glory was. It was where the ark of the covenant was, where the priests went. Even the high priest could only go into the Holy of Holies once a year at Yom Kippur, taking the blood

of atonement. Here's David, and he's happy in there. He says, "Then I'll be brought in." Why is he so confident? When Job got near to God, he said, "I heard of you with my ear. Now I see you with my eyes, and I repent in dust and ashes."

When Peter got near God, he said, "Depart from me. I'm a sinful man." When Moses got near the glory of God, God said, "Stay away. It'll kill you." When Isaiah went into the temple and saw the Lord high and lifted up, what's the first thing he said? Did he say, "My head is raised high; you will hide me in the shelter ..." No. He said, "I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

When you get near holiness, you see your flaws. When you get near infinity, you see your finitude. When you get near superlativeness, you see what's wrong with you. Anyone else who has ever gone into the tabernacle or the temple and drawn near to the holiness of God immediately feels like they're falling apart. Why is he so confident? It's astounding. Verse 10: "**Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will [not].**" The old King James was, "... **the Lord will take me up.**"

You need to realize that David lived in an incredibly family-centered society. Some of you think you've come from family-centered societies. Nothing like this. Therefore, for a mother and father to forsake you, you must have done something incredibly bad. So David is saying, "Even if I do something incredibly bad, you won't forsake me. You will accept me. You will hide me in the shelter of your sacred tent."

How can he be that confident that God will forgive him, that God will overlook all that? How can he be confident that he'll be able to just go in and gaze on the beauty of God? Answer? I'm not really sure, which is scary, isn't it? Generally, you want the preacher to tell you things he knows, not the things he doesn't know. I don't want to waste your time.

I'm really not sure why, but probably, like Isaiah, who when he saw the holiness of God sensed his sin, and the only reason he was able to stay there was because a coal from the altar touched his lips and atoned for his sin ... The altar is the place of sacrifice. The altar is the place where sins are dealt with. David would have gone in there and, as he gazed on the beauty of God, he would have seen the altar of sacrifice.

I'm not completely sure what went on in David's mind, but I know what should go on in our minds and how we can really be sure that we can gaze on the beauty of God. John, chapter 1, says, "The Word [Jesus Christ] became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us, and we beheld his glory." John, chapter 1, deliberately uses a strange word.

He doesn't just say, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became human and *dwelled* among us." I know that's what your English translations say. Literally it says, "The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us." This is John's way of saying Jesus is the tabernacle. He is the bridge between heaven and earth. He is the

final sacrifice for all of our sins. He is the reason why we *can* go in.

Besides that, here's how you know that no matter what you do, God won't forsake you. Even if your mother and father and everybody else forsake you, God will not forsake you, because on the cross Jesus Christ said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He was standing in your place. He was taking the forsakenness we deserve, so that if you believe in God through Jesus Christ, you can know, no matter what you do, God will open to you. God will take you in. God will not forsake you.

If you want to see the beauty, don't just look at the abstract God. You know, just "I'm going to think about the beauty of God." Look at Jesus Christ, the infinitely beautiful one, who came to earth, emptied himself of his glory ... As Isaiah said, "He had no beauty with which we should desire him." The infinitely beautiful one became beaten to a pulp, lost his beauty, so that we could be holy and blameless in God's sight. That's beautiful.

When my son was 2 years old (this was a long time ago) I was walking with him, and he was on my shoulders. We were walking on a rocky beach in wintertime in Massachusetts. It was cold, but it was beautiful out because the sun was out. My son David ... You know how you do with little kids when it's cold. He was bundled up in this coat that had a fur hood.

He was on the top of my shoulders, and suddenly I stumbled and dropped him. I don't even like thinking about it, because I remember how nauseated I was. Fortunately, he was in this coat that he practically bounced. He cried, but he was fine. Not even a bruise on him. I remember how sick I felt. It wasn't long after that that I saw this verse. "Though my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will bear me up."

I realized I'd let him down, but not only that, other people would let *me* down, and what are we going to do with a world like this, where we're always letting each other down? Even if everyone else lets you down, the Lord will bear you up. Why? Jesus is saying, "I have a love for you that will enable you to face anything. It's the one thing you need." Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for showing us the one thing and even showing us how to seek the one thing. We pray that you would teach us how to pray, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever" and be the kind of people David says we can be should we do that. Help us, we pray, through him. In Jesus' name we ask it, amen.

Word: Teach Us to Pray

The Prayer of Prayers—November 23, 2014

Psalm 1

**1 Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,**

**2 but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.**

**3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.**

**4 Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.**

**5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.**

**6 For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.**

This is the Word of the Lord.

All fall we've been looking at the subject of prayer. Up to now, each week we've looked at part of the Lord's Prayer, but we're going to do one more week and learn one more thing about prayer. It's very important, but we're not looking at the Lord's Prayer. There's a sense in which if you ask, "What is the main information the Bible gives us about the nature of prayer?" I would say it gives you basically two resources.

It gives you the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament, and in the Old Testament it gives you the book of Psalms. Those are the two basic answers of the Bible to the question, "How do you pray?" The Lord's Prayer and the Psalms. If you open the Psalms, which is the divinely inspired prayer book ... The Psalms are mainly prayers, so here you see how you should pray. It's divinely inspired.

When you open the prayer book, the first page of the Psalms is not a prayer. Interesting. The very first page of the book that tells you how to pray is not a prayer but actually a meditation on meditation. It's a call to meditation. It's a ringing call, as we're going to see, a very strong call to meditation.

What most scholars and commentators over the years have pointed out is that what this is actually saying is that the gateway into prayer, the bridge to prayer,

the foundation of prayer, the thing that must happen before you pray, is you must meditate on the law of the Lord, on the Word of God, on the Scripture. If the very first page of a book on prayer, which is what Psalms is about, is, “Here’s what you must do in order to pray,” then this is actually, in a sense, the key or a doorway or an important bridge.

Richard Baxter, seventeenth-century British writer, defines meditation. He wrote a book on meditation. It’s very famous. It’s archaic language, but he does a very good job of defining it. He basically says, “Meditation is distinguished from the study of God’s Word in which our aim is to learn the truth, but meditation is the affecting of our own hearts and minds to love, delight, and humility for the things contained in the Word.” See the difference? If not, I’ll show you the difference.

Meditation is not the same as studying the Bible, because in studying the Bible you’re just learning the truth of it. You’re just learning information. What meditation does is it takes what you’ve learned and does something with it. He says that actually it’s a way of deliberately affecting your mind and your heart and moving it to love and humility and wonder at what you just have learned. According to the book of Psalms, by the placement of Psalm 1, this is actually the key to prayer.

Now why would that be and how does that work? Let’s take a look and see what Psalm 1 tells us about meditation. At the very heart of it it’s, “Blessed is the one who knows how to meditate day and night on the Word of God.” So what do we learn about it? We learn a whole series of things. In fact, one of my problems today is an embarrassment of riches in what’s in the passage, but we’re going to learn about *the priority, the promise, the products, the practice, and the problem* and solution of meditation.

1. *The priority.* Meditation happens before prayer. Why would that be? Question. Is prayer mainly a flare shot into the air? Is it mainly a note in a bottle? Those are one-way communications. “If there’s anybody up there, help.” Sometimes prayer can be that, of course, but is prayer rightfully a two-way conversation between two persons in which there’s both speaking and listening?

The answer, according to the Bible, is *that’s* what prayer is supposed to be. It’s supposed to be one half of a two-way conversation, which means you have to listen before you can speak. Otherwise, you’ll say stupid things. For example, back before cell phones, if your phone didn’t work, it just didn’t work. Now there are all these creative ways your phone doesn’t work.

Sometimes you’re talking to somebody and they’re talking and you say, “Well, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” and they just keep talking. You say, “Well, I mean this.” You realize you can hear them and they can’t hear you. What do you do in that situation? You hang up. I’ll put it this way. That must be what a prayer is like to God that’s not accompanied by meditation. You see, meditation means I’m listening to what God has to say in his Word before I respond to it. That’s a two-way communication.

Eugene Peterson has this great book on the Psalms and on how the Psalms relate to prayer, and he actually talks about, regarding Psalm 1, the fact that the bridge to prayer is you have to meditate on what God has said to you before you can rightfully speak. He says something really powerful here. Let me just read it to you.

He says something like, “Essential to the practice of prayer is to fully realize that the first word is always God’s Word. There is a massive previousness of God’s speech to our prayers. Left to ourselves we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing or to the part of God we manage to understand, but what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us and to everything that he speaks to us.

There is a difference between praying to an unknown god, whom we hope to discover in our praying, and praying to a known God revealed through Israel and Jesus Christ who speaks our language. In the first, we indulge our appetite for religious fulfillment. In the second, we practice obedient faith. The first is a lot more fun. The second is a lot more important, because what is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves but that we learn to answer God.”

The one-way prayer, in which you just say what’s on your heart, you just pour out, not really listening to him, not listening in his Word to who he is and what he said to you, just praying ... That fits in with our culture, a culture in which self-expression is everything, but as Eugene Peterson says, that’s not how you have a personal relationship.

In a personal relationship you have to listen to the other person so that what you say is really to the person and not to who we hope the person is. We’ll get back to that. The very first thing is unless you learn to meditate on the Word of God so you know who it is you’re talking to, prayer is a note in a bottle or a flare in the air and it’s not an actual interaction. It’s not an actual give-and-take, a dialogue, a relationship.

2. *The promise.* What is a promise? It’s an amazing promise. The first word here is *blessed*. Many of you have probably heard that the Hebrew word that’s usually translated *blessed* does not just mean happy. It means deep satisfaction and deep fulfillment. Now look very carefully. Because it’s such a long sentence and there are so many ideas in it, you might miss what Psalm 1 is telling you about the key to a satisfying, fulfilling life.

“Blessed is the one who doesn’t do this and who doesn’t do this and who doesn’t do this.” That’s where you kind of lose the train of thought. But who ... what? “Who meditates on the law of the Lord day and night.” Psalm 1 is trying to say if you want an absolutely satisfied, fulfilled life you need to meditate on the law of God, the Scripture. The *law of God* is not just talking about the Ten Commandments or the Torah, the first five books of Moses. It’s the whole Bible. We’ll get back to that in a minute.

It’s saying Scripture meditation is the key to a satisfying life. It’s the key to

blessedness. Do you realize that's an astounding statement? How could such an amazing promise be made about something that's just what might be called a spiritual discipline? Well, it's more than that. You could say there are three kinds of people in the world. There are people who don't believe there's a personal God of love, there are people who believe there's a personal God of love but have never experienced that love, and then there are the people who know and experience it.

Now let me tell you what meditation is, basically. Meditation is an affecting of the heart through an intense use of the mind. That's what Richard Baxter says. That fits in with what the Hebrew word means. It fits in with how the word is used in the Bible. It's an affecting of the heart with an intense use of the mind. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul is talking to the Thessalonians and he says, "Remember when I preached the gospel to you? Remember when I told you biblical truth about the gospel?"

He says, "Our gospel came to you not simply in words, but with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction." Romans 8:16 says (this is Paul again), "Sometimes the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we're children of God." You may be a Christian and you may say, "Well, I believe I'm a child of God, because John 1:12. I received Christ, and now I'm a child of God." So your spirit, that is, your mind, your heart believes you're a child of God.

Sometimes the Spirit comes alongside and bears witness with your spirit. What does that mean? Paul says sometimes the Spirit comes and takes the words you know with your head and brings them all the way home and changes your life with them and infuses them deep in your heart where they catch fire and explode. You get delighted about it in your mind, and your heart is moved by it, and it changes your life.

What is the difference? Well, it's the difference between just knowing something with the mind and having your whole being infused with it through the Holy Spirit. When you meditate, you're preaching to yourself. You're doing what Paul did to the Thessalonians and praying, that as you preach to yourself, sometimes the Holy Spirit will come alongside of your spirit and bear witness to it.

So you won't just say, "Well, I know I'm a child of God" as a kind of concept. Instead, sometimes you'll say, "I know I'm a child of God," and sometimes the Spirit will come and say, "Yes, you are my beloved child in whom I'm well pleased." Why is blessedness the result of meditation? It's only through meditation that the things you may believe about God and the things you may believe about the love of God actually become real.

Martin Luther has a great study on the subject. It's called *A Simple Way to Pray*. It's a short essay on how to pray that you can find online, by the way, in a number of different translations. In it he says he always meditates on something in the Bible before he prays. He meditates until it affects his heart, until his heart is warmed by it. He thinks about it. He's listening to what God is saying, and he thinks about it and meditates on it (we'll talk about how in a second) until it

warms his heart, and then he responds to God. It's a personal thing. It's not a note in the bottle. It's personal.

He actually says (you can read it there) sometimes when he is, in a sense, meditating and bringing this truth home to his heart and, in a sense, preaching to himself, sometimes the Holy Spirit starts to preach to him, and then he says you stop everything and write it all down. By the way, that doesn't mean that suddenly you hear a voice that says, "Go to Grand Central Station and go to the lockers. Get locker 23, and the combination is ..."

We're talking about something that's in the Bible, not just a voice. What he says is when the Holy Spirit starts preaching to him, it doesn't mean, "Well, you ought to move to another town." No, it's the Word of God that comes home. It's just words on the page, but it's God's Word to you, and it becomes real to you. That's the promise of what can happen in meditation.

3. *The products.* Here's what it can produce. It tells you in verses 3–4. "**That person ...**" Who's *that person*? The person is someone who learns how to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. "**That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.**"

I think I told you these are meditations on meditation. That is to say, metaphors are being given to you that as you think about and reflect on you see all these various aspects. Here are the metaphors. They're horticultural metaphors. Chaff, by the way, for those of you who were not raised on a farm, is the husks around the grain.

If you have harvested wheat or barley or something like that, you have the grain that's in the husks, so how do you get the grain out of the husks? Well, the grain is actually heavier than the husk, so what you do is you throw the grain up into the air. The wind blows away the chaff, the husk, the uninteresting, unimportant part, the non-nutrient part, and the grain falls to the ground. The chaff is blown around. It's very light. It's hollow, of course. That's the chaff.

Here's what it says. Are you like chaff? Are you like someone who is completely controlled by your circumstances? The wind comes and you're gone. Bad things happen to you and you're just blown away. Terrible things and you're just destroyed. Or are you like a person who meditates and, therefore, like a tree, and not just a tree that's not blown away by the wind but a tree that doesn't even have a problem when it is too dry?

It says, "**That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season ...**" That is to say, its roots go down to the water even when there's a drought. Here's what it's saying. A meditating person is someone who is not controlled by circumstances, who stays stable and grows, because even when things are bad your roots are in the water. Your roots are in the strength. Your roots are in the vitality.

Real joy is not the absence of trouble; it's the presence of God. Real joy is something that actually stays with you even when you're sad, even when bad things are happening to you. There's this great spot in *The Lord of the Rings*, where one of the hobbits is looking at Gandalf, and he looks really sad, and he *is* sad, but then he looks a little deeper, and this is what he sees. This is describing Gandalf.

"[In Gandalf's] face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow; [but] as he looked ... he perceived that under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth." Under the care and sorrow. There's real care and sorrow due to circumstances, but under the care and sorrow there was a deep mirth, almost like a fountain of joy that could set a kingdom laughing were it to gush forth.

That is what this is saying you can be. If you learn how to meditate, you become someone who is very, very deep and you have a joy even when there's a time of drought. By the way, you have to be careful not to read this superficially, because it says, "Whose leaf does not wither, yields its fruit in season." See that? It doesn't always have fruit, but its leaf is always green. This is an evergreen tree, but it doesn't always have fruit.

Then it says, "Whatever they do prospers." At first when you see it saying, "Whatever they do prospers," it sounds like it's saying that if you meditate you'll always be successful, which means you'd better be an entrepreneur, because if you meditate, then every single business you start will make zillions of dollars. That's not what it's saying. What it's saying is you may not always be fruitful. There are winter times when there's no fruit.

Sometimes, actually, you're *not* successful, and yet your leaf is ever green. What is that saying? Even when things are really bad, if you know how to meditate on the law of God, on the Word of God, and your roots are down in him, then that means even during those difficult times ... Even during the wintertime, a tree can put on rings, a tree can get its roots down deeper. In other words, *you will* prosper, even if your plans aren't prospering. This is the ultimate defeat of evil.

If when evil comes into your life it's like a hammer that drives you like a nail down into God's love ... desperate for it, finding it ... then the ultimate triumph over evil is if it makes you a better person. The ultimate triumph of evil is it doesn't just do evil to you; it makes you evil. It makes you bitter.

It makes you angry. It makes you selfish. It makes you hard. That's the ultimate triumph of evil, but the ultimate defeat of evil is when it comes into your life it actually makes you better and wiser and humbler and more able to depend on God and better able to understand yourself. That all happens when bad things happen and yet you meditate.

4. *The practice.* Three things. Very important. This is the only practical part of this entire sermon, so you really need to listen. The text tells us three things about how to meditate. It gives you *the object* of meditation, it gives you *the means*,

and it gives you *the method*. The object is ... what? What are you supposed to meditate on? It says the law of the Lord. There are various forms of meditation in which you're supposed to relax. You're supposed to empty your mind of rational thought. You're not supposed to think thoughts. Just be present.

That might be very relaxing, I'm sure, but that's not what the Bible means when it's talking about meditation. When the Bible talks about meditation, it's talking about a dialogue with another person, the personal God. Therefore, you don't empty your mind of rational thought. You fill your mind with God's thoughts. You fill your mind with the Scripture. You're supposed to be meditating not on your hand, which maybe that's fine, or not on the ocean, but if you want a relationship with God, you meditate on his Word.

If it's personal, you meditate on the words. You want to hear from him so you can speak to him. That's how the dialogue works. I want you to notice it calls the Scripture the *law of the Lord*. When you first read this, you think that's talking about the Ten Commandments or maybe the law of Moses, certainly the didactic parts of the Scripture, and yet there are one or two places where Jesus says, "In your law, does it not say ...?" and then he quotes the Psalms.

You say, "That's strange. Why would he consider the Psalms part of the law?" The phrase *law of the Lord* actually is a phrase that is often used to describe all of Scripture. Why would it do that? Because all of Scripture is normative. The Psalms are normative. The narratives are normative. The stories about Abraham and Isaac are normative. What does that mean? It means they have authority over your life. They tell you how you're supposed to live.

So it doesn't just say you're supposed to meditate on the Scripture, though it could have said that. It doesn't just say, "Find things that inspire you." To meditate on the law of the Lord and delight in it means you treat all of Scripture as authoritative. Now why would that be important for a personal relationship with God? Very often, very wealthy people and very powerful people are surrounded by what we call *yes men*.

They don't have real personal relationships with those yes men. The yes men want to keep their job. They want to keep their cushy position, so when the big dog says something, they all say, "Sure." They never push back. They may have a different opinion, but they're going to hide that different opinion. They're never going to contradict the big dog, because they don't want to lose their position. We talk about them as *yes men*.

If you just say, "I want to have a relationship with God, but I don't want to meditate on the Scripture," or "Though I will meditate on parts of the Scripture, not all parts, because some parts of it I don't believe in, because some parts of it are regressive or offensive. Some parts of Scripture I accept; some parts I don't," then I want to ask you a question. How does your god contradict you? How does your god push back? If you're going to have a personal relationship, the two persons have to be personal agents. They have to be able to argue.

Here's what I mean. If you don't have a Bible in which you accept all of it as authoritative, how can your god ever offend you? How can your god ever contradict you? It sounds to me like you have surrounded yourself with a "yes god." If you want a personal relationship with God, you have to be able to let him sometimes really upset you with things he tells you. The only way to get that is to accept everything in the Bible as authoritative.

By the way, I can guarantee you that if you accept everything in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, there will be things in there that really bug you. Some of you know that already. Now you have the start of a personal relationship with God. Isn't that right? Isn't every really good friendship, every really good love relationship ...? Don't you argue? Of course you argue. Why? Because you're both persons.

Therefore, unless you meditate on the Scripture as the law of the Lord, unless you let the Scripture sometimes tell you bad things you don't like, how will it tell you good things that you can't accept, like, "You are my beloved child in whom I'm well pleased"? When you don't feel lovable and the Bible says, "I love you ..." There's a place where the Bible says, "When our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts."

If you don't have an authoritative Scripture that, on the one hand, can tell you the bad news you don't like, then how can it tell you the good news you don't believe you're worthy of? Unless the Scripture is a word of law, it'll never be a word of love to you. So you have to meditate on the Scripture. Not just the Scripture but the law of the Lord. The object of your meditation must be the Scripture.

Secondly, how do you do it? I've been telling you the word *meditation* means to ruminate, to reflect, to think out the implications, but let me give you three ways to meditate. It means *to think out*, *to think in*, and *to think up* what's in the text that you're meditating on. To think *out* the implications of it, to think *in* the implications of it, and to think *it up*. What?

First, *think out*, which means you think of all of the implications. You think of all of the aspects of its meaning. I learned how to meditate under a Bible teacher in July of 1971 at a camp. I was in college. It was the year between my junior and senior years of college. There was a woman who was a great Bible teacher.

She was telling everybody in the class, "I want you all to stop where you are right now, and for the next 30 minutes, I want you to meditate on one verse: Mark, chapter 1, verse 17. 'Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." ' I want you to take 30 minutes, and I want you to write at least 50 things down that you see in that text, 50 aspects of the meaning, 50 implications.

If you're having trouble, stay with it the whole 30 minutes, but one of the things you could do would be to emphasize each word. 'Jesus ... Jesus said ... Jesus said follow ... Jesus said follow me ... Jesus said follow me and ... Jesus said follow me and / ...' When you take every one of those words, think, 'What are the

four or five things that wouldn't be part of the meaning of this text if that word was missing?' If you take that word out, how does that change the meaning of the text? What are the four or five things that word brings to the text? Write down 50 things."

At the end of the 30 minutes, she came back and said, "Now circle the two or three most important ones, the ones that mean the most to you." We all did that. Then she said, "How many of you found one of those two or three most important ones in the first 5 minutes?" No hands.

"In the first 10 minutes?" No hands. "In the first 15 minutes?" A couple of hands. Do you see? How long would you spend on Mark 1:17? Would you spend 15 minutes looking at that verse? No. Then you don't know how to meditate. And I didn't. I learned that day. Just thinking it out. But that's not all.

Next, *think in*. How do you think in? Well, Psalm 42 and Psalm 103 are examples of thinking it in. Psalm 42 says, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you upset?" Or Psalm 103: "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. He forgives your sins. He redeems your life from the pit." Who is the psalmist talking to? He's not talking to his listeners. He's not talking to God. It's not a prayer. He's talking to his soul.

What he's doing is he's talking to himself. He's taking the things he has learned as he meditated, and he's saying to himself, "Now if you really took that seriously, if you really believed this, if this was really true, why would you justify doing this? Why would you be upset about this? Why would you be treating this person this way?" Just thinking it in.

Finally, *think up*, which means you ask the question ... This, by the way, again, is in Martin Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray*. Martin Luther says after you're done meditating on the text ask it three questions. "How can I praise God because of what I've read? What sin can I confess because of what I've read here? And what thing do I need to ask God for?"

In other words, *rejoice, repent, request*. "How can I rejoice on the basis of this text? How can I repent on the basis of this text? How can I request on the basis of this text?" Now you're ready to go. You're ready now to pray. Not just to read the Bible and then go pray, but to read the Bible and then pray in response to what you heard. Now you have a dialogue going.

You're supposed to do it day and night. That doesn't mean just twice. It means regularly. It means discipline. Not just episodically, not impulsively, not when you feel like it, but even when you don't feel like it, because only if you meditate on the law of God and then pray, even when you don't feel like it, will eventually you feel and like it.

5. *The problem*. This problem arose when the man who was doing my wedding ... Kathy and I got married something like 40 years ago, and the man who preached at the wedding preached on Psalm 1. He said, "There's a problem in this psalm." I had never seen it before. He said, "It says here that the mark of the

blessed, godly person is not that he prays day and night or that he stands on the street corner day and night preaching or that he even goes to church day and night. It's that he delights in the law of God, which means the mark of a godly person is that you love to have God tell you how to live."

You love to have God cross your will. You love it. You don't just agree to it. You don't just submit to it. You love it. If there is a God and he created you and you are alive only because of him and every minute he keeps you alive, he holds you up, then that's absolutely proper, and yet is there anybody on the face of the earth who can do that, who can enjoy having God cross their will all the time?

It doesn't just say you should be delighting in the law of God. It says you delight in the law of God after you meditate on it, and the more you think about what the law demands ... Look at the Sermon on the Mount. "Thou shalt not murder."

"Let's meditate about that," says Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is a meditation on the law, by the way. The more you think about what murder is, it comes from anger and resentment in your heart, so actually, if you have resentment toward someone, it's like murdering someone in your heart.

The more you meditate on the law of God, the more you see how far you are from what you ought to be. Therefore, how in the world can you meditate on the law of God and delight in it once you see what it demands? It condemns us. How in the world could we possibly delight in the law of God? It's just going to be an everlasting despair to think about the law of God ... unless you think about Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, of course, loved the law of God. He meditated on it day and night. When the Devil assaults him, every time he answers the Devil he quotes something from Deuteronomy. When he's dying, he quotes Psalm 22:1. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Even when he says, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," that's Psalm 31:5. If somebody comes down on your foot and you're in agonizing pain, you don't say, "Gee, what should I say?" You scream whatever is really in your heart. The real you comes out at times like that.

When Jesus Christ was in agonizing pain, he bled Scripture. It's almost like he was so saturated in the Word of God. By the way, if Jesus Christ didn't think he could possibly handle the problems of life without the Scripture, why in the world do we think we can? But we're still not helped, are we? He's just an example now. We say, "I can't live like that. I can't delight in the law of God the way Jesus did."

Jesus did not come just to delight in the law of God as an example (that would just crush us) but as our Savior. When he went to the cross, he was honoring the law of God. Why did he go to the cross? Because he knew our violations of the law could not be shrugged off. They had to be paid for. Going to the cross was Jesus' testimony to the greatness of God's holiness and the inviolability of his justice and the inviolability of the law of God. There are only two ways that you can fulfill the law: keep it or pay the penalty. Jesus Christ went and paid the penalty for us.

Do you know what you see in Jesus Christ on the cross? When he quoted Psalm 22 ... Psalm 22 says, "I am poured out. My strength is dried up. My tongue clings to the roof of my mouth. I thirst." What was happening to Jesus on the cross? He was becoming chaff. He was drying up. He was twisting in the wind. He was being blasted, blown away. He was getting what the wicked deserve. He was getting what we deserve so we could have the water, the living water he offered the woman at the well. It was him.

When I see him fulfilling the law for me so that now, even when I fail, I know God still loves me, now the law is no longer an everlasting despair. It's not just something that condemns me. Now the law of God is a delight. Do you know why? It's a way for me to please the one who did this for me. If you are in love with someone, you say, "What will make you happy? I want to make you happy."

The answer is, "Obey the law." Be as wise, be as honest, be as forgiving, be all the things the law says. You say, "Yes." Without Jesus Christ, the law of God is nothing but an everlasting despair. It's just a note of condemnation. With Jesus Christ, it is a delight. Meditate on the law of God until you're blessed, until you become a tree, until your roots go down into that great water. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have made it possible for us to know you personally, not just to believe about you but to have a personal relationship with you. In these weeks, we've looked at prayer, and now we've looked at listening to you so we really can have a dialogue, an interaction. Thank you that that's possible.

Thank you that you are a God we can know like that. We pray, O Lord, we pray that we all hearing this now would move into that kind of relationship, that our relationship would move into a higher level and we would become more and more like your Son, in whose name we pray, amen.

The Mothers of Jesus

Matthew's Messiah—November 30, 2014

Matthew 1:1–17

¹ This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: ² Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram,

⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, ⁷ Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa,

⁸ Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

¹² After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud,

¹⁵ Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

The Word of the Lord.

In Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas, we usually take a look at Matthew and Luke, which tell the story of how Jesus was born. Interestingly enough, both Matthew and Luke start with genealogies, those boring things you just heard read. They're boring to us. It's a shame, but the word that's missing in the modern translations that was in the old King James Bible is *begat*. Over and over and over again, the King James says, "So and so begat so and so, and so and so begat ... begat ... begat ..."

As modern readers, our eyes start to glaze over, and we ask, "When are we going to get to some action?" We don't understand the significance of it, but the ancient people did. Not only was this genealogy incredibly interesting to ancient people, but it will be to us, too, if we spend a little bit of time thinking about the multiple meanings here.

This genealogy helps us understand what we're going to do with these next four

weeks. We're looking toward Christmas and asking, "What does it mean that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born as a human being?" Here are three things we learn about Christmas from the genealogy. At Christmas, *promise came true, grace changed all the categories, and reality became fact.*

1. *Promise came true.* Probably the main message of the genealogies is right here in verse 1, "**This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham ...**" A promise was made to both David and Abraham. Abraham was promised that through one of his descendants, his seed, all the families of the earth would be blessed. David was promised one of his descendants would sit on a throne, and his reign would last forever. Now, in Jesus Christ, the promises have come true.

It's not just Matthew; Luke starts the same way. The story of Jesus in Luke starts with genealogies. Luke has Mary's song, the Magnificat. In Mary's song, she sings, "He has remembered to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised." The meaning of Christmas, among other things, is God keeps his promises. He made a promise, and he came through with it.

Could I show you something about this promise that's very important for us to understand? Look how long it took God to fulfill his promise. It's centuries after he made the promise to David, and millennia after he made the promise to Abraham. It took God thousands of years to fulfill his promise, but he did.

Something else that's important to notice is not only did it seem to take God a long time as we consider it, but on the road, it didn't look like he was working toward that at all. Prophecy had died out 400 years before Jesus was born. Not only that, but the kings had died out. The lines of David seemed to have died out. There were no more kings on the throne. The children of Israel had been sent into exile, and when they came back, they were subjugated by Rome.

In other words, not only did the promise of God go centuries and centuries without God fulfilling the promise, but it looked like history was going in a different direction away from the promise. It didn't just look like God was taking a long time. It looked like he was not doing anything. Things were moving further and further away. Then Jesus comes, and, as we will see, he was a greater Messiah than anyone had even imagined.

This is your God, if you believe in him. The lesson is God always fulfills his promises, but he never operates on our timeframes. Even the way in which he's working to fulfill the promises is something we cannot see. It looks like he's abandoning us, but in the end he will give you more than you can imagine or even want.

He's not a tame God. He always fulfills his promises, but he always takes longer than we think he should. He always does it in such a way that we think he's not working on it, and in the end, it's more than we can imagine. If you have embraced the Lord and said, "I'm going to follow you, Lord," one God's promises all through the Bible is he will give you the desires of your heart.

I'll bet there are a lot of people out there right now who say, "Yes. I gave myself to him, and he promised to give me the desires of my heart, and he seems to be taking a long time to do that. In fact, my life doesn't even seem to be going in the direction of having my heart's desires fulfilled." We have a whole hymn about this. We sing it fairly often.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense.

*But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

When Jesus finally did show up, he was more than anyone dared ask or think. God always fulfills his promises, but it's foolish to judge God by our timeframes. That's the first point, the first thing we learn from the genealogies. Promise comes true, but generally not in the way or time we expect.

2. *Grace changes all our categories.* This is maybe not quite as obvious to see. We get this from the middle of the genealogy, not the beginning. There are a whole lot of names here. For some of you, maybe your eyes glazed over as you were listening, but there are five names in particular I want to look at. There are five names of women in this genealogy.

Notice in verse 3, "**Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar ...**" In verse 5, "**Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth ...**" In verse 6, "**David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife ...**" And at the very end, down at the bottom, there's Mary. Five women.

This is extremely unusual. The character of the women is also incredibly unusual, but first we have to stand back for a second. Why are these genealogies here? What is the big deal? In every society, if you want a place in the world, you have to have credentials. Today, our credentials are what we call *résumés*. If you want a place in the world, you have to have a great *résumé*.

Your *résumé* is who you studied with. If you're a musician, it's who you played with and studied under. If you're a businessman, it's what school you went to and what companies you've worked for. In other words, what you've accomplished, where you've studied, what awards you've gotten, how much money you've made, and that sort of thing is your *résumé*. If you want a job, you say, "Here's my *résumé*." People say, "Oh, wow, you worked for them? We'll consider this." That's how you get a place in the world.

In ancient times, it was your genealogy, not your *résumé*, that was important. We live in a highly individualistic society in which all that matters is what you

accomplish. In ancient times, and even today, in many parts of the world, it's not the individual résumé that matters as much as who your family is. What have *they* accomplished? What are *they* like?

A lot of people think a way better gauge of who you are and what you're going to do if you work for them is how you were raised, who your family is, what they've accomplished, their place in society, and their character. Therefore, in ancient times, if you wanted a place in the world, you pointed to your genealogy. That, not your résumé, is how you proved who you were.

We're going to go right through the early chapters of Matthew to talk about the birth of Jesus, and we're going to see Herod the Great soon. He's a villain and potentate over this part of the world. He's a very mean tyrant who kills all the infants of Jerusalem trying to destroy the Messiah. We'll get to that later.

The reason I'm bringing him up is he was half-Jewish and half-Edomite. Because he had Edomite blood in him, that made the résumé not look good. Even today, there are certain parts you might leave off your résumé. "I won't mention I worked for them, because they might call them up." We leave certain people off the résumé. In those days, you expunged certain people from your genealogy, too.

By the way, we know Herod excluded certain people ... We do that, even today. "Don't tell people about the crazy uncle. Tell them about this other uncle who's the head of such and such bank." Back then, you didn't put people on your genealogy unless you were proud of them. You put people on the genealogy who showed who you were, so you left off all the people you didn't want anyone to see.

Now that you understand the genealogy was the résumé, do you see what's going on here? First of all, Jesus puts five women in his genealogy. It wasn't that no one ever did that, but very few people did. You usually didn't list your mothers. You listed your fathers, because, in a patriarchal society, the men had the power, and you were trying to connect yourself to successful and powerful people. The fact that he has five women in here already raises an eyebrow.

It goes beyond that. First of all, Ruth was a Moabitess, and Rahab was a Canaanite. They weren't Jews. These were the people of despised, marginalized races you usually expunged. You didn't have them on there, but there they are. More than that (it's intriguing what Matthew does here), it says, "**Judah [was] the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar ...**" Tamar had these two boys with Judah, her father-in-law. By Jewish moral code she, therefore, was committing incest. Rahab, we know from other passages in the Bible, was a prostitute.

That means you have not only gender outsiders (women), but you have racial outsiders (Moabitess and Canaanite), and now you have moral outsiders, immoral people. I won't take the time to go into Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Numbers, and places like that, but the Mosaic law excluded these women permanently from the presence of God in tabernacle and temple worship.

If you go back to the Old Testament and read the temple and tabernacle worship, people who went in to the Holy God had to be clean. They couldn't be sinful, or if they had sin, they had to spend weeks purifying themselves. He's a holy God, and sinners can't go before a holy God, so you have to cleanse yourself.

People who did incest, Gentiles ... These women, according to the law of Moses, were permanently excluded from the presence of God, yet Jesus Christ brings them in. It's not just that they're in the family tree. The genealogy is the résumé. It tells people who you are. They're being owned. You might say Jesus is proud of them.

Why would Jesus bring in people the law of Moses would exclude? I hope you recognize great writing when you see it. This is the first chapter of the first book of the entire New Testament, and the answer is the rest of the New Testament. If you understand genealogies, this raises all kinds of questions in your mind. You say, "Wait a minute, what's going on?" It makes you want to read the rest of the book. That's good writing.

Rather than just saying, "Now we'll close in prayer, and you can go home and read the rest of the New Testament," there is a clue, and it's a big one, to what you're going to find in the rest of the New Testament. That is this strange spot where Matthew goes out of his way not to mention a particular woman's name.

Verse 6 says, "**David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife ...**" She had a name. She's Bathsheba, David's wife and the mother of King Solomon, but Matthew deliberately calls her not "Bathsheba" but "Uriah's wife." This is not a slam at her, but an enormous slam at David himself.

David is the one guy who anyone would've wanted on their résumé or genealogy. He's the ultimate insider. He's male, of course, but he's a Hebrew of the Hebrews and devoutly religious. He wasn't an idol worshiper, he didn't put up Asherah poles, and he didn't worship the Baals. He was religiously orthodox and devout. He was powerful, of course, the greatest king in the history of Israel. Anybody who brings out a genealogy would want David on there.

Look what Matthew is doing. By saying "Uriah's wife," he's forcing you to remember the whole story. Bathsheba was Uriah's wife, David fell in love with her, and in order to get her, he had Uriah killed. He murdered Uriah so he could marry her. In one stroke, Matthew is forcing you to remember all this stuff about this great king who everyone would be so, so excited to have on their résumé.

He's saying he's no better than the prostitute. There's Rahab, there's Ruth, and there's David. Matthew is saying David the king had no more of a right to go into the presence of a holy God than a prostitute. Yes, immoral, irreligious people don't deserve fullness, God's blessing, or life with God forever, but neither do religious, moral people. Their sins overtly don't look as obvious, but inside, in their hearts, do they love God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind? Do they love their neighbors as themselves? No!

Therefore, the message is anyone who relates to God will have to be related through sheer grace, because all people are equally lost. The prostitute and the king are right next to each other. They're equally lost, but because Jesus Christ has brought them in, if you're saved by sheer grace, you're equally loved. No matter how high you are, you need God's grace. No matter how low you are, you have God's grace if you reach for it.

What's so amazing about the gospel of God's grace, which is what the whole New Testament is about, is it's so intense. It's such an incredible message that even the *begats* are dripping with it. It's coming right through the *begats*, don't you feel it? That means two things. Here are two practical applications, and then we have to move on to the third implication of this genealogy.

A. *If you are in Jesus' family, then and only then do you have a name.* You don't get a name through a résumé or a genealogy of being connected to royalty. The only way you get a name, a self, an identity, an honor, and a significance that lasts is like this. We just read all these names, and you applauded. Many of these names are 2,000–4,000 years old, yet here we are in New York City thousands of years later, and you've just heard them read to you.

These names have not perished, and they never will, because they're connected to Jesus. That's the only possible reason. It doesn't matter how much money they made or how famous they were in their day. All those names would have perished, but because they're related to Jesus Christ, their names will never perish.

It doesn't matter what you have done, good or bad, in this life. Apart from a relationship with Jesus, your name is going to perish. It won't take long, Your great-grandchildren will hardly know who you were. Your great-great-grandchildren may not even remember your name. Maybe you will have written a book that'll last for a hundred years, and then it'll be gone, unless you are connected to Jesus Christ.

Do you know the honor of being a Christian? To be in his genealogy, he's proud of you. He sings over you. Hebrews 2 says he is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. When you toss in bed at night because somebody has snubbed you, your reputation has been hurt, or someone has overlooked you and you get all upset, do you remember the honor of being a Christian? Who cares what the peasants think if you have the love of the King? What is any other claim or applause compared to this?

B. *Inside the Christian church, we must not be like out there in the world.* New York City is the land of the killer résumé. Who you know and what you've accomplished means everything, but not in here. We can't be controlled by that. We can't be looking at people as if, "Oh, you work for them," or, "You've come from there."

Oh, no. The grace of the gospel smashes conventional worldly canons of respectability and accomplishment. It did the ancient ones, making mincemeat of

genealogies, and it does the modern, individualistic, meritocratic ones, making mincemeat of résumés.

Matthew Henry was a great Bible commentator and writer. His father's name was Philip Henry, and his mother's name escapes me. When they were courting each other, Philip Henry did not come from the right side of the tracks, as it were. His genealogy wasn't great. Matthew Henry's mother came from the right side of the tracks.

Her parents were very upset she was hanging out with someone like Philip Henry, and they came to her at one point and said, "We don't even know where he's from." She and Philip Henry were both Christians, so she turned to her parents and said something like this. "I don't know where he's from. All I care about is where he's going. His pedigree and background don't matter. It's where he's going."

3. *Reality becomes fact.* I chose those words very, very carefully. I'm only going to take five minutes to point this out. This is not a teaching but an implication of this text. One of the most significant things about the story of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke is they start with a genealogy. The story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection doesn't start with "Once upon a time." That matters.

Many, many years ago, and we know about this because it was written out, J.R.R. Tolkien, the great fantasy writer, was walking with an atheist friend on Addison's Walk near Magdalen College in Oxford along the River Cherwell. It was a very famous place to walk. They were talking about great, old fairy stories, legends, myths, and all those wonderful stories. They were talking about how different they were from realistic fiction.

The ancient stories would depict wonderful things like stepping outside of time, maybe even time travel. They might depict escape from death, communication with non-human personal beings, love without parting (love relationships you'd never lose), and ultimate triumph of good over evil. That's why we find those stories moving.

The point is, those stories are not factual. In the factual, empirical world, the here and now, none of those things are true. You can't step outside of time. You can't escape death. Every person you love will be taken away from you by time and death, and you'll be taken away from them. In the factual world, there are no non-human personal beings, and good never totally triumphs over evil.

In the factual world, none of those things are true, yet in the world of the fairy tale, the legend, and the myth, we read about these things. We keep reading them, and we keep writing them. Think Harry Potter, *Lord of the Rings*, and things like that. The books that sell and the blockbuster movies depict escape from death, stepping outside of time, communication with non-human beings, love without parting, and the triumph of good over evil.

That's what we want to see depicted, and even though we know it's not factually true, it still feels kind of real. It feels like these are realities that, even though they

aren't factually true, they had ought to be true. It's a kind of reality we sense, a deep structure, that feels real, and yet ...

Tolkien and his atheist friend, C.S. Lewis (he was an atheist at the time), were walking along and talking about things like *Beauty and the Beast*. It's not factually true, but isn't there a love that can liberate us from our self-made prisons?

Sleeping Beauty isn't factually true, but do we really feel like death is the end? What if there were a hero who could awaken us from death and break the spell with a kiss?

They're not factually true, but there's a reality there that had ought to be true. We read them and are moved by them, but we have to go back to the factual world. At one point Lewis said, "I love the old myths, legends, and stories ..." Then he said something like this. Tolkien wrote it down later. "... but myths are lies, though breathed through silver."

Tolkien said, "No, they are all not. Think about this story. A man from an obscure village, a nobody, is found to have a power that no one has ever seen before to resist evil. He's raising children from the dead, stilling the storm, feeding the multitude, casting out demons, and loving the poor and marginalized. He's really making a difference, and then he's betrayed. He's put to death, and all hope is over. But wait! He's miraculously raised from the dead! What does that sound like?"

"That sounds like another one of those great stories that isn't factually true, but it's so moving and so wonderful." The point is this story is different. It doesn't start with, "Once upon a time." It starts with, "This is the genealogy, the historical record. This really happened."

Tolkien essentially said, "Jesus is not one more story pointing to this underlying reality. Jesus Christ *is* that ultimate reality to which all the stories point. In fact, Jesus Christ is God's ultimate reality becoming a fact, breaking into the real world. Jesus Christ is the ideal becoming real and starting to transform reality into the likeness of God."

What everybody else in the world but Christians is living with is this concrete slab between fact and what life ought to be. Now, Jesus Christ, our great captain, has opened a cleft and punched a hole in the pitiless walls of the world. What that means is that underlying reality has become fact.

In some ways, he's the handsome prince who kisses you and wakes you up from the sleeping death. He's the love who can get you out of your self-made prisons. He's the knight who slays the dragon. He's the one who does all these things, but it's not a story. This is the claim of Christianity; this is not, "Once upon a time."

This really happened, and if it did happen ... Please listen carefully. If he really was born in a real manger and raised from the dead (not a legend, but actually raised from the dead), and you believe in him, then all the things you have read in those stories over the years that you've longed for will come true.

You will step outside of time and escape death. Your love relationships will go on forever. You will even communicate with non-human personal beings, and good will triumph over evil. The claim is no less than that. That means, with all due respect, if you're in your right mind, you should at least want that to be true. Why wouldn't you? It's the stuff we've longed for in the stories. "No, it's not factual," but in Jesus Christ, that has become fact.

That's the reason, by the way, you can be saved by grace. Point three proves point two. It's the reason the prostitute and king are equally lost but equally loved. If Jesus Christ is just a legend, the best he can ever do is be an example for you. In other words, he can show you should love the poor, tell the truth, and love good. If he's a legend, all he can be is an example for you to try to live up to and save yourself, and you won't.

But if he's not just a legend, if he actually happened, if he really was born in a manger, died on the cross for our sins, was raised from the dead, and broke the power of death over us, then you can be saved by grace. You can be somebody he's proud of, no matter what you've done. Christmas is not, "Once upon a time." It's these lyrics.

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel*

Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that even the genealogies are dripping with the gospel. We thank you that you always keep your promises, so make us patient. We thank you that grace completely destroys the world's categories, so teach us to be open to people and not follow that racism, classism, snobbery, and self-righteousness that characterizes such a big part of the human race.

Teach us to see the only way in which our own names will live forever and we can get an identity and honor that is impervious to anything if we are your children, your brothers and sisters. Last of all, Lord, help us to see because your Son Jesus Christ really was born, became a human being, and lived and died for us, we can be your brothers and sisters and children.

Oh Lord Jesus, thank you for doing all that for us. Bring into our lives the greatness that had ought to be there if we really took seriously all the things we have learned about tonight that are taught in your Word which we will enjoy more and more as we get closer to Christmas. We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.

The Fathers of Jesus

Matthew's Messiah—December 7, 2014

Matthew 1:18–25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. **19** Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). **24** When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. **25** But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Here ends the reading.

The weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas is when we take a look at the meaning of Christmas and the Christian teaching that the eternal Son of God became a human being and was born in a manger. Matthew and Luke are the two main sources of our accounts of the birth of Jesus.

Luke largely does it through the perspective of Mary, the mother of Jesus, but Matthew, as you can see here, is telling us the story more through the perspective of the earthly father of Jesus, Joseph, and the heavenly Father, too. We're hearing the fathers' perspectives. What little we learn about Joseph here does tell us he's a pretty admirable guy.

“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

That's a great balance. On the one hand, Joseph was faithful to the law, and he finds that the woman he is engaged to marry is pregnant.

I always wonder what a painful first conversation they must have had. I have no idea how they would have actually talked about it. I wouldn't even want to begin to think about it. In Joseph's mind, he has to be thinking, "You know, Mary, you look so sincere, but you must have had sex with somebody, which means you've broken the moral law. You broke the law of God."

On one hand, he's faithful to the law of God. He doesn't wink at it and push it aside, but on the other hand, he's not self-righteous or punitive. He doesn't want to expose her. That's a remarkable balance, being moral without being really moralistic. He wants to do this quietly, but he gets a revelation in a dream from the angel of the Lord, and then he responds to it.

We're not going to look at his response, because it's all part of what we'll be looking at more next week, which is how when Christ comes into your life, it can create problems for you. This week, I'd like to look at the actual revelation, the thing Joseph is told by God through the angel about who Jesus is.

We learn three things there. We learn, first of all, *the importance of the person of Jesus*; secondly, *the importance of the doctrine of Jesus*, whatever that means (I'll tell you); and thirdly, *the importance of the authority of Jesus*.

1. *The importance of the person of Jesus.* The main point comes across three ways here. First of all, the angel says, "**Joseph ... do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**" So first of all, the angel says the human life that is growing in Mary has not come from any human father but the heavenly Father, the Spirit, God himself.

Secondly, the angel says, "**She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people ...**" Not God's people, which is what you would expect, but *his* people. "... from their sins." Throughout the Old Testament and the Prophets, there were constant prophecies like the one in Isaiah 35 that said, "God himself will come and save his own people." They're always called God's people. Here, Jesus' name is inserted where God's name ought to be. Jesus will come and save *his* people from their sins.

Thirdly, just to make it absolutely clear, Matthew himself adds a little note to say, "If anybody reading my text wonders what the angel is getting at, let me just tell you." Then he quotes Isaiah 7. "[This is] **what the Lord had said through the prophet [Isaiah]: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').**"

Keep this in mind. Matthew says Jesus is God. Mark, Luke, John (I could take you there, but I won't), Peter, and Paul all say, in their various ways, Jesus Christ is God. You may not be thunderstruck right away, because a lot of us have murky understandings of God. You have to realize these are Jewish writers.

The Greeks' and Romans' understandings of the gods were there were multiple personal deities, none of whom were infinite. You can fool Zeus. You can hide from Apollos. Hermes might make a mistake. In other words, they were personal but finite. Eastern religions' understanding was god was an impersonal force, a divine power that permeates everything.

If someone from an Eastern religion would say, "This human being is god," that's not all that weird. It's really a way of saying he has a particular, acute amount of "god aura." Or if one of the Greeks or Romans said, "This man is god," that would be like Zeus or Hermes coming down and taking on the guise of a human being for a while.

The Jews understood God as infinitely transcendent and above the whole universe. The God of the Bible looks down to see the stars and galaxies, and they're just like dust in the scales. He's infinitely transcendent over all. He's so absolutely holy you can't go into his presence without dying. The Jews' understanding of God is so high and lofty that, as you know, orthodox Jews don't spell God's name.

The idea that a human being could be God was one of the most astonishing claims, particularly in the mouths of these men. Jesus Christ claims to be God, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter. They claimed he was God, and that's the main message. Who is this child being born? He's God with us.

Before moving away from this first point, I would like to give you a takeaway. This claim, which is one of the many things Christmas is about, means you can now understand why Christianity has that all-or-nothing character. In New York City, over the years, I've had a lot of people who have told me that the all-or-nothing character is something they find very irritating about Christianity.

Many people have said something like this to me: "Why can't you Christians just say your religion is a good religion? Why do you have to say it's *the* true religion? Here's this wonderful buffet. Nobody eats everything on the buffet. Why not say, 'Here we are along with other good religions,' or, 'You might find our religion helpful to you, but not everybody will.' Why do you always have to say you're *the* good, true religion. Why is it all-or-nothing?"

I'll tell you the answer. It's Christmas, this claim. All other religious founders say, "I'm here to show you the way to God." Only Jesus, of all the founders of all the major religions of the world, comes and says, "No, I'm not going to show you the way to find God. I'm God, come to find you."

If that claim is true, Christianity has to be the superior way to find God. If it's not true, which means he's deluded or it's a lie, then I don't think Christianity is "one more good religion," it's rather defective. It's either the superior religion or it's an inferior religion, but it's not a good religion. It will not ever sit on the buffet, just because of this.

Therefore, is he Immanuel? Do you realize how radical a claim that is? That's the all-or-nothingness of it. What's amazing to me is people don't know what they're hearing. You can go into Macy's right now, and if you listen to the carols long enough, at some point you're going to hear "Immanuel." I don't know why people don't drop their presents. They are not listening, but I'm hoping you do right now.

2. *The importance of the doctrine of Christmas.* Many people say, "Why in the world are you talking about doctrine and dogma? Christmas is a wonderful idea and story. It helps inspire us to live as we ought to live, but as soon as you bring in the virgin birth and the preexistence of Jesus and all this stuff, I don't believe that, and I don't think you have to believe that to enjoy Christmas. Let's get the Christian doctrine and dogma out of Christmas. Let's just all enjoy the story. What matters is not doctrine and dogma but how you live."

I'll get back to that in a minute, but first of all, let me show you that not only the angel tells us who he is (God with us) but what he's come to do. It says he will save us from our sins. It doesn't say he will instruct us. Again, every other religious leader basically says, "I've come to show you the way to live." All the other religions go with this idea that what really matters is how you live.

Jesus Christ does not say, "I've come to show you the way to live." He says, "... **I am the way, the truth, and the life ...**" Because he's not a teacher who's come to show you how to achieve your salvation but the God and Savior who's come to achieve salvation for you, he did not come to instruct you how to save yourself, but he came to save you, which means you're saved by grace.

If you are trying to save yourself by following some way of life, you say, "Oh, doctrine doesn't matter. What really matters is how you live. Try to live a good life. Be a good person." If that's how you hope to connect to God, get his blessing, and maybe go to heaven, you are going to be up and down.

You are a bipolar person, morally and spiritually. When you are up, which is to say, "I feel like I'm living up to what I should be," you'll be self-righteous and bigoted, and you'll look down on other people. When you're not living up, you'll hate and flagellate yourself. Up and down, and up and down ...

Jesus says, "If I've come to save you (not to show you how to save yourself, but to save you by sheer grace), then you'll always know the joy of acceptance. You'll always be fueled with grateful joy for what I've already done for you. You won't always be worrying about whether you're really living a good enough life, and you won't be able to look down on anybody, because it's just a gift." You can know all that if you understand you're saved by grace.

Let's get back to the objection, when someone says, "Oh, doctrine and dogma don't matter. It matters how you live." The irony is, when you say doctrine and dogma don't matter, that is a doctrine. It is laden and dripping with doctrinal assumptions. For example, you could say, "What really matters is not the virgin birth ... It's just a wonderful story that helps us live."

The doctrinal assumption is that you are not a sinner, you're not lost, and you're not so cut off from God that someone has to take your punishment. Okay, maybe you're right, and maybe you're wrong (I think you're wrong). It's a belief, a doctrine. Don't tell me you don't believe in doctrine.

To say, "I don't believe in doctrine; what matters is living a good life," is a doctrine of justification by works. If Christmas is a legend that just inspires you to live as you should, you're on your own. All I can help you do is help you to live as you should, and you won't. But if Christmas happened, you can be saved by grace. Doctrine means everything, whether you admit it or not.

3. *The importance of the authority of Jesus.* You can easily miss this. It slips in here. I'm sure Joseph realized this was a challenge to him, yet as we see from verses 24–25, he accepted that challenge even though he realized this was going to change his life forever. Verse 21 says, "**She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus ...**"

We've heard that so often (it's read every year and all) that you may not realize how radical that is. The angel is saying, "Joseph, you do not have the right to name your child." When you start your own company, you have the right to name it. You're the CEO, the board, the janitor ... You're everything. You started it and began it. You're allowed to name it.

It's always been the case that if you have a child, you can name the child, because you're in authority over that child. In fact, if you don't take authority over that child, you're a negligent parent. You need to set the course of this child's life and tell this child how to live. Therefore, naming a child is a sign that you have authority over the child.

The angel is trying to say to Joseph, "You do not have authority over this child." There are a couple of ways of understanding this. At one level, it means at least that this is the only child who has ever lived and will ever be born who is older than his parents. He's infinitely older. There's a certain sense to which it's not at all appropriate for him to be named by Joseph.

More than that, what it's really saying is you do not name Jesus; Jesus names you. The namer is the one in authority. You cannot tell Jesus who he is. He has the right to tell you who you should be. You don't say, "Jesus, this is the kind of person I want you to be." No. If he comes into your life, he says, "This is the person I want you to be."

You do not manage him. He manages you. He can only come into your life as the ultimate authority. He can only come into your life so that you lose the right to live your life the way you feel like. You lose the right to self-determination. As you all know, this is the Christmas message. Jesus is born into your life, and when that happens, you lose all control. That is good news of glad tidings and great joy.

Do you see the paradox of the heart of Christmas? Christmas is a child born to you. Unto us a child is given. This child comes into our lives and totally takes

over. That's glad tidings. I've been thinking about this since the first time I saw it, but over the years, I've been speaking and preaching a lot on Christmas, and I don't think I've ever seen it quite as clearly as I do right now.

Christmas really challenges the lie that is the main working assumption, the operating principle, of your heart and my heart. It says you lose all control of your life and come under Jesus' authority, and that's good news. That is exactly the opposite of what anybody has ever believed, especially us today. Let me explain what I mean by that.

Many years ago, Sinclair Ferguson, a Scottish minister and friend of mine, came to Redeemer on a weekend and did a seminar. This was in the very earliest days of Redeemer. He told a story to get across what was happening in Genesis 3 when the Serpent spoke to Adam and Eve. I'll never forget it.

The story goes like this. Imagine it's Christmastime (it might have been Christmas season). Imagine a man taking his little son to FAO Schwarz at Christmas. What a wonderland that place is at Christmas. Imagine he takes the child all around, and they spend 30 minutes to an hour there, and he says, "Look at this! Do you see that?"

"Oh, yes, Daddy, I see that."

"Wouldn't you like one of those?"

"Oh, yes!"

"What about those?"

"Oh, those are great! I would love those. Those are the greatest things."

"What about over here?"

"Oh, yes!"

So he's all done, they've toured the store, and he sits down with his son and says, "Okay, have you seen all these great things? Wouldn't you like to have all of them? Here's what I want to tell you. You will have none of them. I will not allow you to have even one of these things ever in your entire life. Now let's go home."

Sinclair said, "I know this sounds a little bit crazy, but imagine this happening. Wouldn't that warp the child forever? Wouldn't that wound the child in their heart of hearts? Wouldn't that make the child say, 'I cannot trust this father. In fact, I don't know I can trust anyone.' Wouldn't that completely warp and wound you?"

Here's what Genesis 3 is saying. God says to Adam and Eve, "You may eat any tree of the garden." In other words, "You can do anything you want. I want you to enjoy your life, but do you see this tree over here? Don't eat anything from that tree. Why? Because I say so. I'm giving it to you as a way to learn to trust me, just because you love me. This way, our love relationship and our trust will grow. You can do anything you want in life, but you can't eat that tree. I'm asking you

not to do it just so you will grow in love and trust for me.”

Then the Serpent comes and says, “Is it true that God says you can’t eat any of the trees of the garden?” Adam and Eve say, “No, no. It’s just that one tree.” The Serpent says, “Oh, do you realize if you eat that tree, your eyes will be opened? Do you realize that’s the best tree, the one tree that will change you and make you all you should be? You can’t trust God. He’s trying to keep you down. He does not want your best.”

Sinclair said, “However you want to understand how this happened, exactly, the simple fact of the matter is that lie entered into the bloodstream of the human race. It buried itself down at the very core of our being so that every human being who has ever lived now has as his or her main working assumption that if I ever give myself completely to God, I will be miserable. If I give him complete freedom, I will be unhappy.”

I believe Sinclair was right, and that is the right way to read the Bible. I believe you’ll never understand yourself unless ... In some cases, if you’ve never heard this idea before, it may take a few years to see it, but I would like you to think out your entire life in light of that assumption, that *that* is what’s operating at the bottom of your heart.

We’ve been warped. We have been wounded at the core of our being, and we are sure that if there is a God, and we give ourselves to him completely, we will be miserable. That animates everything everybody does. How could that be? Imagine two utterly different people.

One person grew up in a restrictive religious home who says, “No. I took philosophy 101 at my college, and now I know everything is relative. It’s up to me to decide what is right or wrong, and I’m going to live the way I want to live. I’m going to write my own scripts and live according to what I think is right or wrong. I throw off all moral restrictions and become myself.” You could say that’s a relativist.

Over here is another person who’s working very hard to go to church, believes all the doctrine, and takes notes. This person is obeying the Ten Commandments and saying no to all kinds of pleasures. This person is trying to live a very good life but feels guilty all the time because it never feels like he or she is living up. This person is anxious, critical, and receives criticism ...

You would think of these two people, a very moralistic person and a very relativistic person, as opposites. They probably don’t like each other. They probably vote on opposite sides of many elections. They seem different in every way, and yet they are what they are because they believe the same lie, because they’ve been warped in the same way.

Here’s one person who says, “I’m not going to give up any of my freedom to God (if there is a God). I could never be happy if I give myself to God.” The moralist is saying, “I’m going to give up some freedom because that’s the only way to get anything out of God. If I’m going to pry blessings out of his begrudging fingers,

I'm going to have to live a very good life.

I have to also make sure I'm really good, which means I have to have leverage with God. I have to be able to say to him, 'You owe me because of the kind of life I've lived.' I can't just give myself. I have to do all these things and make God bless me and have that kind of leverage and tell God he owes me."

Both individuals and the groups of people they represent are miserable in the long run because they're so afraid of giving themselves to God. I don't know what would heal a child, but if it's true we're wounded like that, what in the world would heal you and me? So often, C.S. Lewis says what I'm about to tell you. He says it at the end of *Mere Christianity* (his lectures and talks on BBC Radio) and in the middle of the book *The Problem of Pain*.

He says we ought to know better, because there are all sorts of clues in the world that self-giving is paradoxically the way to freedom and joy. You can see it in so many levels. Jesus used this idea that unless a seed goes into the ground and dies to being a seed, it never becomes what it really should be, which is a flower, a tree, or maybe a whole forest. The seed must die in order to live. It must stop being itself in order to really become itself.

Marriage is an awful lot like that. In marriage, you give up the right to make any decision in any way you want. You give up all kinds of independence, yet if both of you are giving to each other and surrendering all your independence to the other, what's astonishing is, in a sense, you're giving up yourself to become yourself. You're giving up so much to get so much. You know that's how it works.

Then why would this all be? Why would there be all these clues that self-giving is the way to self-realization, that self-abdication is the way to self-fulfillment? It's because we're made in the image of God, and God, according to the Christian understanding of the Bible, is three persons in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Inside the Godhead, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity have been glorifying each other. That means they love each other, defer to each other, praise each other, and are essentially giving themselves to each other. Jesus Christ gave up his glory to come to earth and gave his very life to die for our sins on the cross.

In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis says in self-giving, if anywhere, we touch a rhythm not only of all creation but of all being. Christ gives himself in sacrifice. He says, "When He was crucified ... He did that in the wild weather of His outlying provinces what He had done at home in glory and gladness." Did you get that? When he went to the cross he was essentially doing what he had been doing inside the Godhead along with the Father and Holy Spirit from all eternity.

"When He was crucified ... He did that in the wild weather of His outlying provinces what He had done at home in glory and gladness. [...] From the highest to the lowest, self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes the more truly self, to be thereupon yet the more abdicated, and so

forever."

We've been wounded and warped by something at the root of our hearts that says, "Don't you dare give yourself to anyone, certainly not God, or you'll be miserable." What will heal us? We're moralists who have been warped by that. We cannot believe if we absolutely give ourselves to God he will love us. We have to see God giving himself to us. That's the only thing that will heal the wound and make it possible for you to trust him.

Dorothy Sayers was one of the first women who ever graduated from Oxford. She wrote detective novels, and she wasn't a particularly beautiful woman. She wrote a series of detective novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey as the aristocratic detective. They're very well-known, and you may have heard of them.

About halfway through the series, suddenly a woman character appears named Harriet Vane. She's one of the first women who ever graduated from Oxford. She writes detective novels, and she's not a particularly beautiful woman. She and Peter, through several novels, get to know each other, fall in love, are happily married, and live happily ever after.

A lot of people say, "That's interesting. That woman looks an awful lot like Dorothy Sayers herself." Some people think she looked into the world she had created and saw one of her characters. She pitied him, and then she loved him. He was lonely. She fell in love with him, and she wrote herself into the world she had created and made him happy, and they lived happily ever after. You go, "Ah. What a sweet, romantic thing to do."

The Bible goes one better. It says in cosmic reality, God looked into the world he had created and saw us sinking. He saw us flailing and miserable, because we don't believe the truth about ourselves or him. We're looking for love in all the wrong place and looking for freedom in all the wrong ways, and he wrote himself in.

That's what Christmas means. He came to earth, became one of us, and gave himself away, so that you, seeing him do that in love, can have the wound of your heart healed. You can give yourself to him and come to know the joy that only comes through glad surrender to the One we were built to surrender to. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for providing for us a beginning look at the glories of what Christmas teaches us about who we are, who you are, and who your Son Jesus Christ is. We pray that you would make us into people who live with the joy of knowing what you did for us at Christmas. Change us this Advent season as we think more and more about what you have done through Jesus. Let those things become real to our hearts so it really shapes the way in which we live, feel, and relate to you, ourselves, and all around us. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

The Magi and Jesus

Matthew's Messiah—December 14, 2014

Matthew 2:1–12

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” **3** When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: **6** ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” **9** After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Word of the Lord.

The passage that was read is one of the Matthew passages about the birth of Jesus we’re looking at this December. I hate to break the news to you, but you don’t know nearly as much about this story as you think. You say, “Wait a minute.

I know the Christmas carol, ‘We three kings of Orient are . . .’ ” No, I won’t do that to you.

First of all, notice there are no kings here. You thought they were kings? It says *magi*, but we’ll get to that in a second. There aren’t three of them. Nowhere in the text does it say there are three. You say, “What? There are three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” I know. I’m going to give my wife three gifts, but that doesn’t mean there are three of me.

Not only that, you probably think they come to the manger with the shepherds, but notice Jesus is in a house by the time they get there. I’m sorry, but you’re just going to have to read the Bible instead of following *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, the Christmas carols, and all that stuff. Somebody’s saying, “Well, what is it going to say next? There’s no Santa Claus?” That’s a different sermon.

Now that I’ve had my little laugh, some of you are saying, “But it’s a legend anyway, right?” I don’t think so. No. For example, *magi* was a Greek word that meant what you might think: astrologers, magicians, and interpreters of dreams. Everywhere else in the Bible, whenever the word *magi* comes up, it’s always negative. The Old and New Testament condemn this. Why do we have only Matthew talking about these guys in such positive terms?

Most historians point out that no Christian writer would have made this story up, because the writer would have known that, for any Christian or Jew reading this story, red flags would have gone up everywhere. “What are these people doing here? You don’t do this.” The most likely reason this is in the text is that it happened. There’s no other good reason for Matthew to even put it in here.

Somebody says, “How could this star stuff be possible? Do you believe in astrology?” Here’s what we do know about astrology in ancient times. Did you know when Julius Caesar was being buried, by some coincidence, there was a supernova? Over Julius Caesar’s burial, there was this great star in the heavens. This helped the astrology business for a number of years. It became cemented in people’s minds that when a great king was born or died, there’d be a star.

We do know in the year this is talking about, there was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that came together to form an event in the sky that looked like a very bright star. We know it happened on May 29, October 3, and December 4. We also know there was a major rumor that not just a Messiah but a great king would come out of Judea. Suetonius, Tacitus, and all sorts of pagan historians talk about it. It wasn’t just the Jewish belief in a Messiah. There was a rumor that there was a great king.

Basically, on May 29, you see this star, and if you are an astrologer and know the rumor, going to Jerusalem and asking, “Where is this great king?” is perfectly historically plausible. But why does Matthew tell us about it? There’s a place in the book of John where John says there’s so much that happened in Jesus’ life that it would take books and books and books to put it all in.

The gospel writers are always very selective. They only tell you stuff that is

instructive. I'm almost certain Matthew is trying to show us that here you have the wisdom of the nations bowing down and acknowledging Jesus Christ as the true wisdom of God. We have the elite opinion of the nations coming and acknowledging the true wisdom is Jesus Christ.

Therefore, this is kind of a commentary on a place where Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God shown the foolishness of the wisdom of the world?" So God has been pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of the gospel. That's what this entire text is telling us.

Look at the features of this story. We're learning *the wisdom of this world, the elite opinion, is dated, insufficient, and superficial*, and yet, with the hope of the Holy Spirit, *it can burst its own banks*.

1. *The wisdom of this world is dated.* You have to remember, when these guys say they're the wise men, that means they're the most highly educated. These are the learned, the professors at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Oxford, and Cambridge. These are the intelligentsia, the elites. In that day, the elites believed the way you dealt with the world was through astrology, the interpretation of dreams, and the magical arts. We laugh, "Boy, that was then, but now, we know better."

Well, first of all, let's go back. Where are the wise men of 100 years ago? They probably wrote on the pages of the *New York Times* or *Harvard Review* or something like that. If you go to those places 100 years ago, you will see that a remarkable number of things that were written by the elites make us cringe now.

In fact, if you go back 40 years and read the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*, there are a lot of things that were said there that, even then, made you cringe. A shocking amount of elite opinion becomes laughable within a generation. As C.S. Lewis once put it, "All that is not eternal is eternally out of date."

For example, I moved to New York 25 years ago (I was in my 30s). When I talked to New Yorkers in their 50s, 60s, and 70s who had been here through the 40s, 50s, and 60s, they told me when they were young here in New York, Freud reigned. Everybody who knew anything, all the elites, went to their psychoanalysts several times a week.

It was normal to go to your psychoanalyst two to five times a week, because it took 10 to 20 years to figure out your unconscious. Everybody knew that was the only way ahead. Everybody who was enlightened knew how to do that. Even by the time I got here in the late-80s, everybody was laughing at that.

When I was a college student, and I took anything on child development or psychology, whenever we got to gender or sexual desire, I was told in no uncertain terms these things are not fixed or genetic, but learned. Today, we're told sexual desires are genetically fixed and determined.

All I can tell you is, our grandchildren will laugh at that, somehow. There will be

something wrong with it, because what I was taught by the professors (who, of course, would be grandparents to a lot of you) 40 years ago in college was something we laugh at now, too. “All that is not eternal is eternally out of date.”

I was told in the 1960s that Christianity was a white, Western religion, and the more modern a country got, the less religious it would get. Now, Christianity is growing so fast in China, Korea, Africa, and Latin America that it’s shocking. The average Christian, of course, is not a white Westerner. The more modern China gets, the more Christian it’s getting. The sociologists who wrote in the 50s and 60s (some of them are still around) are appalled. Governments are based on the idea ...

What the sociologists said in the 50s and 60s ... We always say, “Yes, elite opinion back then was wrong, but *now we know*.” But is it really possible we’ve come to the ultimate cultural moment, that 100 years from now almost all the things the smartest people in New York City are saying, everybody will know we’ve reached the truth? No.

Therefore, if somebody comes to you and says, “Oh, you Christian, you’re out of date. You have to change to keep up with the times. You’re regressive.” We can change the music. There are all sorts of things Christians can change, but if you try to change the ancient doctrines in order to keep up with today, tomorrow it’ll be a laughingstock kind of Christianity.

Everything changes, except ... Go read Augustine, Athanasius, and Anselm. Go read people who were trying to draw God’s wisdom out of the Scriptures 1500 years ago. If you’re a Christian, you read those folks and say, “Oh, my goodness, the same God these guys are dealing with is the one I’m dealing with.” It’s incredible.

Yes, of course you can see the differences. In 1500 years there are a lot of differences. Historically and culturally, they are very different. Every so often, they’ll say something, and you’ll go, “Oh, my word.” But not the core. Is there any other field of endeavor like biblical study that doesn’t look ridiculous 50 years later? “All that is not eternal is eternally out of date.” Where is the wise man, the scholar, and the philosopher of this age? The answer is they’re always on their way out the door, in large part.

2. *The wisdom of this world is insufficient.* It’s not all a crock. By God’s common grace, there are all sorts of things elite opinion, scientists, and philosophers are saying that will abide. There is wisdom in the wisdom of this world, but it’s insufficient. What’s interesting is the wise men, through their arts, do learn there’s a king, but they can’t find out without the Scripture where that king is. Isn’t that interesting?

One of the things *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and a lot of pageants leave out is they just say, “Here are the wise men, and there’s the star that appears, and the star has this little halo lamp that goes down onto the stage.” It moves, they follow it, and there’s Jesus. They miss something. In fact, they miss a lot.

There's really no indication that the star actually moved in the sky and took them to where Jesus was, if you read carefully. First of all, when the star appeared the first time, which would have been May 29, they connected that with the rumor that there was a great king to come out of Judea. They show up in Jerusalem and say, "Where is the king?"

The star didn't take them to Jerusalem. They put two and two together. By their own reason and thinking, they came to the conclusion that there was a king to be born. They found where Bethlehem was by listening to the Old Testament prophet. "**But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah ... out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.**"

We have an extraordinarily important thing, and Romans 1 says the same the same thing. "By your reason you may perceive there is a god. Looking at nature, you can perceive there is a god, but you'll never meet that God personally except through the revelation of the Bible and Jesus Christ." The idea is the wisdom of the world can take you far, but it can't take you home.

I'll give you three illustrations of it. I read books on the end of poverty. The books are really great and encouraging, and they should be followed. They talk about changes in economics, politics, sociology, and technology, and they're all good, but anybody who's really, really spent their life trying to deal with poverty knows poverty is ultimately rooted in at least these three things.

First of all, there are deep, deep things wrong in the human hearts of the people who have the resources and will not part with them. Secondly, there are deep problems in the hearts of people who have experienced poverty, have been hurt by it, and don't always behave like they ought to. Thirdly, there's what we call *systemic evil*, which means sociological systems which are bigger than any individual that aggravate and support what's wrong in the hearts of the haves and have-nots.

The conclusion is you're not going to end poverty with technology. No major human problem can ever be completely addressed with just human resources. When you have evil, the soul, and the heart, you need the grace of God. You need spiritual transformation. In other words, again, the wisdom of this world can tell you an awful lot about what the problem is and even some things to do, but it can't bring you home.

Becky Pippert wrote a book some years ago called *Hope Has Its Reasons*. I love this story in the book. She was, for some reason, auditing courses at Harvard University some years ago. She was in a psychology class, and this brilliant professor was presenting a case study of a man whose life had been ruined, by and large, by his resentment of his mother. He brilliantly showed how this man's anger and bitterness towards his mother had distorted his marriage, hurt his parenting, and shaped and distorted his work life and job.

When it was all done, some of the students raised their hands and said, "How do you treat that?" The professor said, "Well, you show the man what's wrong. You

make it conscious and help him see it, so he can, as much as possible, keep from unconsciously being affected by the anger and mitigate many of the effects.” If I remember correctly, Becky raised her hand and said, “Okay, that’s how you treat it, but how do you solve it? How do you resolve, it? If the man could really, completely forgive his mother, wouldn’t that go a long way to healing him?”

The professor immediately pushed back and said, “Hey, we’re talking about science here. As soon as you say ‘Should he forgive?’ that’s a moral question, an ought question. As soon as you say ‘How do you forgive?’ that’s kind of a religious, moral question. Science can tell you what is, but it can never tell you what ought to be. As soon as it gets into *ought* you’re into morality and religion.” Then he actually said, “If you’re looking for a forgiving heart, you’re in the wrong department.”

The wisdom of this world, empirical science, research science, can maybe show you what’s wrong to a great degree, but it can’t bring you home. Obviously, nobody can live without forgiveness. You know that, yet here’s a guy saying, “You’re not in the wisdom of this world anymore. You’re in something else.”

I saw a study that essentially empirically proved that people who prayed, got joy in prayer, and thought they were connected to God, healed faster after injury or surgery than people who did not. There we go. Fact. Do you think the research can now go out and figure out how to pray and feel connected to God? No.

The wise men, by their wisdom, were able to know there was a king but not where to find the king. Maybe they even knew they needed a king but not where to find him. That’s what Christmas means: the King has come to you.

3. *The wisdom of this world is superficial.* There’s something hilarious about taking these people (the wise men, the elites, the intelligentsia) and telling them to go to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was not an urban center. There was no studio from which you could do a broadcast. There was no arena.

Right away, you see a contrast with the wisdom of this world, which says if you’re really going to make a difference in life, you have to go to the right schools, have the right skills, know and convene the right people, and have the right coalitions. God set up the beginning of Jesus’ life, the single most influential person in the history of world, by breaking all the wisdom of the world’s conventions.

Jesus was not born to the right family or in the right place. He did not have the right credentials, he never wrote a book, and he did not lead an army. From what we can tell, he wasn’t good-looking. He didn’t do anything the world’s way, but he did it God’s way. God’s way is, “The way up is down. The way to get power is to serve. The way to get really rich (to have a love you can never lose) is to give all your money away.”

That’s the opposite of what the world says. Even those of us who say, “Oh, we’re solid Christians, and we live in New York” implicitly start to assume nothing good comes out of Nazareth or places like that. Nothing good comes out of Bethlehem. Watch out. That wisdom of the world tends to superficiality.

If you look at your level of professional success, material comfort, money, power, and looks, and if you do an inventory, you're likely to feel either bad or good about your inventory. I'm saying, "Stop it." Stop both of those. It's not that important, because God has shown the wisdom of the world to be foolishness by the very birth of Jesus Christ. He was born in a manger to a poor, unwed mother, surrounded by shepherds, the scum of the earth. He was born in the wrong place, to the wrong people.

4. *The wisdom of this world can burst its own banks through the power of the Holy Spirit.* In the end, "**When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house ...**" Not the stable, by the way. Sorry to do that to you, too. I'm just destroying all your fond memories of pageants. "**... they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.**"

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were kingly gifts, which is probably one of the reasons why it came to be believed that these were kings. They were very expensive. It was also normal, when you went to see a king or anyone superior to you, to bring gifts. For them to bow down and give gifts is to worship.

J.C. Ryle, a nineteenth century Christian who was the Anglican bishop of Liverpool, wrote a series of little commentaries on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In his commentary on this passage, he essentially says, "They saw no miracles to convince them. They heard no wise words out of his mouth. They saw nothing but a newborn infant on the lap of a poor woman, but they worshiped. No greater faith than this can be found in the whole volume of the Bible."

That's a pretty strong statement, but I understand what he means. Look at everybody else who ever believed. Generally, they believed because they heard the great Sermon on the Mount, saw a great miracle, or were healed. Even the people in the rest of the New Testament believed in Jesus because they heard a great sermon, at least.

But they walk in, see an infant on the lap of a poor woman, and worship him. The only reason these pagan wise men would worship is if, by some divine revelation, they realized, "This is what we've been looking for all our lives." What they've been looking for and living for is wisdom. Now they perceive (and it has to be from the Holy Spirit) this is what they've been looking for, so they worship.

I could end by saying (I will say it, but I won't explain it) that everybody in this room has been living for something. I can tell you no matter who you are or where you are in your faith position, whatever you have been looking for all your life will only be found in this child. Rather than expound on that, let's just end, because this is about wisdom. Let me suggest to you that you can have the same experience as these wise men. You can see in Jesus Christ the ultimate wisdom of God.

Paul tells you how you can have that kind of experience. In the passage where he says, "**Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the**

world?" he then immediately says, "... but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

They went in and saw a child, and the Holy Spirit showed them the true wisdom of God. You can't have that experience by going home and looking at your manger scene, but you can by looking at the cross. Why would Paul say that's where you see it and where you can have this experience?

Think with me for a minute. Jesus was the ultimate wise, because he was not cookie-cutter but was nuanced and insightful. In John 3, Nicodemus confronts him. "**You must be born again.**" In John 4, one chapter later, with the woman at the well he's gentle, patient, careful, and processed.

At the funeral of Lazarus, the man is dead, and there are two sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus meets Martha, and she says, "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." *Boom!* Just a minute or two later, Mary comes up and says, "If you were here, my brother wouldn't have died," and all he does is weep.

Why is he tender with Mary and tough with Martha? Why is he tender with the woman and tough with Nicodemus? It's because he's not cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all, or one-dimensional. He's not just good; he's wise. If you want to be wise, look at the cross, but before looking at the cross, let me ask you a question.

Is God so holy and righteous that he cannot disregard sin, that he must always, always, always punish sin? Or, is God so loving and merciful that he's going to accept you no matter what you do? It has to be one or the other, right? It can't be both equally. It has to be more one than the other, surely.

By the way, all of us are that one-dimensional. Some of us are legalists, and some of us are relativists, or at least we're moving in that direction. Look at our political parties. Look at our churches. They're moving in that direction of either being one or the other. Now let's go to the cross. Is God a god so righteous and holy he has to punish sin or so loving and merciful that he's going to accept you no matter how you live? The answer is both, equal.

Only on the cross could God, in his consummate wisdom, do something that, on the one hand, completely fulfilled holiness and law because it satisfied the justice of God, and at the same time completely satisfies love and mercy, because it makes it possible, if you believe in him, to be accepted no matter what you have done, even if you've done murder.

Therefore, if you see the consummate wisdom of God, how he did both at once (no either-or, but both at the same time), that passes into you, and you become the most multidimensional, un-cookie-cutter, wise, nuanced person. You're not a legalist or a relativist. You have a high view of yourself as completely loved and, at the same time, a low view of yourself as a terrible sinner.

That's nuance. That's multidimensionality. You move through life being able to

know how to be sympathetic and, at the same time, make the hard call and do the confrontation. Look at the cross, and you will have the same experience as these wise men. Keep looking at the cross, and the more you look at and believe in that cross, the more you will give him your all, the more you will give him the great gifts of your life, and the wiser you'll be. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for showing us the beauty of your wisdom. The way these wise men came to see all wisdom is in you. Of course, even though it was revealed to them, they didn't understand the cross. They couldn't see what we see. We're so grateful you have shown us so much.

O Lord, keep us from the simplistic, one-dimensional position of either despising completely the wisdom of this world and not seeing how, by your common grace, there is much fruit and good out there, or, on the other hand, having our heads turned by it, being enamored with it, and being caught up in it, and becoming as superficial, and eventually as dated as the wisdom of this world is and will be.

Help us, in other words, to walk like your Son in all wisdom in this world. We can only do that as we look more at your Son, love him for what he did for us on the cross, and find ourselves transformed more and more into his wise likeness. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

The World and Jesus

Matthew's Messiah—December 21, 2014

Matthew 2:13–23

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” **14** So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. **17** Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great

mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in

Egypt **20** and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, **23** and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The Word of the Lord.

Most all the stories about the birth of Jesus we see in Luke and Matthew are filled with glad tidings of great joy, right? This is a dark episode. It's here for a number of reasons, and I'll give you some of them in a second, but it's also important, especially since New York City is going through a very dark chapter right now, that Christmas doesn't mean the end of darkness. Jesus comes into a very dark world, and there's immediately violence, as we have read here.

Christmas doesn't immediately mean the end of darkness, but it means a light in the darkness. That's extremely important for us to understand. Let's take a look and see what we're supposed to learn from this passage. It's often called “the slaughter of the innocents” because Herod kills all the children in Bethlehem under the age of 2, just to make sure he got the Messiah (or he hopes he did).

There are other things this passage says, and we need to look at three verses tonight. This is sort of a brief meditation on three different verses and three lessons we learn about the coming of Jesus into the world. The three things we learn from this passage are *the coming of Jesus evokes hostility, God works in unexpected ways, and the whole Bible is really about Jesus.*

1. *The coming of Jesus into the world evokes hostility.* This is the heart of the passage. Verse 16 says, “**When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.**”

The story is, the wise men came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the king that's to be born?” Herod gets the scholars together, and they say, “Well, the prophecy says it's in Bethlehem.” So he sends the wise men, the magi, to Bethlehem, and he says, “Make sure when you've found him that you come back and tell me where he is, so I can honor him.” Of course, he wanted to kill him.

The wise men got wise to the situation and didn't go back to Herod, and when Herod realized they had not come back to him ... That was supposed to be a joke, you know. I know it's very cold, but you need to listen more carefully. No, I tell you what, I won't tax you. That's the last joke ... unless I think of something.

They decide to leave, and when Herod decides they aren't coming back, he says, "Oh, well, it's been so many months, so I know I can wipe out the Messiah as long as I kill all the children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem." On the one hand, this was probably not a lot of people. It was likely 20 or 30 children, considering what we know about the population at the time, and it completely fits in with what we know about Herod the Great. He was a very brutal man.

In fact, we know if those kings in ancient times thought there was somebody who might be usurping them, they just killed them, the whole family, and every niece and nephew. Just because it was typical doesn't mean it's not terrible, and just because he's a tyrant doesn't mean we shouldn't see what Matthew is trying to get at.

The coming of Jesus into the world evokes hostility and pushback. We shouldn't look at Herod and say, "Well, he was a tyrant." Yes, but the Bible also says in Romans 8:7 the natural heart is enmity toward God. That's what the English says. It means, in your natural state, you hate God. It's not just that you don't believe in God, but you hate him.

You say, "Wait, what's that all about?" Look. Here's King Herod, and in comes somebody asking, "Where's the new king to be born?" If you're the CEO, and you find out the board of trustees has appointed a new CEO, or if you're the editor in chief, and you find a new editor in chief has been appointed, or if you're the king, and you want to be king, and you find out somebody has appointed another king, you get angry, push back, and retaliate.

Every single person in this room knows his own heart. You don't want other people telling you how to live your life. You want to choose for yourself. By the way, we live in one of the few cultures in history that tells you that's right. Most cultures have told you to fight against that, obey your father and mother, follow the tradition of the elders, and conform. That's how most cultures have been. Western culture says, "No, no, no. You and you alone have the right to live as you want."

We're actually encouraged in this, and along comes Jesus Christ. He says things like, "Unless you hate your father and mother for my sake, and even your own life, you can't be my disciple." That's a Semitic idiom, and it means, "Unless you love me more than your mother and father and even more than life itself, unless you're willing to follow me rather than decide how you want to live your life, unless you make me your king, you can't follow me at all."

Here's another place where he says, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, for that is what I am, but why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not the things I say?" We just sang about it: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth

receive her King.” Yet every one of us has a little Herod in our hearts. We have a part of our heart that says, “Nobody tells me what to do.” It’s very deep.

What that means is when Jesus comes into the world or your life, there’s always pushback and retaliation. In fact, that’s one of the reasons why most people who have read the Bible closely know that when people met Jesus, they always acted in an extreme way. They never acted moderately.

They either ran from him in terror, assaulted him in anger, or bowed the knee in loving ardor and surrender. They were either all for him or all against him. They were afraid of him or angry at him, or they gave him everything and centered their entire life around him, but nobody responded moderately. Why? Because of his claims. He’s the King! “Unless you deny yourself and take up your cross, you cannot be my disciple.”

That’s the first point. When Jesus comes into the world, there is always hostility. When Jesus comes into your heart, there will be hostility. Let me briefly say what that means to three groups of people.

A. *Christians*. If you’re a Christian, and you say, “I’m a strong Christian, and I want to be,” I want you to recognize there’s still residual anger toward God in your heart. There’s still residual hostility toward the authority of God and the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Why is prayer so hard?

John Newton, the great hymn writer who wrote “Amazing Grace,” was also a great pastor, and he wrote letters to his people. At one point he said something like, “All it takes to destroy my prayer life is the buzzing of a fly. Some days, I sit down to have a half-hour prayer, and there’s a fly in the room, and that’s it. It’s over. Why is my prayer life so weak that the buzzing of a fly is enough to shatter it?”

It’s because there’s something in our hearts that makes it hard for us to pray, obey, and be accountable. Christianity is not a waltz. It’s a fight because of our own hearts. Therefore, you’re never going to be any kind of Christian unless you’re willing to fight. Fight to put Jesus in the center. Fight to make him Lord of your life.

B. *Skeptics*. If you’re a skeptic, and you really, really find it hard to believe in Christianity, or you’re not sure you believe in God, I just want you to know one thing. You are not objective. It’s very important to keep that in mind. Thomas Nagle, a philosophy professor at NYU, wrote a book some years ago in which he basically said, “I’m an atheist. I don’t believe in God. I don’t think the arguments for God are valid.”

But then he said there was one thing that bothered him. He said, “The problem is, I want atheism to be true. It’s not just that I don’t believe in God, and I naturally hope my belief is right. It’s that I hope there is no God. I don’t want there to be a God. I don’t want the universe to be like that. I have a cosmic authority problem, and I don’t think it’s rare. I doubt there is anyone who is genuinely indifferent as to whether there’s a God or not.”

He's perfectly right. If there is a god, you lose control. If Jesus Christ is who he said he is, you lose control. You can't live any way you want. You're not coming objectively. If you were a judge, and a case came before you involving a company in which you had an investment, you'd have to recuse yourself, right? You wouldn't be allowed to adjudicate the case. The problem is, if the case goes in a certain direction, you lose money. You're not objective.

If you're skeptical of Christianity in particular or a belief in God in general, just realize you're not objective. You're going to have to adjudicate that case. You're going to have to think it out. Realize you're not objective. It's not a simple abstraction. If God exists, you lose control, and you don't want that. We all have a cosmic authority problem. Christians have it, non-Christians have it, and people in the middle have it.

C. *People in the middle*. Some of you are not really skeptics, but you're not very strong Christians. You kind of believe in God. You maybe believe in Christianity. You come to church sometimes, but you always say, "I wish I were a better Christian. I'm really not the Christian I ought to be." In other words, you're moderate toward Jesus.

You're not angry at him or scared of him, but you're not sold out, every day getting up, centering your entire life on him, or making him your reason for living. You're moderate. I want you to be anything but that. You say, "You mean you'd rather I were angry at Jesus?" Yes. You'd be closer to knowing who he is, and therefore closer, I think, to bowing the knee to him in worship. Read what the Scripture says about him, and you'll see an incomparable life, a life that, I think, will move you toward him, and certainly out of just being moderate.

2. *God works in unexpected ways*. The second verse I'd like you to look at with me is at the very end. Joseph, when he came back from Egypt with Mary and Jesus, wanted to live in Judea, but he realized he couldn't because he was afraid of Herod's son. It says, "... **he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.**" All by itself, the fact that Jesus is from Nazareth is really interesting. Here's the Savior of the world, the most influential person in the history of the world, and he's coming from Nazareth. Nazareth was a nowhere place. It was back of beyond and backwater.

In John 1, when Philip meets Jesus and is really impressed with him, he grabs his friend Nathaniel and says, "Nathaniel, come on. I want you to meet Jesus. He's this rabbi that might be the Messiah." Nathaniel says, "Where's he from?" Philip says, "Nazareth." Nathaniel says, "Nazareth? You think somebody important came out of Nazareth? No way!"

Every society has a pecking order. There are desirable, posh, and exclusive neighborhoods and towns where all the important people live and the important things happen (as the world thinks of it), and then there's the other end of the spectrum. For example, they had Jerusalem, and at the other end was Nazareth.

We have Beverly Hills and parts of Manhattan, but I looked up the other end of

the spectrum, and we have a town called Oatmeal, Texas, that in 1990 had a population of 20. In the year 2000, what it said was, “About that.” Evidently, in the year 2010, nobody seemed to think it was important to count, so there’s nothing from 2010. Oh, yeah. Oatmeal.

You’re laughing, right? Just like Nathaniel laughed at Nazareth. It’s a laughingstock. Nothing important happens there, and nothing that would change the world would come out of a place like that. That’s how the world thinks. Right here, in the very beginning of Jesus’ life, God is serving notice: “I don’t do things the way the world thinks they should be done. I do things almost upside down and counter-intuitively. I love that, and you should love it too.”

In an age in which the oldest son got everything (the birthright, all the money, all the power, all the estate), and everybody else got just a little bit, God works through Abel, not Cain; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; Ephraim, not Manasseh; and David, not his older brothers. When God wants to bring his salvation into the world through a woman, Rebekah, the mother of Jacob; Samson’s mother; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist weren’t supposed to have children.

God always chooses the infertile, unloved, or socially shamed woman. It’s old Sarah, not fertile Hagar. It’s unloved Leah, not beautiful Rachel. God always chooses Nazareth, not Rome, Athens, or Jerusalem. The girl nobody wanted is the one he chooses. The boy everyone else forgot is the one he chooses. That’s how he does it.

You say, “Oh, that’s kind of nice. He likes underdogs.” No, it’s more than that. When we talk about God’s work we’re talking about his salvation, to say that God’s salvation works in a counterintuitive way, upside down from the way the world would expect. Jesus comes from Nazareth because the salvation that Jesus brings is almost the opposite of what people would think. The world does not think it will be anything like Jesus says it will be.

Forty years ago, I went to my first church in a small town in Virginia. It was the 1970s, a long time ago. This is not New York City. This is a place where everybody is very traditional, religious, and conservative, and everybody believes in God. One of the things we used to do is go around, knock on doors, and visit the houses around the church. We’d go in to visit and sit down, and people were happy to have somebody from the church and meet the pastor. Those were the days.

Well, maybe not. Even though they were all very religious, conservative, and traditional, we had a set of questions. One of the questions we used to ask them is, “If you were to die tonight and go before God, and he were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?” Ninety-eight percent of the people would say something like this: “Well, I try my best to live a good life, obey the Ten Commandments and the Bible, live like a Christian, live like Jesus ...”

That's how the world thinks salvation should work. It's for the strong, the people who can pull themselves together. It's for the people who can stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood. It's for the people who are strong, and, of course, they can pull it together and be moral and good. Jesus Christ comes not from the place of the strong, not from Rome, Athens, or Jerusalem, but from Nazareth.

Jesus comes and goes to the cross. He says, "I have come in weakness, and I only save those who know they're weak." It's completely opposite. He comes from Nazareth. He works in unexpected ways. He doesn't just make the world hostile, but he confounds their expectations and shatters their categories.

3. *The whole Bible is really about Jesus.* How can salvation be for the weak, by the weak? It's only after 40 years of thinking about this passage, but my favorite verse is up here in verse 15. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary went down into Egypt to get away from Herod. When Herod died, they came up out of Egypt and went back to Judea, then to Galilee and Nazareth.

It says in verse 15, "**And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'**" When you see that, you say, "Okay ..." The reason you probably did not pick this up and why I didn't pick it up for many, many years is because you say, "Oh, okay, in the Old Testament, there must be a prophecy about the Messiah spending time in Egypt and coming to Judea and Galilee."

No. If you go back to Hosea 11:1 and actually read it, you'll immediately see it's not a prophecy at all. When you first read it, you'll say, "Huh?" In the Old Testament, when God spoke to Israel, he often called the nation of Israel "my son." If you go to Hosea 11, all you have is the story of Israel.

Israel was exiled in Egypt, but God brought his son out of Egypt, took them to Mount Sinai, gave them the Ten Commandments, and sent them to Judea. In other words, they were in trouble, and he brought them out of Egypt, gives them the law, and says, "Obey me, and I will bless you," and he sends them to the Promised Land. "I've rescued you. Obey me and I'll bless you. Go to the Promised Land." They don't.

I read the Bible through every year, and the last part of the year, I'm reading 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. I'm in 2 Chronicles right now. It's the story of God saying, over and over and over again, "Here's my law. Obey me, and I will bless you," and they don't. He gets them out of trouble in Egypt. "Obey me, and I will bless you," and they don't. Eventually, they're in exile in Babylon, and he brings them home and says, "Obey me, and I will bless you," and they don't. Over and over, that's the story of Israel.

As soon as we Gentiles start to say, "Oh, yeah, that's the story of Israel ..." You'd better not think ill of them, because, essentially, Israel is a microcosm of the human race. If you scroll out enough to see the whole Bible, and you see Adam and Eve, who, of course, were the representatives of the entire human race, we see the same thing. God puts them in the garden and says, "Obey me, and I will

bless you," and they don't.

It's the reason the world is such a dark place tonight. It's the reason we have so much stuff we're dealing with. God says to the human race, "Obey me. Love me with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself, and I will bless you and give you peace and *shalom*," but we don't.

Is there any hope? Yeah. What if God's true, real Son came to earth? He comes to earth and is immediately in trouble, and he goes to Egypt to get out of trouble. When he's brought out of Egypt, he goes to Judea, but unlike anyone else, the Bible says he *does* obey his Father. He loved God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He loved his neighbor as himself. Read about it in the New Testament. It was an incomparable life, a life of justice, love, and wisdom. It was an astounding life.

He was the only person who ever actually obeyed the Father. He was the only true Son, Israelite, and human being. All other sons, Israelites, and human beings have been called to obey and be blessed, and we haven't obeyed. Now, one comes along, the only true Son, human being, and Israelite, and he obeys fully and completely.

He's the only one who's ever earned the blessing of God for perfect obedience, but when he gets to the end of his life, he doesn't get it. What happens? There's no pomp and circumstance. There's no gold crown. There's only a crown of thorns. There are no royal robes, except the robe they put on him in mockery so they could beat and pummel and spit on him and then torture and kill him.

Why? He was getting the curse for disobedience. All other sons, Israelites, human beings, were told, "Obey me, and I will bless you." We didn't obey. We deserve a curse for disobedience, but he got the curse for our disobedience, so if we believe in him we get the blessing for his obedience, the blessing he deserved.

Here's what's so wonderful about this verse. Matthew can look at this passage in the Old Testament, which is actually about Israel and how they're supposed to obey the Ten Commandments. And yet, Matthew reads that as if it's about Jesus. There are two ways you can read the Bible.

Is it basically about you and what you must do to be saved? Are you one of the 98 percent of the people who, back in Virginia, told me that's what it means to be saved? Do you read the Bible, try your very hardest to live a good life, summon up the blood, stiffen the sinews, and live a good life? If that's what you think, the Bible is basically about you.

Or is the Bible basically about him? Is it that he has come and been the perfect Son, human being, and Israelite, and he's fulfilled the law fully so that you can be saved by grace? Which is it? Of course the Bible tells you to obey the Ten Commandments. I do, and you do. But that's not the main message.

Matthew can read the entire Old Testament and see it's all about Jesus. He can

read about Israel coming out and say, “Jesus did that.” He can read about every prophet, priest, king, and deliverer and say, “Jesus is the true prophet, true priest, true deliverer, true temple, and true tabernacle. He’s the true altar and the true sacrifice. It’s all about him.”

Once you understand you can be saved by grace and that the Bible is really about him, then you understand why the world’s understanding of salvation is turned upside down, and you’re saved by grace. By the way, knowing what he did for you will take away the hostility of your heart. That’s the only thing.

You can’t just coerce your heart into … There’s a part of you heart that says, “I don’t want to obey him. I want to be in charge.” You can just say, “You have to! You have to.” Or you can say, “Look what he did for you.” If you beat your heart into submission, it’ll break, but you can melt your heart with the knowledge of what he did.

You know this interesting passage from Jeremiah where it talks about Rachel weeping for her children. It’s talking about the fact that Jacob’s wife, Rachel, died in childbirth. She died giving life to her son, Benjamin. There is a sense in which Jesus Christ died giving us life, but here’s the good news: He lives again, and you will live again. By the way, probably even Rachel will live again. Meanwhile, see what he did for you. He used that on your heart, and it’ll be a light in the darkness that never goes out, even when all the other lights do. Let’s pray.

Our Father, we thank you for giving us our assurance that even in dark times, and even in a dark place like this world, your Son comes, and he is the Light. He comes into our lives, and sometimes before he brings us peace he stirs up dissension in our own hearts. We pray you would help us see the wonder of grace, and by it subdue our hearts out of and through love.

We also thank you that you work through not only the powerful and elite, but you prefer to work through anybody. We ask you would make us people at Christmas who remember there’s no more anti-Christmas spirit than the spirit of a snob. Father, use all these things on our hearts and help us to enjoy and rejoice in all you have done for us this Christmas. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.

2015

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Pilgrim Prayer

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Light in the Darkness

Light in the Darkness—January 4, 2015

Isaiah 60:1–5, 10–16

- 1** “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. **2** See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.
- 3** Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- 4** Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip. **5** Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.
- 10** Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion. **11** Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession. **12** For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; it will be utterly ruined.
- 13** The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place for my feet. **14** The children of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.
- 15** Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations.
- 16** You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

The Word of the Lord.

In the Northern Hemisphere, this is the darkest time of the year. It's when the days are short and the light fails quickly. That's one of the reasons the church developed a festival called Epiphany. *Epiphany* literally means striking appearance. The feast or the festival of Epiphany is always held by the church in the very first week of January. It celebrates that Jesus Christ is the divine Light come into a dark world. That's why we do it at this time.

What I wanted to do, even though we actually are going to, in a sense, have an Epiphany series ... After this week, we're going to be looking at the gospel of Mark and we're going to be looking at what we traditionally do in January and February. *Who is Jesus?* Looking at Jesus, trying to understand who he is. Tonight, I just want to share with you a meditation on this subject of Jesus as the divine Light come into a dark world.

The passage you just had read to you is an interesting passage to work off of. It's a vision of the end time. It's a vision of the very end of time in which God heals the world. You notice at first it looks like it's talking about Israel coming back from exile in Babylon, but it's too great for that. It talks about all of the kings of the earth coming and living in Jerusalem and all of the enemies being reconciled forever.

Do you see where it says, "The children of your oppressors will bow down"? That means all enemies are reconciled. War is over. There's no division. Unity. Everyone is together. It's talking about when God heals the world, heals the nation, when there's no more war, no more suffering, no more death. This part of Isaiah talks about that. The book of Revelation talks about that, and it's wonderful.

Notice right in the middle of it is a theme of light. Verses 1–2 say that God is the Light of the World. Verses 3–6 say that believers can be light of the world. Verses 10–16 explain how that's possible. Even though it's not mentioning his name, verses 10–16 point to Jesus. God is Light of the World, and you *can be* light of the world, because Jesus was the Light of the World.

That's essentially the message of not just Epiphany, but it's one of the main themes of the Bible, one of the main messages of the Bible, as it were. So let's take a look in this passage about that. Let's consider that theme, and I'll just do a little meditation on this subject, this theme. God is the Light of the World, and you can be light of the world, because Jesus was the Light of the World.

First, verses 1–2 essentially use the image of the sun in the sky. It says, "**Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.**" The word *sun* isn't used, but God is being likened to the sun. It says, "**See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.**"

It's dark, and the sun comes up at dawn. It rises and brings the light. The Bible is saying that's God. That's just an image of God. There are quite a number of

places that talk about that. Now how is it that God is Light of the World? Let's think about how the sun is light of the world. There are three aspects to sunlight, which I'm going to use all through the rest of the sermon. Sunlight brings *life*, *truth*, and *beauty*.

So how is God like the light of the world? First of all, he's like the sun in that the sun gives us life. If the sun would go out, we'd all freeze to death. If the sun would just go in, as it were, and never come back out, the plants would die, and then the food chain would be destroyed and we'd die anyway, more slowly. In other words, the sun is the source of life.

The Bible says God is the source of all life. In 1 Timothy, it literally says, "God is the source of all life." Paul, in Acts 17, puts it more philosophically. After all, he was talking to the philosophers in Athens, so he got philosophical. Paul says, "In him we live and move and have our being." All of us. In him we live and move and have our being.

One of the reasons some people find it difficult to prove that God exists, the way we can prove that this person lived or not, is that God is not a being in the universe. God is the source of all being. He's not just another being. In him we live and move and *have* our being. It means he holds your molecules together. You exist, second by second, only because he's holding you together. You're borrowing his existence. He's existence itself. He's being itself.

He's a person, by the way. He's not just an impersonal force, but he is being itself. So he's the source of all life, just as the sun is the source of life. Secondly, sunlight is the source of truth. You say, "What do you mean 'the source of truth'?" Well, if you're driving along on a bike in the dark and you can't see where you're going and you hit a tree and you're in the hospital, do you know why? You needed more light.

Why? Because you didn't see the truth of where you were. In other words, light reveals things as they are, and you didn't see things as they were. You didn't see the tree coming. You didn't see where you actually were. Light reveals things as they are. In that sense, light brings truth. That's the reason the Bible can also say God is Light of the World, in that he gives us all truth.

When the Bible talks about this, the Bible doesn't just mean he gives us the Bible. He does, and of course that's truth, but the Bible goes beyond that. It indicates that the fact that you can know anything is because of God. God made your mind and your cognitive faculties. Do you realize what a miracle it is that they work? It's remarkable that your cognitive faculties and your mind actually see what's out there. Why should that be?

The Bible's answer is because God made it and actually connects what's in your brain with what's out there so that you have a view of what's actually out there. There's a place in the Psalms where it says, "In thy light we see light." Saying to God, "In thy light we see light," which means, like the sun ... The sun isn't so much something you see as much as it's the way you see everything else.

If you try to look right at the sun, it'll hurt you. We hardly ever look at the sun. We look at everything else *through* the sun. The sun gives us the ability to see things. When you're looking at a mountain, you're not really seeing the mountain. You're actually seeing the light bounce off the mountain and hit your retina. Therefore, in the same way, God is the source of all knowledge and wisdom and truth. God is the source of all life.

Lastly, light is gorgeous. Light is beautiful. Light rejoices the heart. Light is dazzling. By the way, it's necessary for joy. If you live so far north or so far south that there's one season in the year in which there are one or two hours of light a day ... If you go far enough north and south, you get to places where it's like one or two or three hours of daylight a day and the rest of the time it's darkness.

People who live there have trouble with depression. Isn't that interesting? Why would that be? We need light, not just for life and truth but also for joy. Light is a source of all beauty, and God is a source of all beauty and joy. Saint Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." That is the very first paragraph of his *Confessions*. It means that all joy is really found in God, and anything you do enjoy is just derivative, because what you're really looking for is him, whether you know it or not.

So to say, "God is the Light of the World" means life, truth, and beauty. He is the source of all life, he is the source of all truth, and he is the source of all beauty. But that's not all this says. Verses 1–2 liken God to the sun, and we've just explored what the image means theologically, but then it goes on in verses 3–6, and this is remarkable. Suddenly, Isaiah says:

"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: all assemble and come to you ... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come."

Here's what's fascinating. Verses 1–2 say the light of God rises on us, and then we become, as it were, light magnets. The light comes into us, and the world is healed because they're drawn to our beauty. We become the light of the world. That's what it's saying. You say, "Well, that's at the end of time, right?" Yes, and it will be a lot better then. Everything will be better then. Yet, no, you can't put this off to the end of time.

As you know, Jesus said in his great Sermon on the Mount ... He looked at his disciples and said, "You are the light of the world." Here's what Paul says in Ephesians 5. He's writing to Christians. He says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. So live as children of the light." See, obviously, at the end of time it's going to be much more intensely perfect and full than it is now, but we can't get ourselves off the hook.

We're being told that if the light of God has really dawned on your soul, if you have actually experienced the Holy Spirit in your life, if God's light has actually

shone into the inmost recesses of your soul, you are the light of the world. The objective reality of God's light becomes a subjective experience and reality of your life. Now what does that mean, that we are light of the world or that we *can be* light of the world? Well, let's take our three aspects of light again: life, truth, and beauty.

If God's light has really arisen upon you, you will have a new life. Just like the sun is a source of life, then if God's light has really shone into your heart, you will be born again. You will be regenerated. You will have a new life, and there will be growth. Now what do I mean by vitality and growth? Here are two kinds of growth.

Here's a pile of bricks. I keep throwing bricks on there. Is it growing? Would you say the pile of bricks is growing? Yeah. You could say the pile of bricks is growing. But over here is a tree. It's growing and growing. It's getting taller and bigger and getting more branches and fruit. Is the tree growing? Yes. Are they the same kind of growth? Not at all.

This is mechanical growth. This is growth from the outside. *This* is organic growth. This is growth from the inside, growth in complexity, growth in quality. What's the difference between a good person, a moral person, maybe a religious person, maybe a person who goes to church and does a lot of things, and a person who's actually growing in grace? Well, the moral, religious person is basically heaping up deeds.

Martin Luther and John Wesley, two of the most famous Christians in history, were both clergy, were both priests, were both ordained ministers before (and this is what they themselves said) they became Christians, before they were reborn, before they actually felt that God's light came in, dawned on them, and changed them from the inside and new life was implanted.

What were they doing as clergy? They were going to church. They were preaching the Word. They were doing a lot of good deeds. All good things, but they were growing the way a pile of bricks grows. See, it's one thing to go to church all the time ... By the way, if you are, keep coming. It's one thing to be involved and do all these good deeds, and if you are, keep doing them.

But it's not the same thing as what happened to Martin Luther and John Wesley. They said, "When I actually had new life planted in me, instead of just doing good things, I began to get humbler, wiser, deeper, and happier. I began to change from the inside." Let me ask you a question. By the way, just a warning. This is the most convicting part of the sermon, just so you know what's coming.

If you've been a Christian for a while, let me ask you a couple of questions. Are you a happier person than you were two years ago? In other words, are you harder to discourage because you're happier? You say, "Well, you don't know. I've had a hard two years." Well, yeah, but that's how Christians get happier. You know that. It's only when bad things happen that you really learn to put your roots down into Christ and find your joy in him. That's how it happens, frankly.

Happiness based on circumstances is mechanical. Happiness based on him is organic.

Let me go back to the question. Over the last two years, would you say you're harder to discourage because you're a happier person than you were two years ago? Would you say you take criticism better because you're a humbler person than you were two years ago? Would you say you're a wiser person than you were two years ago, that you're more self-aware, you're less impulsive?

Most of us are not wise, because we're either temperamentally too cautious or too impulsive. Wise people are neither, because wise people do whatever the circumstances require. That's what makes you wise. The rest of us make a lot of stupid mistakes, because we always do the same thing. What happens, of course, is that Christ makes you wiser. It keeps you from being too impulsive. It humbles you. It keeps you from being too cautious. It emboldens you.

Therefore, are you wiser than you were two years ago? Are you happier than you were two years ago? Are you humbler? Are you less anxious? Do you worry less than two years ago? Now I could say to you find a friend, maybe a spouse ... Find somebody who knows you extremely well and ask them, "Am I growing? Am I growing in grace? Am I changing? Am I happier? Am I wiser? Am I less anxious?"

A lot of you are not going to do that. Do you know why? Because you don't want to embarrass yourself. Are you children of the light, then? "Arise, shine." If the light has come and if the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you, then you become radiant. You become attractive. In other words, you get changed. You're not just heaping up good deeds. You're growing. You're growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, meekness, humility, faithfulness, and self-control.

If you are, you will be attractive. That's what it means to be light of the world. Your changed character attracts people. Historians will tell you that the early Christians ... In the earliest church, especially for almost 100 years, there was so much persecution, because Christianity was labeled by a number of the emperors as a *supersitio*, which meant we were a cult, and that meant you could plunder Christians. You could take their goods. They could be thrown into prison. They could be killed.

There was so much persecution that informers would come in and find out where the church was meeting, and the next week everybody would be in jail. There was a fairly long period of time in which non-believing people did not come to churches. In fact, I was reading one account that said the deacons were bouncers. How would you like it if your deacons and deaconesses were bouncers, keeping you from coming in unless you were baptized?

They had to keep unbaptized people out, because any one of them could get them all killed. So the gospel did not grow, even though the church grew. It grew enormously. It grew so much that over a couple hundred years it was one of the

dominant religions in the Roman world. How did it happen if you couldn't even bring people to come hear the preaching? The answer was because of the attraction of Christians' lives.

One of the accounts says the early Christians were stellar and unusual in these ways: integrity, generosity, hospitality, sympathy, chastity, handling adversity, and seeking equity. (By the way, the convicting part of this sermon is not over yet.) *Integrity*. Early Christians were known for being scrupulously honest and transparent and fair dealing. *Generosity*. Christians were known for not only being philanthropic, but if they were employers, not to take so many profits out of the business that customers didn't get great prices and employees didn't get great salaries.

Hospitality. They welcomed people into their homes, especially neighbors and people with needs and the poor. *Sympathy*. Christians were not ruthless in business personal dealings. They were unusually willing to forgive and reconcile. They were not vengeful. They were not spiteful. *Chastity*. What the historians will tell you is the Christians' sex ethic (no sex outside marriage) was weird to the culture, yet the stability of the marriages, the strength of the marriages, and even just the wholesomeness of the relationships between the sexes was very attractive.

Handling adversity. Christians were very well known for handling suffering with poise. *Seeking equity*, which means justice. They were caring for the poor. They cared about the needy and the poor. Christians were so unusual they stuck out. Their integrity, generosity, hospitality, sympathy, chastity, ability to handle adversity, and seeking justice and equity was so unusual they attracted. They were light of the world.

How about us? Are we children of the light. If God has dawned on your soul, if the light of God has come into your soul, you get new life, and that life is attractive. "Well," you say, "how does that happen? How does the change that Martin Luther or John Wesley had happen to us?" The answer, to complete our little trilogy, is to look at *truth* and *beauty*. In other words, you get the life if you see the truth of who you are and the beauty of what he has done.

You can be light of the world if you see the *truth of who you are* and the *beauty of what he has done*. What do I mean by that? Well, first of all, the *truth of who you are*. When the lights come on, you see things. One of the ways you know that God's light has dawned on you is you see yourself in a way you never saw yourself before. Has that happened to you? It's one of the ways you know you've become a Christian. God's light has come in.

Two illustrations. Some years ago, I heard a minister give this illustration. One day, for whatever reason, he was working in his office, and he was working with a pencil and a tablet. He suddenly realized he was late for a dinner party, so he looked in the mirror that he had on the wall in his office, and he said, "All right, I look okay." Then he went to the party.

When he walked in, there was a chandelier up there and it was brilliantly lit. As he walked by a mirror, he caught a glimpse and saw that he actually had pencil lead smudges on his face and on his hands. The new, more brilliant light of the apartment revealed he was much dirtier than he thought he was. There's a perfect illustration of what it's like to become a Christian.

You say, "How do I know that the light of God has shone into my life?" You see your flaws. You see your sins. You see things you never saw before, that you made excuses for or you were just totally blind to or you were in denial about, and now you see them. That is one of the ways you know God is arising upon you. His light is arising.

Here's another illustration. One of my very favorite scenes in all movies is in the old movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Some of you know Alec Guinness plays a British officer who is the commanding officer of the prisoners in this POW camp in World War II. To show his captors and to show the world that they are still soldiers, that they're not beaten and cowed, he shows that the prisoners can build a bridge over the river Kwai.

He is so intent on doing that, to show that they are soldiers, to show their discipline, he builds the bridge and he completely loses sight of the fact that he's aiding and abetting the enemy. At the very end of the movie, when the Allied prisoners have come back into the jungle to try to blow up the bridge ... Alec Guinness sees them. He goes down and stops them, and they get killed.

Suddenly, as only a great actor like Alec Guinness could do, he realizes, as he sees his comrades dead, and he sees everything he has been doing. He takes his cap off, and it registers in his face in a way that only a great actor can do. He says, "What have I done?" (By the way, you can always find that on YouTube right away. That's one of the great things about YouTube. You can generally find your favorite movie scenes, like a minute or two. You can go look it up.)

He suddenly says, "What have I done?" He realizes all that has happened. He suddenly sees everything he has been doing in a new light. "How could I have missed that? What have I done?" That's a picture of what it means to become a Christian. You look back at your life and you see everything differently. You see what was wrong.

Before you become a Christian, before the light dawns, you read Romans 3 ... Romans 3 says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. No one is righteous, no, not one. No one is good. No one seeks for God." Before God's light comes on, you look at that and say, "That's an exaggeration. That's offensive. I know a lot of good people. I'm not perfect, but I do good things too." You don't get it.

When the light comes on and you see what you've done, you begin to say, "Wait a minute. If God is actually keeping me alive every second, if I actually have my being in him, then everything I do should be for him, but I've never done anything for him. Even the good deeds I do I don't do for him. Even the religious things I

do I don't do for him. I do them to get a good self-image. I do them to feel better about myself. I do them in order to get acclaim from other people, and I do them even to get leverage over God in order to get him to answer my prayers. I've never done anything for him."

"What have I done?" The light comes on. You suddenly realize, "I've never done anything right. Everything I've done is wrong." You may not be there yet. I would submit to you, respectfully, the light hasn't come on. When you see the truth of who you really are because the light has come on, that's the first step toward getting this new life in you, but it's not all. Obviously, that would just be discouraging, if all you saw was, "What have I done?" or the smudges on your soul. No, there's a second thing you have.

If you're really going to be changed, if you're really going to be light of the world, if you're going to get that new life, you have to see the truth of who you are and, secondly, the *beauty of what he has done*. That takes us to verses 10–16. Verses 10–16 would have been a weird thing to read if you were living in Israel at the time that Isaiah wrote. Notice it says, for example, in verse 10, "**Though in anger I struck you ...**" Israel had been sent into exile. "**... in favor I will show you compassion.**"

Then over in verse 15, he says, "Though you were forsaken and hated, you won't be forsaken and hated anymore." Lastly, at the very end, "**Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.**" When God says, "On that day you will know that I'm your Redeemer ..." If you were an Old Testament Israelite, you would say, "Well, you can't take that literally." An Old Testament reader would have said, "Well, okay, God is a redeemer, but you can't take that literally."

Why would they say that? Because a redeemer was something very specific in Israel. If you were about to lose your land and go into indentured servanthood, slavery, to work off your debt ... You had gone into such debt you couldn't pay your debts, you couldn't pay your bills, and you were about to lose everything, lose your freedom, lose your land. You only had one hope. That hope would have been a redeemer.

In Israel, a redeemer was a kinsman. It was someone who was a relative, someone who was a relation to you, someone of blood. A redeemer was a kinsman who then would come in and bear the cost himself, pay the debt, ransom you from slavery, give you your land back. So for God to say, "I am your Redeemer," people would have said, "Well, yes, I suppose in a way, but not literally."

We Christians know, yes, literally. Because we know how God was a redeemer, that knowledge is not unimportant. It's the life change. It's the thing you need to see that will really change you. Here's what I mean. Why is it that Jesus Christ said, "I'm the Light of the World" in John, chapter 8? What does that mean? Well, God illuminates people through Jesus. No. He had a very specific meaning.

If you go back to John 8 and read it in the context of John 7, you'll see that Jesus stood up at the Feast of Tabernacles and said this. The Feast of Tabernacles was the commemoration of the years in the wilderness. It was an annual commemoration in which the Jews remembered the fact that when they were going through the wilderness, after they had left Egypt, there was a glory cloud. God's glory led them through the wilderness.

In the daytime it looked like a pillar of cloud. At night it looked like a pillar of fire. The Feast of Tabernacles always had a lot of lights, because it was a commemoration of the fact that God's light led them through the wilderness. Jesus Christ has the audacity in that setting to say, "I'm the Light of the World." Do you know what he's saying? He's saying, "I am the glory of God become human. I am God become your kinsman, your relative, a human being like you."

Why would he do that? To go to the cross and pay our debt, to bear the cost of our sin, to pay the debt we couldn't pay. How did he do that? Well, all the stuff we see here. Why is it that we are not struck in anger? Because Jesus Christ got the eternal justice. He was struck. Why aren't we forsaken? Why aren't we hated? Because Jesus Christ on the cross said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Here's the most interesting thing. On the cross, darkness came down on Jesus. This is Matthew 27. "From the sixth hour to the ninth, darkness came over all the land, and at the ninth hour Jesus said, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' " The Light of the World was plunged into darkness. What is that darkness? Well, God is light, and the farther we get from God, the more in the dark we are. What is darkness? It's death. It's blindness. It's ugliness.

It's taking us away from all the source of life and truth and beauty. The ultimate darkness would be to be totally separated from God. On the cross, the Light of the World was plunged into cosmic darkness. He lost his Father. He experienced hell. He experienced what we deserve. He experienced the darkness we deserve so we could be light, so we could not be forsaken, so we could not be struck, so we could be light of the world.

Now I told you that you will not experience this new life unless you first see the truth of who you are and then see the beauty of what he did. Do you see this? Here's what's so paradoxical. There is nothing more beautiful than to see Jesus Christ voluntarily, out of love, letting himself fall into darkness for you and me. The irony is there's light there. There's beauty there. There's nothing more beautiful than to see someone who lost all of his beauty for you.

There's nothing more glorious than to see one who lost all of his glory for you. That's what will really change your heart. You can't just say, "I'm going to be a good person." All that does is make you hard. Here's what will change your heart. You say, "Oh, Jesus, my Kinsman, my Brother, my Captain, my King, my Redeemer, would you do this for me? If you would give yourself to me, I want to give myself for you."

It melts your heart. It moves you. That's what changes you. What's wrong with you and me is that we love the wrong things. We love *this* and we love *that*. We love things too much. We set our hearts on *this*. We set our hearts on *that*. It drives us. Or we just set our hearts on ourselves and being independent and being our own saviors and lords.

If you really could love God more than anything else, it would soften your heart. That's why you would not be afraid of criticism: because you know he loves you. That's why you would not be driven in your career: because you already have the acclaim you want in his approval. If you really could love him more than anything else, everything would be right in your life.

Guess what? This is how it works. Not just by saying, "Get on the stick. Be a better person." No, you have to see the beauty of what he has done. You have to see the dazzling light of what he has done. If you see the truth of who you are and your need for a savior and the beauty of what he did for you on the cross, that will instill the light of God, the new life in you, and turn you into someone of whom Jesus says, "You are the light of the world." Here's a little poem about what Jesus Christ did on the cross. It's from the seventeenth century.

*For Christ, your loving Savior, hath
Drunk up the wine of God's fierce wrath ...
What bitter cups had been your due
Had he not drank them up for you.*

That's beautiful. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that your Son is Light of the World and was plunged into darkness and, therefore, we can be light of the world. We do ask that the changes you have promised would come into our lives, as we turn our eyes now to you. Yes, there's the broken body. There's the poured-out blood. It's beautiful. The more we're moved to serve you in love by the knowledge of you loving us like that, the more we will be able to say that we, too, are light of the world. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Called to the Kingdom

Light in the Darkness—January 18, 2015

Mark 1:14–34

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God

has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.

²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out,
²⁴ “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

²⁵ “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!”²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.³⁰ Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her.³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed.³³ The whole town gathered at the door,³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Traditionally, in the earliest weeks of the year, churches have taken time to look at who Jesus is. When you get into the weeks up to Easter and Easter itself, you’re looking at what Jesus did. You’re looking at his death and resurrection,

trying to understand what he came to do. Before you can understand what he came to do, you need to understand who he is. We're going to be looking at the early chapters of Mark to give us an idea of that.

This passage is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. In verses 14–15, he gives his message in a nutshell. He then calls his very first disciples. Then he begins to embody the message in the way in which he ministers. There are few places in the Bible where you could go to ask the question, "Who is he?" and get a more fruitful answer.

Because it's such a fruitful passage, you're going to hear me give you six points, six things we learn about Jesus. We're going to learn *he's the King, he's the King of your salvation, he's the King of your mind, he's the King of your heart, he's the King of your life path*, and *he's the King who can be trusted*.

1. *He's the King.* "**A**fter John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. '**T**he time has come,' he said. '**T**he kingdom of God has come near.' " That's the very first thing he says as he's about to announce his message. "The kingdom of God has come near." Why? Because *he* has come. He's the King. What is he saying here? We have to spend just a moment on this. It's very important.

Especially in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he's constantly talking about the kingdom, that he brings the kingdom. He brings the kingdom because he's the King. In the Bible, in general, the kingdom of God is the healing, renewing exercise of God's ruling power. To go into the Old Testament, there are four things you need to know about what the Old Testament teaches to help you understand what Jesus means when he says, "The kingdom of God is here."

First (actually, the very beginning of Mark cites it), places like Isaiah 40 say the world is in such a mess that someday God himself will come and put it right. A second strain you have to know something about is that in places like 2 Samuel 7; Isaiah 1, and Isaiah 11 ... a lot of places in Isaiah ... it says there will be a king in the line of David who will come, and he will put the world right. He will end war, poverty, and suffering and he will make the world right. He'll unite the peoples of the world.

A third strain is in places like Jeremiah 23; Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 37, where it says God will enter into a new relationship with us, a new covenant, that will finally deal with the evil in our hearts, will finally change us. Perhaps the most important background you have to understand from the Old Testament to understand what Jesus is talking about is you have to go all the way back to Genesis.

In the very beginning, we see that when God created the world, the world was a paradise. There was no death, no war, no crime, no oppression, no suffering, no disease, nothing at all. Do you know why? Because God was in control. In other words, he completely ruled. Imagine a great car in perfect condition, an expensive car, a miracle of engineering, a wonderful car, and in the driver's seat

(the car is moving) is a 5-year-old. It's under the control of a 5-year-old.

What will happen? Bad things will happen. You could, by and large, put them under the general heading of *disintegration*. Things will fall apart: lampposts, walls, the car itself, maybe you if you're in the car with the 5-year-old driving. Disintegration. Why? Because there's something wrong with the car? No. The car is fine. It wasn't built to be under the control of a 5-year-old.

Your life, if the Bible is right (and it is) ... You were created, your life was created, the world was created, the human race was created, but we were not created to be in charge of our own lives. We were created to serve God. We were created to be under his control. When you live your life without God, being under your own control, it's actually probably worse than, but it's my best shot today ... It's like a 5-year-old driving a car.

We see in Genesis 3 that as soon as the human race turned away from God and said, "No, no, no. We're going to be in charge. We're going to put ourselves in the driver's seat of our own lives,"

*Things start falling apart;
the centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

We fall apart spiritually and psychologically and socially and even physically. It all falls apart. Why? We were built to serve him, and when we serve ourselves, when we are our own lords, our own masters, our own kings ... When God's ruling power no longer holds sway over us or over our race, over our world, over our lives, things fall apart, because we're going against the grain of the universe. We're going against the fabric of reality.

If you want a miniature case of it, if someone wrongs you, really wrongs you, what should you do? God says, our King says, you must forgive. It's a rule. It's a law. You must forgive. You must no longer hold the person liable. You must forgive from the heart. It's all through the Bible. What if you don't? If you don't, you're taking your life in your own hands. You're being your own master, your own lord, as it were.

You're actually making yourself the judge of this person, sitting in the judgment seat, and what's going to happen? If you're really angry at them, bad things will happen. Disintegration. It won't be good for you psychologically. There will be fear and anger. It won't be good for you in your relationships if you stay angry at this person.

You'll tend to generalize your anger toward other people like that person. It'll hurt your relationships. It'll distort your relationships. It might even hurt your body. It might even create some kind of breakdown. Anger is very bad for your body. What's going on? It's a miniature version of what happened in Genesis. It's a miniature version of what happens all the time.

What does it mean, then, when Jesus Christ comes and says, "The kingdom of

God has come"? What it means is when we enter back under his lordship, we start to heal. Things start to come together. However, there's something very important to see. Notice he says, "The kingdom of God has come near."

What you'll see throughout the rest of the New Testament is that even though Jesus Christ brings the kingdom of God, it's not here fully; it's only here partially, and here's the reason why. Most people who heard Jesus Christ say, "I'm the King; I'm bringing the kingdom of God," were startled, because when they read the Old Testament it looked like the kingdom of God comes in at once. Everything is dark. Now the kingdom of God comes in.

There are places in the Old Testament it certainly looks like that. There are all of these places (like Isaiah 11) where the great King, the heir of David, will come and make everything right, but there are always in the Old Testament these other passages, like the suffering servant passages of Isaiah 42 and Isaiah 53, where it talks about some mysterious person who comes and suffers for the people.

Nobody who read the Hebrew Scriptures understood that that suffering servant could possibly be this messianic king. How could that happen? How could that be? What Jesus shows us is, as the King, he comes not once to set everything right but twice. He comes the first time not in power and judgment to put down all evil but in weakness to bring mercy, as we'll see in a second. Someday he will come back at the end of time and put all evil down, and the kingdom of God will be full.

This is extraordinarily important. What that means is that right now, if you come into a relationship with him, you begin to heal, but it's not fully. "What do you mean 'begin to heal'?" I'll just give you two or three. For example, your self-image, your identity. If you are from a traditional culture, your identity is based on living up to what your parents think you should do. If you come from a very religious background, your identity is rooted in being a very good person who obeys all of the religious rules. You're very spiritual and very religious.

If you come from a secular background (actually, that's where you live right now), then your identity is based on your performance and your achievement. "I have achieved this, and I've achieved this, and I have expressed myself, and I'm being who I'm supposed to be." All of those models for identity will crush you. Jesus Christ comes along and says, "No, no. I can give you an identity rooted in knowledge of your value and love that's not based on your performance."

You begin to heal. You also begin to heal your relationships. Because of the incredible capital you have in your identity now, you're able to forgive and you're able to be open and recognize the humanity of people who are deeply different from you. It begins to heal your perspective. You begin to realize, "God knows what he's doing here."

When bad things happen, instead of immediately freaking out, you say, "Maybe there's some reason for it." In all sorts of ways you partially ... not fully but substantially ... begin to heal, because the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ has

come near.

2. *He's the King of your salvation.* The second thing he says immediately is, “**Repent and believe the good news!**” The word he uses here is *gospel*. It’s the Greek word *euaggelion*, which means the good message or the good news. It had a very specific meaning when Mark and Jesus used it, and the fact that Jesus chose it and the early Christians chose it to express the essence of what Christianity is all about is extremely important.

If instead of being here for 25 years I was only here for two and a half minutes and I only had one thing to say, it would probably be what I’m about to tell you. The word *gospel* means news of a great historic event. It’s a report or news that some incredible thing has happened. I used the word *great*. It wasn’t daily news, the kind of, “This is what happened yesterday.” It meant some great event that changes history and changes your life.

For example, we have an inscription in Greek that reads, “The beginning of the gospel of Caesar Augustus.” You say, “What? What is that?” It was the announcement of his coronation. When he was made emperor, that changes things. He’s the emperor. There is an emperor. That’s history making. That’s history changing. It’s life changing for everybody who’s there. Therefore, it was a gospel.

So what was Jesus doing when he said, “My message is a gospel”? What he was actually saying was, “I’m different than any other religious leader you ever have heard of or ever *will* hear of.” Every other religion’s core message is basically not news but advice. Every religious founder came along and maybe said, “Here are the miracles that happened.” Every religion teaches this or that miracle came, but it’s not the most important thing.

Believing in those miracles is not what connects you to God. It’s not what gets you to heaven. Here’s the most important thing: You have to live like this. You have to do these things. You have to live in this way. Then you’ll connect to God. Then you’ll please God. Then you’ll connect to the divine. Then you will go into bliss, into heaven, however it’s defined.

Therefore, the core message of every other religion is always advice, what you must do. In Christianity, the core message is news. Not what you must do to connect to God but what has been done. It’s news that Jesus Christ died and rose again for us. If you’re saved by what you do, then the core of religion is advice. If you’re saved by what *he* has done and we just have to believe the news and rest in him, then the core of Christianity is not advice but news.

The essential message of Christianity is you’re not saved because of your record and your past; you’re saved because of Jesus’ record and Jesus’ past. To put a fine point on it, the moment you believe the good news and rest in that and say, “Father, accept me because of what Jesus Christ did,” at that moment, you are as loved by God right now as you will be a billion years from now when you’re perfect and glorious. Then you begin to heal. Then you begin to participate in the

kingdom: when you repent and believe.

By the way, if you (and an awful lot of people do) continue to understand Christianity in an advice model, if you still basically think of Christianity as advice, how you should live. “If I live like *this* then God will bless me and take me to heaven.” If you continue to use the advice paradigm to understand Christianity, you’re cut off from the kingdom of God. You’re not connected to God. You don’t have any of this that Jesus offers.

It’s only when you shift your paradigm from advice to news and realize, “No. It’s not how I live but how Jesus lived. It’s not what I’ve done; it’s what Jesus has done that saved me.” Then you begin to participate in the kingdom. Then you begin to heal ... until the very end when Jesus Christ comes back and the kingdom is all in all, and then you will say, “The exile out of Paradise is over, finally. I’ve come home at last. This is my real country. I belong here. This is the country I was looking for all my life, though I didn’t know it.”

He’s the King, and he’s the King of your salvation. You must not be king of your own salvation. There are plenty of people who say, “Oh, I believe in Jesus and I try to be like him and I try to emulate him. I respect him so much, and I just try to really be a good person. I try to live like Jesus.” In other words, you might love Jesus at that point, but you are king of your own salvation. You have to make *him* King of your salvation.

3. *He’s King of your mind.* Go down to verse 21. It says, “**They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.**” Later on it says, “**A new teaching—and with authority!**” Here’s the reason they were so shocked. If you think about it, you’ll immediately see the difference.

What did teachers of the law say when they taught? They said, “It is written.” What did even the prophets say? Elijah, Isaiah ... what did they say? They were prophets. They were getting revelation. Even they said, “Thus saith the Lord.” Jesus comes along and says, “I say unto you.” Jesus claimed original not derived authority. I get up here and open the Bible and say, “This is what the Bible says.” I hope I have some authority as I’m talking, but it’s derived authority.

Jesus had original authority. Even the prophets didn’t ever say such a thing. “It is written” or “Thus saith the Lord,” but Jesus said, “I say unto you.” For example, some of you know in the old King James Bible ... It’s almost lost in the modern translations, which is a shame, but in the old King James Bible, very often, Jesus would begin a statement like this: “Verily, verily, I say unto you.” It’s kind of quaint. We don’t realize how astounding that is.

Literally, he was saying, “Amen, amen.” That’s what he was saying in the Greek text. “Amen, amen,” and then he went on and spoke. What was he doing? Well, maybe this isn’t a total surprise. When the synagogue was assembled and someone was speaking, the elders were always seated up front, and it was the

elders' job to make sure that whatever the speaker said was true to the Scripture. The elders needed to ratify it.

After the person would speak, the elders would say, "Amen." By the way, there are still many churches in the world where people still ratify what the preacher has just said by saying, "Amen." It's a way of saying, "You say that. I agree with you." Do you know what Jesus is doing there? When he starts saying, "Amen, amen," he says, "I'm not going to let you judge me. You don't have the right to judge me."

I once heard a minister say, "And Jesus said, and rightly so, I think ..." Jesus says, "You can't say that, because if I am who I said I am (and I am), if I am the Son of God, then I have to have authority over your mind. I have to have intellectual authority. Even if your culture says one thing, even if your mind says one thing, even if your reason says one thing, you have to believe what I tell you."

What that means, of course, is if you find someplace where Jesus is saying something you think is regressive, like on hell or something like that ... There are plenty of things he says that do not fit in at all with the cultural currents or the intellectual currents of our time. You can't say, "Well, I accept most of what Jesus says, but I can't follow him there." Where do you get that grid that you put down on Jesus and you decide which things you're going to accept and which things not?

Where does that grid come from? What could be higher than him? What you're actually saying is, "Oh, I really respect Jesus, but I can't follow everything you see in the New Testament. I can't follow all of his teaching." What you're really saying is, "I don't believe Jesus is who he said he is at all. He's a fraud or he was a lunatic. He couldn't be the Son of God," because if he is, he has to have authority over your mind.

4. *He's King over your heart.* Maybe you noticed the demon exorcism there. We're told in verse 23, "**Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!' 'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.**"

As modern people, we wonder about that. We're skeptical of such a thing as demon exorcism. I can't take too much time here, but let me give you a couple of thoughts, because I don't think that's the main point for us to have to decide here. If you believe in God ... Maybe you don't, but if you believe in a personal supernatural being like God, I'm not completely sure what would be irrational about believing in a personal evil supernatural being. If you believe in a supernatural good being, why couldn't there be a supernatural evil being?

Or, may I ask, do you just look out there at the world and does it seem so wonderful that it's just impossible to believe there are evil supernatural forces at

work out there? Maybe you should read your paper more closely. (That was ironic. I know it's not always easy to tell when I'm being ironic.) Is it really all that hard to believe in supernatural evil forces aggravating things, taking normal human depravity and making it considerably more demonic and worse than it would be otherwise? I don't think it's that hard to understand.

Here's the most important thing. As far as the Bible is concerned, demon possession is only an extreme end of a condition we're all in. The Bible continually talks about the fact that we're all slaves until Jesus liberates us, until the King liberates us. How so? Because we're all under the control of something. We're all possessed by something.

There's this absolutely tremendous quote by David Foster Wallace in his famous Kenyon College commencement address. Listen to this, and then you'll see what I mean. He says there's no such thing as not worshiping. Everyone has to worship something. What he means is everybody has to live for something. Then he says the only choice you get is what to worship. He says something very interesting. He says you probably should worship God or Jesus or Allah or something, because anything other than God that you worship will eat you alive.

He basically says, "If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, you will never have enough. You will never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. When time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally take you away."

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship [tapping into meaning] is they're unconscious. They are default settings."

You see that term when he says these things will eat you alive ... If you live for power, if you live for people's approval ... Whatever you live for, you're going to have to have it in order to feel good about yourself and to feel like you even have a self, and if something gets in the way, then you're paralyzed with fear or you have overwhelming anger toward whatever is blocking you. You're possessed.

The only thing, according to Jesus, that can liberate you is him. Why? Because he says, "I'm the one master who won't eat you alive. I'm the one master who will forgive you." Worship money or worship career and fail in your career, your career will never forgive you. Worship beauty, your mirror will never forgive you. You know that. Right? Never.

He says, "If I'm the source of your value, of your meaning, of your hope, I forgive. I'm the only master who will not eat you alive." Well, then how does that healing begin? How do you get to that place? Well, it's very interesting. Look at the very first four people who are called to be Jesus' disciples. Verse 16:

"As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother

Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

There are two astounding things here. First of all, they have a living, and he says, “I must be more important than your living. I must be more important than your career or your work.” Secondly, they have a father. This is a patriarchal culture. What he’s essentially saying is, “I have to be more important than your family. I have to be more important than your father. You have to love me and serve me and trust me more than your father. I have to have supremacy. Why? Because, otherwise, how will I do the healing?”

Saint Augustine, who I keep bringing up, said you are mainly what you love the most. What’s wrong with us is the loves of our hearts are disordered. They’re out of order. If you love your job more than you love your children, you’ll destroy your family, but if you love your children more than you love God, you’ll smother your children.

Only if your loves are reordered will things start to work so that you’re not eaten up with anxiety or anger, because you don’t need these things. You just have them. You enjoy them, but you don’t need them. They’re not the end all and be all. That’s the reason why Jesus has to be King of your heart.

You’re going to see this. As you go through the book of Mark or Matthew, over and over again Jesus is constantly discerning the heart. Over and over it says he knew what was in their hearts. He saw what was in their hearts. Why? In Matthew 6:21, Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there is your heart.” Whatever you treasure the most controls the whole life.

If you treasure career, if you treasure anything other than Jesus Christ the most, your heart is under control of something else, and it will eat you alive. By the way, test yourself. If you say, “I’d be very happy to obey Jesus *if* ... I would be happy to be a Christian *if* ...” Whatever is on the other side of the *if* is your real god, and it’s going to eat you alive. There can be no conditions or he’s not King of your heart, your mind, your salvation.

5. *He’s the King of your life path.* What do I mean by that? Jesus Christ, when he calls for disciples, doesn’t just say, “Obey me,” thought that’s implied. He says, “Follow me.” You’re called not just to obey him, though you *are* called to obey him. More comprehensively, you’re called to follow him. Why?

What the theologians and biblical scholars will tell you is that word *follow* meant at least this: to not just show up at classes where Jesus was teaching you, the way you go to a college today, but to live with him, to center your whole life around him, and to have an intimate personal relationship with him.

To really participate in the kingdom and to really see healing to your perspective,

your relationships, and your self-image (partial but powerful healing) ... To follow him means you have to have a prayer life. It means you need to have a personal relationship with him. That's one thing the word means. Just for the next three or four minutes, I'd like you to consider something else.

Follow means, "We're going somewhere, and you have to follow me whatever you do. You have to stay faithful to me whatever you do. I'm going to take you someplace." *Follow me* means, "I'm going to take you someplace. Your life is going to go in a certain way. You're going to go certain places, and you must follow me. You must be faithful to me whatever you do, wherever I take you."

If you think about it for a minute, do you know who these four guys were? We don't know everything about these four, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We don't know everything about how they died, but we do know that three of the four of them, because they followed Jesus, were killed. We know James was executed. It's actually in the book of Acts. He died young because he followed Jesus.

Peter supposedly was crucified upside down. The legend about Andrew is that he was praying and someone came and ran a spear through him. That's a legend. We don't know. Maybe it's true. John, of course, died lonely as an exile on the island of Patmos. They followed Jesus and he took them someplace, and it didn't seem like it was a very nice path, but here's what I'm going to tell you as sort of the second to last thing I want you to think about.

There's nothing more crucial to being a disciple, nothing more crucial to giving Jesus Christ the kingship of your life, nothing more crucial to participating in the kingdom of God and getting that healing than when your life path becomes dark and difficult and confusing and painful and he doesn't seem like he's really there. You don't feel him. You feel like he has abandoned you. You stay faithful to him anyway. You keep following him wherever he takes you. You keep following him whatever you do.

George MacDonald, over 100 years ago, wrote a fairy tale called *The Princess and the Goblin*. It's about a little girl named Irene, and she's in a kingdom in which there are a lot of goblins. She lives in this great big house, and she discovers that in the high room of that house, every so often, her fairy grandmother appears. She's beautiful. She's ancient. Irene loves her. She appears. Sometimes she's there; sometimes she's not.

One day, she appears up there in that room and they're talking, and the fairy grandmother gives Irene a ring and gets out a little ball of thread and attaches the end of the thread to the ring. She says, "Now I'm going to keep the ball with me, and the thread is so fine you won't be able to see it. You can only feel it, but if you ever get in trouble, put the ring under your pillow and then follow the thread with your finger."

Irene says, "Oh, that's wonderful, Grandmother, because now I'll be safe." She says, "Well, it may take you on a roundabout way, but it will take you to me.

Always follow your thread whatever you do.” What happens is one night in the dark she realizes the goblins have come into the house and are trying to get her, so she takes the ring and puts it underneath the pillow and begins to follow the thread.

To her great unhappiness and confusion, the thread does not take her up the back stairs to the high room where her grandmother usually is. It takes her downstairs, where the sounds of the growling and the snarling are coming from. She starts to come back and realizes if you come back the thread disappears. It only works forward. She follows the thread downstairs, and it does take her away, but then it takes her outside. Outside, not in some little hidey-hole in the house. No, outside.

Worse than that, it takes her toward the goblin cave, and then it takes her *into* the goblin cave, and every time she starts to come back ... Finally, it takes her right up to a wall of rock and she says, “What in the world?” Then she says, “Well, maybe I’m supposed to pull this down,” and she starts to pull the rocks down, and inside is her friend Curdie. Curdie says, “How did you ever find me?” She said, “I followed my thread.”

He says, “Great. Let’s get out of here. I was imprisoned by the goblins.” She says, “Okay, let’s follow the thread,” and the thread takes her down deeper into the cave. He says, “That’s crazy. *This* is the way out. You can’t go *that* way.” She turns to him and says, “I never would have found you if I had stopped following my thread, even when it looked foolish. I must follow my thread wherever it goes, whatever I do.” Eventually it takes her to the fairy grandmother.

Now what’s the point? Jesus Christ knows what you need. Jesus Christ has a vision for your glory, and his love for you and his plan for you fit with the possibility of some things that look like dead ends. You must follow the thread. You must obey him. You must be faithful to him. He says, “Follow me.” He doesn’t just say, “Obey me in some kind of abstract way. Here are the rules.” He says, “Follow me. Stay faithful to me. Don’t go back. Continue to obey. Continue to love. Continue to pray. Continue to worship. Continue to believe. I don’t care how bad it is. It will bring you home.”

6. *He’s the King who can be trusted.* Here’s why I say that. I am telling you something that is so counterintuitive. It goes so against everything your culture is telling you. Everybody in this culture tells you, “You can’t let somebody impose their thread on you. You decide what is right or wrong for you.” Of course, if you do what the culture tells you, you hear the goblins and just go right upstairs where probably goblins were ready to eat you, and that’s the story of the human race.

“I’m not going to follow the thread. My goodness! Nobody has the right to impose a thread on you.” The fact is, honestly, that you have to trust him. You have to obey him or the healing won’t happen. You have to give up the right to self-determination. You say, “Well, how can I trust him?” It’s interesting that when he heals Simon’s mother-in-law ... Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever.

They told Jesus about her. Verse 31: “**So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up.**”

One commentator says this is typical of Jesus: unnecessary tenderness and compassion. We know Jesus can just say, “You’re healed,” but over and over again, he touches the leper. He puts his hand on the deaf-mute’s mouth and ears and sighs. Here he takes her by the hand. He has the power. He doesn’t have to do it. It’s unnecessary tenderness and compassion. Here’s why you can trust him. You know how the story ends, right? Look forward and see this. Jesus called James and John to leave their father, but he’d already left his Father.

*He left his Father's throne above
So free, so infinite his grace!
Emptied himself of all but love
And bled for Adam's helpless race.*

Not only had he already left his Father but also on the cross he’s really going to lose his Father, and he did it for you and me. Or put it this way. The thread of God’s will for Jesus Christ took him to hell, but he knew on the other end of it was our salvation.

Here’s how you can trust him. If he followed his thread into absolute cosmic rejection and nothingness, into hell itself, you can follow your thread for him. He did that for you. You can follow your thread for him, especially knowing it’s going to lead you right into the Father’s arms. Trust him. Say to Jesus Christ, “I trust you. I give you my life, my Brother, my Captain, my King.” Let’s pray.

Our Father, we thank you for this very fruitful part of the Scripture that shows us who Jesus is. He’s the King. He’s the Savior. He’s our teacher. He’s our healer. He’s the one we can trust. We pray that you would help us begin to heal more than we have been, because we’ve come more and more under his lordship.

We know, Lord, that we’re kind of like a fish out of water when we are living for ourselves, flopping around, gasping, but it’s in Jesus Christ and in his ruling power that we fall back into the water and we’re able to move about with the freedom and the power, because that’s our true element, our true place, our true country.

So help us to make him King and help us, therefore, to have the joy that comes from that, and also help us to give you the glory. That’s the only way we can give you the glory that we owe to you for all you’ve done through Jesus Christ for us. It’s in his name we pray, amen.

A Paralytic Forgiven

Light in the Darkness—February 1, 2015

Mark 2:1–12

1 A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. **2** They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. **3** Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. **5** When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” **6** Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, **7** “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

8 Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? **9** Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? **10** But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

So he said to the man, **11** “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”

12 He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

This is the Word of the Lord.

In these early weeks of the year, we’re taking a look at who Jesus is, and we’re looking at the early chapters of the book of Mark. This particular passage is actually a fun passage to study, because what Jesus does here is very surprising, and there are three groups of people who are rather surprised and shocked. On top of that, Jesus answers one of the groups with a riddle. It’s great fun to try to figure out what the riddle means.

One of the best ways to understand what this passage is teaching us about Jesus is to take a look at the three surprised groups. The seekers of the healing, the friends of the paralytic, are surprised by what Jesus does. The readers of the story (that’s us), if we compare this to other things we read in the Bible, should be surprised. Then the religious leaders of the people are shocked and surprised.

One of the best ways to understand what the text is telling us about who Jesus is is to take a look at every one of these surprised groups and ask, “What do we learn from this particular surprise?” Let’s look at what surprises *the seekers of the healing, the readers of the story, and the leaders of the people*.

1. *The seekers of the healing.* This paralytic has some friends, and these men want to bring this paralytic to Jesus Christ, who’s speaking in a house in Capernaum, and they want to get him there so Jesus can heal him. It’s a kind of dramatic entrance, because we’re told they couldn’t get in through the door because it was a packed place (verse 2), and then (verse 3): **“Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof ...”**

I wonder what the homeowner thought of that. They lowered the man in the mat he was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he went over to the paralyzed man. Here’s what would have surprised, maybe confused, maybe even irritated the friends of the paralytic. Jesus goes over to the paralytic and doesn’t say, “Rise. Get up. Take up your mat and walk.” He goes over to the man and says, “Son ...” That’s very tender, by the way. We’ll get back to that. **“Son, your sins are forgiven.”**

I would think some of the friends of the paralytic might have said, “All right. Good. That’s always a good thing, but anyone with eyes in his head should see that our friend here has a slightly more urgent, a little more immediate problem.” Jesus is saying to them, “No, he doesn’t.” The first thing we’re going to learn here is that Jesus is saying there is nothing more basic than a right relationship with God.

Physical health, material prosperity ... those are good things. They’re great things, but nothing is more important than having a right relationship with God, reconciled to God. Nothing. Please notice something. Jesus does eventually heal him, does he not? Neither the Bible in general nor Jesus in particular teach that the body is just the prison house of the soul, that this life doesn’t matter, that we shouldn’t deal with suffering and disease and poverty; we should just fix our eyes on the beyond and wait to escape this terrible dark world. No, none of that.

The Bible says God created both soul and body. He’s going to redeem us soul and body. That’s what the resurrection is all about. Jesus does heal him. He does do physical healing. Our future is a material, physical future, not just heaven. We’re going to have a new heavens and new earth. There’s every indication that the Bible takes the body and the physical and our material well being very seriously, but as significant as they are, they are not primary.

Jesus is saying there is something beyond this life that is more important than this life, and if you don’t connect to that thing that is more important than life, you won’t live life well. What you need more than anything else is a right relationship with God as Father because your sins are forgiven. If you were here in the fall, we talked about the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus, in a sense, in the Lord’s Prayer doesn’t

just tell you how to pray. He tells you what kind of relationship you should have with God. He starts the prayer, "Our Father," and inside the prayer it says, "Forgive us our debts."

When Jesus is talking about, "Son, your sins are forgiven," what he's actually pressing on him, what he's offering to him, is a new relationship with God, not as a boss but as a father, so that you are a forgiven, loved, accepted child of God as Father through Jesus Christ. That's the most important thing. That's always the most important thing. No matter what your problem is, you think, "This is my most important, my most urgent problem." No, this is the biggest need. If it hasn't happened, this is the healing you need. No matter what else is your problem, you need to have your sins forgiven. That's the most fundamental need.

Now I can imagine for a second some objections. I can imagine somebody out there saying, "You really don't realize I'm suffering from a physical ailment. It's very, very serious. It's wrecking my life. It *is* my most urgent need. Yes, I'd be happy to work on a spiritual relationship with God at some point, but the main thing I need is I need to be well." Jesus is saying to you, "No. You need a relationship with God as Father even more than you need to be well."

Here's why. Even if you got that healing tonight, you're going to get sick again. Something else bad is going to happen, and you're going to be whipsawed back and forth between fear and anger and dark despair unless you know God not as just some kind of remote deity but as a father. If you're a 4-year-old and you have a great father, your father will appear to you, loving, infinitely wise, and yet quite inscrutable and irritating, because your father is constantly telling you to do things ... making you stop this, making you start doing this ... that upset you.

It's not like 4-year-olds have perfect relationships with their father. They often are crying, often are screaming, because their father at least every day is telling them, "You can't do this," something they really want to do. More than once a day. However, in the end, if you're a 4-year-old with a great father, you fall into his arms and trust him, because you know there's actually no other way you're ever going to get through life.

Unless you have that kind of relationship with God, unless you're able to trust God and know God the way a 4-year-old knows his or her father, unless you have a relationship with God as Father, you're not going to be able to handle the problems of life. If you got a healing tonight, you're going to get sick later, and you won't be able to handle that. What you need more than anything else is to be reconciled with God, a right relationship with God. You need your sins forgiven more than you need to be healed.

Maybe there's somebody out there saying, "Look, I'm not sick, but you're being very insensitive to me too. I have had a lot of troubles in my life. I've been ill-used. I have been wronged. I have been abused. I have all kinds of problems in my life, and for you to tell me that the main thing I need is to be forgiven, that's pretty insensitive. That my sins have to be forgiven? I'm the one who has been abused. I'm the one who has been wronged. Don't go telling me that the main

thing I need is to have my sins forgiven. That's insensitive."

It's not insensitive. It's actually quite practical. If you have been wronged, really wronged, there's one thing you need more than anything else. You need to not be bitter. Have you ever heard bitterness described like this? Bitterness is the poison you drink, hoping the other person will drop dead. If you cannot radically and completely forgive someone who has wronged you, they win, because they rob you of your joy and distort your life in many ways.

If you stay angry at them, you're drinking the poison, hoping they're going to drop dead. No, you're going to drop dead. If there's one thing a wronged person needs above everything else, it's to be able to forgive radically the person who wronged them. Guess what? You will never be able to forgive serious wrongs, especially if you've been really hurt, unless you have experienced forgiveness yourself.

Unless you see yourself as a forgiven sinner, on the one hand you won't have the emotional humility necessary to forgive someone else. You'll feel too superior. But unless you see yourself as a forgiven, loved, and accepted sinner, you won't have the emotional wealth and the ballast to forgive somebody else. No, no, no. Jesus is right. You need to have your sins forgiven. You need to be reconciled to God more than you need anything else.

It's the most urgent need. If it hasn't happened to you, then it's the one healing that has to happen before any other healing can happen. So that's what we learn from the first surprise, the surprise of the seekers of the healing. "Why in the world are you giving this guy forgiveness of sins when he's paralyzed?" Jesus is saying, "It's because you need that more than you need to get up and walk."

2. *The readers of the story.* We're the readers of the story. We're people who read the story, and we've read other stories in the Bible. If you had time, I'm sure this would have hit you, but you don't really have time to hear it read and then I get up and speak. If you reflect a little bit, when Jesus goes up to the man who has not said a thing and says, "Son, your sins are forgiven," that immediately makes you surprised, if you've read anything else in the Bible, because from the beginning to the end of the Bible there is an iron rule: before God there is no forgiveness without repentance.

God will give you forgiveness, but you have to repent. God doesn't look down and see people doing these bad things and say, "Okay, you're forgiven. It doesn't matter if you're sorry or not. You're forgiven." No, he doesn't do that. There's no forgiveness before God without repentance. Yet here's Jesus walking over and saying to a man who has not said a thing to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." What's up with that? Are you surprised now? You should be.

So we, the readers, are surprised. What's the answer? Well, would you agree, would you grant that neither Jesus nor Mark (the author who's giving us the story, nor Jesus who's the main character in the story) act as if they are somehow overturning everything the Bible has ever said? They don't act like this is a great

revolution.

When Jesus tells the people, "You don't have to obey the ceremonial law. You don't have to eat the kosher only," everybody realizes, "Wait a minute. This is a change. This is an overturning of the past." There's no indication of that here. I think we should grant that there's no particular reason why we would think that Mark or Jesus think they are overturning everything the Bible has ever said. If we grant that (and I think we should), then how do we explain this?

I think the answer is pointing to something really wonderful. A little later on, in verse 8, we see this. Jesus looks at the Pharisees or the teachers of the law, and it says in verse 8, "**Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts ...**" We're going to get to them in a second, but in verse 6 it says, "**Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves ...**" See that?

They're not saying anything out loud. They're thinking to themselves, and yet Jesus can hear them thinking. It says in verse 8 Jesus knew in his spirit what they were thinking, which makes perfect sense. Jesus Christ, Son of God. He was able to read their hearts and know what they were thinking. If he has that ability, suddenly we realize what's going on here. There must have been an inarticulate desire for mercy, grace, and forgiveness in this man's heart. There must have been an unexpressed, inarticulate yearning, a cry of the heart, as it were, just an attitude.

Jesus is so gracious that he reads the man's heart, and even though the desire for forgiveness is fragmentary, it's imperfect, it's unexpressed ... Even a fragmentary, imperfect attitude of spiritual dependence is enough. What Jesus does is he responds to that and grants forgiveness, so eager is he to give us his love and his grace. Jesus is not waiting for the man to do it all right. He's pushing his grace. He's looking for every opening. He's creating the opening. His grace is initiating. His grace is aggressive.

So eager is he to love us, so eager is he to be gracious to us, that even when the desire for forgiveness was imperfect, fragmentary, inarticulate, he pounces and grants forgiveness. What do we learn about this? Well, I think we learn two things. I'd like to take a moment to think about it. We learn two things here. One is about *the trustworthiness of Jesus* and the other is *the greatness of the gift of forgiveness*.

A. *The trustworthiness of Jesus.* I think in Mark there are two or three places where we see this tenderness. Notice he says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." He's looking at a man who can't even express, can't even say it out loud, and yet he's that sensitive to where we are and that willing to forgive, even when we don't have it all together. The tenderness and the compassion is remarkable.

Notice Jesus is not like the schoolmaster (no offense to those of you who are) who sits there with the child and says, "All right, but say 'Please. Please, sir.' Okay, if you want to ask for something, you have to say it. You have to come up.

You have to say ‘Please.’ You have to say ‘Please, sir.’ You have to do all these things.” You don’t see that in Jesus. That might be appropriate for the classroom, but it’s not appropriate here.

Jesus is like the father in the Prodigal Son parable. The son is coming to repent, and the father doesn’t wait on the steps. He sees his son coming from afar, and he runs to him before he has even repented and pounces on him and kisses him. He doesn’t love him because he repents. The boy can repent because he’s loved. That aggressive grace. You see it in Jesus, and it’s so tender too.

Of course, there are other places in the book of Mark, like when he touches the deaf-mute’s ears and mouth and sighs. To me, the thing this reminds me of, the most tender of all of the miracles of healing, is when Jesus goes to the home of a little girl who’s dead. Her dead body is lying there, and everybody is wailing and mourning. He sits down next to her and takes her by the hand. Remember this?

It’s very clearly an eyewitness account, because they record what he said in Aramaic. He takes her by the hand and says, “*Talitha koum*.” *Talitha* was a diminutive. It was a word that meant little one. It was the kind of word a parent would use with a child, so it would be like *honey* or *sweetheart*. *Koum* means get up. Jesus sits down next to a dead girl, takes her by the hand, and, like a parent on a sunny morning, says to her, “Honey, it’s time to get up.”

He’s facing the most implacable foe, the most inexorable foe we have, which is death, and he reaches right through death, takes her by the hand, and gently pulls her up right through it to life. Here’s what I want to say. Trust this man. These healings, the tenderness, the compassion … Trust this man. Why don’t we trust him? Why don’t you trust him? Why wouldn’t you trust a man like this? How much more compassionate do you want? How much more trustworthy should he be? What else can he possibly do to make us trust him?

B. *The greatness of the gift of forgiveness*. It’s remarkable that Jesus Christ, Son of God come to earth, of all the things he wants to do for people, and he does it at the drop of a hat, as soon as there’s any opening at all … The gift of forgiveness. It must be incredible. And it is. Two things about the importance of this gift. First, we live in one of the very first societies in history that doesn’t have consensus about what is right and wrong.

That’s the reason why Franz Kafka wrote a novel called *The Trial*. The main character is Josef K. Just the initial *K* to get across the idea of anonymity. Josef K. is living a nice life, but then one day he’s arrested and he’s put under house arrest for days, for weeks, for months. He’s trying to find out what he was arrested for, what was his crime. Nobody tells him. People are constantly saying, “You need to talk to my superior,” and he can’t figure it out.

He starts to say, “What did I do wrong?” He begins to ask for this. “Maybe I did *this*. Maybe it was *this*. I did *this*. Maybe *that’s* what I’m being imprisoned for.” Finally, the way the book ends is a prison guard takes him out into a courtyard, stabs him through the heart, and he dies. That’s how the book ends. You might

say, "Oh yeah, okay, Kafka. It's cool, because we're not supposed to understand what it's all about." Well, he actually tells you what it's about in his diary.

He says in his diary the state in which we modern people (he didn't say that, but that's what he means) find ourselves today is sinful independent of guilt. Do you know what he means? We live in the first society that can't tell you whether the affair you've had with somebody who's not your spouse is right or wrong. Some people say right. Some people say wrong. We live in the very first society that says, "Right and wrong is up to you. Don't let anybody put a guilt trip on you. All moral claims are person specific and socially constructed. Who's to say what is right or wrong?"

We live in a society that can't even define right and wrong. He says essentially we live in a society that says, "Don't feel guilty about anything." Yet, he says, we feel like sinners anyway. That's the truth. We still feel like failures. We say we don't believe in sin, we don't believe in hell, and yet we have a sense of condemnation we can't shake. We feel like fakes. We feel like imposters. We feel inadequate. We do feel shame. We feel guilt, and we can't even put our finger on it. That's what Kafka is saying.

There's a voice in us, almost, that calls us cowards, calls us fools, calls us ugly, says, "You're not living up." When I was a college student, everybody blamed this sense of condemnation that everybody walks around with, that we're not right ... We're very defensive and we don't want people to look into us. We're all afraid of what people are going to see. This sense of condemnation, the sense of shame, inadequacy, and guilt that we can't shake ...

When I was young, it was all blamed on psychology, our parents. Your parents didn't love you right. Then you run into somebody who had great parents and is having the same problem you are and you realize, "That can't be." Today, society is doing it to us. Society is not letting us be ourselves. The fact of the matter is we need forgiveness.

I recently read an interesting book by a British Christian writer named Francis Spufford. He has a chapter on what it means to feel forgiven. He says, "What does it feel like to feel yourself forgiven? [...] In my experience, it's like a toothache stopping because a tooth has been removed. It has the numb surprisingness of something that hurt not being there anymore."

What he means is if you've actually lived with a toothache for a long time and finally you go to the dentist and it's taken out, the surprise is you realize, "Gosh, I was in more pain than I thought." You get used to it. When you're always in pain, nothing tastes. You're always kind of feeling pressed. You're always feeling unhappy. You're always feeling the pain. So no matter what situation you're in, you're never enjoying anything.

There's this background ache, and everything is sullied and everything is harmed. When the tooth comes out, you say, "Gosh, I was in more pain than I thought. I'd gotten used to it. Wow! I feel better. My goodness, I feel better." He

says that's what it's like to be forgiven. Let me just tell you, you are more unhappy than you think. The sense of inadequacy, the sense of shame. You say, "Well, I don't feel guilty about anything."

Kafka has it. No, you may not feel guilty about anything, and yet you know you're a sinner. You feel like you're a sinner. You feel there's something wrong with you. You haven't lived up. You feel the inadequacy. You feel that voice that tells you you're a coward or you're not living up or you're ugly. When it goes ... "Oh my goodness," you say. "I had no idea. I wasn't really enjoying anything in life. That background ache is gone." That's what Jesus offers. That's why Jesus says, "Oh my goodness. I came from heaven and earth to give this. I can't wait to give it to you."

3. *The leaders of the people.* The teachers of the law are very surprised. The response to their surprise and shock actually gives us the most penetrating understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do. Notice it says in verse 6, "**Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'**"

That's right. They're absolutely right. When they see Jesus walking over to a man and saying, "Your sins are forgiven," they're saying, "This guy is claiming to be God." I've had people ask me, "In the Bible, where does Jesus claim to be God? I don't see it. Where does he claim to be God?" I answer, "He claims to be God on every page, if you know how to read."

Here's one. Tom, Dick, and Harry. Tom reaches over and punches Dick in the nose. Harry turns around and says, "Tom, I forgive you." Well, Dick is going to turn around and say, "Excuse me, Harry, but you can't forgive Tom for hitting me in the nose." You can only forgive somebody if the sin is against you. You can't forgive somebody if the sin is against somebody else. You can only forgive people who have sinned against you. Right. So if Jesus Christ walks over to a man and says, "All your sins are forgiven ..."

Who can say such a thing? Only the Creator of Tom, Dick, and Harry. Only your Creator. Only the person you owe everything to. Only he can say, "All your sins have been against me. Oh, they may have been against Tom, Dick, and Harry and a lot of other people, but they're also against me." These guys knew immediately Jesus is claiming to be God himself. How do you like that? In response to their unhappiness ... "How dare you call yourself God?" ... Jesus gives a riddle. That riddle is wonderful, because it shows us what he came to do. See the riddle?

"'Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk"? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all."

Here's the question. Which is easier: to say, "You're forgiven," or to say, "You're healed"? Actually, it's a trick question, because there are two answers and they're both kind of right, but you have to understand both those answers. On the surface, what are you going to say? You're going to say, "Okay, well, it's certainly easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' than it is to say, 'Take up your bed and walk,' because you and I can forgive somebody, but we can't heal a paralyzed man."

There's a sense in which that's the right answer, because Jesus says, "To show you that I have the power, that I am not like the rest of you, I'm going to heal the man." He heals him, and he walks out. Jesus is trying to say, "Yes, I am who I said I was." The Greek word for *get up* ... In verses 11–12 Jesus says, "Get up," and he got up. It's a kind of unusual Greek word that Mark actually uses in chapter 16 when it talks about what happened to Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. On Easter Sunday he got up.

Mark is signaling something, or you might say Jesus is signaling us something. The signal is the only reason why he can get up now, the only reason Jesus can forgive him and heal him is because someday Jesus is going to lay down in death and rise for our justification. In the end, here's the point. Yeah, if somebody wrongs me, I can forgive. In that sense, you might say, it's easier than trying to heal a paralyzed man, but for Jesus to forgive all our sins, that's infinitely harder than saying, "Take up your bed and walk," because it means dying. It means going to the cross.

Here are two illustrations to end. The story of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare, a remarkable depiction of the terror of guilt, not being forgiven. *Unforgiven*, you might call it. Lady Macbeth helps Macbeth, her husband, murder some people, and it unhinges her mind. She walks around at night ... She sees blood on her hands and she tries to wash it out and she can't. That's her guilt, of course. "Out, damned spot! Out, damned spot! Oh, who knew that the old man would have so much blood in him? Not all the perfumes in Arabia can sweeten this little hand."

Later on, Macbeth, talking to a doctor about his wife, whose mind has gone, calls guilt "that perilous stuff that weighs upon the heart." That ache, that sense of inadequacy that I think in modern people is more inchoate, more background. You don't realize to what degree it's weighing on your heart, but it's there. In her case, it drove her mad. Why? Because guilt is indelible. It is not easy to get out. This is why Jesus is saying, "Which is easier: to forgive sins or to heal?" The ultimate answer is guilt, sin, is not easy.

Lady Macbeth can't get it out. "I can't get the stain out." The reason we have this voice in us that gives us that sense of condemnation is we know ... Whatever your moral standards are, whether it's the standard of love or justice or integrity or purity, whatever it is, you've violated them, and you can't just wash it off. You can't just turn over a new leaf. You can't just say, "I'm going to try harder and live a better life." There's something indelible about the spots. You can't get the stain out yourself, the damned spot.

The other story is an old Celtic fairy tale. It's not very well known, but it's a lovely fairy tale called "The Black Bull of Norroway." The heart of the story is about a prince who is in a battle and in the battle kills someone he regrets killing. He feels great shame over it, great regret, great remorse. Not surprisingly, because after the battle he tries to wash his tunic, his shirt, because there's blood on it and he can't get it out. The damned spot will not come out.

So it is decreed that in the kingdom, if there's any young woman who could get the spot out, could get the blood stains out of his shirt, that woman would be his bride, because that woman would be his true love. The story, by the way, is a sort of Cinderella-ish story, because there's a kind of nasty older woman with three daughters, and there's a humble serving girl who serves and waits on the family.

She doesn't even know about the story. She doesn't know about the bloody shirt. One night, the bloody shirt has been brought to this house, and all of the daughters are trying to get the stain out. They can't get it out. The servant girl doesn't know about the story. One night, she sees all this laundry to be done and she sees this bloody shirt and she washes it and the blood comes out.

The next morning, the evil stepmother kind of person sees what has happened and grabs the shirt, takes her oldest daughter up to the prince, and says, "Look! My daughter got the stain out. This is your true bride." Of course, the way the story goes is the prince says, "Okay," so they get engaged, except the prince somehow feels like, "No, this can't be the one." As you might guess, there's quite a wonderful story arc that in the end brings him to see who really got the blood out.

Whoever gets the stain out, the damned spot, whoever can deal with that, has to be your savior and your true love. Jesus comes to you and says, "I'm that person. I'm going to the cross. It's going to take a lot." Malachi 3 says about the Messiah, "He will be like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap, and he will purify you."

Jesus says, "I can get the stain out. I can get rid of all that, but I'm going to have to go to the cross to do it. But I am doing it, so come to me. I'm your true love. I can wash the bloody shirt. I'm your true love." So go to him and trust him. Don't worry about having to get his attention, because if you go to him to trust him and to ask for forgiveness, you will find that he has been trying to get your attention, so eager is he to bless you. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the gift of forgiveness. We do want the toothache to be gone. We do want the spot to be taken out. There is a sense of inadequacy, of ugliness, of foolishness, of not measuring up, a sense of guilt and shame that, to a great degree, we've learned to live with. We don't even want to admit how unhappy we are.

We need this. We long for this, and your Son is our true love who can get the stain out. We pray, then, that you would teach us how to take hold of this wonderful gift so that it would open up a whole new way of thinking and living in

our lives. I pray, Father, that you would help us to apply this to our lives through your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

A New Sabbath

Light in the Darkness—February 8, 2015

Mark 2:23–3:6

23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. **24** The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

25 He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? **26** In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

27 Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. **28** So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Mark, chapter 3:

1 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. **2** Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

4 Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. **5** He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. **6** Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

The Word of the Lord.

These first weeks of the year we've been looking at the early chapters of the

gospel of Mark to come to some conclusions about who Jesus is. This is a traditional thing for the church to do in the early weeks of the year. Who is Jesus? Last week, if you were here, you would have heard and learned from a text in which Jesus offered forgiveness of sins, and the religious leaders who heard him do that were aghast, because they said, "Only God can offer that."

If anything, in this passage, Jesus makes a claim almost more immense, which is kind of hard to imagine. It's a claim so immense that it almost defies categories. There's no category for it. To understand the magnitude of it, it's going to take us our entire time, because we have to unpack the meaning of the entire text, and at the end we'll come back and ask, "What is this claim? What is he actually claiming here?"

There are two incidents here, if you notice, but they both have to do with the Sabbath day and how we observe the Sabbath day. What I'd like to do is take a look at the features of the story and see what we learn from each of the features. I'd like to look at the anger of Jesus, which is mentioned in chapter 3, verse 5. Why is he so angry?

Then I'd like you to look at the enemies of Jesus, the Herodians and the Pharisees. Why do they get together? What does that alliance tell us? Lastly, we want to look at the amazing claim of Jesus. "**So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**" So let's take a look at *the anger of Jesus, the enemies of Jesus, and the claim of Jesus*, and that'll help us understand the magnitude of what he's saying about himself here and what that means for you.

1. *The anger of Jesus.* In chapter 3, verse 5, it says, "**He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts ...**" He looked at them in anger, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts. Three very important words. First of all, the word for *anger* that Mark uses to describe Jesus is a very intense word. It's not irritation. It's not even just, "I got mad." The Greek lexicon (and Greek lexicons are usually not very rhetorical) said this word means anger at an epic scale. He's not just irritated or kind of mad. Epic scale.

Then it says *distress*, which is a word that actually means to grieve as if somebody whom you love died. So epic-scale anger and incredible grief over ... what? It says *stubborn hearts*. Is that it? Stubborn hearts? The word *stubborn* means both a mixture of hostility and blindness. It's a little bit like addiction. Addicts, on the one hand, are in denial. They don't know what they're doing. At another level they do. They kind of do and they don't. That's what addiction is about.

It's a little bit like that, but this phrase *stubborn hearts*, an attitude of the heart that's both blind and hostile ... It's a little hard to imagine why Jesus would be so furious. I mean, epic scale and grieved over the way they treat the Sabbath? Let's take a look at this for a second. The trigger is their attitude toward the Sabbath. In the first passage, the religious leaders are upset because Jesus and his disciples were picking grain on the Sabbath. In the second, they're upset because Jesus is doing medical treatment, as it were, on the Sabbath.

The religious leaders of the time (we'll explain why they were doing this in a minute) had put so many regulations around the Sabbath that the things Jesus was doing were technically illegal. There were many, many things the religious leaders said you can and can't do on the Sabbath. There were at least 39 forms of activity that were not allowed, and there were other forms that were allowed. It was all laid out to the millimeter, practically, of what you could do and what you couldn't do. You could walk *this* far but not *this* far. It was all laid out.

What is the Sabbath for? The idea of rest ... what's its purpose? What does it mean? The idea of rest is to restore, replenish, repair. In a sense, when you take your rest, you're restoring and replenishing your strength and repairing yourself so you can get up and go on with your life and your work. So here is Jesus about to restore a man's hand. Down there it even uses the word *restore*, which we get our word *rest* from.

The Pharisees had created so many laws around the Sabbath, trying to make sure nobody violated the Sabbath, that what Jesus was doing was technically illegal, except he was restoring. That's what the Sabbath is for: to restore. The legalistic rules had thwarted the very purpose of the Sabbath, which is bad and why Jesus was mad. But can we really say epic scale? I don't believe he's angry simply at an overscrupulous approach to the Sabbath. He's looking at something deeper, an attitude the religious leaders had toward the law of God itself.

When he says up in verse 27 (which is an interesting phrase), "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," I think there is the secret, because Jesus is not just talking about the Sabbath. He's talking about the law of God in general. Let's translate that. God's law was made for us, not us for the law. Do you know what that means? The law of God, Jesus says, is a gift, not a chain. It's a gift, not a burden.

It's a gift from a loving God, who gives it to you, saying, "This is how you'll thrive and find your true self," not a chain by a tyrannical God, saying, "I'm going to make you sweat. I'm going to restrain you. I'm going to restrict you." The law of God is something that keeps you from being happy, but you're just going to have to put up with it. That's the chain idea as opposed to the gift idea. The law of God and obedience to the law of God is the way to thrive and find your true happiness and the desires of your heart.

What Jesus is saying is those are two different approaches to the law of God, and the one that makes him furious is the attitude of the heart that sees the law of God not as a gift, not as something that's for us, but actually as a burden, something that's against us, something that's over us, something that is crushing us. *That's* what makes him unhappy. Not just simply the Sabbath observance, but it's that very attitude toward the law, and it's an attitude of the heart. It's the heart that upsets him.

Now where did that attitude come from? We're going to keep going back. You have to go back to Genesis. In Genesis 2–3, God puts the human race in

Paradise and gives them only one law. It's amazing. He says, "You can do anything you want. There's only one law. Do you see that tree? Don't eat the fruit of that tree. Just that one. Anything else is fine. Just that one." What's interesting is there's no indication of why. God says, "Don't eat anything of that tree," but he doesn't say why.

Because he doesn't say why, that means a lot. He doesn't say, "Don't eat of that tree, because it tastes terrible, just terrible." Nor does he say, "Don't eat the fruit of that tree, because, if you do, you'll drop dead. It's poison." Nor does he even say (which he could have), "Don't eat the fruit of that tree, because it's high in calories and low in nutrition. Just to make sure you see that it's in your best interest not to eat of the tree, I'm going to put one of those labels that tells you the sugar and carbohydrates and calories and things like that."

If he had said, "Don't eat of that tree, and here's the reason it's in your best interest not to ..." He just says, "Don't eat of that tree," and he doesn't tell them why. That means he was calling not just for a particular kind of behavior but a particular relationship to him. See, that law was also requiring an attitude of heart.

Basically, God was saying, "Obey me just because you trust me, just because you trust that I'm infinitely loving, good, and wise. Obey me just because you know I'm God and you're not, and you willingly embrace that and gladly trust me to be God. So obey me. Not just that; obey me because you trust my infinite goodness, love, and wisdom." You know the story. When the Serpent came in, the Serpent didn't immediately say, "Eat of that tree." Here's what the Serpent said. "You know, if you eat of that tree, your eyes will be opened."

What's he doing? He's going after the heart. What he's saying is, "Do you realize that God has told you you shouldn't eat of that tree because he does not have your best interests in mind? If you obey God, you will miss out. God does not have your best interests in mind. There's all sort of potential you'll never reach if you obey God. The law of God is not a gift; it's a chain. It's a burden. It's not a way to actually find the deepest desires of your heart. It's a restriction. It will squelch the deep desires of your heart." That's what the Serpent said.

Once the heart attitude changed, they ate. The point is that the lie of the Serpent has gone into every single human heart. Every single one of us believes that if we obey we'll miss out, that you really can't trust God to be in your best interests, that the law of God is not a gift but a chain, a burden. My thesis is because that's in every single human heart, whenever any human being at all faces a moral norm, a moral absolute in general or the law of God in the Bible in particular ...

There's a huge range of possible responses, but every single one of them is informed by the lie of the Serpent. The lie of the Serpent comes into play whenever somebody says, "You must not. Thou shalt not." Whenever that happens, however you respond to it is informed by that lie. That's the attitude of heart. That attitude of heart, not just, "You're kind of legalistic and you need to loosen up, Pharisees. You need to enjoy yourself on the Sabbath." That wouldn't

be enough for epic-scale fury.

What he's trying to say is, "There's something in your hearts that is treating the law of God not as a gift but as a chain." That's why the anger. We need to get into the second point like this. I just said that every possible human response to a moral absolute or to the law of God is informed by the lie of the Serpent. You say, "How can that be? Some people obey the law of God; some people don't."

2. *The enemies of Jesus.* Who are these enemies? It says in verse 6, "**Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.**" Every commentator, every historian who knows anything, says this is one of the most extraordinary verses. Do you know why? Well, who were these people?

The Roman Empire, because it had taken over all these countries and cultures, was essentially imposing Greco-Roman, Hellenistic pagan ideas and codes of conduct, and they were spreading over the whole empire, even into countries that were very, very different culturally. Of course, one of them was Israel. One of them was Judea. There was an enormous conservative reaction.

Many in Judea felt like they were being overwhelmed with a cosmopolitan licentious, pagan immorality, so they put up these huge walls. The Pharisees were a big part of that. That's one of the reasons they didn't just say, "Obey the Sabbath day." They said, "Here are all of the things you may or may not do." Every single one of the biblical commands had tons and tons of high barriers around it, saying, "You can do this. You can't do that."

It was a conservative reaction to what was perceived as being a creeping immorality, a creeping licentiousness. The Herodians were the people who actually supported the secular power, which was Herod. The kings were called Herod. The Herods were the rulers of Israel, but they were put in place by the Romans. The Herods and the Herodians were people who supported the secular power and the Hellenization of culture.

The Pharisees were their absolute enemies who were trying to hold on to the old conservative ways and the traditional moral values. I heard once somebody said, "Well, the Herodians and the Pharisees are a little bit like blue state liberals and red state conservatives." I want you to know that's not fair, because as much as you may think we have a polarized culture, the differences between blue state liberals and red state conservatives are nothing like this.

These people were sworn enemies. These are people who would kill each other in a dark alley if they found each other. These are people who were total enemies, and that's the reason why Morna Hooker, who's a Cambridge scholar, a historian ... In her commentary on the book of Mark she says something like, "An alliance between the Herodians and the Pharisees, two groups completely opposed to each other in attitude and in interest, is extraordinary."

Mark shows us that Jesus was opposed both by religious authorities and by the secular power who ordinarily hated each other to death. Why would these two

groups that utterly hate each other agree on this? “This guy has to go. We have to kill him.” It’s extraordinary. Yet we’ve already laid the groundwork of an answer. How so?

The reason they were both mad is that when Jesus met a moral person, a religious person, or when Jesus met an immoral person, an irreligious person, he told them both they were lost. So when he met in John, chapter 4, the woman at the well, who had had serial husbands and lovers, he said, “You’re lost; you need eternal life.” One chapter earlier, when he met Nicodemus, who was the Pharisee of the Pharisees, a religious ruler, a leader, morally scrupulous, a Bible teacher, a theologian, he said, “You are lost; you need to be born again.”

Here’s a spectrum of possible ways of dealing with the law of God. At one end of the spectrum, people who say, “Oh, there’s no right and wrong” or “I can live any way I want.” At the other end of the spectrum, highly moral. In fact, loading regulations on top of regulations. Highly moral. Yet Jesus says, “You’re all lost.” Do you know why? Here’s my thesis.

They’re all lost because they’re all cut off from God personally, because even the people at *this* end, who look like they embrace the law of God, all of their attitudes toward the law of God are being informed by the lie of the Serpent in their hearts. All of the attitudes toward the law are completely controlled by the conviction that the law of God is not a gift; it’s a crushing chain, burden, weight. How so? Well, it’s not that hard to see that people at *this* end of the spectrum, people who say, “I can live any way I want ...”

I guess at the far end of the spectrum of human responses to moral law you have people who say, “There is no right and wrong.” They’re relativists. They say, “Everybody has to decide what is right or wrong for me or you.” You can get a little more moderate, and people will say, “Well, I see some things in the Bible that are good, and I accept those, but there are other things in the Bible I can’t accept. I just can’t. That’s not healthy,” or “That’s regressive,” or something like that.

Here’s what you have. These are people who are informed by the deep conviction that the law of God ... They do not believe that everything God says in his Word and tells you to do is there to help you thrive, to help you get liberated so you don’t get enslaved to other things, to help you find deep satisfaction, to turn you into a person of greatness, to teach you habits of the heart, of love.

In other words, nobody there actually believes that every single thing God tells you to do is a gift from a loving God who says, “This is the way you’ll thrive. This is the way you’ll be free. This is the way you’ll be satisfied. This is the way you’ll turn into the person you really want to be and need to be.” Nobody down there believes that. They see the law of God, one way or the other, as a burden or a chain.

Oh, okay. How about over *here*? How about the devout? How about the very, very devout? Do they see that obedience is intrinsically pleasing to God,

intrinsically liberating, satisfying? Do they obey the law of God just to know God, just to please God, just because he is God? No. At this end of the spectrum, people are saying, "If I obey the law of God ..."

In fact, that's why I want to add regulations. I want to nail it. I want to totally nail it. I want to say, "I'm absolutely perfectly compliant with the law of Sabbath or this law or that law." Then I can turn to God and say, "Now you owe me. You have to answer my prayers. You have to give me a decent life. You can't let this or that bad thing happen to me. I have my rights. I'm a taxpayer. I've paid my dues. You owe me."

In other words, the attitude toward the law of God is, "I'm going to use the law of God to pry blessings out from under the clammy hands of this tyrannical God. If I don't live an incredibly good life, I can't do that, but if I *do* live a good life, then God owes me." No way is there a sense in very moral people that the law is just a way for me to become liberated, a way to learn how to love. Therefore, everybody on the whole spectrum ...

I'll say this again. Every single human response to moral norms in general or the moral law of God in the Bible in particular, whether you reject it, whether you embrace it, it's always informed by the lie of the Serpent. That is, it's a burden. It's a crushing thing. I'm either going to reject it because I think it's a burden and a chain or I'm going to use it to force God to give me the things I want. It's not intrinsically a wonderful thing.

When I was falling in love with my wife, I'll never forget going to her and saying, "Aren't there things you want to change in me? Tell me what you'd like me to do differently." I wanted her to love me. I wanted her to like me. I actually wanted to make changes. I remember she had a list. One of them very nicely could said to be ... I need to show honorable reticence and discretion. I guess I could say there was one category you might call the area of personal hygiene.

I was okay with that. That's great. Okay. Except that when my parents had talked to me about it, it was a chain. It was a burden. No way. But now to be told, "This is what I want you to do" from her was a gift. Why? My attitude of heart. I knew it would please her, and I knew that she knew also ... She said, "It's not just for me. It's for other people."

I'll get a little more serious. When I was a teenager and living at home, I lived in a pretty morally strict home, and one of the rules was no sex outside of marriage, which is a biblical rule. I have to tell you at the time it felt very restrictive and not a way to have joy in life, but as time has gone on, I've come to see if it is true what the Bible says, that sex is actually God's designed way for you to make a whole life commitment to someone else ...

It's God's designed way to create a unitive community between two people that is incredibly strong and yet intimate. If you don't use sex in that way, according to the Bible, you actually ruin, to some degree, your heart's ability to make that kind of long-term commitment. In other words, the Bible says, "Don't use sex as a way

of personal fulfillment, as a way of basically getting ego affirmation. Use it as a way of not getting ego affirmation but giving yourself to somebody else.”

I now look back on it, and I’m very glad that what I thought was a very restrictive rule turned out to be a way of me being able to develop a habit of the heart that took me into areas that are of richness I would have never known otherwise. When Jesus says to both the moral and the immoral, “You’re lost ...” When the Herodians and the Pharisees say, “This guy has to go,” they realize that Jesus is saying something that both moral and immoral people hate, and it’s because they have the lie of the Serpent. We all do in our hearts.

Our attitude toward the law is informed by that, and Jesus rejects the whole thing. So here’s my question. What he’s angry at is this attitude of the heart. This attitude of the heart informs absolutely every single ... If it comes out every time we confront the law of God, no matter how we respond to it, how can we get some kind of change here? What will liberate us from that? Honestly, none of us has anything like the joy and liberation the Bible says would come to those who gladly give themselves to the obedience of the King.

3. *The claim of Jesus.* Here’s how you get out of it. Here’s the solution. It’s his remarkable claim. I want to unpack it for you. Now we’re finally in a position to see why it’s so important. Verse 28, right smack in the middle: **“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”** Jesus is not repealing the Sabbath completely.

When he says in verse 27 the Sabbath is a gift for us, he’s clearly not saying, “So you don’t have to observe the Sabbath anymore.” No, he’s not saying that. What he *is* seeming to do is he’s also, at the same time, disobeying a lot of these regulations that had grown up around the Sabbath. What is that about? Well, he gives us a very big clue when he gives us a biblical illustration. Up here in verse 25, when they were saying, “Why are you doing things unlawful on the Sabbath?” he says:

“Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

What’s he saying here? At first sight, it’s a little hard to tell. This happened in the Old Testament. It was when David was on the run for his life. He wasn’t the king yet. He was a fugitive. He went to the tabernacle. The tabernacle was the place where you worshiped God and you had the altar and the sacrifices and all of the various ceremonies. You also had a table, and on the table there was the consecrated bread. It was part of the tabernacle worship.

Jesus says David went in there and ate the bread. It wasn’t on the Sabbath. There’s no indication it was on the Sabbath. He wasn’t breaking any Sabbath rule. So what is Jesus bringing this up for? Ah. He’s talking about the ceremonies. There are the Ten Commandments. Those are ethical laws. “Don’t

kill. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery." Then there were a lot of other rules that are called *ceremonial rules*, because they had to do with how you worship God.

The tabernacle was the place where a sinful human being could go into the presence of a holy God. How could that be done? The tabernacle was a whole set of ceremonies in which you had to clean yourself. You had to wash. You couldn't touch this or that. You couldn't eat this or that. You had to refrain from this or that. Then when you went in, you had to bring a certain kind of sacrifice. *That* kind of sacrifice, not *this* kind of sacrifice. Then you could go in and worship.

It was really a kind of enormous object lesson, trying to show people that you can't just go in to a holy God. Something has to be done to bridge the gap between you as a sinner and the Holy God. So you had all these ceremonies, a lot of ceremonies, and Jesus is saying even David realized the ceremonial law was temporary. It was provisional. It wasn't an abiding thing. It wasn't like, "Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Evidently, some of the ceremonial laws around the Sabbath were about what you could eat, what you could wear, what you could touch, and what you did in the tabernacle. All of those things, Jesus is saying, were temporary. Even David knew they were temporary, that the sacrifices weren't there forever. So you have a lot of laws in the Old Testament that are not ethical laws so much as they're ceremonial laws. They have to do with the temple worship, on how you connect to God, how you get into a relationship with God.

Jesus is saying those are actually ... He's hinting here. "Those are actually temporary. David knew they were temporary. I'm telling you they're temporary, including these things you've put up all around the Sabbath." Temporary until what? Then he says it. "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." That's a bombshell, because when he said, "I'm the Lord of the Sabbath," everybody said, "Wait a minute. Isn't God Lord of the Sabbath?"

Jesus is directing us to think about the origin of the Sabbath. Come with me for a second to Genesis, chapter 1. God is creating the world, and then we're told he rested. Why? What does that mean? God can't get tired. When you and I rest, we need to restore our batteries, but God obviously doesn't ever need to restore his batteries. So what does *rest* mean? Well, the word *sabbath* just means to cease. That's all it means. He said, "It is finished. It's good. Nothing more needs to be done."

The original Sabbath day, according to Genesis 1, was when God had been creating the world and he basically said, "It's finished. It's done. It's good. It's paradise. Nothing more needs to be done." When Jesus Christ says, "I'm Lord of the Sabbath," here's what he's saying: "I'm going to go to the cross, and on that cross *I'm* going to say, 'It is finished.' *I'm* going to say, 'It is done.' *I'm* going to say, 'Cease from your work.' "

How would that be true? Well, Judith Shulevitz, a fine Jewish writer, wrote a great article in the *New York Times Magazine* called "Bring Back the Sabbath" over 10

years ago. She was Jewish and had been raised with Sabbath observance, and she had gotten away from it. Then she realized she had been wrong, and she wrote an article called “Bring Back the Sabbath.”

In the first half of it she says, “Let me argue ... on behalf of an institution that has kept workaholism in reasonable check for thousands of years [the weekly Sabbath]. Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. [...] You cannot downshift casually and easily ... [Interrupting] the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.”

That’s very wise. She says what’s great about the Sabbath is it was a way that the entire community of people, your community, came together, and it was basically a disciplined downshift. You say, “We’re not working.” She was right in saying that, at one level, we all need to cease from our work every so often in a very disciplined way. We need to really downshift. We need it to restore ourselves.

At one level, we need to cease from our physical work, but then she goes further and says there’s another kind of work we have to cease from. She was trying to also say it’s good to go to religious services on your Sabbath day. Here’s how she defended it. She says, “Religious rituals do not exist simply to promote togetherness. [...] They are designed to convey to us a certain story about who we are ... [The] machinery of self-censorship [must] shut down, too, stilling the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach.”

Here’s what she means. There’s a rest underneath the physical rest that we need, or you might say there’s a work underneath the physical work that we must stop doing, we must cease. She called it “the machinery of self-censorship, the inner murmur of self-reproach.” A perfect example of that would be the great movie *Chariots of Fire*. Remember that movie? There are two guys, and they’re both working very hard. This was in the early twentieth century.

They were both training to be in the Olympics. They were running in the Olympics for Britain, and they were both running in the 100-yard dash. One was Harold Abrahams and one was Eric Liddell. They were both training and working. They were exerting themselves physically, but their attitudes were very different. Harold Abrahams never smiled, and he basically said, “When that gun goes off and I start to run, I have 10 seconds to justify my existence.”

What he was saying was, “I’m running to prove myself. I’m running to make sure I feel like I’m a person of worth. I’m running to achieve something.” Even when he gets the gold medal, it’s very clear in the movie that he really isn’t all that satisfied. It wasn’t as satisfying as he thought it would be. He’s working and working and working, but there’s an inner work. It’s the machinery of self-censorship, the eternal murmur of self-reproach. “I’m not good enough, I’m not good enough, but if I win this gold medal, maybe I will be.”

He’s working, but underneath he’s working to achieve a sense of worth. Eric

Liddell is working, but he actually has a sense of self-worth. It comes from God. He says at one point to his sister, Jennie, “God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” They’re both exerting themselves, but, underneath, one is working and one is resting. You might say the first guy is working even when he’s resting, and the second guy is resting even when he’s exerting.

There are two kinds of work we have to cease from. Where does that deeper kind of work come from, the need to prove ourselves? Well, if you come from a traditional society, you have the pressure of your family and what your parents want. What a burden. What a chain that is. If you live in Western society, especially if you come to New York, you’re working to prove yourself, to make some money. What a burden that is.

What happens if you get religious? Well, then you have all of these rules. “If you do all of these things, then you’ll go to heaven.” What a burden that is. What a chain that is. We need to cease from that work. We need to have the rest that Eric Liddell had. How do we get it? When Jesus Christ said, “I am Lord of the Sabbath,” he didn’t just mean, “I have the power to change the rules.” He’s saying, “*I am the Sabbath.*” He says in Matthew, chapter 11, “Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy-laden. I will give you rest. *I am the rest.*”

How can he do that? Here’s how he can do it. On the cross, when he said, “It is finished,” what was finished? I believe he’s saying, “I have just finished the work that you are being crushed under.” All of us know we’re not what we ought to be. The Bible explains that. Go back to Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve lost their relationship with God, they put fig leaves on themselves. Why? Because they knew there was something wrong. We’ve been working ever since (it’s exhausting) to get rid of that sense that we’re not what we ought to be.

Jesus Christ says, “I have completed the work that’s crushing you. Whether it’s religious work, whether it’s traditional society work, whether it’s Western society, whether you’re irreligious, whether you’re religious, I have finished the work. I have lived the life you should have lived. I even died the death you should have died for your sins. Now, if you come to the Father through me, he looks at you and says, ‘I’m satisfied. There’s nothing more you should do. It’s finished. You’re accepted. The verdict is in.’ ”

That’s the reason why Hebrews, chapter 4, says, “**There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his.**” Do you know how Jesus achieved this rest for you? By cosmic restlessness. When he was on the cross, he was saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I thirst. I thirst.” What’s that? Restlessness. Why? He got the restlessness you and I deserve so that we could get the rest he has won for us.

Do you know what this means? That’s what will change the lie of the Serpent in my heart and your heart. If somebody just tells me, “God is love; you should trust him,” I don’t, but if I see him doing this ... He’s Lord of the Sabbath, because on the cross he said it was finished, crushed under the weight of our sins. If I see

him doing that for me, then I begin to say, “I can trust him,” and slowly but surely ... It’s slow. Christian brothers and sisters, it’s slow, because the lie is still there, but bit by bit it can be killed.

The more it’s killed, the more you treat the law of God the way I treated Kathy’s mandates, as a great way to get closer, as a great way to please the one I was falling in love with, as a great way to become more aligned ... Religion says, “If you obey, then God has to accept you,” but the gospel says, “Because God has accepted you radically at infinite cost to himself through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that changes that fear and mistrust in the heart, and now you want to obey.” That’s the gospel.

So what is the great claim? Jesus Christ is actually replacing all religion with himself. “I’m the Bread of Life. I’m the final sacrifice. I am your Sabbath rest. You don’t need any of these other things. I’m the tabernacle. I’m the temple.” Do you see what I mean by saying there’s no category for the immensity of this kind of claim?

Dick Lucas says if you want to understand how radical this claim is, imagine an early Christian in the Roman Empire talking to a non-Christian friend, his neighbor. The neighbor comes and says, “I understand you’re a Christian. I love religion. The pageantry is wonderful. I don’t know much about this Christian religion. Where are your temples?” The Christian would say, “Well, we don’t have any temples. Jesus is our temple.”

They would say, “No temples? Where do your priests do their work?” The Christian says, “We don’t have any priests. Jesus is our priest.” “No priests?” says the neighbor. “Where do you offer your sacrifices to curry favor with the gods?” The answer is, “We don’t have any sacrifices anymore, because Jesus is the final sacrifice, because Jesus is the God who has come to get us. We don’t need a whole religious cultus to try to get favor with some remote god. Jesus is God come to us.”

The neighbor would finally say, “What kind of religion *is* this?” The answer is it’s not actually a religion, in some ways. It’s utterly different than any other religion. Jesus is the bread. Jesus is the tabernacle. Jesus is the priest. Jesus is the sacrifice. When you have him, you have everything. Question ... *Are you a religious person (moral), are you an irreligious person (skeptical), or are you a Christian?* “Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I, only I, can give you rest.” Let’s pray.

Thank you, Father, for the richness of this passage and the magnitude of the claim. We ask that you would simply help us to know how to enter into that rest. That’s the promise. Lord, we admit, those of us who have admitted our need for a savior and have rejoiced in Jesus’ words, “It is finished,” and know we have a complete salvation that we don’t have to add to, that we don’t have to keep living up to something to earn our salvation ...

Yet the lie of the Serpent stays in our hearts. We really don’t trust you in so many

ways. Continue to kill that lie so that, more and more, we come to love and trust you, because, oh my, Lord, the love relationship with you is actually that which most completely satisfies the desires of our hearts. Thank you for all of the things you've done for us in the gospel. It's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Prayer of Confession

Pilgrim Prayer: Psalms for the Journey—February 22, 2015

Psalm 32

**1 Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.**

**2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.**

**3 When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.**

**4 For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.**

**5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, “I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord.”
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.**

**6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.**

**7 You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.**

**8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.**

**9 Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.**

**10 Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.**

**11 Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!**

The Word of the Lord.

This is one of the six psalms that are called the *penitential psalms*. What that means is there are six psalms that especially go right in and talk about sin. Psalm 51 is probably the most famous, but this is maybe the next most famous. The word *sin* hits modern people's ears ... It either makes us laugh or it makes us shudder, if we're modern people. We laugh, because, generally speaking, the word *sin* is usually used in modern public discourse in a lighthearted, ironic way.

We don't like to talk about sin seriously. It's sort of a joke. Advertisers, for example, always promote chocolate or lingerie using the word *sin*. "It's sinful." We laugh at it. It's lighthearted. When anyone uses the word *sin* like I am now, seriously, people get very nervous, because we think we live in a modern culture in which one of its accomplishments is we don't guilt-trip people. People have to decide what is right or wrong for them. We don't lay guilt trips on everybody.

Yet the Bible says there's nothing more important for practical living than for you to understand the concept of sin in general and to understand your sins in particular. So let's see whether that's true. Come with me. Let's take a look at this psalm. It'll teach us three things about the subject of sin: *the poisonous reality*, *the treatment*, and *the antidote*.

1. *The poisonous reality.* Let's start at the very top. Verse 1 uses two Hebrew words that can both be translated *sin* or *transgression* or something else. It says, "**Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.**" Let's look at that verse. First of all, there's a Hebrew word that's translated *transgressions*. It's the Hebrew word *pesha*, and it means rebellious self-assertion.

One of the things we're learning here about what the Bible says about sin ... You say, "What is sin?" Sin is rebellious self-assertion. Saint Augustine, in his great book *The Confessions*, remembers an incident in his past when he was 16 years old and he and a bunch of friends broke into a pear orchard and stole the pears.

Afterwards, he was asking himself the question, “Hey, why did I do that?” Especially when a) he wasn’t hungry, and b) he didn’t really like pears.

He reflected on it, and he answered it something like this. “I realized the reason I wanted to steal the pears was because it was forbidden.” It was because somebody said, “Don’t go into that pear orchard.” If nobody had said, “Don’t go there,” he wouldn’t have been interested, but because someone said, “Don’t go in there,” that’s why he wanted to do it. He realized at the core of the core of the core of his being was an impulse that said, “Nobody tells me how to live my life.”

It’s that self-assertiveness, that self-centeredness, that hatred of any limitations on our desires that actually makes our lives the most miserable and makes the world a miserable place. A Christian writer, Francis Spufford, wrote something like this. “Sin is the human tendency not just to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident. Sin is our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including promises, relationships we care about, and our own well being.”

Here’s the thing. If at the very core of the core of the core of our being is this impulse ... It’s almost like a trigger that can explode if it’s triggered. “Nobody tells me what to do.” What that means is we don’t want limitations on our desires, but that means if rules get in the way, we tend to break the rules. If promises get in the way, we tend to break our promises. Most of all, relationships.

You can’t have a relationship without losing independence. The closer you are to a friend, the closer you are in a romantic relationship, the more and more you just can’t do what you want, and we hate that. Which means there is something deep in us (it’s called *sin*, self-assertiveness, self-centeredness) that makes us break stuff: break rules, break promises, and break relationships.

There’s another Hebrew word for *sin* that tells us another aspect of it. It’s the second clause in verse 1. “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose *sins* are covered.” That’s the Hebrew word *chata’ah*, which means to go off the path. It’s another way to look at sin. It’s actually completely supplemental. It tells us something about sin.

First of all, a path is the way you get to your destination. The path has all been cleared out and you can walk. If you go off the path, you go into the weeds. You can’t see where you’re walking. You might fall into a pit. You might fall off a cliff. You might get lost. This word tells us something else about what sin is.

Think about lying for a minute. What happens when you lie? I don’t mean lies you get caught in. What happens when you lie and you never get caught? Is there anything wrong? Does anything happen? Sure. First, anyone you lie to, you have begun to erode the relationship. If you lie to somebody, you have to keep the truth from that person. You’re not unguarded with them. You’re not able to share. You’re not able to open. You’ve actually begun to ruin the relationship as soon as you lie.

Secondly, when you lie, you treat people not as subjects but as objects. You’re manipulating them. You’re telling them what you want them to hear. You’re trying

to control them. You're not treating them as people. You're treating them as things. You're dehumanizing them. When you dehumanize people, you dehumanize yourself. You harden yourself.

Also, studies show that the more often you lie, the less often you trust anyone else. In other words, if you're not trustworthy, you don't trust other people either. Of course, in the end, every time you lie you're actually taking a shot at the social fabric. A society in which people can't trust what they read, can't trust what they hear, is a society that's unraveling. The economy unravels. Rule of law unravels. Everything.

When the Bible says, "Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not commit adultery," that's not busywork. That is basically reflecting the design of your heart, of relationships, of the world. When you sin, you violate the design and set up strains in the fabric of reality that can only lead to breakdown. There's an impulse inside us, self-assertion, self-centeredness, that makes us want to break stuff, break promises, break relationships, break rules.

When we do it, it's not just like somebody comes and finds us or we get it on judgment day. There are natural consequences, deep natural consequences. We're going against the fabric of things. We're going against the grain of the universe, the grain of our own nature, and it sets up strains in the fabric of reality that always lead to breakdown. That's the poisonous reality. Because everyone sins and because we have sin in us and because of those effects, we know there's something wrong with us.

The other thing I want you to see in this first point is, "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are *covered*." We need cover. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his famous book *Being and Nothingness*, has a very famous passage. He says imagine you are going about your life, and then you realize someone is looking through the keyhole at you.

They can see everything you do. They can hear everything you say. For the sake of argument, let's say they even know everything you're thinking. They can see you, and you can't see them. They can see everything about you; you can't see anything about them. How do you feel? Sartre says you're dehumanized. It's intolerable. It's hell. Why? We need cover.

We know if we can't control what people know about us we're done for. Why is that so important? Why can I say that with confidence in the middle of New York City in the year 2015? It's significant, because we supposedly live in a culture in which people decide what is right or wrong. There's no consensus about right or wrong. People are supposed to make up their own minds. Therefore, we're supposed to be living in a guilt-free culture.

Franz Kafka, in one of the great novels of explaining the nature of our modern time ... It's called *The Trial*, which is about a man named Josef K. who gets arrested. The whole novel is about the fact he never finds out what's wrong. He never finds out what he did. Nobody will ever tell him. He starts to rethink his

whole life. "Did I do that? Was that it?" he doesn't even know, but he knows he's in prison. He knows he's under indictment, but he can't find out why.

In the end, he's stabbed to death by one of his guards, and that's the end of the story. You say, "Okay, Franz Kafka. Who knows what that was about?" Well, he tells you in his diaries. He says, "The state in which we find ourselves today is sinful independent of guilt." Modern people feel sinful without guilt. Here's what he means. We are the first culture in history that doesn't have consensus about right or wrong.

Let's just say you're married and you have an affair with someone else. Is that all right? Some people say, "Yes." Some people say, "No." There has never been a culture like that. Never. So I guess it's up to us to decide. In a sense, nobody is guilty, and yet here's what Kafka is getting at in that novel. We can't avoid the sense that there's something wrong with us. We've had our guilt explained away. We've had our guilt therapized away.

We don't feel guilty, and yet we know there's something wrong. We still feel like sinners. We don't believe in hell. We don't believe in sin. We don't believe in moral absolutes, and yet we have a sense of condemnation we can't shake. There's like a voice that's telling us, "You're an imposter." You know this voice. "You're a fraud. You're not good enough. You're ugly. You're a fool. You're a coward. You're not living up." That's why we have to cover.

We all know we're hypocrites. One theologian says if someone was going around after you your entire life, invisibly (you couldn't see them), and every time you said to somebody else, "You ought," they turned on their little recorder and recorded what you said ... Every time you ever told anybody else how they ought to live ... "You ought to do *this*. *This* is wrong. *This* is right."

All they were doing was recording your moral standards. If at the end of your life God came down and said, "You know, I'm a really nice guy, so I'm not going to judge you by the Ten Commandments. I'm not going to judge you by my standards; I'm going to judge you by *your* standards," and turned on that little recorder, there isn't a person on the face of the earth who could stand up to that test.

We know we can't pass the test of our own standards. We're all hypocrites. That's the reason someone looking at us through the keyhole, someone exposing us, someone uncovering who we are ... We know we're sinners. I can say that confidently. Franz Kafka said so, so it must be right. Even though we don't even know how to agree on what is guilt ... "You can't lay your guilt trip on me." Okay, I'm not laying a guilt trip on you.

I'm just saying you know there's something wrong with you. You have that voice, a voice that makes you feel stained, like Lady Macbeth. She couldn't get out the spots on her hands. There's a voice that says, "You're a fraud. You're an imposter. You're not good enough. You're not smart enough. You're not living up, and you know it." As the years go by, it gets worse. What are we going to do

about that sense there's something wrong with us?

2. *The treatment.* Let's look at verse 5, and let me unpack it for you. There are three things you can do. We're talking here about the liberation of confession.

"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin." Let's unpack that.

He's talking about something called *confession*, which is liberating. Do you know why it's liberating? It's liberating because, first, it relieves your conscience, that sense there's something wrong with you. It takes that weight off. It silences the voice. It gets rid of the feeling like we're stained, that we're infected. Secondly, it actually changes you so that you don't do the things again that you don't want to do. What is the treatment? Three things.

First, *you need a clear standard*. The first thing you need to deal with the voice, the first thing you need to deal with the sense there's something wrong with you. The clear standard has to be what God thinks. **"Then I acknowledged my sin to you ..."** Some people feel guilty about things they shouldn't. Some people feel guilty about things they should.

For example, if you've ever looked at the transcriptions of trials of war criminals, they never feel guilty. They genuinely don't feel guilty. They have it all worked out in their head. There's a place in 1 Corinthians 4:3, where Paul says, **"My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent."** In fact, let me give you the whole thing. Paul says, "I don't care whether you judge me or any human court judges me." Then he says, "I don't even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." Then he says, "It's the Lord who judges me."

Do you see those three things? First of all, he says, "I don't care what you think." He's not letting public opinion dictate how he feels about himself. He says, "I don't care what you think or what any human court thinks." That's right. You can't let your heart be judged by what society says, because it's always changing. I hate to bring up such an unsettling example, and I'll only do it briefly just to show you.

In the 60s and 70s, when I was a teenager and a college student during the sexual revolution, it was well understood, at least on college campuses, that teachers could have sex with their students. That was just part of being liberated. Nobody thought anything of it. Today, that's seen as an abuse of power, and people who did it and who are now in their 60s or 70s are being convicted. They're being tried. Why? Because public opinion has changed, and it will always change.

When Paul says, "I can't judge myself by society ..." Right now, there are things that most smart people think are terrible and other things they don't think are bad. I can guarantee you that 40 years from now, a lot of the things that everybody thinks are bad will be thought of as okay. A lot of things that people

think of as okay will be thought of as bad. Don't go to public opinion. You'll never be able to judge your heart. Don't acknowledge your sin before public opinion.

Secondly, Paul says, "I don't even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." There are plenty of people who have done terrible things who should feel guilty but don't. The conscience isn't always a good guide. Or sometimes there are people who feel guilty for things they shouldn't feel guilty for.

Some years ago, I remember trying to help a young woman who was in and out of mental institutions, and it was largely because her parents had raised her up from the time she was little to be a great concert violinist. When she got into adulthood, either she didn't have the discipline or she just didn't have the talent. I think it was probably the latter. She just really wasn't very good. She felt she had let her parents down, and her parents felt that she'd let them down.

When I would talk to her ... Her conscience was completely programmed by, "That's how I'm going to be a good person." There's a place in the book of 1 John where it says, "When our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." What that means is you can't trust your conscience. It doesn't matter what Jiminy Cricket said. You know that little song in the Disney movie *Pinocchio*? I forget how it goes, but at the end it said, "Always let your conscience be your guide." Paul says, "No."

War criminals let their consciences be their guides. Look at what happens. The woman in the mental institution lets her conscience be her guide. Look at what happens. What you need is a straightedge, and that straightedge is what God thinks. Paul says, "I don't care what you think. I don't care what I think. It's what God thinks." The only way to get that is to believe the Bible.

When I have people say to me, "Well, I like the Bible, but there are things in the Bible I can't accept ..." Oh, why not? Well, they either say, "Because nowadays we know these things ..." Oh, public opinion. Or they say, "Well, there are some things I just find offensive." Oh, your own feelings and your own conscience. Don't you realize? You're on quicksand again. In your 40s you're going to feel guilty about things you didn't feel guilty about in your 20s.

Public opinion changes. Your conscience changes. You have to have a straightedge. The only way to get that, the only way to make sure your guilt is not false guilt, and the only way to make sure you feel guilty about the things you ought to feel guilty about and don't feel guilty about the things you should not feel guilty about is you need to believe the Bible is true. Then you can acknowledge your sin before God. So first you need a straightedge. You need a standard.

Secondly, *you need to take full responsibility for what you've done wrong*. It says here, "**Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.**" Cover up means no excuses. In a minute we're going to see that God covers our sin, but you may not. One of the main ways we cover our sin is we blame-shift. We say, "Yes, I did that. Yes, I do that. I know it's not good, but if you

had my mother, you would do it too," or "If you were in my state" or "I feel bad ..." "

When you start to talk about all of the extenuating circumstances ... "I did wrong *but* this, this, this." Those things may be true as descriptions of your sin. They may be true as occasions of your sin, but I'll tell you one thing. They're not the cause of your sin. Do you know what the cause of your sin is? You. You're the cause of your sin. You did it.

Unless you're willing to take responsibility without covering it, without explaining it away, without rationalizing it, without denying it, and without blame-shifting, real liberating confession, relieving the conscience and changing the heart ... Real liberating confession starts where blame-shifting ends.

Some years ago, I was trying to move a log out of the way, and I picked it up. I didn't pick the whole log up. I left the one end on the ground. I lifted up *this* half. I threw it, and it came right back down and hit my feet. Somebody said, "You're going to have to pick up the entire log if you're really going to get rid of it. You have to bear all the weight."

When you say, "I did wrong, but you made me do it," you're not picking the whole log up. You're not bearing all the weight. Saying, "No excuse. I'm not going to cover up. I did wrong." That's the way to get it off. That's the way to get it forgiven. That's the way to get liberating confession.

Lastly, *you need to distinguish true confession from either self-pity or self-flagellation*. What I'm about to tell you is very important. It's very practical, and it's also a little alarming, I hope. I hope you'll be alarmed by it. A lot of people, including me, including you ... Sometimes you experience sorrow. "I'm so sorry. I never should have done that." You might weep. You might feel terrible.

It sure looks like you're confessing that you're wrong, yet neither self-pity nor self-flagellation is liberating confession that actually relieves your conscience and changes the heart. I would say most people, because of their temperament, because of various things ... Their confession actually goes into one of these cul-de-sacs, either *self-pity* or *self-flagellation*. What do I mean?

Well, first of all, *self-pity*. Down here. "**Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.**" What is that? A mule or a horse doesn't come because they love you. There needs to be a bit, a bridle, maybe even a whip. That's the idea. Even more so, up here in verse 5, it says, "**And you forgave the guilt of my sin.**"

I never like doing this when I'm preaching, but that's not a great translation. The older translation is, "... **and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.**" Have you heard that? At first sight, the word *iniquity* looks like a tautology. It looks like *iniquity, sin* ... aren't they synonyms? Well, they are. The word that's translated *guilt* (improperly, I think) is another Hebrew word for evil, which means to be twisted. Here's what it says: "And you forgave the sinfulness of my sin."

A number of years ago, I counseled with a guy who was abusive in his language. Not physically abusive, but he was abusive when he spoke to his wife. He would get angry and be very verbally abusive. At one point, his wife left him. He wept tears of sorrow, and he came to me and said, “You were right. I was wrong.” He called her up and said, “You were right. I was wrong.” She comes back, and for a while he changed, but after a few weeks, when he was sure she was back to stay, he went back to it, and she left.

What happened? Didn’t he confess? Didn’t he admit he was wrong? Didn’t he repent? No. He repented for the embarrassment of the sin. He was upset about the embarrassment of what he had done. He was upset about the inconvenience of what he had done. He was upset about the consequence of what he had done, but he wasn’t upset about the sinfulness of the sin. In other words, he didn’t see it as a bad thing in itself. That’s self-pity.

He wasn’t sorry about what he was doing to her, and he wasn’t sorry about what he was doing to God. He was sorry about what he was doing to himself, which means he hated the consequence of the sin, not the sin. As soon as the consequences went away, his heart was right back there. He didn’t change. I’ve seen so many people …

Almost everybody has one part of their life where they have tried to change, tried to change. You’ve been so sorry. “I’m going to change that,” and you never change. Do you know why? Because you’re not confessing. You say, “Of course I’m admitting.” No, no, no. Self-pity is not the same thing as liberating confession and repentance that changes the heart so that the thing you were doing has no more attractive power to keep you doing it anymore.

The other thing that is also not liberating confession is *self-flagellation*, beating yourself up. **“I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.’ And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”** There are plenty of people who are weeping and upset and beating themselves up, but they’re not really looking to God for forgiveness. They don’t want forgiveness; they want to pay the debt themselves.

They’re doing that by weeping so much and saying, “Look, God. See how miserable I am,” and saying to other people, “Look at how miserable I am.” Self-flagellation is hating yourself, not the sin. Self-pity is hating the consequence of the sin, not the sin. In both cases, your heart doesn’t change. You weep and weep and weep, and it won’t be long before you’ll be back in it. It doesn’t change you. It doesn’t really liberate you. Well, what will?

3. *The antidote.* Here’s the antidote. **“Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.”** Why are they covered? **“Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them …”** In Romans, chapter 4, Paul quotes Psalm 32. **“Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them …”** That’s an amazing statement.

Imagine you're in a class and you get a *D* on a test, and your professor comes along and says, "I'm not going to count that against you. I know you got the *D*, but I'm going to act as if it's not there. I'm not going to count it against you in your grade. I'm going to cover it over. I'm not going to look at it, as it were. I'm not going to take it into account." You'd say, "Hallelujah!" even if you're an atheist. You would be very excited. You'd be extraordinarily excited.

How can David say that? Is there any indication, especially in the Old Testament here, that God wouldn't count sin? Is that the just, holy God we know? Why does David think God is going to cover his sin and not count it against him? I think he knew by revelation, but we also know by revelation. He knew directly; we know by reading the Scripture.

In Romans, chapter 4, Paul says, "What shall we say, then? Are we justified by good works? No. The one who trusts the one who justifies the wicked, his faith is counted to him for righteousness. So David pronounces a blessing on the person to whom God counts righteousness apart from works." Then he quotes Psalm 32. "Blessed is the one whose sin is covered, against whom the Lord counts no iniquity."

Here's what Paul is saying. It's what Jesus did. Do you know why? Jesus was not electrocuted. Jesus was not shot. Jesus was crucified. Do you know what crucifixion is? It's a terrible, horrible, slow death through exposure. You're stripped. You're uncovered. You're stripped naked. You're totally uncovered. You are naked and exposed to the elements, the cold and the rain. You're defenseless to all of the weapons of the soldiers. You're naked to the jeers of the crowd.

It's a horrible death. It's a slow death. It's terrible. You're stripped naked. You're uncovered. It's the ultimate keyhole. Everyone is looking at you. You're completely exposed. You're completely uncovered. It's horrible. Why did Jesus go through that? It's what we deserve for our sins. He was uncovered so that our sins could be covered. He paid the price so that when you say, "Lord Jesus Christ, save me," or when you say, "Father, accept me because of what Jesus did ..."

You heard Romans 4. You say, "Father, accept me not because of anything I do or can do. I can't cover over my sin. I can't be good enough to cover over my sin. I'm not going to try to cover my sin by beating myself up. I'm not going to try to cover up my sin by denying it. I uncover my sin. Now cover me, because Jesus Christ was uncovered for me." That's the gospel.

This is the way you avoid both self-pity and self-flagellation. Self-flagellation is avoided because of the freeness of this forgiveness. Jesus Christ has given you an absolutely free forgiveness. First John 1:9. Listen. This is a wonderful verse. When I say it to you the first time you're not going to see it, because it's sort of hidden. "If you confess your sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us of all unrighteousness."

Notice it did not say, "If you confess your sin, God is faithful and *merciful* to forgive your sin and cleanse you of all unrighteousness." Of course he *is* merciful, but that's not what it says. If you're a Christian and you confess your sin, the reason God will forgive you is because he's just. It would be unjust for him not to forgive you. Why? Because Jesus Christ paid for you. He paid for your penalty. He paid your debt.

He was uncovered so you could be covered. He paid your debt, which means if you believe in Jesus Christ, God has to forgive you. It would be unjust for him not to forgive you, because that would mean he would get two payments on the debt, and that would be wrong. Do you see how forgiven you are? Do you see how free you are? There's a hymn that goes ...

*Well may the accuser roar
Of sins that I have done;
I know them all and thousands more
But Jehovah [God] knoweth none.*

In Jesus I'm freely forgiven. No more self-flagellation. No more trying to cover myself by feeling terrible. On the other hand, it gets rid of self-pity. Do you know why? The main thing I need when I see something I've done wrong and I want to change is I need to realize this cost Jesus his life. If you had a dear friend and an arrow shot him dead, you wouldn't take the arrow home as a memento and put it up on your wall. Would you? No.

If you see what Jesus Christ has done and you say, "O Savior, did you do that for me? Why did you die for me? Why did you *have* to die for me? What was so bad that it required the death of the Son of God?" The answer is the things you're doing every day, the things *I'm* doing every day. When I have a grudge, but I realize Jesus Christ forgave me at infinite cost to himself ... If I'm proud, Jesus Christ humbled himself at infinite cost to himself.

How can I hold onto grudges? How can I be proud? How can I indulge in lust when he's this great beauty? In other words, you say, "O Savior, why in the world do I want any of these things around?" You start to hate the sin. Not yourself and not the consequences but the sin itself, because it grieves the one who did this for you, and that liberates.

There's an old fairy tale called "The Black Bull of Norrway" about a prince who goes into battle and kills someone he regrets. He's really upset about it and very, very guilty. He comes home and tries to take off his tunic and there's blood on it and he can't get it out. He tries to wash it out. He can't get it out. He feels stained, guilty.

So a decree went out through all of his kingdom in which he said, "Any young woman who can get the stain out of my tunic will be my queen. She is my true love." It's a long story. I can't tell it all to you. At one point, there's a servant girl who doesn't know about the tunic or anything. She's a servant girl, almost a slave. She comes upstairs in the home where she's working. She sees some

laundry around, and she does the laundry.

In the laundry is the tunic, and she washes it and the stain comes out, but she doesn't know the significance of it. The evil mother ... There's always an evil older sort of stepmother. She sees what the girl has done. She knows the significance of it, and she has a daughter, so she grabs the tunic and her daughter (not the servant girl), goes off to the palace, and says, "Look, my daughter got the stain out." The prince says, "Yeah, something is not right," but he gets engaged to her.

There are all these intrigues and twists and turns in the plot, but in the end he finds out who his true love is. Whoever can get the stain out, whoever can reprogram your self-image, whoever can liberate you from that voice that says, "You're condemned, you're no good," that's your true love. Guess what? Sometimes we meet human beings who can go a long way to that. I did. I married her. But he's the true love. He's the real true love, because he can always get the stain out. He can silence that voice. He can liberate you. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you. What great bad and good news this psalm is. On the one hand, it tells us we're sinners, and we modern people don't want to hear that. Yet it shows us a reality that we have to deal with and it gives us all the wherewithal to deal with it, especially the great antidote, which is your Son, Jesus Christ, uncovered for us, stripped, experiencing the dehumanizing gaze, so we could be covered, so we could be completely cleansed. We pray that you would help every single one of us here listening to this tonight to know how to apply that to our lives through your Spirit. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Prayer of Thirst

Pilgrim Prayer—March 8, 2015

Psalm 42–43

**1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.**

**2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?**

**3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
"Where is your God?"**

4 These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

6 My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

8 By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Psalm 43:

1 Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
against an unfaithful nation.

**Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.**

2 You are God my stronghold.

**Why have you rejected me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?**

**3 Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.**

**4 Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.**

**5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.**

The Word of the Lord.

We're looking at a series of psalms. As we go through this psalm, you're going to feel that you're on a couch talking to your therapist. By the way, it looks like it's Psalm 42 and Psalm 43, but you can see why we've put them together and why everyone puts them together. There are three stanzas, and they all end in the same refrain. "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" There are three stanzas that end with the refrain, and, for whatever reason, in the past Psalm 43 got divided from Psalm 42. Everybody understands it as a unit.

Psalms 42 and 43 (I'm going to call them *the psalm*) talk about how to deal with being downcast, how to deal with being despondent, in despair, in darkness. Everybody needs this at many times in life. Whoever you are sitting here, you either need it now or you just needed it and you will again or you'll need it soon. We all go through these times. This is maybe one of the most famous, one of the most beautiful, one of the most practical and wise psalms on what to do with dark times, what to do with being downcast.

I was first introduced to it through a sermon I read in a book many, many years ago when I was in theological school, college, graduate school, by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. (I'll refer back to him in a bit.) He did a remarkable job of opening this passage, and it not only has helped me over the years but I've used it on countless other people as a pastor and as a preacher.

Let's notice that there's a *condition* described, then there are *causes* diagnosed, and then there's a *cure* prescribed. There's the condition of being downcast. It's

described. We'll look at that. Then the psalm actually gives you some idea about the causes of the condition, and then finally gives you three extraordinarily practical cures. There's really nothing better than this psalm for this subject. Let's take a look at it.

1. *The condition.* Three times the author says he is downcast. The word *downcast* is a very strong Hebrew word that means to be dissolved, to be crumpled, to collapse. It's basically a metaphor for complete despair, absolutely giving up. If your will collapses and crumples, if an army collapses and crumples, if a person ... It means you're being blown away. You have nothing left at all. It means to be in complete despair.

Let's just start off by saying this. This psalm (and the Bible in general) says that being downcast is not something that just happens to spiritual midgets; it also happens to spiritual giants. It happens to everybody. I mean not just a little blue but dissolved, decimated, completely despondent, profoundly so.

For example, in 1 Kings 19, it talks about how Elijah, after a great triumph, was plunged into an emotional, psychological despair or depression. He went out into the desert, sat under a broom tree, and prayed that he might die. "Take my life," he said to God. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah says to God, "Take my life." In Numbers, chapter 11, Moses says to God, "Take my life. Kill me." In Jonah, chapter 4, Jonah says, "Take my life. Just kill me right now."

Notice something very important. All three of these men knew they did not have the right to take their own lives, that no one has the right to take their own life. They weren't going to take their own lives, but what they were saying to God was, "I have nothing left. I don't even want to be here. Just kill me." That is downcast. The English word *downcast* actually doesn't get across the strength of this word. It means, "I have nothing left. I don't even want to be here. I'm completely out. I'm spent. I'm crumpled. I'm dissolved. I'm blown away."

Who is Elijah? Who is Moses? These aren't spiritually immature people. This is the crème de la crème. These are our spiritual heroes, and they get despondent. So can you. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter how well you're living or not. Everybody gets into this situation. It will be, at some point, true of everybody. Everyone can become despondent.

In this situation (this is important to see), this is actually a specific kind of being downcast. It's a specific spiritual condition. It can exist with others. Oh my goodness, yes. But it also should be distinguished, because it is its own condition. You get at it when you see what's *not* here. Three times it says, "I pant for you. I thirst for you." "As a deer pants, so my soul pants." That means thirst. Then in the next phrase it says, "My soul thirsts for you."

Thirst, dehydration ... I don't mean just a little thirsty. This is an arid climate. These are people who knew what the desert was like. They're talking about how animals or human beings are when you really are in the heat and you have nothing to drink. To be dying of dehydration is an absolute agony. The word *pant*

means to deeply yearn, to yearn in a poignant, agonizing way. He says, “I am agonizingly panting, thirsting after God himself.”

“When will I come to the living God?” He actually says, “When can I go and meet with God?” Literally it’s, “When can I get to the face of God?” Here’s what this is talking about. God is not real to him. He believes in God, but he wants the living God. What that means is, “I want the reality of God. I don’t just want to believe in God as an abstraction. I want to sense his presence, his face.” That’s gone. God is absent. He’s not real to him at all.

This spiritual condition … Let’s call it spiritual dryness, a sense of being deserted by God, a sense that God is not there, a sense of God’s complete unreality. What I want you to see is that can certainly go along with other things, but it actually can exist all by itself. Here’s what I mean. Notice, for example, there’s no talk about guilt here. Often when you have a psalm that talks about “My tears have been my food,” the psalmist is crying and weeping because “I’ve done wrong. I have sinned against thee and in thy sight.” There’s no talk about that here.

Sometimes spiritual desertion, a sense that God is not there, can go along with having done something and you’re guilty and you feel ashamed of it, but that has not happened here, and yet he’s still thirsty. He still senses God’s unreality. God isn’t alive to him anymore. He just doesn’t feel him at all. He feels completely gone, but there’s no guilt. Not only that; there’s no tragedy or suffering. Another thing that casts us into darkness is terrible tragedy, terrible suffering, but if you look here, there’s no talk about something like that.

Often the psalmist says, “Here’s an invading army, and they have killed my people or they have sacked Jerusalem. Why are you letting this happen?” There’s no talk like that. There are a couple of references to enemies, if you notice, but it doesn’t seem that the enemies are an imminent danger, only that he’s sad that his enemies are seeing his spiritual dryness and sorrow. There’s no indication that the enemies are about to break in on him.

In other words, it’s true that you can feel deserted by God, you can feel a sense that God is not there, you can feel this tremendous spiritual thirst and dryness if you feel guilty because you’ve done something wrong or if something horrible has happened to you, and yet you can have it anyway. That’s what’s interesting here. It can be there anyway. Sometimes it can be there even when you haven’t done anything wrong, even when nothing terrible has happened.

You still sense God’s absence. You still feel this agonizing yearning that he’s not there, that you don’t feel his presence. So that’s the condition, and we’re going to look at that condition. Of course, even though it can go along with other conditions (and very often does) … Honestly, if there’s tremendous suffering in your life, if some terrible tragedy has happened to you, God doesn’t seem real, or if you’ve done something terribly wrong, God doesn’t seem real. If you have a problem with your conscience or something like that, God doesn’t seem real.

I want you to see that it’s possible to be doing everything right, like Elijah or

Moses ... Doing everything right and suddenly feeling like, "Where is God? I feel like he's not even there." For Christians, very often this is conscious. Christians have conscious times in which, "I don't feel like I know where God is. He just doesn't seem to be real to me." I want to show you as we go along that actually everybody experiences this, because even people who don't believe in God need God.

The Bible teaches that human beings need God as much as animals and we need water physically. We need God spiritually as much as we need water physically. When we don't have water physically, we're dazed, we're dehydrated, we're disoriented. If we don't have a connection with God spiritually, there's an emptiness, a disorientation, a dislocation. It's very profound.

Christians know what it is. "I don't sense God." People who don't believe actually experience it too, which we'll get to in a minute. There's the condition: spiritual absence, a sense that God is not there, lack of reality, spiritual dryness, thirst. It can happen to anybody, and it can happen even when you're doing fine and you're not living in a wrong way.

2. *The causes.* I'd like you to see that there are far more causes, or triggers, than are in here. There are many things that can trigger it (I'll mention that in a minute), but there are a couple of things that trigger it here that are helpful. After looking at specific causes that might be the triggers for this sense of spiritual absence and thirst, I will then talk about the root cause. Here are a couple of specific causes.

A. *His rhythms of worship and Christian community or fellowship have been disrupted.* In verse 4, he says, "**These things I remember ... how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise ...**" Then down in verse 6 he says, "[Now] **I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.**"

We don't know all the background here. We don't really know all what this means, but it looks like he has moved. It looks like he used to go to the temple, or he used to go someplace where he was worshiping, but he has not only moved away from where he worshiped but he has also moved away from the friends he worshiped with. Actually, this happens a lot.

When I was a college student, I found vital saving faith in Jesus Christ at college, and I was part of a college campus fellowship of Christians. God seemed very real to me, but when I went home in the summer, God didn't seem very real to me. Actually, when I graduated and left college I struggled too. This can happen all the time. You find God in the city and move to the suburbs and you don't feel him. I can understand that.

On the other hand, it's also true you can find God in the suburbs and move to the city and not feel him, or you find God in college and you leave and ... Why? Here's a little practical tip. In the beginning of our Christian lives, a lot of times our relationship with God is more secondhand than we think it is. We tend to

experience God through other people who experience God, more than we would think.

God seems real to me because I'm with people for whom God is real. When I leave them, then God is not real. He doesn't seem to be there. Very often it's because we actually haven't established our own relationship with God. How do you do that? Well, your own prayer life, your own Christian thought life. More than that, you actually have to go through bad things, difficult things, with him and, when it's all over, sense that he was with you all the way and see how he was with you all the way. That just takes time.

Sometimes, if you're with a group or you're in a certain setting, you move to some other place and God doesn't seem real. In a way that's good, because you need to establish your own relationship with God, but wherever you go I can tell you this. He senses a loss of spiritual reality when he's away from worship, when he's away from Christian friends. I want you to know you can't experience God's reality in your little individualistic cell.

You always have to have a place to worship. You always have to have Christian community and friends with whom you can talk about your common faith. Why? Because you're a social being and you're a physical being. Therefore, unless you're knowing God in the worship service, not just in your little prayer life, unless you're knowing God with other people, not just all by yourself privately ...

Because you're a social being and a physical being, unless you're, in a sense, connecting to God with your whole being, all aspects of yourself, God won't be real to you. You have to keep that in mind. Very often, the spiritual absence means there has been some kind of change, and you have to reestablish your relationship with him and, certainly, sometimes reestablish Christian relationships or church relationships and that sort of thing.

B. *The environment.* You see in verse 10 he says, “... **my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’**” Here we're talking about not so much your worship and your fellowship. We're talking about the external environment of the culture in which you live. Just to be evenhanded, let me put it like this.

If you are living in a very conservative, religious, traditional environment, where everybody believes, or even in a family in which everybody believes, very often God does not seem real to you because God is taken for granted. “Well, everybody believes that.” If you come to a place like New York, which is more like *this*, where people are very skeptical of faith, and Christianity in particular ...

If you're surrounded by people you're working with and friends who think you're crazy for believing in Jesus (or who *would* think you're crazy if you were honest with them about what you believe), that very often can work on you. Frankly, if everybody around you, every day, always thinks you're crazy, you start to feel crazy. Therefore, the external environment is another thing that can start to make God feel unreal. Or a change, a dislocation in Christian relationships or worship,

can also make God feel unreal. Here's another thing.

C. *Physical conditions*. Here's where I'd like to tell you about how many factors can be involved. It says in verse 3, "**My tears have been my food day and night ...**" This is interesting. That's a rhetorical way of saying, "I'm not eating." When he says, "My tears have been my food day and night," what he's probably saying is a) "I have no appetite because all I'm eating is my tears," and b) "I'm actually not sleeping either. I'm crying."

He's downcast and he has a loss of appetite. He's not sleeping well. At that point, you recognize signs of what people today would call *clinical depression*. Let me say something about the sermon I read years ago by Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a Christian physician. That is to say, before he went into the preaching ministry he was a medical doctor, and a pretty good one, working at a pretty high level.

When he read this passage and he was preaching on it, he said something very interesting. Let me read it to you and tell you what he means. He notices that there are physical symptoms. The man is downcast, but part of the problem is he's not eating and sleeping. He basically says, "Physical conditions play their part in all of this. It's difficult to draw lines here, but some physical conditions promote depression.

There are some in whose cases it is clear to me that the cause of their depression is mainly physical. On the other hand, when you are physically weak, you're more prone to attacks of spiritual discouragement and depression. If you recognize that the physical may be partly responsible for the spiritual condition and make allowances for this, you will be better able to deal with the spiritual issues."

Here's what he's doing. As a very good Christian minister who's also a physician, he knows that all depressions, all experiences of downcast, are always complex. You have a physical nature, a spiritual nature, a moral nature, and an emotional nature, and they're all involved when you go into darkness. They're all involved when you get downcast. You mustn't reduce the solution to just one of those things. They all have to be treated. See what he's saying?

He says, "Only if you realize that, yes, maybe you do need to change your diet. Maybe you do need nutrition. Maybe you do need medicine. You need to do some physical treatment that will put you in a position where you can deal with the spiritual issues." He won't say it's all spiritual. He won't say it's all physical. I have to say most people just reduce it. For example, evangelical Christians, when they talk with a downcast person, very often just reduce it to, "Well, you just need to do the right thing." This can happen.

If you talk to an evangelical Christian friend and say, "I'm downcast," they might say, "Oh really? Have you prayed in faith? Have you confessed all known sin? Have you claimed the promises? Have you rebuked the Devil? Have you pleaded the blood? Have you thanked God for all the blessings you actually do have?"

Like, "If you just do all these things right, everything will be fine." Kind of reducing it to, "Well, you have these moral issues. You need to repent and get on the stick." No consideration of the physical. No consideration of the emotional. No consideration that there needs to be love.

On the other hand, in 1 Kings 19 ... Remember I talked about 1 Kings 19? It's the place where Elijah goes into this deep gloom, this deep despondency, and he says, "Take my life away." What does God do for Elijah? Oh my word. I've never gotten over this. God sends an angel, but what does the angel do? Go read it tonight. In 1 Kings 19, the angel comes. Elijah has just said, "Take away my life," and then he falls asleep.

When the angel gets there, do you know what he does? While Elijah is sleeping, he cooks him a meal. It's the only place in the Bible where an angel cooks a meal. I've often wondered, "What did he make him, and how much nutmeg did he use?" Inquiring minds want to know. What's amazing to me is he cooks him a meal, and then he wakes Elijah up and says, "You're tired. You're exhausted. You need food."

You would think that an angel talking to a depressed prophet would come from God and say, "Thus saith the Lord, 'Why do you doubt me? Get on the stick.'" But no. It's like, "You need something to eat. You need to take a walk. You need to get your strength back." See, the Bible actually is far more multidimensional ... I'll put it this way. Christianity always accounts for the complexity of things better than any other view.

Secular therapy says, "Take a pill. It's brain chemistry. It's all clinical." Moralistic Christians say, "Just repent and go through my list of things and get it done." There's another view of things where you just support the person. Help their self-esteem. Just love them. Just talk with them. The problem is you have a moral nature, a physical nature, a spiritual nature, and an emotional nature. You need to do all of those things.

It doesn't matter what triggers the despondency. Whatever starts it, once you're into it, all of those aspects are true, and you have to deal with all of them. Dr. Lloyd-Jones said so, because he recognized that, as both a minister who knows it's never just physical and as a physician who also was willing to say, "But it's also spiritual."

For all of these reasons you can get downcast. To deal with them, you need to say, "I need to get into fellowship. I need to be willing to get more support from God. I maybe need some kind of physical treatment. On the other hand, maybe I do need to make some changes." We're going to talk about the cures in a minute, but there are many, many factors.

Here's the issue underneath the issue. I've been through this passage many times and preached on it many times over the years, but in my study for you I found a Hebrew scholar, Robert Alter, who points out that all the way through here the psalmist does something a bit unusual. He does talk about the fact ...

For example, he says, "Why, my soul, are you cast down? Put your hope in God. My soul is cast down; therefore I will remember you."

He uses the word *soul* and he uses the word *I*. "These things *I* remember." In Hebrew it's possible to take a verb and use an intensification of it. You can have an intensive form of a verb. If you take the word *concern* and make it an intensive form, then it means frightened. If you take a word and make it intensive, it puts it on steroids, as it were. What this man is doing is he's taking the first person pronoun, the word *I*, and he's putting it in an intensive form, which is rather unusual.

Therefore, when he talks about, "My soul is cast down because I'm yearning for you," this is what he's saying. "I (my deepest core being, my identity) need God. I'm looking for something that only God will satisfy." C.S. Lewis put it very well when he said something like, "Most people, if they really learned how to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never keep their promise.

The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love or first think of some foreign country or first take up some subject that excites us are longings which no marriage, no travel, and no learning can really satisfy. I am not speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages, or trips, and so on. I'm speaking of even the best possible ones. There is always something we grasp at in the first moment of longing that just fades away in the reality. The spouse may be a good spouse. The scenery has been excellent. It has turned out to be a good job, but *it*, the thing we were looking for, has evaded us."

Those of you who are young ... If you want to be offended by what I'm about to tell you, fine, but you're wrong. When you're young, you don't know how unhappy and discontent you are, because you're sure that if you get a decent job, if you find the right love partners and relationships, if you make a little bit of money ... You're in preparation for the future, and you're sure that as long as you play your cards right and you have the family, the love, the money, the career, you'll be satisfied.

You think you'll be satisfied, because everybody is looking for satisfaction and contentment and fulfillment. As time goes on, you're going to find out that those ordinary things don't give it to you, even the best possible ones. Then you're going to start to ask the question, "Why?" A lot of people over the years say, "No, it'll be fine. I'm not going to be discontent." Yes, you will be. You won't be any different than anybody else.

As the years go by, you will find that the things you thought would make you happy, even a good marriage ... One of the problems about having no marriage or a bad marriage is you think that if you had a good marriage everything would be great. Okay, I have a good marriage. Everything is not great. It's not enough to satisfy the deepest parts of your heart. Nor is career, nor is a cause, nor is art, nor is anything.

Why not? For this reason. You may not believe in God at all, and you're wondering why you're discontent. It's because of what the psalmist is saying here. In the core of the core of my being, I thirst for God. If I don't have God, I will never be satisfied. The glory I'm looking for in all of my pursuits, the love I'm looking for in all of my relationships, I can only find in him. Ultimately, that's the reason we very often find ourselves being blue or gloomy or downcast or unhappy or dissatisfied.

It's because we need God. We were built for God, and nothing else will satisfy. That's the cause beneath all of the other causes of why, very often, we feel cut off from God: because we're human beings, because we don't have the perfect relationship with God, and yet we're built for a perfect relationship with God. Sometimes the loss of that, the unreality of that, gets through to us.

3. *The cure.* When you're in the downcast situation, especially this kind, where you really sense God not being real, there are three things this text tells you to do. I want you to know these three things work. It may take you years to learn how to do them. I have to admit that, but these three things work.

A. *Pray even when you don't feel like it.* This is one thing you definitely can do, and I know you won't, but you should. What does he say? "I pour out my soul." "**These things I remember as I pour out my soul ... My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you ...**" He's talking to God. Even though God is not real to him, he is intensely, in a sustained way, reflectively and eloquently praying. God is not real to him, but he's praying anyway.

If God is not real to you, go and pray about the fact that he's not real to you. If you're prayerless, go and pray about your prayerlessness. If you're angry at God, go tell *him* you're angry at him. If God is not real to you and you don't actually go and talk with him, he'll stay unreal to you 10 times longer than if you go. If you *do* go and pray (I'm going to tell you other things to do), it's a little bit like opening your eyes in the dark in the middle of the night.

Very often what will happen is you'll wake up in the middle of the night, and let's just say it's completely dark. When you first open your eyes, you can't see a thing. You could close your eyes, and you still won't see a thing. The other thing you do, which you *should* do, is you keep your eyes open and you notice they adjust.

At first it's just all dark, but the next thing you know you can see the edge of the bed, and maybe you can see a little bit of light coming through the door. That's what you need to do. In the darkness, open your eyes and look into the darkness. That is to say, you pray into the darkness. You keep your eyes open and you pray and talk to God, and you will find the darkness will start to lift, in a way. You'll start to see some things.

It's extremely important to do that. You might say it's one of the simplest and most practical things you can do. Pray, and pray a lot, when you don't feel like praying at all. As a pastor, I can tell you I've told people this over the years. They

find that extraordinarily hard. I know. So what? This is still the way forward. There's no alternative to it. So first of all, pour out your soul. Pray even though you don't feel like it.

B. *Challenge yourself about your hopes.* In a way, this is the heart of the whole psalm. This is the key to the whole thing. If you see, he's getting better. If you read through the thing carefully, there are three stanzas. Each time he ends with a refrain. He's getting a little more hopeful as time goes on. Here's what he says over and over again. **"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."** He does that three times.

Here's what he's doing. He's actually doing two things at once. First, he's talking to himself, not just listening to himself. Do you know the difference? I know many people who only know how to listen to themselves. And you should. You should learn how to go into your heart and say, "What am I feeling?" It's important not to be out of touch with your feelings. You need to know if you're angry. You need to know if you're scared. You need to know if you're sad. You need to know what you're feeling.

It doesn't mean you shouldn't listen to your heart, but if you *only* listen to your heart, you are dead meat. Do you know why? Because at times like this, here's what your heart is going to be saying: "It's terrible. It's terrible. It's awful. It's never going to get better." That's how you feel. If all you do is listen to your heart, you are dead meat. Do you know the difference between listening to your heart and talking to yourself?

What he's doing here is he has listened to his heart ... Sure he knows, but now he turns around and talks to his heart. He starts to say, "Listen, self." It's one thing to listen to yourself, but at a certain point you have to talk to yourself and say, "Hey, self. This is what you need to know." Do you know how to do that? Do you know how to, in a sense, preach to yourself? That's what he's doing here. It's the key to the whole thing.

Notice he's not just taking himself in hand and talking to himself and preaching to himself. He's not talking about his feelings. He doesn't say three times, "Buck up." Frankly, you can't control feelings. He doesn't just say, "Stop feeling bad." I guess you could do that, but that's pretty unhealthy to deny or squelch your feelings. That's not what he's talking about.

What he's doing is talking to himself about his hopes. What does that mean? He's actually analyzing why he feels what he does. Your feelings come from what you hope in, what you rely on, what you rest on for your happiness, for your security, for your significance. Listen carefully. Let me give you an example of how you do this.

You've listened to yourself, but now you talk to yourself. You say, "Self, wait a minute. Why are you feeling so afraid? You're feeling afraid because something has been threatened. What is being threatened? Why is that so important to me?"

Why do I feel like I can't experience life joyfully without it? Why do I think that God isn't enough for me? Why should I give that so much control over me?"

What are you doing? You're looking at your hopes. What is it you've really rested your hope in? What is it you've really rested your happiness, your security, your significance, and your self-worth in? What have you done? He's not just listening to himself. He's talking to himself and saying, "Change your hopes. Hope in God. Something has changed, but I'm going to hope in God." If you do hope in God, your feelings will start to heal. Do you know how to do that?

C. *Comfort yourself with God's unconditional love.* He says in verse 6, "**My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you ...**" Oh, therefore I will remember you. How so? Verse 8: "**By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.**"

The word *love* there is the Hebrew word *cheeced*, which means unconditional love, committed love, love no matter what. He heals his heart. He challenges himself. He says, "Hey, self." He takes himself by the hand. He's not just talking to himself soothingly. He's challenging himself over what he really hopes in, but then he's comforting himself with God's unconditional love.

I must say in the Old Testament God's unconditional love is rather inexplicable. Do you know how inexplicable it is? In the Old Testament, God says, "I will never clear the guilty. No one can look at my face and live. You must not walk into the tabernacle. I'll kill you if you touch the mountain, because I'm holy and you're a sinner." Then over here he says, "But I love you. I'm completely committed to you no matter what."

How do those two things work? If you were an Old Testament believer, there was almost no way to know. In the New Testament we *do* know. When Jesus Christ went to the cross, he said two things that are germane to us today. He said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and he said, "I thirst." Do you know why? Jesus Christ was experiencing the absence of God, and it wasn't just a feeling. He was actually *being* deserted by God.

When he says, "I thirst ..." Yeah, he was talking about the fact that as a human being with a physical body he was thirsty, but he was talking about something much deeper. He was talking about the cosmic thirst that comes from being completely cut off from God. Why did he experience that? The Bible says because he went to the cross and got what you and I deserve.

As human beings who have sinned, who have done wrong, what do we deserve? We deserve the absence of God. We deserve to lose the living God. We deserve the horrible thirst of not being with the one we were made for, but Jesus Christ experienced that on the cross in our place, which means if I believe in God through Jesus Christ, now, because Jesus Christ was really deserted for me, I only *feel* deserted by God, but I'm not. He is with me.

Because Jesus Christ took the cosmic thirst, I only have the temporary spiritual thirst that comes sometimes because of changes, because of all of these various

factors. What that means is we have the ability to heal ourselves in a way that this man did not. We know why God loves us unconditionally. If you think about what Jesus Christ has done on the cross for you, as you're feeling dry and deserted ...

When you say, "He went through real desertion so that right now I'm only having a sense of desertion, but God is with me. I know he's with me. God would never desert me, because he deserted Jesus in my place. There's no condemnation for me ..." Thinking of him doing that for you, thinking the fact that God is really there with you, you will find the water starts to flow.

You will find the darkness starts to lift. You will find the sense of God's absence starts to go away. When it's over, you will find that you're holier, happier, deeper, and wiser than you were before. It says in verse 9, "God is my Rock." It reminds us of that hymn that goes:

*I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name
On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Let me pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us this counseling. We thank you for the gospel therapy. We thank you for the description of the condition, the prescription, the diagnosis, and we ask that you would help us to apply it to our lives by your Holy Spirit. We mostly thank you that you have made it available to us, this great medicine, because of the work of your Son Jesus Christ. It's in his name we pray, amen.

Prayer of Rest

Pilgrim Prayer—March 15, 2015

Psalm 91

**1 Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.**

**2 I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."**

3 Surely he will save you

**from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.**

**4 He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.**

**5 You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,**

**6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.**

**7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.**

**8 You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.**

**9 If you say, "The Lord is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,**

**10 no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.**

**11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;**

**12 they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.**

**13 You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.**

**14 "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.**

**15 He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.**

**16 With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."**

This is the Word of the Lord.

Every single week leading up to Good Friday and Easter, we're looking at psalms that help us understand the workings of the human heart, and especially how to understand our own hearts. This particular psalm is about how to have your heart at peace during times of difficulty, how to have hearts at peace in the midst of a very dangerous world, dangerous circumstances.

When I started out in the ministry, I was in my 20s. I was in a church that had a lot of elderly people in it, so I often went to the nursing home. I went to see people who were shut in. One of the things I noticed about older people was they worried all the time. They were very anxious. They worried about their children. They worried about their neighbors. They worried about their friends. They worried about themselves.

I remember thinking, “Phew! Old people. They worry all the time.” I remember thinking, “Worry doesn’t get you anywhere. It doesn’t solve a thing. It doesn’t get anything done. It’s just a useless thing.” I realize now, looking back on it, that one of the reasons I didn’t worry as much when I was young was that I had this implicit belief that, yeah, bad things happen, but they don’t happen to me or to people I’m close to. They don’t happen to anybody I know.

What happens to everyone is, as you get older, those things *do* happen, and they happen more and more. You come to understand how dangerous a world there is. Bereavement (people dying on you), serious illness, relational betrayal, and financial reversal, just to name four. There is no way to stop those things from happening.

No matter how savvy you are, no matter how much planning, no matter how powerful or successful you are, there’s no way to stop those things from coming into your life. They *will* come into your life. It’s a dangerous world. Shakespeare’s great line, “Each new morn, new widows howl, new orphans cry.”

So how do you get peace and poise in your heart in the face of a world like this? How do you live in a world like this and have peace and poise in your heart? That’s the question. This psalm is about that. It starts off with making a remarkable promise in the first four verses (it says it very clearly). Then in the middle part of the psalm, it describes the promise in ways that show us it’s actually very difficult to know quite how to read it, how to understand the promise.

So there’s the promise, and then the middle part shows us it’s not that easy to understand exactly what the promise means. At the end, however, we will learn how we can rightly understand the promise so we can enter into what it promises. There’s a peace that’s offered. Then we’re going to see it’s very easy to misunderstand what the promise is, but if we misunderstand the promise, we won’t be able to enter into the peace that’s given to us. So there’s *the claim*, there’s *the misunderstanding of the claim*, and then *how we can take hold of the claim* in such a way that we enter into the peace that’s offered.

1. *The claim (or promise)*. In the first four verses, it’s extremely clear. We’re told God is a shelter. God is shade. Do you see the word *shadow*? It’s the same word as *shade*. Shade from the sun in a hot, terrible climate. In a hot climate, the sun can be lethal. Getting into shade or the shadow can be a matter of life and death. He’s our refuge. He’s our fortress. Then finally it says, “**He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge ...**”

There is image after image after image that says, “God will protect you.” Probably

the most vivid image is this one where it says, “**He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge ...**” The wings of God is actually a metaphor that is used fairly often, and it evokes one of the most familiar and vivid sights we’ve all had: a mother bird protecting her young by spreading her wings over them, protecting them from the rain, from the sun, from predators.

This image of a mother bird protecting her young with her wings conveys several things. It conveys strength. By the way, sometimes God is actually likened to a mother eagle and it talks about eagles’ wings. It’s strength and protection, but it’s also tenderness. The image conveys tenderness and love, and it conveys a third thing, which we’ll get back to.

This metaphor is often evoked in the Bible. Boaz says to Ruth in Ruth, chapter 2, “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” Psalm 36: “Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Psalm 57: “In you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster is past.” Psalm 61: “I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shadow of your wings.”

Over and over again, God is likened to a mother bird who protects her young with outstretched wings, protects from the elements, from predators, and so on. The vast majority of metaphors that describe God in the Bible are he’s a king and he’s father. They’re overwhelmingly masculine, but this occasional evoking of God as a mother bird, I think, is there partly to make sure we don’t misunderstand and think of God ever as remote and distant, which some human fathers can be. We’re not allowed to do that.

This is a God who will protect you. Who’s *you*? It says, “**I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’**” *My God* is covenant language. In the Bible, when God says, “You will be my people; I will be your God,” that is covenant language. When it says, “My God, in whom I trust,” we’re saying, “If you trust God, if you’ve given your life to God, if you have entered into a covenant relationship with God, the promise is he will protect you.” There it is. That’s the claim. So how do we understand that? If we trust God, he will protect us. What does that mean?

2. *The misunderstanding of the claim.* In the middle part of this psalm, it starts to describe God’s protection, and the statements are so incredibly sweeping. Notice it seems to say that if you trust God you won’t experience violence. You know, the terror of night, the arrow that flies by day. “**A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.**” That seems to be saying you won’t experience violence.

You won’t experience disease. See verse 6? “**... nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.**” Down in verse 10 it says, “**... no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near [you].**” No harm, no disaster, no violence, no sickness. Finally, it actually goes so far as to say, in verse 12, you won’t stub your toe. “[The angels] **will lift you up in their**

hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

It looks like this is what it's saying. You read it through, and at first reading it seems to be saying, “If you trust God, nothing really bad will happen to you. If you trust God, your life will go smoothly.” Of course, that would also imply the opposite, that if your life is not going smoothly, you're not trusting God. You're not being faithful to him in some way.

Is that how we should read this? If you trust God, everything will go well, and if everything is not going well, it means you're not trusting God. Is that what it's saying? Is that how we're supposed to understand and read the promise? Right away, there should be three reasons that immediately give us pause. I think any thoughtful reader will know there are three reasons why you shouldn't read it that way.

The first reason is because you want so desperately for that to be the way to read it. We read that and we desperately want it to say that. Whenever you know you desperately want a text to say something, you should realize, “I'm not objective here.” It should right away give you some pause. “Okay, maybe I'm not reading it right.”

The second reason it should give us pause is because even inside the Hebrew Scriptures, inside the Old Testament, you have the book of Job. If you remember the book of Job, Job experiences a lot of these things. He experiences disaster. He experiences violence. Harm overtakes him. Disease and pestilence overtake him. A lot of the things it says won't happen to you if you trust God happened to Job.

Then Job gets these guys who come to see him, and they're called Job's friends, so-called. Job's friends definitely read it that way. They say, “Job, if you trust in God, he will not let bad things happen to you. Bad things are happening to you; therefore, you must not be trusting God somewhere. You must be not being faithful to God somewhere.” That's what they say, but as you know, at the end of the book of Job, God shows up in a whirlwind, in a storm, and he looks down at Job's friends, and what does he say? “You have not spoken truth about me.”

There's God looking at these guys who say, “If you trust God, bad things don't happen to you. If bad things are happening to you, it's because you're not having faith or something.” God looks them right in the eye and says, “You have not spoken truth about me.” If you have ever read the book of Job, you realize that you can't read Psalm 91 that way either. Otherwise, you're like Job's friends. If you read it that way, God says, “You are not thinking truth about me.”

The third reason we should not read Psalm 91 that way is because Satan wants you to read it that way. I know a lot of you are sitting there saying, “I've never heard a Presbyterian minister say anything like that.” “The Devil wants you to read it that way.” Usually Presbyterians don't talk like that, do they? Well, no, and I usually don't talk that way either, but the reason I'm talking like that is this.

You know how Shakespeare says the Devil can quote Scripture for his purpose?

It's a famous saying. Do you know that in the Bible there is one place where the Devil actually does quote Scripture? Shakespeare is not lying. There's one place in the New Testament where the Devil actually quotes Scripture, and the Scripture the Devil quotes is Psalm 91. So whenever you're reading Psalm 91, always remember the Devil knows this psalm and quotes it.

But what does he do with it? If you go to Luke, chapter 4, you will see Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness. What he's doing there is trying to derail Jesus. He's trying to get Jesus off target. One of the ways he does it is he quotes Psalm 91. In fact, he quotes Psalm 91, verse 11, which is the most extreme statement in Psalm 91. "If you trust God, God will protect you, and you won't even stub your foot."

He quotes this to Jesus and says, "If God lets you suffer, he is not being true to his word. Look. God promises that you will not suffer, so if you suffer, that means God can't be trusted." Satan is nothing if not strategic. Satan knows that if you believe that, if you read Psalm 91 or any other text of the Bible like that ... If you come to believe, "If I really trust God and I'm really true to him, then God is not going to let bad things happen to me," he knows what that's going to do.

It means eventually you will be deeply disappointed. It means you will pull back from God. You will never come to know the powerful promise that's here. He doesn't want you to know that. Lastly, as you get older, you'll not only get more and more anxious (which we do as we get older), but you'll get more and more angry and bitter. It will totally derail your life. Satan is nothing if not strategic.

It's really interesting. There must be something so powerful that's being given to us here in Psalm 91 that the forces of darkness want you to misread it so that you don't get it. Well, then how can we start reading it right? What does it mean, then? What does it mean that God protects us? To give us a better idea of that, I'll give you one biblical story and three biblical statements that will get us started toward reading it rightly.

The biblical story ... I could have chosen more than one, but I still think probably the best one is the story of Joseph. It's in the book of Genesis. Most of you know something about it. Some of you know it well. It starts with Jacob. Jacob has a group of sons. He has Joseph, but he has other sons. Jacob, because of his own problems, because of the way *his* mother and father treated him, because of his own family history, favors one son over all of the others.

He very visibly, very obviously favors Joseph over all of his brothers. You know what poison that is in a family. What you see happening as you read the story is, first of all, Joseph, even by the time he's an adolescent, is becoming entitled. He's becoming spoiled. He's becoming arrogant. He's becoming cruel. You can see it in his dreams. The brothers are becoming murderously bitter and angry and hard.

As the story progresses, the brothers actually sell Joseph into slavery, and he goes to Egypt. Down in Egypt it gets even worse, because one of his employers

falsely accuses him, and he ends up in a dungeon, in a prison. Not just a slave but in prison. For years, as far as we can tell, for decades, everything goes wrong. At every point where he would have cried out and said, "God, help me," there would have been just silence. Year after year, decade after decade, time after time, everything goes wrong. God never comes through. No answers.

Yet we all know that, in the end, if all of that hadn't happened, if all that disaster hadn't happened, if all the violence, if all of those bad things hadn't happened, Joseph would never have become a great man. He never would have escaped the mean, self-absorbed person he was becoming. He would never have become a great man. Secondly, the brothers never would have been humbled and healed psychologically. Thirdly, multitudes of people, including his family, would have starved.

Joseph was protected from being the wreck he was becoming. He was protected from his own arrogance. He was protected from his father's loving mistreatment of him. He was protected, basically, from his brothers. His brothers were protected from themselves. The people were protected from starvation. All this protection was going on because of all this disaster that happened under God's control as part of his plan.

Now here are the three statements. The first statement is actually at the end of the story, Genesis 50:20, where Joseph says to his brothers, "You meant all these things for evil, but God meant them for good." The second statement is basically an elaboration on that first statement. It's very famous. It's Romans 8:28. It's often quoted, but please listen to it.

It says, "All things work together for good to those that love God and are called according to his purpose." It's often quoted, not very often understood. "All things work *together* for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Notice when it says "All things work together," that little word *together* is so important. There's nothing Pollyanna-ish about this. There's nothing superficial about this.

This is not saying, "Well, all of these bad things are really good things. Every cloud has a silver lining," or "Even bad things actually are good if you just learn to look at it like this." No, no, no. Bad things are bad things. Horrible things are horrible things. God didn't create a world with evil, violence, war, sickness, aging, and death. None of those things. He didn't create the world that way. They're the result of our sin that has come into the world. That's what the Bible says.

But when it says everything, even the terrible things, even the *most* terrible things, work together for good, what that means is that even though those things are terrible (there's nothing good about them) God somehow is bringing his power to bear on all things in such a way that we will see from the vantage point of eternity that every bad thing that happened in the end brought about something better and more glorious than would have happened if the bad thing hadn't happened.

In other words, the bad thing brings about something better than if it hadn't happened, which means all the evil intention of evildoers will be utterly thwarted. Evil will be absolutely defeated, if it's really true (and it is) that every bad thing that happens in the end only leads to something more glorious and great than if it hadn't happened.

The third statement, which I think is actually the most important statement that will help us understand how to read Psalm 91 and not read it wrongly, is Luke, chapter 21, verses 16–18. It's nowhere near as well known as the other passages I just read to you. It's Jesus' own statement. Listen carefully.

Jesus was talking to his disciples, and his disciples were listening in. Jesus was saying, "You're going to be persecuted. Bad things are going to happen. After I'm gone, many bad things are going to happen to you." Listen to what he says, though. Listen very carefully. "You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, family, and friends. Some of you will be put to death. You will all be hated for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish, and in patience you will possess your souls." Did you hear that? I'm going to read it again. Listen carefully.

"You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, family, and friends. Some of you will even be put to death, but not a hair of your head will perish." Wait a minute. Did he really say that? "Some of you will be betrayed. You'll be thrown into prison. You'll have your goods plundered. In fact, some of you will actually be killed, but not a hair of your head will perish." What? Then he says, "And in patience you will possess your souls."

What is he saying? I actually think it's the clearest of all. We've already gotten close to it. We've moved toward it in Joseph. Joseph needed to be protected from a whole lot of things that would destroy him forever. So did his brothers. So did everybody. The hair on their heads, spiritually speaking, you might say, in the ultimate sense ... The only way they could really be protected was by other things coming into their lives.

When Jesus says, "Bad things will happen to you, but not a hair of your head will perish," and then he adds (which is very helpful), "And in patience you will possess your souls," I think there you have a key. If you love anything more than God, if there's anything in your life that gives you meaning in life more than him and his love ... You can believe in God. You can even go to church. You can be a good person.

You can believe in Christianity, but if there's anything in your life that's more important to you than God, you don't possess your own soul. *That* has the title to your soul. It owns you. A career. Everybody should care about your job. Your career matters, but if it's the most important thing to you, if it's the thing that really turns your crank, that really gives you meaning in life, gives you your self-worth, much more than your relationship with God, then it owns you.

You don't possess your own soul. It possesses you. It will drive you. You'll be anxious. You'll be up and down all the time. There will be no rest in your life.

There will be no poise. There will be no peace. Only when something bad happens to your career and if you take shelter under his wings ... What does that mean? What it means is when you reinvest in God that which was invested in this thing you're losing now because bad things are happening, you become somebody else. You become yourself.

In that sense, you possess your soul in patience. The word *patience* there means longsuffering. "In suffering," Jesus says, "if you rest in me and trust in me, then when the bad things happen, you will become a person who finally, in a sense, is self-possessed." That is to say, you're not scared. You're not up and down. You'll become a person with that peace, with that poise.

Look at Joseph. He would never have become a person of power, of depth. He needed to be protected from his own self-absorption, and he was. Here's what this means. If you read Psalm 91 in a superficial way and say, "Well, this means no bad thing will happen to me," here's what you're actually saying.

"Oh, Psalm 91 is telling me that all of the things I love more than God that, though I don't know them, are actually possessing my soul and making me a somebody who will never be able to handle hardship, never be able to handle trouble, never be able to handle the dangers of life ... I'll just be wracked. I'll be whipsawed back and forth between anxiety and having my head inflated because my career is going well and being destroyed because it's not going well. I will never, ever, ever be a person of poise and peace if I hold on to all these things."

You can't read Psalm 91 as saying, "God is going to let me keep all of the things I love more than him." That would be the worst thing for you. Instead, you have to recognize what it's really saying. "I will protect you. I will protect the real you. I'll protect the you that will last forever. I will protect the only part of you that really matters. There are a lot of other parts of you that need to be shed anyway."

We're on the verge of knowing what this means. It means you must trust God *in* trouble in order to become a person who can handle trouble, not trust that God will prevent or make you exempt *from* trouble, which would be the worst thing possible for you. It would have been for Joseph. You say, "Okay, that's not easy, to trust God in trouble."

3. *How we can take hold of the claim.* Let's look at the last three verses. The last three verses is a kind of oracle. It's basically God speaking very directly to the reader. By the way, it not only proves that what I'm saying is right but also shows you how to get the power to trust him when troubles happen. Notice it says in verse 15, "I will be with him *in* trouble." There it is. It does not say, "I will be with him (the one who trusts in me) and prevent trouble from happening."

If you read the rest of the psalm wrongly, when you got to verse 15 you'd say, "What's that doing there? It looked to me like he said, 'I'll protect you *from* trouble.'" No, it says, "I'll protect you *in* trouble. I will be *with* you in trouble." That shows that what I've been telling you is right, that you need to read Psalm 91 in line with the rest of what the Bible says to understand it properly.

There it says, “I will be with him in trouble,” but here’s what’s great about that line. It points forward to the rest of the Bible. It points forward to the New Testament. It points forward to the gospel. It points forward to Jesus. How so? Well, think about it. When you’re reading Psalm 91, it seems to say, “I will be with him in trouble.” What does that mean? You think that just means, “I’ll feel God’s presence in trouble.” God went a lot further than that.

Do you know the lengths to which he has gone to literally be with us in trouble? You won’t know that until you get to the story of Jesus, until you get to the New Testament. There we’re told something about God that no other religion says about God. No other religion makes this claim. Only Christianity makes the claim that the transcendent God and Creator, who was exempt from trouble … He was perfect. He was all-powerful. How could he experience trouble?

He became a human being, was born in a manger, became a person who experienced betrayal, who experienced wrongdoing, experienced injustice, and experienced what it was like to die, what it was like to be beaten. The invulnerable God became vulnerable. The immortal God became mortal. The invulnerable God became killable. He went to the cross. When he says, “I will be with you in trouble …” That’s the first thing you need to use on your heart when bad things happen to you.

What does it mean to take shelter under his wings? What does it mean to really rest in him and invest in him? How are you going to do that? When bad things are happening and you feel like, “Why is all this happening to me?” the first thing is, “You know what I’m going through.” That’s the first thing you need in order to really rest in him. “You know what I’m going through. You’ve experienced worse than I’ve experienced.” That’s important.

This doesn’t just point to the incarnation; it points to substitution. How so? It talks here about rescue. It talks about salvation. It talks about grace salvation, but not until the New Testament do we understand what that means. I told you that this illustration, this metaphor of a mother bird conveys three ideas. It conveys protection, it conveys love and tenderness, but it also conveys substitution.

The mother bird is spreading over her young her wings to protect the young from the rain. Well, how does she protect the young from the rain? *She* gets wet. How does she protect the young from the sun? *She* gets hot. How does she protect from the predators? *She* gets eaten. She puts herself between the bad and her young. She takes it in herself.

There’s only one time where Jesus Christ identifies with a mother bird. It’s when he’s riding into Jerusalem. It’s in Matthew 26. You can also find it in Luke 13. He’s talking about judgment. He’s talking about the fact that the people of Jerusalem are going to be judged for their sins and wrongdoing, that judgment is coming down. As he’s talking about judgment, that is where he says the famous thing. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I wanted to gather you as a mother hen gathers her children under my wings, but you would not.”

That seems very sweet. "Aw, Jesus is identifying as a mother hen, and he would like his little chicks to be under his wing." It's the context that matters. He's talking about judgment. Judgment is coming down. In that context he says, "Oh, if you believed in me, I would be your mother bird, and you would take shelter under my wings." Shelter from what? Judgment. That means judgment will fall on him. That's how he protects us.

True story. Remember the terrible fires in Yellowstone National Park? *National Geographic* ran an interesting little article. It talked about park rangers who went into the parts of the park that had been ravaged by fire after the fires had died down. Two park rangers were walking along, and they saw this tree that was just a charred stump. At the base of the tree, they saw a very creepy, macabre kind of sight.

It turned out it was a mother bird still sitting upright in her nest, but she had been completely burned to a crisp. It was a corpse. She was charred. She was basically ash, but she was sitting there like *this*, completely upright. It was very creepy and sad. One of the park rangers decided to knock it over. He took a stick and knocked it over, and three little live chicks ran out from underneath it. They realized the reason the chicks had lived was that when the heat came, the mother did her thing. She just sat there. She let the fire come down on her.

When Jesus Christ was on the cross, he looked down at people betraying him. He looked down at people denying him. He looked down at people abandoning him. He looked down at people mocking him and jeering at him, and in the greatest act of love in the history of the world, he stayed and was burned to a crisp by the judgment of God, by the fire, by the wrath of God. He took what we deserved. That's what the Bible says.

There's the answer to understanding Psalm 91. If you read Psalm 91 and say, "Well, if you trust in God, God will never let anything bad happen to you ..." Well, Jesus Christ is the only person who ever completely trusted in God, the only human being who ever trusted in God fully. Did anything bad happen to him? Yes. Why? Because through it God was going to bring redemption. He was going to bring joy. He was going to bring glory.

Here's how you can rest under the shadow of his wings. When bad things happen to you, it's always a way for you to possess your soul by taking your heart's overinvestment in these other things and putting it in God. The way to do that is not just to do it in some abstract way. "Yes, I need to love God."

Look at what Jesus Christ did. Look at him taking the judgment. Look at him being burned to a crisp so we could be saved, so we could live, and say, "Lord Jesus, if you suffered for us like that, I can suffer right now with patience." In patience you will find yourself. You will become yourself. You will possess your soul. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us a glorious promise that is so easy for us to misread, and Satan wants us to misread it. He doesn't want us to enter into the

remarkable promise that's offered, the remarkable peace that's given to us here. We ask that you would help us to enter into that peace to avoid the false interpretations. Please give us, O Lord, the ability to sing in the shadow of your wings. Help us to put our hearts at rest in a very dangerous world. Do it because your Son died that we could have that. We ask for it in his name, amen.

Prayer for the World

Pilgrim Prayer—March 22, 2015

Psalm 98

**1 Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.**

**2 The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.**

**3 He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.**

**4 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;**

**5 make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,**

**6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.**

**7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.**

**8 Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;**

**9 let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.**

The Word of the Lord.

In the weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter, we've been looking at the Psalms. In some ways, this psalm looks like a simple hymn of praise, like many others. You could spend your time just talking about praise itself and its importance and its character, but I believe in this psalm and in its companions (Psalms 96; 97, and 98 are very similar. They're usually read together. They have a lot of links between them) there's a puzzle, almost a conundrum.

It's one of the key conundrums in the Bible. If we understand it, we're going to be able to understand the whole Bible. It's also a conundrum in human thought, and it's part of the human condition. You see it in verse 9 at the very end, where it says, "He comes to judge the earth." Everybody is exalting, clapping their hands, singing together for joy. Why? Because God is coming to judge.

Psalm 97, which as I just said is a companion psalm, puts it very starkly in verse 8. There it says, "The people hear and rejoice and the villages are glad because of your judgments." "The villages are glad because of your judgments. Everyone is clapping their hands because you've come to judge." Let me give you the essence of this conundrum. "I've come to judge you." "Yay!" Huh? That's it.

I just did jury duty last week. I've been in New York County so long that that's about the fifth or sixth time I've done jury duty. No one is ever happy in a courtroom. I just want you to know it's not a place where people party. So what in the world is going on here? We're talking about judgment day, the final judgment of the earth, and it's a time of joy. How does that work?

First of all, let's look at that joy. The last two-thirds of the psalm, basically verses 4–9, talk about the great promise, the joyful promise of judgment, and something about why it is joyful. Then I think we need to talk for a moment about the problem, the conundrum. Then we'll look at the first three verses in which we actually see the answer, which is God's provision. So we're going to look at *the promise of judgment, the problem of judgment, and God's provision for judgment* that makes judgment a promise and not just a threat.

1. *The promise of judgment.* By that I mean what's so good about judgment day? From verse 4 to the end it talks about the King coming. It talks about the Lord coming. When the King comes, everything rejoices. I told you Psalm 96; 97, and 98 go together. The way Psalm 96 ends is, "Let the sea roar and all that fills it. Let the fields exalt, and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the woods sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the nations with righteousness and the peoples with his truth."

Psalm 96 adds the trees to everything else. It says, "The trees will sing for joy when the true King comes back." You say, "Well, that's just metaphorical." Yes and no. It's probably pointing to some greater reality than just trees humming. What we're being told here is that when the true King comes back, it's not just that wrongs are righted. It's not just that broken things are mended, but even inert and latent things explode in their full capacity and realize their full potential. All this happens under the King, when the true King comes back.

The ancient literature of the human race is filled with these kinds of stories. If you go out and get any kind of compendium of fairy tales ... Go get those old Andrew Lang books. There are like 15 or 16. There are all these books of assembled fairy tales and legends and myths of the various cultures. See how often this thing comes up.

The Greeks believed there was a golden age when true kings reigned, and, of course, we have King Arthur. On his tombstone it supposedly says, "*Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus.*" ("Here lies Arthur, the once and future king.") When he was here everything was great, and if he comes back it will be great again.

Robin Hood is another fairy tale story in which he's fighting until the good king, the true king, King Richard, comes back and puts everything right. It happens over and over and over again. The absolute juggernaut, the incredible movie and literature enterprise which is J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, is basically built around the return of the true king. There's a poem right in the middle of it that goes:

*From the ashes a fire shall be woken
A light from the darkness shall spring
Renewed shall be blade that was broken
The crownless again shall be king.*

What Tolkien has done there is tapped into a deep vein of human imagination. My question is ... *Why is it there?* The actual record of real human kings and queens is terrible. That's why we got rid of them. If that's true and we've basically gotten rid of royalty as a way of governing, why are we still fascinated? Why are we still paying all this money to go see movies and read books about them? Why are the few who are left ...? We have a few royal people left in the world. Why are we fascinated with them?

I think there are two good answers, and they're both right. One is a more sociological answer. I think one of the reasons we're fascinated by the stories of true kings is that we know that democracy, for all of its assets, is more like medicine than food. Do you know what I mean? I think Churchill was the one who said, "Democracy is the worst kind of government except for all the others."

What he's getting at is democracy is unbelievably inefficient. Like I said, it's medicine not food. Its main asset is it basically tamps down on the worst aspects of human nature. It basically makes it much harder to kill each other, but when it comes to actually solving all of the long-time human problems, it's not so great. We yearn for something beyond medicine when it comes to human society.

That's the sociological answer, but I think the theological answer (which, being a Christian minister, I believe) is the Bible says every human being is made in the image of God. Therefore, we have a knowledge of God, according to Romans 1, that we tend to suppress and, in a sense, are maybe not even conscious of, and yet at some deep level we know it, and here's what we would know.

I believe the reason we're so fascinated by the talks of a true king that comes back and everything is great again is because in the human race there's a memory trace that at one point there really was a King who stood on this earth, and his rule was characterized by such wisdom, such power, such justice, such compassion, such beauty, and such glory. He was like the sun shining in full strength.

We know deep in our souls that we were built to serve and love that King and that we will never reach our capacities, all our latencies and inert things that are in us ... We know we're nothing like what we're supposed to be. Deep in our souls, we know that only under the rule of the great King will we ever blossom. We'll start to blossom in places we didn't even know we had buds, by the way.

Therefore, we know that if that true King comes back and rules on the earth, that'll be the end of all evil. There will be love without parting. We will escape from death forever. The world will finally be beautiful, and we know it deep, deep inside. Therefore, these stories are like a memory trace of what we know to be true. In fact, here's a riddle for you. How is the Bible like Maggie Smith? Don't try to guess. I'll just tell you.

A movie that I didn't really like except for two great scenes ... Steven Spielberg made a movie in 1991 called *Hook*, and it was his whimsical retelling of the Peter Pan story. In his retelling of it, Peter Pan has grown up (he's played by Robin Williams) and has forgotten who he is. Somehow he has memory loss. Wendy Darling, who is played by Maggie Smith, is now very old, but she does remember. Peter doesn't.

At one point, Wendy looks at Peter and says, "Peter, the stories are true." His memory is starting to come back. "The stories are true." The Bible doesn't exactly say that all of the fairy stories are true, but what it says is the thing that all of the fairy stories point to is true. There *is* a true King. He *will* come back.

When he does, his rule will be one of beauty, greatness, and glory, and everything will be put straight, and there will be the end of death, the end of evil, the beginning of love, and the beginning of glory, and you will be everything you always knew you should be. That's how the Bible is like Maggie Smith. The stories are true ... sort of.

2. *The problem of judgment.* There is a problem here, and it's a major problem. Do you not see it? Let's work it out. The problem is when judges come back, what do judges do? At least what are judges supposed to do? They're supposed to right all wrongs and set everything straight. That means anything that anyone has done wrong has to be paid for. Right there we have the problem. How in the world could we rejoice at judgment day? With all of its promise, that's the problem.

Now before I even show you how it's a problem in the Bible (I told you it's one of the main conundrums in the Bible), let me show you why it's a problem in human condition, in human thought. Five years ago (this knocked me over, practically,

when I first saw it), the Victoria and Albert Museum in London had a major exhibit and they called it “The First Comprehensive Retrospective on Postmodernism, 1970–1990.”

Many of you know that this word *postmodernism* has been thrown around now for 30 years or so. It’s architecture. It’s literature. It’s philosophy. People have been saying, “Now we’re postmodern.” Here’s the Victoria and Albert Museum, five years ago, saying, “Yeah, postmodernism is sort of over now. We’re going to have a retrospective. We figured it ended somewhere in the mid-90s or something like that.”

At the same time the exhibit came out, *Prospect Magazine* had an article in it by Edward Docx. He’s a British novelist and intellectual, and he wrote an article called “Postmodernism is Dead.” It’s a great article, a fascinating article. Listen to it, and you’ll see the conundrum. He said postmodernism is “... this idea of de-privileging any one meaning, this idea that all discourses are equally valid.” You may have heard it put that way.

In other words, no one has the truth. No one knows that “My moral standards are the right moral standards.” It’s the de-privileging of any one meaning. It’s saying that all discourses are equally valid. Basically, it’s saying there is no judgment day. There can’t be a judgment day, because there’s no one set of judgments. There’s no one set of moral standards by which everyone has to be judged. It’s just not true.

Then he went on and said here’s why a lot of people liked postmodernism. He says something like, “It has led to some real-world gains for humankind. Because once you challenge the dominant discourse, you’re in the business of giving marginalized and subordinate groups their voice. And from there it’s possible to see how postmodernism has helped Western society redress miserable injustices.”

Do you see what he’s saying? He says, “Look. If you say no one has the truth, no one has the right moral standards, there is no judgment day, there’s no one set of standards, then everybody is free to have their own voice. Everyone is free to have their own freedom. Everyone is free to have their own rights. You don’t have one group knocking another group down and saying, ‘You’re wrong and we’re right.’ ” Postmodernism. No one has the truth.

Then he says, “Why do we know it’s over?” Here’s basically what he says, and it’s great. “Over time, though, a new difficulty was created. Because postmodernism attacks everything, a mood of confusion and uncertainty began to grow and flourish, until in recent years it became ubiquitous. If we de-privilege all positions, we can assert no position, so, in effect, aggressive postmodernism becomes indistinguishable from inert conservatism.”

Do you hear that? By the way, he’s coming from the left. He’s a left-wing person. He says, “If we de-privilege all positions, if we say, ‘Nobody has the right position,’ we can assert no position, so, in effect, aggressive postmodernism

becomes indistinguishable from inert conservatism.” What he’s saying is if you say everything is relative, then I can’t say that’s unjust. I can never say anything is unjust. We just have to accept everything as it is.

He says the result was what he called an *inert conservatism*. He says, “The postmodern will no longer do as a response to the world we now find ourselves in.” If you press him, at the end of the article, on what’s coming, he has no idea. Here’s why. He feels like if you go back to the idea that there’s a truth and one set of standards, then you’re going to have everybody fighting. “Well, I have the set, I have the set,” and we’re killing and oppressing each other.

He says the problem is if you get rid of that, then you have … what? If you de-privilege all positions, you can assert no position. You can never talk about injustice at all. He hates judgment day, and yet he wants judgment day. Do you see the problem? Let me tell you about the biblical problem. What do I mean by that? The Bible always shows us how when God enters into a relationship with somebody he enters into a covenant relationship. It’s binding.

In a covenant relationship you make promises to each other. It’s an intimate, personal relationship but bound through solemn promises, legal promises. He says, “I will be your God; you will be my people,” and we make promises. Then he would always say, “There are blessings and curses. If you keep your promises I will bless you, but if you break your promises I will abandon you. I’ll break it off.”

Therefore, the entire Hebrew Scriptures, the entire Old Testament, basically, is driven by one particular narrative. There’s a narrative that is the main tension that drives the plot of the Old Testament forward. Those of us who have entered into a covenant relationship with God, God’s people, since we’re always breaking our promises, always, no matter what … Good kings, bad kings … the people are always breaking their promises.

Here’s the question. Will God give up and say, “Sorry, you’ve broken your promises; I’m abandoning you”? Then, what about God’s love and faithfulness? On the other hand, is God going to say, “I give in. Even though you’re breaking your promises all the time, I’m going to accept you anyway”? Then, what about God’s justice and holiness?

There are all of these places in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, where you have an enormous number of seemingly irreconcilable statements. Judges, chapter 2, verse 1, says, “I will never break my covenant with you.” There are a lot of those places where he says, “I’ll never abandon you. I’ll always be faithful. I will never break my covenant with you.”

Then there are a lot of places, like Deuteronomy 29, where Moses says, “If you go your own way, the Lord will not be willing to forgive you. His wrath will burn against you. All the curses written in the covenant book will fall on you. The Lord will blot out your name from under heaven.” If you read the Hebrew Scriptures, you’ll see them all over the place, seemingly irreconcilable. “Here’s the covenant. If you follow your promises you’ll be blessed. If you don’t, you’ll be cursed.”

Will God give up on us or will he give in to us? If he gives up on us, then where is his love and faithfulness? If he gives in to us, where is his holiness and justice? Or put it this way. Is the covenant of God conditional or unconditional? Or put it this way. Are the blessings of God conditional or unconditional? Are they conditional on perfect obedience to the law or are they unconditional and are given to imperfect people? Which is it?

There's almost no answer. It almost feels like there's no way (within the scope of the Old Testament anyway) that there can be an answer. It's so irreconcilable it actually splits people. I think virtually everybody in the human race either has more of a liberal spirit or a conservative spirit when it comes to this. I'm not talking about politics here.

The liberal spirit says, "Well, you have to try to obey God, but in the end he accepts you no matter what." Then there's the conservative spirit that says, "Well, God loves you, but in the end you have to obey him or he will judge you." The liberal spirit basically says, "Well, you try to obey God, but in the end he won't judge you," and the conservative spirit says, "Well, God can be merciful, but in the end you have to obey him or he'll judge you."

You have a liberal spirit and a conservative spirit. You have Sadducees; you have Pharisees. You have relativists; you have moralists. You have postmodernists; you have traditionalists. Actually, you could even break down the religions. You have Buddhism; you have Islam. Everybody breaks into one side or the other. Everybody says either the blessings of God are conditional and you have to obey or they're unconditional and he gives them to you anyway and just accepts you.

Do you see the problem? We've gotten to the problem now. If there's no judgment day, what hope is there for the world? Everything is relative. Everything is just going to go on and on. Miroslav Volf has a great book he wrote. Miroslav Volf is a Croatian thinker, and in the mid-90s he wrote a book after all the genocide that happened in the Balkans in the early 90s. He basically says, "Look, I know a lot of people think that if you believe in a God of judgment it can lead to being warlike, but I want you to know something else."

He says, "I've been back to places where people have had their mothers and daughters raped and their fathers' and brothers' throats slit and their homes burned to the ground, and if I look them in the eye and say to them, 'You just need to love your enemies. There's never going to be a judgment day. There's never going to be a day in which everything is put right. We don't believe in that, but you just need to not retaliate. You need to live at peace,' they're going to say, 'Oh, there's no judgment day? There's no God who's ever going to stand on the earth and make everything right? Fine. I'm going to get my gun and go do it myself.' "

If there is no judgment day, what hope is there for the world? But if there *is* judgment day, what hope is there for you and me? Paul says the Gentiles, the people who have never even read the Bible or heard of the Bible ... God will

judge them on what their own conscience tells them. Everybody has moral standards.

God will judge you on your own moral standards, and nobody will live up to their own moral standards. If there's no judgment day, there's no hope for the world. If there *is* a judgment day, there's no hope for us, because nobody can stand on that day. Do you see the conundrum? Do you see the problem? What's the answer?

3. *The provision for judgment.* The answer is in the first three verses. The first three verses are talking about something that happened in the past. “**Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known ... He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen ...**”

It's all past. It's interesting that verses 4–9 are looking to the end of time, but the first three verses are saying the reason we can look forward to judgment day is because of the salvation God has already worked. Now what are we talking about? If you have a regular Bible with cross-references ... A lot of Bibles have cross-references. The cross-references are ways of showing you how that verse you are reading has links to other verses.

Almost everybody has noticed that Psalm 98 is a lot like Miriam's song in Exodus 15. It's almost like the psalmist had her song in mind. “His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation. He has remembered his love and faithfulness to Israel.” Those things are in Miriam's song. What was Miriam's song about? The children of Israel had just been taken out of Egypt and had just gone through the Red Sea and the Egyptian army had been drowned in the Red Sea.

With his holy arm, God had worked salvation. He had remembered his love and faithfulness to Israel, and Miriam is singing this great song about the salvation. It's looking at the exodus. Here's what I'd like you to keep in mind. God saved Israel out of Egypt through judgment. He sent the destroyer. He sent the angel of death into Egypt. God is going to judge the world at the end of time, but occasionally in the Bible you see that God gives you a little bit of, you might say, a down payment on judgment.

What he did to Egypt, which was imperialistic, violent, and was enslaving Israel ... In order to free Israel from slavery, God sent some of that future judgment into Egypt's life at that moment. The angel of death came down and slew the firstborn son in every family. It was a terrible judgment, a terrible experience, and then they let the Israelites go. Here's what's interesting. Here's where biblical religion differs from every other religion. The Egyptians worshiped false deities. They worshiped pagan deities.

The Israelites worshiped God, but God says to the Israelites, “Since I'm sending judgment down on Egypt so that people will have to pay for their sins, you will be judged too. You're sinners too, and the only way you're going to survive this is if

you slay a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on your doorposts.” That’s a remarkable statement. You know the story. It’s the story of Passover. Here’s what’s so remarkable. The Jews worshiped God, so wouldn’t they be exempt from judgment? No.

God is trying to say, “Every human being deserves to be judged. It doesn’t matter whether you obey the Ten Commandments and they don’t. You’re only relatively better. The point is you’re not living up to *your* moral standards; they’re not living up to *their* moral standards. Everybody deserves to be judged. If I am a God of justice and I am a completely impartial judge and I send my judgment down into the world, everybody is going to die. Your only hope is if the judgment falls on this substitute, this lamb.”

Of course, the children of Israel, the Jews, had no idea what in the world that was about. What in the world does that mean? The point is they did it and they came out. Psalm 98 does not only sound like Miriam’s song in Exodus 15. Do you know what else it sounds a lot like? It sounds like Mary’s song in Luke, chapter 1, called the Magnificat. In fact, there are so many lexical links ... “His holy arm has worked salvation for him. He has remembered his love to Israel.”

It’s almost like Mary was thinking about Psalm 98, and here’s why. When she realized she was going to bear into the world the Savior of the world, with the help of the Holy Spirit she suddenly realized that her baby, her son, Jesus Christ, was the fulfillment of all of those promises in the Bible but also the resolution of the conundrum, of the problem. Jesus Christ solves the problem of judgment. How? Here’s how.

Is the blessing of God conditional on perfect obedience to the law or is it unconditional and comes to imperfect people? I told you up until the time that Jesus Christ shows up, it’s like it has to be one or the other. We have to basically be liberal or basically conservative. We have to basically be relativists or basically moralists. He’s more holy than good or he’s more good than holy, but not on the cross.

John Stott says the essence of sin is to put yourself in the place of God. In other words, to be your own boss, as if you weren’t created by somebody else. The essence of sin is to put yourself where God deserves to be, but the essence of salvation is God putting himself where we deserve to be. Where is that? On the cross.

Though we owe him everything, we live our own lives. What do we deserve? We deserve to be cut off. We deserve the curses of the covenant, but when Jesus Christ went to the cross, what we have there is the judge ... It’s almost like this. The judge pronounces the fine and then pays it himself. The judge pronounces the penalty and then goes and takes it himself. What that means is on the cross the love and holiness of God coincide and shine forth brilliantly.

They coincide. Why? Because the law demands perfect salvation, perfect satisfaction. You either obey the law perfectly or you pay the penalty. On the

cross, the law is perfectly satisfied, but what does love want? Love wants exemption. Love wants salvation. Love wants redemption. On the cross, love is perfectly satisfied. It's not like love gets its way and law doesn't. Law and love are perfectly satisfied, equally satisfied.

On the cross, the love and the holiness of God perfectly coincide and shine forth brilliantly. Therefore, the question is, "Are the blessings of God conditional or unconditional?" and the answer is "Yes" to both. On the one hand, they are conditional on perfect obedience to the law, and Jesus Christ fulfilled the law. On the other hand, yes, God wants to give them to imperfect people, and here they come. Believe in Jesus Christ, and you, O imperfect person, are flooded with the benefits of God's love.

See how this works out personally? The reason Edward Docx says we want moral absolutes and we don't want moral absolutes is because, on the one hand, we need them; on the other hand, they feel like they oppress us. We use them to oppress other people and they crush us. But this is the answer. Here you have a judge and a king who did this for you. How can that person ever oppress you? They won't. Here's the one King and the one Judge you can trust.

Think of it like this. There are two kinds of children who are raised improperly so as to have miserable lives: neglected and abused. The neglected child ... No boundaries, overindulged, hands off. The child grows up not knowing what the limits are. The parents say, "Oh, do whatever you want." That's the neglected child. Then there's the abused child.

If you believe in a god who doesn't judge, just a god who loves and accepts everyone, you're kind of like that neglected child. You might believe in a god of love in some general way, but not a god who ever tells you what to do. You don't believe in judgment. You might believe in a god like that, but you probably feel like an orphan, and you kind of are, because you don't have a god of costly love, a god who not only tells you you have to obey but says, "But I went to the cross so that when you disobey I can still love and accept you."

You're not an orphan. There's a God right by your side. At the same time, you might have a harsh god, a god that's very judging, and you really don't have a good grasp on the grace and love of God. So you're always feeling unworthy. You're always feeling like too little butter stretched over too much bread. You're like an abused child. I have to tell you you will either be like a neglected child or like an abused child until you see that on the cross love and law were absolutely fulfilled.

*To see the law by love fulfilled
And hear his pardoning voice
Transforms a slave into a child
And duty into choice.*

Once you realize that your judgment day is over ... It's already past. Your judgment day for your sin is over. It happened on the cross. Your judgment day

for your sin is gone. It's in the past already. Now all you have to look forward to on judgment day is beauty, glory, and love. You'll be like that character in that one fairy tale C.S. Lewis wrote. When he gets to heaven, do you remember what he says? "I'm home at last. I belong here. This is the land I was looking for all my life, but I didn't know it until now." Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that the promise of judgment can be ours, the joy of judgment day, the knowledge of judgment day, the knowledge that someday everything is going to be put all right, so we don't have to take vengeance on others; the knowledge that someday everything is going to be put all right, so that when we lose things and when we feel ourselves aging and when we see people dying, we know that someday everything is going to be put right.

We have the joy of judgment day because Jesus Christ, your Son, solved the problem of judgment day. He was the Judge who was judged. He came to earth and took it all. We thank you that because of that we can look forward to the future with incredible hope and peace. So now make us people who should live with the poise and the peace that goes with that knowledge and that belief. Make it real to us, as you just have through the preaching of the Word, as you do when we sing your praises. Make it real to us so that we can live in its light. We ask for this in Jesus' name, amen.

The True King

Pilgrim Prayer—March 29, 2015

Psalm 110

1 The Lord says to my lord:

**"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."**

**2 The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,
"Rule in the midst of your enemies!"**

**3 Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning's womb.**

4 The Lord has sworn

**and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”**

- 5 The Lord is at your right hand;
he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.**
- 6 He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead
and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.**
- 7 He will drink from a brook along the way,
and so he will lift his head high.**

This is God's Word.

On Palm Sunday every year, Christians around the world think about what it means that Jesus is King. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem one week before he died, and he received the acclaim of the crowd, who waved palms and said, "Hosanna" and "Blessed is the King" and acclaimed him as King. So each year, Christians think about what it means that Jesus is a king.

You'll notice, obviously, that we did not read to you one of the accounts of the actual triumphal entry the day of Palm Sunday from one of the Gospels, which is often what we do. Instead, you just had Psalm 110 read to you. Psalm 110 is unbelievably rich. It's not all that well known, not compared to Psalm 23 or something like that, but did you know (you probably didn't) that the New Testament writers quote this psalm more than any other passage in the Old Testament? Over 20 times, and that's just direct quotations.

Jesus, as I'm going to show you, forcefully used this psalm to explain to people who he was. Peter, on the day of Pentecost ... The first Christian sermon was preached on this psalm. The writer of the Hebrews, when he was trying to give his readers a picture of the entirety of the history of redemption, goes to this psalm more than once.

Considering that the early Christian preachers' Scriptures would not have included the New Testament, that it would only have been what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, that means this was the single most important bit of Scripture the early Christian preachers had. How do you like that? You're saying, "Really? Can I read that again? What's so great about it?" Let me show you.

It's talking about some person who combines excellencies, who combines traits that ordinarily would never be combined in a single figure. It's talking about a king, but *a divine and human king* and *a strong but weak king* and, therefore, *a transformingly beautiful king*. A divine human, strong/weak, and transformingly beautiful king. There's actually so much to tell you about, because this psalm is used so much, that I despair of getting it all in, but let's go.

1. *A divine and human king.* If you look at the first two verses, it tells us about a

divine human king. A psalm of David. “**The Lord says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’**” In Matthew 22 and in Mark 12 (they’re talking about the same thing), Mark and Matthew talk about a time in which Jesus Christ is, in a sense, publicly confronted by his opponents.

The religious authorities were very upset with Jesus that his star was rising, that he was getting to be very popular, and they wanted to do something about it, so essentially they plied him with questions. They publicly debated him with hard questions. It was a kind of press conference. They came and asked Jesus questions, and they were hoping he would either say something stupid or at least alienate part of his constituency. This is how politics works.

He was asked all of these hot questions. He was asked a question about politics. He was asked a question, “Should we pay taxes to Caesar?” He was asked a question about the resurrection, a theology question. In every case, Jesus just hits the ball out of the park. Every time, he answers the questions beautifully, perfectly, surprisingly, carefully. Finally, Jesus turns on them and says, “Okay, my turn. Let me ask *you* a question.”

At that point, Jesus gets in their face, and he gets in their face with Psalm 110. Now why does he go to Psalm 110? Important background. The Old Testament is filled with prophecies of a descendant of David who would be a great military, political leader, a king perhaps, who would deliver Israel. This descendant of David who was going to deliver Israel was called the *Christos*, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Anointed King.

Of course, because of the time (they were colonized by Rome), most Jews were hoping the Messiah would come and liberate them from Rome. Psalm 110 was understood by almost all religious scholars as being one of the places in the Old Testament (there are many other places) that pointed to this descendant of David who was going to be the *Christos*, the Messiah, who was going to liberate Israel from its political enemies.

So Jesus says, “Let me ask *you* a question.” Then he quotes verse 1 of Psalm 110. He says, “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Then he looks at them and says, “If this is David’s son (and your scholars say the Messiah would be David’s son), why does David call him ‘Lord’?” Matthew says that everybody was stunned with that question. No one said a thing, and nobody dared ask him any more questions.

You say, “Okay, what happened right there? Would you please tell me?” Here’s what Jesus is doing. This is a psalm of David, and this is David speaking. Here’s David saying, “The Lord said to my lord ...” The Lord is God. So David says, “God the Father said to *my* lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” That raises two incredible questions. The first question is ... *Who in the world is David talking about?* David was the supreme king. Who would David call his lord? It’s not God. “The Lord God said to my lord ...” Who is that?

What Jesus is pointing out is that if this *lord* David is talking about was actually one of David's descendants, he would have called him "my son." He would have said, "The Lord said to my son." He would never have called him *lord*. Even if David was foreseeing a descendant of his, he never would have called him *lord*. So first of all, who in the world would this person be that David would call "My lord"?

Secondly, who in the world would this person be that God would speak to him this way? God says, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." He doesn't say, "Sit at my feet." When he says, "Sit at my right hand ..." In ancient times, to sit at the right hand of the king was essentially to sit level with the king, and that meant to share in the throne. Joseph shared Pharaoh's throne, essentially. He shared Pharaoh's ruling power.

In fact, you can see it in verse 2. "**The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, 'Rule in the midst of your enemies!'**" The Lord extends the scepter, and this king reigns. They're sharing the same rule. Here's what Jesus is saying. "Hey, everybody, you say the Messiah is just a human being, a political ruler, and I'm asking you this. How could that be? This messianic psalm, this messianic prophecy ... The language is inexplicable unless the Messiah is more than a human being, someone who is not the same as God the Father and yet is level with God the Father. That's who your Messiah must be."

He basically refuted from the Scripture their understanding. He basically showed them their understanding of who the Messiah was and what the Messiah was coming to do was absolutely wrong, and he proved they were wrong from the Scripture. It just shut their mouth and they said nothing else. Of course, what Jesus is saying is, "I am David's Lord."

Jesus used this psalm to get into the face of his audience, but if you don't mind, I'd like to use Psalm 110 to get into *your* face. What Jesus did with his original hearers was he said, "If you understand who the Messiah really is, then you will not be able to put me in the box you're trying to put me in."

He was saying to his hearers, "You cannot put me in a box. You cannot say I'm just going to be a political leader who's going to help you with your political enemies. No, no. I am not just David's son; I am David's Lord. I am not just a human being. I am much more than that, and I'm coming not simply to be a human political leader. I'm coming to conquer not just your enemies but sin and death itself."

Jesus is saying to his listeners, his immediate hearers, "Don't put me in a box," but I think Jesus needs to say to us modern people too ... What he's saying to you right now is, "You can't put me in a box either." How do we put Jesus in a box? Everybody likes Jesus. It's amazing. Everybody wants to invoke Jesus. Everybody wants to talk about his wise sayings and his wonderful example, but Jesus is saying, "I'm the Son of God. I've come from heaven. I am God."

Jesus says things that just make New Yorkers' skin crawl. He says, "I am the

way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” Did he really say that? How could he say something so exclusive? What he’s saying is, “If I’m God, then that’s only natural. If I’m God, of course I’d be the way to salvation. Of course I would be the supreme way for you to connect to the divine. That’s who I am.” When Jesus says, “I am not just a wonderful human being, a human teacher ...”

He says, “You can’t put me in that box. I am not the messiah you want. I’m the Messiah you need. I am not a messiah who fits into your existing agenda. I am God. I am the divine King, and if you’re going to deal with me at all, you need to come and enlist in my agenda. I am not a messiah that fits into your existing agenda and just helps you plug the holes and meets your needs. No. If you’re going to deal with me at all, because of the magnitude of who I am, you have to surrender to me. You have to give up your right to live your life the way you want.”

Actually, in some ways, Jesus really does a number … Most Americans say, “I have the right to choose how I want to live, but I want to be spiritual.” How do you do that? Well, you depersonalize God. You believe in God, but you believe in a god who’s a spiritual force and doesn’t make any demands on you. The more personal God is, the more you have to deal with God’s will, and the less personal he is, the more he is a kind of force of love and spiritual power and energy.

The more impersonal he is, the more we can kind of live any way we want and don’t have to deal with his will and never have to have him cross *our* will. From what I can tell, most Americans want to have some kind of idea of God, but they don’t want a God like this. What Jesus is doing by saying, “I am God. I’ve come to rule. I’ve come and you must bow to me and give yourself to me …” That personalizes God in a very threatening way.

There’s some place where C.S. Lewis puts it like this, and, boy, does he put it well. He says, “An ‘impersonal God’—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth, and goodness inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter.” Yes, it is. So this is the divine human King. You can’t put him in a box. Now just so some of you can exhale, that was the most threatening, combative part of the sermon. It gets a little better as time goes on.

2. *A strong but weak king.* Again, I said this psalm combines things that people don’t think can be combined in one person. It also shows us that this divine King is a priest. Therefore, what we have here is not just a divine human king but a strong/weak king. How so? Verse 4: “**The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’**”

This is the same person to whom the Lord God said, “Reign, rule,” but now he’s saying not just, “You’re a king,” but “You’re a priest.” People who read Psalm 110 when it was new, before the time of Jesus and during the time of Jesus, would

have been shocked by this. Why? Because in Israel, kings were not priests, and priests were not kings. No one was allowed to do sacrifices in the temple (or the tabernacle before that) unless you were a Levite or a priest. It was illegal.

The fact that kings and priests had different jobs was not simply just a technical difference. The calling of kings and the calling of priests, you might say the office, the very mission of kings and priests, were almost the opposite. Kings represented God to the people. Priests represented the people to God. Kings were coming from God to the people. Kings ruled in the place of God. Kings were figures of strength and judgment, because kings enforced the law of God in Israel. If you disobeyed the law of God, you were punished.

So kings were figures of strength who brought judgment on people, but priests were exactly the opposite. The priesthood was an office of sympathy and service. Priests offered sacrifices and prayers for the people. Priests got atonement and forgiveness for sins. Priests cared for the poor and the sick. In the Old Testament, when you wanted to give your money to the poor, you gave it to the priests, and the priests distributed it.

When Jesus heals the leper, he tells the leper, "Go and show yourself to the priest." Why? Because the priests were the health officers of society. They were the social workers. They were exactly the opposite. By the way, even today ... Some of you might be social workers. Some of you might be policemen. You're very often working with the same people, and you're working at loggerheads. One of you, in a sense, represents the king. It's your job to punish. It's your job to enforce the law. One of you is an advocate. One of you is trying to get this person okay.

The king was a figure of strength and judgment. The priest was a figure of love and mercy and forgiveness. Therefore, you don't have priests who are kings. You don't have a priest king. But you will never understand Jesus Christ, you will never understand the gospel, unless you understand that Jesus Christ was deeply, profoundly, radically, and equally both. In fact, I'd go so far as to say if your heart basically thinks of Jesus more as a priest than a king or more of a king than a priest, you are injecting distortions into your life.

Jesus Christ combines things nobody else can combine, and unless you see that he's both a king and a priest, you will not understand his person or his work. One of the great sermons Jonathan Edwards wrote and preached years ago was called, *The Excellency of Christ*. In that sermon he says this. This is his thesis statement. Be patient. It's eighteenth-century English. I'll translate.

This was his thesis statement. "There is an admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies in Jesus Christ." Do you hear that? He says there is a beautiful combination of excellencies that we would never think could be combined in one person, but because they are combined in Jesus Christ, he is overwhelmingly beautiful. Then Edwards goes on and explains them.

Jesus combines infinite majesty and glory yet the lowest humility and meekness.

He combines infinite justice yet boundless grace. He combines absolute sovereign dominion yet perfect submission and obedience. He combines transcendent self-sufficiency yet entire trust and reliance upon his Father. He's a lamb and he's a lion. He's a priest and he's a king. He is a judge and he's the one who offers sacrifice for forgiveness of sin, all at once. Not one or the other ... both.

You can't understand his person or his work unless you understand he's both a priest and a king. Come with me. Ninety seconds. Let's start with his person. With this model of he's a priest and a king, just walk through the Gospels and look at him. On the one hand, you see Jesus Christ, in front of the Pharisees, in front of the religious authorities, in front of Pilate, in front of people who could kill him, is undaunted. He is bold.

He says to the religious authorities, "You whitened sepulchers." He goes into the temple, makes a whip, and throws out the moneychangers in the temple. He is bold. He is undaunted. And then ... oh my ... look at him going to the little dead girl and taking her by the hand and saying, "*Talitha koum*," which means, "Honey, it's time to get up." Look at him going to the deaf-mute and sighing and touching him as he heals him. Look at him going to the tomb of Lazarus. Mary says, "Lord, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't be dead," and Jesus just weeps, speechlessly.

Look at Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He brings his disciples in and says to them, "This is the hour of my greatest need. I am under so much pressure. I have never needed friends like I need you right now. Please just stay awake with me and pray with me." He goes to pray and he looks around, and they've all gone to sleep on him. What does he say? He says, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." That is a King James archaism to say, "I know you meant well."

Here is absolute power, undaunted boldness, and yet melt-in-your-mouth sweetness. He's a king and a priest. You will never see his beauty unless you see both of those and how he brings them together in a way that no one else does. By the way, you won't really understand Palm Sunday very well if you don't see this. Think about it.

When Simon Maccabeus, two centuries before Jesus, overthrew the Seleucid dynasty and restored independence to Judea, he rode into Jerusalem, and they waved palms at him and shouted, "Hosanna," and made him a king. Now, 200 years later, Jesus Christ rides into Jerusalem, and he accepts them saying, "Hosanna." Palm branches. Unless he knew he was a king, he would never have allowed that.

But he didn't ride in the same way Simon Maccabeus did, did he? He rode in on a little baby ass, deliberately. One commentator on the passage in Matthew that describes Jesus riding in, triumphant, on a little baby ass says, "Victors in battle do not ride into their capital city riding on asses. They come in on fearsome horses. But this king, Jesus, will not triumph through force of arms."

The commentator goes on and says what Jesus is saying by riding in triumphant and at the same time on a baby ass ... He's the counterintuitive strong/weak King. The commentator says Jesus is saying by riding in that way, "I will triumph. I will save you, but through weakness. I'm a king not going to a throne but to a cross, because I'm a king and a priest. I'm a judge, but I also offer sacrifice for sin."

If you want to understand the work of Jesus Christ, come with me to one more place in the Old Testament that is so seminal to understanding the whole gospel. It's Exodus, chapters 33–34. It's where God comes down on Mount Sinai and is talking with Moses on Mount Sinai. Many of you know (because I often refer to it) that in chapter 33 Moses says to God, "Show me your glory." He says, "I want the ultimate spiritual experience. Show me your glory."

God says, "If I gave you an unfiltered look at my glory it would kill you. But," he says, "here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to hide you in a rock, and I'm going to put my hand over you to protect you from my glory." Then he says, "I will have all my goodness pass before you." Isn't that an interesting way to say it? "All my goodness will pass before you."

What does that mean? We find out right away, because in Exodus 34 we're told that God comes down in a cloud and Moses is covered with God's hand, and we're told that God passed all of his goodness before Moses. What does that mean? Well, then it says, "And he declared his name." So to pass all of his goodness and to understand his name are the same thing. And this is the name. It wasn't just a single word. This is who he said he was. This is all God's goodness passing before Moses.

God proclaimed, "**The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished ...**" That is God's name. That is God's way of showing us all of his goodness. Unless you understand what he just said there, you will not understand all the goodness of God. You won't really see the goodness of God.

Did you notice the contradiction at the very heart of God's self description? He says, "I am God. The Lord, The Lord. Yahweh, Yahweh." Then he says, "I am compassionate. I am gracious. I am forgiving." Then he says, "And I won't let any sin go unpunished. Not one." Did you notice a problem there? He says, "I cannot just forgive, and I want to forgive. I'm a forgiving God who can't forgive anything." That's what he's actually saying. "I am a forgiving God who must punish every sin, because I'm also a just God."

You say, "Well, what does that have to do with goodness?" Everything. Why is it that God cannot let any sin go unpunished? Do you know why? Because he's too good. A judge or a king (in those days, a judge and a king were the same thing) who sees a wrongdoing and just says, "Wink, wink. Okay, let it go. Let's not do

anything about it,” is not a good judge. A good judge punishes wrongdoing. A good judge gives wrongdoing what it deserves.

When God says, “Every sin must be punished ...” Why? Because he’s so good. But also God says, “I am compassionate. I forgive sin and rebellion and wickedness.” Why? “Because I’m so good.” Until you come to grips with this apparent contradiction at the heart of who God is, you will not understand all the goodness of God.

What you’re going to say, rightly, is, “Okay, now wait a minute. Logically, this doesn’t work. If God is all good in terms of love, then he won’t be all good in terms of justice. He’ll have to let some sins go unpunished. After all, he’s going to forgive us. Right? On the other hand, if he’s all good in terms of justice and punishes every single sin, then he won’t be all good in terms of forgiveness and mercy. There’s no God who can be all good.” Oh yes, there is.

Listen to me. Think about what I’m about to say. I’m going to do a little metaphor on you. Unless you get into Jesus Christ, unless he is your Rock ... Unless you get into Jesus Christ and believe the Christian gospel and understand what Jesus Christ did when he went to the cross, what he was coming into Jerusalem to do on Palm Sunday ... Unless you understand the gospel and what Jesus came to do, you will not see all the goodness of God.

It’s only as we understand what Jesus Christ did for us in the gospel that all the goodness of God passes in front of us. Can I show you? John Stott says the essence of sin is you putting yourself where only God deserves to be, which means in charge of your life, calling the shots in your life. But the essence of salvation is God putting himself where we deserve to be: on the cross.

On the cross, all your sins are punished, yet if you believe in him, that means God puts your sins on him, and when you believe in him, God treats you as if you were as righteous as Jesus Christ, as if you’d done everything Jesus Christ has done. Jesus Christ pays for all the sins. Do you know what that means? On the cross, God’s holiness is completely satisfied, because all the sins are being punished there, and yet when you believe in him ...

It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter who you’ve been. I don’t care if you were a hit man for the mafia. You can be forgiven, because all your sins fell on Jesus. That means God’s love on the cross is absolutely satisfied. On the cross, the holiness of God and the love of God coincide and shine forth brilliantly. They’re both completely satisfied. That means only when you see what Jesus did for you ... You see that God was so holy this had to happen and he was so loving that he did it.

It’s only when you’re in Jesus, only when you’re thinking about how great Jesus is, only when you understand what I just told you, which is the Christian gospel ... Only then does all the goodness of God pass before you, and it takes your breath away and melts your heart, because you see the diverse excellencies brought together, and that’s what makes something so exquisitely beautiful. He’s

king and priest. He's the judge and yet the sacrifice.

If you see him really as the king and kind of as a priest ... In other words, if you mainly see God ... "Yeah, God is sort of merciful, but you'd better obey or you're going to go to hell. You'd better be good." Or if you see God as mainly a priest not a king ... "Yeah, well, you should try to obey, but in the end God just accepts you." In other words, if you have a god who's loving but not really just or a god who's just but not really loving, you don't have a god who's all good, perfectly good.

Unless all the goodness of God passes before you, you won't see the beauty of it, and besides that, you don't really have the real God. It's only Jesus who reveals the real God, because he's king and priest. If you see through your faith in Jesus Christ all the goodness of God passing before you and it takes your breath away and melts your heart, then, thirdly, it turns you into someone new.

3. *A transformingly beautiful king.* The people who believe in him, and not just believe in him but see the conjunction of the diverse excellencies and see the beauty of that ... You become someone else. You become changed. *You* become kings and priests. Verse 3: "**Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy splendor, your young men will come to you like dew from the morning's womb.**"

Here's something very important. This is talking about this king, who's getting willing volunteers who want to come and fight with him. Notice he doesn't have to do any conscription. He doesn't have to do any draft. "Your troops will be willing," which means they love him. They want him. They are attracted by him, and they want to work in his campaign.

Now keep this in mind. When David was writing this, he was thinking about deliverers. David was, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pointing us to Jesus Christ, but he was thinking about deliverers, and the deliverers were people like Othniel and Gideon and Samson. In the old days, when someone rose up and delivered Israel from oppression from the Egyptians or from the Philistines, or whatever, what you have is down here in verses 5–7.

"The Lord is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of his wrath. He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead ..." Boy, isn't that bloodcurdling. That's the way the old deliverers were. That's how they dealt with oppression. That's how they delivered Israel. They heaped up bodies. They filled the earth with bodies. What an image. Jesus Christ, though, is a different kind of deliverer. He's on a different kind of campaign, and for you to enlist in his army is a very different kind of army.

Years ago, an old mentor of mine who's now gone, an old teacher of mine, Ed Clowney, preached a sermon on Samson and pointed out that probably, when David was writing Psalm 110 ... You know here at the end it says, "**He will drink from a brook along the way, and so he will lift his head high.**" That seems to be a reference to one of Samson's one-man campaigns against the Philistines.

He was delivering Israel from the oppression of the Philistines, and at one point he was almost dying of thirst and he found a brook and drank from it and it lifted up his head.

So David is thinking of the old deliverers, but Jesus Christ is the one to whom all of them point, and he supersedes them and goes beyond them. Ed Clowney said in Ephesians, chapter 1, Paul quotes Psalm 110. He says that when Jesus Christ died he was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he is seated at the right hand of God. Right out of Psalm 110.

But the next verse, where Psalm 110 talks about filling up the world with bodies, in Ephesians 1 Paul says, “Jesus Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, filling the world with his body.” Who’s the body? It’s us, the body of Christ. Here’s how Jesus Christ is defeating evil. He’s turning enemies into friends. He’s converting people. What that means is that’s the ultimate defeat of evil.

For you and me to see the beauty of the King and come and follow him and work with him in his kingdom work ... According to the New Testament, when you see the beauty of Jesus Christ and accept Jesus through the gospel, the good news that we’re accepted and saved not by our works but by Jesus’ works, that turns you into a king and a priest. The Bible over and over in the New Testament says, “You’re kings and priests.”

What does that mean? Well, first of all, it means we have his character a little bit. The gospel humbles you by saying, “You are a sinner. You need this.” If you become a Christian, you have to admit you’re a sinner. You have to admit you need salvation. You have to admit you can’t earn it, and it humbles you. But at the same time you’re told, “Now in Jesus Christ, no matter what you’ve done or who you are, you are accepted in him.” That lifts you to the sky.

That gives you both that humility and that boldness that Jesus Christ has. The gospel recreates that in you. Then what does it mean to be a king and a priest according to the New Testament? Kings call people to repent and believe. Kings turn to other people and say, “I want you to have the same joy I have,” and show them how to give themselves to Jesus. That’s what it means to be a king. That’s what it means to be part of this army, as it were.

If you want to become part of the kingdom, what does Jesus say to Nicodemus? “You must be born again.” So on the one hand, kings are people who say to others, “Here’s how you can become a Christian. Here’s how you can have your own life turned upside down. Here’s how you can have the joy I have.” At the same time, Christians are priests, and what do priests do? Priests help the poor. Priests serve their neighbor sacrificially, whether they believe like we do or not.

You say, “Well, that’s pretty hard. Where would I ever get the power to live like that, to be that bold and that humble, to be that open to talk to other people about my faith and at the same time that unselfish and kind to everybody, no matter who they are? Where would I get that?” It says that Jesus Christ is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. What is that? In Hebrews, chapter 7; Psalm 110 is quoted

and it says, "Look, Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek."

Well, who is Melchizedek? Melchizedek was a strange person who, by the way, was a priest and a king. Before Israel was founded, in Genesis 14, Abraham meets this strange guy named Melchizedek who's king and offers sacrifices to God. So he was a king and a priest. He shows up just for a moment and blesses Abraham, and then he goes away, and we never hear from him again in the Bible. The Hebrews writer, with tongue in cheek, says, "You notice that Melchizedek never dies."

That tells us that Jesus Christ is a priest unlike all of the other priests who have ever lived. All of the Levitical priests died, but Jesus Christ is the Priest who always lives. Even today, he's standing before the Father, not just ruling ... He's not just our King in heaven. He's our Priest in heaven. I'll be honest with you. I don't quite know what that means, but I do know he says to Peter, "Peter, you're going to deny me three times."

"No, no, no. Not me, Lord."

"Yes, Peter. You're going to deny me three times, and it's going to be the worst thing that ever happened to you. You're going to be so ashamed and so devastated and you're going to feel like you'll never recover, but I have prayed for you. When you recover, strengthen your brothers." He doesn't say, "If you pull yourself ..." No, he says, "I've prayed for you, so you will recover. I'm your priest. I'm your advocate. It doesn't matter how bad you are. I'm there for you before the Father's throne."

When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was about to be executed by a kangaroo court that was condemning him, he got a vision of Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God as his advocate in the courtroom, as it were, up there. When Stephen realized that though he was being condemned in this earthly court he was being commended in the heavenly court, that there Jesus Christ was always for him, always representing him, always defending him, always his advocate, his face was like the face of an angel.

"Who cares what people think? I am loved by the only pair of eyes whose opinion counts. The only one in the whole universe whose opinion counts sees me as more precious than all the jewels that lie beneath the earth. When God the Father looks at me, he sees me in my High Priest, Jesus Christ." If you know that, you will be a priest and a king for Jesus here in this world. Let us pray.

Our Father, what a passage. No wonder the early Christians were always preaching about it. Jesus is the divine and human King. Jesus is the Mighty God, but he's at the same time the Wonderful Counselor. He's the great King. He's the great Judge, but he's the Judge who became judged. He was the sacrifice for our sins.

Lord, we pray that the glory, the diverse excellencies of Jesus Christ, the beauty of him as King and Priest, would rest on our hearts and change us into his likeness, so that we can truly give ourselves to him and be part of his campaign

of loving people and serving people and turning enemies to friends and filling the earth with his body. We thank you for all the great insights from this passage. Teach us how to apply them to our lives through your Holy Spirit. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

Prayer for Security

Pilgrim Prayer—April 5, 2015

Psalm 16

1 Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge.

2 I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing.”

3 I say of the holy people who are in the land,
“They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.”

4 Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.
I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods
or take up their names on my lips.

5 Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.

6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.

7 I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.

8 I keep my eyes always on the Lord.
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

9 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,

10 because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

11 You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

The Word of the Lord.

On Pentecost, the first day of the Christian church, when Saint Peter was preaching the very first Christian sermon (this is all in Acts, chapter 2), after he got through the introduction, the main text he preached on was Psalm 16. His message was that Jesus Christ is risen, and he preached on Psalm 16. If Psalm 16 was a good enough Easter text for Saint Peter, it ought to be good enough for you.

What does Psalm 16 tell us on Easter day? Essentially it tells us two things. It's still a psalm of David. David wrote it, and in the beginning you can see he's crying out for something. He's crying out for a refuge. He's crying out for safety, a refuge, which cannot be shaken. What the psalm is going to help us understand is *why we need a refuge that cannot be shaken* and *how we can get a refuge that cannot be shaken*.

1. *Why we need a refuge that cannot be shaken.* See the very first verse. It's a cry. "**Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.**" Down in verse 8 he says, "If I keep my eye on you, if you're at my right hand, I will not be shaken." He needs a refuge, a place of safety that will not be shaken. Why? What's this all about? It's actually one of the main themes of the Bible.

We're told in Hebrews 11 Abraham did not rest his heart in his wealth, in any particular land, in nothing in this world. In fact, it says, "Abraham looked forward to the city with foundations whose builder and maker is God." Later, at the end of chapter 12 of Hebrews, we're told that city was a kingdom that cannot be shaken. So Abraham was looking for something with foundations that cannot be shaken.

This is one of the main messages of the Bible, that there's nothing in this world with foundations. There's nothing in this world that will last. There's nothing in this world that won't be shaken and pass away. Everything in this world is passing away. It's fleeting. It's precarious. It's temporary. What do I mean?

For example, this world has no *physical* foundations. Did you know that? A hundred fifty years ago, physicists would have told you that the world was solid and that matter had always existed. Today, what physicists will tell you is that matter itself is nothing but energy in motion, and the particular configuration of energy that you and I call *matter* that we think of as solid started with a big bang and it's winding down. It's going to more and more disorder. The second law of thermodynamics.

You've heard the idea that eventually the sun will burn out and all life on earth will die and maybe the universe will die, but do you realize that matter itself will go away? Even matter itself is just a temporary configuration of energy. Because of that, nothing you do, nothing *anybody* does, is going to make any difference in the end.

One author put it like this: "If nature is all that exists, if there is no God and no

supernatural world outside of nature, then human civilization will, in the end, have been just an accidental flicker, and there won't be anyone around to even remember it. If the whole of human civilization lasted a billion years, in the end it would be infinitesimally short in relation to the oceans of dead time that proceed before and follow it." This world doesn't even have any physical foundations.

Secondly, this world has no *intellectual* foundations. No human philosophy will last. What's extraordinarily clear is that things that were written in the *New York Times* on the editorial page 20 years ago are now seen as hateful, obscene, primitive, horrible stuff. Twenty years ago. Do you think we've arrived at the ultimate moment now? Do you think that somehow 20 years from now everybody will read the stuff that's in the *New York Times* and say, "Isn't it wonderful how brilliant ... We've finally arrived at all the right views"? No.

In fact, let me be personal. There are things that right now you believe as an enlightened person that two generations from now will be risible, embarrassing. Anyone who is related to you will be upset that you even put it on paper. There are no intellectual foundations here. No human philosophies last. It's not just that they sort of develop. They become obsolete. They become stupid. You give your whole life to building your life on the basis of a set of beliefs. They're going to go away. All human philosophies have no foundation.

Worst of all, there are no *emotional* foundations. This life will take away everything you love. Everything that means anything to you will be taken away. You can't keep your family together or any group of friends together. This world will scatter them. Some will get angry. Some will just move. Some will sort of wander off, and of course they'll all die.

Not too many years ago, I read an interview with a young woman who was a model. She said, "I have to get ready for the future." She said, "I'm 26. I'm a size 3, but I know by the time I'm in my 40s I may be a size 8, a size 10. I know of people who get there and they're just devastated. I have to get ready for that emotionally." You want to say, "My dear, there is a lot more you're going to have to get ready for than that."

Beautiful flowers ... They are going to be in the ground decaying soon, and they're only on a slightly faster path than you and me. We're on the same path. You see why David is crying out. We all cry out. We don't want to just be a wave upon the sand. We don't just want to be a flitting phantom. We want something that lasts. We want a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

We want a refuge that will be there, something we can stand on. We need a love we can't lose. That's the reason why all human beings who actually think about it, who are not too busy on their cell phones and have enough time to think about it, realize there's nothing in this world that has foundations and that we need a refuge that cannot be shaken.

2. *How we can get a refuge that cannot be shaken.* This is an extremely practical psalm, and he tells us three important things that we are going to have to do if we

are going to get a refuge that can't be shaken, if we're going to become unshakable people. First, it's more of a negative thing. We have to see what we run to. Look at verse 4. "**Those who run after other gods ...**" Not just who believe in other gods; who *run* after other gods. What does this mean?

In the older days, ancient people actually believed in a set of divine beings. They believed there was a god of war, a god of beauty, a god of fertility, a god of wealth, a god of athletics, a god of wine and parties. There were all of these different gods, and people worshiped these different gods. We don't believe those entities exist, but we still run after every one of those things. Here's what that phrase *run after* means. To run after means to pant.

See, you have to live for something. Something has to be chosen by you to say, "If I have that, then I have a fulfilled life. Then I have self-worth." You're going to make that choice consciously, semi-consciously, and whatever that is will function in your life, though you may not want to say it, as basically divine. It's going to function exactly the way those things functioned in the lives of the ancient people who believed that wealth and fertility and beauty and power actually had a divine being behind it.

We don't believe *that*, but those things function in our lives exactly the way they did back then. We say, "If I have that, if I get into that school, if I get that kind of income, if that person will love me, then I will have a good life." You're running after those things. You're panting after them. Your tongue is hanging out. You're not just doing those things; you're running after them. This is your meaning in life.

David is hinting ... Notice he says, "**Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.**" As time goes on, you'll be shaken. Do you know why?

Because even if you are part of that lucky minority of people who actually get the things you're running after, they'll start slipping away, because nothing in this world has any foundations. They will start slipping away, and you'll be shattered and shaken. So that's the first thing. You should recognize what it is your heart is running after.

The second thing (look at how deliberate David is) ... If you want to have a refuge that cannot be shaken, if you want to be able to say, "Because my eyes are on him, he's at my right hand," here's what you have to do. It's very deliberate. Verse 2: "**I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.'**" Literally in the Hebrew it says, "Beyond you, no good. There's no good beyond you."

He actually says it again in verse 5. "Lord, you are my portion [my wealth]. You are my cup." *Cup* meant experience, my joy. Didn't David already believe in God? Yes, of course he believed in God, but that's the importance. We're not just talking about believing in God. We're talking about running to him. We're talking about saying, "You are my meaning in life. You are my highest good. You are my joy."

It's very easy for us to deceive ourselves. You can be extraordinarily religious

and never have done this at all. You can go to church. You can believe in God. You can say your prayers. You can give to the poor. You can believe all the doctrines, be very busy in religious activities, but if you are and something goes wrong with your health, something goes wrong with your family, something goes wrong with your financials, you get furious and say, "All this I've done for God. Why is he letting this happen to me?" and you start to walk away.

You have done God, but you've been running after those other things. What David is saying is, "Change that around. The only way you'll become unshakable is to do those things but run after God. You've been doing God but running after those things." David says, "For the first time in your life, pursue God. Run after him."

Say, "I don't just believe in you. I'm not just obeying in order to get the things I really get joy out of. *You're* the joy. *You're* the meaning. *You're* the self-worth. *You're* my all. *You're* my hope." Pursue God. That's the second thing he says. That's the only way you'll be unshakable, because that's the one love you can't lose. That's the one thing that can't be taken from you. That's the one thing that even if death comes it will only make it better. God's love, God's presence, which leads to the third point.

In some ways, what we've said so far other religions can offer you. Buddhism, for example, is actually quite good at saying that the reason why you're so shaken is that you're running after all these things. Buddhism says, "If you're that concerned about career or how you look or what size dress you're in ... If those things really bother you, those things are passing away. They're illusions." Buddhism says, "Don't run after those things." So Buddhism is quite good at that. Islam has a personal god, and you have to make him the most important thing in your life.

So other religions can also say, "Make God the most important thing. Don't run after other things," but only biblical religion can give you what David offers. He offers something way beyond just that, honestly. Here at the end, these last few verses, he says something we have to reflect on for a moment or two, because it was remarkable when he wrote it especially. To the first people who read the psalms and sang the psalms, this must have been a shock. Look at verses 9–11.

"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

This is pretty remarkable. In that stage of redemptive history, at that stage of the history of revelation, back in the Old Testament time, when the Bible was being written at this time, the ancient Jews had some idea of afterlife, but they didn't have a very strong understanding of what was going on. It wasn't all that well developed. But here's David saying something pretty remarkable. Basically, it boils down to this.

He's saying, "The love I have, the friendship I have with God, the fellowship I have with God ... His love for me is so strong I cannot believe that death could strip it from me." If you have a love relationship with somebody and something comes between you, what do you do? If you have the power to get rid of it, you get rid of it. Well, God is omnipotent.

David is saying, "God loves me, and I have a friendship with him and a fellowship with him that I just do not believe God will let death come between us." He says basically, "Here are the two things I have a conviction about. The first thing is that I will see him face-to-face." You know that word *presence*? "**... you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.**" The English word is *presence*, but the Hebrew word is always *face*.

Here's what literally David is saying. "God, in your face is joy upon joys, and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. In your face there's joy upon joy upon joy, and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." He's talking about the beatific vision. He's saying, "I'm going to see God face-to-face." David, who wrote this, certainly knew that Moses asked, "Show me your glory; give me the ultimate experience," and God said, "No, it will kill you." Yet David is saying, "I'm going to see that."

Now it is really hard for us to imagine this. Notice he talks about pleasure, eternal pleasure, infinite pleasure and joy. The only person I know who even comes close to getting us to understand this is C.S. Lewis in his great sermon that he preached at University Church in Oxford in the 1940s called *The Weight of Glory*. You can find it online in its totality.

He has a couple of fascinating passages where he's trying to get to grips with what it will be like. What is David talking about? Here's one way to think about it. I'm going to have to explain it in the middle, because it's such a wonderful thought. Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory*, "[The] energies which God's creative rapture implanted in matter when he made the worlds are what we now call physical pleasures ..."

Did you hear that? Do you know what he's saying? If you go back to some parts of the Bible, like Proverbs 8, it says that when God was creating the world he was just so happy. He was frolicking, practically. He was joyful. The creation accounts of other cultures and other religions usually have the gods ... It's usually the result of a battle or something. Only the Bible says when God created the world it was a work of art. It was the overflow of his own creative joy.

Here's what Lewis is saying. I love this. It's such a wonderful thought. He says when God was creating the world he was in rapture. "God's creative rapture." He was in such joy when he was creating the world that some of that joy got permanently into the world he was making, and the energies which God's creative rapture implanted in matter are what we call physical pleasures.

Why is it that the sounds these people are making are bringing you a little bit of pleasure? Why is it some of you are crying? Why is it you find it beautiful? What

Lewis is trying to say is that when God made things like sound or music, when he made your body, when he made food, what he did was he put some of the joy he had, the creative rapture he had as he was making it, into it, and now we experience it as physical pleasure.

We participate a little bit in God's joy that he has put into creation. Some of these things we taste, we hear, we see. Why are certain sights so beautiful? Why are certain sounds so beautiful? Here's the answer. "[The] energies which God's creative rapture implanted in matter when he made the worlds are what we now call physical pleasures; [but] even thus filtered, they are too much for our present management." There's a whole sermon there. "What would it be to taste at the fountain-head that stream of which even these lower reaches prove so intoxicating?"

The greatest pleasure you've ever had in your life, the most beautiful sight, the most incredible sounds, the most wonderful physical pleasure you've ever had ... They're just far-off hints of what it must be like at the fountain-head, in the presence of God. In his face is fullness of joy. At his right hand are pleasures forever more. David says, "That I'm going to have."

There's a great place in 1 John 3 where it says, "Beloved, we do not know what we're going to be like, but when he appears ..." He's talking about the end of time. "When he appears, we will see him as he is." Then it adds, "Anyone who hopes for that purifies himself as he is pure." To even know that's going to happen, to even hope in that, to even say, "That's for me" is going to affect you. Of course it is. It's going to make you more unshakable.

Anyone who even hopes for it purifies himself. You become a more unshakable person. "Okay, that's great. I'm glad David believed that, but how can I know that?" Oh my goodness. We have better proof that that's going to happen to those who believe in God through Jesus Christ than David did. Why? Because David has a second thing that he says. What does it say? Commentators have tried to figure out what David was saying.

"... my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay." It sounds like he's saying, "I'm going to be resurrected. My body is going to be resurrected. I'm not just going to have a kind of afterlife as a disembodied spirit. My body is going to be resurrected so I can really experience these pleasures."

Is that what he thought? Maybe. But here's what Peter says on Pentecost. David didn't quite know, but he was pointing to one of his descendants, a greater David, someone who was truly faithful. Yes, David was faithful, but only Jesus Christ was completely faithful. In the grave, God did not abandon him to the grave. God never let his body see decay but raised him up, and now Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God, and that guarantees that you who believe in him will be resurrected too.

Do you know what that means? If you do not believe that Jesus Christ was

physically raised from the dead, if you don't believe in the historical fact, would you please imagine what would happen if you did? What if you knew he was raised from the dead? What if you knew the resurrection was a fact and that if you believed in him this future was your future? It would change the way you went to every funeral. It would change the way you wept every one of your tears. It would change the way in which you handled everything that came your way.

It would change the way in which you acted every time things were slipping out of your hands. What about the rest of us? We believe in the resurrection up here, but imagine you were 5 to 10 times more sure of it. It would change you too. How can we do that? Well, think. A.N. Wilson, who's a British public intellectual, like most British public intellectuals, he didn't believe in Christianity, didn't believe in God. He laughed at it, until a few years ago he got convinced by the evidence.

He actually has an article in the *Financial Times* today, plus one in *The Guardian* this weekend, on why you can believe Easter, why you can believe Jesus Christ actually rose from the dead. The evidence is there. It's not just something that people who seem to want to believe in it just do. There's a lot of evidence there. He talks about the eyewitnesses. Or think of this just for a second. Let's be rational for a second, because that's the way into this incredible unshakable life.

You say, "Well, back then people were more gullible." Jews did not believe that there could be a resurrection in the middle of history. They believed there might be a resurrection for the righteous at the end of history, but Jews did not believe somebody could be raised from the dead in the middle of history. They did not believe a human being could be God, and yet thousands of Jews started believing that Jesus Christ was the resurrected Son of God.

You and I here in New York City have a hard time believing in the resurrection because we're rational and scientific, but they had different yet equally strong reasons to be skeptical of the idea that Jesus could have been raised from the dead. So here's the question. What evidence did they get? It must have been so powerful. In fact, I'll put it like this. What evidence would *you* need today to overwhelm your skepticism, to believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead? It would have to be pretty strong, right? Well, they must have gotten the same kind. And they did.

As A.N. Wilson says in one of his articles ... He talks about the fact that they were transformed. He says, "We can easily dismiss Easter as a fairy tale—especially if we hide from ourselves the uncomfortable fact that the first men and women who claimed to be witnesses to Easter were prepared to be tortured and to die horribly rather than deny the risen Christ." It's hard to believe that those people didn't see what they saw.

Is there any reason to believe in the resurrection? Lots of it. Would that change your life? Absolutely. It would make you unshakable, because the resurrection doesn't just mean that someday in the afterlife we get a consolation for the life we lost here. No. We get the restoration. We get new bodies, the restoration of the life we lost. More than that, we get the life we always wanted in the world

which we never had. Know that. Run to the doctrine of the resurrection. Run to it, and you will receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you have given us on Easter a tremendous assurance that you exist, that there is a love we never can lose, that there is a foundation we can stand on, and that we can be unshakable in this world and life. Thank you for that. We pray that now as we sing again, as we think some more about what you did on that day, raising Jesus from the dead, that these truths would pass more into us and we might become more and more conformed to the image of your Son, in whose name we pray, amen.

Hannah's Prayer

David: The Man of Prayer—April 12, 2015

1 Samuel 1:3–11, 18–20; 2:8–10

3 Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Lord. **4** Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. **5** But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb.

6 Because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. **7** This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. **8** Her husband Elkanah would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

9 Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. **10** In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. **11** And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

18 She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her

way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.¹⁹ Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her.²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the Lord for him.”

8 He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's; on them he has set the world.⁹ He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

It is not by strength that one prevails;¹⁰ those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Pretty much the whole year in our Sunday morning worship services we've been looking at the subject of prayer. Back in the fall, we actually went through the Lord's Prayer. In the weeks leading up to Easter, which was just last week, we were looking at the prayers of the Psalms. Now starting this week and stretching out for a while, we're going to be looking at the life of David, who is not only the author of most of the Psalms but was a great man of prayer.

Quite appropriately, the story of David, which starts here in 1 Samuel 1 ... First and 2 Samuel are often called the *book of David*. This story begins with a woman who radically changes her life through prayer. She's a desperate woman. She's culturally oppressed, but she takes control, you might say, through prayer, so it's very, very appropriate.

What we're going to do is we're going to look at this. She's obviously the forerunner of David and the mother of the forerunner of David. Nevertheless, since we've been looking at prayer all year, this is another tremendous look at the subject. Let's take a look at this very attractive person.

Her name is Hannah. We are first going to look at *Hannah's sorrow*, which we're given more insight to in the first few verses. Secondly, *Hannah's response* to her sorrow. Lastly, in her great song, only of which a few verses we were able to read, we see a *Savior* who Hannah is looking forward to who actually enables her to respond to the sorrow in the way she does. It's *Hannah's sorrow*, *Hannah's response*, and *Hannah's Savior* who enables her to respond to the sorrow in the remarkable way she does.

1. *Hannah's sorrow*. What's the nature of her sorrow? “Whenever the day came

for Elkanah to sacrifice ...” This is an Israelite man who has two wives. “... he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters.” Notice Peninnah has lots of sons and daughters. “**But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb. Because the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.**”

What we have here is a man with two wives. One wife is bearing a lot of children, and one wife, Hannah, cannot bear any children. The one wife who is bearing children is mocking and rubbing it in and making Hannah even more disconsolate. Down in verse 10, we see she’s in deep anguish. The words *deep anguish* literally means pain of the soul, not pain of the body. When it says *weeping bitterly*, it means crying out loud, wailing aloud. She’s a woman who is in great sorrow.

What do we know about the sorrow she’s experiencing? Why is she so unhappy? Let me just take a second. There are two reasons she’s unhappy. The first one bears at least a mention, I think, even though it’s not the main point. One of the reasons she’s unhappy is she’s in a polygamist marriage.

The only reason it bears saying is I’m constantly not only being asked about this but very often I just read about it all of the time. People do everything they can to undermine the authority of the Bible by saying, “There’s a lot of stuff the Bible says that we don’t believe in anymore,” or “There’s a lot of stuff the Bible says is okay that we have just abandoned.”

I always say, “Like what?” One of them comes up as this. They say, “Look! In the Bible, it was okay to have multiple wives and you Christians don’t do that anymore, so you see, you pick and choose. The Bible said it was okay.” Okay. Every single place in the Bible where you get a look at a polygamist marriage, everybody is miserable. Everybody is miserable, so anybody who says the Bible says it’s okay to have polygamist marriage just doesn’t know how to read a text.

The more specific reason why she is so sad is that she’s not living up to the cultural ideal, and the cultural ideal for women was to have a lot of babies. Before you start to go, “Poor Hannah. What a horrible, oppressive culture that was,” let’s first of all keep in mind why, especially in ancient times, bearing children was an extraordinary social and cultural good and why anyone who bore a lot of children was a cultural hero. Why?

First, the more children you had the better things were economically. Period. It was true of your family. The more children you had the more people there were to work in the field or the more people there were to work in the shop and, essentially, the bigger your business. That’s that. The more children the more money. Period. Of course, it also meant the more children in the society, the better the entire economy was.

Secondly, future security. The more children you had the more likely you were to live to old age with a certain amount of comfort and security. There was really no

other way to do that. Most important, unless the women of this society were fertile, some bigger country or some bigger nation would come by with a bigger army and just squash you or colonize you. Therefore, the more children the more militarily and politically strong you were.

Therefore, anyone who was having children and a lot of children was just doing the very best possible thing you could possibly do for your society or for your family economically, politically, militarily, or culturally. Period. You were a hero. You have to remember that, so when you look back and you see Hannah and this cultural ideal that was being pressed on her and she was not doing it. She wasn't able to do it. Her womb was closed, and because of that, she was in great agony.

Before you say, "What a shame," realize ... By the way, not only was that good culturally, you do know there are places in Europe now where governments are paying women to have babies because their culture is dying because women are not having children, so it's not a ridiculously ancient idea.

Here's what I want you to see. Every culture tends to put a lot of pressure on the individuals to live up to the ideal. In other words, every culture has the Peninnahs who come and say, "You're not living up to the cultural idea." For example, we live in an individualistic society, and in many ways that is less oppressive. There's no doubt about it. We live in an individualistic society where people are much more able to choose their path. Yet, do we really want to say the culture puts no pressure on women to live up to an ideal?

What's with all of the self-harming? What's with all of the eating disorders? What's all that about? What I know about it when I read about it is the fact is the culture puts enormous pressure on women. Our culture. Looks. Not just that, by the way. Looks, money, credentials, accomplishment. Every culture has its Peninnahs who come up and say, maybe not, "You're just not having children and I am," but the Peninnahs come up and say, "You're ugly. You're unsophisticated. You're untalented. You're unaccomplished. You're stupid."

There is no such thing as a non-oppressive culture. That's how culture gets things done. It says, "Here is the way in which we ought to live." Every culture has some norm, some ideal of what a good society should look like, and the people who aren't fitting in are stigmatized and everybody gets after them and makes fun of them. Therefore, that's how cultures keep you in line.

Every culture is trying to suck you into its own meaning systems so you fit, and she didn't fit, and the culture was telling her that, and she was in agony. By the way, this is true of all of us. I preached on this text some years ago, and I was looking at my old notes, and I realized on the way home after preaching it in the morning my wife, Kathy, said, "Hey! Interesting. A sermon that's actually kind of a chick flick."

I said, "Yeah, it is," but I have to say, if you're a male here and you don't see the ramifications for yourself, you're a fool, because the culture will come at you no matter who you are, whether you're young or old, male or female, black or white,

Asian or Hispanic (all of the cultures), and the cultures are complex, but she's sad she's not living up. People are saying, "This is what you ought to be," and she's not living up, so there's her sorrow.

2. *Hannah's response*. How does she respond? First of all, to understand her response, we have to understand what she doesn't do and then see what she does. What she doesn't do is something I think most readers will miss. Robert Alter, a great professor (retired now, I think) of Hebrew and Hebrew literature at University of Berkeley in California has written many, many books on how to read Hebrew narrative, and he is just the world's expert.

One of the things he says is extremely important, if you know how to read a Hebrew narrative, is that there are two voices addressing Hannah in this story. There is, of course, the voice of Peninnah. It says in verse 6, "**... her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.**" She was trying to get a response out of her.

One voice is Peninnah's voice representing the culture, but notice, as Robert Alter points out, there is a second voice. It's the voice of her husband. Verse 8: "**Her husband Elkanah would say to her, 'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'**" Here's almost certainly what he's saying. You notice it says he gives her a greater portion.

It says, "**But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her.**" He says to her, "Look. I know you don't have children, but you have my love. Shouldn't that be a consolation to you?" Almost certainly, what this means is he actually loved Hannah in a way he didn't love Peninnah. This is part of the horror of polygamy anyway, but there is no way that would be a consolation.

To say to Hannah, "But I love you. Doesn't that console you for not having children?" would be no consolation if he loved her exactly the way he loved Peninnah. It would only be a consolation if what he's saying is, and this is almost certainly what he is saying, "Look! She's having the children, but you're my true love." That's very admirable of him to say, and that's very wonderful of him to say, but Robert Alter says ... I'll say what he says, and then I'll translate. He says it's narratively significant that Hannah doesn't answer either voice.

He says it's extremely important to see you have two voices. Both of them are saying, "Here's how you can be happy." One is to depend on having children. The other is to depend on your husband's love. There are two voices, and she doesn't answer either. In Hebrew narrative, that means she's not giving in. She's not responding. She's not saying, "Okay." She's not building her life not only the cultural ideal but not on her husband's affection either.

Some of you know this because I constantly refer to it. It was a paradigm shifter. I remember a woman some years ago who had recently become a Christian and started coming to my little church in Virginia. I was young, and she was a lot older than me, and she was actually, even though she was a new Christian, smarter

than me about a lot of things and wiser, I think, about Christianity.

She had lived a pretty horrible life because she had been addicted to male affection, so she had needed always to have a man loving her. That meant she would get into abusive relationships and stay in relationships when she should have gotten out and all of that. She had become a Christian, and she was going to a therapist, a good therapist, in the big city right up the road from where we lived.

I don't remember much about the conversation, but I do remember this. She said, "You know, it's funny. My therapist has said to me, 'You have depended all of your life for your self-image on male affection (what men think of you), and that's not good.' " Agreed. "What you really need to do is get a career. Then you'll feel good about yourself because you're a career person."

Here's what she said. She said, "What's funny is I've always been enslaved to men, but the men I've been enslaved to were usually enslaved to their careers. I would get all upset depending on whether the man loved me or not. They would get all upset about whether they were making money or how their career was going." You can say, "You need to be your own person. Go out and have a career."

"Okay, so I'm going to be a dancer. Now I'm enslaved to what the dance world thinks of me," or "I'm going to be a Wall Street tycoon." Now you're enslaved to the stock market. I remember her saying something like this. She said, "I don't want to be enslaved to any of those. That's why I became a Christian. I don't want to give up a typical female ideal and take on a typical male ideal and somehow feel better about myself."

What's interesting is what Hannah does not do. Obviously, Elkanah is an admirable guy just to say, "Look. I love you. Just know you're my true love." That, of course, by the way ... I want you to think about this. If you're in a polygamist marriage and your husband says, "I actually love you; I don't really love her. She's having the babies, but you're my true love," what would that do if she built her life on that?

First of all, she'll turn around to Peninnah and say, "Ha-ha! You have the kids, but we have some romantic evenings. He only comes into you when he wants another child." Oh, my word! What that does to your soul! What that does to the family system! What that does to the children! Oh, my word! Any alternative, anything you build your life on rather than God looks okay on the outside until you get into it. The first thing she does not do is she refuses these other voices.

What does she do? She does the most decisive and radical thing she possibly can do. It's signaled in verse 9. Again, I'm going to have to rely on what Robert Alter says. It's interesting. In verse 9, it says, "**Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up.**" When you and I read that, it looks like, "And?" Why does that have a period? Of course, if you're going to go do something, you have to stand up before you go do it. Don't you? Get out of

your chair or whatever.

You read that, and you realize, "Wait a minute. This seems significant. I don't know what the significance is." What Robert Alter, the Hebrew scholar, says is it's an idiom. We have idioms that are not literally true. For example, imagine you don't know English and you don't know our culture. You're trying to learn English, and you get to a place where it says, "She put her foot down." You'd say, "What does that mean? Don't you have to do that in order to walk?" No, no, no. It's a metaphor. It's an idiom. It means to say no.

Robert Alter says to say she stood up means she took charge. It means she stopped being passive and became active. It means she decided to take decisive action. Hannah stood up. "No more am I just going to let life happen to me. No more am I going to have all of these voices coming at me and I'm going to be weeping, weeping, and weeping. No more. I'm going to take charge. I'm going to do something radical."

Are you ready for something radical? What is it? She prays. In her deep anguish, Hannah prayed to the Lord, and she made a vow saying, "**Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.**"

What's going on here? What's so decisive about this? At first, it looks like she's bargaining, and I do think if you just read that thing it's going to seem like she's striking a bargain. It sounds like she's saying, "I have a new way of getting a kid out of this God who won't give me a child. I'll promise to let him go into the ministry. Then maybe he'll give him to me." If that's what she's doing, if she's striking a bargain, then what happens afterward wouldn't have happened, which means she's not striking a bargain. What happens afterward? Take a look.

"She said, 'May your servant find favor in your eyes.' Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, 'Because I asked the Lord for him.' "

If she had been bargaining, this is what would have happened: prayer, pregnancy, peace. It would have happened in that order. Right? For example, if you apply for a job, you're making your pitch, your offer. If you apply for a school or if you apply for a grant, you're saying, "Here's what I will do if you do this."

When you go home, you're still on pins and needles. You make your prayer to the school or the grant-meister or whoever. You make your prayer, but you don't come home in peace. You come home saying, "Let's see." You made an offer. If the person comes back and gives you the grant, now we have peace, but that's not what happens to Hannah.

You don't have prayer, pregnancy, and peace. You have prayer, peace. It says so. "**Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.**" That's a very significant phrase. Her face was no longer downcast. That means that's the end of it. She made this prayer, and even though she had no idea whether God was going to give it to her or not, she's at peace. Then comes the pregnancy.

Why? What was going on? Here's what was going on. Let's look carefully. This isn't just ministry. When she says, "... if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head," what is that talking about?

The Levites were one of the 12 tribes. The Levites. They were the priests and they were the helpers at the tabernacle. Of all the 12 tribes of Israel, the other 11 tribes could own their own land, they had their own wealth, they had inheritance, they could go into business, and they could do all of these things.

They could have their farms, but the Levites were not allowed to own land, and they had no assets. Basically, they were paid right out of the central ... They lived near the tabernacle or even right in it, practically. They lived right around there and they took care of everything. If you were born into the Levitical tribe, that's what your job was. That's what you did. That's how you lived.

But a Nazarite was a voluntary Levite. A Nazarite was someone who was given to basically do Levitical work, to live at the tabernacle and do the help of the priests and that sort of thing. The sign that you were a voluntary Levite was you were a Nazarite. What that meant was the two signs were ... There were more than two, but there was at least two. One was your hair wasn't cut as a sign that you were a Nazarite and, secondly, you didn't drink alcohol.

If you want to understand what Hannah's doing, you need to try to get into what the emotional and social payoff was for a woman at that time to have a child. Why did a woman even want a child? What would be the social and emotional reasons for having a child? I'll give you three. One reason a woman at that time would want a child is to fit in.

Every day all the women went to the marketplace and all the women went with their children. The children played with each other, and they talked about their children. They showed their children off and that sort of thing. Every day Hannah went to the marketplace with the other women with no children at all, but now she had a son who was a Nazarite. She still wouldn't have anybody. In other words, she still wouldn't fit in.

Another reason why you'd want a son is because your son would grow up and learn the trade of your husband and inherit the land or the shop or the farm and take care of you the rest of your life, but if your son is a Nazarite, you don't have any of that either. No security. He can't do that. He can't own and can't inherit.

Thirdly, one of the reasons why you'd want to have a son is to fill your life with the richness of the literal hugs and kisses of a child. The emotional richness of having children who run up to you with their big smiles and put their arms around you is another reason to have a child, but if the son is a Nazarite, he doesn't live with you. You might see him once a year.

Well, then, what's going on here? Here's what's going on. Let me paraphrase what the prayer is, I believe. "Lord, all of my life, I have always wanted to have a child for me, but now, I still want to have a child. I still want to participate in the goodness of childbearing, but now I want to have a child for you." Let me paraphrase that again.

"Lord, I've always wanted to have a child, but for me, and if you had given me a child before this, I would have made a slave of that child. He would have been enslaved to me; I would have been enslaved to him. It would have been a disaster. If I had actually lived up to the cultural ideal and said, 'Now I'm somebody. I have a son,' it would have been terrible. Yet, Lord, I still want to have a child. I still want to participate in what a woman can do. I'd like to be able to bear a child, but if you give me a child, I'll give him to you. I'm redirecting my desire for a child. Not for me. It's for you."

That means, "If I were asking for a child for me, then how you answer this prayer would mean everything, and I wouldn't be able to have any peace until I knew you had answered it, but if I'm asking for a child for you, then however you want to answer this prayer is fine with me. Lord, I've always wanted to have a child, but up till now it has always been for me. Now I want to have a child for you," and the Lord said, "Okay."

Robert Alter is a secular man (an incredible scholar of the Old Testament but a secular man), but I actually saw a recorded discussion between Robert Alter and Marilynne Robinson, a Christian author, and as they were talking, at one point Robert Alter let this out of the bag. He said, "You know, sometimes the biblical stories are so unbelievably beautiful it makes me think, maybe, the Bible is true." This has to be one of them.

What's going on here? She stood up. What does that mean? She took control. What does that mean? She says, "I'm not grounding myself in what my husband thinks of me, as attractive as that is. I'm not grounding myself in what the culture says. I'm getting the culture off my back forever. I'm certainly not grounding myself in my career," which wasn't an option for her, but it's an option for you.

She's saying, "I'm not giving God-like power to any flawed human beings who will just destroy me. No. I'm free, free through the radical act of prayer." How did she do that? The theology of her song, which I can only briefly allude to here at the end just for a couple of minutes, is in chapter 2, verses 1 to 10. We only read the last part of it because it's really the only part you really need to see.

When she receives her son Samuel, who becomes one of the great figures in history ... Of course, he becomes a prophet, and he grows up at the tabernacle.

He doesn't see much of his mom, but on the other hand, he becomes this great figure. She sings this wonderful song, and in this song, we discern two things. She sees a pattern and a person, and the pattern and the person explain how she had the power to do what she did and how you can have the same power to do what she did.

What's the pattern? Before I read it to you here ... This is in verses 4 and 5. This wasn't printed. It's not there, but you can see what I mean. In verses 4 and 5, she says, "**The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.**"

Do you see the pattern there? The strong are weak; the weak are strong. The barren are fertile; the fertile are barren. The filled are empty; the empty are full. Then you get down here to verse 8. It says, "**He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.**"

Here's what she's saying. "I see a pattern. I see it in my own life. God does not seem to work through strength but through weakness. Through wealth? No. Through poverty." Here's what she's saying. "If I had not experienced the sorrow I have experienced, if I hadn't experienced the cultural rejection, the sense of alienation I went through, I never would have discovered this freedom otherwise. I never would have discovered the freedom I'm in now. I see also, now that I've had this child who is going to become this great man ..."

(We don't know quite when she wrote the song.) She says, "I also see this is the way God seems to work. He works through the excluded. He works through the weak. He works through the poor. I don't quite know why, but he seems to work through the weakness and the suffering and the difficulty." That's the pattern. That's the pattern of God's salvation, but beyond the pattern, there's a person. Do you see the person at the very end?

3. *Hannah's Savior.* "**The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.**" The words *his anointed* mean the Messiah. It means the anointed king, the Messiah. Who is Hannah talking about? There was no king in Israel at the time. Who was she talking about? Well, she's obviously, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, seeing ahead, and most commentators say, including Robert Alter, that she's foreseeing David, but is she only foreseeing David?

Does this sound familiar? Does this sound familiar? Centuries later, another young woman found herself unexpectedly pregnant through the intervention of God, and she sang, "**... my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ... He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.**"

Does that sound familiar? Yeah, because that's Mary, and Mary has just discovered she's pregnant with the Savior of the world, and she sings about it in Luke, chapter 1. It's called the *Magnificat*, and she bases her song on Hannah's song. Why? Because it's Mary's way of saying, or it's certainly the Bible's way of telling you and me, that Jesus Christ is the ultimate embodiment and climax of the pattern of salvation that Hannah experienced.

Because when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, comes into the world, he's born into a manger. "**Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.**" He comes as a poor man. He becomes as a weak and powerless man. He is beaten. He is excluded. He is tortured. He's put to death. He's a king. He's the anointed King who goes to a cross not a throne.

What does that mean? By going to the cross, he's saying salvation is by grace, and that's the key to everything. If he had come in strength and said, "You may be saved if you're like me. Be like me. Then God will bless you," then it's a strong God coming to save the strong, but if you have a weak God coming to go to the cross and die in your place and take the punishment for your sins so you can be saved by grace, then salvation only goes to the people not who are strong but who know they're weak, like Hannah, who go and say, "Father, accept me because of what Jesus did."

Do you know what that means? Then and only then, since salvation is not based on accomplishment, it's not based on strength, it's not based on how many children you have or how much your husband loves you or what a great career you have ... It's not based on any of those things. It's based completely on what a weak Jesus Christ did on the cross for you, so when you believe in him, you're completely accepted.

Therefore, the Lord can look at you and say, "I'm your husband," to the lonely, or "I'm your wealth," to the poor, or "I'm your righteousness," to the morally failed, which is all of us. If you want to restructure your heart and get the culture off of your back and to have the freedom (psychological, sociological, cultural freedom) that Hannah got, you have to believe in the one to whom Hannah points, the ultimate Son of promise, the ultimate impossible birth, the ultimate removal of shame, the ultimate Savior. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have shown us a way to freedom that doesn't seem like it's one most of us can even imagine, so we thank you that you have given us this story of this great woman, Hannah. We love her as we think about her and as we listen to the story, and we're grateful for her because she depicts something we're really not allowed by our own culture to conceive, and that is the idea that we could really be free from what the culture tells us, what our hearts tell us, what our emotions ...

Oh my goodness. We can really be free, but only in the salvation which is ours through Jesus Christ, so we pray you would help us to do what Hannah did, to

stand up, to take charge as it were by utterly surrendering to you, to take charge of our lives by utterly surrendering everything to you and grounding ourselves in you ... We pray, Lord, you would help us do that now, especially as we participate in the service of the Table. We ask it through Jesus, in whose name we pray, amen.

Saul's Rejection

David: The Man of Prayer—April 19, 2015

1 Samuel 15:10–26

10 Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: **11** “I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.” Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.

12 Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, “Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal.”

13 When Samuel reached him, Saul said, “The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord’s instructions.” **14** But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?”

15 Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.”

16 “Enough!” Samuel said to Saul. “Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night.” “Tell me,” Saul replied. **17** Samuel said, “Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. **18** And he sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.’ **19** Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?”

20 “But I did obey the Lord,” Saul said. “I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. **21** The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord

your God at Gilgal.”

22 But Samuel replied: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. **23** For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.”

24 Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned. I violated the Lord’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them.

25 Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord.” **26** But Samuel said to him, “I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!”

The Word of the Lord.

A rather sobering passage. We’re looking at the life of David, and today we get to a text that actually gets us to address one of the most urgent and important questions you could ask ... *What’s wrong with the human race?* What’s wrong? A few years ago, a philosopher at San Francisco State University, Jacob Needleman, wrote a book called *Why Can’t We Be Good?*

It kind of sank without a trace. Here’s what he said. He says social theorists are writing books about how we should live, and therapists are writing books about how we should live, and politicians are making speeches about how we should live and setting up laws for how we should live, but the real problem, though, of the human race is not that we don’t know how we should live. We kind of do know how we should live. The problem is we know how we should live, and we aren’t able to do it.

That’s the big problem of the human race. We know what we should do, and we can’t do it. Every single civilization has a moral code and a criminal justice system to go along with it, and every single civilization has widespread violations of the moral code that everybody basically knows is good, so the point of the book was we have a problem. We don’t need more lectures. We don’t need more education.

Very often, as he points out, many people in a secular world tend to think, “If you do bad things, it’s because you have been socially deprived, you’ve been oppressed, or you’re the victim of poverty.” There’s an article today in the *New York Times*. What is it that gets young men and young women to leave fairly good lives in the West and go to the Middle East as jihadists?

At one point, the person writing the article asks a couple of experts, “Is it because these are people who have been oppressed and they are socially alienated so they go there to strike out?” The answer is no. That’s not true. The idea of social

oppression being a profile for a jihadist is just not true. We don't really know why, though there's actually an insight in the article I'll get back to later.

This is our problem. Why do we do the terrible things we do when we basically know how we should live? One answer is in this text. It's not the only answer, but it's an extremely important one. It's a small but important subject I want to bring to your attention. To get at it, let's look at the story itself and let's ask these questions: *How did Saul fail? Why did Saul fail? How can we escape the thing that destroyed him?*

1. *How did Saul fail?* To grasp everything else, it's important to look at what is actually going on here. Saul, the first king of Israel, had been given a command by the Lord. Samuel mentions it in verse 13. "**When Samuel reached him, Saul said, 'The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions.'**" That's a reference to it.

Then, down in verse 18, Samuel gives a little synopsis of it. It says, "**And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.'**" When we first see that, we think, "Oh, my goodness! That's terrible! God is telling him to go wipe out a group of people," but let's not read this superficially.

The Amalekites were a violent people. They committed atrocities. They committed genocide. They were marauders. If you want to know a little bit about the kind of violence of those nations that lived around Israel, go to the book of Amos. Look at chapters 1 and 2, and see how they waged war. They did atrocities. They did genocide. They were violent. How do you, then, stop a group like the Amalekites? In other words, how do you keep them from continuing to destroy other people? What do you do? How do you stop them?

The answer is with force, but when God says to Saul and to Israel, "I want you to go, and I want you to attack the Amalekites with force, of course," then he says, "However, I will not let you use force on them the way they use force on other nations." All nations, when they attack another nation, do so to enrich themselves. They don't just do it to kill. They do it to get slave labor. They do it to get farmland. They do it to get timber. They do it to get capital. They do it to enrich themselves.

What God actually says, and you can actually see this better, maybe, if you read the first nine verses of the chapter, which we didn't read, is basically, "I want you to smite the Amalekites, but as an instrument of divine justice. This necessary but terrible thing you have to do is an act of justice, not of imperialism. Therefore, you may not profit one cent from this military action. Not one cent! You can't take slave labor. You can't take the livestock and the cattle, which of course, is their wealth. This is not an act of imperialism. This is an act of justice, and you mustn't profit one cent." That's what he said to Saul.

I think this is, by the way, extraordinarily realistic of God, because we know this. All nations always say when they go to war they're going to war for truth and

justice, but actually, they're going, at least also, to enrich themselves. God knows that, and he says to Saul, "This is to be an act of justice. This is supposed to be an act of truth and justice. You must not profit a cent," but, of course, what Saul does is he actually adopts the very values of the nation he was sent to smite, and he takes Agag, the king, as prisoner. We'll get back to the reason why he does that.

It actually says in verse 9, which we didn't read, "**But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs— everything that was** [valuable]."
They took everything that was valuable, so he has adopted the imperialistic, violent ways of the nations around him, and as a result, he has completely failed to be the king of Israel, to make Israel different, to make Israel a light to the nations. As a result, God sends Samuel to tell Saul he has been rejected. That's how Saul failed.

2. *Why did Saul fail?* That's where we have to really look because it would be very easy ... Listen. There would be nothing wrong with us doing a little reflection. It's interesting this text basically says nations say they're going to war for justice and truth but they actually go to war in order to enrich themselves at the expense of other nations through violence.

Would that bear interesting reflection? Sure. That's something we could say, "That's interesting. What do we learn about foreign policy from that?" It's worth reflecting on, but the purpose of this text in the Bible is not to get you to think about US foreign policy. The purpose of this text is to get you to think about yourself. It always is. The question is ... *What was it that brought Saul to this point?*

Saul started out as a modest man. Saul started out as a humble man. Go back to 1 Samuel 8; 9, and 10. Samuel is sent to tell Saul that God is going to anoint him to be the very first king of Israel. Then, in 1 Samuel 10, Samuel gets all of the people together, and he's going to try to anoint Saul in the presence of the people, and Saul is so modest and shy and scared, he hides amongst the luggage, and they have to send people to go pull this tall, gangly kid out and anoint him king.

How did he get to this? How did that shy, modest, humble man get to the place where he actually is essentially doing atrocities, because he's doing it to enrich himself? How did that happen? Here's the answer. The answer is the almost infinite capacity of human beings for self-deception. That's what this passage is about. Self-deception. The almost infinite capacity of the human heart for self-deception.

For example, you see it in many ways. In verse 19, Samuel basically says, "**Why did you not ...?**" Literally, in the Hebrew he says, "Why did you not listen to the voice of the Lord?" I know it is translated, "**Why did you not obey the Lord?**" Literally, he says, "Why didn't you listen to the voice of the Lord?"

In verse 20, Saul says, "But I did listen to the voice of the Lord." Then down in

verse 22, he says, “**... to heed is better than the fat of rams.**” Basically, here is what Saul is saying. Samuel says, “You didn’t listen.” Saul says, “But I did listen.” Samuel is saying, “Well, you listened, but you didn’t really listen. You listened, but you didn’t really take heed.”

By the way, all parents of teenagers know exactly what I’m talking about, because self-deception is our ability to know something at one level and keep ourselves from knowing it at another level because we don’t want to know it. Self-deception is the ability to know something at one level but not know it at another level because we don’t want to know it because it’s too threatening. Self-deception is not the worst thing we do, but it’s the reason why we do the worst things. How does it work? Well, some ideas. Let me give you four examples, most of which I’ll get back to.

For example, when my wife and I were first married, we used to take long trips in the car, especially on vacation. When we were in the car on long trips, my wife would fairly regularly say, “Honey, do you hear that noise? Should the car be making that noise? Isn’t there something wrong with the car? Let’s pull over on the side and put up the hood and see. Is there something wrong with the car?”

I would always say, “No. There’s nothing wrong with the car,” and then turn up the radio. “Cars make that sound. You just don’t pay attention.” I didn’t want there to be anything wrong. I desperately didn’t want there to be anything wrong with the car. Why not? I’ll get back to that. I knew there was something wrong with the car, but at another level, I didn’t want to know there was something wrong with the car, so I didn’t know there was anything wrong with the car until it broke down in some remote place.

Air Florida Flight 90 in 1982, taking off out of Washington, DC. As many of you might remember, it went down in the Potomac River. It was icy. It was winter. It hit one of the bridges on the Potomac. Many, many people were killed. Why? Self-deception on the part of the pilot. We got the recorder, and we know the pilot was saying, “Oh, yeah. These bureaucrats always want to de-ice the plane. It’s really not a big problem.”

Forty-nine minutes after de-icing ... They hadn’t de-iced in 49 minutes. They were starting to get ready to take off, and the co-pilot says, “I have some readings here I’m not sure are very good,” and the pilot was saying, “I know what I’m doing. The bureaucrats have all of these rules. It makes them feel better, but I’m a good pilot. I know what I’m doing.” His overconfidence, his self-deception ... Self-deception is not the worst thing we do, but it’s the reason why we do horrible things. Lots of people died.

There was an article I read at some point about the difficulty parents have at recognizing their own children’s flaws. We’ll get back to this, too, but the point is it’s very difficult for parents to look at their children and admit what’s wrong, so we defend them very often, and we talk to other people about them, and we defend them to the school or to other parents.

"Everything is fine. You shouldn't pick on this child." Yet, we know, but we don't know, there is something wrong until, very often, it's too late. You can ruin your child. Of course, parents want to think the best about their children. Self-deception isn't the worst thing we do, but it's the reason why we do such terrible things. You can ruin your child's life. You can kill a lot of people on an airplane.

In the middle of Germany there is a town called Ohrdruf. Ohrdruf was the site of one of the worst death camps. When Eisenhower, at the end of World War II, liberated it, he couldn't believe what he saw. I was reading up on it a little bit. When General George Patton came to town ... If you know anything about George Patton, you know what a tough guy George Patton was.

George Patton looked at it from ... George Patton wouldn't go in. When he saw it even from the outside, he said, "I think I'm going to throw up." George Patton. It was a horrible place. Eisenhower went into town, talked to the civic leaders, including the mayor and his wife and others, and said, "You knew what was going on there."

"No! We didn't know. We didn't know." Of course, they brought them out, they saw it, and not long after that, the mayor and his wife hung themselves. You can read about it on the Internet. Their last words were, "We didn't know, but we knew. We didn't know, but we knew. We knew, but we didn't know."

One of the main messages of the Bible is Romans 1. We know, and yet we hold down the truth in unrighteousness. We know many things about how we ought to live. We know many things about God, but we don't know. We know, but we don't know. The Bible basically says exactly what Jack Nicholson said to Tom Cruise: "You can't handle the truth." Why? What's going on here? Why?

Listen. Self-deception. We don't really have time to look at it all, but you can see many aspects of it and how it works. It works out in many, many different ways. In verse 15, when he's first confronted, it's amazing. Verse 13: "**The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions.**" I mean, there's a bad conscience. "By the way, I did everything God told me."

"Okay. You did?" "**What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?**" Verse 15: "**Saul answered, 'The soldiers brought them ...'**" By the way, in Hebrew, he doesn't use the word *soldiers*. He just says *they*, a vague, third-person plural. "Well, I did everything God told me. They brought them. They shouldn't have brought them." That's blame-shifting. Blame-shifting is always, always part of self-deception.

The other thing is very often religiosity is. Do you see what he says? We "... **spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.**" "Look how religious I'm being." By the way, Elisabeth Elliot tells a story. Elisabeth Elliot was a missionary, and she was one of three children. Her little brother was named Tommy.

She tells this story about how, when they were little, they used to be able to take

the paper bags they saved underneath the kitchen sink and get them out, and they could always play with them, but once they had them out, you always had to put them back. You could play with them as long as everybody put them back.

One day, Tommy had them all out, and they were everywhere. Suddenly, he realized, "Oh, my goodness! Piano lessons," so he ran into the living room where he had to practice his piano. Of course, being a missionary family, he was playing hymns. In comes the father. "Tommy, why did you leave all of these things out? You left the kitchen a mess." Tommy said, "But, Daddy, I'm singing songs to Jesus."

Elisabeth Elliott remembers what he said. He said, "Tommy, it's no good singing songs to Jesus when you're being disobedient. To obey is better than sacrifice." What he's saying is, "Well, I'm being religious. I'm sacrificing. I'm going to church, and I'm giving my tithe, and I'm reading the Bible," but to obey is better than sacrifice.

What does God really want? He doesn't want your sheep and goats. He wants you. He wants you. Religiosity is always a part of the self-deception, but here's the worst thing of all. It's really pretty sad, but you have to at least mention it. At the end, when he realizes Samuel is not being fooled and God is obviously not going along with this, then Saul said to Samuel (verse 24), "**I have sinned ...**"

When David, in 2 Samuel 12, does something even worse than Saul here, he also says the same words ("I have sinned"), but when David says, "I have sinned," God accepts the repentance and forgives him, but when Saul says, "I have sinned," he doesn't. Why? You can even see immediately. Look.

"I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command. I was afraid of the men." He has deceived himself. He says, "I'm repenting! I'm repenting!" But it's actually self-pity; it's not repentance. He's not sorry for the sin. He's sorry for the consequences of the sin. He's not sorry for what he did. He's sorry he has been caught. He's sorry because of the bad things that are coming into his life because of it.

If you took those consequences away, he'd be right back into it, and he doesn't see it. He's self-deceived. "I'm sorry! I'm really repenting! Look at me. I'm upset! I'm beating my breast. I'm beating myself up. I see what a horrible thing I've done. Why in the world aren't you coming back and forgiving me?"

"Because you're not repenting."

"What do you mean I'm not repenting?" Self-deception. "Saul, the minute these consequences go away, you're going to go right back into what you were doing before. Do you see how self-absorbed you are?" No. He can't.

3. *How can we escape what destroyed Saul?* How are we going to escape it? Well, we'd better figure out what the heart of it is and what all of these forms of self-deception we're talking about have in common, and I think it's right here. There are two places where you can see what's going on. It's interesting.

In the very beginning, verse 12 says, “**Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, ‘Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal.’**” The heart of the heart of it is down here in verse 17.

Samuel says to Saul, “**Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel.**” There it is. “You were small in your own eyes, and God made you king. God made you big. You were small. God made you big, but now you’re trying to make yourself big. You’re trying to create a monument.” This is the reason why he makes this fascinating statement in his oracle when he says, “... **arrogance [is] like the evil idolatry.**”

Here’s what we have. What is it? Why did I have trouble admitting there was probably something wrong with the car? Because Kathy’s father and my father could always just pull over to the side, pick up the hood, and immediately figure out what was wrong with the car. That’s what the men in those families did.

They’d pick up the hood of the car. “Oh, it’s a thingamajig, and I just happen to have three in the trunk. I’ll just pop the thing right in here, pull the old one out.” I couldn’t do that. I never could do that! I could never do that. I didn’t want to! I couldn’t pull over to the side. I would just look and say, “There it is. It smells bad. I don’t know what’s going on.”

Why did the pilot ...? Of course, the pilot was proud of being a good pilot, but he was too proud. Arrogance is like the sin of idolatry. He was too proud. He said, “You know, these people ... I’m not going to be late. I am not going to stay here and be another hour and a half late because I have to de-ice again. I know what I’m doing. I’m going to go.”

What about parents who say, “I have this perfect kid (athletic, great grades, popular), so what’s going on?” In every case, the reason why they’re in denial, the reason why they’re self-deceived is because their self-image is based on something, and whatever the thing their self-image is based on, whatever they see as a monument to themselves, whatever they see as basically how they’re making themselves big in their own eyes (“I’m raising a great kid,” or “I’m a great pilot,” or “I’m a manly guy”) ...

Whatever your self-image is based on, you will have to be in denial and you’ll have to filter out and you’ll have to suppress any information that basically jeopardizes that self-image. “I need to believe I’m like this. I need to believe I’m like this. That’s how I feel good about myself. I need to believe it.”

In comes information that doesn’t fit with that, you filter it out, and that’s the reason such awful things happen. As long as you’re trying to become big in your own eyes, as long as you have anything you’re basing your self-image on in order to feel big, good, a monument, you will not be able to be honest about that thing. You can’t admit what’s wrong with your kid. You can’t admit you’re just normal in this way.

Certainly, that's why religiosity, by the way, is one of the main ways in which self-deception happens. "I need to believe I'm a good person. I need to think of myself as a good Christian, a decent Christian, a mature Christian." In comes information that shows you're not, and we have to do something about it. You know it, but you don't know it. You just filter it out.

In fact, getting big in your own eyes is definitely the way to get evil. In the *New York Times* article, at one point, the interviewer was saying, "Why in the world would a 20-year-old kid having a fairly good life in this Western country go over there and start beheading people?" This is what the expert said.

"Can you imagine a 20-year-old kid whose peers are getting drunk, obsessed with finding a girlfriend, but he realizes, 'I could go to Syria and Iraq and do something that within an hour gets a response from the president of the United States'? If he goes to Syria and becomes involved with the Islamic state, he goes from being the manager of a second-rate clothing store to someone giving headaches to the president of the United States."

What? That's exactly what Saul is doing. Exactly. "I want to feel big. I want to know I'm getting a rise. The world notices what I'm doing." If you need to become big in your own eyes, that automatically means you've built your self-image on something that leads to self-deception that can lead to some terrible, terrible things.

What's the solution? Interestingly enough, Samuel gives Saul the solution. He gives it in an Old Testament version. All we have to do is show, since we live on the other side (we live after the New Testament), we actually have an even stronger resource. I'll be brief about it, but it's very clear. The answer is in verse 17. **"Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel."**

In other words, "You were elected through sovereign grace. You were not better. You were not smarter. You were not wiser than anybody else. You were taller, but apart from that, Saul, you were small in your own eyes, but God actually swooped in and made you king by grace." He says, "You're rejecting the grace of God. You're trying to go out and build a self-image without the grace of God. You're trying to make yourself big in your own eyes, and that's the reason why everything is going wrong."

Some years ago, I heard Edmund Clowney preach a sermon on Deuteronomy 7, verses 7 to 8. It's one of those things that changed my life. Therefore, some of you have heard me refer to it before, but it explains this and brings us home. Deuteronomy 7, verses 7 and 8. I'll just read it to you.

Deuteronomy 7, verses 7 and 8, is where Moses is actually talking to the children of Israel, and he says, **"The Lord did not set his [love] on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you ... that he brought you out [of Egypt] with a mighty hand ..."**

Did you hear that? "God didn't love you, O Israel, because you were greater. In fact, you were the fewest. You were the least of nations, but it was because the Lord loved you that he set his love upon you and brought you out of Egypt with a mighty hand." If you listen carefully, it's a completely circular argument. "Why did he love you?" Because he loved you. "Why did he love you?" He loved you because he loved you because he loved you.

Then Ed turned around and said, "Let me give you an example." He said, "O men, if your wife comes to you and says, 'Why do you love me?' everything is on the line. Here's what you might say. 'Honey, I love you because you're beautiful, you have a great figure after all of these years, the sexual chemistry is great, you have had a great career which enhances the family coffers, you are athletic and we can do stuff together that I couldn't do with somebody else. There are all sorts of ways in which you are so much fun to be with, and I just have this great time with you, and you're hilarious, and you add zest to my life.' "

He said, "Oh, my goodness! At first, maybe, if she's really stupid, she'll feel good for about a minute. Then she'll begin to say, 'Wait a minute. What if I gain weight? What if I get tired of my career? What if I get injured? Wait a minute.' She'll realize you're not loving her because you love her. You're loving her because of the benefits she brings into your life. You're not loving her. You're loving what she gives you."

The only way to answer a question like that that will satisfy the deepest need of a heart is to say, "Honey, I love you just because I love you just because I love you just because I love you. It's unconditional." You see, if you know you're loved because of *XYZ*, the *XYZ* becomes the basis of the self-image, and you'll always need to be that *XYZ*, and you'll have to filter out any information or any data that calls that into question.

If someone says, "I love you because of *XYZ*," the *XYZ* becomes the self-image, but if somebody says, "I love you because I love you because I love you," then the love becomes the basis of self-image, and you're free to admit the worst things about yourself. You're free to finally be honest. You have the emotional ballast. You're not threatened because your self-image isn't based on you being this perfect little *this* or perfect little *that*. You can admit, finally.

You say, "Well, can't you get unconditional love from human beings?" Sure, you can. If you get unconditional love from a human being ... Let's just say a spouse or a parent or something like that. That's great, except then you're never going to be able to be really, really ... You will not be able to handle anything going wrong with that person's life. You'll be in denial that there's anything wrong with that person.

The only love that is truly unconditional that gives you the basis of a self-image that leads you to become more honest about yourself instead of more deceived about yourself is the unconditional love of God. When he told this to Saul, that was the best Saul had and the best Samuel could offer, that we have a God of

grace. It was a kind of principle. You're saved by grace and not by works. If you think you're saved by your good works, that creates a self-image that leads to self-deception, but we have something better. We don't just have a principle. We have a person.

Jesus Christ was great in everybody's eyes. Philippians 2 says he became small. You know that place in the rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, where Jesus comes into the presence of Pilate, and Pilate looks at him and says, "Oh, so this is Jesus Christ. I'm really quite surprised. You look so small. Not a king at all."

He was great. He became small so you and I, if we admit that we're small, that we're sinners in need of grace, can have a name that will last forever. Jesus Christ lost everything. He's the true King of Kings. He doesn't take people prisoner. He liberates. He doesn't kill people. He saves people. He doesn't take life. He gives his life.

He did all of that for you, so when you say, "Father, accept me because of what Jesus Christ has done," you can have that unconditional love, and that is the only self-image ... You have to live into it. You have to take it out when your wife asks you to do something that will be embarrassing. You have to say to yourself, "I don't have to be like her father. I don't have to be like my father. That's not where my self-image rests."

You have to take it out all of the time, and you have to be in a community in which you're using the gospel on each other. Hebrews 3:13 says to exhort one another daily, lest you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Sin is deceitful, and the only way you're going to get through that is if you have a community of brothers and sisters inside the church who you have given a hunting license to. They can come and exhort you.

They can talk to you about what's wrong with you, so when you see it and you start to get defensive, you use the gospel on it and you become more and more clear-eyed about who you are and less and less self-deceived and more able to really know your strengths and weaknesses and really able to see the world as it is instead of going around in a fog, in denial, in blindness, and in self-deception. There is nothing more liberating than to be so loved you can finally admit that you're flawed.

I'll just end with this, paraphrased from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. Christians may still be left to their loneliness because, though they have fellowship with one another as devout people, they do not have fellowship as sinners. It's the grace of the gospel which is so hard for the religious to understand, that it confronts us with the truth and says, 'You are a sinner. You are a great, big, desperate sinner. Now come as the sinner you are to God who loves you.' "

The gospel message is liberation. The mask you wear before human beings will do you no good before him. He wants to see you as you are. He wants to be

gracious to you. Know the freedom of saying, “I am a desperate sinner, and as I am, God loves me.” Let us pray.

Father, free us from the self-deception we have because, to a great degree, we don’t ground ourselves in your unconditional love, forgetting what Jesus Christ did. He’s the true King of Kings. He doesn’t take life; he gives his life. He doesn’t enslave people; he liberates people. Though he was great in everyone’s eyes, he became small, so small, so that we, believing in him, could know we are great in the eyes of God.

Lord, in that self-image we have a clarity and we have a reality and we have an honesty we could not get any other way, so please, Lord, as we think about these things, show us how to apply this to our lives by your Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.

David’s Anointing

David: The Man of Prayer—April 26, 2015

1 Samuel 16:1–13

1 The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.” **2** But Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.”

The Lord said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’ **3** Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate.” **4** Samuel did what the Lord said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, “Do you come in peace?”

5 Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. **6** When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.”

7 But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people

look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel.

But Samuel said, “The Lord has not chosen this one either.”⁹ Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, “Nor has the Lord chosen this one.”¹⁰ Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “The Lord has not chosen these.”¹¹ So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?”

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.”¹² So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah.

The Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at the life of David, and it impresses me how each week each time we look at a new episode we not only are getting ancient history, but we’re always getting some question addressed that has quite modern, contemporary ... I should actually say perennial ... relevance. For example, I think the question we’re going to be helped to answer today is ... *What do you really look like?*

Many years ago, when we first came to New York City, I read an article in the *New York Times*. It was a column by a woman, and this is what she said. “More than 40 years of looking at myself in a mirror has left me like so many women I know, almost totally ignorant of what I really look like. In the mirror, I do not see reality. I see a composite of memories, wishes, half-truths, and old photos of myself.”

By the way, this is not just a female problem. That’s so well said let me say it again. “In the mirror, I see not reality but a composite of memories, wishes, half-truths, and old photos of myself.” Then she goes on and explains that she decides she doesn’t like the way she’s looking as she’s getting older. She’s obviously in her 40s now, so she goes and gets a major makeover. She walks back into her apartment. Her 7-year-old son takes one look at her and screams and runs away.

She said, “I thought I looked kind of good, but now I don’t look like Mommy.” Then, finally, she ends with a question. “What do I really look like? Am I ugly? Am I attractive? What do I really look like?” Actually, believe it or not, as contemporary a column as that is, this passage talks about that, and there are a number of ways to read a passage, so let’s read the passage, in a sense keeping that question in mind, and let’s notice what the passage teaches us about *the*

importance of true beauty and the source of true beauty and the secret of both detecting and developing true beauty.

1. *The importance of true beauty.* What do I mean? All the way through this passage, I was impressed again on how much more pictorial and concrete Hebrew is. When you try to get it into English, it always becomes more abstract. I'll show you a couple of examples of that. In verse 1, you've read that God says to Samuel, "**I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.**"

Literally, what he says is, "I see myself a king among Jesse's sons." Isn't that kind of quaint? "I see myself a king ..." In other words, he says, "I've looked at Jesse's sons, and I see a king." God's eyes. What does he see? It tells us, because the heart of the passage, the heart of the teaching of the text is down here in verses 6 and 7.

All of Jesse's sons come traipsing by, and Samuel sees Eliab. Eliab is the oldest son, and Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "**Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord.**" The reason is because he was big and he was strapping. In those days, keep in mind how important that was.

William Wallace, the great Scottish hero of the Battle of Stirling Bridge ... In the 1200s, we believe William Wallace was about 6 foot 5. We know that because he had a broad sword. You know how they used broad swords. It was a broad sword that was 5 foot 6 inches long. In a day in which most of the warriors he would have been facing would have been about 5 feet 6 inches tall, you can see why he was just unstoppable and why he was king, as it were.

I mean, he could just mow people down, so in those days, when height and size and might was so important, any man who was tall and strapping was beautiful. It meant you looked at somebody like that and said, "Wow! If he's on my team, that meant protection and safety." Samuel looks at him and sees the external appearance and says,

"‘Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.’ But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’ "

Only God's eyes see truly, and what God's eyes see in true beauty is always internal. Only God's eyes see truly, and what God's eyes see is internal beauty. A nineteenth century author, George MacDonald, wrote a couple of fairy tales (*The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*). One is a sequel to the other. In the second one, *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie is a little miner boy, and he meets an ancient fairy queen, and this fairy queen sends him on a quest.

It's a dangerous quest, and in order to get him ready for the quest, she gives him a special power. She has him put his hands in a fire of rose petals, and it burns him. It's very painful, but when it's done, he discovers when he takes somebody's hand he can discern through the outward appearance and detect what's really in

the persons' heart.

At one point, he takes a hold of the hand of a horrible monster named Lena, and he feels the hand of a little girl. At another point, he takes the hand of a regal-looking king or a beautiful woman, and he perceives the claw of a vulture. In other words, he has God's eyes. That's how the fairy tale goes.

God sees beauty is internal and not external. "Don't look at the appearances. Don't look at the externals," God says. It's actually a command. Why not? First of all, external beauty, attractiveness, or whatever, is temporary ... always. It's always going away, whereas internal beauty can get stronger and stronger not only all of your life but throughout eternity. We'll get back to that.

External beauty, and not just external beauty, but even brains and smarts and talent are actually not a matter of the heart. What is going to make a kingdom go well is not if the king is a great warrior, though that can come in handy in the short run, or a brilliant tactician, but it's the king's heart. It's whether the king is wise. It's whether the king is loving. That's what's going to make the kingdom go well.

What God is saying, not just to Samuel but to you and me, is "Don't let your pocket get picked." What does that mean? You're distracted. You're looking at the wrong thing. That's how your pocket gets picked. He says, "Don't be like everybody else in the world. Don't be distracted by beauty, by polish, by sleekness, or even by talent and by success." None of those things really matter. What matters is what's in the heart. I could go on and say that's the first lesson and let's go on, but let's not yet. Here's the reason why.

We need to at least spend a little bit of time recognizing our own cultural moment, because obviously, when God says (God is making a categorical statement), "The Lord does not look at things the way people look at them," what this means is this is an abiding problem in all cultures in all times to be distracted, to have your pocket picked, to be distracted, to be looking at the wrong thing, to be looking at the externals.

That has always been a problem, but I like my thesis here that we live as a culture that has almost infinitely intensified this problem, so that we are much more seduced and much more obsessed with the externals, with physical beauty, with success, with credentials, with talent, with glitz, much more than any other culture ever has been.

Why? I'll give you two reasons why. Then we'll talk about how. Broad categories. Two reasons why: technology and philosophy. Technology. Neil Postman, who was a professor at NYU for many, many years, was a cultural critic. His most famous book was called *Amusing Ourselves to Death* about media.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he points out when Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln were running for president of the United States in 1858, they engaged in debates, very famous debates, and the transcripts of those debates of the issues of the day were run in all of the newspapers, but Postman points

out, even in the height of the midst of that campaign, if Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln had walked down the main street of almost any town in this country, no more than 4 or 5 percent of the people would recognize them.

The reason for that was, even though photography had been invented, you didn't have wire service, and you had no way of conveying the photography. In other words, as Postman points out, how did they make their decisions on a national election? They looked at their ideas. They looked at their ideas.

He says we live in a completely different time in which, because of photography and because of images everywhere ... By the way, when he wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, that was the 80s. What he says, though, is exactly powerful. Images are more powerful. Photos are more powerful. Why is Instagram taking over from Facebook? Because I'd rather send a picture than read or even write a text. Pictures are powerful, but because of that now, we are dominated by images and not ideas.

Postman says our elections are much more determined by impression, by feeling and not by thinking, by impression because of what people look like, and because of advertising, we're just blasted with images everywhere, and you can't help but compare yourself to them. The technology in the media means we are completely overwhelmed with images and photographs.

In the past, it was not that way at all, but it is now, but here's something that's even a more powerful cultural impulse. In the *New York Times* book review section today, there is an article about a new book. It seems like a pretty good book about the 2011 massacre of children in that summer camp in Norway. Do you remember? It's a pretty good book, evidently, and there are reviewers reviewing it, but at one point, the reviewer says something awfully telling.

At one point, this reviewer says, "Well, there's a lot of debate around how evil this was. Was this man evil or was he insane?" Then, the reviewer says, "The definition of evil is still being debated." When the reviewer says that, that's true, but if you read philosophers like Charles Taylor or Andrew Delbanco up here at Columbia University, what they will say is that's actually true, but it's also telling.

We're the first culture in the history of the world that didn't have any consensus around what is evil or what is good. Martin Luther King Jr., in 1963, in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" said ... He was in jail. Why? He was in jail because he had disobeyed the law. People said, "You're a minister. Why would you disobey the law?" He said, "Because it was an unjust law." "Well, how do you know it was an unjust law?"

Then he said, "Any human law that contradicts God's law is an unjust law." You see, what Martin Luther King Jr. was doing at that point ... That's a blast from the past. In the past, every culture had some idea of what God's law is or what the moral absolutes were. Every culture has always said there is right and wrong, there is truth, and here's good character, and here's virtue, and here's evil, but we are the first culture in history that says you have to decide what is right or

wrong for you.

Our society just makes you as free to live any way you want as long as you don't harm somebody else, but we don't define harm and, therefore, the reviewer is right. We actually live in the first culture in the history of the world that doesn't know how to define *evil*, that doesn't even know how to agree if something is evil, which means we also can't define *moral character*. We can't define *moral goodness*, and because we can't define *moral goodness*, we have nothing left but externals.

Since we can't lift up, "This is good," or "This is a good person," or "This is a bad person ..." We can't do that anymore. Therefore, all we have left is money and looks. We have externals. It's the only thing we have. We can't talk about the internals. It's too abstract. We can't agree on it, so we live in a culture, because of its worldview, because of the media and technology, that puts more emphasis on looks, on the externals, than ever, and it's devastating.

The emphasis on physical beauty and looks and polish and appearance ... First of all, you know how it's devastating in the lives of women. You know that. Eating disorders didn't even exist 150 years ago. It also devastates the lives of us aging people. I mean, we're blasted with what we're supposed to look like, and it's so powerful that we actually, in our heads, deny what we really look like. We're like that woman. We actually don't even really look.

Sometimes, you're walking down the street and you catch a vision of yourself in a window, and you go, "Oh, my gosh! When did that happen?" Let me say something. I'll lower my voice so I get some gravitas here. The cultural intense emphasis on beauty and appearance has distorted male lives, I think, maybe the most of all.

Pornography, which, of course, is enabled by the media ... To use Martin Luther King Jr.'s phrase ... I'm going to paraphrase. Pornography deeply trains you to look at the beauty and the quality of the skin and not the content of the character. That's what pornography does. You remember that's what Martin Luther King Jr. said. "I want to be judged on the content of my character, not the color of my skin."

Well, to paraphrase, pornography trains you deeply to care only and mainly about the beauty and the quality of the skin, not the content of the character. It trains you to look at that. It trains you to notice that on the street and not the content of the character. In other words, pornography trains you to look at life exactly the opposite of the way God does, according to this passage.

What that does mean, by the way, is I know plenty of men who walk right on by all kinds of wonderful spouse material because they have been radically changed by the culture to not look at content of character, which is the only beauty that can last, the only beauty that can grow as time goes on. All other beauty fades. All other beauty is superficial.

By the way, New Yorkers, there is that Waylon Jennings song, "Too Dumb for

New York City, Too Ugly for LA." Do you know that song? New Yorkers like to say, "Well, yeah. California. They are really obsessed with looks, but what we care about is whether you're smart, whether you're productive, whether you have the goods, whether you're talented, and whether you can produce," but honestly, that's just as superficial, you know.

That's not a matter of the heart. That's a matter of the talent. That's a matter of brains, and those things are not virtues. That's not a matter of the heart. Look at the world right now. Look at all of the problems of the world. Everything from war and oppression down to broken relationships. What's the problem with the world? Lack of creativity? Lack of intelligence? Lack of smarts? No! It's lack of love. It's lack of character. Do you see the importance of true beauty?

Secondly ... No, I'm not done. I gave myself half the time for the first point. It's too important. Let me just look at you. You say, "What do you mean by inner beauty?" All right. Look. Your life is not going to be basically determined by the externals but by the internals. Are you becoming more beautiful?

That is, are you less prone to selfishness? Are you less prone to self-pity? Are you less prone to envy? Are you less prone to vanity? Are you less sensitive to criticism than you were two or three years ago? Are you wiser? Are you happier? Are you less anxious? Are you less concerned about how life goes and circumstances?

Do you have more poise? That's what's going to set the course of your life. It's the inner beauty, not the outer beauty. Do you know how to love? Do you know how to be loved? That's what's going to set the course of your life as a whole, so that's the importance of true beauty.

2. *The source of this true beauty.* That comes from the very last couple of verses. Take a look at the last couple of verses. "**So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David.**" Again, literally, the Hebrew says, "From that moment, the Spirit of the Lord rushed through David." Isn't that something?

Here's the second point. Please do not think what God means in verse 7 is, "I've looked at all of the various sons of Jesse, and these guys have bad hearts, but one has a great heart, and I'm going to choose him." Is that what he's saying? Because if that's what you think, that David was the only one who had a great heart and God said, "You can be my king," you're going to be very surprised reading the rest of the life of David.

He's going to do some terrible things, and you're going to say, "Wait a minute! Why did God choose him? I guess God must have made another mistake." No. The point is if David is going to be a true king, what the Bible would consider true kingly character will have to be the gift of the Holy Spirit. Nobody has that naturally. That's going to have to come through the power of the Holy Spirit rushing through his life if he's ever going to become a true king.

You say, "Well, I don't mean to say there aren't some people who are better than other people." For example, some people are very cruel and some people are not cruel, but here's what the Bible teaches. The people who are not cruel have the seeds of cruelty in their hearts. All the same seeds. Some people are liars and other people are fairly honest and have more integrity, but I can tell you every single heart has the seeds of being a complete liar, a complete deceiver.

The only difference between hearts has to do with environment or whether you've had good examples or how you were raised. I mean, if you have any pride ("I'm less cruel than that person" or "I'm more honest than that person") in your natural state, it's only simply because of the ways in which your heart was cultivated by other people. You have the ability to do every bad thing anyone has ever done.

David has to get the Holy Spirit if he's going to become a true king. Why? Because true kingliness is the true beauty we've been talking about. What we have here is in Saul and David and in the song of Hannah a depiction of normal kingliness and true kingliness or true beauty. The normal king does what? A normal king gets money and power and leverages it to get more. The true king, and you can see this in Hannah's song and you can actually see it in David's life, gives away that money and power and shares it with other people.

An ordinary king lifts himself higher and higher. The true king comes low to lift the needy up from the ash heap and to put them on thrones with the princes. That's all in Hannah's song. Ordinary human nature says, "My life, your life, and your life to serve me." Ordinary human nature says, "I'll get into a relationship as long as it's paying off for me."

In other words, "Your life for mine. I'll get into a relationship as long as it's paying off for me, as long as it's serving my interests. Your life for mine," but true kingliness, real beauty, is, "My life for yours. My life sacrificed for yours. I'm only happy when I see you thriving even if that costs me something."

That's beauty. That's inner beauty. That's true kingliness. The reason the Holy Spirit has to come in is that you are not capable of that. Jacob Needleman was a philosopher at San Francisco State University, a secular philosopher, but he wrote a book a few years ago that sank without a trace. Nobody wanted to touch it. It was called *Why Can't We Be Good?* It was a great book.

Here's what he says. Social theorists say, "Here's how we ought to live," and therapists say, "Here's how we ought to live," and politicians say, "No! This is how we ought to live," but the real problem is we basically know how we ought to live. We just can't do it. That's the problem of the human race. That's the problem of history. That's the mystery of the ages.

When I lift up to you true kingliness when I talk about sacrifice and love and giving away your power and sharing with others, you're going to sit there going, "Yeah, of course," and that's what Needleman is saying. You do know that's how you ought to live. The real problem is we're not doing that, and he says it seems

like we can't.

Therefore, I've come to this spot. Up till now, most of what I said, I think, probably makes sense to you regardless of who you are. Regardless of what your beliefs are, probably most of what I have said has made sense. Yes, we shouldn't be enamored with the external. We shouldn't judge a book by the cover. We shouldn't be controlled by images and physical beauty and sleekness and polish and the externals. No, we shouldn't do that, and yes, we ought to be developing this kind of true beauty, so what are you going to do now?

Yes, I'm going to just try harder to live that way. I'm sorry. New Year's resolution. You're going to need a lot more than that. I already told you, first of all, you live in a culture that is going to be constantly pushing you to that. It's going to be just lifting it up. It's going to be bombarding you with images, of course, of what you ought to be like.

When you write, ideas can, especially if it's good writing, make the inner realities real. Pictures can't do that. Pictures are always going to be focused on the external. We live in a society in which all of the emphasis is on that, but more than that, let me tell you, here's one of the places ... I'm not saying it's the only place, but one of the places where Christian thinkers and evolutionary biologists agree.

One of the reasons why we really can't help but be extremely attracted and extremely concerned for other people's beauty and our own is because we know we're aging. We know we're mortal. The evolutionary biologist will tell you the reason why we want beauty is because it reminds us of youth, and when beauty fades, we're going. We're out.

Christian thinkers would say the same thing. We know we're mortal, and we don't like that. We know we're fleeting. We know we're ephemeral and we hate that. It frightens us. One of the ways you live in denial of that is to work on your appearance or hang out with people whose appearance, also, doesn't speak at all of mortality. There are powerful reasons why you are never going to become a person who knows how to develop or detect true beauty unless something pretty radical happens to you, and here's what it will be.

3. *The secret to detecting and developing true beauty.* Let's look here in the middle of how this happens (verse 10) in the middle of the passage. “**Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, ‘The Lord has not chosen these. So he asked Jesse, ‘Are these all the sons you have?’ ‘There is still the youngest,’ Jesse answered. ‘He is tending the sheep.’ Samuel said, ‘Send for him ...’ ” Notice this, by the way. “**So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.**”**

Quickly, just an aside but such an important subject, you notice David's not actually ugly. I've been reading lately in the *New York Times* there is an enormous pushback, but I'm afraid it's a desperate pushback about the modern

emphasis on image. There's the *Flawless* movement. Did you read that? It's based on Beyoncé's 2013 video.

There was even an article in the business section of the *New York Times* yesterday about Spanx. You know, Spanx is that stuff that is sort of a girdle. Isn't it basically a girdle? We just don't call it that. Now there's a movement in the culture to say, "Don't you tell me I'm too fat. Don't you dare tell me that. I like my body. I love my body. I love the way I look. Don't you tell me I'm overweight."

What's funny about that, of course, is if you're saying, "I like the way I look," in other words, how you look is still important to you. In other words, you're just as obsessed with externals, and the way you know you're obsessed with externals is you're angry at the people who are thin. You don't see that in the Bible. In other words, the Bible doesn't say, "Don't look at the external appearance," and then say, "So we're only going to choose ugly people." It doesn't say that.

The Bible says that's not the important thing. As long as you're upset about it and you're angry about it and you're trying to assert yourself and you're mad at this and that, you're just as obsessed with externals, and God said, "This is the one." What do we learn here? When David wasn't there and Samuel looks at all of these guys and God says, "Not him. Not him. Not him," finally, he says to Jesse, "Are there any other sons?" Then he says, "There is still the youngest."

The word literally there is still the smallest, and it's a Hebrew word that has a kind of negative or pejorative connotation. Therefore, it's actually not very easy to translate, so if English isn't your first language, you might have a little trouble with this one. Here's basically what Jesse is saying. He's saying, "Is this all of them?" and Jesse says, "Well, no. There's still the runt. There's still the runt of the litter." Robert Alter makes this remarkable statement. Robert Alter is a great Hebrew scholar, and he wrote a commentary on this passage. Here's what he says.

"David is a kind of male Cinderella left to the domestic chores instead of being invited to the party, but the tending of his flocks to which he had been banished will give him exactly what he needs, both in the Goliath battle and later to lead his people. This David story plays out of the theme of the reversal of primogeniture that dominates Genesis. David is not only not the oldest; he's not even one of seven sons, the Hebrew number for completion. David is the eighth child and, therefore, not even there at all."

That's brilliant. Here's what Robert Alter is saying. First of all, Robert Alter is saying one of the main things of the Bible is the reversal of the world's values. Alter was an expert on Genesis, and did you hear what he said? He says one of the main themes of the book of Genesis, and notice nobody ever brings this out except him and people who have read him, is the reversal of primogeniture.

What is primogeniture? *Primogeniture* was the oldest son got all of the money. The oldest son got the estate, got all of the assets. It was always the oldest son who got all of the assets, and of course, by the way ... The oldest son got all of the money, and the most beautiful women always got the man who had the

money. Not too far from where we are now. Not quite the same.

Robert Alter says everywhere in the Bible, when God does his salvation, when God does his work, he always does it deliberately in the reverse, deliberately the reverse of the world's values, deliberately rejecting the world's values. What do you mean? Primogeniture. Look at the book of Genesis and even Exodus.

God chooses Abel not Cain. He chooses Isaac not Ishmael. He chooses Jacob not Esau. He chooses Moses not Aaron. And, he chooses old, barren Sarah not young, fertile Hagar. He chooses unlovely, unwanted Leah not gorgeous Rachel to bring his salvation into the world. He always chooses the girl nobody wants. He always chooses the son everybody forgot.

Notice what Alter says was really interesting is it's not just that God does this in spite of their weakness. The person he always chooses is always an outsider, always lacks social capital, always lacks affirmation. The world laughs. The world despises. God always chooses people like that, but then he doesn't save in spite of that fact that they're outsiders and they lack appearances and they lack the world's approval, he saves because of it.

Remember, Alter says it was only because he was banished as the runt just to watch the sheep that he learned the skills he needed in order to defeat Goliath and, later on, even to be king. We'll get there later in the series. What does this mean? It means this is all pointing to the cross. First Corinthians 1 says, and I paraphrase, "The Jews want power, the Greeks want intellect, but Jesus Christ crucified is weakness to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to those who are being saved true wisdom and true power."

What does that mean? David is pointing us to another child of Bethlehem. He's pointing us to another person who, when he was anointed with his Spirit, was hunted not by Saul but by Satan. He's pointing us to one who, when on the cross, wasn't just forgotten by his Father. He wasn't just ignored by his Father but was forsaken by his Father. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Okay. Here is true beauty and the only kind of true beauty that will change you. On the cross, what we see is someone who was beautiful beyond bearing. He was glorious. He was equal with God. He was in heaven, but he emptied himself of his beauty, Philippians 2 says, and he became a servant.

Isaiah 53 says he had no beauty that we should desire him. His visage was marred. We couldn't even look at him because he not only was an ordinary-looking human being, but then he was beaten to a pulp, and he was put on a cross, and you couldn't even look at him. Here's one who was beautiful beyond bearing who lost all of his beauty and bore our sins so, if we believe in him, God looks at us and sees us in him.

Here's the one who lost all beauty so you and I could have the only beauty that matters, beauty in the eyes of God, and the only beauty that can last forever. When you see him dying on the cross for you, that's true beauty. Losing his beauty for you that we could have true beauty is the most beautiful thing of all,

and I want you to know that is true kingliness, and only that will change you into somebody who is capable of the same thing.

How so? This is the secret. Only when you see him doing all of that for you, only if you not only see it as a general concept but you embrace it and you say, "Lord, would you do this for me?" and you believe in him, and then you know in Jesus Christ you're accepted, you're loved by God, and you're seen as a beauty in God, that's all in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you see that, only that can destroy, at least slowly but surely, your need to appear great or beautiful to other people. Only that could destroy your fear of death. Therefore, only that can teach you how to detect and develop true beauty. Nobody put it better than C.S. Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce*. Whenever I use an illustration from *The Great Divorce*, unless you've read it, it's a little hard to understand. It's a fictional book, and it's a parable where he's trying to get certain ideas across.

It's a busload of people from hell who go to the outskirts of heaven and meet people coming down from heaven. It's a way for Lewis to say things, but there's one person on the busload from hell who comes to the outskirts of heaven, and he has a guide, and he's seeing people coming down from heaven.

At one point, he sees this most gorgeous woman, tall, beautiful beyond bearing, and surrounded by all sorts of happy, younger men and women rejoicing in her and dancing around her. This is what happens. "And only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face. 'Is it?... is it?' I whispered to my guide. 'Not at all,' said he. 'It's someone ye'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green.'

'She seems to be ... well, a person of particular importance?'

'Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things.' [...] 'She must have had a very large family, Sir.' ['No. She had none. She never married.'] 'And who are all these young men and women on each side?'

'Every young man or boy that met her became her son—even if it was only the boy that brought the meat to her back door. Every girl that met her was her daughter.' [...] 'Every beast and bird that came near her had its place in her love. In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows over into them.' [...] But already there is joy enough in the little finger of a great saint such as yonder lady to waken all the dead things of the universe into life."

Maybe you look like a supermodel, but that's going to go away, but if you're Sarah Smith, you'll be that forever. Maybe you say, "I wanted to have a family. I don't have a family. I never married, or this or that went wrong." If you're Sarah Smith, you'll have the true family forever. You'll have true beauty. Come on! See true beauty with God's eyes as much as possible. Look at the cross. That will burn your hands so you can look beyond the surface. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us this vision of what really matters and what real beauty is and what will really last. Lord, forgive our superficiality. We live in the most superficial age in history, but we ask that you would teach us to become people of character and not just through resolution and hard work and trying to be good.

That will only happen when we see your Son losing all of his beauty, that we can have true beauty forever. That is true beauty. Only when we see what he did for us will our hands be burned so we can start to detect reality from superficiality. We pray you would help us understand these things and apply them to our hearts now as we continue to worship you. We ask for it all through Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.

David's Courage

David: The Man of Prayer—May 3, 2015

1 Samuel 17:32–50

32 David said to Saul, “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.” **33** Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” **34** But David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, **35** I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.

36 Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. **37** The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.” Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you.”

38 Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. **39** David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. “I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. **40** Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones

from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

41 Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. **42** He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him.

43 He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. **44** "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!"

45 David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. **46** This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head.

This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. **47** All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

48 As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. **49** Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. **50** So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Of all the episodes in the life of David this is the most famous, it's the most dramatic, it's the most often told, and it's probably the one that deals with the most fundamental question of all. The most famous episode in David's life deals with the most fundamental question which is ... *How do you deal with fear?* How do you have the courage to face life?

The ordinary way this text is read to answer that question is kind of like this. Goliath represents your fears. Look at them. They're intimidating, but David is your inspiring example to show you how to handle those fears, which is to go right at them. Banish the fears. Face your fears, and the bigger they are the harder they will fall.

That's what you learn about how you deal with your fears from this story of David and Goliath, and I'm here to say that's a shallow understanding, even a

deceptive understanding of how to read the text, and it has a lot more in here to answer that question if we read it a little differently, so let's, first of all, ask the question, "What is this telling us?" I think it's going to give us two answers. It's going to show us *the problems of counterfeit courage*, but it will also show us *the way to true courage*.

1. *The problems of counterfeit courage.* Let's take a look at the text. You notice it is 50 verses long in 1 Samuel 17, and it's all this story. It was too long to read the entirety. I can tell you the first part, which you probably may know. Israel and Philistines are mortal enemies. Their armies come out, and they line up. They're ready for a big battle.

Then, one man comes forward from the Philistines, Goliath, and Goliath says, "**Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.**" The term that is used for Goliath is a *champion* (verse 4). A champion named Goliath came out of the Philistine camp and made this charge.

A *champion*, literally, is a Hebrew word that literally means the man between. A champion was someone who fought on behalf of the army. It sounds like a great idea. Usually, it's a great idea. One man comes from one army. One man comes from the other army. They're the champions of their respective armies.

They fight, and, as Goliath said, "If your champion wins, we become your prisoners. If I kill him, you become our prisoners." There's a sense in which the victory or the defeat of the champion is transferred to the entire army, and it's a great way to figure out who wins a battle with only one person dying. Very efficient, don't you think? Probably very cost effective.

Goliath comes out, and he challenges the Israelites to come up with one champion so they would have a battle of the champions. For 40 days every day he shows up and calls for a champion, and every day nobody comes forward. In fact, we're told in verse 11, "**On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.**" Why? Because of who this guy was.

We're told by the text, first of all, he was so many spans and cubits high. Here I'm going to follow Robert Alter. Robert Alter is a Jewish expert in ancient Hebrew narrative and really knows how to read ancient texts, and he believes the text is essentially saying Goliath is about 8 feet tall, but he's not just 8 feet tall. He also has the most advanced military hardware. You might say he's incredibly high tech. This is what the text says.

It says, "**He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels ...**" which was, by the way, 125 pounds. He had 125 pounds of bronze armor, which was very high tech. "**... on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six**

hundred shekels,” which was about 20 pounds.

Robert Alter points out (this is the Hebrew scholar) very seldom in Hebrew narrative do you have these long detailed lists of what a man was wearing, but Alter says the thematic purposes of this exceptional attention to physical detail is obvious. Goliath moves into the action like a man of iron and bronze, an almost grotesquely quantitative embodiment of a hero, a hulking monument to an obviously obtusely mechanical conception of what constitutes power.

Now, Alter shows one of the mistakes people usually make when they read. I said very often Goliath represents your fears (that's the way it's read) and David represents a kind of inspiring example of how you should handle your fears. Robert Alter says, “No. Goliath and David are alternate approaches to heroism.” They are alternate approaches to how to deal with your fears. They are alternate approaches to courage. Each of them is a model for how to go about dealing with your fears and having courage, and the Goliath model is the one we're looking at first.

How does he do it? Well, you can see it in words in verse 42 like, “**He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy ... and he despised him.**” “I'm big. You're small. I'm high tech, and you couldn't even handle Saul's tech. You couldn't even do the armor thing, even Saul's armor.” He says, “**Come here ... and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!**”

Here's how Goliath deals with his fears. He builds his self-esteem by focusing on his assets (which are considerable), visualizing success (he can't even imagine defeat), and banishing his fears. Do you have that? He bolsters his self-esteem by focusing on his assets and banishing his fears, not being able to visualize defeat and visualizing only success, so his fears are gone. That's how he gets courage. That's how he deals with his fears. He builds up his own self-esteem until he can just banish the fears. That's how he does it. That's the Goliath approach to courage.

The question is ... *Was that just for ancient times?* Oh, no. Not at all. That has always been the world's way to do it. The world always says you deal with your fears by banishing those fears. You think about, “You can do it. It's possible to do it.” You build up your own self-esteem. You visualize success. You bracket out the possibility of failure.

I got this off the University of Florida's website in its area on counseling and fears. I didn't think there was anything to be afraid of in Florida, but evidently I was mistaken. If any you were thinking about going to Florida, please take this advice. It says, “After you are relaxed, imagine yourself approaching the feared situation. Now visualize doing the behavior you fear. It is crucial to get a feeling of what it's like to deal with the situation successfully.” Visualize success.

“Imagine yourself in the situation without all of those unpleasant consequences you've been scaring yourself with and think what will happen. Imagine you're successful. Imagine you've dealt with the situation in a successful way, and as

you enjoy the feeling of mastery that comes from having dealt successfully with the situation that has made you fearful you will become more and more confident in life and certainly less fearful when you approach a situation like this."

It's very similar. I mean, obviously, it doesn't say, "And snarl and say, 'You dog! I will give your flesh to the birds!'" That's a little antiquated, but basically it's the same. Build up your self-esteem and banish your fears, because you just say, "I know I'm going to be able to do it. I can do it! I can do it! I can get this done."

What are the problems with this approach to fear and courage? They are considerable. The first problem is when you banish your fears (when you say, "I can't lose, I can get this done, and bad things can't happen") you have become out of touch with reality. The reason you become out of touch with reality is because this is a dangerous world.

For you to say, "No, it's not going to happen ..." Why not? Of course, it can happen. Did you know even paranoids sometimes have people out to get them? Did you know that? You can't tell a paranoid person, "Come on! You're paranoid. Nobody is out to get you." Why not? This is a dangerous world.

Christians have a version of Goliath courage. Goliath courage is you have high self-esteem, banish your fears, and visualize success. One of the ways Christians do it is we say, "I'm a good Christian. I am obeying the Bible. I'm trusting in the Lord. I'm repenting when I sin. I'm trying to live a good life, and I know, therefore, God could never really let anything *really* bad happen to me."

Huh? Build up your self-esteem, don't visualize anything bad happening. Yeah. God never lets bad things happen. For example, John the Baptist. What a great man! Oh, wait a minute. Let's find another example. Jesus, the perfect man. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. What's going on? The reason Goliath lost was because his self-esteem was too high because he had banished his fears and he should have been afraid. Obviously, he didn't watch *Star Trek* because he went in with his shields down. You never do that!

The fact of the matter is a sling, which is not a slingshot ... I don't know what you think this is here, but a sling was a weapon. The Romans used slingshots in battle as well as archers, because a sling was, of course, a little patch of leather. You put a stone two or three inches in diameter in it. It had two strings.

You did *this*, and you usually let it go this way, by the way. I don't know what you think, but you let it go from the bottom and you let go of one of the strings. You can propel through a sling a stone 60 miles an hour or more. There are some ancient Roman sources that say to some degree slings were more dangerous than bows and arrows, so it's not that Goliath wouldn't know he had a weapon. He could see, perhaps.

The point is Goliath could visualize success and because of that he was overconfident. He was out of touch with reality. To banish your fears means you're going to be unwise. You're going to be out of touch with reality. You're going to be unready for real life. If you say, "I can do it ..." The other thing about

the Goliath approach to dealing with your fears is it only works in short-term bursts and mainly on adrenaline.

The fact is, and this is fine if you need this, if you have to run into a burning house to save a child, I don't care how you do it. Just do it. Probably what you're going to say is, "I can do it! I can do it! I know I can. I know I can reach that before the house falls down," so you visualize success. You say, "I can do it." It's an adrenaline burst. Yeah. Okay, but that kind of courage you can't muster over a long period of time.

What if the doctor says to you, "You have a maybe fatal disease, and it's going to be months before we can figure out if it's going to take your life or not"? How do you have courage over a long period of time? Adrenaline won't help you at that, but here's the main problem. Most of the acts of courage we most admire don't come from self-assertion and self-confidence. They don't come from saying, "We can do it. I can do it. I know I can."

If you go into Grace Episcopal Church at 10th and Broadway, if you walk in the front door and you turn left, if I remember ... It has been a while since I saw this. Over on the side wall there is a plaque. It's a plaque to Edith Corse Evans. It says on the plaque, "In the midst of life she gave herself for others on the Titanic."

She was one of only four people, I think, in first class who didn't survive the Titanic. There are different reports, of course, but the main point was the reports were all the first-class people had seats on the lifeboats, and she gave up her seat for a woman who had children. Edith Corse Evans was a wealthy socialite from New York City, but she had no children of her own, and she gave up her seat for someone who had children.

Here's my question. What leads to that kind of heroism? What leads to that kind of courage? Self-assertion? "I can do it! I know I can!" Of course not. What we need is not something to banish our fears, but we need something to help us do the right thing in spite of our fears. You need to keep your fears. Otherwise, you're just not going to be realistic. You need something to enable you to do the right thing despite the fears even if the right thing isn't success, even if the right thing is a terrible loss.

Remember Esther. She was scared. The book of Esther in the Old Testament. She was scared. Her uncle said, "You're going to have to go in to the king of the world and say, 'You have to save my people. I'm Jewish, and they're condemned to die.' " She was scared, and Mordecai challenged her, and finally she says, "Pray for me. I'm going to go in," and her mortal words, "If I perish, I perish."

Where do you get that kind of realistic courage? Not, "I can do it." No. "I may die. Oh, well. I'm going to do it." We don't need something to banish our fears. We need something that enables us to do the right thing in spite of our fears. In fact, that's the reason why I call it *counterfeit courage*. Goliath courage is counterfeit courage. Why? If you're doing something and you're not afraid, it's not courage.

If you're not afraid, whatever you're doing is not courage. It's some psychological state you have gotten yourself in, but it's not courage.

2. *The way to true courage.* What is true courage? What's the way to true courage? The way to true courage is to now put yourself, finally, in the story, and don't do it the way you usually do it. The way we usually do it is we say, "Goliath ... Here are the fears." I've already showed you Goliath is not being depicted as the personification of your fears. Goliath is an alternate approach to heroism and an alternate approach to courage.

You say, "Okay, so I'll identify with David." No. Don't do that. Don't do that, because I really think if you say, "I have to be like David," that will probably lead you into at least a certain kind of maybe more spiritualized version of Goliath courage. I told you there's a kind of Christian Goliath courage that says, "I'm going to really trust God; therefore, nothing bad is going to happen to me."

That's awfully close to banishing your fears and visualizing success and becoming unrealistic and asserting yourself. No, no, no. Here's where I want you to put yourself. Where are you in this? Where are you in this story? Who should you identify with? I'll tell you who you should identify with.

You should be identifying with the Israelites. You should be identifying with those people with their knees knocking. You should be identifying with the people who are scared. Isn't that a little more realistic, everybody? You're not David, and you're not Goliath. You're the frightened people. I'm the frightened people. You're the frightened people. Come with me on this.

Here's the question. What does God give to frightened people? What does God give to fearful people? Here's what he gives. I'm going to say it to you, and then I'll unravel it. He doesn't give frightened people an example. He gives them a champion and a Savior. He doesn't deal with their fears through inspiration and emulation. He deals with their fears through substitution and imputation.

Some of you are saying, "Please don't stop there. Would you please keep on going? What in the world do you mean?" Here's what I mean. David is not an example for the Israelites. He doesn't come and say, "I want you to do exactly what I do." He doesn't do that. He doesn't want to say, "Get all of your armor off." No. He doesn't do that. He doesn't say, "I'm going to rush Goliath, and when I rush Goliath, you rush the rest the same way." He's not an example. He's a champion. He's a savior. He's a deliverer. What do I mean?

A. *He is a weak savior.* Do you notice he doesn't win in spite of his weakness? He was small, he does not have military hardware, he doesn't have any armor on, and he has no military training, but you don't say, "Well, he won in spite of that," which is, I think, the main way we think of it. He's the underdog. He won in spite of that.

No, no. He won because of that. It was because he was so weak, so laughable, that Goliath went in with his shields down. Robert Alter says, "David does not win in spite of his weakness; he wins through his weakness. He wins because of his

weakness." In fact, you can push this back a little further if you want to.

In 1 Samuel 16, the story about David's anointing, do you remember God says to Samuel, "Go to Jesse's home. One of his sons I'm going to anoint as king." So Jesse brings all of his sons except David and troops them before Samuel, and Samuel says, "I don't see ... Is this all of your sons?" Jesse says, "Well, no. There's David. He's the runt. He's the little guy. He's the youngest. I don't even have any idea whether he's king material. He's out with the sheep."

Robert Alter says, because David is banished, because he's thought so little of, because he's so young, because he's so weak, because he has no training, he actually learns as a shepherd all the things he's going to need in order to be king. He's going to learn how to use a sling. In fact, we already mentioned he's going to learn how not to be intimidated by snarling wild animals. It's through his weakness that he saves his people, not in spite of it.

B. *He is a substitute.* He is a representational savior. He is a champion. To be a champion was a legal thing. We have a little bit like that. The closest thing we have right now on this is if you're on trial and everything is at stake, you choose an advocate. You choose a defense attorney, do you not?

You choose an advocate, and if that advocate is great in court, brilliant in court, his or her victory becomes yours, but if your advocate is stupid, is ineloquent, and makes terrible mistakes, then you go to jail. You're in your advocate. What happens to your advocate is imputed to you, legally imputed to you. It comes to you.

David was fighting against a champion. He was the legal representative. If he won, his people won. If he lost, his people lost. In other words, he was not just fighting for them; he was fighting as them. What does this mean? God gave frightened people not an example but a Savior. He didn't save them through inspiration and emulation ("I'm going to be like David"). He saved them through substitution and imputation.

What does that mean? It tells you in Hebrews 11. In Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12 in the New Testament, there is a place where the writer is listing all of the heroes. He says, "Remember Noah. Remember Abraham. Remember Moses." He even says, "Remember David," but then he says, "But fix your eyes on Jesus. Remember David, but fix your eyes on Jesus." Then he calls him the author and perfecter of our faith.

Basically the Greek word that is used there is the word *archēgos*. "Look at David, but fix your eyes on Jesus, the *archēgos*," which is a word that means the champion, so let's do that. David is pointing to the real champion. Jesus Christ saved us not in spite of being weak but because he was weak, because he died, because he was tortured, and because he was killed. He took the punishment. This is what the Bible teaches and what Christianity teaches. He took the punishment we deserve so when we believe in him God can accept us, and that's imputation.

Jesus Christ, like David, died to save us from death but not physical death only, which is what David did, but eternal death. Or put it this way. David saved his people at the risk of his life; Jesus saved his people at the cost of his life. David went into the valley of the shadow of death; Jesus Christ went right into death.

Here's what he did on the cross. What is your greatest nightmare? Let's finally talk about your fears. What is your greatest nightmare? Loss of love? Loss of wealth? Loss of life? Your health? On the cross, Jesus Christ took the ultimate nightmare. The ultimate nightmare is to be alienated from God. If there is a God and you were made by God, unless Jesus Christ does something about the way you've lived your life, you will be lost, and that's the ultimate nightmare.

The ultimate poverty, the ultimate loneliness, the ultimate death is to be lost, is to be alienated from God spiritually forever, and on the cross, Jesus Christ experienced that cosmic alienation. He took your greatest nightmares on. What does that mean? If you believe in him, it means you are finally, finally safe.

Oh, yes, you might lose love here. Oh, yes, you might lose money here. Oh, yes, you might lose your life here, but the only debt that can destroy you forever, the debt of sin, has been paid, and the only disease that can destroy you forever, the disease of sin, has been healed. There's a place in Psalm 30 that says, "**Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.**" You might think that's just rhetoric, but if you are a Christian, if you are a believer, if you put your faith in Jesus Christ, that's always true.

No matter how bad things are right now, joy is on the way. You say, "Well, what if I don't get better? What if I die?" Well, joy is still on the way! Now we know by looking at Jesus Christ what true courage is. Jesus Christ was the Son of God who became human, and because he became human, he was subject to fears. He knew pain.

In the garden of Gethsemane he was shrinking back. He says, "**... let this cup pass from me ...**" He was shrinking. Why? He was afraid. Why? He was realistic. It was going to be terrible. He knew what it was like. He knew what it was going to be like. We're told, again, in Hebrews 12, "For the sake of the joy that was set before him ..." The joy. He ran the race. He endured the shame. He went to the cross. What does that mean?

When he was in heaven, you might say Jesus Christ was the man who had everything except one thing. What was that? Us, and he envisioned ... yes, he envisioned ... the joy of being with us forever, of eating the feast of the wedding supper of the Lamb in the new heavens and the new earth. He envisioned that, and for the sake of the joy he endured the shame. He dealt with his fears.

There it is. True courage is not an absence of fear. It's the presence of joy. It's not the absence of fear, but it's the presence of joy. It's the assurance of joy. It's the assurance that joy is always on the way and the ultimate end ... He knew enough about the joy to say, "I can handle my fears, because no matter what happens it's going to be all right in the end," and that's courage. That's courage.

In other words, courage is not self-assertion; it's self-forgetfulness. It's not self-confidence; it's self-sacrifice. It's a self-forgetfulness that happens when you know everything is going to be okay. How do you know everything is going to be okay? Because Jesus Christ, though I'm a coward, is my champion.

He took everything I deserve, and now I know God will never leave me. I know God will always be there for me. The ultimate loneliness, the ultimate wealth, the ultimate death has already been taken away, and ultimately, no matter how lonely I get here, no matter how poor I get here, or no matter how sick I get here, it's temporary. Joy is on the way.

How does that actually work out in real life? I'll tell you how it worked out for me. Let me be personal here. Two ways. First of all, one of the reasons why J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has the kind of enduring appeal is because Tolkien himself was actually a world-class scholar of ancient legend. He was an expert in northern European ancient myths ... old-Norse, old-English, old-Icelandic. He knew those old myths, and he loved them: the epics, the heroes, slaying the dragon ... all of that stuff.

He wanted to write his own story about that, but what he did was put into the story ... Filled with these figures who were very high and noble and heroic, he puts hobbits in these stories. He makes them up. It's his own invention, and hobbits are modern people. That's why they're short, compared to all of these heroes.

They're modern people with the fears of modern people, so when you read it, on the one hand you're in the old, heroic world, but you're in it able to identify with the hobbits who are like us. They have all of our fears. That's the reason why Tolkien does some remarkable stuff inside the book at helping us understand how the hobbits come up with courage. How do they run with all of these heroic figures? Where do they get the courage? Because they're like us.

Some of the greatest passages, I think, in literature on how you get courage are in there, and here's one. There's a place where Sam, who is Frodo's faithful companion, has been defending him. At one point, he gets him out of a tower by saying, "Here I come!" He fights and he gets Frodo out, but they're on their way to the end of their quest and he's scared. One night, we're told he looks up into the sky.

"Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart ... [Then,] like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even [Frodo's] ceased to trouble him.... he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep."

Do you see? There the two are. Before, at one point, he had saved Frodo, but it was defiance. He was thinking of himself. "I can do it." This time, the thought

pierced him like a shaft, cold and clear, that with all of the evil around him there is light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. Even the shadow is temporary. There is joy coming. It said it didn't even bother him anymore. He didn't even think about himself or even Frodo. What does that mean?

It means, yes, you can have courage in the short run through stoicism. You deal with your emotions, you banish your fear or anger or, "I can do it," but hope ... The Christian hope. Here's how it worked for me. I was going into surgery for thyroid cancer, the biggest surgery of my life, and I know this doesn't sound very spiritual to some of you, but as I was going under, I thought about that passage. It doesn't sound very spiritual, huh? But it helped me. It was like a shaft, cold and clear.

Here's what happened. I suddenly realized, "Wait a minute." I suddenly said, "If the Bible is true, the whole universe is a universe of joy, of glory, of life. The whole universe is just filled with joy and glory, and we here on earth are just stuck in this little tiny speck of darkness, and even that darkness someday is going to be taken away."

When I thought of it like that ("It's all joy. I'm just stuck in this little speck of darkness just temporarily because of Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' salvation."), it suddenly hit me. "It'll be okay. No matter what happens in the surgery, it will be okay. My family will be okay. My wife will be okay. I will be okay." Why? Weeping may only tarry for the night, but because of Jesus Christ, joy is always on the way.

So I had something that enabled me to get into a deep, untroubled sleep, though I think it was also the anesthesia. I can't hold on to that kind of heroism (it doesn't last), but the more I actually take the truths of the gospel and burn them into my life through times like this, through preaching, through the Lord's Supper, through singing ... The more I look to his heroism the more heroic you and I can actually become. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for bringing us to the place where we are now. We're about to partake of the bread and the cup. With the power of your Holy Spirit, we're about to take more deeply into our hearts and our minds the realities of what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, and that will make us courageous.

That will help us to deal with our fears. That will help us to not think so much about ourselves, knowing that joy is coming. Joy is inevitably coming because Jesus Christ is our champion and we are in him. Father, we pray you would help us face whatever fears we're dealing with right now, remembering all of these things. Do it for Jesus' sake. In his name we pray, amen.

Saul's Jealousy

David: The Man of Prayer—May 10, 2015

1 Samuel 18:1–14

1 As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. **2** And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house.

3 Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

4 And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. **5** And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war. And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants.

6 As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. **7** And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.”

8 And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” **9** And Saul eyed David from that day on. **10** The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. **11** And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David evaded him twice.

12 Saul was afraid of David because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul. **13** So Saul removed him from his presence and made him a commander of a thousand. And he went out and came in before the

people.¹⁴ And David had success in all his undertakings, for the Lord was with him.

The Word of the Lord.

We're looking at the life of David, and it's interesting how this ancient text every week yields so much insight about very current problems (you could even say perennial problems), and this week we get a portrait, a simple portrait of something that is a lot bigger problem than most of us think of it as being. It's a lot bigger of a problem than we think it is. Saul's life is being destroyed by envy.

Envy. Over the years, I've had plenty of people come to me to talk about issues like anger and despondency, but almost never does somebody come to me and say, "I have a problem with envy." I've had lots of people say, "You need to preach on this issue," or "You need to preach on that issue. These are important issues." Never, I want you to know, has anyone ever asked me to preach on envy.

Yet, Aristotle ... Not just the Bible but all of the ancients understood envy is one of the deadly sins, one of the things that destroys people's lives, one of the things that's making the world such a miserable place, so let's look at what this passage tells us about envy: *what it is, what it does, and how we can escape it.*

1. *What envy is.* There are three parts to envy. You have to understand all three to even understand the anatomy of it. Three things that have to go together to make envy envy. You see it down here in verses 8 and 9. You see it, of course, in Saul. Saul is the example of envy. Those three things are *comparison, desire, and resentment.* You compare your life to other lives. You want their lives, and you resent them and begrudge them their lives. You don't just want their lives, but you're resentful about it. Take a look.

First, *comparison.* You see where it says, "**They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands ...**" That's the essence. That's the first layer, you might say, or foundation of envy: comparison. "... to **David ... to me ...**" You don't just look at what the other person has; you immediately compare what the other person has to what you have.

You can't just appreciate it for itself. You immediately connect it. You never just say, "They have that," without also saying, "And I don't." Envy starts as comparison, but that's not enough to make it envy, because to say, "They have that, and I don't," would just be a statement of fact all by itself, but envy doesn't stay there.

Secondly, *desire.* Not only do we compare our lives to other's lives, but we want their lives. The next layer and maybe the essence of envy is not being content with what you have, not being satisfied with what you have but wanting what they have: wishing you had their looks, wishing you had their connections, wishing you had their spouse, wishing you had their life.

The comparison moves to desire. When you start to desire and wish you had that then it makes it impossible to enjoy what you have. That comes out, by the way, in verse 9, when it says, “**And Saul eyed David ...**” That seemed a little odd. The English translators didn’t mean he just looked at David.

It’s a word that actually means a jealous eye, to jealously look. In English we say of something you really want, “He eyed it,” and that’s what Saul is doing there. First of all, you compare your life to the other person’s life. Secondly, you want their life. You wish you had their life, which makes it hard to be satisfied with what you have.

Thirdly, *resentment*. You resent their life. You begrudge them what they have. You don’t just compare. You don’t just want it. You begrudge them what they have. You feel like they don’t deserve it. You feel like you do deserve it. There’s a sense in which, therefore, envy is weeping when other people rejoice and rejoicing when other people weep.

The other side of envy, which almost sounds like the opposite, is *schadenfreude*, loving to hear stories about how people who have money and wealth and power fell down. We all know, by the way ... Those of you in journalism and those of you in the media, you know stories about somebody who is beautiful or powerful, stories where they screw up and they fall from their high perch, lots of eyeballs want to read those stories. Everybody knows those stories are going to sell. People are going to want to see it.

Why? Because the essence of envy is not just to be sorry that they’re happy, but it’s also to be happy when they’re sorry. John Gielgud, the great British actor with a candid admission in his autobiography says, “When Sir Laurence Olivier played Hamlet in 1948 and the critics raved, I wept.” That’s envy. Envy is being unhappy at other people’s happiness. It’s being happy at other people’s unhappiness. It’s begrudging them their happiness. That’s it.

2. *What envy does.* What does it do? I need to spend a little time on this, because as I hinted in my introduction, we live in a culture that doesn’t really see envy as all that big of a problem. It’s kind of innocuous. A little bit of an embarrassment but kind of innocuous, but it’s not. Here’s what envy does. It robs. It grows. It hides.

First, *it robs*. Envy robs you of all joy. Internally, and I’ve already said this, envy makes you much less happy with what you have. You were perfectly happy with your apartment until you saw your friend’s who graduated from the same school in the same class and didn’t get as good of grades as you did. In other words, you thought you were doing pretty well, and then you saw them. Internally, you now can’t enjoy what you have.

It’s also true it robs you of joy relationally. It robs you of joy relationally because, you see, if you actually got happier when other people were getting happier, there’s a lot of happiness that goes around, but if you’re getting unhappier while other people are getting happier (if it bothers you they’re doing so well), of

course, that robs you of joy, too.

That's the reason why those who have analyzed the deadly sins have often noticed something: almost all of the deadly sins in the beginning feel pretty good. For example, gluttony ... That's one of the seven deadly sins. Gluttony feels great at first, absolutely great. Then the consequences come in. Even anger, to vent your anger, feels great until all of the destructiveness shows up. It's like all of the other sins feel good at first, but envy makes you unhappy from the word go. It sucks all of the joy out of your life from the very first second you do it. It robs you.

Secondly, *it grows*. This isn't just true of envy. It's true of all sin, but you have to notice, for example, in verse 10, a very enigmatic place where it says, "**The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house ...**" He began to try to kill David. What's going on here? That sounds so strange, yet, you can understand this if you put it in context with the rest of what the Bible says.

In Judges, chapter 9, the very same term is used. This phrase, *harmful spirit* ... The Hebrew word that is translated *harmful* here is a hard word to translate. It doesn't mean evil. It doesn't mean wicked. It actually means terrifying in this context, but there are other places in Judges, chapter 9, where Abimelech is fighting with the men of Shechem, and they're getting really angry at each other. Then the Bible says, "And God sent a harmful spirit to them," and they really got angry.

In both cases, what we have is Saul was envying and getting afraid. Then God sent a harmful spirit, and he got really afraid. They were getting angry, and God sent a harmful spirit, and they got really angry. What? What's going on here? God, according to Romans, chapter 1, is the most equitable and fair-minded judge possible.

Here's how God judges sin. He gives you more of what you have chosen. There is no greater punishment for bitterness than more bitterness. There is no greater punishment for envy than more envy. Here's what God is doing. If you have chosen a sinful path, God will let you go. That's the worst kind of judgment he can give, and by the way, it's the fairest kind of judgment. Isn't that right?

There's a frightening, frightening place in Genesis 4, and I bring it up because it's the first case of envy and jealousy in history, according to the Bible: Cain and Abel. Cain is jealous of Abel's life and a lot of things in Abel's life. It's remarkable. God comes to Cain. This is before Cain murders Abel, but he sees Cain moving in that direction. God comes to Cain and counsels him and uses a fascinating metaphor.

He says, "If you do not do what is right, Cain, sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is to have you, but you must master it." It's a remarkable metaphor. Crouching? *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*? Yes. God is likening sin to a predatory animal who crouches down to hide but is ready to come and spring

and destroy your power, destroy your life. At this point, we're not just talking about envy.

With all sin ... every time you're selfish instead of serving, every time you pay back instead of forgiving, every time you tell a half truth instead of the whole truth, every time you worry instead of trust God ... sin doesn't just go away. Every time you sin, sin doesn't just go away. It becomes a force in your life.

It becomes a shadow presence in your life that makes it harder and harder and harder for you to resist it. It destroys your will. In the beginning, you do anger and you do envy, but in the end, anger and envy do you, so Saul raved, and Saul tries to kill. See what has happened. Envy robs and envy grows.

Lastly, *envy hides*. I need to say this. This is my last effort to show you the seriousness of it before going to the solution. We live in a capitalistic society where envy is basically seen as a kind of innocuous way to sell things. If you actually Google envy, you will find all kinds of retail outlets.

For example, clothes envy is this or that clothing store. Body envy is usually either a fitness center or skin care. "Don't you envy that person's body? Well, then, come to our fitness center. Don't you envy that person's ..." Envy is seen as something we're encouraging because it's a way to get people to compete. It's a way to get people to achieve. It's a way to get people to spend money. It's a way to lift the economy.

I remember 10 years ago or so when I was doing a series on the seven deadly sins, and I Googled envy. I remember coming to a website called *I Envy You*. It was basically young women who would write into this message board about the women they knew who they envied. They'd say, "I envy Natalie Portman ..." or "I envy Charlize Theron ..." Why? "... because she's tall (or beautiful or this, that, and the other)."

But I remember (by the way, you won't be surprised that the website is long gone) at one point there was kind of like a message on the front page of the website by the owner that said, "It has come to my attention that pro-anorexia websites are linking to my website, my '*I Envy You*' website, and even that my website is attracting self-harmers. I just want you to know I don't support any of that stuff."

But Aristotle would have told her, "You can't encourage envy at all because envy always leads to everything else." Yeah, in the beginning envy is just nothing more than a headache. Envy starts just like a headache, but so do brain tumors. That's what envy is and that's what envy does. Did I make you feel bad enough yet about your envy? Okay. That's my job. Now I want to make you feel better.

3. *How to escape envy*. How do you escape? The way to do that is not to look at Saul. Saul has been helping us understand what envy is and what envy does, but if you want to understand how to escape it, let's look at Jonathan. The first four or five verses in the beginning of the passage ... Don't forget. This comes right after David and Goliath, and Saul and Jonathan both perceive God has anointed

David for great things, for great leadership, and they suspect, for the kingship, to be the next king. Here's what we read.

"As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt."

Honestly, this is incredibly remarkable. First of all, Saul and Jonathan both perceived that God has anointed David for leadership and the kingship, and if anybody had more to lose it would be Jonathan. Jonathan is Saul's heir, and Saul is already king, and here's David, who is probably younger than Jonathan from what we can tell.

In a certain sense, Saul is probably safe. He has had his kingship and all of that, but Jonathan, if David becomes king, probably will not be king or never will be king. If anybody has more to lose, it's Jonathan, and if anybody has more, you might say, warrant for envy (if there is such a thing as that) it would be Jonathan, but that's not what happens.

In a stunning, stunning act, he gives him two things: his robe and his armor, especially his sword. The robe was his royal robe, and it was basically the symbol of his kingship. He was basically taking his crown off here and giving it to David. The armor and, especially, the sword ... That's a little different, but even we modern people know what that means, because we've seen movies and we've read novels.

When someone come up, takes out the sword, and hands the sword to someone with the hilt toward the person, what you're saying is, "Command me." You're making yourself vulnerable. That person could actually take the hilt of the sword and kill you. When you take out your sword and you offer it, you're saying, "Command me."

Jonathan was not just simply saying, "I'll let you be king," but secondly, he was saying, "And I will willingly serve you and make myself vulnerable to you." It is stunning, because in the ancient Near East, if you were the heir to the throne and you see someone who is your rival, you don't put your sword in their hand. You put your sword in their belly. That's what you do with it, but that's not what Jonathan did.

How did that happen? Why did that happen? Here's the answer. Jonathan, in a remarkable act of faith, basically says, "I see God is bringing his salvation into the world through you, and it can only happen if I get off the throne, and I do so gladly." All right. Obviously, Jonathan conquered envy, but it's not enough just to say he conquered envy. How do we conquer envy? The answer is by looking at Jonathan. Will you come with me? Let's look at Jonathan. There are three ways in which Jonathan helps you and I escape and conquer envy.

First, *Jonathan helps us grasp the biblical meaning of love*. That's the most obvious thing the text tells us about how Jonathan triumphs over envy. It says he loved him. Twice it says he loved him. I have to say much of what we in our culture call *feelings of love* is really a hunger for enhancement. I would like to be honest about this. I'd like us to be honest about this.

A lot of what we consider feelings of love for somebody is really a hunger for enhancement. We see beauty, we see connection, we maybe see wealth, and we say, "I want that person to be my friend. I'm attracted to them," or "I want that person to be my mate," or "I want that person to be my spouse." Why?

You're attracted, you say. It's a feeling of love. Yes, but here's what the feeling really is. "I want what you have. I want your assets to come into me and enhance me. I will feel better. I will be happier if your beauty is connected to me, if your wealth comes into my life, if your connection and power comes into my life."

In other words, you feel love, but it's actually hunger for enhancement, but according to the Bible, true love can't envy. It's exactly the opposite of envy. It says in 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter, "... **love envieth not ...**" We envy because our love isn't perfect, but to the degree you have real love, you can't envy. Why not?

Because love is exactly the opposite of envy. Love is putting your happiness ... Listen carefully, because this is not my term. It's well-crafted and very important. It's a metaphor. Real love is putting your happiness into someone else's happiness. Real love is saying, "I love you so much I can't be happy unless you have joy. I can't be happy unless you flourish, and the more you flourish and the more you prosper, the happier I get. Not the less happy, the happier. I put my happiness *into* your happiness. I love you so much that I can only get joy if I see you flourishing."

That's love, but that's hard, by the way. The first thing we have to see is Jonathan is actually loving David, and true love never says to somebody, "I love you, but I'm starting to get a little jealous of you." That's impossible. That means you really didn't love the person. You were hungry for the enhancement that person brought.

Unfortunately, as you get closer to that person, the person is a little too strong for you, a little too good, a little too beautiful, and a little too smart, and you feel stupid. Then you never loved that person. You never loved the person. Real love is putting your happiness in their happiness so you're only happy when they flourish. You weep when they weep and rejoice when they rejoice. But let's admit something. That's hard. You know why it's so hard. Because something has to happen in our hearts for us to do that.

I remember once years ago when I was in my little church in Virginia. There was a girl. She was 16, and she had been in the local Junior Miss pageant at the high school, and her best friend had won, and she came in third. She heard me preaching on something like this, and afterward, she came up to me.

She said, "So what you're saying is, if I really loved my friend I would have been as happy when she won as I would have been if I won. I'd be as happy for her when she won as I would have been for myself if I had won." I said, "Yeah," and she said, "That's hard! That's Christian love? That's really hard!" What do we do about that? It is really hard. First of all, Jonathan shows us biblical love.

Secondly, *Jonathan shows us the unenviousness of God in Jesus Christ*. This is what we need to see. I'd better say that a couple more times. Jonathan shows us the unenviousness of God in Jesus Christ. Let's look at Jonathan again for a second. He emptied himself of his glory, and he made himself vulnerable, radically vulnerable, in order to lift up someone he loved.

Does that sound like anybody you know? Often, the Bible says Jesus is the true David, the true King. That's true, but here, we need to see Jesus is also the true Jonathan. Philippians, chapter 2, says Jesus Christ had the ultimate glory. He had the ultimate royalty, but he emptied himself, and he came down to become a human being. When he did that, when he became mortal, when he became vulnerable, when he became killable, he was putting his sword in the hands of the human race, and we killed him with it.

Do you see what I mean when I say that's radically unenvious? Jonathan Edwards, in his great sermon on envy, basically says, "Look at Jesus Christ. If you take the spirit of the gospel into your heart, you will see Jesus did not begrudge his own precious blood. He did not begrudge us sitting with him on his throne in heaven though we deserved to be infinitely below him."

What Edwards says is what I'm going to say right now. Jesus Christ loves us and he loves, therefore, seeing us get what we don't deserve. He loves seeing us get what we don't deserve. We look at other people and say, "They don't deserve that. They don't deserve that," and it bothers us. Jesus Christ loves us. He has put his happiness in our happiness.

If you want to deal with the seeds of envy in your heart, listen to this. Listen to him saying this. Jesus says, "Father, I don't want to be the only Son of God in the universe. I love them. I want their joy, but the only way they can get what they don't deserve is if I take what I don't deserve. I need to take the punishment their sins deserve. I need to take the punishment their envy deserves," so he went and he did that.

If you see him doing that and you see because he did that, when you believe in him, what that means, where you're going to go, and what is guaranteed ... The kind of wealth, the kind of beauty, the kind of prosperity that is guaranteed to you by grace ... How can you be envious of anyone else when you know what you have and how you got it? How can you be envious of anyone else when you know what you're getting in the future and also how you got it? You got it through a radical act of unenviousness.

He put his happiness in our happiness. He is delighted to see us get what we don't deserve. He stripped himself of his glory. He made himself vulnerable and

killable all to lift us up, so if you see the radical unenviousness of God in Jesus Christ, that will begin to get rid of your resentment. It has to. It takes pride to be resentful. It will get rid of your discontent if you understand what is coming to you. It will eat away and erode your envy.

Thirdly, *Jonathan shows us the freedom of abdication*. He knew the only way he could get God's salvation into his life is if he got off the throne. And guess what? That's true of every single person in this room. The only way God's salvation is going to come into your life is if you get off the throne of your life, if you basically put your sword in his hands and say, "Command me."

Do you know how free it is to finally lay down the kingship of your own life? There are a lot of aspects of it. I don't have time to go into all of them, but one I often like to talk about was Philip Melanchthon, who was Martin Luther's friend, was a worrier, a terrible worrier. Every so often, Martin Luther would sit down, when Philip was really anxious, put a hand on his shoulder, and say, "Let Philip cease to rule the world."

Because worry is basically looking at the world and looking at history and knowing you think exactly how things have to go and being afraid God is not going to get it right. It's basically saying, "If I was on the throne of the world, I would be doing *this*." You wouldn't be worried unless you're saying, "If I was on the throne of the world, then *this* has to happen and *this* has to happen." Let Philip cease to rule the world. Get off the throne. Do what Jonathan did, and if you do ...

There's a little essay C.S. Lewis once wrote called *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*. It's satire. It's funny. It's imagining a banquet in hell. Screwtape is the senior devil, and he's toasting all of the devils, and he's pointing out they've been very, very, very successful lately in making the world a miserable place through envy and jealousy, what he calls the most degrading and also the least enjoyable of human feelings. He's very happy about the misery, of course. He's a devil, after all.

During his toast, he says, "The feeling I'm talking about is that which prompts one person to say to another, 'I'm as good as you.' " He says no one who goes around resenting others saying, "I'm as good as you," really believes they're as good. They don't believe it. The St. Bernard never says to the toy dog, "I'm as good as you." The top scholar never says it to the dropout. The rich never says it to the homeless. No one who makes such a claim ever has anything other than an itching, smarting, writhing awareness of inferiority.

That's brilliant, because in the end, the only reason we would resent other people and envy other people saying, "I'm as good as you," is if inside we didn't feel that way. In other words, inside we have that itching feeling of inferiority, but look at what Jesus Christ did. Look at him stripping himself of his glory. Look at him taking off his sword.

Look at him doing all of that for you. Why? Because he loves you. Because

you're that valuable to him. Get the sense of love that comes with abdication, the sense of his love in your life. If you give yourself completely to him, he will give himself and all that he has completely to you. Who do you think is going to get the better end of that deal? Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us a way out of envy. Help us to see the seriousness of it. We live in a culture that actually encourages it. The ancients and your Word see how deadly it is. It is one of the deadly sins. We pray, Father, you would help us to see the ways in which it is harming us right now.

We pray that by looking at Jesus Christ, our true Jonathan, the one who divested himself for us because he loved us, the one who rejoices to see us get what we don't deserve and who doesn't begrudge us his own life and doesn't begrudge us sharing his throne with us, the vision of that would melt our hardness and help us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

David's Friend

David: The Man of Prayer—May 17, 2015

1 Samuel 18:1–4; 19:4–7; 20:40–42; 23:15–18

1 As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. **2** And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. **3** Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. **4** And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

First Samuel 19:

4 And Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, “Let not the king sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have brought good to you. **5** For he took his life in his hand and he struck down the Philistine, and the Lord worked a great salvation for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood by killing David without cause?”

6 And Saul listened to the voice of Jonathan. Saul swore, “As the Lord

lives, he shall not be put to death.”⁷ And Jonathan called David, and Jonathan reported to him all these things. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before.

First Samuel 20:

40 **And Jonathan gave his weapons to his boy and said to him, “Go and carry them to the city.”⁴¹ And as soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times. And they kissed one another and wept with one another, David weeping the most.**

42 **Then Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, ‘The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.’ ” And he rose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city.**

First Samuel 23:

15 **David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh.¹⁶ And Jonathan, Saul’s son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God.¹⁷ And he said to him, “Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this.”¹⁸ And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home.**

The Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at the life of David, and the life of David is a little bit of a challenge for a preacher because we have more information in the Bible about the life of David than about any other figure, so we have all of this material. Therefore, the narrative arcs are longer in this part of the Bible than normal.

If you’re going to follow out David’s relationship with Saul or David’s relationship with Jonathan or anything like that, you have these multiple texts, so we did something a little unusual today, and we gave you four texts. We’re going to show you how they tell us about the rightly famous friendship between Jonathan and David and what these texts here and what the Bible tell us about the importance of friendship.

Let’s take a look at what we learn from the relationship of David to Jonathan about *the absolute importance of friendship, the constituent elements of friendship* (what is it made of?), and *the power requisite for friendship*. The absolute importance of it, the necessary elements of it, and the requisite power in order to be a friend and to have friends.

1. *The absolute importance of friendship.* Let me just trace out these four texts. Essentially, right after David slays Goliath, you can see at the very beginning here (this is the first verse of chapter 18; chapter 17 was about David slaying Goliath) Jonathan perceived God had anointed David as the great future leader.

He had anointed David to be the king after Jonathan's father, King Saul, so Jonathan perceived God had chosen David to be the future king and not Jonathan, and he accepted that. He recognized it. He accepted that by taking off his robe. That was essentially the same thing as giving David his crown.

Then, during the next few (we're not quite sure how long) years, David lived in Saul's house. He lived in the royal court, and while Jonathan perceived God had anointed David and Jonathan loved that, Saul also perceived it, and he hated it. He envied David, and he became murderous. During the time in which David was staying with Saul, Jonathan did everything he could, essentially, to constantly protect and save David from his father, Saul.

You see, the second snatch there in chapter 19, shows a place where Jonathan was successful, and he turns Saul's heart back toward David. **"And Jonathan called David, and Jonathan reported to him all these things. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before."**

Then chapter 20 tells about a time in which he failed. Saul had invited David to a feast. Jonathan goes there and recognizes if David had made it (he didn't make it) Saul would have killed him, so through the little boy who fetches his arrow during target practice Jonathan signals to David it's not safe to come.

Finally, the last passage in chapter 23 is the last time David and Jonathan ever see each other. They renew their covenant of friendship, and after that Jonathan follows his father, Saul, into a very, very ill-advised and foolish military action on Mount Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan and his brothers are killed.

That's the narrative arc of the friendship. What do we learn? One commentator, Eugene Peterson, wrote a commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, and he says what's interesting is ... Notice chapter 18 at the beginning David and Jonathan make a covenant of friendship. Then, down in chapter 23, they make another covenant. They renew the covenant.

This is the most dangerous time in David's life. He's young. He's vulnerable. He's still in court. Saul is out to kill him, over and over again, back and forth. It's the most dangerous time of David's life, and what Peterson says is Jonathan's friendship with David brackets the evil. Literally, it's true in that the most dangerous time is bracketed by a covenant of friendship here and a covenant of friendship here (chapter 18 and chapter 23), but what Peterson is saying is it's Jonathan's friendship that contained the evil.

The only reason why David survived was because of his friendship with Jonathan. The only reason he got through the most dangerous and perilous time in his life was his friendship with Jonathan. There is a place in Proverbs 17 where

it says, “**A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.**”

Here’s the first point. You can’t get through adversity without friends, the Bible says. You’ll never get through your hardest times without friends, and you’ll never get through life without adversity. Therefore, you’ll never get through life without friends. You have to have friends. You say, “Wait a minute. Friends are what get you through suffering and difficulty and danger? What about brothers and sisters? What about siblings? What about spouses?”

The answer is yeah, but the only spouses and siblings who get you through times of suffering are ones who are also friends. Sexual chemistry is not going to get you through times like this. Having common hobbies and having a lot of fun together ... When people say, “I love her, and I want to marry her. We have this great sexual chemistry. We have a lot of hobbies.”

There had better be more to it than that. What gets you through these tough times is friendship, whether pure friends or family members or spouses who are also friends. Without friendship you will never get through adversity. Without friendship you’ll never get through life. If you say, “Why?” I can give you a good theological answer ... briefly.

Go back to the garden of Eden. One of the most important aspects of the teaching of Genesis, chapter 2, is when Adam is in the garden and everything is perfect (he’s in Paradise, there is no sin, and there’s nothing wrong with the world) it says it’s not good that Adam be alone. He’s lonely, and God makes a companion for him, Eve.

Usually, especially today in our time period and moment, when people look at Genesis 2, they immediately look at what the implications are of God making Eve for Adam. What are the implications for sex, what are the implications for gender, and what are the implications for marriage? But I’d like to give you the most basic implication. Here’s the most basic implication. Even the garden of Eden wasn’t enough without friendship. Even the garden of Eden, even Paradise, wasn’t enough until Adam had a friend.

Why? Because we’re made in the image of God. I know this boggles everybody’s mind. Christianity teaches God is tri-personal. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is three persons in one God, loving and knowing each other and delighting each other in relationship from all eternity.

That means, because Adam was made in the image of God, even when he was perfect, even when there was no sin in his life, even when there was nothing wrong with the world, he was lonely. To be lonely is not to be imperfect; it’s to be like God, because he was built, he was made, in the image of God. Even the garden of Eden isn’t enough without friends, and without friends you’ll never get through life. You see the absolute importance of it.

By the way, my most favorite (yeah, it’s kitschy) example of this important principle is the 1935 movie *The Bride of Frankenstein* where Boris Karloff, playing the monster, is being hunted, of course, and he goes into the forest, and

in the forest he finds a cottage. In the cottage, there is one old, poor blind man. Of course, when the monster comes into the cottage, the blind man can't see how horrible he is, so he's not afraid of him, but the blind man also perceives whoever this person is who is coming to his cottage can't speak.

He says, "Are you afflicted? I cannot see, and you cannot speak. Are we both afflicted?" Then he says, "Maybe we could be friends." He gets down on his knees and says, "O Lord! I thank thee that you have finally answered my prayers and sent me a friend to comfort me in my terrible loneliness." Of course, the monster is rather lonely, too. Everybody is trying to kill him. Over the next period of time ...

It's a short episode in the movie. Of course, the blind man, not being able to see him, starts to befriend him and feed him and talk to him and play music for him, and the monster, having never experienced anything but hostility, starts to soften and actually starts to begin to use some English words and begin to speak a little bit. Then, of course, the hunters find him, go in and see him, and they burn down the cottage, and he goes lurching off into the woods saying, "Friend, friend."

What's the point? There is nothing more humanizing than friendship. In fact, it's very theologically right. If we're made in the image of God and in the image of a triune God, you're never going to become fully human without friends. You'll never make it through life without friends. You'll never become all you ought to be without friends. There's the absolute necessity of friendship.

2. *The constituent elements of friendship.* What is friendship? If it's that important, what is it? Actually, Jonathan and David here and in, of course, other parts of the Bible, which I'm going to keep referring to, tell us what those elements are. There are really three. I'm going to call them *constancy*, *transparency*, and *sympathy*, though when we get to sympathy, you'll see I'm using that word more literally. It's not quite what you think. Constancy, transparency, and sympathy.

First, *constancy*. Jonathan and David make a covenant with each other. That's not the norm (a formal covenant). By the way, kids very often do that. You know that. Kids say, "Do you want to be my friend?" They very often do something in which they make a kind of covenant. It's not the norm, and it's not necessary. However, it gets across the idea that friendship is covenantal.

In other words, a friend is not a user. A user is conditional; a friendship is unconditional. For example, my wife and I have lived in the same place for over 25 years. Practically right across the street is a Gristedes store, and we have a friendly relationship with the Gristedes store. They know who we are, and we're friendly to them, and they sometimes do deliveries for us, and we're very nice to each other. That's very nice, but it says in Proverbs 18 ... What is a friend? Proverbs 18 says, "... **there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.**" You stick.

One thing I know that the Gristedes know and we know, too ... They know and

we know that we are under no obligation to stick with them no matter how bad their products get or how high their prices get. We actually have a user relationship with them. We're friendly, but that doesn't mean we're friends.

A user relationship always has a cost-benefit little calculator connected to it, and it's always going. When you're in a user relationship, you're always calculating. "Is this worth it? Am I getting more out of this than I'm putting into it?" That's a user relationship. Economic relationships are user relationships, and they do not expect us to stay sticking to them no matter how badly they serve us. They know that.

But friendships should be different, and I must tell you over the years as a pastor here, I've had person after person over the years who I've talked to who in New York City thought they had a lot more friends than they really did. They had a lot of users. We network here. We hang out here. We usually network and hang out with people we think are helpful to us. Sometimes it's pretty overtly calculating. We know these people have the ability to open doors for us. These people have connections.

Sometimes it's actually a little bit more implicit. You are smart enough and cool enough and hip enough and good-looking enough that hanging out with you makes me feel better about myself. That's more implicitly calculating, but the point is I've talked to many people over the years who thought they had friends.

When they lost their position or when their own life became troubled enough that what they needed from the people around them was a lot more input and they weren't going to be giving those people a whole lot of output because they were hurting, suddenly the little cost-benefit calculators went off and people just started to avoid them, and they realized they didn't have the friends they thought.

A friend sticks. "... **a friend that sticketh** ..." is the old King James Version of Proverbs 18, verse 24. "... **a friend that sticketh closer than a brother**." Jonathan was constant with David to the point of sacrifice. We'll get back to that. First of all, constancy. Friends never let you down. "**A friend loves at all times** ..." (Proverbs 17:17).

Secondly, *transparency*. You see this in Jonathan and David because it says, when it talks about the soul, "**Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul**." Twice it says that. To love someone with your soul is an image. Most of the commentators say it's a metaphor for transparency. You're letting a person into your soul. You're letting a person see your soul.

Transparency means vulnerability. Transparency means letting in. If you look at transparency and constancy, friends always let you in and never let you down. They always let you in. They're vulnerable. They're open. They never let you down. You say, "What do you mean by transparency? What do you mean by open?" Let me give you four ways real friends (not users but real friends) are open to each other.

A. *Friends are open about their feelings.* There are a number of places in the Bible, like Acts 20, where Paul was saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders, and you have all of these men weeping and kissing each other. Here, again, you have men weeping and kissing each other. I read an interesting commentator some years ago who said what's interesting is back in ancient times, when men really were warriors ...

They really were warriors. They were actually always out there with their lives on the line. They could be killed at any time. They were actually going out into the forest hunting and having to kill wild beasts with little more than their bare hands. Back when men really were warriors, they didn't need to keep up a front of being tough. When men knew they were tough, they could just weep and be open with their feelings. Today we don't know we're tough, so we're afraid to. Friends are open with their feelings.

B. *Friends are open with their common life.* You don't dress up for a friend. In fact, you must not dress up for a friend. What that means is you have to let friends into your common life, into your daily life, into your regular life, and that takes time. You have to open up your schedule to your friends. You have to open up your feelings to your friends.

C. *Friends are open with their decisions.* What do I mean by that? Sometimes you think a person is your friend, and then you realize a person has made a major decision and hasn't even talked to you about it. That person has actually been a user and not a friend. You say, "Wait a minute. Don't I have the right to make my own decisions?"

Yes, of course, in the end, but if you're not willing before you make that decision to be open with your friend about your motives, about the values you're probably using in order to make the decision ... If you're not willing to take counsel, if you're not willing to get advice, if you're not willing to be open before you make that decision, what that shows is you're not transparent. Your arms are not open to your friend. You're a user. You are managing what they see of you.

D. *Friends are open with their flaws.* Ultimately, if you tell somebody who you think is your friend about a problem they have in their life or some place they need to change, and they say, "I'm out of here," that person was a user. That person was using you. As long as cost-benefit, but now, "Uh-oh. Cost. I'm out of here."

This great verse, which is one of the great verses of the Bible, is Hebrews 3:13, where it says, "... exhort one another daily ... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." On the one hand, it says our sin deceives us. You can't see your biggest flaws and problems. On the other hand, it says you should have a group of people around you who every day are talking to you about your flaws, and that doesn't probably mean literally every day, but who would those people be?

They have to be friends. They can't be colleagues. They have to be people who

you, in a sense, have deputized to talk about that. Proverbs 27:6 says, “**Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but an enemy multiplies kisses.**” Now we know we’re really into transparency. Now we know we’re into friendship when we’re willing to wound each other and take it. That’s the reason why the Frankenstein monster starts to become more human, because there’s nothing that changes you more than friendship.

Don’t forget. Transparency and constancy … The constancy is necessary to get you through the suffering of life (you have to have friends who are there), but the transparency is what will actually help you change and become who you’re meant to be. Otherwise, you won’t. You’ll be blind. You’ll be deceived by your sin. Transparency and constancy. Friends always let you in and never let you down, but there’s one more, and it’s important.

Thirdly, *sympathy*. I said sympathy partly so the three things could be remembered (transparency, constancy, and sympathy), but I’m using the word literally. Do you know what the word *sympathos* means? Common passions. What makes you a friend at bottom, something you can’t create, something you must discover … Did you hear that? You can’t create this. You can only discover it.

Something you must discover is to find someone with a common passion, a common vision, and a crucial foundational common belief. C.S. Lewis in his famous chapter on friendship in *The Four Loves* says the essence of friends or friendship … I think he means this friendship starts when one person says to the other, “You too? I’ve read all of those same books, and I love them, too!”

“Really? That happened to me when I was a child, too!”

“It did?”

That’s how friendship starts: some common vision, some shared historical experience, some common passion, some common belief. You say, “Does that mean friends have to be people who agree on everything?” Oh, no! As a matter of fact, the opposite. It’s when two people become friends because they have something in common (some incredible passion in common) and that brings you together as friends, they’ll always be different in other ways.

Because of that common passion, you will actually listen to your friend’s views on areas you don’t agree with. People you would never listen to otherwise, you’ll listen to your friend, and it expands your mind. The best way to become broadminded is to have friends on whom you really agree on basics. That’s the best way.

That’s the reason why Lewis, at one point, says … By the way, Jonathan and David both loved the God of Israel and wanted the prosperity of the nation. They had that common purpose even though it meant Jonathan had to abdicate. There’s one place where C.S. Lewis says in that chapter, “That is why those pathetic people who simply ‘want friends’ can never have any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends.”

Where the truthful answer to the question ‘Do you see the same truth?’ would be ‘I see nothing and I don’t care about the truth; I only want a friend,’ no friendship can arise ... There would be nothing for the friendship to be about ... Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow-travellers.”

That’s actually how friendship happens. Did you see this? Sympathy, transparency, and constancy. Sympathy means you discover somebody who has a common passion with you. You can’t create that. You can only discover that. Then, you must add transparency and constancy, letting them in and not letting them down. If you add transparency and constancy to this layer of common passion and sympathy, you have a friend, and you can’t live without a friend.

3. *The power requisite for friendship.* How do we get the power to be a friend and how do we get the power to conduct friendships? Let’s face it. These things are hard. Transparency, always letting people in ... Do you really want people to look inside? If a full transcript of all of your thoughts of the last two days was suddenly put out on the Internet ... The end of your life. You know? You really want to let people in? Transparency. It’s not easy.

Never let you down. That’s hard to do, too. That’s hard to get, too, because, of course, that costs a lot. That costs a whole lot to be faithful to a friend when they’re going through adversity. Where do you get the strength to do that? You can look at Jonathan. You can see one of the things that was so amazing about Jonathan was he was covenantal. He was a non-user in all of his relationships.

On the one hand, it would have been very easy to side with his father against David, have David killed, and get the throne, but it would also have been easy to side with David against his father in such a way that he overthrew his father or assassinated his father. That happened all the time in those days. Then, Jonathan could have been prime minister, and he would have made out pretty well, but it was because Jonathan was absolutely faithful, constant to both David and his father ... Because he was loyal to both was the reason why he died.

Does he remind you of anybody, dying for his friends? In John, chapter 15, Jesus Christ says this to his disciples, “**I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you,**” and “**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.**”

David was saved through Jonathan’s sacrificial friendship, and you can only be saved through Jesus’ sacrificial friendship. He saved you through his friendship. How so? Friends always let you in and never let you down. Jesus Christ ... Look how vulnerable he made himself. Jesus Christ ... His arms are open to you. More than that, they’re nailed open. How much more vulnerable do you want somebody to be?

Friends always let you in, but also, they never let you down, and when Jesus

Christ was on the cross ... I mean, over and over there are places where Jesus says, "At any moment, I could snap my fingers and legions of angels would come and my suffering would be over," but Jesus Christ looks down from the cross and sees people denying him, betraying him, mocking him, and forsaking, and in the greatest act of love in the history of the world, he stayed. He stayed on the cross. He was constant. He was a true friend.

Do you believe that? Do you not just see Jesus Christ dying on the cross in general for people but for you? Do you see you're saved by that friendship? If you do, his transparency can become the basis for your transparency, and his constancy can become the basis for your constancy. For example, what does it take to really be transparent to somebody?

You have to know your sins are forgiven. You have to know God sees all the way into the bottom of your heart, and he sees all the stuff, and he forgives it. Then, it doesn't bother you so much when other people see some things that aren't very flattering. Therefore, it's Jesus' radical transparency that saved you so you could be forgiven that's the basis for your transparency.

On the other hand, it's Jesus' constancy that can be the basis for your constancy. Look at Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. He said, "Please don't fall asleep on me," and they fall asleep on him, and he dies for them anyway. Why? He's a friend. He's actually dying for you because you and I have fallen asleep on him. We always do.

You have to say, "O dear Savior. O my friend, if you laid down your life for me when I was not giving you what I should have given you ... If you laid down your life for me when I was letting you down, I can lay down my life now for others and be their friends." We are all like that monster groping through the forest saying, "If I could just find the friend my heart longs for, I could be all that I should be. If I could only find the friend my heart longs for, then I could come into my own." Well, are you looking for that friend? Here he is. Let's pray.

Our Father, we ask that Jesus' saving friendship could be the basis for us to make one another friends, friends to our neighbors, friends to our brothers and sisters. O Lord, how exciting it is that Christians can become friends because they share the common vision and passion and experience of salvation through Jesus Christ in spite of all the other differences in our lives, and those friendships can be so transforming.

But it's also possible for us to be friends with people who don't share our beliefs. Father, turn us into a radically friendly people. Turn us into people who don't use but befriend, and we will be different, and we will attract people to your glory, and ultimately to your Son, Jesus Christ through whose friendship we now live. It's in his name we pray, amen.

David's Mercy

David: The Man of Prayer—May 24, 2015

1 Samuel 26:7–14, 21–25

7 So David and Abishai went to the army by night, and there was Saul, lying asleep inside the camp with his spear stuck in the ground near his head.

Abner and the soldiers were lying around him. **8** Abishai said to David, “Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I won’t strike him twice.”

9 But David said to Abishai, “Don’t destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless? **10** As surely as the Lord lives,” he said, “the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. **11** But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let’s go.”

12 So David took the spear and water jug near Saul’s head, and they left. No one saw or knew about it, nor did anyone wake up. They were all sleeping, because the Lord had put them into a deep sleep. **13** Then David crossed over to the other side and stood on top of the hill some distance away; there was a wide space between them. **14** He called out to the army and to Abner son of Ner, “Aren’t you going to answer me, Abner?” Abner replied, “Who are you who calls to the king?”

21 Then Saul said, “I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have been terribly wrong.” **22** “Here is the king’s spear,” David answered. “Let one of your young men come over and get it.

23 The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed. **24** As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me from all trouble.” **25** Then Saul said to David, “May you be blessed, David my son; you will do great things and surely

triumph.” So David went on his way, and Saul returned home.

The Word of the Lord.

We're going through the books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, which is the story of King David's life, and each week we look at a new episode, and each week the episode ties us into another major biblical theme. This week, this particular story talks to us and tells us quite a bit about what it means to love people who have wronged you.

What I'm going to do is kind of recount the story, and as we recount the story, we're going to see what it tells us about loving a neighbor, loving an enemy or someone who has wronged you, loving a fool, and where you get the power for all of that. *Loving a neighbor, loving an enemy, loving a fool, and where you get the power for doing all of that.*

1. *Loving a neighbor.* First of all, let's take a look at the story itself. The story is the entire chapter. We only had a part of it read, so here's the story. David has been anointed by God to be the new king of Israel, but Saul is still the king, and Saul has been rejected by God. We'll explain why later.

Saul, of course, is envious and furious and afraid of David, so he tries to kill him, and that drives David into the wilderness. He becomes a fugitive, and in the wilderness he is surrounded by some of his warrior friends, but basically, he has nowhere to lay his head. He's a fugitive. Saul is constantly trying to find out where David is so he can attack him, and he gets intelligence that says he's going to be in this location, so he goes with 3,000 picked men to that location.

One night he sets up camp, and the men all sleep. Of course, Saul sleeps in the very center of the camp, which would be supposedly the safest place, but with God's help and also with their own skill, David and one of his picked men, one of his warrior companions (Abishai), sneak into the camp and are able to get all the way to the center, right to Saul, without waking anyone up.

There is Saul with his spear in the ground next to his head because, again, supposedly you do that in case there is an attack. It's a safety measure. Then you're supposed to be able to get up and have your spear right there, but of course, Abishai looks at Saul. They get there, and he sees his spear, and he says, **“Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I won’t strike him twice.”**

What Abishai is doing is he's bragging a little bit. He says, “I'm a consummate professional. I know how to kill a man with one strike, and it will silence him.” In other words, one silencing thrust and he wouldn't even say anything. He wouldn't cry out. Obviously, those of us who are not wonderful professional soldiers, we would go, “Uh, uh, uh,” and he would be screaming and would wake up the whole camp. He says, “Not me. Not me. I know how to do this. We'll be out of here.”

David says, "No," and he gives a theological reason, and it's in verse 9. "**But David said to Abishai, 'Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?'**" This is his theme. In verse 11, he says, "**But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed.**" Even down in verse 23, when he's talking to Saul, he says, "**The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord's anointed.**"

We will actually get back to this a little later about what that means, but the anointed ones were people God anointed. He anointed prophets, he anointed priests, he anointed kings, and they were supposed to save the people and serve the people. Therefore, the anointing gave them a special dignity.

What David is saying is, "In himself, Saul does deserve to die. He's not worthy in himself, but as the Lord's anointed, as someone who the Lord has touched, he has to be treated with a sacred dignity, and I will not lay a hand on him." In some ways, what David is saying to Abishai here is something that was said in another novel, a favorite novel of mine.

These aren't David's words, but he might have said something like this. He might have said to Abishai something like this: "He was great once, of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hands against. He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it."

You say, "All right. That's noble and kind of moving a little bit, but what does that have to do with us?" Well, it actually has a lot, and here's the reason why. You, too, are surrounded by people, many people who in themselves don't deserve good treatment, but because they've been touched by God, they do.

Genesis, chapter 1, says all human beings are made in the image of God, the *imago Dei*, and even though we don't know ... I'll put it this way. People debate what that entails. "How do we reflect God? Is it in our personality? Is it in our rationality? Is it in our moral sense?" There's all this debate about that, but what's not debated because it's perfectly clear from the Bible is that human beings, all human beings made in the image of God, reflect God in such a way that they must be protected. They have a sacred dignity about them.

In James, chapter 1, there's a place where James is saying, "We mustn't speak abusively to each other. We mustn't curse each other. We mustn't speak harshly to each other." Why? Because we're made in the image of God. Therefore, the fact is we're all like David, surrounded by Sauls, people we actually don't like in many cases, people who, probably, in themselves deserve less than great treatment, but because of the image of God, we must treat them as God treats them, which is infinitely precious and worthy of absolute dignity and respect because of who they are as God's creation.

I'm going to give you two quotations that have helped me a lot on this. The first one is from a man named John Calvin. Whether you've heard of him or not, he has a half-warranted, not fully warranted, reputation for being a rather austere and demanding Christian thinker, so this statement ... This is from his book on

theology and is pretty amazing to me.

He essentially says, "The Lord commands us to do good to all without exception, yet the greatest part of humanity are most unworthy if they be judged on their own merits. But Scripture teaches we are not to consider what they merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all of them, to which we owe all honor and love. You say, 'He has deserved something far different from me.' Yes, but what has the Lord deserved from you? We remember to look upon the image of God in them which effaces their transgressions and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them."

That's an amazing statement, especially from a guy like John Calvin. He says, "When you look at somebody next to you who maybe doesn't deserve great treatment, but what does the Lord deserve?" You say, "What do you mean? What does the Lord deserve?" Because that person is in the image of God. Give that person the treatment God deserves or that God, the maker of this person, would want you to give to someone in his image. It's an amazing statement.

What does the Lord deserve from you? That's what you owe everybody around you. In fact, the most uninteresting and the most unlikable ... That gets me to the second quote. C.S. Lewis, at one place, is talking about ... He doesn't use the term *image of God*, but he says we have to remember that, because we're in the image of God, every human being is immortal, in a sense.

That is to say, we all have souls, and we're going to go on forever, and if in this life we learn how to love, we may go on to be something incredibly beautiful like the angels, but if in this life we learn only how to live for ourselves, we may go on to be something horrible like the demons. This is what C.S. Lewis says.

"It is a serious thing ... to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations.

It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. [...] The weight or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it ..."

You should do that to yourself. I should do that to myself. The weight of our neighbor's glory in the image of God should be laid daily on our backs. What does this mean? David looked at somebody who deserved something else and, at great risk to himself, treated him with sacred dignity, and we're supposed to do that to everybody around us.

We should be so kind to everybody. We should be so non-exploitative. We should never be abusive with our language. We should never be harsh with our language. How are we doing? Here we learn something about what it means to

love our neighbor.

2. *Loving an enemy.* More directly, of course, this passage teaches us something about loving an enemy, somebody who has wronged us. David says something about that, too. He again gives remarkable theological reasoning to Abishai. Why? He is not going to revenge himself on his enemy. It says in verse 10, “ ‘**As surely as the Lord lives,’ he said, ‘the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish.’ ”**

Now those are three very different outcomes. Think about it. It could be God will say, “This guy is so wicked he’s going to strike him dead right here.” *Wham!* Right now. Or maybe he’ll die a ripe old age. Or maybe he’ll die in battle. Those are very different outcomes, and here’s what David is saying.

The point is only God knows what he deserves and only God has the right to give it to him. Let me say that again. Only God has the wisdom to know what a person deserves. You must never try to give people what they deserve. Never. Not in our personal relationships. No. If you’re a sitting judge, that’s another sermon, but in our personal relationships we’re not supposed to do that.

Why? Because, first of all, you don’t know what that person has gone through. You do not know the motives of that person’s heart. You don’t know what that person’s background is. You don’t know what they deserve. You don’t know if they ought to be struck down now or whether they should mercifully be allowed to live the rest of their life. You don’t know.

Not only does God only alone have the wisdom to know what a person deserves, only he has the right to give it to them. Why? Here’s the point. This is one of the great themes (this is the second point) of the Bible. Because you and I live only by God’s mercy, it would be absolutely unjust to withhold mercy from anyone else. Let me say that several different ways.

Because none of us live as we ought ... None of us love God with all of our hearts, souls, strength, and minds or our neighbor as ourselves. None of us do that. If God created us, which means he has given us everything, and if he sustains us every second of the day, we owe him everything.

If we don’t do that, we fall short of that. Therefore, if you and I are alive today, it’s only because of God’s forgiveness and mercy only, and if you and I live strictly by God’s mercy and forgiveness, then to withhold mercy and forgiveness from anyone else is just absolutely unjust. It’s incredibly unfair! It’s a monstrosity of unfairness.

That’s the reason why, for example, two important texts, but they’re really, really strong ... One is in Matthew 18 in the New Testament. Jesus tells a story about a king who forgives a servant an enormous sum of money, but then that servant fails to forgive another fellow servant, a second servant, a small sum, a small debt. When the king hears about it, he looks at the servant he had forgiven and says, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?” *Bang!* That was it.

That's the reason why Jesus says in the most categorical terms in Mark, chapter 11, verse 25, "If you're standing and you're praying and you realize you have anything against anyone, forgive them. Full stop." Forgiveness. You say, "Well, all right. Why? What? How?" Really fast. I mean, I just opened up a big can but briefly what the Bible says about forgiving your enemies, forgiving people who have wronged you. *Why? What? How?*

First of all, *why*? Why do you have to do it? I already told you why. Because it's utterly unjust for you not to, but let me press a little further. David, by forgiving Saul and not taking vengeance on Saul, has made sure he's not going to become Saul. If David had killed Saul in vengeance, if David had let his anger go, if David had let himself get to the place where he was as self-pitying, as self-absorbed, as self-righteous, and therefore, as capable of cruelty as Saul had become, by killing Saul he would have put another Saul on the throne.

The fact of the matter is if you don't forgive people, you in some way or another become somewhat like them. If you stay angry at somebody, it makes you feel sorry for yourself. It makes you feel kind of noble and self-righteous. It makes you able to justify self-indulgent behavior and especially cruel behavior. If, when someone does evil to you, you don't completely forgive, then to some degree the evil wins because it starts to come into you. It just seeps its way into you. It makes you harder. You have to forgive. It's not just right; you need it desperately. That's why.

Secondly, *what*? You say, "What is forgiveness?" All right. Let me give you a little memo. Let me give you a way to think about forgiveness. I'll say it quickly. Then I'll try to open it up a little bit. When someone wrongs you, to forgive them is a commitment. It's granted before it is felt. It's a commitment.

If you're forgiving somebody who has wronged you, it's a commitment not to bring it up to that person again in order to punish them, not to bring it up to other people hoping they will punish them, and not to bring it up to yourself hoping someone punishes them. Resenting them, nurturing them, replaying the tapes of what happened, and all that sort of thing.

Do you hear that? You say, "Well, let's go back over that." Yes. Okay. I will. I'll be happy. In other words, what you're actually doing when someone wrongs you is you decide, "I'm going to make a commitment. I'm not going to go to you and try to punish you with it trying to bring it up all of the time and make you feel bad about it." First, I'm not going to bring it up to them in order to punish the perpetrator.

Secondly, I'm not going to keep bringing it up to other people, hoping to undermine their reputation so other people will punish them, nor am I going to, in my own heart, spend time thinking about it. David does all of this. David doesn't himself strike Saul nor does he let Abishai strike Saul, but even the way ...

There's a section here we didn't read in which he's talking to Saul. We only gave you the end of the conversation, but when David is talking to Saul, he says, "...

my lord, the king." He doesn't say, "You dirty, bitter old man. Do you know what you've done?" He doesn't say, "I forgave you, you bitter old man!" Well, you know you haven't then. You haven't then. Because what he's actually doing is he's trying to punish him.

It is very clear the reason he's not killing Saul and he's not letting other people kill Saul is because in his heart he has forgiven. He doesn't think ill of him. In his heart, he thinks respectfully of him. "... **my lord, the king.**" Those are the three things: don't bring it up to them to punish them, don't bring it up to others to hope they will punish them, and don't bring it up to yourself, constantly thinking about it and hoping somehow punishment will fall upon him from heaven or something. That's a commitment.

Thirdly, *how*? Here's the how. When you do this, it hurts. Every single time you do it, it hurts. In other words, every time you refrain from bringing it up to them and trying to make them feel bad, every time you refrain from talking to other people about them, every time you just turn your thoughts away from nursing your resentment, it hurts. Do you know why? Because you're paying the debt rather than having the other person pay the debt, and that's what forgiveness is.

This is from an essay I read long ago someone wrote on forgiveness. This is a young man who had to forgive a woman who led him on and then jilted him. He thought she was going to marry him, and she jilted him, and this is what he says. "Once I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her, but it took forgiving her in small sums over a year."

Now listen to this. "I forgave her in small sums over a year, done when I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, done whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity when seeing her with another man, and done when I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments. Pain is the consequence of sin. There is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails, and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals."

Why would he say that? That these were payments? When you forgive, you just say, "Well, that's it. Forget it. No problem." Which were the payments? If you own a car and you lend the car to somebody and they wreck it, there are only two things that can happen. Either that person pays for it or you say, "I forgive you. Don't worry about it," in which case you pay for it. You either pay for it through higher insurance premiums or you pay for it by going without a car or something.

In other words, when somebody really, really wrongs you ... Sometimes we forgive people for things that don't bother us that much. We say, "Oh, forget it. Yeah, you did that. Okay. That will cost me \$10. Forget it." You are paying there, but the point is usually we don't feel it. When someone *really* wrongs us, there are only two things you can do. You can make them pay. You either punish them by going to them and making them feel badly or you punish them by ripping up their reputation or you punish them in your heart by thinking about it.

But that young man who wrote that was saying, "I realized to forgive means I am

going to make the payments by not doing those things,” and every time he didn’t do those things, he said it hurt. Of course. You’re paying the debt yourself. You’re absorbing the debt yourself, and that’s the reason why forgiveness is always hard.

David risked his life. Abishai says, “**Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands.**” Abishai must have said, “You are crazy not to do this! This person could kill every one of us! You’re putting us all at risk.” Yes. David was actually paying a very, very big price, putting himself at enormous risk, making himself incredibly vulnerable, but forgiveness is always costly. Always, always, always. You either make them pay or you pay in some way.

But … *but* … somebody is trying to say, “Wait a minute! That’s interesting, but it sounds like you’re saying the person just gets away with it. You mean, you don’t go and talk to them about it? You just let them get away with it?” No, no, no. Did you listen carefully? I said you don’t go to them in order to punish them, but it doesn’t mean you don’t go to them, and that leads us to our third point, interestingly enough.

3. *Loving a fool.* Saul is a fool. Do you know he calls himself a *fool*, which is really remarkable? He says, “**... I have acted like a fool ...**” In the Bible, the word *fool* means something different than it means in our English. In English, *fool* is just a pejorative. It’s just a way of saying, “You jerk! You idiot! You fool!” But in the Bible, it had a very specific meaning. It really meant to be willfully and destructively blind to your own faults, and when you are dealing with a person like that …

Not somebody who wrecked your car and feels really bad about it. We’re not talking about that. When you’re talking about a person who is really pretty bad and who is willfully and destructively blind to their own … You say, “How can you be willfully blind?” Well, it’s called *denial*. You know but you don’t know, and there are people who have not only done bad things to you but they’re going to keep doing bad things.

What do you do? We see here. How does David love Saul? He doesn’t just simply forgive him and go away. He takes the spear, and he goes to a high place where he’s not only safe, by the way, from assault, but where he’s audible. He calls down. The first person who answers is Abner, who is Saul’s chief of staff, chief general, but then Saul hears and wakes up, and David says, “Look! I was down there! I could have killed you and here’s my proof: the spear!”

Saul is cut to the heart, and he’s pricked in the heart, and his conscience bothers him, and he says, “David, my son, I’ve been a fool.” What’s going on? David is being realistically and aggressively loving. He’s not being passive. Forgiveness does not mean being passive, not in this situation. He’s going after Saul, but not going after Saul vindictively. He’s not trying to make Saul pay. He has already given that possibility up. He’s going after Saul’s hardness of heart.

It’s possible to continue to hate in response to love, but it’s hard, and what David

is saying is, "Look, Saul. I've just loved you. I valued your life," and Saul starts to melt. Here's what's going on. What most people do is not what David did. What most people do when we are wronged is we either say nothing on the outside but on the inside we boil or we just let it out, and we go and talk to the person but we do it in order to punish them and make them feel bad and rehash the past.

Basically, we're trying to punish them. We're trying to make them feel as badly as they made us feel. David does neither. David, first of all, forgives Saul from the heart so when he confronts Saul he's not trying to make him feel bad. He's trying to reclaim him. Here's what's important to see.

We are supposed to forgive people who have wronged us, but we are also supposed to love them, which means, in fact, we're supposed to forgive them because we love them, and to love a person is never to let them just keep on sinning. It's never loving just to let people keep on sinning. That's the worst thing for them. They're becoming awful. They're becoming evil.

Remember what C.S. Lewis says. They're on their way to being something terrible. Therefore, if you love them and if you love the other people they might hurt, then you lovingly confront them even though it's hard. It takes ingenuity. Look what David did. It was pretty remarkable, and it does entail risk. Abishai says, "Just kill him!" It entails tremendous risk, but David does it, and it's remarkable.

Yet, by the way, notice he's realistic, because when Saul says, "Come down, David," David says, "No, no. Send somebody up to get your spear." Do you know why? He doesn't trust Saul, and he's right not to trust Saul, because Saul doesn't stick with his repentance. He never does. You say, "He doesn't forgive him, then, if he doesn't trust him."

Wait a minute. To forgive is to love somebody and to trust somebody who is going to wrong you again is not loving. It's never loving, as I will say again, to let somebody sin against you. To forgive someone and then trust them naively isn't loving. It's not the best thing for them. It's not the best thing for you either, but when you confront someone after you have forgiven them, you're not confronting them for your sake. You're confronting them for their sake and the sake of the other people they might wrong.

I can tell you this. If you confront somebody out of love with not the slightest desire to make them feel bad but just simply to show them what's wrong, if you confront somebody out of love, they may not change, but I tell you if you confront somebody out of vindictiveness, they'll never change.

They will rightly see what you're supposedly doing as you're seeking justice is you're really doing vengeance, and as you're trying to show them the truth you're really trying to make them feel bad. They see you as retaliating against what they did, and they will just retaliate back, and on it will go.

The only hope we have in this world is if we know how to love fools, which is to realistically and aggressively love people and confront them only out of love.

There is really no reason to go on about this one because we have to ask ourselves the question ... *How in the world will we ever get the power to do this?*

4. *Where we get the power to do this.* It's actually not that hard to say nothing and boil inside, and it's actually not that hard, on the other hand, to just sort of let them have it, but what David did was really hard. You have to refrain from punishing that person or trying to get other people to punish them or hoping for punishment in your heart. You have to grant that. You have to work on that. You have to pay that price. You have to absorb that debt, and slowly ... *slowly* ... your anger goes down.

Then you have to actually do what you don't want to do because you're still probably mad at them to some degree. You don't want to confront them. You don't want to love them like that. Yet, this is the only way you and your relationships and other people around you won't be getting sucked into the vortex of evil.

Where do you get the power to do that? Here's how you get the power to do that. The way you love your neighbor and the way you love your enemy and the way you love a fool is by learning to love God's anointed and see how he loved you. You say, "What do you mean? I thought God's anointed was Saul."

Well, yeah. Saul is a bad example of God's anointed. When God anoints somebody, that person is anointed to save and serve his people. Whether he anoints a prophet, a priest, a king, a judge, or someone, in the Old Testament when he anoints someone, he anoints them to save and serve his people, and Saul only used his position to serve himself.

That's why he was rejected by God, but David is showing himself to be a true anointed one, because what David is doing is David is not using his position in order to just serve himself. David was struck, but he doesn't strike back. David gives himself and commits himself to God. At the end, he says, "**The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me ...**"

"Into thy hands I commit my spirit, God. I'm not going to try to take care of myself by striking out at my enemy. No. I'm going to forgive my enemy. I'm going to even try to lovingly confront my enemy and put myself at risk. Instead of running away, I'm going to put myself up here where people can see where I am. It's risky, but I'm going to do it. Why? Because I'm going to trust in God. I'm not going to try to take my life into my own hands."

As David is doing that, by being a true anointed one he's pointing to the ultimate anointed one, of course. Jesus Christ, the ultimate anointed ... By the way, the word *messiah* means the anointed one. Jesus Christ, the ultimate anointed one, was driven into the wilderness, too, and he had no place to lay his head, too, and when he was struck and when he was reviled, he didn't strike back (1 Peter 2). When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made

no threats. Instead, he entrusted him to the one who judges justly.

You see, David just risked his life in order to forgive Saul and reclaim him, but Jesus Christ lost his life in order to forgive us and reclaim us. On the cross, he said, “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they’re doing.” He forgives his enemies. At the very end, he says, “**... into your hands I commit my spirit.**”

That’s just a nice symbol. Right? No. It’s not just a nice symbol, because if you see him doing that for you, that will enable you to do all of the love we’re talking about here, and here’s the reason why. Remember how I said, if you actually really ever successfully forgive someone and get through the anger and come to love someone who has wronged you, it only happens when you pay the price. You pay a price. It’s very hard.

If we know even these little sins against us (these finite things against us) take a payment, what must it be like for God to forgive us through Jesus Christ? Why did Jesus go to the cross? Why couldn’t God just say, “Okay, I forgive you”? Because we’re made in God’s image, we know when someone wrongs you there’s a price to be paid, and that’s an image of the fact that because we are wronging each other and we’re wronging God as a human race, there is a price to be paid. God is holy. He’s just. He can’t just say, “Oh, well. Forget it.”

No. A price has to be paid, and on the cross, Jesus paid that infinite price. Imagine! That young man said it was agony but then liberation to spend a year forgiving the woman he thought wronged him. Think of Jesus’ agony, and he did it for you. When you see him, the Lord’s true anointed, loving you, that will make you love him, and as you do that, it will enable you to love other people, because it will give you two things you have to have.

If you believe you’re a sinner saved by grace, if you feel awash with God’s love because of what he has done for you through Jesus Christ, he gives you two things you have to have to forgive, without which you can’t live. First of all, it gives you the humility you need to forgive. You can never forgive somebody you feel superior to.

Mark my words, and if you’re having trouble forgiving right now anybody, use this little test. You can’t forgive somebody if you feel superior to them. If you say, “Well, I would never do anything like that,” but the gospel comes to you and says you have all of the seeds of the worst sins in your heart, and if you haven’t done them it’s only because you just haven’t had the opportunity or the occasion to.

You’re a sinner. You’re lost. Apart from Jesus Christ’s salvation, there is no hope for you, and the gospel humbles you down to the place where you can’t feel superior to anybody. Unless you have that, I think, in your mind and in your heart, there are a lot of people out there in life you’re not going to be able to forgive. First of all, you need humility in order to forgive people because you can’t forgive somebody you feel superior to.

Secondly, it gives you the affirmation you need. The reason it’s hard to forgive some people ... They hurt your reputation, and your reputation means everything

to you and it will never come back. They took love away. They took money away. Those things are so important to you, and they'll never come back.

But if you're a Christian and you know your true wealth is in heaven and you know your real reputation is you have a name that will live forever, if you know these things and to the degree you know these things, when other people wrong you, they really can't take away the things that are really important to you, and it gets easier and easier to forgive.

Unless you have that emotional wealth and unless you have that emotional humility which comes from the gospel, you will not be able to forgive, but if you see the anointed one loving you in order to forgive you, when you love him for the way he loved you, you'll be able to love other people. It's as simple as that.

By the way, we live in a world in which it's going to be increasingly difficult to find forgiveness. We live in a culture ... Several years ago, when a young man broke into an Amish schoolhouse and shot five little girls, everybody was shocked that within hours the Amish community had gone to the ... He also killed himself, this shooter.

They went to the wife of the shooter. They went to the parents of the shooter. They loved them. They came to the funeral. They forgave them. They said, "It's going to be so hard in the future." Everybody was amazed this community could do that. There were three sociologists who wrote a book not too long after this happened who said a lot of Americans are amazed at how the Amish forgave.

They said, "Here's the point. It's going to get harder and harder to see anything like this happening in the future because our culture is a culture of self-assertion. Every single person growing up in this culture is told, 'You have to be yourself. You have to assert yourself. You can't let anybody tell you how you should live. You have to take it yourself.' So we live in a culture of absolute self-assertion, but forgiveness is incredible self-renunciation."

The only way you're ever going to be able to do that, which, of course, is liberating, as I've tried to show you all morning here ... The only way you're going to be able to do that is if the basis of your life is the one who renounced himself for you, who gave up his glory and came down and went to the cross. When you see Jesus Christ and you live by Jesus Christ's self-renunciation, that enables us to live by self-renunciation. The joy and the liberation of living not for ourselves but for God and not for ourselves but for our neighbor ...

If you are immersed in that like the Amish are (they're not the only Christians who believe this, by the way), you will be able to be agents of forgiveness and grace in this world, but increasingly out there in the culture the culture is not giving anybody else the ability to do that. It's crucial we know how to do it. It's crucial you begin practicing it now. Think about right now. Is there any neighbor I'm failing to love, any enemy I'm failing to love, or any fool I'm failing to love? Then use this and go do it. Let us pray.

We thank you, Father, for giving us such a wonderful example in David of our

greater true David, Jesus Christ. We thank you for how David forgave Saul, how he loved Saul, how he confronted Saul, and in that we have all sorts of pointers to Jesus Christ and resources for doing this in our own lives.

We want to be agents of forgiveness and grace in this world, and also, not only do we owe it to you, but we need it. So now equip us through what we learned today about the gospel so we can be this. Help us to forgive one another as you in Christ forgave us. It's in his name we pray, amen.

David's Passion

David: The Man of Prayer—May 31, 2015

2 Samuel 6:1–23

1 David again brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. **2** He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark.

3 They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart **4** with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. **5** David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistruums and cymbals.

6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. **7** The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God.

8 Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. **9** David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, “How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?” **10** He was not willing to take the ark of the Lord to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.

11 The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household.

12 Now King David was told, “The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.” So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. **13** When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf.

14 Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, **15** while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets. **16** As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart.

17 They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord. **18** After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord Almighty.

19 Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes. **20** When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, “How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!”

21 David said to Michal, “It was before the Lord, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord’s people Israel—I will celebrate before the Lord. **22** I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor.” **23** And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.

The Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at the life of David, and this episode is a strange one for modern readers. It’s a strange one. One of the very first things David does after he becomes king is he wants to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark of the covenant was a wooden box plated with gold with two gold angels over the top (cherubim). It was in the Holy of Holies. It was in the center of the tabernacle. God’s presence was so connected to it that it says here he was enthroned above the cherubim. You see that in verse 2. We’ll get back to that in a second.

To bring the ark of the covenant to the capital, to Jerusalem, was to put, in a sense, God's worship in the very center of the national life and in the very center of David's life. You notice in verse 9, he says not just, "How will the ark of the covenant come to Jerusalem?" but "How will it come to me?"

That's what he wants to do, but two fascinating incidents happen. One is, first of all, the death of Uzzah, a man who simply seems to reach out and try to keep the ark from falling off the cart, and he's struck dead, making David frightened and angry, thinking, "This God is more holy than I thought." Then the ark is given to Obed-Edom, the Gittite, and there the ark actually doesn't do anything but make them prosper, showing God is more gracious than he thought. Finally, he brings the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, and when he does, he's a changed man.

As strange as this whole thing is, and you laughed as soon as I said, "What a strange passage for us modern readers," I would like to tell you the message of this passage is as seminal and as central to the Bible as any other passage anywhere. This message here is as seminal and as central as you could find.

Let's notice three things. *A changed man.* David is a changed man when he gets the ark to Jerusalem. Secondly and thirdly, *the first thing that changes him and the second thing that changes him.* He's a changed man. How? The first thing and the second thing that changes him. Let's start at the end, and let's avoid some of the more strange parts and get to the end. Here's what we see.

1. *A changed man.* Verse 16: "**As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart. They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord.**

After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people ..." By the way, this is the work of a priest, not a king. "... in the name of the Lord Almighty. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes."

Commentators and Greek scholars like, for example, Robert Alter, who is a Jewish expert on ancient Hebrew narrative who taught at Berkeley for years, says we actually don't know how to exactly translate some of these. I mean, a *cake of dates* is a very difficult term and we're not sure how to translate it, but here's what we know.

David was giving delicacies out to everybody, not just the head of the home, the man, the head of the family, but to every man and every woman, giving all sorts of very, very exquisite and very expensive delicacies. He's out there mixing it up with the people, with the hoi polloi. He's blessing them, he's fraternizing with them, and then he sends them home.

When Michal, the daughter of Saul, sees that, here's where I like to show you the change. She was the daughter of Saul. She was raised in a typical ancient Near Eastern royal family. She understood the normal way royalty and power operated in all of the cultures of the ancient Near East and all of the cultures of the world.

She looks at him. Boy! What sarcasm and sneering! **"How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"** He was dancing with abandon. He was wearing his heart on his sleeve. He was letting his emotions go, and she looks at him and says, "This is not how a king works! A king doesn't operate like this! That is beneath your dignity!"

Here's what she's saying. In shame and honor cultures, kings had to be remote and intimidating. Kings had to carry their dignity, and no one ... *no one* ... could even begin to trample a little bit on their dignity or they were just killed, because what was understood in those days was, basically, society would unravel unless strength was respected. If anybody shows disrespect to the king, if anyone shows any disrespect to the dignity of the king, they were just killed. The king just holds himself back. He's a little bit remote and kind of frightening and intimidating.

That's how power works. That's how kings operate, and to a great degree, I think that's pretty much where David was going until now. He comes into Jerusalem a very different kind of king. I mean, it looks pretty attractive to us, but he is utterly different than the kind of kings they had back then, and Michal is telling him about that. She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand.

His answer is wonderfully theological. David looks at her and says, **"It was before the Lord, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel ..."** This is not a proud statement. He is saying, "I was chosen by grace. I was a shepherd boy. I don't have royal blood. I didn't fight my way up. God just chose me. I am simply a recipient of grace. How shall I not celebrate?"

Then he points out, **"... I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes."** What he means is, "Maybe I'm the king of Israel and there's nobody above me in Israel, but God is above me." You can dance. You can open your heart before someone who is greater than you, and God is infinitely greater than him, and he says, "I am not going to stand on my own dignity. You don't do that. That's inappropriate before God." He says, "I'll do it again. I'll be humiliated in my own eyes."

Then, he does point out, **"But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor."** In other words, he's saying, "They understand. If anything, they're going to respect me more as a king than if I was the kind of king you want me to be, if I was the kind of king all of the other nations have."

By the way, it's very strange when it says at the very end, **"And Michal daughter**

of Saul had no children to the day of her death.” Actually, nobody quite knows what that means. This is good story telling, actually. It doesn’t say God struck her. It doesn’t say David stayed away from her. What it really says is there was an alienation that went on there until the day of her death, and she was fruitless in the sense of what she was supposed to be doing.

That’s sad, but we turn away, and we point out what she was irritated at, what she could not understand, was how David had become a changed man. The reason he is a changed man was because he was worshiping. What do you think all of that dancing was, all of that joy was, all of that sacrificing? He was worshiping, and I want you to know that is what changes you.

David Foster Wallace, the famous novelist who is now gone, has a place where he says ... This is a pretty famous section out of a speech he once gave. He basically says everybody worships something. By the way, he was not a religious man from what we can tell, but he says everybody worships something, everybody adores something, everybody lets something capture their imagination, and whatever it is will control you. This is what he says.

“Everybody worships. [...] If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. [...] Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths ... Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid ...” Go back and re-read the biography of Saul, that king who stood on his own dignity.

“Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need evermore power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is ... they’re unconscious. They are default settings.”

I don’t know quite what David was worshiping before, but when he changed what he was worshiping, he was liberated. He wasn’t standing on his own dignity. He wasn’t afraid of how he looked. He didn’t need power. Isn’t that something? That’s how you change. That’s what changed him. He worshiped. How did he get there? How did this change happen?

The text tells us there were actually two incidents around two people: the first time he tried to bring up the ark of the covenant and the second time, so let’s take a look at each of them. Here are the two things he learned, and you have to learn both of them. It’s not like either one will change your life. Oh, no. It’s together that these two lessons he learned changed his life and will change yours.

2. *The first thing that changes him.* As he was bringing the ark of the covenant up, Uzzah, one of the men who was just walking along with the oxen cart ... You know, because the ark of the covenant was put on an oxen cart, you don’t drive an oxen cart the way you drive a stagecoach. The oxen walk alongside, and you

walk alongside, and you guide the oxen.

These two men, Uzzah and Ahio, were walking along, and at one point, evidently, one of the oxen stumbled and the ark started to fall off. The ark of the covenant! This holy shrine thing in the Holy of Holies about to fall off, so Uzzah just reaches out just to steady it and put it back, and he's struck dead.

Right away, we think, "That was a little excessive! Wasn't that a little excessive?" It really kills the parade. It does, by the way, kill parades when that happens. Of course, we laugh, but then you get irritated. You say, "Yeah! This is the kind of stuff in the Bible that turns a lot of people off and why I'm kind of turned off, too."

Actually, I have heard this preached. Kathy reminded me on the way home this morning. One time we heard a sermon on this in which we sat there and listened and the preacher's point was that this teaches us you have to follow all of the rules, you have to follow them absolutely, and if you don't follow all of God's rules, he's going to get you, so you'd better take him seriously.

Here's the question. Is that it? Was Uzzah struck because he broke the rules? The answer is yes, but not really. Yes, the rules are part of that, but not really. That wasn't the ultimate reason. Let me show you why. In order to understand what happened to Uzzah and what happened to David, here are a couple of important things we have to keep in mind.

First, the rules around the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle ... There was a way in which you approached God. The ark of the covenant was God's holy presence dwelt over the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, and all of the rules about how you approached and how you did the sacrifices and what you did were not just the typical kind of technical rituals every single religion develops (I'm going to show you here in a second) just so we could say, "Here's how we're pleasing the deity."

No. In Deuteronomy 4, just before he died, Moses is speaking to his people about all of these rules, all of these laws God gave about how you worshiped him and how you came into the tabernacle and how you treated the ark, and he says, "If you obey all of these laws ..." He doesn't say, "God will be okay with you." He says, "Then the world will know what a glorious God we have."

The world will understand who God is. The world will understand, and what that means is the ark of the covenant and, actually, the whole tabernacle worship, but especially, as we're going to see, the ark of the covenant is a concrete sermon to the world. It was God's way of telling the world who he is and how he must be approached and how he was going to save the world. It's a concrete gospel presentation.

Do you see why all of the rules around the work of the ark were so crucial? Because they were part of the message to the world of who God is, and if the rules are forgotten and the rules are disobeyed, the message of God to the world about who he is and how we can be saved is lost. Do you see what is at stake here?

You say, "What were those rules?" Okay. There were two basic things about the ark of the covenant. I'm going to give you one, and then I'll tell you the next one under the last point. The first thing David learned was, inside the ark of the covenant was the Ten Commandments, the actual stone tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai with, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," and all of the rules (all of the Ten Commandments), and they were actually inside the box.

It was a repository, and you couldn't touch it. You couldn't draw near, and you couldn't touch it. In fact, whenever the ark of the covenant was moved, because, of course, the children of Israel were traveling through the wilderness, here were the rules. It had to be covered so nobody could see it. By the way, it wasn't covered.

Secondly, it could not be put on any cart or anything. By the way, it was. The way it was carried was there were two poles you put metal rings through on both sides, and it was just carried along. It was not set on anything. Thirdly, only Levites could carry it. Only people whose entire life was set apart in order to handle the worship of the tabernacle.

It was so important that the worship and how the ark of the covenant and how the altars and everything was done because it was the message of the gospel. It was the message of who God is to the world, and if it gets forgotten the message is gone. The Levites were supposed to be the ones who did this.

So it was never supposed to be seen. It was never supposed to be touched. It was not supposed to be put on a cart. It was only supposed to be transported by Levites. By the way, all of those rules had already been broken. Got it? If you say, "He struck Uzzah down because he broke the rules?" The problem is they should have all been struck down already. God had been very patient.

All of the rules had been broken, and most of all, David ... *David* ... hadn't read the rulebook either. He hadn't read the owner's manual. Don't drive a car without reading the owner's manual. Even David the king didn't seem to be aware of any of this stuff. Why is that so important? Here it is. Rule one: the Law of God is in that ark.

The Law of God is what we are supposed to be doing. It's how we're supposed to be living, and if you touch the ark, you die. Do you know what this means? This God is different than all other gods. This religion is different than all other religions in the world. Every religion in the world, every nation all had their temples, and inside the temple there were shrines and holy objects.

What did you do when you saw a shrine? You touched it. Everybody touched it. Have you ever seen any of these places? I mean, it's like they're worn away by people touching them and taking the handkerchief and kissing the handkerchief and rubbing on it. You rubbed up against it because you wanted the magic.

It was also a way of showing devotion. You touched it by saying, "I'm devoted to

you.” In every other religion, the deity is appeased by that. The deity is flattered by that. Why? Because in every other religion, the way you get your salvation is through your efforts, through your obeisance, through obeying the rituals, through flattering, and through appeasing the deity, but only biblical religion says, “No. There’s an infinite distance between you and the deity, because the Law of God condemns you.”

You touch that. You die. Why? Because no one is righteous. No, not one. No one ... *no one* ... lives up to the Ten Commandments. None! There is an infinite chasm between you and God, and your efforts will never traverse it. Your efforts can never bridge that chasm. If there’s going to be any salvation, it’s not going to come from you. There’s nothing you can do. It’s going to have to come from God. It’s going to have to be supernatural. It’s going to have to be this gracious intervention. That’s the first thing David discovered.

Now do you see what was at stake? When it was falling over, here are two things Uzzah was doing. First, Uzzah thought the soil ... If it hit the ground, that’s terrible. Right? In other words, the soil would have defiled the ark of the covenant more than he would. Boy! That’s bad theology! That’s more than bad theology. That shows he has not the slightest idea of who this God is and who he is. Does he really think the soil somehow is more defiling than he is?

Let me just tell you something about soil. God made the soil, and guess what. It’s not fallen. The soil is everything God ever wanted it to be. It’s doing its job. It’s filled with nutrients. You plant things in it. They grow. It’s wonderful. There’s nothing wrong with the soil. The soil is everything God wants it to be, but you and I are not close to being what God created us to be.

Not close, so Uzzah has no concept of how lost he is, no concept of how sinful he is, and by the way, by putting the ark back up, he’s showing he feels maybe God occasionally needs our help, because that’s how all of the other deities are in the world. “God needs our help. God makes these promises, but we have to help him with the promises. I’ve prayed to God, but I have to help God answer my prayers.” There are lots of ways of doing that, by the way.

“Besides that, I have to help God because I have to contribute to my salvation. I have to do something. He’ll do part. I’ll do part.” Uzzah ... Everything is on the line here. Everything is on the line, because if Uzzah gets away with this, and David the king seemed not to see anything wrong with this, it showed the gospel was ready to be lost.

The uniqueness of this God, the uniqueness of this religion was completely lost, a religion of complete grace, a religion where God is so holy he cannot overlook any evil, any injustice. He cannot overlook any sin, and we are so lost that nothing we do can traverse the chasm between us and him.

It’s the only religion in the world like that, and it was about to be lost, and God didn’t let it get lost because God sent a message to David and to us, because here we are looking at it a few thousand years later. “I am holy,” he says, and

David says, "How will this ark ever come to me? This God is more holy and more dangerous than I thought he was." That was the first step toward actually becoming a new man.

3. *The second thing that changes him.* The incident with Uzzah showed David he was more sinful than he ever dared believe, but the incident with Obed-Edom showed him, at the same time, that God wants his fellowship, and it's possible to be loved, and it's possible for your sin to be dealt with.

This is, by the way, the comical part of the story. Obed-Edom was a Gittite, which means he was a foreigner. He was not an Israelite. He was a person of a different race. The ark of the covenant just zapped somebody, killed someone, and here's David saying, "What am I going to do with the ark of the covenant? Well, there's this foreigner who lives right here. Fine. Let him have it."

It's a little bit like putting a toxic waste dump in the back yard of the neighborhood that doesn't have the power to stop it. Here's almost certainly what they thought. "My! God is the God of Israel. He's our God, and if God is so dangerous that even one of our Israelite people would be killed just by touching the ark, my goodness, what is going to happen to these foreigners? They'll probably all die within a day or so just by being in the neighborhood."

Immediately, God prospers and blesses them. Deliberately! These foreigners, these people who, for all we know, weren't believers in God at all. We don't know, but God deliberately prospers them to try to get David to see, "I'm also a God of grace." Put it another way. He's really saying to David, "David, don't you dare think there are good people and bad people in the world, that there are some races that are good and some races and cultures that are bad or that somehow some people just by virtue of their pedigree have a leg up on God and other people do not."

He said, "You're all sinners. No one is righteous. No, not one, but that also means anybody can be saved. Anybody can receive my grace." Biblical religion is the great leveler. It's the most democratic force in the world and always has been. David goes back and probably reads the manual. Do you know why?

Notice what it says here in verse 13. As he brings it back up, it says, "**When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord ...**" Every six steps they sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. Where did he get that idea? Here's where he got it.

If you go back to Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, you go back to the temple worship and you really read what God says about the ark, here's what you do. It's true the Law of God is in the ark. The Law of God condemns us. The holiness of God is something that, because we are sinful, man and woman cannot approach a holy God, but one day a year the high priest might enter.

First, the high priest goes by the altar of burnt offering out front where he sacrifices a bull or sacrifices a fattened calf and then takes the blood and goes

into the Holy Place. On the top of the ark of the covenant, over the Law of God, was a gold slab called the *mercy seat*. The Greek word is *hilasterion*, the place of propitiation, and if the high priest sprinkles the blood sacrificed for atonement of sin, that shields the high priest from the demands of the Law, and God says, “I will speak to you over the mercy seat.”

That's an astounding picture of the gospel, that though, no, you cannot approach a holy God in your own righteousness, but if there is a sacrifice for sin, by grace God can open the way and justify you. David didn't understand. Of course, nobody in the Old Testament understood exactly how the blood of bulls and goats and fattened calves would atone for sin, but he did understand this God was more holy than he thought but also more gracious than he thought.

When he put those two things together (“I am more lost and I am worse than I thought, but the fact that God still wants to deal with me and have fellowship with me means his grace is greater than I thought”), that gave him the joy. That made him dance. That brought a change in his life. He didn't just believe in God; he was worshiping this God. When he worshiped this God, as we saw, that's what changed his life and heart. David intuited what you and I know a lot more about than he did.

He saw through a glass darkly, did he not? But here's what we know from the book of Hebrews. Talking about Jesus Christ, the book of Hebrews says, “Because it is impossible for the blood of bulls to take away sins, therefore, when Christ came, he said, ‘With burnt offerings and sin offerings you are not pleased, O Lord, but a body you have prepared for me. Here I am. I have come to do your will, O God, and by that will of God, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.’”

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom and the ark became obsolete. Why? Because Jesus was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. His blood was the blood to end all blood sacrifices. What it means is when you say, “Father, accept me because of what Jesus did,” you go in, and the ark of the covenant has been fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's only when those two things go together. There's that great hymn by John Newton:

*To see the law by Christ fulfilled
And hear his pardoning voice
Transforms a slave into a child
And duty into choice*

Do you know the difference between doing something because your boss asks you to do it and you just don't want to lose your job versus doing something because the person you're most in love with in the whole world wants you to do something and you do it like this because you can't wait to see the smile on his or her face? Because your greatest happiness now is to see the person you love happy and happy with you. There's no greater happiness, and that's worship, and that comes from the understanding of the gospel.

Charles Spurgeon, a great Baptist preacher, near the very end of his life said, “The love of God has been so overpoweringly experienced by us on some occasions, that we have almost had to ask for a stay of the delight because we could not endure any more.” He was getting so much love and so much joy in prayer that he actually said to God, “Stop. I don’t know that I can take this any longer.”

By the way, at that point he was kind of crippled. Yet, he was dancing. He was dancing. If you’re Uzzah thinking you can manage God, thinking you can help God out, thinking you can contribute to your salvation, you’ll just be a self-righteous person. There’s not going to be any joy or dance about you.

You’re going to look down on other people. You’re going to always be complaining because God’s not actually giving you the life you think he owes you. There’s not going to be any dance, but if you understand the gospel, there will be a joy. There will be a dance about your life. If David could dance and he didn’t even know about the cross, what should you and I be doing? Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us an insight as to how worship works. It’s basically just believing the gospel. Lord, every time we get a deeper insight into how lost we are, we can turn that. We’re not afraid of that. We’re not afraid of all these passages that talk about how holy you are and your judgment. No, because it just shows us Jesus Christ took all of that for us, and now your grace shines more brightly, your love becomes more real to us, and we can dance.

We don’t have to stand on our dignity, and we don’t care what anybody thinks anymore because we’re only worshiping you and nothing else. Let that be. Let that be. Let that be true in our lives, and would you show us how to worship you and be a worshiping people? We pray this in Jesus’ name, amen.

Sight for the Blind

Faith in an Age of Unbelief: Elijah and Elisha—August 30, 2015

2 Kings 6:8–23

8 Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, “I will set up my camp in such and such a place.” **9** The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: “Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there.” **10** So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha

warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

11 This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, “Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of

12 Israel?” **12** “None of us, my lord the king,” said one of his officers, “but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.”

13 “Go, find out where he is,” the king ordered, “so I can send men and capture him.” The report came back: “He is in Dothan.” **14** Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city. **15** When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked.

16 “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” **17** And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

18 As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, “Strike this army with blindness.” So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.

19 Elisha told them, “This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for.” And he led

20 them to Samaria. After they entered the city, Elisha said, “Lord, open the eyes of these men so they can see.” Then the Lord opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria.

21 When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, “Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?” **22** “Do not kill them,” he answered. “Would you kill those you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their

23 master.” **23** So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory.

The Word of the Lord.

During the summer these last few weeks we’ve been looking at the lives of the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha. One of the reasons to do that comes from this fascinating exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus in Matthew,

chapter 11. John the Baptist is in prison, and he's hearing about the Christ. He's hearing about the things Jesus is doing, so he sends word to Jesus through his disciples.

It says, "When John heard in prison about the deeds Jesus did, he sent word by his disciples and asked him, 'Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?' Jesus answered him, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them.' "

It's notable that Jesus would point to these miracles like that and say, "These are the signs I am the Savior of the world," because, first of all, that list is almost a summary of the careers of Elijah and Elisha. They did every single one of them. Of course, Jesus did those, too. He also healed the blind, raised the dead, helped the poor, but what he's saying is not only are these great supernatural actions, which they are, but they're also signs. They're representations of how God's salvation works.

While Jesus came to heal the physically blind, he also came to heal the spiritually blind. He not only came to raise the physically dead but to raise the spiritually dead. He not only came to help the poor but to restore the spiritually poor, and that's the reason why we should always look at those miracles and kind of read the miracles of the Bible like that on those two levels, as we can see right here.

Let's take a look at this really interesting story, an extraordinarily interesting story, about sightedness and blindness and what we learn from it. Let's see how this story teaches us about *the gift of spiritual sight, the condition of spiritual blindness, and how it can be healed*.

1. *The gift of spiritual sight.* We learn about the gift of spiritual sight from the first two scenes in the story. The king of Aram, which is Syria, by the way (I'm just going to call it *Syria* from here on), was at war with Israel. In fact, if you've been here for other sessions, we were looking at other parts of the history of Elijah and Elisha.

This Syrian king along with the Syrian army has been going into Israel and invading and pillaging and enslaving people and all of that for a while, but here we're told Elisha is given spiritual insights (spiritual sight, as it were) from God so that every time the king of Syria tries to make a move, the king of Israel knows all about it.

It's almost a comedic scene down here in verse 11. "**This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, 'Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?'**" He's just enraged. They say, "None of us! It's Elisha. It's that prophet." When the king of Syria finds out where he is, which is Dothan, he sends an army to sack the city, probably kill a lot of people, and capture Elisha.

In the second scene, Elisha and his servant are in the city. They're surrounded by the Syrians, and the servant is petrified. We have the first of the two prayers

Elisha prays. In verse 17, it says, “**And Elisha prayed, ‘Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha,**” which were the legions of angels, the hosts. The Lord of Hosts he is.

In other words, the servant of Elijah could see the physical reality but couldn’t see the spiritual reality. He could see the physical forces but not the spiritual forces. He could not see those who are with us more than those who are with them. Point: Blindness is impaired ability to recognize the truth.

Blindness, in the Bible and, actually, the way we use the word at several levels, is an impaired ability to recognize the truth, so physical blindness is an impaired ability to recognize the truth of what is actually in your physical environment. There might be things out there coming at you that you can’t see because you’re blind. So spiritual blindness is an impaired ability to see what is spiritually around us. That’s why it’s obvious why, in the Bible, therefore, physical blindness represents spiritual blindness and physical sightedness (getting physical sight) represents getting spiritual sight.

For example, when Saul who becomes Paul is on the road to Damascus, he’s blinded (literally and physically) by a light, and he meets Jesus Christ, so he’s physically blinded. Why? It’s God’s way of saying, “It’s because you’re spiritually blind.” When he gets his physical sight back, it’s as he gets his spiritual sight that he comes to see who Jesus Christ is.

In John, chapter 9, Jesus heals a man born blind, but he doesn’t just leave it at physical healing, of course. He not only heals him physically, but then he leads him to faith and, in a sense, gives him spiritual sight. The Pharisees are upset with the whole thing, and when Jesus (this is John, chapter 9) confronts them, this is what he says.

“For judgment I have come into this world so that the blind will see and those who see be blind.” The Pharisees heard him saying this and said, “What? Are you saying we’re blind, too?” Jesus said, “Since you claim you can see, your guilt remains,” which is Jesus’ way of saying, “Yep,” but he’s actually saying more than that. What he’s saying is, “If you think you’re spiritually sighted, it’s a sign that you’re spiritually blind, and if you know something of your spiritual blindness, it’s a sign that you’re becoming spiritually sighted.”

What do we learn from this story here? Two things, as we already said. These first two scenes, first of all, tell us spiritual sight (the ability to see your spiritual surroundings), to know spiritual realities, which we’ll get to what those are in a minute, is a gift of God because it’s not natural. Spiritual sight is not natural for anybody, and the way that gets across in the story is you have bad guys ... Right?

Who are the bad guys? The soldiers. They’ve been marauding and pillaging and raping and killing and enslaving. Now they’re coming to destroy this city and capture the prophet of God. These are the bad guys. Of course, as we will see,

they're struck with physical blindness to show them they're spiritually blind.

But here's the good guy, Elisha's servant, who knows God. He's a monotheist. He's not a polytheist. He knows God. Yet, he can't see spiritual reality. It's intriguing that both the bad guys (later on Elisha is going to have to pray in verse 20, "Lord, open the eyes of these men") and the good guy (Elisha has to pray, "Lord, open the eyes that he may see") ...

In other words, we're all naturally blind. There are nice people and there are nasty people. There are moral people and there are immoral people, and we're all spiritually blind. Ephesians 4 says our foolish hearts are darkened. We're all insensitive to spiritual realities. We repress them. We don't like them.

John, chapter 3, is about Nicodemus, a moral, Bible-believing person. John, chapter 4, is about the woman at the well of Samaria, and she's a pagan, non-moral person. Yet, they both need to be born again. They both need the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. They both need the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. We're all spiritually blind (good and bad) no matter who you are. That's why spiritual sight is a gift. It has to be a gift.

Here's one other thing while we're in this first couple of scenes that I want to get across that is not as easy, I don't think, to grasp as what I just said and that is, becoming a Christian is not like turning over a new leaf. It's not like just working harder. It's not an extension of the things you're already doing. It's not just like finally saying, "I'm going to get on the stick and I'm going to live the way I ought to live."

A lot of people think that's what it means to become a Christian. No, no. It's much more like getting a new faculty and being ushered into a whole realm of reality you never even knew existed. It's much more radical than just becoming a good person. This is the value of all of these divinely ordained metaphors. Let's think about this one. Imagine a person is not just legally blind but born without any visual ability at all, no concept of light and darkness or color or anything. Totally and absolutely blind.

They grow up, and they're talking to you. If the person says, "I've been hearing people talk about red and blue and yellow, so I've been trying to think about this. Is red like the sound of a trumpet or like the feel of wool?" the only right answer (I don't know what you're going to say, because you're trying to be kind and all of that) is to say, "Not really."

Because sight is not an extension of hearing or feeling. It's just not. Sight is not an extension of hearing and feeling. Sight allows you to perceive realities that hearing and touching cannot perceive. Therefore, there is no way for you to even imagine what color and light and darkness are like until you have that faculty.

A lot of people think becoming a Christian is basically an extension of what you already are doing. "We ought to obey the Golden Rule, so as a Christian, I'm really going to ask God's help to really live as I should." We believe in God. You can do that without spiritual sight. "I believe in God, so I'm going to pray, and I'm

going to pray more often.” That’s not becoming a Christian.

Jesus said, “I came that the blind might see. I came to bring the new birth. I came not just to make people nicer but new.” What does that mean then? Here’s what it means. Spiritual sight means ideas that were either silly to you or just abstract to you become so compelling and so amazing and so thrilling and so real to you that they change you permanently.

For example, Elisha’s servant would have known a lot about God. He would have had right theology and right doctrine. He knew God was around him, but he didn’t see it, and because he knew it with his head, it didn’t affect his heart. It didn’t affect the way in which he lived, but when he saw it … When the spiritual reality of an idea that was just an abstraction gripped his heart, it changed him.

I know plenty of people who believe in a God of forgiveness; yet, they’re racked with shame and guilt. Or they believe God said, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” but they’re having affairs. What is it to say, “I know God says this is wrong, but I’m having an affair”? What is that to say you know something but you don’t see it? You may know it in the abstract, but you don’t see it, because if you saw it, it would change you.

That’s the reason why one of the marks of somebody who is not just becoming a nicer person or a more moral person but is getting spiritual sight is they may listen to a sermon or they may read the Bible and they may say, “I’ve heard this before, but now it’s like the Bible has become alive. It’s like there’s light on every page. It’s like stuff I knew before now is just so wonderful and so thrilling.” What’s going on there? The gift of spiritual sight. The first thing we learn is spiritual sight is a gift. Secondly, we’re talking about spiritual realities. What are we talking about? What does that mean that you become alive to spiritual realities?

2. *The conditions of spiritual blindness.* The second thing I’d like to look at as we go down into the story is the conditions of spiritual blindness. What is it that we’re blind to? What are these realities we’re blind to? When the soldiers are struck with blindness, when Elisha has to pray and he says in verse 18, “**Strike this army with blindness**,” this is like Paul on the road to Damascus.

By the way, the guys who were trying to attack the angels in Sodom are struck with blindness. In other words, in the Bible very often spiritual blindness is shown by striking them with physical blindness, so these guys are now physically blind to show off their spiritual blindness. What is the condition of spiritual blindness? There are three things. Spiritual blindness means to be blind to three things: *the depth of your sin, the beauty of grace, and the blindness itself.*

First of all, *you are blind to the depth of your sin.* These guys thought they were just following orders. They did not know they were fighting God. In the same way, until you get spiritual sight, you might say, “I’m flawed. I’m not perfect. I do bad things. I really can be a bad person.” You may have some concept you’re not perfect, but you do not understand until you get spiritually sighted the depth of your sin. You can’t see your sin in the true light any more than they could see

what they were doing in the true light.

How so? Like this. Before spiritual sight comes, you understand sin as discrete violations of rules. You're violating the rules. You understand sin as breaking the rules, and you regret sin only when it messes up your life. You understand sin as breaking the rules, and you regret sin as just messing up your life basically, but when spiritual sight is given to you, when your heart is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, when the faculty comes, then both of those things change.

First of all, you start to see your sin not just as ... Of course, it is breaking rules. If God says, "Don't do this," and you do it, that's a sin. Of course. But you see it as much more of a pervasive attitude of heart, something that goes extraordinarily deep and affects every single part of you. If you ask a person without spiritual sight, "Are you a good person?" they'll say, "Well, I have done a lot of bad things, but I've done a lot of good things, too," but if you ask a person with spiritual sight, "Are you a good person?" here's what they'll say, and only a Christian who has spiritual sight will say this.

He'll say, "Well, I've done bad things, but even the good things I've done I've done for bad reasons. I do good things, yeah, but to control God so he has to bless me, to control other people's thinking of me so I can control my image with them, so I can command their respect, so I can have my own self-respect. I help people, but I don't help them for their sake; I help them for my sake. I've even obeyed God, but I haven't obeyed God for his sake. I've obeyed God for my sake." Only a Christian will ever talk like that. Only a Christian can see that.

C.S. Lewis, in his famous book *Mere Christianity* ... You get to his great chapter called "The Great Sin," which is about pride. Basically, he says he has heard people who are not Christians, people who have not had spiritual sight, in other words, admit all kinds of things they've done wrong (discrete individual things).

"I lied. I cheated. I did this wrong. I did that wrong.' I've never heard somebody who wasn't a converted Christian say, 'I am the most self-centered, curved in on myself, self-absorbed person,' or if they do say it, it's in passing because they're having a bad day." Only with spiritual sight do you see the depth of your sin. Sin is not just this and that bad thing but a whole attitude of the heart.

Secondly, I get this from John Newton, the guy who wrote "Amazing Grace" and wrote a bunch of letters, without spiritual sight, you only regret sin when it gets you into trouble. You do things wrong, but you only get really upset when it screws up your life. That's the reason why, when you repent and you think, "I'm going to change," as soon as things get better, you go back. Why?

Because your only real motive was to have a happy life, but as John Newton says, only with spiritual sight do you start to regret sin because it grieves God, because it dishonors the one who has given you everything. That never goes away, and that's the reason why people without spiritual sight rue the fact that they're this or that and they try to change their behavior and they can't and people with spiritual sight try to change their behavior and they can. First of all,

we're blinded to the depth of sin.

Secondly, *you are blind to the beauty of grace*. These soldiers had no idea the enemy (Elisha) ... They thought public enemy number one, if you're Syrian, was their greatest friend they had in the world. They're struck with blindness and Elisha meets them on the road and says, "You're not going to the right place," and leads them where? Samaria. Do you know what Samaria is? That's the stronghold of the kingdom of Israel. That's the capital. Here's the army that has been ravaging Israel, and they're led into Samaria, and they can't see straight.

I mean, it's a little comical again. The king of Israel is really excited. He's almost like a kid in the candy shop. He says, "Oh, my God! I have the enemy!" Notice he doesn't just say, "Shall I kill them?" He says, "Shall I kill them, my Father? Shall I kill them?" The doubling is a Hebrew idiom that shows great emotional excitement. He's really excited. "Can I kill? Can I kill? Can I kill?"

Elisha says, "No." Elisha stands as their advocate. He stands as their mediator. He stands as their savior. This kind of grace with this army that does deserve to die by the rules of war who is captured and completely helpless and he makes them a feast is radical grace that, by the way, changes their lives. They go off and the bands from Syria stopped raiding Israel after that. This was shocking! It was stunning! They couldn't believe it. That's a fact. It takes the Holy Spirit to have you understand and love the gospel of sheer grace.

Let me give you my four favorite examples of this. The most favorite example, of course, is Paul. Paul was a Pharisee, and Paul understood you have to obey the law, which is true. He understood God is holy and you need to be holy (that's true) and that God was righteous and you needed to be righteous (that's absolutely right), but he had no concept of salvation by grace alone.

That's the reason why he says in Philippians 3, this famous place, "As to legal righteousness, I was faultless, but I count it now ... now ... all loss that I might be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from keeping the law but the righteousness that comes from God and is through faith in Christ Jesus." He understood. Without the Holy Spirit, you can understand, "I need to be a good person or God wants me to be a good person," but only the Holy Spirit gives you ... It was astounding. Salvation by grace.

I remember when I was a very young minister, 24 years old, trying to visit some of the very poor homes in the neighborhood around our building in a small town in Virginia. I went with another guy from the church. I found a welfare mom. She had children out of wedlock. She was living on welfare by herself in this home. In that small town in that time and place, she was disgraced. She was on the outs of society.

We sat down and we explained the gospel. She said, "Well, I understand the gospel. I was raised in church." I said, "What's the gospel?" She said, "If you really, really, really live a good life, you'll be saved." I said, "No. You're saved. Then you live a really good life." She said, "That doesn't make sense."

I explained it to her, and she couldn't believe it. She said, "You can be saved before ...?" I said, "Of course. Let's understand goodness." We worked on this a little bit. Then she said, "When you're saved by grace, you're saved now? God loves you now because of what Jesus did? It's not based on my works or my goodness at all?"

"No." She said, "Well, I have to think about this." During the week, we were away. We came back the next week. She had called her sister. Her sister was in a completely different place in that society. She was married. She was married to a prominent person in the community. They went to a prominent church in the community.

When she told her sister what I had told her, her sister said, "That is stupid! That is ridiculous! You have to live a good life. You have to go to church. I've worked hard for my salvation. You can't. You have to get going here. He can't just come in and say, 'It doesn't matter you've got five children out of wedlock and all of that.' Come on!"

We came back the next week. I could have said, "Your sister is spiritually blind," but I didn't do that. But she was. But this woman ... Her eyes were starting to get opened, and she said, "Am I supposed to listen to my sister or you?" I said, "Let's not do it that way. Let's put your sister up against the Bible." We studied the Bible and read the Bible, and her heart was opened and her eyes were opened.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great British preacher, used to say one of the ways you know your eyes have been opened is whenever you hear about the gospel, the doctrine of justification by faith alone ... The doctrine of justification by faith alone means we're justified before God just by what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross and our faith in that.

We're not justified by our works. We're not justified by our moral record. He says one of the ways he knows a person is not just a nice person but a person whose eyes have been opened is they can't get enough of that doctrine. All they want to do is hear about it. It's an endless source of joy. It's an endless source of fascination.

My favorite illustration is this. Years ago when I was pretty young, I was on a committee, and this committee was a group of ministers who were listening to candidates who were other ministers (generally young ones) who wanted to go plant churches, so they had to come before our committee, and we had to approve them. You always asked them, "Tell us something about how you became a Christian."

Almost every one of them said, "I was raised in the church, but I had never heard the gospel. I never heard the gospel of grace, but then this or that happened, and I learned it or somebody showed it to me or something like that. Then I became a Christian and off I went." When the sixth guy in a row had come in and started doing that, the most prominent minister in that group whose name was Frank Barker ...

He was probably the most prominent minister. He had a great big church in Birmingham, Alabama. He said, "You know, I don't want anybody here to get the wrong impression that somehow these guys must have been in terrible churches where you never heard the gospel. Let me tell you my story." He said, "I was raised in the church, and I wanted to go in the ministry, so I started taking courses at seminary. I took some courses on theology and the Bible."

Then, for whatever reason, he got into the military. I'm not sure. I think it might have been the Korean War. Anyway, he was brought into the military, and while he was in the military, a chaplain led him to Christ. He told him the gospel of grace. He had never heard it. He said, "This is amazing! This is astonishing! I thought being a Christian was just living a good life, but it's like having your eyes opened. It's understanding grace. It's trusting in Christ. It's being saved and accepted apart from anything you've ever done." It was amazing to him.

As he was meeting with the chaplain after this, at one point he said, "Chaplain, I want to know why nobody ever, ever, ever told me the gospel. My minister at home didn't know the gospel. Here's what I really want to know. Why didn't Martin Luther know anything about the gospel?" The chaplain said, "Why would you say that?" He said, "I took a course on Martin Luther. In fact, I read his commentary on the Galatians, and there was nothing about the gospel in there."

The chaplain said, "Now that your eyes have been opened now that you've become a Christian, why don't you go back and read that book again?" Frank was telling us all of this. He said, "I went back and opened that book. There on every page there was the gospel highlighted, underlined, and I hadn't seen it." He said, "I want you to know right now there are young men and women growing up in my church under my preaching and they're not hearing the gospel until the Holy Spirit opens their eyes."

The beauty of grace is not something you can take in without the Holy Spirit's help. You may say, "Yeah, I've heard the doctrine of justification by faith." Yet, you ignore it. You reject it. Even if you think you believe it, you don't believe. Unless the Holy Spirit opens your eyes and it becomes the most wonderful thing you've ever heard, the most compelling and astounding thing you've ever heard, you're still blind. Don't forget. Spiritually blind people are blind to the depth of their sin. They're blind to the beauty of grace.

Thirdly, *you are blind to blindness*. In a word, Jesus already talked about it. One of the ways you know you're blind is you don't think you are. If you don't think you are today, you are. It's proof you are. The most self-centered people have no idea they're self-centered, do they? Of course not. The least self-centered people actually have a pretty good sense that they are self-centered. That's the way it works. If you say, "I can't see right, I'm blind," your sight is beginning to clear. There's the condition. There's the gift. How do we get the gift?

3. *How the condition is healed.* How does the condition get healed? Let me give you really fast three how's and a why. How can the condition of spiritual

blindness be healed? There are three how's and a why. The three how's go like this: *stages, suffering, and prayer*.

First, *stages*. You need to recognize the fact that even though there is a spiritual healing of your sight that brings you to see the depth of your sin, the gospel of grace that brings you to Christ brings you to salvation. Nevertheless, Paul in Ephesians 1 writes a group of Christians and says, "I'm praying your eyes will be enlightened, that the spiritual eyes of your heart will be enlightened." That's what he says. "So you may grasp the hope and the power and the glory of what you have in Christ."

What does that mean? What he's trying to say is, "You see enough to be saved, but your spiritual sight needs to be constantly improving because it's not very good." We're all very near-sighted, frankly. Spiritually near-sighted. Even the best Christians are. Even the most mature Christians. It's healed in stages.

Secondly, *suffering*. It tends to be healed most by suffering. Two things happened in Dothan. Do you know what they are, class? This happened in Dothan. A man about to be captured looks to God. Chariots of fire. Centuries before, Joseph, a stupid, self-absorbed, stuck-up young boy (Joseph) went to see his brothers who were tending sheep in the field outside of Dothan. He went to see them, and they captured him and put him in a pit. They captured him, but he wasn't delivered. No chariots of fire. No legions of angels. He was sold into slavery.

To our non-spiritual sight, we can look there and say Joseph was in trouble. Elisha was in trouble. God came through for Elisha. God did not come through for Joseph. But you know that's not true. If Joseph had been immediately delivered, if he hadn't gone through the terrible suffering (the years and years of imprisonment and slavery), he never would have risen up.

He never would have saved Egypt from famine. He never would have saved his own family. He never himself would have been redeemed from his own sin. What you have here is this reference to Dothan has always shown me one of the ways out of spiritual blindness is bad things happen to you like they did to Joseph. That's what woke him up.

The delusion of self-sufficiency, which is at the heart of spiritual blindness ... "I know best. I can see best. My perspective is the right one." That's the heart of spiritual blindness, and it's suffering that destroys the illusion. Therefore, generally suffering is one of the ways out of spiritual blindness, but also your ability to see God is there even when he seems to not be answering is one of the marks of spiritual sightedness. There are stages. There is suffering.

Thirdly, *prayer*. Paul, in Ephesians 3, prays that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened so our hearts will grasp the height and the width and the breadth and the depth of the love of God. Therefore, generally speaking ... I can just speak for this. When I pray in the morning, my spiritual sight starts to clear. Things that upset me get into perspective. Do you see? Unless I pray again in the evening, by the evening I've forgotten a lot of what I heard in the morning because your

spiritual sight is something you're always fighting to clarify, asking the Holy Spirit.

It happens in stages. It happens, very often, through the worst things that happen to us in our lives. It happens through prayer. Why can it happen? I'll tell you why it can happen. Why were these guys saved? These were people who were doing terrible things. These guys are not innocent, these soldiers. Why could they just be let go? The king of Israel must have been pretty upset.

"Elisha, what are you doing? Why are you acting as a mediator? Why are you acting as a savior? How can you let these guys off? These guys deserve to die. Do you know what they've done? They've done terrible things." Elisha says, "No. Let them go," and he prepares a feast for them, a feast of grace that changes them. They don't go out and pillage any more. It doesn't seem fair, actually, and it doesn't seem just, but here's why it can happen to you and me, why we can get this grace.

Centuries later, there were a bunch of soldiers who were also trying to capture a prophet and kill him. He was the greatest prophet. This was in the garden of Gethsemane. The soldiers came. Here's what's interesting. That prophet also knew he was surrounded by legions of angels and chariots of fire, but he does not call on them.

In fact, when Peter got out his sword, this is what Jesus said. This is what that great prophet Jesus said, the ultimate prophet. He says, "Put your sword in place. Do not think the Father could not send twelve legions of angels. But then how would the Scripture be fulfilled?" What Jesus is doing is this.

All of the other deliverers, all of the other prophets, all of the other people in the history of the world in the Bible who were recipients of grace were able to get that grace because their sin was put on Jesus Christ. Jesus was executed so we wouldn't have to be. Jesus was plunged into the darkness ... remember, darkness came down on him when he died ... so we could be brought into the light.

Jesus took the punishment so we could get a feast when we deserved to be executed, so we could be saved, so we could get spiritual sight. That's why God can do this for us if you just ask, so do it. Ask. If there is anybody here who actually says, "I have never really seen the things you are talking about or had these senses or thought these things," maybe you need to say, "Lord, for the very first time, please open my eyes."

Everybody in this room, even those of you who are the most mature Christians, you're struggling right now because you don't see as well as you ought to see. You need God to give you another touch. You're afraid of darkness. "Lord, show me your light and beauty." You're afraid of weakness. "Lord, show me the hope of the resurrection." Whatever is bothering you, say, "Lord, open my eyes that I may see." Remember, the only people who get an answer to that are the people who admit they're blind. That's the reason why we sing,

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,

*your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold, your Savior come;
and leap, ye lame, for joy!*

Let's pray.

Father, we are amazed that becoming a Christian is a miracle. It's a miracle. It's like getting a new faculty. It's getting a new sense. It's such a radical thing, and Lord, we not only thank you for it, but we also pray people around us will experience it, too. We pray, more than that, that you would improve our sight.

The soldiers needed spiritual sight. Elisha's servant just needed better spiritual sight. There are a lot of us who just need to have our sight cleared, and one of our problems this morning is we can't see. We might know this or that abstractly, but we can't see, but we need to see about your wisdom, your love, your power, your mercy, and your costly grace, so open our eyes, Lord, that we might see. We ask for it through Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.

The Bible and History

What We Believe: Foundations—September 13, 2015

Luke 1:1–4; 24:25–32

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 24:

²⁵ He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. ²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther.

29 But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. **30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. **32** They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

This is the Word of the Lord.

September is in many ways like a new year, so when we gather for worship and instruction in September, it's a good idea to lay a foundation on which we can build as we go through the year. There's nothing more foundational to who you are as a Christian, what you believe, and also how you live than how you regard the Bible itself, how you approach the Bible, how you understand the Bible. It's fundamental to everything else you do as a Christian.

So for the next three weeks, we are going to be doing a little mini series on the Bible. This particular week, we're looking at the bookends of the book of Luke. Luke is one of the four gospels and one of the books in the New Testament. At the very beginning and the very end, practically, Luke 1 and Luke 24, there are statements that help us understand, I think in a tremendously clear way, what the Bible is and what it's about.

As we take a look at these bookends, these two passages, the beginning and the end of Luke, we're going to learn about the Bible that *it's the truth, it's the truth about a man, and it's a truth not just for the mind but for the heart.*

1. *It's the truth.* In verses 1–4, if you read them carefully, Luke is saying this to Theophilus. He's the nobleman he wrote this account of the life of Jesus for. Here's basically what he's saying. “I went to eyewitnesses, and using the eyewitnesses, I then investigated the other written accounts of Jesus' life that already existed that themselves were based on the eyewitnesses, and after I'd done a very thorough investigation, I put it into a single orderly account of the life of Jesus, and that's what I'm giving to you.”

Now when Luke says this ... He says, “That's the nature of my account. That's the nature of this gospel. That's the nature of the four gospels.” He's flying in the face of our popular culture right now, because our popular culture, I'm afraid, in the last 10 years has developed a view of the Bible, particularly the Gospels, the life of Jesus, the New Testament ... There's a view of the Bible that's out there in the popular culture that is almost becoming common sense.

In the last few months ... I wasn't even looking for these articles, but I saw an article in *Newsweek*. I saw an article in *Huffington Post*. I saw an article on some other newswire service, and they were talking about the Gospels. They talked as

if, "Well, everybody knows this," and here's what everybody knows, according to them. Three things.

First, that after Jesus died, many legends circulated. They were orally transmitted. For many years, legends circulated about his life, and of course they changed and were embellished as the time went on. Second, eventually, many of these legends were written down, so we had a lot of gospels, a lot of accounts of Jesus' life.

Third, 300 years later, finally, the powers that be in the Christian church got together and threw out all the others and chose these four (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), because these four gospels consolidated their power, helped them get across their particular points of view, and supported their position and their leadership.

So there were all these legends. Later on there were a lot of written gospels. Finally, these four were chosen and, as the *Huffington Post* article says, all the other gospels were left on the cutting room floor. Sort of like a big movie. Now the only problem with these three ideas is that they're completely wrong. Apart from that, they're fine, but they're completely wrong. Because they're just considered common sense now, we have to do at least a rapid look at why they're wrong.

The first thing is that what we do have in the Gospels are legends that were passed down for many years and embellished. They were legends. No. That's not what Luke is saying. Luke says, "My gospel is made of eyewitness testimony that has been carefully preserved right from the mouth of the living, surviving eyewitnesses."

Ten years ago, Richard Bauckham wrote a major work of scholarship called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. It's about 10 years old. It completely refutes the popular understanding of the Bible and the New Testament, the Gospels. In that book, Richard Bauckham makes the point that in ancient times historians valued eyewitness testimony almost supremely.

You and I would understand that to some degree, because we would say if you're writing a history of a battle and you found out there were three surviving eyewitnesses to that battle, you would not feel you'd written a good history unless you talked to all three of them. You would check out everything else you'd heard by their eyewitnesses.

Even today, we would say, "Of course. There would be no better source for real good history than a surviving eyewitness." But in those days, Bauckham says, they were even more important, because this is before printing. This is before there were libraries everywhere and magazines. Everything was hand copied.

What that meant was when you were reading a historian it was very hard to go check out their primary sources. Today you can go out and check their primary sources. How about going to the library, getting the primary source out, and seeing that kind of thing. In those days, the best way for a historian to say, "I did not make this up. This is not a fabrication. It's not a fiction. It's not a legend,"

would be to say, “It’s based on surviving, living eyewitnesses, and here they are.”

When you said, “My history is based on living eyewitnesses,” that checked any fabrication. That was a control. That was a way of being publicly accountable, because anybody could go and talk to the eyewitnesses and fact-check the historian. Therefore, Bauckham says, if you read Luke in the ancient Greek language, you will notice the first four verses are very different than the rest. They’re very formal, very stylized, very different than the Greek of the rest of the book.

It’s because what Luke is doing here in the first four verses is using established historiographical language. It’s a way of a historian to say (and they always did; they started their accounts this way), “This is not fiction. This is not a legend. This is based on eyewitness testimony.” That’s what Luke is saying. Obviously, the eyewitnesses are dead now, but they weren’t then. How do you know? Because that’s what he’s saying. *Eyewitness* means a living, surviving eyewitness.

We say, “How do we know what those names are?” In Mark, chapter 14, Jesus is on his way to Calvary, and he can’t carry the cross he’s so weak, and a man named Simon of Cyrene comes and carries the cross for Jesus. Then Mark adds, “He was the father of Rufus and Alexander.” Rufus and Alexander actually aren’t there. They’re not in the story. They’re not part of the account at all.

Why would a historian talk about them? As far as we know, Rufus and Alexander might not even have been born. The only reason Mark could say, “Simon of Cyrene carried the cross; he’s the father of Rufus and Alexander ...” The only way he could say that to his readers is if the readers knew who Rufus and Alexander were or *could* know and could check it out.

Why is it that four gospels say that in the garden of Gethsemane Peter cut off the ear of a soldier, but only John names him Malchus? Why is it the Gospels all talk about the man who is blind and is healed on the side of the road, but only Mark names him Bartimaeus? Why is it that they all talk about the women who were present and saw Jesus on Easter morning, but only Luke mentions Salome?

Why is it that in this final passage we’re about to come to, on the road to Emmaus there were these two disciples who talked to the risen Christ, but only one is named Cleopas; the other one is never given a name? As Bauckham points out, if you’re writing fiction, you either name the two people or you *don’t* name the two people. You don’t give one a name and not the other. These were their eyewitnesses. These were their sources.

Therefore, there is no way that the Gospels are legends. In fact, Bauckham keeps on going to say there’s a difference between historical composition, where a historian composes and makes an account, and eyewitness testimony. It has selectivity of detail. It has narrator perspective. All through the Gospels, especially the resurrection accounts, you have all the marks of eyewitness testimony. These are not legends. Luke says they’re not legends. There’s no evidence inside the text that they’re legends. They’re eyewitness testimony.

They're history.

Remember one of the other parts of the popular culture is that these things are written down many, many years later. The fact is all four of the Gospels were written inside the lifetime of the living eyewitnesses. Do you know one of the reasons we know that? P52. P52 was a papyrus, a scrap of John, chapter 18, that was found in Egypt. It's in the John Rylands Library museum in the UK. It was found somewhere in Egypt, and it has been dated about AD 100 to AD 110.

Because since everything was hand copied it took years for books to be copied and circulated, everybody now says John, which is the last of the four gospels, couldn't have been written any later than AD 85 or 90, which means all of the Gospels were written within 30 to 60 years after Jesus' death, within the lifetime of many, many of the eyewitnesses.

So the four gospels were not written late. In fact, nobody knows that any of the other so-called gnostic gospels were written that early. Only the four gospels were written that early. Only the four gospels are based on eyewitness testimony. By the way, they don't help Christian leaders. I just want you to know that. There's no way the four gospels helped Christian leaders consolidate their power.

First of all, all of the early Christian leaders believed they were heirs of the apostles and heirs of Peter, but when you read the Gospels, the apostles and Peter look stupid all the time. If you're trying to make up stories in order to promote your religion in a shame and honor culture ... Every other religion, the founder of that religion, whether it's Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad ... Every other founder of religion dies serene, surrounded by followers, brave, looking to heaven, confident of their connection to God.

The founder of Christianity dies screaming, "Why have you deserted me, God?" If you're trying in a shame and honor culture to get people to take hold of your religion, that's the worst possible way to do it. No. Why are these stories the way they are? Because they happened. There's no other good reason for them. There's no good reason for their form. There's no better reason for their content.

Here's what Luke is trying to say. This is true. And here's what *I'm* trying to say. Don't believe the Bible because it's exciting, even though it actually is, and don't believe the Bible because it's relevant and will meet your needs, even though it will. Believe because it happened. Believe because it's true, and only if it's true and only if it happened will it meet your needs.

2. *It's the truth about a man.* There's no use ... In fact, I'm going to show you it's not just there's no use, but it's destructive to only believe in the Bible in general and not understand its message. There's no use in believing the Bible is filled with truth unless you understand what it actually is saying. That's Jesus' main point in this final passage that we were looking at.

Luke, chapter 24, talks about an incident that happened several days after Jesus died. On the road to Emmaus, there were two Christian disciples walking along,

and they were very unhappy and very confused and they were talking. A stranger shows up and says, "What are you talking about? Why do you look so downcast?" They say, "How could you not know what has been happening around here?"

Here's what they say. "Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet, and we thought he was going to redeem Israel, but they killed him. They put him to death. Now some of our women are saying he's alive, so we're confused, and we don't know what to think." Here's what Jesus says. "**How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!**" The Prophets are the Bible, the Scripture.

He's saying, "You believe the Bible. You read the Bible, but you can't see the forest for the trees. You believe the Bible is true, fine. But what good is that if you don't see what the Bible is actually saying?" Then he says, "**Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?**" Here's what he's saying. Here's what he goes on to say. Here's what the New Testament goes on to say.

He says, "Oh, the Messiah the Scriptures foretold has come and he has redeemed, but he didn't come just to redeem the Jews but the whole world. He didn't come just to liberate people from social and economic oppression, like the Romans, but to liberate us from sin and death itself. Therefore, he did not come in strength at the head of an army to go to a throne. He came in weakness and went to a cross."

He died on the cross. He took the punishment for our sins so that God's forgiveness and God's love and God's pardon could come into your life, and *then* glory. Then he can rise to glory, because he completed his work and redeemed us from our sin, and then there's glory for you, resurrection, and the new heaven and new earth."

Then he goes on and says the most astounding thing of all, which is verse 27. "**And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.**" Do you notice what he's doing here? "Starting with Moses and the Prophets." Starting with Moses means starting in Genesis.

He went through the whole Bible, and instead of saying he went through and showed them what *some* of the Scriptures said about him, like, "Oh, I'm the Messiah, so there are these messianic psalms here and there. Isaiah 53 talks about the Messiah. Psalm 22 talks about the Messiah. Let me show you how some of the Scriptures talk about ..." No. He says, "*All* the Scriptures talk about me. Everything in the Bible is about me. Every law is about me. Every maxim, every ethical axiom is about me, and every story is about me."

How could that be? Okay, let's think. I want you to see it's not just useless to believe the Bible is true and miss the fact that it's about Jesus and what he has done for your salvation. It's not just useless; it's devastating. For example, do you

believe the Sermon on the Mount is true? Do you believe it's good? It talks about loving your neighbor. Life at the highest. For years, people have said, "Oh, I don't know if I believe all the doctrine, but, boy, the Sermon on the Mount tells you how human beings ought to live with each other. It's wonderful."

Some years ago, Virginia Stem Owens, an English professor in a literature course, decided to ask all her students to read the Sermon on the Mount carefully. Most of them had heard of it or maybe had read it and thought, "Oh, it's wonderful. It's about love and about loving your enemy and all this. This is great stuff, isn't it?" She said, "I want you to read it. I mean *read* it, and then write a response paper to it."

When they read it, most of her students, she said, were absolutely disgusted and terrified by it. One of the students wrote, "I did not like the Sermon on the Mount. It made me feel I had to be perfect." Here's another one: "The things this sermon asks are completely absurd." Here are four of the things the sermon does ask for. The sermon does not just require that you give a lot of your money away but to do so with joyful, cheerful, generous passion.

The Sermon on the Mount does not just forbid killing but forbids disdain, superiority, or even treating someone with coldness or indifference. The Sermon on the Mount does not just forbid paying someone back who is persecuting you. It doesn't just forbid vengeance. It also insists that your heart has to be filled with love and hope and prayer for the person who's persecuting you. The Sermon on the Mount does not just say, "Avoid worry," but it says to be gratefully happy and content with whatever God is sending into your life.

Here's the reason they were rightly devastated and terrified. Because on the one hand, we want to live around people like that. We want people to be that loving to us. We want people to be that forgiving to us. We want people to be that generous to us. We want that. So because we want to live with people like that, we know we can't get under the truth that we ought to be living like that, and we can't.

Therefore, if you just read the book as a bunch of truth things, true statements, true axioms, true proverbs, true stories ... "Live like this. Be like this person. True laws. Live like this." If you just see it as a set of truths and you aren't devastated and terrified like those students, you're not reading it. Mark Twain obviously read it, because he kept having nightmares in which he's lying there in bed and someone is putting this enormous Bible on his chest and crushing and suffocating him. *He* read it. He understood what's in there. Have you?

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great British preacher, said anybody who has really read the Sermon on the Mount will close it and say, "God save me from the Sermon on the Mount." Here's the point. Jesus says, "It's all about me. All those laws are about me. How so? I lived the Sermon on the Mount. I'm the only one who ever lived it. I fulfilled it. I lived like that. Life at the highest, human life as it ought to be.

I did it, and I'm the only one who ever did it. But here's the gospel. I did it and earned God's blessing, but then I went to the cross and took God's curse, and that means when you believe in me, when you rest in me by faith as your Lord and Savior, then all that you deserve comes on me and all that I deserve is accredited to you, and now God loves you and accepts you and delights in you as if you did everything I have done."

Therefore, you're saved by sheer grace, not by trying to obey every single thing in the Bible. Should you try to obey everything in the Bible? Yeah, secondly. But firstly, you ought to see that it all points to him. Not only are all the laws about him but also all the stories. You can read the stories as piecemeal, a lot of true things. Here's Joseph, and he's thrown into slavery in prison, but he rises up and saves the people who betrayed him.

Here's David, and he's too small, but he has the courage and he takes down the giant and saves his people. Here's Moses, and he's scared, knees knocking, but he stands in the gap between God and humanity and saves his people. Here's Jonah, and he lets himself be thrown into the storm to save the sailors. You can read it as a bunch of true stories, meaning you ought to be *that* faithful. You ought to be *that* sacrificing. You ought to be *that* courageous. You ought to be like *that*.

It will crush you. That big thing will crush you. It'll suffocate you, just like Mark Twain felt. There are only two things that can happen. If you see the Bible as a bunch of true things and not about Jesus and what he did for your salvation, what will happen is you will either think you *are* living up to your standards and you'll become a Pharisee, you'll become a bigot, and you'll have a superiority complex, or you will *not* find yourself living up.

You'll read it carefully, you'll realize you're not living as you should, and you'll be crushed and have an inferiority complex. Eventually, you might just run away from the Bible and religion screaming. People who do usually move to New York. Therefore, there might be some of you here right now who moved to New York to get away from religion, because nobody helped you understand what the Bible was about, and it was just crushing you.

Jesus says, "I am the true Joseph who was sold, who was in prison, but I rose up and saved the ones who betrayed me. I'm the true David who didn't just save you at the risk of life but at the cost of my life. I'm the true Moses who stands in the gap as the mediator between God and humanity, and I'm the true Jonah, because I was thrown into a sea of divine wrath on sin so you could be saved."

3. *It's a truth not just for the mind but for the heart.* If you actually see the Bible is not just truth but it's about him, what will that do? It will affect not just your mind but your heart. The last thing to show you is this wonderful end of the story. Think about this. Jesus is giving these two men an incredible theological seminar. Here's Jesus Christ, one of the three persons of the triune God, the Messiah, coming and explaining the Bible to two guys, and guess what? They're not

getting it.

Those of us who are teachers, especially those of us who teach theology ... It makes you feel better to see that here's Jesus, and his students aren't getting it. Sometimes you say, "Why aren't my students getting it? Maybe I need to work harder on my lesson plans." Well, maybe sometimes not. Maybe the problem is the students. It's a theological seminar. It's all up here in the head.

They're trying and trying and they're not getting it, but finally they invite him in, and he breaks bread with them. When he breaks bread with them, two things happen. First of all, their eyes are opened. That means they do see it's Jesus. They do make all the connections. Just imagine all the little synapses that must have been overheated at that moment. "Wait a minute. We never understood the Bible before, and he showed us the Bible is about the Messiah, and now we see this is Jesus and he's the Messiah. Oh my word!"

Suddenly, as he breaks bread, they see who he is and they recognize him, so mentally it all comes together, but then after he disappears they say, "But in hindsight, our hearts knew him before our heads did. Even when we were on the road, even when we were not understanding anything he was saying, our hearts were on fire. The longings of our hearts knew they were in the presence of their fulfillment even when our heads didn't seem to realize it."

What does that tell us? Here's the main point, and then here's the application. The main point is simply this. Let me use a philosophical term. Arguments and explanations about the Bible are necessary but not sufficient. Isn't that a wonderful term? *Necessary but not sufficient*. Now listen. Your mind needs to be convinced. You need to be convinced the Bible is true. You need explanations and arguments that help you understand the Bible is true.

After all, what do you think I've been doing for the last 30 minutes? I've been giving you explanations and arguments. So it's not that they're not necessary. They're necessary, but they're not sufficient. Ultimately, the goal of the Bible, the goal of the gospel, the message of the Bible, is not just to get you to believe the right things but to get you to bring Jesus Christ into your life as a living presence that restructures the fundamentals of your very heart.

Normal religion, which says, "Try real hard and do all the true things the Bible talks about, and then maybe God will bless you. Maybe God will take you to heaven. Maybe God will hear your prayers ..." That doesn't change your heart. It just kind of crushes you with the weight. It makes you either proud or makes you feel inferior. We talked about that. Either way, it makes you self-absorbed, extremely concerned about yourself and looking at yourself and saying, "I am living up. I'm not living up."

Oh, but the gospel that you're saved by sheer grace at infinite cost to him ... You're saved freely. It has nothing to do with who you are or what you've done. You do nothing to earn or deserve it. It's a free gift, and yet it came at infinite cost to him. That completely changes your very identity, because you stop looking at

yourself. You don't have to look at yourself anymore.

You don't have to be constantly saying, "How am I doing?" and comparing yourself to other people. It gets you out of yourself, and yet at the same time gives you a new desire to live as you ought. It's pure. It's clean. It's not the old crushing, self-absorbed, "I have to live a better life; otherwise I won't live up." No, no. You say, "I want to be like the one who did all this for me." It changes the fundamental structures of your heart.

How do you get there? You have to break bread. Do you know how you break bread? Breaking bread in the Bible was a metaphor for two different things. It's a metaphor for friendship and it's a metaphor for worship. First of all, it's a metaphor for friendship. Even today, we actually use this in English, don't we? To break bread with somebody means to bring them into your home or to go out to eat with them at a nice restaurant. It means to get closer to them. It means to talk with them. It means to bring them closer.

Here's what I would say. If you are not sure whether you're a Christian, if you would say, "I don't think I know about the kind of things you're talking about," or maybe you are one of those people who ran to New York, screaming, away from the Bible and religion, because it was just crushing and you hadn't ever thought of it the way I'm talking to you about it now ... If that's the case, you should read books (I read books), you should listen to arguments and explanations (I've just given you a few), but ultimately, you need to get into a relationship.

The only way I've ever seen anybody find faith that's really vital and really fulfilling and really solid ... It happens through friendships. It happens through spending a lot of time with people, people you trust, people you may not agree with, but you talk and you process it and you work it out and think it out. You have to break bread.

Secondly, I always say to people, even though they don't believe, "Come to worship services. Come on in. Be around the people as they sing. Be around the people as you hear the Word of God preached in the Bible, and see how Christianity actually works in people's lives. You may find that you recognize him in the breaking of the bread."

By the way, for us Christians, we actually grow in grace and get the truth more into our hearts so that they're restructured the same two ways. I hope occasionally, while I was talking to you about the Scripture today, you found that your own hearts were warmed, because maybe it wasn't just me opening the Word of God to you tonight. Maybe Jesus helps too.

In the end, breaking bread with other Christians is the way to change, and literally breaking bread, the Lord's Supper ... Tonight, as we're about to do that, here's what I'd like you to say in your heart, O Christian brother and sister. I'd like you to say, "Lord Jesus, tonight reveal yourself to me in the breaking of the bread. Make yourself more real to me than ever." Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for giving us the Word of God. We thank you that

you're not a remote God or an impersonal God but you're a God who speaks. We really can't know anyone who doesn't speak to us. We can have affection, but we need to converse with people to go deep and to become friends and to be in love with someone. We need words.

Thank you that you're a God who gives us words, and we thank you for the true words of the Bible. Help us now through your Word and through the breaking of bread to know you personally and know you more deeply and to have your love restructure our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

The Bible and Experience

What We Believe: Foundations—September 20, 2015

2 Peter 1:12–21

12 So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. **13** I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, **14** because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. **15** And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. **17** He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” **18** We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

19 We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. **21** For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Nothing is more foundational to the way in which you live than how you regard the Bible, how you approach it, how you understand it. It has a direct influence on how you actually live. That's the reason why for three weeks in the very beginning of this ministry year in September we're looking at the Bible itself. Last week, looking at the beginning of the gospel of Luke, we talked about the truth of the Bible.

For example, when the Gospels say, "These are accounts of what Jesus said and did in his life," that's not legend. It's eyewitness testimony. So last week, we were talking about the idea that you can take the Bible as being reliable. When it tells you something happened, it happened. But even if you believed everything the Bible taught was true, that doesn't actually answer the question, "What role should that have in my life?"

So we're moving on this Sunday from talking about whether the Bible is true to whether the Bible is authoritative and what that means. What does it mean to talk about the Bible's authority? This very important text in the second letter of Peter talks about the Bible, and we're going to learn three things about authority: *why the Bible has authority, why that's a good thing, and how that authority works in our lives.*

1. *Why the Bible has authority.* Why would we say that? This is such an important passage. If you read the entire letter of Peter, you'll see that Peter is basically talking about what he calls *false teachers*. He's warning the people who are reading his letter about false teachers. What he says is, "Don't listen to them. You have to listen to what God has said. You need to listen to God's Word. You have to listen to what God has spoken to us."

Well, how has God spoken to us? That's what he's explaining in these few verses. He looks to two sets of sources of God's word and God speaking. The first set of sources is in verses 16–18, where Peter says, "**For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.**"

Who's he talking about? Who's *we*? He's talking about the people who actually literally saw Jesus himself, saw what he did, heard what he said. He gives one example of it: the transfiguration, which, in some ways, is one of the more supernatural events in the history of Jesus' life. He's talking about those people who actually saw Jesus and, therefore, they are the sources of what he said and did. They are what you and I would call New Testament authors.

These are the people who are writing what we today would call the New Testament. They were either actual eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, like Paul or John or Peter, who actually saw Jesus Christ raised from the dead, or like Luke ... If you were here last week, Luke said in the beginning of his gospel that he went and talked to living, surviving eyewitnesses and put the accounts of what Jesus said and did together from that.

The New Testament authors were people who either *were* eyewitnesses or who talked to the eyewitnesses, so they tell us what God has said through Jesus Christ. It's interesting that Peter is saying exactly the same thing Luke said. "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories, but we were eyewitnesses." What he's saying is, "When you read the New Testament, these are not legends. This is not fiction. This is not hearsay."

So the one way we find God speaking to us is through the accounts of Jesus himself, who was the Son of God, speaking to us. That's what we call the New Testament. On the basis of that, it would be natural to assume the New Testament would make the Hebrew Scriptures, the writings of the prophets, what we call the Old Testament ... We would think maybe the New Testament makes it obsolete. Why? Well, because Jesus is the Son of God, but the Old Testament prophets were just human beings.

At least in the New Testament we have God speaking directly to us through Jesus, but in the Old Testament that's just human beings. That's just their interpretation. Doesn't Jesus coming make the Old Testament obsolete? "No," Peter says in no uncertain terms. That's why in verses 19–21 he's turning to the prophets, what you and I would call the Old Testament. He says, "**We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it ...**"

Yes, of course, Christians have always believed that you interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, just like if you're reading a novel you can't really understand what's happening in the earlier chapters unless you get to the end. It's only when you get to the end that you really can understand the last chapters, and usually the last chapter helps you understand what was going on in the early chapters.

There's a sense in which we interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, but here's what he's trying to press. He's trying to say this is just as reliable. The Old Testament is just as reliable as the New Testament. You must pay attention to it. You must not think it's obsolete. Then he goes forward and says something pretty remarkable.

Verses 20–21: "**Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human ...**" It's almost as if Peter is kind of anticipating this question. "Why do you need the Old Testament when you have the New Testament?" "**... but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**"

That's a remarkable statement. Our culture today would say, "Oh, the Bible is fine. Shakespeare is fine. There are a lot of great works in history we can learn from, but in the end they're all human documents, and it's always the author's interpretation. I have my interpretation; they have their interpretation." Peter is

saying, "No, that's not the case." It says, "Though human, they spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Here's what this means. God, because he's in complete control of everything, always sovereign over everything, can actually produce people who have been prepped by everything in their entire lives to sit down and write exactly what God wants them to write. Every word. Therefore, what Peter is saying is, in the end, because God bore on these authors in that way ... They were human. You can see their humanness. You can see their particular dialect. You can see their culture. You can see their temperament. You can see their language and all that.

They were human, and yet God so bore on the situation ... Because God is in control of all things, he could prepare a person to write exactly what he wants to write. Therefore, when you read the Bible, it's not their interpretation of things. I'll put it this way. Peter is saying what Scripture says, God says. This is not just Peter's view; it's Jesus' view. Not only does Jesus say this very thing ... He not only believes it, but it's the basis of his entire life. See what I mean by "believes it."

In Matthew 19, there's a very interesting place where Jesus is talking about marriage. He quotes Genesis, chapter 2, and he quotes the very famous verse, "A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh." If you've gone to any Christian wedding ever in history you've probably heard that read. It's very famous. What's interesting is if you go and read it in Genesis 2, it's an editorial comment by the author.

Genesis 1–3 talks about God speaking here and human beings speaking and God answering them, but when you get to that verse it's actually an editorial comment. It's not God speaking. It's not any other human figure speaking. It's the author saying that. Yet when Jesus Christ quotes it, he says, "God has told you that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh."

You go back into the Old Testament and you say, "Wait a minute. God doesn't say that. It's the author of Genesis who says that." That means Jesus Christ does not believe in red-letter Bibles. By the way, I have a couple of red-letter Bibles, and I don't want you to say, "Tim Keller said we should go home and burn our red-letter Bibles." Don't tweet that. It's not true. I'm not saying that.

Here's what Jesus is saying. You know what a red-letter Bible is. You have the words of God in red, and then you have the words of Jesus in red, and then everything around it looks like, "Well, that's Mark or Luke or Paul or Moses or somebody else, but these are God's words. These are Jesus' words." Let me just tell you what Jesus Christ says in red. He says everything in the Bible is God's Word. It's not just when Moses says in the book of Exodus, "And God spoke these words out of Mount Sinai: 'You shall have no other gods before me.' "

When Moses goes on and explains what those commandments mean, that's as much God's words as what he's telling what God said out of the cloud. Jesus

didn't believe in red-letter Bibles. Jesus says, for example, in Matthew 5, "Not a jot or tittle of the Scripture will pass away until it's all fulfilled." Not just statements. Not just propositions. A *jot* is the smallest of all the Hebrew letters, and a *tittle* is a part of a Hebrew letter.

What Jesus is saying is every letter of the Bible is divinely inspired. It's all true. See, it's not just that Jesus believed in the complete divine authority of the Bible, every letter of it. He based his life on it. Every time the Devil assaulted him in the wilderness, do you remember what his first word always was? In Greek, the first word out of his mouth was *gegraptai*, which means, "It is written." He quotes the Bible.

When they come to arrest him, there are men running around with staves and knives and spears, and they're coming to arrest him and kill him. Peter takes out his sword, and Jesus says, "Put your sword down, Peter. I could call 12 legions of angels, but then how would the Scripture be fulfilled?" Jesus is thinking of Scripture at a time like that, and he's saying, "I have to base everything I'm doing on Scripture."

When he's dying on the cross, he quotes Psalm 22. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus didn't just in the abstract believe in the divine authority of the Scripture. It was the operating principle of his life. He faced everything in life with the Scripture. He based everything in his life on the Scripture. He had full confidence in every letter of it. It was the essence of his identity and it was the secret of his greatness.

I've talked to so many people in New York City over the years who say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't take the Bible literally." If I gave them the benefit of the doubt (and I never do, by the way), I could say something like this. I'll tell you why I don't give them the benefit of the doubt: because they don't mean this. They say, "I don't take the Bible literally." Well, if Jesus is right that what the biblical author says, God says, that what the Scripture says, God says ... That's how inspired the Bible is.

If that's the case, then when the biblical author is writing poetry in the Wisdom Literature or the Prophets, then you read it as poetry. When the biblical author, like Luke, is saying, "I historically researched this, and Jesus rose from the dead," then you take it literally. In other words, if the biblical author says, "Read it like this," you read it like that.

The reason I don't give them the benefit of the doubt is, generally speaking, when people say, "I'm a Christian, but I don't take the Bible literally," they're not talking about that. I could grant *that*. Of course we can. Anybody who believes in the authority of the Bible could grant that, but here's what they usually mean. "I'm a Christian. I follow Christ, but I can't accept everything in the Bible. I feel some parts are obsolete. Some parts are regressive. I'm a Christian, but I can't accept everything the Bible teaches."

Here's the problem. If you're following Jesus and you're rejecting the very core

operating principle of his life, how does that work? If you're following Jesus and you say, "I can't take the Bible literally," meaning, "I can't accept every single part of it; I don't take it as fully authoritative," then you're following a Jesus of your own imagination. That Jesus never existed, by the way. There's not a historian on the planet who would say he existed.

Therefore, what you're doing makes no sense. Why should we believe the Bible's authority? Because not only the Bible says it and Peter says it, but Jesus said it. Of course, if you say, "I don't even believe in Jesus. I don't believe he's the Son of God. I don't believe he was raised from the dead," well, that's one thing, but if you say, "Oh, I follow Jesus," you have to accept the full authority of the Bible.

2. *Why it's a good thing.* I'm talking in New York City. I'm a creature of my own culture, and in our culture we're told, "Don't let anybody tell you how to live your life." We're all very prickly. I'm as prickly as you. I'm in this culture, and we're always told, "Look, don't let anybody tell you how to live your life. You should be your own life authority."

It's true that in the past, and even today in many parts of the world, most people over the years have had the center of gravity of their life authority outside of themselves. Your life authority is what determines your choices, what determines how you live, what determines whether you say, "I'm going to live *this* way or *that* way." What determines those choices is your life authority.

Most people, most of the time, have said, "Well, it's my religion or it's my family or it's my tradition or something outside of me I have to conform to," but in modern Western culture, what we're told and what we feel is, "No, I need to be my own authority. Nobody can tell me what my choices ought to be. I will determine my life choices."

The text here says you should pay attention to the Bible (verse 19) "as to a light shining in a dark place." Most commentators say what Peter is trying to say is that in your hearts and the world and the cultures of the world and everything around there's a certain darkness. Only Scripture can show you the right way to live.

Let me show you why if you are a person from the Western world, like most of us are here, that idea that you can be your own life authority (not the Bible, not God, not anybody; you determine how to live) is basically an illusion. If you think you're determining today how you live your life, if you think you're your own authority, what you're actually doing is being controlled either by your feelings and/or by your culture and/or by certain validating human beings out there, but you're not in charge of your own life. You're not your own authority. Nobody is.

The reason it's good the Bible be your authority is because something else will be your authority, and it won't be as good as the Bible. For example, many people who say, "I'm my own authority ..." What that really means is, "I'm doing what feels right to me." You're actually letting your feelings dictate how you live your life. Is there any problem with that? Yeah. If you're letting your feelings

dictate your life, you're actually letting your feelings dictate your life, and your feelings are both incoherent and unreliable.

Let me explain what I mean by *unreliable*. I've used this joke so often I'm not going to make it a joke. I'm just going to make the point. The 15 percent of you who have never heard the joke will probably laugh, but most of you will not. The point is that your 15-year-old self always thinks your 12-year-old self was embarrassingly stupid, and your 30-year-old self will pretty much look at your 20-year-old self the same way: really stupid. "I can't believe I believed the stupid things I did and did the stupid things I did."

It slows down a little bit, but I fully believe that if you could live to a hale and hearty 130 years old, you would think of your 85-year-old self as an absolute jerk. It means that whatever age you are right now, you are right now a fool. You're a fool now. How can you rely on your intuitions when your intuitions of just a few years ago let you down? Or also the incoherence. When people say, "I have to do what feels right," the problem is your feelings contradict each other.

For example, if you say, "I would like to have this great career. I'd also like to have a relationship with this person. I happen to know that this relationship will hurt this career. Which do I do?" Some people say, "I have to decide what I really most want, what's really the right thing for me." What if that's an illusion to imagine that somehow one of these feelings is deeper than some other feeling? Besides that, they change all the time. They're probably equally strong, in which case you can't follow your feelings, because they're incoherent.

One Christian writer wrote about this recently that I just love. He says, "Eventually you will come to see that you are a being whose wants make no sense. They don't harmonize. Your desires, deep down, are discordantly arranged so that you truly want some things and truly not want them at the same time. You're equipped, you will eventually realize, for farce or tragedy much more than for happy endings."

If you really say, "My authority is me," what that *could* mean is, "I'm basically doing what most feels right, what my intuitions tell me," and that is sinking sand. Besides that, it's more likely that that's even more an illusion and that you're much more a prisoner of your culture than you think. I'll give you another example. A lot of times people say, "I'm in charge of my own life. I'm my own authority." I say, "Well, either your feelings are running with you and they're going to make a hash of your life, or you might be more a slave or prisoner of your culture than you think."

For example, today in the Middle East and in pretty good parts of Africa too (and some others, I'm sure), there are honor cultures. Do you know what an honor culture is? It's very different than our modern individualistic Western culture. In an honor culture, a man walks along and he looks in his heart and sees two very different feelings. The one feeling is aggression. When people wrong him, he pays them back. He goes after them. If they cross him, he makes sure they know it. He doesn't let anybody get away with that.

So one feeling is aggression. In an honor culture, he looks at that and says, "That's good. That's a great thing. That's me. I'm a man. I'm a person of honor." He also may see in his heart some sexual desire that doesn't fit in with the social norms, so he says, "I'm going to just control that, suppress that." Here in Manhattan, a young man walks down the street and he looks in his heart and notices aggression, that when people wrong him he just wants to smash them.

So what does he do with that? He says, "That's not me. I need therapy. I need anger management. That's not me. I don't identify with that feeling." If he sees any sexual desire or passion at all, he says, "That's me. That's who I am." Why? "Well," the Manhattan person says, "I'm being true to myself." No, you're not. You're as much a slave to your culture as the guy over there in the Middle East.

Here's why. Your culture has given you a grid, and *his* culture has given *him* a grid. When you put that grid down, it says some feelings, "No, no, bad. Therapy. That's me." Over there it says, "Great. That's me. Let's ventilate that one. No, no, we have to suppress that." In other words, you're as much a prisoner of your culture as anybody else. You're not being yourself because you're looking in your heart and being true to yourself. You're doing exactly what your culture tells you. You're a puppet. You're a marionette.

Maybe you're not your own authority because your feelings are your authority or your culture is your authority or, lastly, I just have to say this. Nobody really can validate themselves. I hear people. I see it on TV sitcoms. I see it in popular culture. Nobody can tell you whether you're good or bad. You have to decide yourself. You validate yourself. Nobody can do that. Nobody can look out there and say, "Everybody hates me; it doesn't bother me. Everybody thinks I'm a fool; it doesn't bother me. I don't care."

Nobody can say that. You have to have some cheerleaders. You have to have some people who say, "Well done, good and faithful." You have to have somebody who comes to you and says, "You're great." You *have* to. That means whoever those people are, they're running your life. They may be your peers. They may be your academic peers. They may be popular.

It's the reason why one writer puts it something like this: "Whatever controls us is our god. Those who seek power are controlled by power. Those who seek acceptance are controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives." What she's trying to say is you have to live for something and you have to get validation from somewhere, and wherever you're going, those people control you.

You are not your own authority. Therefore, it's good news that the Bible can be your authority. If the Bible is your authority ... Think about this. Here's the good news. Here's why it's good. One reason is that if you make the Bible your authority, it liberates you emotionally and intellectually. It liberates you emotionally. Why? It doesn't matter what anybody thinks. The Bible will tell you what God thinks, and that's what matters.

Emotionally, it's tremendously liberating. And intellectually. In the early part of the twentieth century, virtually all Western intellectuals were sure communism was the future; capitalism was going to die. Everybody thought so. In the middle of the twentieth century, almost all Western intellectuals felt psychoanalysis, years of Freudian psychoanalysis, was the wave of the future. Both those things have been exploded.

The only authors I know from the early part of the 30s and 40s who were critiquing these things when everybody said, "That's the wave of the future" tended to be Catholic and Protestant Christians. The culture of your great-grandparents you find cringeworthy. We feel so enlightened. You need to realize the culture we are living in right now will be just as embarrassing to your great-great-grandchildren.

The only way to base your life on something that will not look obsolete in 10 years, 30 years, or 100 years is if you go to the Bible. Saint Augustine, who wrote 1,500 years ago, wrote a book called *The City of God*. You've probably heard of it. It's a major important book in Western civilization. What's interesting is when you read Saint Augustine, if you're a Christian today, you say, "Okay ..."

You see the differences. He lived in North Africa. He lived 1,500 years ago. You see the cultural distance, but, by and large, you say, "This guy believes in the same God I believe in. This guy knows the same God I know." You can see this is a brother in the faith. Here's what's interesting. All of his opponents, all of the people who opposed Christianity in his day ... He goes kind of toe-to-toe with them in *The City of God*.

The only reason we've even heard of most of them is because they're in *The City of God*. They're so obsolete the only reason we even know they ever existed was because they're in *The City of God*. Do you know what that means? All opposing views to what's in the Bible will be obsolete. Why would that stop now? It was true 1,500 years ago, 1,000 years ago, 500 years ago. Why would it stop now?

Have we arrived at the perfect moment? Many of the people in the culture would say we have. We haven't. If you want to be intellectually liberated so you can think outside the box and not be a prisoner of your culture, if you want to be emotionally liberated, also if you simply want consummate wisdom, the Bible's authority is really good news.

For example, if you buy a car, do you say, "I'm a modern Western person. I live in New York City and, therefore, I'll decide what kind of fuel to put in that car. I'll put in the fuel when I want to put it in, and I will maintain it the way I want to maintain it and in a way that is cost-effective and convenient for me." You don't do that. You get out the owner's manual and do whatever it says.

You don't even think of it as being some kind of onerous authority that has come down on your life. Oh no. All you know is you didn't build the car. They built the car. The builder, by definition, would know a lot more about the car. Besides that, I don't want to destroy the car. I bought the car. So you put yourself under the

authority of the owner's manual. You don't even think you're doing it. Why? Because you just see it as consummate wisdom.

By the way, maintaining your car will often be more expensive than you want it to be, and it'll be pretty inconvenient, because sometimes it has to happen even when it's very inconvenient to you. If there is a God who created you (and there is) and if he has spoken through the apostles and the prophets of the Old and New Testament (and he has), then even though, very often, what the Bible tells you you should do will also seem expensive, inconvenient, and difficult, nevertheless, in the long run, it will reflect consummate wisdom.

In the beginning it might hurt, but in the long run, in the end, over the years, it'll just be nothing but wisdom and wonder. So the authority of the Bible is good news because it's liberating emotionally and intellectually. It's good news because it's consummate wisdom, but also it's good news because it's radically personal.

At one point, J.I. Packer said, "The word which God addresses directly to us is ... an instrument, not only of government, but also of fellowship. [...] He made us with the intention that he and we might walk together forever in a love relationship. But such a relationship can exist only when the parties involved know something of each other. God, our Maker, knows all about us before we say anything, but we can know nothing about him unless he tells us. [...] Therefore God sends his word to us ... to woo us as well as to instruct us."

The only way we can know God personally is if he speaks to us and says, "This is who I am, and this is what I want, and this is who *you* are." It's only when you submit to his authority that you can know him personally. So the authority of the Bible is radically intimate and personal. The authority of the Bible is consummate wisdom, and the authority of the Bible is profoundly liberating. That's the reason it's good news.

3. How the authority works in our lives. I'll tell you three things. It does work through the will, it does work through the heart, and it does work through practice. First of all, it works through the will. At some point, if the Bible is authority, that means you need to obey it when you don't want to. By the way, if you hate that, don't raise children.

The distance between the parents' wisdom and a 3-year-old's wisdom is not infinite, but the point is you're constantly asking a child to do things that the child hates, finds terrible, doesn't want to do, screams about, but you know if they do it they'll die, so you just don't let them do it anyway. You exercise your authority for their sake. The distance between a 40-year-old's wisdom and a 3-year-old's wisdom is far less than the distance between God's wisdom and yours.

If you expect children to do what they're told even when they don't understand, how dare you not do what you're told when you don't understand? Once you say, "Jesus is the Son of God; he was raised from the dead," and you accept the authority of the Bible because there's no other way to do it and still follow him,

then that means there are going to be times in which you say, "I don't care what my feelings are. I'm going to do what's right."

The most brilliant example of this in fictional literature is the place where Jane Eyre, who has been lonely her entire life, realizes that this man is saying, "I want you to come live with me, but I can't marry you, because I'm actually still married. I can't legally marry you, but I do want you to come live with me." She desperately wants to, and at one point she actually says ... In her mind, feeling cried, "Oh comply! Who will care for you?" Isn't that interesting? Her feelings said, "Who is going to care for you?"

This is basically what she says. "I replied, 'I care for myself. The more friendless I am, the more I will keep the law given by God. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane and not mad as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation. They are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth, and if I cannot believe it now, it is only because I'm insane. There I plant my foot.' I did."

If you can't do that, don't raise children. If you can't do that, don't say, "I'm following Jesus." Sometimes you just have to do it. By the way, Plato and Aristotle had a debate about this. Plato said, "You know something and that leads to doing," but Aristotle, more wisely, said, "When you do it, it leads to knowing." Doing leads to knowing.

Plato says, "You have to know, then you do," and Aristotle says, "To some degree, yeah, but to a great degree it's when you do, you come to know it." Jesus says, "Anyone who wills to do my will, he shall know." In other words, I'm saying as you obey God, even when he doesn't seem real to you, he gets more real to you. If you disobey God, he'll become less and less real to you.

Secondly, the heart. Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 12, says the Word of God is alive and active. It's a two-edged sword, and it pierces the heart. I've seen the Bible used on people more like a weight just to smash people. "This is what the Bible says. It's authoritative. You have to do it." Archibald Alexander, the first professor of theology at Princeton Seminary in 1812, wrote a book called *Thoughts on Religious Experience*.

In the very beginning, he uses an illustration. Back in those days, when you wrote a letter, the way you sealed it was you took your signet ring (usually your family seal) and you took a piece of wax and brought a little flame to it. As you softened the wax, you put your seal down on it, and the seal molded the wax into the form of the seal and sealed the envelope.

Then when you got the envelope you saw whose seal it was. He says the truth of the Bible is like the signet ring, and your heart is like the wax. If you just bring the signet ring to the wax without the flame, either it will create a very superficial facsimile of the ring but won't actually shape it, or if you keep pushing, it'll crack

the wax.

He says if you just bring God's truth, the authoritative, biblical truth, into people's connection to their hearts without fire, it will either make them superficial, nominal Christians, who say they're Christians on the surface but underneath are not shaped by it, or they'll be cracked. They'll be crushed by the weight of the authority of the Bible, and they'll run away screaming, eventually, saying, "I can't be good enough. I can't live up to this. This is just oppressive."

You need the fire. What's the fire? Well, the fire is in the Bible. It's the gospel, and here it is. All other religions have a god who speaks and gives you revelation, but Christianity has the only God who comes to earth in Jesus Christ and goes under authority. We have the only divine authority who ever went under authority. He obeyed his parents (Luke 2). He was born as a child. He obeyed his parents.

Then eventually, as we saw, he obeyed the Bible. He followed the Bible, and at the very end of his life, when he said, "Not my will but thine be done," he did the Father's will, and he was crushed. He went under authority and he did it all, even though it destroyed him in the end. Why? For you. For me. Now *there's* an authority you can trust.

Nobody has ever loved you like Jesus Christ, because nobody has ever given up what he has given up. Nobody has ever sacrificed what he sacrificed. It's the only authority you should really trust. It's the only authority that has ever done anything like that for you. Why wouldn't you want to trust someone like that? There's the fire. Do you see it?

Then it takes practice. The first part of this whole passage is where Peter says, "Look, you know these things. You know what the Bible says, but I have to constantly remind you." That's why you're here, by the way. This is an effort to remind you ... Probably 80 to 90 percent of the things I've just told many of you are things you already know, but you need to hear it again. Do you see what he says?

"So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory ... And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things." Our hearts are hard. You may see what the Bible says about God being wise and loving, and it gets rid of your anxiety. Three hours later you're anxious again.

You need the sacraments. You need the Lord's Supper. You need the worship. You need the hymns. You need daily Bible reading. You need prayer to work this wonderful, life-giving, trustworthy authority of the Bible in your life until you're liberated emotionally, liberated intellectually, walking in the way of wisdom, and having a personal, intimate relationship with God. Do that. Accept the authority of the Bible. See it in light of the gospel. Put yourself under that authority day in and day out. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the ways in which you have spoken to us. We thank

you that you're a God who's not silent, that you've talked to us because you love us. You want to be our friend, our father, and now we thank you for the remarkable way in which you have given us your Word through the apostles, through the prophets, and we ask that you would teach us to pay attention to it and to the Morning Star, Jesus Christ.

Like the star of Venus that tells us the sun is about to come up, it's Jesus Christ who has come into our life telling us someday we'll all be resurrected. New heavens and new earth. Meanwhile, during the darkness of this time, we can live in the light of your Word, knowing that someday every tear will be wiped away. We thank you for that hope. We thank you for this truth. We thank you for all this through Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.

The Bible and Finality

What We Believe: Foundations—September 27, 2015

Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:6–13

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Hebrews, chapter 4:

⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience,⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just

as God did from his. ¹¹ **Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.**

12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ **Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**

The Word of the Lord.

In the month of September, we've had a short little series on what the Bible is, how we should approach it, how we should regard it, how we should understand it. What we've been especially doing is contrasting our Western culture's attitude toward the Bible to what Jesus' view of the Bible was or what the biblical authors' views of the Bible were. We have looked at the reliability of the Bible and the trustworthiness of it. We looked at the authority of the Bible, what authority it should have in our lives.

Today we come to another aspect of how we understand the Bible, another aspect of how our Western culture looks at the Bible. It's very typical to hear people say something like, "There are many good things in the Bible, absolutely. But there are also things in the Bible that are really outdated. There are things in the Bible we can't accept anymore, because we have new insights."

As the years go by and the ages go by, we get new insights that show us there are some things in the Bible we can't accept anymore and, therefore, we have to, in a sense, update our own views. We get some things from the Bible, yes, but also we can't take everything. Therefore, the Bible, as great as it is, is not the final word on how to believe and live. It's not the final word, because it has to be updated, because it has to be corrected by insights later on."

How do we respond to that? Well, the place to go in the Bible to respond to that is the book of Hebrews. We've taken the first verses of chapter 1. We've taken some verses from chapter 4. I wish I could go to other places. I'll refer to other places. The book of Hebrews is basically about this very subject. Does God's Word make progress? Are there parts that are obsolete? Is that really true?

As we look at what Hebrews is saying, we're going to learn this. I'll put it in one sentence, but when you see how long the sentence is you'll know why I'm breaking it into three parts and three points. What we're going to learn here is that Jesus brings God's final word that creates a living, dynamic relationship with him because of the unsurpassable beauty of who he is and what he has done. Let's break that into three parts.

First of all, what we're learning here is that Jesus brings God's final word. Let's take a look at the first four verses. That's where we learn this. "**In the past God spoke to our ancestors ... but in these last days he has spoken ...**" Twice it

says we have a God who speaks. The biblical God is a speaking god. He's not a force-field god. He's not a god you just sense. He's not a god who is an *it*, an impersonal force that we can just sort of sense on the edge of our emotions.

Sunsets are gorgeous. Mountains are gorgeous. Oceans are beautiful. They take your breath away. They touch the emotions, but do they replace friendship? Would they replace marriage? No. As beautiful as that is (the sense of the wonder of an impersonal sight), it can't replace personal relationships for human beings. We're told here that the biblical God is a personal god, a god who speaks, who reveals his will and himself through words.

We're not just told here that God gives us his Word but that God has given us his final word. That you can see in a number of ways, if you just read with a little care. First of all, you'll notice in verse 2 there is a perfect tense. "In the past God spoke through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken." It's a perfect tense. It's over. He *has* spoken to us by his Son. Also, when it talks about the past it says, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets."

The prophets were the people who wrote what we would call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. He says, "In the Old Testament, through the Hebrew Scriptures, God spoke to our ancestors at many times and in various ways." In Greek it's a bit of a play on words. He says *polymeros kai polytropos*. *Polymeros* means at many times, but *polytropos*, which is translated "in various ways," is a very interesting word. It actually means piecemeal, in pieces.

It's saying, "In the past times God spoke truly to us, but always in pieces, not in wholes. Now, in Jesus Christ, he has spoken to us fully, obviously not in pieces but wholly. He has shown us the whole truth. In Jesus Christ he has spoken truly to us." Then the idea that this is God's final word, that he has spoken many other ways, but now he has finally spoken through Jesus Christ, through his life, through his words, through his teachings.

Then in verse 3, it ties that to the fact that after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down. The purification for sins is when Jesus went to the cross, he died for our sins, but then it says he sat down, and that is a metaphor for finished. His saving work is finished. There's nothing more that can be added to it. Do you see the link? Here's what verses 1–4 are saying.

Jesus is the ultimate Savior who ends the sacrifices of former times, because there's nothing more that can be added to his saving work. He's the ultimate revealer who ends the revelations of former times and gives us his final word. What we're being told here is that in the work, in the life, in the teachings of Jesus Christ, given to the apostles and written down for us in the New Testament, we have a revelation as complete as his salvation is complete.

His salvation is complete. His revelation is complete. In the Bible, Old and New Testament, we have God's final word to us about who he is and how we should live. It's the final word until judgment day, which means the Bible cannot be improved. It can't be updated. It can't be corrected. It can't be added to. Because

how could anything be higher or beyond Jesus Christ?

Those of you who are sitting out there, hearing me say, “No, the Bible can’t be updated. It can’t be corrected. It can’t be improved. There’s no part of it that’s obsolete. It’s the final word. It doesn’t get corrected by later on things and insights ...” Some of you are saying, “Wait a minute,” and you have objections. I can’t possibly answer them all, but I have to do some, because I know either they’re in your own mind or else other people have asked you about these things.

So let’s talk about this. When I say the Bible is God’s final word (it can’t be improved, it doesn’t get obsolete, it doesn’t go out of date), what are the objections? Here are a bunch. Somebody might say to me, or you may be thinking in your mind, “Wait a minute. There’s a lot of stuff in the Bible that’s obsolete. There’s a lot of stuff in the Bible that Christians don’t do anymore, that we’ve decided, ‘No, we can’t do it.’ For example, polygamy. The Bible approves of polygamy, yet Christians don’t practice it anymore.”

Okay, well, let me ask you, where does the Bible approve of polygamy? You say, “Well, read the book of Genesis. All these heroes of the faith, Abraham and Jacob ... they all have multiple wives.” Well, okay. The Bible records that Abraham had multiple wives. It also records that he lied and cheated. That doesn’t mean it approves of the lying and cheating.

If you go to the beginning of the book of Genesis, it says, “A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his *wife*.” It does not say, “Cleave to as many as you can get.” It just says, “A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.” That’s the beginning of Genesis. Then, of course, the rest of Genesis you say, “But all these guys are having multiple wives, and they’re miserable.”

All kinds of dysfunction and destruction happen because of multiple wives. One commentator, a Jewish commentator, once said that anybody who reads Genesis and thinks it’s promoting polygamy doesn’t know how to read a narrative. If anything, this is critiquing polygamy, in spite of the fact that it was the way it was done in ancient times. It’s a critique. No, no, no. The Bible doesn’t approve polygamy.

You say, “All right. But wait a minute. There’s a lot of stuff in the Old Testament that says, ‘You can’t dress like this. You can’t eat these things. You can’t wear a garment that mixes fabrics. You can’t eat pork. You can’t eat this. You can’t eat that. You can’t touch these things.’ There are all kinds of rules that Christians have completely abandoned, but then there are these other things they hold on to.

See? It’s arbitrary. Christians pick and choose. They pick the things they want to hold on, as they point to that, but then the things they want to discard, they discard. It’s arbitrary. Christians arbitrarily pick and choose the parts of the Bible they consider obsolete and the parts they want to keep on.” The answer to that is it’s not arbitrary at all.

In the book of Hebrews, you come to the right place. Actually, the book of

Hebrews is completely about this. If you go to Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 16, it says when you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit writes the law of God on your heart. Don't forget. The book of Hebrews, when it talks about the law of God, is talking about the Old Testament. It's talking about the Ten Commandments.

We're told that the Holy Spirit writes the law on your heart. That means it's eternal. That means it's abiding. It doesn't go out of date. But the same book, Hebrews, also says that Jesus Christ's sacrifice ends the need for all of the animal sacrifices for sin and that Jesus Christ, when you believe in him, makes you completely clean and acceptable in God's sight.

All those other regulations, like, "You can't eat this. You can't touch this, because otherwise you're not clean. You're not ceremonially clean. You're not able to go in to worship ..." All those things were pointing to Jesus. All those things were extremely important. All those things were saying, "You can't just go in to God. There does need to be atonement for your sin. You have done some things wrong. Something has to be done." All those things are true, but in Jesus Christ they find their fulfillment. Jesus makes you clean. Jesus atones for your sin.

So, yes, Christians don't follow a lot of those things in the Old Testament that were required of Old Testament believers, but it's because the Bible itself tells you what things you don't have to follow. There's no arbitrariness about it at all. Yes, there are some things in the Bible that Christians don't follow, but the Bible tells you. You don't decide. The Bible tells you what things are obsolete in the sense of they're fulfilled in Christ, because in another sense they're not obsolete.

The Bible tells you. You don't decide that, because you are not in the position. Every 10 years your heart changes and you realize, "What I thought was great 10 years ago ... I was wrong." Every 100 years society says, "Oh, the stuff we thought was great was wrong," but in 100 more years they're going to change that too. Nobody is in the position to do that, to say, "This stuff is great. This stuff is right. This stuff is wrong."

The Bible tells you what parts of the Bible you don't have to follow and, therefore, the Bible is the final word. Somebody says, "Okay, okay, that was a nice move, but the Bible condones slavery. Absolutely, you have to admit, the Bible condones slavery, and we now know that that's wrong. If that's the case, then there *are* parts of the Bible that go out of date. There are things the Bible says that are wrong, and we have to update it." That is actually a big subject, but at least can I lay the groundwork for you?

First of all, if somebody today says the Bible condones slavery, I immediately say, "Tell me what you have in mind. What is slavery?" Almost immediately, you're going to talk about the African slave trade. Then I'm going to say, "Wait a minute. First Timothy 1 (the New Testament) and Deuteronomy 24 (the Old Testament) unconditionally condemned kidnapping and slave selling. The slave trade (someone you kidnapped) was absolutely condemned."

If you go to the Old Testament, of course there it talks about slaves, and modern

readers get creeped out. "It talks about slaves." You have to realize that in the Old Testament slavery was what we today would call a form of bankruptcy law. Do you understand that? If you don't understand that, then you don't know what the Bible says about slavery. In Israel, if you fell into debt you could not pay, you did not actually declare bankruptcy and say, "Oops! Can't pay my debts."

What you did is you became an indentured servant of the person you owed, and you worked for that person until the debt was paid. There were all kinds of rules about that. One rule was it couldn't last more than seven years. Did you know that? Every seven years, even if you hadn't paid the debt off, you were freed from the indentured servanthood.

Here are some others. Exodus 21:27 says that if you have a manservant and you hit him and knock his tooth out, he goes free. You do not have the right to treat somebody like that. This person basically is trying to make up a debt. You don't own the person, in a way. You own their means of production until they pay the debt. Thirdly, the most amazing place is Deuteronomy 23 actually says that if a slave runs away to you, you don't send them back to their master.

In all of ancient times, there was no law like that. Why would they say that? The answer is you give the slave the benefit of the doubt. The implication is you figure that if a slave is running away from doing what the slave is supposed to be doing, which is paying the debt back, probably the slave is being mistreated, so there's no way that you send that slave back. You immediately begin to say, "Well, that's not what I mean by slavery." Okay, then. There's more to say. I won't say it.

But I want you to see that it is not only a misconstrual but a reductionistic and, frankly, misleading thing to say the Bible condones slavery. Now we know better. Let me repeat the first point. The work of Jesus Christ, the teaching of Jesus Christ, the life of Jesus Christ given to the apostles, written down in the New Testament, means the Bible is as complete a revelation as Jesus Christ's work is a complete salvation. The Bible, therefore, is God's final word until judgment day, and it can't be added to or improved or corrected or updated.

Now the reason I'm not going to stop there is this. Some of you are disappointed and, being a good pastor, I want to deal with your disappointment. Some people are going to say, "Are you saying that God can't speak today? Are you saying that God doesn't speak anymore today? Is that what you're saying?"

If I say, "No, no, of course I'm not saying that. Of course God can speak today, but he speaks through his final written Word," then if you say, "Oh, is that all?" I don't think you know what you're talking about exactly. (That wasn't very pastoral, was it? Maybe I should say it a little better.)

Here's what I'd like to say. It's because, and only because, the Bible is the final authoritative written Word, complete, that you can have a living, dynamic relationship with God in which he continually speaks to you. Let me make my case. First of all, George Whitefield (some of you know he's kind of a hero of mine) was a British Anglican eighteenth-century preacher, one of the great

orators in the history of the world, we think.

He was a fine man in many ways, but when his wife gave birth to his only child he ever had, an infant boy, he named him John after John the Baptist, and he told a crowd one time why. He said God had told him that his son was going to grow up to be a great preacher. Just a few months after he told the crowd that, his son got a fever and died.

In the depths of his grief, he realized what he had done was he had taken a fine and natural feeling in his heart ... You look at your infant child and you just want the world for that child. You just want everything for that child. It's so natural. What he had done was he had taken a very good thing and had deified it. He had baptized it, as it were. He had said, "No, that's not my heart working; that's God telling me something." Later on, he wrote about the fact that he realized how wrong that was.

I've seen innumerable situations like that as a pastor, but here's what I want you to know. I do not say to you that God cannot lead you through your feelings, that God can't give you impulses, give you impressions that are ways of leading. I'm not saying that. I'm saying if you're mature, you'll never be sure at the moment.

By the way, if you *are* sure at the moment, you'll have experiences like George Whitefield. Maybe not that dramatic, but as time goes on you'll realize eventually, "No, I can't be sure." I'm not saying God doesn't lead you like that. I'm just saying you can't be sure. Here's why that's so important. If you are going to have a personal relationship with somebody, you have to have words that you know are from that person.

For example, first of all, you have to have words. Sometimes my wife and I will just look into each other's eyes and wordlessly adore each other, but I have to tell you the only reason that works is because we've spent 40 years of talking to each other, so we know a lot more about each other. I have to say in 40 years of staring into each other's eyes we probably wouldn't have gotten very far in knowing who we are.

So there are times of wordless adoration, but you need words for a personal relationship. More than that ... Let's just say the person you're trying to have a relationship with is not physically present with you and you're trying to have the relationship using words over the Internet. We all know the problem the Internet sometimes poses. There has been a lot of fraud on the Internet.

Sometimes when you're using the Internet, you have to say, "Now am I really talking to the person I think I'm talking to? Are you really male? Are you really female? Are you really this age? Are you really the person I think I'm talking to?" Why would you open your heart up to someone when you're not totally sure the person you're talking to is the person you *think* you're talking to?

If you say, "There are parts of the Bible I think are true and parts of the Bible I just don't think are true; I don't think they're right," you're not identical, exactly, but analogous to what happened to George Whitefield. What you're saying is,

"My heart is telling me what things are God's Word, and my heart is telling me what things are not God's Word."

Here's the problem. Your heart is going to change. As time goes on, you're going to wonder. No, no. The first step in having a dynamic personal relationship with God is you accept the complete authority and the finality of the Bible. You say, "Everything in it I have to accept." Then when you open your Bible you can know, "Every single word here is a word from God to me."

That's not all. Chapter 4 tells us that when you trust the Bible like that, you will see it is not just a book of true things. It's not just a book of facts. Look at what it says in verses 12 and 13 in chapter 4. **"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."**

The Word of God is alive. It's active. Why would it say that? I'll tell you why. I mean, if you read the Bible you'll see. In the beginning God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. That's as significant a theological statement as you're going to find in the Bible. It doesn't say God said, "Let there be light" and then he went and did it. See, if you say, "Let there be light," you then have to do something about it. You have to screw in the lightbulb or at least flick a switch or something.

You can say, "This is what I want done," and then you have to go do it, but when God says it, he does it, because his word is his deed. His word is his power. It's through his word that his power operates. That means it is through his Word, and only through his Word, that his power starts to operate in your life. I tell you, God does speak through that Word personally, dynamically, penetratingly, like a surgeon's scalpel goes right down.

Some years ago, I was reading a new translation of the book of Romans. Sometimes one of the best ways to learn what a verse really says in the Bible is to read more than one translation. You can get kind of used to translations and you think you know that verse. "I've heard that before." Then you read a new translation and you say, "That's weird. That's different." Then you realize, "I'd never really thought about that verse."

I was reading Romans, chapter 1, verses 16–17, and the translation said, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Now to use more modern language, we all are trying to be righteous, but that's not how we talk about it modern-wise. If you understand what the Greek word there means, the concept is like this. We're all looking for significance. We all want self-worth. We all want self-respect. We all want to feel like we're living the way we ought to live. We want respect from people. We want self-respect.

We're all trying to achieve significance and self-worth and self-respect. Right? But what are we doing? We're working so hard to achieve it ourselves. We might try to be moral. We might try to be good parents. We're trying to be successful.

We try to be good-looking. There are all kinds of ways in which we're trying to do it. It's very exhausting. In fact, that's actually, to a great degree, what the first part of the chapter 4 reading is about.

We're not at rest. We're working so hard through our good works to try to achieve a sense of significance and self-worth. Here's what God is saying. "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Faith in Jesus Christ. There is a way to so rely on Jesus Christ's love and salvation that you don't have to worry about that. You rest from all that incredible work. To know that as you stand there in Jesus Christ he loves you completely. You can ...

*Lay your deadly doing down
Down at Jesus' feet
Stand in him, in him alone
Gloriously complete.*

You can stop all that worrying. He who through faith is righteous shall really live. So I was reading and I was thinking, "That's great. Yeah, I can preach that." Then suddenly a thought came into my mind just as clear as a bell, and here's what it said. "Yeah, and he who through preaching is righteous shall die a thousand deaths every Saturday night." What I said is what every preacher I know says. "Oh, my motives are perfectly pure for why I've gone into the ministry. I want to honor God. I want to help people."

All of a sudden, the Word of God pierced to the dividing of soul and spirit, to the deepest motives of my heart, and said, "Do you know why you obsess? Do you know why you're so anxious about your preaching? Do you know why you're so restless and you're struggling all the time when it comes to preaching? It's because you're trying to feel good about yourself by being a good preacher. It's not just about God. It's not just about everybody else. You're trying to feel good about yourself."

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." I experienced the active and living power of the Word of God, which actually showed me, "You'd better do something about your motives or, frankly, you're never going to be any good for anybody." That started a pilgrimage for me, a major change for me.

God speaks. God speaks immediately. God speaks penetratingly. God speaks personally to you, not by giving you some other revelation but through the revelation he has given you, climaxing in Jesus Christ. There are two basic ways in which you need to believe the Bible is absolutely true if God is going to have this dynamic ability to change your life and speak into your life. I already mentioned one.

A lot of it is God has bad news to give you. Frankly, this is pretty scary. **"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."** That's saying

that, if you trust it, the Word of God has the power to show you things you don't want to see about how self-absorbed you are. Paul says in Romans 7, "I was alive apart from the law once, but then the commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet' came home, and it slew me."

Do you know what he's talking about? He said, "I always believed the Ten Commandments, but the last commandment is the only commandment that's not about behavior at all. It's only about motive. 'Thou shalt not covet. You shalt not be envious and jealous.' One day it came home and slew me. I thought of myself as a really good person, and one day it just wiped me out and showed me what I was really like."

If you don't believe in the full authority and truth of the Bible, that can't happen. Every personal relationship that has ever been of any help to you has been one in which the other person was empowered to confront you. If you leave out of the Bible things you don't like, how will God ever tell you something you don't like? If you leave things out of the Bible that offend you, how will God ever be able to offend you? Every friend I know has offended me sometime. Every spouse I know has offended me sometime.

It's only if you accept the whole thing, only if you see it as a final word, that God can ever tell you the things you desperately need to see. But here's the other thing, and here's the best thing. Only if you accept the Word of God fully, only if you accept the bad things or the hard things God wants to tell you that are hard for you to accept will you be able to handle the great things he wants to tell you that your heart doesn't want to accept either.

First John 3:20: "If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." One commentator says, "It's an item of faith that we're children of God. There's plenty of evidence against it. Faith, real faith in Jesus Christ, surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources."

Here's what it's saying. We don't want to believe we're as bad as the Bible says we are, but we also can't believe we're as loved as the Bible says we are in Jesus Christ. Sometimes we hate ourselves, and unless you're willing to let the Bible tell you things about your sin that you don't want to believe, how will the Bible ever come in and say you're more loved than you believe?

When our hearts condemn us, what are we going to do? But God is greater than our hearts. Well, not if we're not giving the Bible the right to speak into our lives. Otherwise, we're going to go stealing love and acceptance from other things instead of getting it from God. Thomas Goodwin, the great British Puritan, once told a story like this. He was talking about Romans 8:16. Romans 8:16 says, "Sometimes the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we're children of God."

He said one day he was walking along and he saw a father and a little boy walking in front of him. At one point, the father turned to the little boy, picked him up in his arms, and said, "I love you," and they hugged and they kissed. "I love

you too, Daddy.” Then he put him down and they left. Now was the boy more the son of his father when he was in his arms than when he was on the sidewalk? No. Not legally, not objectively, but in his arms he was experiencing his sonship. He was experiencing his father’s love.

Sometimes, when you just cannot believe that the Lord of all the universe loves you with all of his might, you’ll read places where the Word of God will tell you he loves you, and suddenly he’ll be picking you up and putting you in his arms. That happens through this. So this final word, and if it’s accepted as the final word, gives you a living, dynamic relationship with him.

Now the last point. It’s brief but important. The reason I have to say it is some of you are probably saying, “I’ve read the Bible. I’ve never experienced anything like what you’re talking about.” Some of the rest of you are ready to cry because you have, but it has been a long time. You say, “Why have I lost it?” The answer to both questions (“How do I get it? How do I get it back?”) is to remind yourself of the emphasis here.

It’s not saying, “The New Testament is the end of the Bible. Along with the Old Testament, it’s the complete Canon. You should believe the New Testament writers because they’re right.” We actually spent some time on that. Yes, that’s true, but that’s not what it says here. It says that God has brought his final word through his Son. Before you get your doctrine of Scripture straight, you have to get your doctrine of Jesus Christ straight.

If you start to read the Bible just hoping it’ll be like some magic thing, that “If I read it, I’m going to feel God’s love,” no. You have to understand the main message of the Bible. The main message of the Bible is the reason this is the final word is because Jesus Christ is unsurpassable in the beauty of who he is and what he did. It tells you a little bit about it here. There’s the who he is. “He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” I could do a whole sermon on that.

Do you remember the *shekinah* glory cloud that nobody could stand in front of? When it appeared before the Egyptians, they fell back. If it appeared at the tabernacle or the temple, nobody could go in. Everybody fell down. The *shekinah* glory, which is the representation of the brilliance and the superlativeness and beauty of God. It doesn’t just say Jesus Christ *has* some of God’s glory or he participates. It says he *is* the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his being. It means Jesus Christ is God’s glory in human form.

“All the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him,” Colossians 2 says. Second Corinthians 3 and 4 make some amazing statements, where it says if you’re reading the Bible and you’re hearing the gospel and the Holy Spirit takes the veil off of your heart, because you’re thinking about the greatness of who he is, sometimes you behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, not with your physical eyes but with your faith, and his love, his humility, his wisdom, his courage, his tenderness start to reproduce in you, as you adore him, as you read about him in the Word.

But it's not just who he is; it's also what he has done. Only when you see that he took everything you deserve will you really see his beauty and the Bible start to become a living power in your life. Another way to put it is this says the Bible can be a penetrating, piercing, life-giving power, the way a surgeon penetrates and pierces and cuts you, yes; but to heal you, to take out the tumor, to give you life.

The only reason the Bible can pierce you unto life is because Jesus Christ went to the cross. There he quotes Psalm 22 as he's dying, and part of Psalm 22 is saying, "They pierced my hands and my feet." He was pierced. Nails, thorns, spear. Two-edged. He was pierced, because he took the punishment we deserve for our disobedience to God.

He was pierced unto destruction so we could be pierced, as it were, by the Word of God, but only unto life. See the beauty of that. See the beauty of who he is and what he has done, and then the Bible, once you accept and trust in it, will become the vehicle through which God's living, powerful Word comes in and changes your life. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you have given us this possibility. We do ask that you would, on the one hand, help us to accept your Word even where it offends us, even where it doesn't seem intuitive to us, so that we can know this is your Word and so that can be the basis on which you begin to speak into our lives.

To speak into our lives is to change us. To say, "I love you" is to change us with your love. To say these things through your Word makes it living and active, so we ask that that would happen now. We ask it through Jesus. We ask that you would effect these things in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

I Believe

What We Believe: Foundations—October 4, 2015

Acts 17:16–34

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods."

They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’²⁹ Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”

33 At that, Paul left the Council.³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

The Word of the Lord.

What we’re doing for the next few weeks is looking at a lot of the basic beliefs of Christianity, and we’re going to follow the outline of the Apostles’ Creed. The

Apostles' Creed is the oldest summary of biblical doctrine we have. As you know, the Apostles' Creed begins with the words, "I believe." *Credo* in Latin. "I believe."

As soon as we talk about Christians believing, we're posed with the question, "Yeah, but we live in a world in which fewer and fewer people seem to be believing." In the Western world every year we see statistics that say more and more people say, "I don't believe in God. I don't have religious beliefs. I don't have a religious preference." So what is the future of Christian belief in a world in which fewer and fewer believe?

One of the ways to answer that question is to go to Acts, chapter 17, because there Paul goes to the Areopagus. He goes to Athens. Athens was the intellectual center of the Roman world. It was sort of like Oxford, Cambridge, and all of the Ivy League schools all rolled up into one. He went into the marketplace. When you and I hear *marketplace*, we think of a farmer's market or a shopping mall. It was actually the place where all of the ideas were debated.

For example, this Athens Agora, the marketplace, was the place Socrates would go every single day to debate with people and to propagate his philosophy, and so on. Athens was famous as being a place where the philosophers didn't believe in the gods anymore. It was very skeptical. So for Paul to plunge into the marketplace and begin to debate and dialogue with people about Christian belief will tell us something, because it's very much where we are today.

Here are the three things I'd like you to get from this passage. There are many more things in here than I'm going to tell you. It's rather top level, as it were, but here are the three things. First of all, we're going to learn that everybody does believe. Everyone is deeply religious. Everyone does believe. Secondly, your beliefs must have a God-sized God big enough for your moral intuitions, and your beliefs must have a heart-shaped hope that can fulfill your deepest desires. Those are the three things we're going to learn from Paul in this passage.

First of all, when Paul begins his message in verse 22, he says, "**People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.**" He says, "You're all very religious." We might say, "Well, that's then. Back then everybody was superstitious. There was a lot of religion, but today religion is dying out. Today people are more secular." I believe if Paul were here he would say exactly the same thing to New Yorkers.

He'd say, "You're all very religious. Maybe not formally religious. Maybe you don't adhere to institutional religions or formal religions, but you all hold deeply religious beliefs, unprovable faith beliefs." How would he make his case? Well, Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, has an article in this weekend's *Wall Street Journal*, the review section. In it he says that even in secular societies, all human beings have to live for something, and they all have to live on the basis of answers to certain questions.

You can't live unless you answer some questions, or at least tentatively answer some questions. What are we here for? Where have we come? Where are we

going? Is there an afterlife? What's wrong with life? What would put life right? How should I be living? Nobody can live without tacit, implicit at least, tentative answers to those questions, but the answers to all of those questions are beliefs. Not a single one of them can be proven.

Whatever your answer is to any of those questions ... What should human beings be doing? How do you determine right and wrong? How should you be living in such a way as to put life right? The answer to those questions, whatever they are (and everybody has to have some answers), you can't prove them in a laboratory. You can't prove them in a test tube. They're beliefs.

For example, let's say you're an atheist or an agnostic. You say, "Well, I don't have any religious beliefs. I don't have faith. I just go on what I see. I go on the evidence. I'm a reasonable person." Most secular people I've met in New York City would say two things. One is they say, "I don't believe in God. I don't believe in an afterlife. I believe when you're dead that's it. I don't believe in God."

Can you prove there is no God? Can you prove there's no afterlife? Of course you can't. If you can't prove that there is no God who will hold you accountable in the afterlife for how you've lived here, then to live as if there is no such God is something of a bet. It's certainly a leap of faith. You're betting your life. You're betting your destiny on your faith that there is no God, that there's no afterlife, because you can't prove it.

Therefore, you are living by faith just as much, in some ways, as a person who believes there *is* a God and an afterlife. Or most secular people believe in human rights. They believe every human being is equal and we should work for equality and freedom and the betterment of especially people who are poor and who are marginalized and oppressed. Most secular people believe this. Why do you believe that?

If you ask a secular person, "Where did human beings come from?" probably the answer is, "Through a process of natural selection, of survival of the fittest, of the strong eating the weak, we got to be here. But now we must stop that. Even though that's how everything is in nature, stronger nations must not trample weaker nations. Stronger individuals must not trample weaker individuals. We have to stop it. Even though nature is red in tooth and claw, even though nature believes in the strong eating the weak, we have to believe in the equality of all human beings."

Okay, you can believe that, but for you to get that value out of *that* understanding of the universe is a complete leap of faith. The Russian philosopher Solovyov put it in a nutshell. He says modern secular people believe this: "Man descended from apes. Therefore, let us love one another." What he's trying to get across is there's no *therefore* there. He says it's a complete non sequitur.

In other words, if we are the product of the survival of the fittest, then why should we love one another? "Well, we should." Why? "Because we believe that." Okay, but it's a belief. It's every bit a leap of faith as anybody who believes in God.

Every bit. Before leaving this point, I need to make a point. We live in a secular Western society, which is the first society probably in history that doesn't believe it has beliefs. "We're just being rational," people say.

They don't see that deep down they're living their life on the basis of faith beliefs that are no more empirically based than other religious beliefs, that are not self-evident to everybody, even though you say, "All my smart friends think so." Well, fine, but not the rest of the world. So your beliefs are not self-evident, they can't be empirically proven, and, as I'm going to show you, they have problems in them.

Western secular people have a tendency to say, "Why doesn't everybody think the way we think? We don't have belief. Those are religious people. Religion is bad. It doesn't follow reason. Religious beliefs are no good. They're really hurting. We need to get out to the place where people are operating on the basis of science and reason, not religious belief." That's just not true. Nobody can operate without faith and religious belief. Western people are every bit as reliant on those beliefs as anybody else. They just don't see it.

There was an article in the *New York Times* recently about a think tank. It was called the Berggruen Institute. What they said is our political problems today ... You know how people are constantly arguing and yelling and screaming at each other over various political and cultural issues, and we're not getting anywhere, we're not convincing each other? It's because underneath we don't share the same worldview, they said.

We don't share the same understanding of the universe or human nature or how you decide right and wrong. In other words, our worldviews, our macro religious worldviews, are so different. So we're arguing up here, but it's down here where the problem is. You say, "If everybody has belief, then how are we ever going to make progress?" Actually, part of the answer is what Paul does, and I'm going to show you how he does it.

In verses 16–17 it says, "**While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue ... as well as in the marketplace [the Agora] day by day with those who happened to be there** [including Epicurean and Stoic philosophers]."

That word *reason* is really interesting. It's the Greek word *dialogomai*, and it has a very specific meaning.

First of all, here's what it tells you. Christians, listen. When he is dealing with people with a deeply different worldview ... Their understanding of human nature, their understanding of whether there's a God, their understanding of the nature of the universe ... They're radically different. He doesn't start preaching. I know that's what I do. You have to realize that I'm saying preaching, monologuing, just telling people, "This is what the Bible says," is not what he does.

Dialogomai is not preaching. He's entering into dialogue. Christians who just think, "All I have to do is tell people, 'This is what God says. This is what the Bible

says,’ ” to people with a radically different worldview ... You’re going to get nowhere, and it’s your fault that you’re getting nowhere.

On the other hand, *dialegomai* does not mean what you and I would think of, which is just conversing. It was a Socratic method. Here’s how the Socratic method works. The Socratic method says, first of all, we acknowledge that we both have deeply different worldviews, but rather than me criticizing your worldview from the point of my worldview, which of course gets us nowhere ... Of course one worldview will look stupid from the vantage point of another worldview.

Instead, the Socratic method was you came inside, sympathetically, the other person’s worldview. You tried to think like them. You tried to understand them. You tried to listen. You tried to sympathetically and imaginatively enter in and imagine what it’s like to be a person inside this worldview. You’re not laughing. You’re not yelling. You’re not screaming. You’re not saying, “How stupid.” You’re coming on the inside.

Then, and only then, do you criticize that worldview from its own premises, from its own standards. By your own standards you have a problem here, and that’s what Paul does. That’s how you make progress. You say, “How does he do that?” Let me show you. The first thing he does is he shows these folks, especially when he gets up and speaks ...

He’s doing all the dialoguing. He’s doing all the Socratic method. He’s persuading people by entering inside their own worldviews, and he’s trying to show them the problems on the basis of their own premises. He’s also showing them how they smuggle in resources and values from other worldviews, showing that their worldview is actually not adequate. You say, “How does he do that?” Here we go.

First, when he gets up to speak, he challenges them to have a *God-sized God*. He says, “You do not have a big enough God for your moral intuitions.” Now how does he do that? Well, he starts with this fascinating beginning in verse 23. **“For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”**

That is an astonishing statement, and it’s the secret to how he is reasoning with them. He says, “On the one hand, you’re worshiping something without knowing it. This altar to the unknown god shows that you sense there’s something inadequate about your worldview, that your worldview can’t quite account for all of your intuitions, that there might be a God out there that you sense but can’t identify, that your own understanding of the universe and of the gods isn’t adequate.”

Now how does he do that with them? I’ll show you in one second, but, first of all, I would like to suggest this is what I think he would do with you and me. If he came to New York City, how would he use the altar to the unknown god? What would

he say to secular New Yorkers to say, “Let me show you that you are actually sensing God, even though you don’t believe in him; that you’re actually worshiping something you are ignorant of. You won’t admit that he’s there, and yet you are worshiping him without knowing it.”

I think here’s how he would start. I think he would go to the area of moral values and moral obligation. Let me give you an example, and then let me give you a philosopher who explains it. The example is that there is a custom in Afghanistan (it’s a very old and ancient custom) for Afghan officers, Afghan soldiers, Afghan officials, to recruit young boys and have sex with them. There’s a name for it. It’s an old custom.

In 2007, on the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, Richard Shweder, who is a leading cultural anthropologist at the University of Chicago, said that when US military personnel are in a place like Afghanistan, they must not think they can impose their cultural values on the people who are there. He mentioned this particular practice.

He says, “Listen. There is no way one culture’s values are better than another. All moral values are culturally relative. No one can say, ‘I have the superior cultural values to you.’ It might upset you when you see things in this other culture, but you have no right to take your white Western values and say, ‘Ours are right and yours are wrong.’ That’s imperialism. That’s what we’ve been doing for centuries. We have to stop it.”

He says this on the pages of the *New York Times*, and yet just a few weeks ago, the editorial pages of the *New York Times* was saying how horrible it is that US military personnel in Afghanistan see this going on and don’t stop it. So the *New York Times* is schizophrenic about this, and if you read the comments to the articles that were just run the last couple of weeks, you’ll see the commenters, secular people on both sides, are totally conflicted.

Some say, “No, we have no right to tell them their culture is wrong,” and other people are saying, “No, it’s terrible. It’s oppression. We have to stop it.” The person who explained all this to me is Elizabeth Anscombe, who was a philosophy professor at Oxford for many years in the twentieth century. She wrote an essay called “Modern Moral Philosophy” that you can find online. (It’s not very easy to read, by the way.) It has been extraordinarily influential.

This is what she says has happened today. She says if I say to someone else, “You ought not to do X,” and that person says, “Why ought I not to do X?” my answer could be, “Because I prefer you not do it. Because I wish you not do it. Because I feel that I don’t want you to do it.” Then the person might say, “Okay,” if they love me or they fear me, or whatever. So I say, “You ought no to do X.” They say, “Why ought I not to do X?” I say, “Because I don’t want you to,” and then they can decide what to do.

She says if I say to another person, “You ought not to do X” and they say, “Why ought I not to do X?” and I say, “Because it’s wrong ...” She says when you say,

“Don’t do it because it’s wrong,” what you mean is, “It doesn’t matter what I feel, and it doesn’t matter what you feel. There is an independent standard of moral absolutes, some independent standard of moral norms that exists apart from your and my feelings.”

The first time, I said, “Don’t do it because I prefer it,” meaning I have an internal moral feeling I want you to honor, but when I say, “I want you to do it not because I prefer it but because it’s wrong; it’s just wrong,” what I am implying is that there’s a moral standard above either your feelings or my feelings.

Elizabeth Anscombe says here’s the problem. Modern people, secular people, like Richard Shweder, the anthropologist, do not believe there are moral norms we all have to follow. Modern people believe that all moral values are person-specific and culturally relative, that there are no moral absolutes out there, objectively, outside of us, that we have to align with. Oh no. We determine morality for ourselves.

She says modern people, secular people, say there are no external, moral standards, but then they go on using the language we’ve used for centuries. That language assumes that exists. Therefore, when secular people use the words *right* and *wrong*, they are being, at best, disingenuous and incoherent and, at worst, hypocritical. If you don’t believe in God or you don’t believe in moral norms outside here, you have to stop saying, “This is wrong.”

Think about it. In New York City, I’m constantly being told something like this: “No one has the right to tell other people what is right or wrong for them. You do not have the right to tell other people what is right or wrong for them. Only they have the right to decide what is right or wrong for themselves.” I’ve had people say, “You don’t have the right to tell me what is right or wrong for me.” I say, “Okay, but you have the right to tell me that I don’t have the right to tell you what is right or wrong for you?”

If I don’t have the right to tell *you* what is right or wrong for you, then how can you tell *me* that I’m being wrong? This is exactly what Elizabeth Anscombe is saying. Unless you believe there’s a God or a moral law out there, you should stop talking about what’s right or wrong. You just stop it. Just say, “I prefer you not kill people. I prefer you not rape people, but I can’t really say it’s wrong.” Ah, but here’s, I think, what Paul would say if he was here.

Of course we believe it’s wrong. We can’t help but believe that’s wrong. If there’s no God, you can explain moral feelings, right? They might be the product of evolutionary biology. It might be the product of cultural construction. If there is no God, you can explain moral feelings, but if there is no God, you cannot explain moral obligation. Moral feeling is, “I feel this is wrong.” Moral obligation is, “You must not do it, whether you feel it’s wrong or not.”

If there is no God, there is no moral obligation, and yet we all know there’s moral obligation. Therefore, that knowledge is an altar to the unknown God in the midst of New York City, because we are so moralistic here. We’re always saying, “This

is wrong. This is evil. This is bad. You must stop this. You must stop that." Oh, but there's no God. What you're actually doing is ... "The very thing you worship you're ignorant of." That's what Paul would say.

Paul would say the existence of God makes sense of your moral intuitions, but your worldview does not. Your worldview is too small for your own moral intuitions. What he does here, by the way, is he's working on them in his own way. He says in verse 28, "Your own poets say, 'We are his offspring.' " He says, "So you say, on the one hand, that God creates us, but then how do you make idols?" He's criticizing the way they believe in multiple gods and idol worship.

He says, "If God made you, then how could we make God? That doesn't make sense." What he's doing is coming inside and showing them their own worldview has incoherencies and inconsistencies. If you read verses 25–29, you see him giving them a God-sized God. He says, "Let me give you a God big enough for your intuitions, big enough so that you're no longer in contradiction. Let me show you ..."

He goes through and says, "This is a creator God. This is a God who's not dependent on anything, but everything is dependent on him. This is a sovereign God, and this is a God who wants a relationship with you." That brings us to the resurrection. He doesn't just talk about God. In the end, he talks about the resurrection. He begins to turn to Jesus and the resurrection, but then he's interrupted.

That's okay for us, because we know what Paul says about the resurrection from other speeches. Here's what he says. It's not just enough that your belief system intellectually have a big enough God for your moral intuitions. You also have to have a *heart-shaped hope* wonderful enough salvation for your heart's deepest desires. What's ironic about this entire scene is how they make fun of Paul. They call him a babbler. Do you see that? "What does this babbler have to say?"

By the way, I want you to know that's a pretty big insult. It's basically saying, "What does this intellectual lightweight have to say?" What's ironic is even though they sneer at it and not that many people become Christians, what happened is Christianity grew so much and won so many people to faith that, within a certain amount of time, all of those Greek gods were extinct. Why? I'll tell you why.

One reason is because of the reasoning Paul did. That reasoning worked, but here's the other reason why. I've been trying to study what historians say were the reasons Christianity triumphed in that old Roman world. All of the philosophers, the Stoics, the Epicureans, all the beliefs in gods ... They just went away, because Christianity was received by the population in such great numbers. Why?

One of the reasons was the older worldview could not help people understand or face suffering. The Stoics said, "When suffering comes, just be strong. Control your emotions. Don't let your heart get too attached to anything, because

everything is going away. When you die, you become part of the All-Soul. You don't exist in a conscious, personal heaven. You just become one with the All-Soul. You become part of the impersonal life force."

What they said was, "Just be strong, because everything here is passing away. Don't get your heart too involved with anything." The Epicureans, however, believed that when you died, that was the end of body and soul. There was no afterlife of any sort. What they said you should do is you should run away from suffering. You should live for pleasure and for your own happiness, and when you saw suffering coming, you ought to just get away from it.

Historians say the average person found neither the Stoic nor the Epicurean approach to suffering not only workable but right. It wasn't workable, because only very strong people can handle suffering through being stoic, but they also thought it wasn't right. You shouldn't detach your heart from people who are suffering just so you don't let it get to you, and you certainly shouldn't run away from suffering in a cowardly way.

The old Greek worldview did not give them the resources for handling suffering. Oh, but the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gospel ... When Jesus Christ went to the cross to die for our sins, that's not the way the Stoics say to go. Oh no. He didn't detach from us. He attached to us. He didn't run away from suffering, the way the Epicureans said. He ran toward it. He attached himself to us.

When he was on the cross, he was screaming. He was yelling. He was crying. He wasn't stoic at all. Christians had a model of someone who was not afraid of suffering. He didn't run away from suffering and also didn't try to detach the heart but cried out to God and cried out to others. They had a model for someone who embraced suffering and loved people in spite of it, but the resurrection ... Oh, the resurrection.

Think about this, everybody. The Stoics and the Epicureans said, "After death there's no way that you're going to be your loved ones. You're not even going to be conscious. Your personality goes away." Not only did Christianity say that after you die you're with your loved ones and with God as a loving person, but the resurrection means you get your bodies back. It means you get a new heavens and a new earth.

The whole earth is going to be made perfect. We're going to have our bodies back. There's no other religion that says anything like this. Nothing. See, heaven is a kind of consolation for the life you lost, but the resurrection is the restoration of the life you lost. In fact, it's more than that. It's the restoration of the life you never had; all kinds of things you've always wanted but the brokenness of the world didn't allow.

When the people in that era heard that because of the cross I can follow Jesus Christ, who embraced suffering and loved people through the suffering, and because of the resurrection I don't have to detach my heart ... I can handle

anything, because I know the worst thing that can happen to me is I die and the resurrection.

When the plagues came, the terrible plagues in the cities, and everyone else ran for the mountains, the Christians stayed in the cities and took care of the sick, even though they died themselves, because they weren't afraid of suffering and death. When they went into the arenas to die for their faith, they sang hymns, because they weren't afraid of suffering and death. All of the other people said, "Our faith does not fulfill the deepest longings of the heart such that we can handle suffering like that. I want that."

I don't know who you are here tonight, but I do know you do believe. You have deep beliefs. My question is ... *Do you have God-sized beliefs big enough for your moral intuitions, and do you have a heart-shaped hope big enough to satisfy your deepest desires?* Christianity has that for you. Christians, here's what I want you to see. When Paul saw all the idols in the marketplace, he was distressed. Do you see that in verse 16? It's a word that actually means angry and indignant.

But he didn't look at the pagans and say, "Stew in your own juices. I hope God judges you." He plunged into the marketplace, even though he knew he was going to be mocked. We need to do that too. We need to be willing to go into the marketplace of ideas. Paul believed that if you use this method, if you learn how to dialogue, Christianity could engage the most dominant cultural ideas. He was not afraid of that. He was not shy. He also knew he was going to be called a seed picker, a babbler, an intellectual lightweight. We will too.

But those early Christians loved that old brutal culture until it changed, because they were walking in the footsteps of Jesus himself. Jesus looked down from heaven. He saw idols in our hearts, but he didn't disdain us. He came down. He got involved. He plunged, as it were, into the world, even though he was going to be mocked. More than that, he was going to be killed, but he did it for us. Walk in his footsteps. Have that fearless love. Plunge into the marketplace. Go and do likewise. Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us what we need here to be public with our faith, to say, "I believe," to show other people that they also say, "I believe," even the ones who don't think they do, and to show them how the gospel gives us a God-sized God and a heart-shaped hope. We pray, Lord, that you would teach us how to be wise, not just in what we say but how, like Paul, to embody the gospel with love, making ourselves vulnerable, opening our mouths, even though we know sometimes it's going to bring mockery. We pray, Lord, that you would show us how to walk in Paul's footsteps and in your Son's footsteps. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

God

What We Believe: Foundations—October 11, 2015

Exodus 3:1–14

1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. **3** So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” **5** “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” **6** Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

7 The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **8** So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.

9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. **10** So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” **11** But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” **12** And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

13 Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his

name?' Then what shall I tell them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.' "

This is the Word of the Lord.

This fall we're looking at basic beliefs of the Christian faith. The outline we're using in order to do that is the outline of the Apostles' Creed, which is the oldest summary of biblical doctrine the church has. We're just following that outline. Today we come to *God*. The Apostles' Creed goes, "I believe in God." If you're going to preach a sermon from the Bible on God, the first question that comes up is, "Where in the world do you go, since the whole Bible is about God?" However, I actually had no doubts about where to go: this passage, for this reason.

Most people believe in God in the world. They believe in the existence of a God, but they don't know him personally. Moses believed in God up to this point, but it was really at the burning bush that he came to see who God was and encountered him, met God. Didn't just know about God but came to meet God. That's why several commentators on the book of Exodus say this is Moses' conversion experience.

So let's see what this famous story of the burning bush tells us about God. I think we're going to learn this as we look at it. The central metaphor is fire, because God decides to appear as fire. He could have appeared as anything, but by deciding to appear as fire in the burning bush, that metaphor is going to tell us these things. It's going to tell us that *God is a real God and can be known and he is a God who seeks and sends*.

1. *God is a real God and can be known.* Why am I starting there? I live in New York City, where I constantly hear people say, "I don't like to think of God like *this*. I like to think of God like *that*." It's very clear that most people (in great Western cities at least) believe they can believe in God as they want to believe in God, that they are able to basically have the right to construct their own religious beliefs.

You even respect the weather better than that. "I want to believe that all this week it's going to be 85 degrees and sunny. I desperately want to believe the weather is going to be like that so I can run out the door in my shorts." Do you know what you're really going to do? You're going to check and see what the weather actually is, because if the weather is 40 degrees and raining, you're not going to do that. You're going to deal with the reality.

I would think that if there is a God, he's at least as real as that. He'd have to be at least as real as the weather. I don't know what else you believe about God, but if there is a God, he has to be at least as real as the weather. That's what this text is telling us in a number of ways. This text is saying there's a real God, a God who is there, a God who you don't create or even tweak, a God who's untamed and you can't domesticate and use for your own purposes.

Now there are a couple of ways the text gets that across. One is with the fire.

When God appears in a burning bush he appears as a fire, but not like any other fire. Notice what it says in verse 2. **“There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire ... Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.”** It’s repeated. It says, **“So Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.’”**

Right off the bat, this shows us that though God is appearing as fire, it’s not like a fire that anybody has ever seen before or since. Fire is dependent on fuel. As long as there’s fuel there can be fire, but when there’s no more combustible fuel the fire goes out. *This* fire is not dependent on fuel. *This* fire is not dependent on anything. *This* fire has the power of its own being within it. We don’t know of anything in the world like that, and that’s the point.

The other way the text gets this across is in the name. In verse 14, when Moses says, “Look, if I’m going to go to Egypt and to Pharaoh and to the Israelites, they’re going to want to know who sent me, so what’s your name?” God said to Moses, **“I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”** It depends on what your translation is, but every translation of that verse looks different, because it’s almost untranslatable.

Essentially, when Moses says, “What is your name?” God gives Moses simply the Hebrew verb *to be*. Therefore, the best way to translate this (though nobody does, because it would seem so strange on the page) ... Basically, what God is saying is, “Tell them being itself has sent you.” The fire that is not dependent on anything but is self-existent, that has the power of its own existence within it ...

That fire, along with this name, is God’s way of saying, “I have no beginning. I have no end, because I depend on nothing. Nothing caused me. I caused everything. I depend on nothing. Everything depends on me.” Look at the term *I Am*, even that translation. This is God’s way of saying, “I always am. There never will be a time in which it could be said about me ‘God was,’ and there never was a time in which it could have been said about me, ‘He will be.’”

God is saying he not only has no ending (“I always *will* am”) but he has no beginning. He always *was* am. By the way, when I was a kid growing up in the Lutheran church and they told me God has no beginning and no ending, I could understand the no ending, because I had seen enough science fiction. They just keep putting your brain in a new robot body. I could understand that, but no beginning?

What God is saying is, “I am being itself. In some sense, I’m not a being, because beings are all in this world and they all depend on other beings. Every being exists because some other being brought it into existence, and every being exists dependent on other beings. In a sense, I’m not one more being. I am being itself. Everything depends on me. I depend on nothing.”

Now what are we to make of this? This idea is called the *self-existence of God*. Sometimes the word is the *aseity* of God, that God brings himself into existence, keeps himself in existence. In other words, he always was. There was never a

time in which he was not. On the one hand, that's quite a philosophical thing to think about. By the way, it's actually a fruitful thing to spend some time on. We're not going to do that, but I will at least say this.

The most powerful, rational argument for the existence of God is right here, and that argument goes like this in a nutshell. Everything in the natural world is caused by something else. No being in the material, natural world pops into existence out of nothing. Something cannot come out of nothing. Nor is there anything we know of in the material world existent forever. We don't know of anything. That's the reason why my young self, when I heard God has no beginning, said, "I don't understand that." Right. Nobody can understand that.

In the natural world, everything has a cause. Therefore, *the* natural world must have a supernatural cause. There must be an uncaused cause. There must be some supernatural being that caused us. Otherwise, you have a miracle anyway. I know Richard Dawkins, the atheist writer, says, "Well, if you think God caused the world, then what caused God?" But you're missing out something, Richard Dawkins.

If there is no God, then you have to say the world came into existence out of nothing. Something came out of nothing, which is a miracle, by the way. Look it up. That's a scientific impossibility. It's a miracle. Or you can say, "Well, there was always something here in the material universe that has always existed," and that's a miracle too. We don't know of anything in the material world that has always existed. Therefore, life is a miracle. Existence is a miracle, one way or the other. The Bible says it's because it has come from God.

What I'd like you to think about is the practical for a minute. If you are willing to grasp the doctrine (that's what it is) that God is dependent on nothing and everything is dependent on him, that is the most humbling yet liberating truth you could ever grasp. The reason it's humbling, especially to those of us who live in New York, is New Yorkers are quite proud of where they are. They say, "I worked very hard to get here. I learned my craft. I got into that right school. I came up the ladder. I've worked very hard for everything I have."

Of course, the Bible comes back and says, "Yeah, you worked hard with the desires, with the talents, with the abilities, and with all of the opportunities, none of which you could have created but were actually given to you. God gave you those desires. God gave you the talents. God gave you the abilities. God gave you the opportunities, really. If he hadn't given them to you, you wouldn't have anything. Therefore, everything you have is a gift from God."

That's the humbling part. That's very stinging. It's kind of an insult. It's very ego-deflating. You feel the pin going into the ego balloon. So we say, "No, no, no. We don't like it." But if you're willing to get through the sting of that, the insult of that, on the other end it's liberating. Why? It doesn't depend on you. It's not you who's holding your life together. It's not you who's keeping the world spinning. You can relax.

Martin Luther was constantly talking to his worried friend. Philip Melanchthon was always worrying, and whenever he would worry, Martin Luther would say, "Let Philip cease to rule the world." What he was trying to say was, "Philip, worry and anxiety is laboring under the illusion that you have to keep things spinning, you have to keep it all together, it all depends on you. Nothing depends on you, Philip. It never has."

We have a real God, a God who's the source of all being, but he's not simply a kind of force out there. There are plenty of religions that believe in a divine source of all being. "In him we live and move and have our being." There are many religions that believe he is a kind of great impersonal force, but the Bible is showing us that not only is God real but he's also not a remote reality. He's a God who can be known.

In other words, this is telling us we must not just know *about* God; we must *know* God. We must not just believe in God with our heads; we must encounter him. Now how does that get across? Again, fire. Think about this. You don't just know fire is in front of you with your head. You feel it. You experience the fire. It's not just a mental process. "Oh, I know there's a fire there." Rather, you see it. You hear it crackling. You feel it against your skin. You may smell it. It assaults the senses.

So when you know there's fire in front of you, you don't just know it rationally; you know it experientially. That's how you're supposed to know God: not just rationally but experientially. It's very intriguing that Blaise Pascal connected his great experience and encounter with God with the story of the burning bush. Some of you know this. I get it out a lot. Blaise Pascal, the great French philosopher, had an experience of God which he wrote up. He journaled it, and then he took that page of his journal and sewed it inside the lining of his coat, and when he died they discovered it.

It's out there. It's quoted a lot. It's on the Internet all over the place. I've quoted it a lot, but I'm going to do it again, because it's connected to this Exodus 3 burning bush experience. Here's what they found inside his coat. This is essentially what Blaise Pascal said about his encounter. "The year of grace, 1654; Monday, the 23rd of November, from about half past 10:00 in the evening until half past 12:00. FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants. Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace."

This powerful encounter with God he had ... Notice he is evoking the burning bush. He says it was an experience of fire. Then he even quotes, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob," which is what God says when he is revealing himself to Moses. Then he says, "Not the god of the philosophers or the savants." He was a philosopher, and he'd only known God philosophically, but now ... fire. He was experiencing God. "Certitude, certitude, joy."

The God he'd known about he was experiencing. He understood that fire means that. It means not just believing in God but meeting God. Have you met God or

do you just believe in God? I have to say something. Let's be careful here. There are a couple of other shoes that have to drop. On the one hand, a big part of the Christian life is holding on to what you know and believe in spite of your feelings. I just want you to know a big part of the Christian life is essentially telling your feelings where to get off.

For example, a big part of your Christian life works like this. You know and you believe that God loves you in Jesus Christ, even though you don't feel lovely at all. You know and believe that God is sovereign and in control of history, even though history feels like it's totally out of control, and your life does too. Or, even, you have to hold on and believe that you are a weak, dependent person who needs God, even though you may feel absolutely self-confident and self-sufficient.

So a big part of the Christian life is actually telling your feelings where to get off and holding on to what you know to be true. It's a big part of Christianity. The other thing I want to say is that we're all of different temperaments. Some people have strong emotions and feel their emotions, and some of us (I'm saying *us*) are much less trusting of their feelings, and we're not prone to have these great emotional experiences.

Having said all that, in the end, why does it say in the book of Psalms, "Taste and see that the Lord is good"? Don't we know the Lord is good? Sure. They're not saying, "Know that the Lord is good." We all know it, but I want you to taste it. I want you to sense it on your heart. Or in Ephesians 3, Paul is talking to Christians and he says, "I pray that the Spirit will strengthen you in your inmost being so that you may grasp and know the height, the width, the breadth, and the depth of the love of Christ."

Now come on. These are Christians. Of course they know Christ loves them. He doesn't say, "Oh, I want you to know in the mind." He says, "You need spiritual power to grasp, to sense." Some years ago, when I was a very young man, I heard a man say, "I always believed that Jesus Christ died for people, died for the human race, died for our sins, but I turned a corner when I realized Jesus died for *me*."

Being a young person, overly logical, I said, "That makes no sense at all. You believed Jesus died for the world, but now you believe Jesus died for you. What are you? Not a people? Are you a Martian? What's going on?" Here's what he meant. He says, "I knew with my mind that I wasn't perfect and I needed forgiveness, but I sensed in my heart one day I needed forgiveness. I knew that Jesus loved, but I sensed Jesus' love and the costliness of his love."

It's one thing to say, "I believe God is X, Y, Z." It's another thing to sense that holiness, to sense that love, to sense that power in your heart. You haven't met God unless your mind *and* your heart are engaged. Do you just believe in God or have you actually met him? He's a God who can be known. In fact, even here, when Moses says, "Tell me your name ..." You say, "What do you mean, 'Tell me your name'? He's God."

Well, the Hebrew word that's translated *God* in the Bible is *Elohim*, and it's not really a name; it's a title. The word *God* tells you what he is, but when he says, "I Am That I Am," that's the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, and that's who he is. He's saying, "I'm telling you my name." If you want to have a personal relationship with somebody ...

Somebody comes up to you and says, "Mr. this" or "Mrs. that" or "Professor this" or "Doctor this," and you say, "Hey, call me ..." And you give them your personal name. It's your way of saying, "I want to have a personal relationship with you." That's what God is doing here. He's real. He's the ground of all being, but he is also one who can be known. That leads us to the other two things.

2. *God is a God who seeks and sends.* Here's what's interesting. Notice, for example, that he is seeking Moses. It says in verse 2, "The Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within the bush. Moses saw the bush didn't burn, so Moses thought, 'I will go over and see.' " God is drawing Moses in. "When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from the bush." God wants a relationship. He's seeking Moses, and yet, even though Moses is attracted and drawn in, there's the other side.

"‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’ [...] At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God." Here's what you have. You again have the fire, and the fire tells us something else we need to see about God. This is really compelling. The fire is both beautiful and attractive and fatal. There are certain situations in which if you don't get near a fire, you're going to die. Fire, in one sense, is life giving, because you need the heat, but if you get too close to the fire it kills you.

Fire is life giving and death dealing at the same time. It's attractive and dangerous and frightening at the same time. That's the reason this is so brilliant of God to appear as fire. When he appears as fire, he is showing us who he is. Listen, everyone. No matter who you are or what you work in or what you think, if you take this insight I'm about to give you, which is one of the fundamental insights of the Bible, it will help you understand human life better than you've ever understood it before.

We can't live with God, and we can't live without God. That's the human condition. We can't live without him because we were created for him and we want him, but at another level, we are broken, we've turned away from him, and his very presence is traumatic and fatal. Now I know I can't possibly answer all of the questions in New Yorkers' minds that will come up as I tell you this, but I'll try as many as I possibly can.

The Bible repeatedly says the immediate presence of God is fatal to human beings, just like fire. Moses says, "Show me your glory," and God says, "I can't; it'll kill you." Isaiah goes in to see God high and lifted up, and he says, "Woe is me. I am undone. I'm coming apart. I feel like I'm dying." God comes down on

Mount Sinai and says, “I’m coming down on Mount Sinai ...” In fire, by the way, if you remember. He says, “Don’t touch anything, because if you touch the mountain you’ll die.”

Now let me mix metaphors. I’m sorry, you English majors. I know you don’t want me to mix metaphors, but I have the microphone. All human beings are naturally oriented toward the self. The most natural impulse is to please yourself. It’s much more natural than to try to please somebody else rather than yourself. That’s hard. To please yourself, self-indulgence ... natural. Self-sacrifice ... unnatural. We are naturally self-centered.

The human heart, therefore, naturally wants everything to orbit around it. If that’s the case, then when we get into contact with God, who is the true center of the universe, around which everything in your life ought to orbit ... In other words, you have two solar systems coming together with two centers and all these planets revolving around. They’re going to crash. They’re going to clash. It’s going to be traumatic. There’s going to be an explosion.

It’s the reason the Bible says over and over again flawed human beings cannot exist in the presence of God. The holiness of God is fatal. Well, then, here’s the question. Here you have a God who wants Moses, and a God of compassion. Notice how in verses 7–8 he says, “I’m hearing the cries of my people.” Verse 12: “I want to be with you. I want to go with you.” He’s seeking Moses, and he loves his people, and he wants to be with Moses, and yet he says, “It’s holy. Don’t get too close.” Moses is scared.

So how can a holy God have a relationship with us? How can Moses draw near to a holy God? Here is why many commentators say if you have actually read all of Genesis and Exodus and then you read this passage ... If you put this passage into the context of all of Genesis and Exodus, here’s the real question. The big question is not, “Why is the bush not consumed?” The big question is, “Why isn’t Moses consumed?” How could Moses get that close and not be consumed?

Here’s the answer. It’s the Angel. Do you see that? It’s actually extremely easy to miss, because you kind of go by it. Verse 2 is a summary sentence. Do you know how journalists are taught to make the very first sentence a kind of summary sentence of what the news article is going to be about, and the rest of the article is essentially an unpacking of that summary sentence? Look at verse 2. **“There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.”** Then starting in verse 3 it goes on. It says Moses saw it and he went over and he spoke.

What’s interesting is up there it says, “The angel of the Lord was in the bush,” but all through the rest of the passage it says, “The Lord was in the bush. The Lord spoke to him from the bush. He was afraid to look on the Lord.” Here’s the question, class. Was it the angel of the Lord in the bush or was it the Lord in the bush? Of course, the right answer is, “Yes.”

There are at least a dozen times in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Old Testament, in which this Angel of the Lord shows up. The Angel of the Lord is unlike any other angel. The Angel of the Lord, on the one hand, seems identical to the Lord and, at the same time, seems to be distinct from the Lord. All through the rest of the Bible you have a lot of other angels, but whenever the other angels show up they speak *for* the Lord.

Gabriel shows up. He's probably the most famous other angel in the Bible. He shows up and says to Mary, "Blessed are thou. You're going to give birth to a child." When Gabriel speaks he says, "This is what the Lord says." When any other angel shows up, the angel always says, "This is what the Lord says." Every other angel speaks *for* the Lord, but when the Angel of the Lord speaks it *is* the Lord. Radically different.

So you have this really strange situation in which the Angel of the Lord, on the one hand, seems to be identical with the Lord. When the Angel of the Lord says something, the Lord says something. On the other hand, in another sense, it's a distinct person from the Lord. Even though that's very mysterious, Alec Motyer, a commentator on the book of Exodus, points out that the Angel of the Lord is a way that God continually solves a problem.

For example, do you remember how I said Moses at one point says to God, "Show me your glory," and God says, "I can't; it would kill you. It would consume you"? Moses also gets into an argument with God in that same couple of chapters and says, "I really want you to come with us. I want your glory presence to come with us as the children of Israel go to the Promised Land." God keeps saying, "I can't go with you, because you're rebellious. You're sinful, and I would consume you. I would destroy you. So my presence cannot go with you." Moses was saying, "You have to come with us. I need your presence. I need your presence."

"No, my presence will consume you."

"You have to come."

"No, I can't. It will kill you."

Then, suddenly, in Exodus 32 (round 24), God says, "I will send my Angel." It solves a problem. Alec Motyer says something like, "The Angel of the Lord is revealed as a merciful accommodation of God, whereby the Lord can be present among a sinful people when were he to go with them himself his presence would consume them. The Angel suffers no reduction or adjustment of his full deity, yet he is that mode of deity whereby the holy God can keep company with sinners."

Do you see that? "Please come with us." "No, it will kill you. I'll tell you what. I'll send you my Angel." The Angel is the mode of deity whereby the Holy God can keep company with sinners. This happens again and again in the Bible. Let me give you the most moving example of it. Here it's fascinating. Because of the Angel of the Lord, Moses can draw near without being consumed. Let me give

you another example of this in the book of Genesis.

Abraham and Sarah are very old, and they have no children. Sarah finally says, "I'm never going to have a child, so here's what I want you to do." She says to Abraham, "Take my maidservant, Hagar, who's young and fertile, and sleep with her and have a son through her." So Abraham sleeps with Hagar, and Hagar gets pregnant and gives birth to a child, Ishmael. At that point, everybody in the story begins to act despicably.

First of all, Hagar gets full of herself, full of pride, and starts to taunt Sarah and say, "You're old, and I'm young. I have a son, and you don't." Then Sarah, because of the taunting, just erupts and says, "I'm going to send you out into the desert with your son," which was another way of saying, "You're going to die." To be sent out into the desert, you're going to die. She goes to Abraham and says, "Send her and her son out into the desert."

Abraham, the ineffectual, cowardly Abraham, doesn't like the idea, wrings his hands, but then says, "Okay, go." So poor Hagar is out there in the desert with her son, and they run out of water. The boy is dying of thirst, rejected by his father, and she puts him under a bush and says, "I can't bear to see him die." She walks away from him a little while, because she just can't see him breathe his last breath, and the Angel of the Lord appears.

Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham don't deserve any help. They screwed up. They did despicably. Every single one of them acted in a proud, cowardly, self-centered, inexcusable way, but the Angel of the Lord shows up. The Lord speaks through the Angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord shows up and it says, "The Lord said to her, 'I will save you and your son, and I will make him into a great nation.' "

Now here's the question. How is it possible that, through the Angel, God can come near to people and help people who don't deserve his presence and who otherwise would be consumed by his holiness? Some of you are saying, "Whenever you're preaching on the Old Testament, at this point in the sermon you say, 'This reminds us of somebody,' or 'This points to somebody.' " But I'm not going to do that, because this *is* the Somebody.

Alec Motyer essentially says this about the Angel of the Lord: "There is only one other person in the Bible who is both identical with yet distinct from the Lord, one who without abandoning the full essence and prerogatives of deity or diminishing the divine holiness is able to accommodate himself to the company of sinners, and who, while affirming the wrath of God, is yet a supreme display of his outreaching mercy. The Angel of the Lord cannot be understood except as a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ himself."

This is Jesus Christ before he was born as a human being. Now let's answer the question, "How can the Angel of the Lord be the means by which Moses can draw near without being consumed and God can draw near to Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah and save them without them being consumed?" Here's how it can be done. Because centuries later, that Angel was born into this world, and he

became the son of a poor woman.

At the end of his life, he was rejected by his Father too. He was crying out in his thirst and he was dying, but nobody answered him. Do you know why? Because on the cross Jesus Christ was getting the abandonment they deserved. He was being consumed by the divine wrath and justice that Moses deserved. He was getting the punishment for sins that we all deserve, so that if you believe in Jesus Christ, he becomes your Angel and you can draw near to God. In fact, not just draw near to God; God can indwell you with his beauty and power and you not be consumed.

If you think, by the way, "Boy, he's kind of pressing things," no, because John, chapter 8, verse 58 ... When Jesus Christ is talking to his critics, he says, "Before Abraham was, I am." He doesn't say, "Before Abraham was, I was." No, no. He's deliberately invoking this name. He says, "Before Abraham was ever born, I am." Everybody was amazed. They tried to stone him. They understood what he meant. "I am the Angel who was speaking to Moses from the burning bush." There's a great Christmas hymn that goes like this.

*The royal guest you entertain
Is not of common birth
But second in the great I Am
The God of heaven and earth.*

In the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is second in the great I Am, the God of heaven and earth. That leads us just to this. God sends Moses out now, and we can spend some time on what it means to be sent. We don't have to look at Moses and see how God changed Moses and made him a person God could use in the world. We actually already have what God says when he says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Have you read the book of Genesis? When God says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," here's what he's saying. "I work with the most unpromising material. I took that coward Abraham, I took that dysfunctional father Isaac, I took that schemer con man Jacob, and I made them into great people. I changed the world through them. I took meek Moses and made him into a leader. I take Peter and turn him into a rock. Who knows what I can make of you? Who knows what I could do in the world through you?"

You know when Paul says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels"? When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, that's the power of God, the Spirit of God in our lives, even though we're earthen vessels. It's another way of saying if you believe in Jesus Christ, God through Jesus Christ, your Angel, comes into your life and *you're* the burning bush now.

You may not be, humanly speaking, a giant sequoia. You may be just a bush, but it doesn't matter. If God through his Spirit is burning with the fire of his beauty, love, and power in the center of your life, you'll become something beautiful. You'll become something safe. You'll become something powerful.

God can burn with his uncommon light, holiness, and beauty in the center of your life, and you won't be consumed by it because of what Jesus Christ did. Don't you want that? Don't you want to be used like that? Don't you want to become something like that? Well, then, do what Moses did. "I will go over and see." I don't know what that means for everybody in this room, but whatever it means, go over and see. Let's pray.

Our Father, thank you for giving us what we need to understand who you are. You are infinitely great. You are endlessly and infinitely great. We can hardly understand what it means that you have no beginning and no end, that all things have their being in you, but at the same time you are astonishingly personal.

You're a God we can know. You're a God we can love, but all because of the merits and the work of Jesus Christ, our Angel, who has made it possible for you to come in and burn in the middle of our hearts and lives with your power and we not be consumed by it.

So we thank you, Father, for all that, and we ask that you would help us to know you better, that you would strengthen our hearts so that we can experience and know you better. Father, everyone in this room needs to give themselves to you, some people for the first time, some people for the 'nth time. Help us to do that now. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Sin

What We Believe: Foundations—October 18, 2015

Genesis 2:16–17; 3:1–9

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17** but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Genesis 3:

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” **2** The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, **3** but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ ”

4 “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. **5** “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” **6** When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. **8** Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

The Word of the Lord.

We’re looking at the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, and there’s no way to do that without getting to what the Bible says is wrong with us. It’s really obvious to everyone that human beings can do an awful lot of very bad things, really evil things. But why? Sociologists will say unjust social conditions. Oppression will result in violence. The real problem is what made the oppressors oppressors, if they weren’t oppressed (and they weren’t)?

Psychologists will say, “Well, if a person is deprived of love, if there’s abuse or neglect or abandonment, they’re capable of very horrific things.” Well, the trouble is a lot of people who have done very horrific things have not had that kind of background. What if these conditions do not actually cause the evil? What if those conditions only magnify something that’s already inside of us?

In 1961, Adolf Eichmann was captured and put on trial. It may have been the first televised trial. I can’t remember exactly. Adolf Eichmann was the German Nazi SS Lieutenant Colonel who was the mastermind behind the death camps and the Jewish genocide. He was put on trial, and a man named Yehiel Dinur, who was a death camp survivor, was brought in in order to testify against Eichmann. When he walked in and saw Eichmann, he collapsed on the floor, sobbing, and fainted.

Twenty-two years later, Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* in 1983 interviewed Yehiel Dinur and showed him the clip of himself falling apart. Mike Wallace asked him, “What went through your mind at that point?” In other words, “Why did you collapse?” Wallace said, “Was it hatred? Were you overwhelmed with hatred? Were you overwhelmed with fear in the presence of your former persecutor?”

Yehiel Dinur startled Mike Wallace (and anybody who has ever seen this, by the way) by saying, “No, no, no. Here’s what overwhelmed me. I came in, I looked at Eichmann, and I realized, ‘This is not a demon. This is not a superman. This is someone just like me, and if he’s capable of doing this, so am I.’ ” This is what

Yehiel Dinur said. “Eichmann is in all of us.” He was facing himself.

The Bible says that’s exactly right, and here’s my question to you. Have you faced yourself? Do you know what’s in your heart? Do you know what you’re capable of? What are you going to do about it? If you grasp the biblical doctrine of sin, you will be forced to answer all of those questions, which you need to answer.

There’s no one place that will give you everything the Bible has to say about this subject of sin, human evil, but there’s no more classic or more foundational place than the great story of the Serpent, an agent of Satan, tempting the first man and the first woman in the garden of Eden. It tells you pretty much everything top level you need to know. As we take a look at this narrative, we’re going to learn about *the root of sin*, *the essence of sin*, *the signs of sin*, and *the solution for sin*.

1. *The root of sin*. In chapter 2, verses 16–17, God gives the first man and the first woman a command. **“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”** In chapter 3, verse 4, the Serpent says to the man and the woman, **“You will not certainly die ... For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened ...”**

This is a direct contradiction of what God has said. The Serpent says, “You will not die. If you do this, you’ll be better. You will see better. Your horizons will be opened.” What is the Serpent doing? The Serpent has not targeted belief in the existence of God. He didn’t go after that. If you look out in the world, evidence of what I’m saying is that most people in the world *do* believe in God, and probably most people *will* believe in God.

That’s not what the Serpent goes after. He’s not targeting that. What is he targeting? If you look at verses 16–17, where God says, “I’m only giving you one command ...” Some years ago, I was in a class and a teenager said, “That’s paradise.” What’s paradise? Only one command. It’s amazing. You can do anything. “I’ve put you in paradise, and there’s only one law. Not 10 commandments, not two commandments ... one. Don’t eat the tree.”

But wiser heads than me have noticed something. There’s something implicit here. It’s not just that God is saying, “Don’t eat that, and you’ll be fine.” Notice he says, “Don’t eat the tree,” but he doesn’t give a reason. He doesn’t say, “Don’t eat the tree because it’s fattening.” For New Yorkers, that would have been enough. “Don’t eat the tree because it’s not nutritionally good. It’s caloric. Too many carbs.” Or something bigger. He could have just said, “Oh, by the way, don’t eat the tree or else human history will be an absolute atrocity.” He doesn’t even do that.

He just says, “Don’t eat the tree.” What’s going on? Here’s what God is saying. “No, I’m not telling you why you shouldn’t eat the tree, because then you might do it simply because you think it’s good for you. That’s not obeying me. That’s self-interested compliance. No. I want you not to eat the tree just because I’m

asking you not to, just because you love me, and just because you trust my love for you." That's what the Serpent goes after. He does character assassination.

God says, "If you eat this tree, you will surely die," and the Serpent says, "Oh no, no. You will not surely die. You will not get worse. You will get better. Your eyes will be opened. You'll see new horizons." Here's what the Serpent is saying. "You can't trust God. You can't trust his love. You can't trust his love for you. You can't trust his good will for you. If you obey God, he'll keep you down. If you submit to God, you'll miss out. You will be held back from opportunities. You won't be all that you could be."

This is what the Serpent is saying. "You can't trust God. You can't give yourself completely to him. Therefore, you're on your own. You have to take your life into your own hands." That, friends, is the lie of the Serpent that has passed into, indeed, every human heart. Whether you believe in God or not, whether you're religious or not, whether you're moral or immoral, it has passed into every single human heart. Do you know that?

My friend Sinclair Ferguson, a Scottish minister who's probably the best at preaching and teaching about this, tells a story to try to get it across. He says imagine around Christmastime a man has a little boy, and he takes that little boy to some toy superstore. He walks all the way through with his little boy. He says, "Do you see that? Would you like that?" The little boy goes, "Oh yes, Daddy!" Then they go a little farther. "Do you see that? Do you see those things?"

"Oh yeah."

"Would you like some of those, or would you like that?"

"Oh yes, Daddy!"

He goes all the way through the store that way. He gets to the very end of the store, and he turns to his son and says, "Let me tell you why I brought you here. I've brought you here to let you know you're not going to get any of this. I'm not going to give you anything. Do you see all that? You'll have none of it. Now let's go home."

Sinclair says that is what you believe in your heart of hearts about God and you. If you don't understand that, if you don't know that, you won't understand yourself. You really do not believe God has your best interests at heart. You believe he's never going to give you the things you most want in life.

You might have to negotiate with him. You might have to deal with him. You might have to have some kind of relationship with him, but you can't utterly trust him, because that's how God is. You're on your own. You're going to have to take charge of your own life. You can't trust him.

I don't understand psychology like I probably should, but Erik Erikson wrote a book called *Childhood and Society*. It's a pretty famous book. He's a psychologist. One of his points was that if a child doesn't learn to trust in its

earliest stages ... If an infant, for example, or a young child is abandoned or abused by the dominant adult, like a father or a mother or somebody like that ... If they don't learn how to trust in the earliest stages of their life, all kinds of pathologies result from that. They have problems their entire life.

Now I don't know well enough what Erikson's theories are. I'm sure there are people writing all sorts of papers and books criticizing it, but here's what I do know. That *is* what happened to us at the beginning of history, in the deeps of time. The human race has learned from the Serpent, at the heart of our hearts, not to trust God. There are people all over the world (I see people out there) who are working themselves to death to try to prove to themselves and to others their value, because they don't trust God's love enough to get value from him.

I see people demonizing others and tearing others down and criticizing others to bolster their own sense of self-worth. Why? Because they don't trust God enough to get that worth from him. I see people out there exhausting themselves trying to control everything, to make sure their family and their children and their health and their finances and everything will be fine and nothing will go wrong, and they're eaten up with anxiety because they don't trust the love of God enough to give them that sense of safety.

This is the lie that is at the root of every human heart. In a sense, it's the prereq for all the bad things we ever do, because we have to take life into our own hands. We have to do it ourselves. We can't trust God to do it.

2. *The essence of sin.* If that's the root of sin, the prereq, what is sin? The essence of sin is right here. There are actually two sides to the essence of sin. There always are. You say, "What is the definition of sin? What's the essence of sin according to the Bible?" Verse 6: "**When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.**"

I could parse that, but the main point is there was a law ("Don't eat the tree") and she violated the law (she ate it). That is certainly one of the biblical definitions of sin. It says in 1 John, "Sin is transgression of the law." If you have a prescription ("Don't do this") and you do it, if God says that and you disobey God, you've sinned. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows that the motives of the heart, the impulses of the heart that lead us into actual behavioral sins are also sin.

What is the essence of the heart that leads to behavioral sins? The answer is actually in what the Serpent says just before she takes it. He says, "You will not certainly die." That's the contradiction. That's the lie. "God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." Theologians and commentators over the years ... "You will be like God." That is actually what we're all after. We want to put ourselves in the place that only God should be. That's the essence of sin.

We take on prerogatives that only God should have. We put ourselves at the

center. We make ourselves the authority of our lives. God should be that. We try to get everything to orbit around our glory, our worth, and our acclaim. God should be the center of that. So you could say sin is putting ourselves in the place of God. Sin is making everything center on us instead of on God. Sin is trying to be our own savior and lord, and that's extremely important to grasp.

Martin Luther has said it best. In his famous lectures on Romans, there's a spot where he says, famously, that human nature is *incurvatus se*, which is Latin for being curved in on itself, and he essentially says, "Our nature is so deeply curved in on itself that it wickedly, curvishly, and viciously seeks to use all things, even God, for its own sake." That is brilliant, and I'm going to have to unpack that a little bit.

He says we are so curved in on ourselves that we wickedly, curvishly, and viciously seek to use all things, even God, for our own sake. What he's saying is self-centeredness is the essence of sin. When you and I think of self-centeredness, we think of a couple of kinds of people. First of all, we think of cruel people. It is true that some of the greatest dictators and tyrants of history have been self-centered. They're often what we call *egomaniacs*.

That's really true, but here's what you need to see. The essence of self-centeredness is not just being cruel or being bad. No. Luther says it pervades everything because it makes you use everything. Self-centeredness also is the main motivation for being good. It's the main motivation for being moral, for being nice, for giving your money away. There is no better way to get control of other people than by being nice.

There is no better way of demanding that people give you respect and hear you than by being good. There's no better way to get everybody to have to do everything you want than by being incredibly self-sacrificing and loving. Deep down inside, what we're doing when we're helping people, when we're giving our money away, when we're doing all of these wonderful things for people, is using them. We're not doing it for their sake; we're doing it for our sake. That's what Luther is saying.

But let's go even further. Religion, in general, is fueled by self-centeredness. That's what Luther is trying to say too. Here's how religion generally works, what most religious people do. I obey my Scriptures, whatever they are. I go to my place of worship, whatever it is. I pray to God, and I'm doing all these things, and I expect results. I expect answers to prayer. I expect blessing in my life.

As I often have said, because it has often happened to me as a pastor, I have had people say, "I try to live the Christian life, and none of my prayers are being answered. Everything is going wrong. I try to live a Christian life. What use is it to be a Christian if God never answers my prayers?" Ah, *use*. Freudian slip. Let me point out what Martin Luther just said.

If you obey God and you say, "I'll obey you, Lord, but *if* ... I'll obey, I'll be a Christian, *as long as* ..." Whatever is on the other side of the *if*, whatever is on

the other side of the *as long as*, is your real god. The God you supposedly are obeying you are using. If you love somebody, really love them, why do you do the things they want? Because the reward is just the look on their face when they're happy, just to see the smile. It's a reward all by itself. That's love.

Martin Luther says nobody loves God. Saint Paul says nobody seeks God, nobody loves God. Why? Deep down inside we all believe he's somebody we're going to have to negotiate with. He's somebody we're going to have to do things for if we're going to get anything. We're going to have to do it in order to put him in our debt. Nobody just loves God for who he is. Nobody just pleases God unconditionally. We all use him. That's the normal way that religion operates.

The essence of sin, then, is putting yourself in the place of God, self-centeredness, being your own savior and lord. Just as a sidebar, Christians, do you understand how radical this understanding of sin is? Sin isn't just breaking the rules. Sin is being your own savior and lord, living for your own glory, being your own rescuer.

That's the reason we often say around Redeemer if sin is being your own savior and lord instead of letting God be that for you, because you don't trust him, then that means you can be your own savior and lord as much through keeping God's law as by breaking it. By keeping God's law and insisting that God obey you and making sure everybody respects you. That's what a Pharisee is. That's what a self-righteous person is.

Once you realize that sin is this self-centeredness and it can work itself out just as much through being moral and religious as being immoral and irreligious, it's so radical. It levels the world for you. You can no longer do what almost everybody else does. Christians can no longer go around basically dividing the world into the good guys and the bad guys. We can no longer just divide the world into sinful people and us wonderful people. You can't do that anymore. It's impossible.

There's this great quote by G.K. Chesterton about how radical the belief in original sin is, the belief that we're all sinners, the belief that we don't trust God, the belief that we're all self-centered and we're just working our self-centeredness and our sin out in both religious and non-religious ways, in respectable and non-respectable ways.

Chesterton has this great spot where he says something like, "Christianity preaches an obviously unattractive idea: original sin. But when we wait for its results, they are sympathy and brotherhood and a thunder of laughter and pity. For only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king." No longer do we look at the person out in the street ...

He could have said, "Pity the criminal and distrust the king." We're all mixtures of, obviously, in the image of God, goodness, but also because of our sin we're all broken. Whether you're being respectable or not, everybody is a sinner. Christians look at that, and we no longer can feel superior to anybody. We just

can't do it.

3. *The signs of sin.* If you go through the rest of chapter 3, you see the results of sin. They're not really in the passage we have chosen, but they're there in embryonic form. Basically, sin is a malignant tumor that destroys relationships, *all* relationships. If sin is self-centeredness, self-centeredness destroys all relationships. You see it in two ways.

First, as soon as they sin ... Do you see what happens to them? As soon as they sin, "Then the eyes of both were opened." It's exactly what the Serpent said. Never trust the Serpent, FYI. Make a mental note. Never trust the Serpent. Never trust Satan. "**Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked ...**" They felt shame, and they were scared to death of anybody having unmediated knowledge of who they were.

The reason they sewed the fig leaves is this. Now that I'm my own savior and lord, now that I'm not resting in God's love but I'm going to have to kind of patch up a righteousness, patch up an identity, a self-worth of my own, now my relationships are this. I cannot bear to have you see all the way into me. I have to control what you know of me. I can't do transparency anymore. I can't do self-giving. I have to use you to get you to see me the way I need you to see me.

So self-centeredness destroys human relationships. Secondly, it also destroys the relationship with God himself. "When the Lord God was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden." What this means is something pretty simple. If you build your identity on being a really smart person, there is nothing more devastating than sitting with a person 10 times smarter than you.

If you build your identity, to any degree, on being talented or being good-looking and you get into the presence of someone 10 times more than you, it's just devastating. That is the dimmest hint of what it's like to get near the real God. It's the reason people don't want to believe in God. It's the reason why people, if they do believe in God, want to create a God that doesn't traumatize them.

If you get near a holy God, you're going to see you're so flawed, and you don't want to admit that. If you get near a powerful God, you're going to see how absolutely weak and helpless you are, and you don't want to admit that. As human beings, we're all basing our lives on the idea that we're competent to run our own lives and that we're not all that bad and we're better than a lot of other people. You get near God and it's smashed.

The way this plays out in our lives now is even if you don't believe in God, even if you don't believe there's a heaven or a hell, even if you don't believe in the Bible, even if you don't believe any of that stuff, you have a sense of condemnation you can't shake. There's a voice sometimes that calls you a fool, a fraud, an imposter, that you're not living up. You know what I'm talking about.

Do you know what that is? The Bible says, whether you believe it rationally or not, that's your heart and conscience picking up the fact that there's a God out

there, and if you ever came near him it would be utterly traumatizing and devastating to your whole way of thinking in life.

4. *The solution for sin.* Because we distrust God and we think we're out there in the universe on our own and we are radically self-centered and it destroys relationships, what in the world are we going to do about it? I must say this text only gives us the barest hint, and yet it's the most delectable and wonderful hint. It's verse 9. This points to the whole rest of the Bible, ladies and gentlemen. All the bad stuff has happened. They're already experiencing the anxiety, the insecurity, the fear, the shame. Everything that goes wrong in the human life is already happening.

"But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" Surely he knew. Your first response is, "He's God. This is the same God we get in the rest of the Bible. He's the God who created the world in chapter 1. How could he not know?" Of course he knew. Well, then, why is he asking the question? He knows where they are, and he knows what has happened. If you actually go on, the interview goes like this.

The first question is, "Where are you?" which means, "Why are you hiding from me?" What should the right answer be? What would be the right answer? "Because I sinned." But what is the answer God gets? He says, "I'm hiding because I'm ashamed, because I was naked." So God says, "Why are you hiding from me?" The right answer is, "Because I sinned," but the answer he gets is, "Because I'm ashamed."

So God says, "All right, then, why are you ashamed? Did you eat the tree I told you not to eat?" Leading question. What should the right answer be? "Yes." Pretty simple. That's not the answer he gets. The man says, "The woman made me do it," and the woman says, "The Serpent made me do it." What is God doing? He's counseling. Seconds into the fall of the human race and he's already our Wonderful Counselor. He's counseling.

Those of you who are counselors or those of you who have been through counseling, you know this. If a counselor sees a person all screwed up, all messed up, in denial, not owning what's wrong ... You're the counselor. You see what the person needs to do. What do you do? Do you lecture them? Do you say, "You're a dysfunctional person. I'm going to give you a lecture on borderline personality. This is you, and you're going to listen to it"? You don't do that. You don't descend in judgment. You try to get the person to see.

You ask questions so *they'll* come to see it, so it'll start to dawn on them, so they'll experience *metanoia* (which is repentance), so they'll begin to get out of their denial and see the truth and own up and start to get liberated from the things that are binding them and the delusions and the illusions. Right? That's what God is doing. It's amazing. He doesn't descend in fire and judgment. Instead, he comes out and seeks them in love, like a shepherd, like a counselor, tenderly, trying to wake them up, trying to redeem them, not judge them.

If you had only read the Bible up to this point and you never read the rest of the Bible, you would have no idea the lengths to which God would go to not judge us but seek us in love and to come near. Of course he does it with Jesus Christ and *in* Jesus Christ. In verse 15 of chapter 3 we're told that some descendant of the woman would come, and he would be bruised. He would shed his blood, but he would destroy the works of the Devil.

Here's what I want you to see at the end. What's fascinating about this is that if you want to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ and the solution to your sin, it all comes down into this nutshell. Jesus reverses the work of the Serpent. He comes back to reverse the work of the Serpent and restore paradise. How? The Serpent put a lie in your heart through a tree, and Jesus Christ is going to take the lie *out* of your heart through a tree.

The first Adam in the garden of Eden was told by God, "Obey me about the tree and you will live," and he didn't do it. The second Adam, Jesus Christ, in the garden of Gethsemane, was told by God, "Obey me about the tree." What tree? The cross. The first Adam was told, "Obey me about the tree and you will live," and he didn't do it.

The second Adam was told, "Obey me about the tree, go to the cross, and I will crush you into dust, but it's the only way to end the hiding. It's the only way to end the shame. It's the only way to take the punishment for their guilt." The second Adam was told, "Obey me about the tree, and I will crush you," and yet he did.

George Herbert, in that great poem "The Sacrifice," which is a remarkable poem ... You can find it online. It's a long poem, but it's Jesus speaking from the cross. George Herbert depicts Jesus Christ and imagines him speaking to people as they pass by, as he's up on the cross, but there are two lines that are astonishing to me. It goes like this.

*All ye who pass by, behold and see
Man stole the fruit, now I must climb the tree
The tree of life for all, but only me ...*

Do you see what the poetry is saying? "All ye who pass by, behold and see." "Adam stole the fruit, but I'm climbing this tree, the cross." "The tree of life for all, but only me." Because the cross was a tree of death for Jesus Christ, that cross becomes a tree of life for you and me. Because he took the punishment. There's the gospel. If sin is putting yourself in God's place and trying to take on yourself prerogatives only God has, salvation is God taking your place and my place and getting what we deserve.

Sin is putting ourselves in God's place; salvation is God putting himself in our place. Sin is trying to do things that only God deserves to do; salvation is God coming and taking the things that only we deserve to have. He did it for you. That's what's going to root the lie out of your heart. You are exhausted and I'm exhausted, because we really don't trust God's love. We really don't believe it.

If you just say to yourself, “I know God loves me, I know God loves me,” that won’t work. That’s just abstraction. But if you behold the glory of Jesus Christ dying on the cross, turning that tree into a tree of life because it’s a tree of death for him, all for you, that transforms a slave into a child and duty into choice. New Yorkers, you work so hard. You want to look good. You want to have a great résumé. You want to go to the right schools. You want to be in the right networks. You want to have the right job.

Those are fig leaves, and the pitiful fig leaves of your own making will never, ever actually clothe you the way the love of Christ will. It’ll never really deal with the deep down self-doubt you have, but this will handle that. Don’t you want this? Get Jesus Christ’s healing. Let’s pray.

Our Father, we’re grateful that you have helped us see through this famous and great story of the origins of our human problem that there is a solution, that you have come out for us not in judgment but as the Wonderful Counselor. You’ve come for us as a sympathetic Savior. You’ve come into the world and mounted the tree of death, making it a tree of life for us.

Here we have the solution, and here we have the gospel. We pray that you would help us to take this into the center of our lives so we could be healed of our biggest problem. O Lord Jesus Christ, with your gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, uproot the lie that is at the root of our hearts so we can begin to relax in your love. We pray this in Jesus’ name, amen.

Incarnation

What We Believe: Foundations—October 25, 2015

Philippians 2:1–11

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. **3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. **5** In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God

something to be used to his own advantage;⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is the Word of the Lord.

We're going to look at a fundamental belief of the Christian faith, a doctrine, called the *doctrine of the incarnation*. It's a belief that's unique to the Christian faith, that the eternal, infinite God became a human being in Jesus Christ, a physical, limited, vulnerable, mortal being in history. The implications of this doctrine are vast and many, but what I love about this particular place in Philippians, chapter 2, which in some ways is maybe the classic statement of this high doctrine ... It's just astounding. It's a nosebleed-high philosophical principal doctrine.

Yet what Paul is doing is he's not getting it out just to teach it. He's getting it out because of a problem in the church. You can sort of tell, even from the reading we gave you. He says, "If there's any encouragement from being united with Christ, any comfort from his love, any common sharing in the Spirit, make my joy complete by being one in spirit and of one mind." What he's saying is, "I want unity here," and the reason he's saying, "Please, please have unity, have one mind ..."

As you go on in the rest of Philippians, you'll see that there were divisions in the church, that there were some key figures who were pushing on each other. There was conflict. They were butting heads. In other words, they were fighting. What's great here ... "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, comfort from his love, sharing in the Spirit ..." Those are powerful things.

Paul doesn't expound on what they are, and I'm not either, but those are powerful things, and yet they're not enough to keep them from fighting. He says, "Even though you have all these things, you're still fighting. You have all these things, so keep these things in mind, and stop fighting." That's what he's saying. There's something in the human heart so strongly inclining us to fighting that even these powerful bonds that should be pulling us together aren't enough to stop us fighting.

Common faith and common blood are maybe the two strongest bonds that can hold people together. Common blood. You're in the same family. Common faith. We're in the same church. Now I know this is going to be news to a lot of you. There is fighting in families. There is some *deadly* fighting in families. There is

fighting in the church. In other words, there's something in our hearts that inclines us to fighting that even the strongest resources toward unity are not enough to stop the fighting.

What Paul does is he takes this basic practical human problem, the problem of fighting, and he brings to bear on it the doctrine of the incarnation. He's not doing a little psychological move here. He's saying, "You need to understand the incarnation." He's solving the problem with the incarnation. That's amazing. So let's see how he does it this way. If you just take a look at these few verses, you're going to see, first of all, he describes *the heart that fights*, and then he describes *the heart that makes peace*, and then he shows us *how to get that kind of peaceful heart*.

1. *The heart that fights*. Look carefully. This is where grammar works. In English grammar, you teach your kids how to take apart a sentence. It works very well right here. He says, "I want you to be one in spirit and one mind," and then it says, "**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**"

First of all, what is the cause of the fighting? Vain conceit. Vain conceit is an English translation of a particular Greek word. It's one word. The Greek word is *kenodoxia*, and it literally means ... *Kenos* means to empty. *Doxa* is glory. It means to be glory empty. What does it mean to be glory empty? Among other things, it means to be starved for validation and approval. It means to be not assured of your significance and value. It means to be starving for respect and honor. It means to be cosmically insecure. It means to feel like, "I don't matter, and I don't count."

The Bible actually says this is the case of all human beings. Paul is pointing out that this is the reason you fight. It's because of this. "Have unity rather than have *this*, because *this* is what causes the disunity." If that's the case (and it is) that this is a natural human condition ... There's a kind of vacuum in us, and we feel like we don't have respect, we don't have honor. We need to go get it. We're not sure of our own significance, our own value. We're not sure of our own worth. We have to go get it. That leads, according to this, to fighting.

Now if that's true, that explains a lot of things. First of all, it explains our culture of success. Harriet Rubin some years ago wrote a great article in *Fast Company* called "Success Excess." In it she basically says, "We believe that success and its cousin money will make us secure, important, and happy, but it's time to tell the truth about the high numbers of people who have used all their means to achieve money, power, and glory and then self-destruct."

Then she says, "Maybe it's because when they got to the place, they didn't like what they saw." She says success is our way of dealing with the glory hunger, but then, in the end, it doesn't satisfy. It doesn't give us the glory we want. Later on in the article (to me the greatest thing about the article) she interviews a counselor, and the counselor says that success for us today in our contemporary

culture is the new drug. It's the new alcohol.

She says now think about a drug addict for a minute. The first time that drug addict has that first high, the drug addict is trapped, because from then on, they're going to need more and more and more of the substance to get to the same high. As time goes on, she says, you actually end up having to use more and more of the substance, and yet you get diminishing returns. That is, you have less and less pleasure from it until, finally, you get to the place where you're driven to destructive levels of use, all the while experiencing increasing emptiness inside.

She says that's exactly how success works. In the very beginning, success, money, the first big paycheck, whatever ... It's a high. "I want to get even more success." But as time goes on, she says, it takes more and more success to get that high, and then you can't get it back anymore, and you're working yourself to death and getting less and less satisfaction and empty.

If it's true that we're all glory starved, that would explain the culture of success. It also would explain inner-city crime or even international terrorism, to some degree. It's really not about politics or money. It's about respect. There's a hunger for respect, and the violence is a response to ... what? Not the fact that the folks are assured of their value, assured of their worth. Oh no. It's because they're not that they're lashing out.

Also, by the way, for those of us who have tried to rear children (I mean tried), one of the things I do remember is punishing a child, and as I punished the child for the misbehavior, it didn't seem to stop the misbehavior. In fact, the punishment almost seemed to increase the misbehavior ... until you talk to a parent who knows something about child-rearing or a psychologist or something. They say, "Here's the thing. The one thing human beings want more than anything else, including children, is attention, and even anger is better than being ignored."

We need that attention. Why? We're starved for the attention. Why is it at the end of the movie *Amadeus* the old composer Salieri is in a living hell? It's not because his music is disliked. It's because it has been forgotten. C.S. Lewis says because of the nature of human beings, here's what hell really would be. Fire isn't the worst thing that could be imagined for human beings. Here's hell. Hell is being eternally and utterly ignored.

Now some people are going to say ... By the way, this is the dominant response in our popular culture. Some people would say, "Okay, okay. These children who want attention and the people who lash out in violence and the people who are working themselves to death in the success syndrome and all that ... These are just people who have low self-esteem. It's because they're trying to get their approval from other people. You mustn't do that."

This is the popular narrative. "Oh no, no. Only you can bestow significance on yourself. You have to decide that you love yourself. You have to decide that

you're of value. You don't get validation or accreditation from anybody else. You bestow it on yourself. All that matters is what you think of yourself." Every philosopher, every sociologist, every psychologist, anybody I've ever read commenting on that popular narrative says that's impossible.

We are social beings. We're relational beings. You can't really say, "Everybody in the world thinks I'm a horrible monster. It doesn't matter. I love myself." That's not going to work. Oh no. We're relational beings. We're social beings. Do you know what that means? Only if you get love, approval, and esteem from someone you esteem will you ever have self-esteem. So actually, no, you can't just validate yourself.

Yet if you're out there constantly trying to get that from everybody else, you feel like you're on a treadmill. You feel like you're that little squirrel in a cage, just running and running and getting nowhere. The Bible has the right answer for why we are glory starved. It's because we were made for God. We've turned away from God, and because we've turned away from God, there is an infinite-size vacuum in us that was meant to be filled with the smile of the infinite God.

It was meant to be filled with the delight of the majestic and eternal God. It was meant to be filled with his love. If you turn away from God, if he's not the center of your life and the source of all of your joy, you have this infinite-size vacuum in your soul, and you're doing everything you can to fill it with other people's approval and awards and maybe money and whatever.

It will never be full with that, so you're always cosmically insecure, and you're always touchy and irritable, and you feel like you're not getting what you deserve, so we fight. That's the heart that fights. Glory starved.

2. *The heart that makes peace.* Again, let's look at the structure of these sentences, how they relate to each other. He says, "Don't be glory starved." "**Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**" On the one hand, the word *humility* ... If you just look at the Greek word, it's a simple word that means gentle and modest, but what's great is it's the sentence and its place in the sentence that Paul gives content to this understanding of humility.

What is humility as Paul is talking about? Well, first of all, it is counter to glory starved. "Don't be glory starved, but rather be humble." What that must mean is whatever humility is it means some kind of inner fullness. If what makes you fight is an inner emptiness that you're trying to fill with people's approval, then humility must mean inner fullness. That's the reason it says, "Rather, in humility, not look to your own interests but each to the interests of others."

Humility (and pride) is being defined and determined by what you habitually look at. If you're empty, you habitually look at yourself. You're always saying, "Am I getting mine? How am I doing? How do I look?" You're focused on yourself. That's what you're habitually looking at if you're empty. If you're full, you have the bandwidth to look away. You have the ability to look at other people. You're not

always thinking about yourself or caring about yourself, because there's a fullness there.

Only when you're hungry do you think about food. When you're completely filled up, you can walk right by all that great stuff. If you're hungry, it's very hard to walk through the streets of Manhattan. You all know that. If you're full, you can get right to your destination. No distraction. This is the reason Jonathan Edwards in his series of sermons *Charity and Its Fruits* has one of his chapters, which is actually one of his sermons, on humility. He says there are four things that humility is opposed to. Here Paul opposes humility to being glory starved.

It's very interesting that Jonathan Edwards says to the degree that you have the humility God can give you ... Nobody has it perfectly, but if you're a Christian, as the humility grows in you, which is the inner fullness that grows in you, then there are certain traits by which you can tell that humility is growing in you. Here's what he says. Humility is opposed to four things. It's opposed to *self-consciousness*, it's opposed to *willfulness*, it's opposed to *scornfulness*, and, finally, it's opposed to *drivenness*. Let's take them in reverse order.

First of all, Edwards says humility is opposed to *drivenness*. It's one thing to work hard. There are seasons in your life and seasons in the year where you have to work hard, but if you habitually work hard, if you're working all the time, overworking, it's a response to inner emptiness, not to inner fullness. I have to go so far as to say most people, at least many, many, many people who are super competent and super productive are so because they're trying to prove themselves to themselves and other people. They're trying to fill that vacuum.

Secondly, humility is opposed to *scornfulness*. Sometimes sarcasm is a good way to make a point, and sometimes there are certain things that deserve to be disdained. There are evil things. There are bad things that deserve to be disdained, but if your habit is to be contemptuous, if you habitually show disdain, if you jeer, if you taunt, if you mock (by the way, this is what the Internet encourages in us), if you're always scorning and disdaining and taunting, that's a sign of inner emptiness.

You're putting people down so you can feel you're above them. You're not just saying, "Well, I disagree." "Oh, how idiotic. How stupid. Unbelievable!" That is the opposite of being full. Courtesy and gentleness is not just a sign of being nice. It's a sign of being full as opposed to inner emptiness. Thirdly, humility is opposed to *willfulness*. This is what Edwards means by *willfulness*. A willful person is someone who's always right. Often wrong, but never in doubt.

It's somebody who doesn't listen, somebody who never takes advice. He says that is always, always a mark of a lack of humility. It's an inner emptiness. "I have to be right. You have to be wrong." No, you don't, and yet you do if you're empty, if you're always trying to assure yourself of your validation, if you're always trying to accredit yourself, if you're always desperately looking for respect and honor.

Do you feel bad yet? If you don't, this might help. Humility is also opposed to *self-*

consciousness. You say, “Yeah, I understand. People who are not humble are self-promoting and they brag all the time.” That’s right. That’s one response to the inner emptiness. One of the ways to deal with glory hunger is to be domineering and tell everybody how great you are. You’re trying to convince them and you.

The other response to being glory starved is to hate yourself, to be down on yourself, to be self-conscious, to be shy, to be beating yourself up all the time. To be always noticing, “Oh gosh, I’m not very this. I’m not very that. Other people have more. Other people are better. I’m really not what I should be ...” You’re totally self-absorbed, every bit as self-absorbed as the proud person.

If you are full, you’re not thinking about yourself all the time. That’s the reason why that very, very famous place in C.S. Lewis’ book *Mere Christianity*, his very famous chapter called “The Great Sin ...” It’s about pride. That’s where he says, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it’s thinking of yourself less.” You don’t think about yourself. Why? Because you’re full.

It’s the reason why you walk down the street, and even though you might smell this or that, you’re on your way, because you’re full. You don’t care about everything else on the street. You don’t see all the stores. You don’t go buy from all the vendors. You just run by them. Why? Because you’re full. You’re not distracted. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It’s not thinking that much of yourself, not thinking *about* yourself. Not thinking “I’m this” or “I’m that.” Just not worrying so much about it.

3. *How to get a peaceful heart.* So how do you get a heart like that? How do you get a heart that full? How do you get this kind of spiritual humility? How do you get the heart that makes peace instead of always fighting? The answer is the doctrine of the incarnation. I love this about Paul. I love this about the Bible. The answer is not a little psychological move on yourself. Oh no. You need doctrine. You need biblical doctrine.

What he’s really saying is you need to believe, you need to rejoice in, and you need to constantly remind yourself of everything that happens in verses 6–11. That’s why he says, “**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus ...**” What is that mindset? This is the story, from verses 6–11 (it’s like a hymn, by the way), of everything Jesus Christ did. This is his career. It’s a trajectory. It’s where he was, where he went, and where he is now.

Where he was? He was in nature God. He had the being of God. The Greek term is very strong. He had the same being, and he was equal, it says. He didn’t hold onto his equality, but he *had* equality. There was absolutely nothing illegitimate about it, but he didn’t hold onto it. He was equal with the Father, equal in power, equal in omnipotence, equal in omniscience. He was equal being with the Father.

So he had the nature of God, but then it says, in verse 7, he made himself nothing and took on another nature by taking the nature of not just a human

being who was an aristocrat but a human being who was a servant. That is, not a wealthy, powerful human being but one who was simple, one who was actually poor, one who was very vulnerable and who didn't just come down and become an ordinary human being and lose his glory in *that* way, but he went to the cross.

As a result, God has highly exalted him to the highest place and given him the name which is above every name. He was *this* high and he came *this* low, and yet in some ways, because of what he did, if anything, he has more honor and more glory than he had before. That is the story of the incarnation. Here is what Paul is saying. You have to use that on yourself. How do you do that? You have to see what happened *outside* you, and then you have to use it *inside* you.

What happened outside you? The key word is verse 7. He just said, "You're empty of glory. That's your problem. You're glory starved." Then in verse 7 it says ... The English is "He made himself nothing," but literally it says, "He emptied himself." It's the same word, *kenosis*. Here's what Paul is saying. You and I are killing each other and killing ourselves, desperately trying to fill ourselves with glory. Harriet Rubin says we're doing everything. We're in success. We're out for money. We're doing everything we can.

We feel empty and we're filling ourselves with glory, but Jesus Christ was full and he voluntarily emptied himself of glory. Do you know what kind of glory Jesus had? Do you know what kind of beauty Jesus had? The answer, by the way, is "No, you don't." I don't either, but I can tell you this. He was beautiful beyond bearing. He was glorious beyond our comprehension. He was full, and he emptied himself.

We're empty trying to fill ourselves. He was full and emptied himself voluntarily. He didn't just come down and become an ordinary human being. Isaiah 53 says that. "He had no beauty or majesty that we should desire him." He wasn't an attractive human being. He lost all of his glory, but it wasn't just that. He went to the cross, and on the cross, what does he say? "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Do you know what's happening there? He's being eternally and utterly ignored. He's being cut off. Jesus Christ is embracing our worst nightmare. What is that? To be eternally and utterly ignored. What is he doing on the cross? I'll tell you what he's doing on the cross. He's taking what we deserve. We have turned away from God. What do we deserve? For God to turn away from us.

That has probably happened to you. If someone just rejected you, just turned away from you, what do you do? You say, "You've turned away from me? Fine. If that's the way you want it, I'll turn away from you." It feels very just. But even those of us who believe in God, even those of us who try to be moral, we don't center our lives on him. We don't do everything in reference to him. We don't love him, even though we owe him everything. He keeps us alive every second.

We've turned away from him, and what we deserve is for him to turn away from us. Because we have this inner vacuum that was made for his love, for him to

turn away from us means we're going to just dry up and blow away. That's what we deserve. That's justice. But on the cross Jesus Christ got that justice. He got what we deserved. The Father turned his face away. We sing that. Jesus Christ was eternally and utterly ignored. He experienced all that. Why?

Jesus Christ experienced that so now when you go to God and say, "Father, accept me and love me and give me your smile and give me your delight. Love me because of what Jesus did. Not because of anything I've done but what Jesus Christ has done ..." The Bible says God puts your sin on him, treats Jesus as you deserve, and God gives you his righteousness, meaning he treats you as he deserved.

It says in 1 Peter we are his treasured possession. That means now God looks at you and says, "In Jesus Christ, I find you more precious and beautiful than all the jewels that lie beneath the earth." Take that into your heart, and that fills it. That's what happened outside you. Do you believe it? Do you accept that? Do you embrace it by faith? Now take it inside. If you take it inside ...

We've talked about this, and you all nodded. Nobody can validate themselves. Only if you get the love and approval and esteem of someone you esteem can you have self-esteem. The praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards. To be praised by someone you would praise, to be adored by someone you adore ... that would be heaven.

What that means is there could not be possible any greater basis for your identity, any greater strength, than to know that you not only have God's approval but you cannot lose it. You not only have his smile but it's not based on you. It's not like this week you get his approval and next week you don't have a good week so you lose his approval. No. Everybody else is like that. Everybody else's esteem is like that.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to get other people's esteem and approval. Fine. But you're going to be up and down. It'll never satisfy like *this* will. Nothing can satisfy like *this* will. If you know it, you can start to live like Jesus Christ lived. How did he live? Do you see his trajectory? He was up *here* and he came down *here*, but if anything, he has more honor. How could that be? Because the greatest glory is a person who gives up his glory in order to save us. If anything, that's more glorious.

The greatest strength is to become weak to save us. If anything, that's true strength. Now *you* go do it. You know it will work. The way up is down. The way to be rich is to give your money away. The way to have power and influence is to not domineer but sacrifice for other people. The way to be happy is to stop thinking about your own happiness and help other people be happy. That's the way. The way to rule is to serve. You can do that.

You know that's true, but you won't be able to do it just by saying, "Yes, I guess I have to go out and do that." You have to know inside the smile of God, the delight of God. He became so small so that we would become big in the eyes of the

Father. C.S. Lewis says, “To be loved by God … delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.”

“For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.” Success won’t open that door. Lashing out won’t open that door. Telling yourself, “Oh, I love myself” is not going to open that door. *This will.* Let’s pray.

Our Father, thank you for showing us the solution to our problems. This is high doctrine. We thank you, Lord, that your Son Jesus Christ had this mindset. Now give us the same mindset. Give us the same frame of mind. Most of all, help us to rejoice in what your Son did for us until that painful self-awareness goes away, until we’re full.

Lord, we thank you that your Son emptied himself that we could be filled. Now make us people who understand this, and help us to eat the fruit of this wonderful doctrine through the power of your Spirit. We pray it in Jesus’ name, amen.

Salvation

What We Believe: Foundations—November 1, 2015

Ephesians 1:3–10

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

The Word of the Lord.

We've been looking at the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, and we've been using the outline of the Apostles' Creed, the oldest summary of biblical doctrine, to do it. When you get to our topic for today, *salvation* ... It says, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting." That's salvation. Where do you go in the Bible to talk about salvation? It seems like the Bible is all about salvation.

What I've decided to do is take this text, which, by the way, in the original Greek was one sentence. This is one long sentence. When Paul got rolling, he got rolling. It's actually, I think, the single greatest, most panoramic view of all that Christian salvation entails in one place. It's kind of a nosebleed sort of text.

If you see the breathtaking view, especially at night, of New York when you're flying in, or if you're in a city near a mountain and you go to the top of the mountain and look down on the city, a panoramic view of the city is not necessarily ... Well, certainly it's not the only way to get to know the city and, frankly, I'd say it's not the best way to get to know a city, but the aerial view is an irreplaceable way to see a city. It's a perspective you get no other way.

Therefore, what I'm going to do here is do a survey of all that the Bible says about salvation in Jesus Christ, which is right here in this text. It doesn't go into any detail at all and, therefore, I won't go into much detail. I will simply, in a sense, give you the panoramic view. In some ways, it can even be a little briefer than usual.

You say, "Well, it doesn't say the word *salvation* anywhere. What makes you say this is about salvation?" It says, "**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing ...**" Every spiritual blessing. Then Paul goes on to talk about every spiritual blessing. That's salvation. Salvation is multidimensional. Christian salvation is all sorts of blessings.

One of the most astounding things is the very first sentence says he *has* blessed us. Who's *us*? Christians. He *has* blessed us. That's past tense. Every spiritual blessing you already have when you become a Christian. What about resurrection of the body and life everlasting? The salvation of Christ is so profound and so powerful that when you receive it, you have at least in seed form, in nascent form, absolutely everything.

So let's take a look at every spiritual blessing. Let's take a look at this powerful salvation. We're going to learn how we get every spiritual blessing, what those spiritual blessings are, why we can have those spiritual blessings, and how to know whether you have them. *How we get them, what they are, why we can get them, and how to know if you have them.*

1. *How we get them.* How does every spiritual blessing come? The answer is

said so often in this text some people would say it's the main theme of this passage. It comes *in him*. Look at how often it's said. In verse 3 it says we get every spiritual blessing *in Christ*. Then in verse 4, "He chose us *in him*." Then down in verse 7 it says, "*In him we have redemption.*" In verse 6 it says, "The praise of his grace, which he has given to us *in the One*."

So we get grace *in him*. We get redemption *in him*. We get every spiritual blessing *in him*. If you have Jesus, you have every spiritual blessing. If you don't have Jesus, you don't have anything. It comes in him. In other words, to become a Christian is to be united to Jesus Christ. You're united to him, and all the blessings come with him. *All* of them. Once you have him, you have everything.

The best example of this, when people say, "What in the world does it mean to be united with Christ?" Well, the theologians say we're united legally and vitally. The best illustration we have of this is marriage. First of all, legally. Here's how the illustration goes. Here are two people. They're not married, but they're thinking about it.

One of them is poor. One of them has had a pretty messed-up life. One of them has nothing, and the other one has done everything right, made every right move, has worked incredibly hard, and is rich. So you have one person who's rich and one person who's poor. If they get married (and this has been the case for centuries and centuries across all of the various cultures) ... If a rich person marries a poor person, they share the wealth.

The poor person may not have deserved any of it. The rich person has worked hard to earn it all. But when they get married, they share that wealth. So the poor spouse receives with the rich spouse the riches of the spouse. The Bible simply says everything Jesus Christ has ... When you're united with him by faith, when you believe in him, when you give yourself to him, everything he has comes to you. You're united with him legally.

You can break this down a little bit. To be united with him legally. Romans 6 says we're united with him in his death and in his resurrection. What does it mean to be united with him in his death and in his resurrection? Well, on the one hand, why did he die on the cross? He died on the cross for sin. He died to pay the penalty for sin. Do you know what this means?

In your town, wherever it is, if there's a stop sign law, you have to stop at the stop sign. If you go through the stop sign, now you're guilty and you have to pay the fine. Whatever that fine is, when you pay the fine, the law has no more claim over you. None. To be united with Jesus Christ in his death means that you are as free from guilt and condemnation as if you died for the sin. If you've done something really wrong but you're united with Christ, you are as free from condemnation as if you died for that. It has all been paid.

Then it says we're united with him in his resurrection. What is his resurrection? How can we be united with him in his resurrection? We're still mortal here. What that means is Jesus' resurrection was his reward. It was reward for his service. It

was reward for all that he did. It was his vindication. It was his triumph.

What this means is that all of the things Jesus Christ deserves for everything he has done, all his honors ... When you're united with him, they're yours. God treats you as if you deserve all of the things he has achieved. One of my favorite illustrations of this ... It was an episode in a cop show some years ago I watched. It was just a TV episode. It was fiction, by the way. There was an old 80-year-old man, kind of broken down, and he was wanted for a crime.

He was being hunted by navy military police, because he'd been in the navy, and they find him. It turns out, though, this 80-year-old man had been in World War II, and in World War II he had done something very heroic and he had been given the Congressional Medal of Honor. When those snarling MPs go for him, somebody next to him pulls aside his tie, and there underneath it is the Congressional Medal of Honor.

When those MPs see that Congressional Medal of Honor ... In spite of the fact this guy is guilty, in spite of the fact that they're after him, when they see that, they snap to attention and salute. They're saluting the medal. They're saluting what it refers to, what it stands for. When you become a Christian, no matter who you are or what you are in yourself, no matter what your record is, all of Jesus' awards are pinned to your chest, and the whole world salutes, and the Father loves you and accepts you and honors you.

That's just what it means to be united with him legally. What does it mean to be united with him vitally? What that means, of course, is the very Spirit of God comes into your life, the very Spirit of the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son come. Next week, if you're here, there will be a sermon on John, chapter 14, where it talks about how the Father and the Son come and reside in you through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Second Peter, chapter 1, verses 3–4, have one of the most amazing statements in the entire Bible. It says that we have everything we need for life and godliness, because we've been made partakers of the divine nature. It means that when you become a Christian, united with Christ, you're united to him not just legally, but his Spirit comes into you. That means, as it were, the genetic material, spiritually speaking, of God comes into you.

All the rest of your life ... Just like your physical life is basically just the outworking of the biological DNA that's put into you at the beginning, so the rest of your spiritual life is the outworking of this new genetic material that has been put in you, the very lifeblood of God, as it were, the divine nature. To say that when you become a Christian you're united to not only him legally but also united to him vitally and you have his Spirit and you have divine nature in you ...

That's the most convicting and comforting possible statement. It's the most convicting, because you have no excuse. You have everything you need to live like you should. But here's how comforting it is. God's very Spirit in you, his nature in you ... There is no wound in you that can't be healed. There is no

brokenness that can't be repaired, and there's not a single binding habit from which you cannot be liberated.

In other words, when you're united with Christ, all spiritual blessings are yours. Either in embryonic, nascent form or in full-blown form, it's all yours. This is the reason why Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of my heroes when it comes to being a preacher and a pastor ... He had a diagnostic question. If he was meeting somebody one-on-one pastorally, he would ask them a diagnostic question. It was very simple. He'd say, "Are you a Christian?"

He found the answers were extremely enlightening. One of the answers he usually got was, "Well, I'm trying" or "I hope so." When he heard that, he would say, "Well, I'm not sure you understand what a Christian is." You either have every spiritual blessing because you're united to Christ or you don't have any spiritual blessings because you're not. When someone says, "I'm trying to be a Christian," what they seem to mean is that spiritual blessings come over your life as you work hard to accrue them.

But no. Not if you understand you're saved by grace. You're saved by Christ. You're not saved by what you do. You don't work hard and try to be a Christian and some of those blessings come if you earn them. No, no. They all come by faith because you're saved by grace. Now there can be a process by which you cross that line, and you may not even be sure when you cross that line.

C. Everett Koop, who was the surgeon general of the United States for a while ... He was a great surgeon at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, and he tells how he became a Christian. His wife used to drag him to the evening services at Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia to listen to Donald Grey Barnhouse preach. He remembers that over about an 18-month period ... When he first went there, he thought 90 percent of what this guy said was stupid.

About halfway through the 18 months, he decided that about half of what the guy said was stupid, and about 18 months into his regular attendance he realized he believed it, but he wasn't quite sure where he crossed that line. There's a line. Just because it's not dramatic, just because you're not sure where you crossed the line, you're either united to Christ or you're not. You either have given your life to him or you haven't. Therefore, you either have all of the spiritual blessings or you don't.

Let me just tell you this. How can Paul be so confident considering his past? You say, "What do you mean his past?" He killed people. He was a murderer. He probably spent the rest of his life sitting in Christian assemblies with people whose relatives, family members, certainly friends he had put to death when he was a fire-breathing, fanatical, church and Christianity hater. How do you live with yourself?

In 2002 there was a movie called *Heaven* starring Cate Blanchett. It's not a very well known movie, but, like most things she does, it's great. She's a great actress. She plays a schoolteacher in a poor urban neighborhood. She sees this

drug dealer hurting her kids, and she decides to do a very radical thing, a very breathtaking thing. She decides she's going to kill the drug dealer by creating a bomb and putting it into his office and killing him. But it goes wrong. It goes off in the wrong place, and a lot of innocent people are killed.

The whole story is basically about her psychological and spiritual collapse after that, her absolute shame, her guilt, her regret. She cannot get over it, and it literally eats her up and destroys her. Why isn't Paul like that? I'll tell you why. Because Paul says, "In myself I am nothing; in him I'm everything. In myself I'm a sinner; in him I'm righteous. In myself I'm ugly; in him I'm beautiful." *In him*. So that's how they come. In some ways, it's the most important thing I wanted to get across, but here are the other things we learn.

2. *What they are*. What are some of those blessings? Here we go. Panorama, aerial. He mentions three of them. Let's just talk about what those three are. There are certainly more. Every spiritual blessing. There are many aspects to salvation, but here are three. One of them is in verse 5: *adoption*. One of them is in verse 7: *redemption*. One of them is at the very end in verse 10: *consummation*. Let me explain.

First of all, *adoption*. What does that mean? In ancient times, when Paul was writing, people generally didn't adopt little children to raise them the way we do today. When you hear *adoption*, you're thinking of something probably a little different than what Paul was talking about when he used the term *adoption*. Generally, people adopted children not because they wanted to raise children but because they wanted an heir.

See, a man who was lord of an estate did not have an heir. There was no one to inherit it. So he would adopt someone (maybe a child, but more often an adult) and that person would now be the heir. What's so radical about what Paul is saying ... He's looking at Christians and saying, "We, us ..." Who's that? Men and women. Back in those days, women were never adopted. They weren't chosen to be heirs. Only men were chosen to be heirs.

Here's what Paul is saying. In Christ, men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile are all equal heirs of every spiritual blessing. Of course, to be adopted means the person who adopts you is no longer your boss but your father, which is access, intimacy, security. You don't get fired by your father. So there's security and access and inheritance and also a name, identity. When you're adopted you get a new name. That's who you are. You might have thought you were this or that. It doesn't matter. *This* is your name now. You might have had a dishonorable name. Now you have an honorable name.

Next *redemption*. What do you think *redemption* means? I'll just tell you the root meaning of the word *redemption* in the Bible. I can give it to you through an illustration. Some years ago, when this West Side congregation was meeting in the morning at the Society for Ethical Culture on 65th and Central Park West, I drove my car over to the West Side, parked it nearby, and preached the sermon in the morning service. I came out after preaching the sermon, and my car had

been towed. You want to say, “I was preaching a sermon. Is nothing sacred anymore?”

But I’m a New Yorker. I’ve lived here a long time. I know where to go to get the car after it has been towed. You go up to that place on the West Side Highway. So I went there, but that day I was particularly struck, because when I went there, I walked in the door to sit there in the place where you have to get your car out, and I hadn’t seen it before. Maybe it was new, but the name of the place was the Redemption Center.

When I paid my ridiculous \$300 or \$400 in order to get my car, they stamped the bill “Redeemed.” They were being absolutely aligned with the biblical definition, because *redemption* in the Bible means to be bought out of captivity. I was buying my car out of its captivity. But what does that mean? Adoption is one thing. Redemption is another thing. Redemption means we’re all slaves.

How are we all slaves? Well, you have to live for something. You say, “I don’t know if I believe in God.” Well, you’re living for something. There’s something that makes your life meaningful. “I’m living for my children. I’m living for my career. I’m living to make a difference.” Fine. But I want you to realize that whatever you’re living for is your master, and the only master that doesn’t enslave you, according to the Bible, is God.

The Lord is the only master who dies for your sins. Your career will not die for your sins, and your children won’t die for your sins. You’d better not make them. Anything else that you live for is going to drive you, is going to enslave you. You have to be careful. I’m a minister, so I’m doing ministry. I’m preaching. Why am I preaching? Well, I’m preaching to serve God and to help you. Right? Or I could be preaching so I can feel that I’m a worthwhile person, so I can feel successful, so I can say, “Look at all of the people I’m helping.”

In that case, my preaching becomes a master, and I’m serving the preaching, and the preaching is not serving you. That means anything, even stuff like preaching, can become a master. If God is not the absolute center of your life, and if he’s not the root of your salvation ... I’ll put it another way. If you have any identity other than that you’re his child ... Until you’re adopted, you’re enslaved, because your name, your identity, is coming from something, and whatever that is is going to drive you. It’s going to enslave you.

When I’m adopted and my name is “I’m the child of the King ...” Not a successful *this*. Not a parent with great children. Whatever your name is ... You say, “The reason I feel good about myself is my children are all fine.” What happens when they go off the rails? “I’m successful.” What happens if you lose your money? All those other names ... It’s a ball and chain unless you are redeemed.

Finally, resurrection, or you could also call it *consummation*. In fact, it’s more than resurrection. Verse 10: “... to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” The promise is that eventually God is going to put an end to all suffering

and evil. He's going to make the world new, and he's going to get rid of death.

When it says "to bring unity," what he means is everything is falling apart. "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." That's true at every level. Law of thermodynamics. Things are falling apart. What is death? Things that were cohering in your body fall apart. What is war? What is racism? What is poverty? Things that should be together are being split apart.

God is going to end all of that, because he's going to end death itself. You say, "Well, we haven't received *that* yet. We're going to die, and I'm going to be raised from the dead, I guess, if I'm a Christian, but I'm going to die." Well, put it this way. If you have every spiritual blessing, here's a wonderful thought. The minute the Holy Spirit comes into your life and you sense the love of God in your life through Jesus Christ, that will never end. Never, ever end.

The worst thing that can happen to you if you die is it will flood you with more love, more glory. Jesus Christ says, "My sheep know me, and they come to me, and nothing can pluck them out of my hand." You will go from life to life to life. You will go from love to love to love. So those are the blessings. How do we receive them? In Christ. What are the blessings? There are a few.

3. *Why we can get them.* It tells you in verse 7. "We have redemption in his blood." Here's why we can have the spiritual blessings. When Jesus Christ went to the cross, he died in our place. What does that mean? Every time Jesus Christ ever addressed God, he called him "Father," except when he was on the cross he said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It's almost like Jesus Christ lost his sonship so you and I could be adopted and brought in. Jesus Christ was bound and nailed so we could be redeemed and liberated.

Jesus Christ was put to death so we could have life everlasting. Through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, all of these things can be yours. So how? Union with Christ. What? We just had a few. Adoption, redemption, consummation, resurrection. We didn't even talk about justification, sanctification, and glorification. Then why? Because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for your sins. When you accept what he has done and rest in what he has done and ask God the Father to accept you because of what he has done, you're united, and they all come.

4. *How to know if you have them.* How do you know you have received these? How do you know you've had every spiritual blessing? I think the answer is that grace becomes glorious to you. Do you notice verse 6? All of this is to the praise of his glorious grace. Is that the theme of your life? Is that the ground note of your daily life? Do you find grace glorious?

What do I mean by "grace glorious"? Well, first of all, grace. Dr. Lloyd-Jones used to say that when he asked his diagnostic question, "Are you a Christian?" one answer was, "Well, I'm trying," and then he would explain, "No, no. Being a Christian means to be in Christ. You're either a Christian or you're not." But he said sometimes there would be another answer.

Sometimes he would ask, "Are you a Christian?" and they would say, "Of course I'm a Christian." The doctor used to say that was a very bad sign. If you believe you're saved by grace, grace becomes the most wonderful thing, and the sense that you're saved by grace permeates everything and gets rid of any sense of "of course."

When you say, "Of course I'm a Christian. I'm a good person. I go to church. Why would you even ask such a thing?" No, no. If grace was glorious to you, you'd be saying, "Yeah, I'm a Christian. What a joke. Me. It's amazing. It's astounding. It makes me laugh, but it's true." It's all grace. Not "Of course I'm ..." What do you mean "of course"? It's a miracle. It's especially a miracle that *you're* a Christian. I don't know about all these other people, but me, a Christian.

If you don't think it's an absolute miracle, if there's any like, "Well, of course I'm a Christian," grace isn't glorious to you. It's not a good sign. Do you understand grace? Also, *glorious* means beautiful. If you find something beautiful, you just can't get enough of it. If you find a certain kind of music glorious, you play it over and over again until your family is sick of it. It touches your aesthetic center, so you listen to it.

Or it could be a painting or it could be a book or it could be a passage of something. Here's the thing. Once you realize Jesus Christ died for you, he gave his life for you to save you ... My favorite Harry Potter book is the first one. I know some of you are going to say, "Of course. It's the shortest." But no. It's because I love the fact that at the very end, when the nasty guy tries to grab him, it burns. He can't touch him.

Then afterwards, Harry Potter says to his mentor, "Why couldn't the evil man touch me?" His mentor says, "Because your mother died for you. Your mother gave her life to save you. When someone experiences love like that, it puts a power on you that no evil can deal with." Listen. If grace is glorious to you, it lifts you up. It touches your aesthetic center. Everywhere you see substitutionary atonement, it's the most beautiful thought in the world.

Is it to you? Is this the ground note of your life, the glory of grace? Does it give you this eternal sense of humor about yourself, so you can never take yourself that seriously again because you know you're saved by grace? There's no "of course" about you anymore. That's a sign that you have every spiritual blessing given to you in Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Our Father, thank you for showing us how multifarious, rich, astonishing our salvation is. Every spiritual blessing. How we ask that you would give us that sense of richness and that sense of joy and even the sense of humor, not taking ourselves very seriously ever again, that should all come from understanding our salvation. Please, Lord, let us live into our redemption so we're not bound by anxieties and fears.

Let us live into your grace so that we find our lives sweetened by the knowledge of that. Let us live into our adoption. Let us live into these things. Let us live in the

hope of the resurrection so we don't fear death anymore. Father, we pray that you would help us to appropriate the greatness of life that should come from knowing our salvation as it is in Jesus Christ. It's in Jesus' name we ask it, amen.

The Holy Spirit

What We Believe: Foundations—November 8, 2015

John 14:15–26

15 “If you love me, keep my commands. **16** And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—**17** the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. **19** Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. **21** Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.” **22** Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?”

23 Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

24 Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. **25** All this I have spoken while still with you. **26** But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

The Word of the Lord.

These weeks in the fall we're looking at the most basic beliefs of the Christian faith, and we're doing it using the outline of the Apostles' Creed, which is the first of all the church's summaries of the biblical doctrine. If you speak the Apostles' Creed, you get eventually to the declaration, “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” or “I

believe in the Holy Ghost,” the older version of the Apostles’ Creed.

When it comes to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, without a doubt, the Holy Spirit is the most mysterious of the three, the one person we know the least about. If you’re going to learn about the Holy Spirit, there’s no better place in the Bible to go than right here. To put it a little differently, John 14–17 is Jesus’ Upper Room Discourse the night before he’s going to die, his last night on earth, the last time he has to teach his disciples.

By the way, when you know you’re speaking to people you love and you’ll never speak to them again, you don’t talk about the weather. You go to the subjects you think are the most crucial for them, maybe the most crucial to you. It’s intriguing that almost the last words of Jesus to his disciples are filled with teaching about the Holy Spirit, which shows how important it is. So let’s look at what we’re taught about the Holy Spirit in this section, and let’s look at it under three headings: *who the Spirit is*, *what the Spirit does*, and *how to receive what the Spirit gives*.

1. *Who the Spirit is*. Jesus gives us three clues. The first clue is in verse 17, where he says, “**The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him.**” The Holy Spirit is referred to as a person. Not a force, not a nebulous power, not an *it*, but a *him*, a person. The second clue is when he says in verse 16, “**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate ...**” We’ll get to the word *advocate* in a moment (it’s very important), but right now let’s take a look at the word *another*.

In Greek, there are two words that can be translated *another*, and one of the Greek words means another *unlike* and the other means another *like*, exactly like. Jesus uses the second of those two words here, which is his way of saying, since he claims to be God ... Since Jesus says, “I and the Father are one,” since Jesus has already said in John 8, “Before Abraham was, I am,” Jesus is saying, “The Holy Spirit is not only a person but an equally infinitely divine person with me and the Father.”

Then he says one other thing which is intriguing. You have to look carefully. Notice in verse 18 he says, “**I will not leave you as orphans ...**” That’s actually the theme of the entire three or four chapters. He constantly says, “I’m leaving you.” In fact, chapter 14 begins with him saying, “I go away. I’m leaving you, and I’m going to prepare a place for you. In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” So the theme is, “I’m leaving you.” Then look at verse 18. He says, “**I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.**”

Then if you go down to verse 23, it says, “**My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.**” So on the one hand, Jesus is saying, “I’m leaving you.” On the other hand, he’s saying, “I’m leaving. The Holy Spirit is coming, and when the Holy Spirit comes, I will be coming and my Father will be coming.” Welcome to the dizzying unique and wonderful doctrine of the Trinity. How do you like it in here?

This is the teaching of the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not

three gods. They're too one. They're one God. On the other hand, they're distinct. It's not like there's one person who sometimes has his Father hat on, sometimes his Son hat, and sometimes his Holy Spirit hat. There's not one God and one person, not three gods and three persons. There's one God in three persons.

On the one hand, they're distinct. They know each other. In one sense, Jesus can leave and the Holy Spirit can come, but in another sense, since they are so one, when you get the one you get them all. When I was a new Christian, I must admit, I found this confusing. I would like to tell you now that after years of meditating on it I believe the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is triune, is the blazing, brilliant heart of the Christian faith, and it's genius, but for our purposes, there's just one inference, one thing we need to learn from the doctrine of the Trinity.

When the Holy Spirit comes into your life, you're not getting some nebulous force. You're not getting some emanation from some distant God planet. God himself is coming to dwell in your midst. In fact, in some ways, the triune God is coming to dwell right in the middle of your life. Have you been melted with the joy and the awe at the knowledge of that, at who is living in your life? Have you been changed by the privilege of it, the miracle of it?

The reason I ask you that question that way is this. There are other places in the Bible that talk about being filled with the Spirit. The Bible says we must be filled with the Spirit. Notice that idea of being filled with the Spirit almost immediately moves our mind's metaphor ... Our minds think in pictures, and "filled with the Spirit" starts to move us away from thinking of the Spirit as a person. To be filled with something evokes the idea of a gas or a liquid or a force.

"I want to be filled with the Spirit" means "Instead of just three amps, I want six amps. Instead of one gallon of the Spirit, I want two gallons." As soon as you begin to think of the Holy Spirit that way, you immediately get into looking for technique. To be filled or to have more of the Holy Spirit becomes a technique. "What are the two things I have to do, the three things?" No, no. If he's a person (and he is), what does it mean to be full of a person? To be full of a person is something like being in love, but it's a little more than that.

Years ago, when I was a young teenager, my family did something they very seldom do. At our church there was a visiting speaker. This speaker was a very prominent church leader from Britain, if I remember. This person was coming to speak, and my parents offered that he would stay with us for several days. They were very excited about it, because they really respected this person. They were amazed that they were going to be able to get him close.

I've never forgotten how different our home was during that time. For example, I woke up the morning he was supposed to arrive, and I didn't recognize my house. I thought I'd died and gone into a *Better Homes and Gardens* book. "It's beautiful. What's going on here?" I must tell you it was just feast after feast. I never ate better in my life. Not only that. The relationships changed. All the little

grumping at each other and snapping at each other and arguing went away. We didn't do it. Nobody did it.

You might say, "Well, you were trying to put on a good face for them." No. It was better and deeper than that. Everybody felt affirmed. Everybody was excited. Everybody was looking forward to the next meal. They felt excited and affirmed, so it really did mean that the little things that used to bother us about each other didn't matter anymore.

Has that happened to you with the Holy Spirit? Have you been melted by the acute consciousness of the glorious person in the middle of your life? Do you walk around in amazed wonder and awareness of it? For example, there are a lot of things you would do ordinarily you would never do in front of somebody you respect. Well, you have somebody you'd better respect right in the middle of your life. It would change your self-regard. (We'll get to that in a minute.)

Even more, 2 Peter, chapter 1, verses 3–4, has a remarkable statement. He's talking about the Holy Spirit, and Peter says, "We have been made partakers of the divine nature." The Holy Spirit is a person, and yet the Holy Spirit is a spirit. When the Spirit comes into our lives, in a sense, we're getting God's very lifeblood. We are made partakers of the divine nature. It's an amazing statement.

Do you know what this means? Are you amazed at the wonder of this? It means there is no wound in you so deep that this can't heal. There is no brokenness in you so great that this can't repair. There's no binding habit in you so binding that you can't be freed from it. Are you full of the Spirit? To be filled with the Spirit is largely to walk around aware of what you have, who you have, who's right there.

2. *What the Spirit does.* When it comes to this subject, I almost hate to have only one passage of the Scripture to talk about, because what the Bible tells us about what the Spirit does is so multifarious, so multidimensional. There are so many things he does. In fact, I'll even mention two that go by in passing, even though we can't spend more than a few seconds on them, since the passage only spends a few seconds on them. Look up in verse 16.

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever ..." The Holy Spirit is with you forever. Let me just point out two things. By the way, that's a *you* person plural. He doesn't just say *you* individually. As you know, in the English language, unless you're from the South, y'all have no second-person plural. That's why, very often, when the Greek or the Hebrew is second-person plural, we don't have a good English way to designate that.

What he's actually saying is when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, he doesn't just bind you and unite you to Christ, but he unites you to everyone else united to Christ. If the Holy Spirit brings you into a new family and you get a new father, that means you automatically get new brothers and sisters. We're going to look at this next week, so I won't even say any more than this this week.

The Holy Spirit puts you into community, and that doesn't just mean, "Oh, now we

have fellowship.” It means every other Christian on the face of the earth … No matter how different their culture, no matter how different their race, no matter how different their temperament, you now have a spiritual bond of infinite depth, because that bond is the Holy Spirit himself.

It also says you receive the Holy Spirit to be with you forever. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and he who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Those statements almost seem contradictory. He says, “If you believe in me, you’ll die, but you’ll live,” and then he says, “If you believe in me, you’ll never die.” Here’s what he means.

If you become a Christian, if you believe in Jesus Christ, of course you’re going to die. Your body is going to die, and you’ll be resurrected. But there’s another sense in which he says, “Once the Holy Spirit comes into your life, once the Holy Spirit brings the love of God into your life …” Romans 5 says, “By the Holy Spirit, God’s love is shed in our hearts.” Once you, conscious you, begin to experience God’s love through the Holy Spirit, that will never end. It’s forever.

Right now, you might have a little bit of the love of God, but the minute you die you’ll have an infinite amount of the love of God. It’ll never end. There will be no interruption. Death will not have the final word. Why? Because you have the Holy Spirit forever. But we can’t stay there. The Holy Spirit gives you community. It gives you an eternal bond not only with one another but with the Lord himself. But the two things that are emphasized, which we have to look at, are these: the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of truth and he’s the ultimate friend.

First, the Spirit of truth. Verse 17 calls him a Spirit of truth. That’s a really important term. We’d better never pit the idea of the Holy Spirit against the Bible and say, “Well, you have all your doctrine and you have all your truth and all that stuff, but I have the Holy Spirit. I have experience.” He is the Spirit of truth. If you look down at verses 25–26, you’ll see a two-layer promise.

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” At the first level, this is Jesus talking to his disciples. His disciples literally heard Jesus teaching. “The Holy Spirit will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

In other words, Jesus Christ has been teaching them for several years, and he’s going to teach them after his resurrection as well, and he says, “The Holy Spirit will enable you to remember the things I’m telling you, so that when you and your colleagues write it down in the New Testament it will be the truth.” Historically, everybody has understood that verses 25–26 …

One of the ways the Spirit is a Spirit of truth is that the Spirit is going to make sure the New Testament is as inspired as the Old Testament, that the New Testament apostles, with the Spirit’s help, are going to remember the things accurately that Jesus Christ taught, help them understand them, and write it

down so that the New Testament will be as inspired as the Old Testament. So the Spirit of truth creates the Bible. That's not all. Almost everyone understands he's not just talking to the apostles here.

Both 1 John 2 and 1 Corinthians 2 say that when the Spirit comes into us it gives us an anointing that helps us understand the truth. I was born and raised Lutheran, and my family took me to church all the time. I was confirmed. It was two years of studying the Bible and doctrine before I could be confirmed at the age of 14. Also there was a lectionary, so every year we went through and read certain passages of the Scripture.

I thought I knew the Bible. I knew a lot about the Bible, but when I went to college and in college met Christ, was converted, really brought to true faith, vital faith, the most interesting thing to me was how the Bible that I thought I knew a lot about ... Somebody turned the light on. Suddenly, all sorts of things I thought I understood ... I saw things I'd never seen before. It's not only that the Spirit of truth teaches you and illuminates your mind. It's interesting.

Notice in verse 21 ... “**Whoever has my commands ...**” So here you’re reading the Bible. “... and keeps them is the one who loves me. **The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.**” When you read the Bible with the Holy Spirit’s help, you don’t just find the truth makes sense to your mind. God becomes real to your heart. When you’re wrestling with the commands and the truths of God in the Bible, the Holy Spirit actually brings God to you.

Jonathan Edwards, who I often quote, was an eighteenth-century philosopher and pastor. He also was a pastor of a Presbyterian church in downtown New York City in 1723. He actually later on wrote what’s called a *personal narrative* (you can find it online), which was an account of his spiritual experience during that time. When he was living in New York City, he had a strong, vital spiritual life, which shows it can be done. You can read about it online.

Both these aspects of how the Spirit is a Spirit of truth come out in the personal narrative. Here’s the first aspect, which I’ll paraphrase. “I had the greatest delight in the Holy Scriptures ... Oftentimes in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence to see the wonders contained in it.”

That’s the first aspect of what the Spirit does. He makes the truth make sense to your mind. But then listen to this. “Once in 1737 in prayer I had a view that for me was extraordinary of the glory of the Son of God and I saw his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and his meek gentleness. The person of Christ appeared to me with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception. This continued about an hour, which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud.”

There’s always a little bit of a danger in reading not only a very eloquent account

but a very intense account of both the illumination of your mind and the sense of God's reality on the heart that the Spirit brings, but I want you to know that if you have the Holy Spirit, what I just read is not completely foreign to you. You know what he's talking about. Maybe not like that, maybe not so intense, but you know it. He's the Spirit of truth.

However, he's also the ultimate friend. The reason I call him an *ultimate friend* is this. In some ways, the most important word in the passage to tell us about the Holy Spirit is, "**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate ...**" Then down at the bottom he says, "**But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit ...**"

If you look at four or five different Bible translations, they'll all have a different word there. Some translations will call him the *Advocate*, some will call him the *Helper*, some will call him the *Comforter*, some will call him the *Counselor*, and those are just the top four. Whenever you see that all of the translations render a word in a different way, what you know you have is a word that's so rich no one English word can convey the fullness of the meaning of it.

Even though I'm quite happy with *Advocate*, nevertheless, the fact is that none of these English words suffice. *Advocate* is a little too hard. *Comforter* is a little too soft. "There, there." *Helper* is a little too weak. Even *Counselor* is a little too detached. You know, the professional counselor or the consultant. They may help you very much, but then you go home and he or she goes home, that sort of thing.

Here's my translation. He's the ultimate friend. I'll tell you why. The Greek word is *parakletos*, someone who "*parakleos*" you. *Para* is a word that means be alongside, someone who is alongside of you. The image in ancient times of someone alongside of you meant someone always with you and always for you. You don't see him one hour a week. Never goes home. Always with you, but always for you.

The word *kaleo* actually means to declare or to argue. That's the reason none of these words quite get across like I think the term *ultimate friend*, and here's why I would say *ultimate friend*. A friend, a true friend, a real friend ... By the way, this is a better friend than any friends you have, even if you think you have some good friends. No one has a friend like this.

First of all, a real friend is willing to be with you, never leaves you, and is always for you, but is willing to argue with you. That's why the word *advocate* might be the best of the bunch. Your advocate, but an advocate who argues with you. Who does he argue with? He's making a case. Well, who's he making a case to? Not God and not the world. He's actually arguing against the enemies in your own heart.

The best example of this is in Romans 8:16, where it says, "The Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are his child." The phrase *bears witness* is a very specific phrase through which Paul is able, within a stroke, to create a picture.

When it says, "The Spirit bears witness," it's a word that means star witness or decisive witness in a trial.

So the picture Paul is showing is it's like you're on trial, and the outcome is in doubt. Will you be locked up or sent away forever or will you be freed? Nobody is sure. The outcome is in doubt. In comes the Holy Spirit. He's the star witness. The Holy Spirit gives his testimony, and it's very clear, and you're free. The trial is over. What is that all about? Here's what it's about. First John 3:20: "When our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." Do you know why? Because God, the Holy Spirit, is in our hearts.

There are two things the Spirit is going to constantly argue with you about, like any good friend will. On the one hand, the Spirit will tell you you're a sinner. John, chapter 16, verse 8, says the Holy Spirit comes into the world to convict of sin. One of the things a friend will tell you is where you are being blind to your own sinfulness, your own responsibility, your own weakness. The Spirit has to come and argue with you against that blindness.

It has to say, "Look. You are a sinner here. You have done wrong. You need to take responsibility," or "Look. You are weak. You need God. You are overconfident." A good friend will come and tell you that, break through that. But here's what's weird. Not only does our heart not want to believe we're as sinful as the Bible tells us we are, but it also does not want to believe that we are as loved and accepted in Christ as the Bible says we are. Our hearts are idiots.

The other thing the Holy Spirit has to do is bear witness that you're a child of God. It's the Holy Spirit that comes in and says, "You're not living loved. You're not living accepted. You're not admitting this. You will not see how sinful you are, but I'm going to show you. Otherwise you're going to screw your life up. And you will not understand how loved and accepted you are. You're trying to earn it. You're trying to achieve it. You're trying to get it."

The Spirit comes into your heart, looks around your life, and he's appalled. I just want you to know. He sees you working yourself to death to prove yourself. He sees you manipulating people to try to squeeze a little bit of approval out of them. He sees you addicted to power, to family and their approval. He sees you like a drug addict addicted, and he is not going to let you alone. Almost all friends at a certain point give up. "They won't listen to me." He will never do that.

It says in Philippians, chapter 1, verse 6, "The good work that God began in you he will bring to completion in the day of Jesus Christ." The reason Paul can say to all Christians, "The good work God began in you he will bring to completion in the day of Christ" is because he knows you have the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will never just let you stay the way you are. He will never let you alone. He will never do that.

He will sanctify you. He will make you all that God wants you to be, because he's always with you and he's always for you. He'll be telling you things that are too bad for your heart to believe, but he's going to show you that they're true, and

also things that your heart finds too good to believe, and he's going to show you that they're true, because he's the ultimate friend. Isn't that wonderful?

3. *How to receive what the Spirit gives.* How can you be sure that you are going to receive all the things the Spirit gives? The community he gives you, the illumination he gives you, the experience he gives you, but most of all, the ministry of the Holy Spirit as a friend inside your heart, working against the various enemies your heart has ... accusation, temptation, all the things ... by telling you the truth. Do you know how you can receive it? You have to do two things, according to this text.

If you want the ministry of the second Advocate, another Advocate, in your life, you have to believe in the ministry of the first Advocate. You have to believe, and you have to obey. You have to believe in the first Advocate, and you have to obey. Only then will the Holy Spirit, as your second Advocate, do the ministry we've been describing. You say, "How does that work?" Well, here's how it works.

First of all, because he's another Advocate, that means his job is to basically tell you about the work of the first Advocate, who's Jesus Christ. When I first became a Christian, I heard this idea that Jesus Christ died and rose and now is in heaven and is interceding for us before the Father. It's mysterious and wonderful that Jesus intercedes for us before the Father. I thought it means he's praying for us or he's pleading for us, and that's a warm and wonderful thought.

In the early days, I heard about that and it was really nice, but as the years went by and I saw how often I failed to be what God wanted me to be, I was not comforted by the idea that Jesus Christ was up there pleading for me, interceding for me. It seemed like every day I got up and I didn't do what God wanted me to do, and I imagined Jesus was up there saying, "Father, he did it again, but would you give him one more chance?"

Well, as the years went by, I kept saying, "Even Jesus ... I mean, how long can he keep this up for me? How long before the Father finally says, 'No, this is it. It's been years now for this guy.'" So I wasn't really particularly comforted. Then some years ago I read a chapel talk given to students by Charles Hodge, who in the 1800s was one of the early teachers at Princeton Seminary. It was called "The Advocate."

He helped me understand what Jesus is doing up there. He actually doesn't quote Hebrews or the other places that talk about Jesus Christ interceding for us. He quotes 1 John 2, verse 1. "**My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins ...**" Same word.

Charles Hodge said you have to realize that Jesus Christ is up there, and he's like your defense attorney. He's an advocate. A defense attorney isn't just always begging for mercy. A defense attorney is making a case. A defense attorney is not up there just hoping for mercy. A defense attorney is making a case based on

the law.

What he's actually telling the Father is not just, "Oh, please be merciful one more day." God showed his mercy when he sent his Son to go to the cross and accomplish our salvation. That's where we got the mercy. But now, Charles Hodge says, this is what Jesus Christ is doing, something like this.

He's saying, "Father, the wages of sin is death. The law demands payment, and I've paid. I went to the cross. Here's my blood. Do you see these people down here? They have sinned. Yes, they have, and they've sinned today. But they've believed in me and, therefore, I have paid for their sins. Because I have paid for their sins, it would be unjust to get two payments for this sin. Therefore, I demand you accept them, you love them, you acquit them. Why? Because not to do so would be unjust. Therefore, Father, I am not asking for mercy; I'm asking for justice."

Charles Hodge says, "Look. He's up there, and he's not actually pleading for mercy. 'One more day, please.' No. He's saying, 'This is justice, and justice is that there be no condemnation for those who are in me.' " I remember when I read that, I suddenly realized for the first time in my life (I even kind of remember the year it happened) ...

All my life I had thought the scales of God's justice were against me and Jesus was just up there trying to pull down on them every day, maybe one more day. Now I suddenly realized the scales of God's justice were completely for me, and God's justice is like the mountains. God's justice is omnipotent. It means the justice of God demands that he love me forever. That's the work of the first Advocate.

What I have just said ... Does this move you? Does it move you at all? Do you know why? Because the second Advocate is talking to you about it. That's the case. That's how the Advocate does it. That's how he is your friend. He's pointing to the work of the first Advocate. That's what not only humbles you into the dust out of your pride; it's also the thing that raises you to the heavens out of your despondency.

You believe in the work of the first Advocate, and the second Advocate will do his work. You believe in the infallible case that Jesus Christ, the first Advocate, is making, and when the Holy Spirit comes and talks to you about it, he'll give you the infallible peace that comes from the infallible case.

Lastly, you have to obey. Why do I say that? Do you know how often in the Bible it says, "Don't quench the Spirit"? It's all through here. "If you obey me, I will be real to you. If you obey me, I will come to you. If you obey me ..." I think here's the reason why. Look at the work of the first Advocate. Jesus Christ gives up his glory and goes to the cross. How selfless. How unselfish. Look at the work of the second Advocate. The work of the second Advocate is to point to Jesus, not to himself.

The Holy Spirit does not come in and say, "Let me tell you about myself." No, no.

The second Advocate's work is to point to Jesus, to glorify Jesus, to show how beautiful Jesus is. Do you see the glory of the divine selflessness? Do you see the Father emptying heaven of his greatest treasure to come to earth to save us? Do you see Jesus Christ emptying himself of his glory? Do you see the Holy Spirit pointing away from himself to Jesus? Do you see the magnificence of the divine selflessness?

Do you want to have the Holy Spirit in your life? Stop thinking about yourself all the time. Stop your self-assertion. Stop your self-indulgence. Stop your self-centeredness. Obey him. Serve God. Serve your neighbor. Then you will find the ministry of the ultimate friend flooding your life, and you will know the glory and the joy of having this one for your ultimate friend. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that through faith in what Jesus Christ did on the cross and through obedience, through giving up our right to self-determination and obeying you, we can have the ministry of the ultimate friend, Jesus Christ, in our life. We thank you for that, and we pray that you will enable us to be Spirit-filled people and be a Spirit-filled church, because you have spoken to us, O Holy Spirit, through the Word and all for Jesus. It's in his name we pray this, amen.

The Church

What We Believe: Foundations—November 15, 2015

Ephesians 2:11–22

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—**12** remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15** by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. **17** He came and preached peace to you who

were far away and peace to those who were near.¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

This is the Word of the Lord.

In these weeks we've been looking at the basic beliefs of the Christian church, essentially following the outline of the Apostles' Creed. Today we come to the Christian belief in the importance of the church as established by Jesus Christ. If you're going to choose a single text (which we must) to talk about the doctrine of the church, whatever that text is it's not going to be able to give you all of the things the Bible says about the church. It just can't.

We've chosen a text that gives us one very important truth about the church that is always relevant, but in light of the world events this week it's probably more relevant than ever. What is that? Well, let me put the truth in the most colloquial, practical, simple way possible. In the church, its members get both the resources and the power to get along with people who are deeply, deeply different. Obviously, this is one of the main problems the human race faces today.

We're told in this text that that's what the church does. The church is a place where people get the resources so that kinds of people inside the church can live in unity who outside the church you would want nothing to do with, and it's because our hearts are changed in such a way that not only can we deal *inside* the church with people who ordinarily we would never want to have anything to do with but even *outside* the church we actually have resources for reaching out and embracing people who are deeply, deeply different from us.

Let's just plunge right in. It's such an important subject. Let's not do any more introduction. What the text is going to tell us is basically three things: the gospel creates *supernatural community* through *spiritual heart surgery* that works itself out in a *radical new identity*. The gospel creates a supernatural community through spiritual heart surgery that plays itself out in the world with Christians having now a radical new identity.

1. *Supernatural community.* This is being dealt with in the last paragraph. In the last paragraph, Paul, the author of the book of Ephesians, gives you three images or three metaphors that describe the church. First of all, he says, you are fellow citizens with God's people. What that means is you have an earthly citizenship. You're citizens of New York City or Tokyo or London. You're citizens of a particular country. But if you're a Christian, you have another citizenship that

supersedes that. Philippians 3:20 says we're citizens of the heavenly city.

Then it goes on and says you're also members of his household, which is another way to say you're in his family. When we become Christians we're adopted. God is no longer just our boss or our King. He's our Father. That means we're brought into a family with other people who have God as their Father, so we have new brothers and sisters.

Thirdly, it goes on even beyond that and says the church is also like (verse 21) a whole building joined together and rising to become a holy temple in the Lord. The third image is one in which we are like living stones, building blocks, and God inhabits us the way the Holy Spirit, the *shekinah* glory of God, inhabited the ancient temple. Notice that the three metaphors ascend. Each one is more and more relationally intense. How so?

Well, each one is more relationally intense with regard to God. A king lives in the same country with his citizens, but a father lives in the same home with his sons and daughters, but in the temple imagery God actually indwells you. He comes right into you. It's not that he just lives *near* you; he lives *in* you. Or you can go this way. Relationally, it gets more intense when it comes to your relationship with the others around you.

You are united to other citizens through a social contract. You're united to other brothers and sisters in a family even more tightly than you are to your neighbor or your fellow citizen, because genetics and shared historical experience, lived experience, attach you to your brothers and sisters, but when it comes to the idea of the building, if Christians are like the blocks in a building, they're cemented together. I don't know how much closer you could get than that.

Every metaphor is trying to talk about the absolute intense relational bond that happens to all Christians with one another. Okay, let's get this down to earth. What does that mean? When Redeemer got started 27 years ago, in the early couple years, there was one point at which one of my sons was in some event at school in which he needed inline Rollerblades, and he evidently had a pair, but there was a wheel that was screwed up.

Kathy, my wife, went to some little shop somewhere in Manhattan that had skateboards and roller skates and Rollerblades and bicycles. She goes in, and there standing behind the counter is this great big tall guy. He has a thick Australian accent, long hair, tattoos everywhere back when it was not *au courant*, rings coming out of every part of his flesh, of a race that she wasn't able to discern. She couldn't quite tell what race.

She walks on up (this is her description of herself, by the way) in her dowdy Presbyterian minister's wife gear (she's five-one, by the way), looking about as straitlaced and as white bread as any human being could. So here they are, the two of them, looking, "Oh my gosh." But she walks up and notices he has a little ring on with a fish on it.

She says (if you know my wife, you know why she would), "You know, sometimes

Christians wear rings like that to signal the fact that they're Christians to other Christians." He says, "Well, I am. I'm a Christian." She says, "Well, so am I. My husband and I moved to town to start a church."

"What's the name of that church?"

"Redeemer."

"I've heard of that church," he said. "A couple of friends of mine have gone to that church. I heard it's a great church." They're carrying on, and all of the other people in the shop are looking at these two people, who would look like they would have nothing to do with each other, wouldn't even want to be near each other, and here they are carrying on like a lost brother and sister. Do you know why they were doing that? Because they were.

The reason for all of these metaphors is verse 18. "**For through him [Jesus Christ] we both ...**" We're talking about Jew and Gentile. Every race, every group of people. "**... have access to the Father by one Spirit.**" When the Holy Spirit comes into your life because you believe in Jesus, that Spirit not only unites you to Christ but also unites you to all other people who are united to Christ.

You will discover (and this is saying) that every other Christian on the face of the earth, no matter how different they are temperamentally, racially, educationally, or culturally, you have with that other person an infinitely deep spiritual bond, and you will feel it if you just give it a chance to express itself.

Now what does this mean? Practically speaking, this is the supernatural community the Holy Spirit makes the church capable of. I am not saying the church necessarily executes on this, but I am saying the church is capable of this level of supernatural community. Before moving on, I can't let you off the hook this easily. We have to do something at the end of point one.

Point one talks about the fact that we are co-citizens. We're a family. Christians are a holy temple cemented together, inhabited by the Holy Spirit. Here's what I want to know. Do any of these metaphors fit in with you just showing up at church two or three times a month for inspiration? In other words, do these metaphors describe that kind of relationship with the church?

If you're a Christian, if that's the kind of relationship you have with the church ... You show up three times a month. You think of yourself as a regular attender and you get inspiration and you do a couple things here or there. You go to a couple other events. Do any of these metaphors fit in with that kind of relationship? Of course not. You're supposed to be bonded together with other Christians in a particular place in a church.

Let me just use one of the metaphors: the family. One of the things you know about families is that your brothers and sisters, your immediate family members, know all about your faults and flaws. They've seen them. You can't hide from them. They are happy to tell you about them. Hebrews, chapter 3, verse 13,

speaking to Christians, says, “Exhort one another ...” The word *exhort* is a strong word. It’s the word *parakaleo*. It’s the word that means to counsel, to argue, to confront even.

“Exhort one another daily so that you’re not hardened by the deceitfulness of your sin.” There are a couple of assumptions there, a couple of premises. The one premise is that sin is deceitful, that your worst sins, your worst flaws, are kind of hidden from you. You’re somewhat in denial of them. You don’t particularly see them.

The second premise is that you live in relationships with other Christians so deep they are at brother/sister level. You have other Christians in your life who can actually talk to you sometimes, not just about your big sins but about the sins that are semi-hidden from you, your besetting sins, the sins that harden you, that blind you, that you’re kind of in denial about.

The reason they’re able to talk to you about them is, first, they’ve been told about them by you. You have given them the right to speak the truth in love to you. But it’s not just that they’ve been told about them; they’ve also been shown them. Why? Because they’re living with you in close enough proximity they can see your flaws, which is how brothers and sisters do.

You’re eating with other Christians. You are ministering with them. You’re reading with them. You’re studying with them. You’re praying with them. You’re in close enough proximity. You’re not so busy. You’re not having your own life. You’re in close enough proximity. You’re living in community with other Christians so they can see it. Is that happening?

It doesn’t happen on social media, by the way. People can’t read your expression on social media. You put on that little smiley face when you’re actually ... Social media is a great way to control what other people think about you. In a family you can’t do that. That’s redemptive. So first of all, the Holy Spirit can create supernatural community. We don’t execute on it, but we’re capable of it. Are you executing on it?

2. *Spiritual heart surgery.* How does such supernatural community happen? How is it possible that there is some kind of bond that’s possible between people who are radically different? That’s why I call this *spiritual heart surgery*. That’s what mostly the rest of this whole passage is about. Notice it tells us what it is that needs to be removed from our hearts. Using the metaphor of heart surgery, what is the tumor that needs to be removed from our hearts if we’re going to start getting along with people, even feel unified with people who are deeply different from us culturally, racially, and all of the other ways? The tumor is mentioned a couple of times.

Verse 14 says, “**For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ...**” Then verse 16 says, “... in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” The word *hostility*, by the way,

is a Greek word that simply means enmity (sometimes it's translated *enmity*) or just hate.

There is in the human heart an enmity, a hostility, toward people who are very different. Why? What is that there for? What's the cause of that? To answer that question you have to look at the case study that is here in Ephesians 2, but it's also important to look *through* the case study and realize there's a principle behind the case study. What's the case study? The conflict between Jews and Gentiles. It says here in verses 11–13:

"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' [the Jews] ... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

The Gentiles and the Jews were often in conflict with each other, but what is the cause of that conflict? Here's what's so intriguing. In verse 14 it says that Jesus Christ destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. And what is it? Verse 15 tells you.

"... by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations."

When it says the dividing wall, the thing that kept the Jews and Gentiles from being together, the thing that divided them, the thing that created hostility between them was the law, God's law, the Mosaic law, you say, "Okay, well, then maybe the Mosaic law was bad," but of course Paul, who wrote Ephesians 2, also wrote in the book of Romans, "Is the law, therefore, sin? By no means." Paul asked the question, "Is the law sin? Is the law bad? No," he says. "It's spiritual."

How can something that's really good, the Ten Commandments and all that, be the cause of the hostility? Here's the answer. Some years ago, we went through the book of Deuteronomy here at Redeemer. If you read the book of Deuteronomy, what's so fascinating about it ... You have the Ten Commandments. You have all of the commandments and regulations that set the Jews apart, but there are several places in the midst of all of those regulations ...

In Deuteronomy God says, "The reason I'm giving you this law is so you can be a light to the Gentiles. The reason the Jews are given all of these laws and regulations is so you can show the world a godly society, a society of love, a society of justice, a society of holiness, a society of truth. I want you to be a light to the Gentiles so the Gentiles will see how you're living and be attracted to me and attracted to my glory. Your whole job is to attract the Gentiles by obeying the law."

That's not what happened, is it? No, it isn't. What happened was that the Jews, because they had the law and the Gentiles did not, began to despise the Gentiles as unclean because "you eat these things and do these things." Unclean,

unwashed, awful, profane. The Jews despised the Gentiles because they had the law and, of course, the Gentiles despised the Jews because they were so proud. The law, this great, great thing, actually became the dividing wall of hostility.

Now let's not get stuck here with the conflict between Jew and Gentile. What's the principle? Here's why it's so important. Here's the principle. The things that divide us are the good things about us. The law was like the pride and joy of the Jews, and that's the problem. *You* have something that's *your* pride and joy, or your race has something that's *its* pride and joy, but here's how the human heart works today.

The sinful human heart is now ordered so that we take the best things about ourselves, our virtues, the greatest things about ourselves, and we become so proud of them, and then we use them to bolster our sense of self-esteem by despising anybody who doesn't have what we have. Mark Currie, a professor of contemporary literature at University of London, wrote a book in a series that I read recently, a series of philosophical short books. It's called *Difference*.

The book is talking about postmodern thinking and critical theory of the last generation, and it's bringing out one concept of that critical theory and postmodern thinking that actually is a tremendous insight. When I read it to you, it's not immediately going to jump out at you. He basically says, "The insight of postmodern theory is that in our world today identity is never defined by inherent characteristics but only those characteristics in relation to other persons." What does that mean? Here's what it means.

There's a famous chapter in C.S. Lewis' great book *Mere Christianity* in which he says something like, "People are not proud of being rich. They're proud of being richer than the next person. People are not proud of being beautiful or smart or talented. They're only proud at being more talented than the next person." Everybody has to have an identity factor. An *identity factor* is something that gives you both a sense of self and a sense of worth.

Everybody has a job, but for some people, your job, your career, gives you a sense of self and a sense of worth. For example, let's just say you're a violinist (my favorite illustration on this). There are a lot of people who are violinists and it's part of who you are and what you do. For some people, it's your identity factor. It's the main thing. "I feel I have a sense of self and a sense of worth because I'm a great violinist. I love my violin."

Let's just say you're in a small town and you're the best violinist in town. It gives you a sense of self and a sense of worth. But then you decide to move to New York City. When you get off the train in Penn Station, there's somebody playing the violin and begging for money, and people are throwing money into the violin case, and you realize this person is way better than you. Let's just say after about a year you realize, "Everybody is way better than me," and you're working and working and you can't get a job anywhere because you're not good enough.

What's going on? It's psychologically brutal. Why? Because your "violining" is not

just violining. It's who you are. The way in which you get an identity is comparatively. This is what Mark Currie is saying. Let me just put it this way. Ordinarily, the way identity works is human identity operates comparatively through superiority to the different. I don't just have a good career but I have a better career than you.

We take our identity factors and bolster our sense of self-esteem by looking at people who don't have what we have as well, and because they're different we look down at them. I'll give you a couple of examples of this. This is the way the human heart works. One time some years ago I did a wedding. It was an interracial wedding, so one person who was being married was an Anglo white American, and the other person was a non-Western, non-white person.

One of the things I found interesting was the invitation went out and said the wedding started at 2:00. At 2:00 all of the white people were in their seats and none of the non-Western, non-white people were in their seats. They came in over the next 45 minutes, after which we started the service. If you read any book on cultural differences, you'll know one of the big differences ... There are many. There are at least 20 ways for you to test out differences in culture, but one of them is cultures very much differ on the definition of *late*. When are you late?

In some cultures (I won't tell you which ones), after five minutes you're late. You call it "five minutes late." In some cultures, it's 15 minutes before you feel like you have to apologize. In some cultures, it's an hour or two before you feel like you have to apologize. Some cultures, you might say, are more relational and event-oriented, not time-oriented. It happens when it happens. When everybody is there, then we do it. When everybody is gone, then it's over.

Other people are not event-oriented or relationally oriented. They're very much time-oriented. They're much more rational about the way in which your life is divided up. What happened in that wedding was very simple. The white people were extremely irritated with the lack of punctuality of the non-white people. The non-white people, by the time they got about halfway through the reception, had come to realize that the white people were very irritated with them, and instead of each group saying, "Oh, the other group is different," that's not what happened.

See, we moralize our differences. We assign moral value to them. We don't just say the other group is different; we say the other group is worse. "They're irresponsible. They're not punctual. They're insensitive to everybody else. We don't have all day. I expected this to be done at this time." On the other hand, the other people were looking at those people and saying, "Cold. Not relational. I know those kinds of people."

In other words, instead of just saying, "Oh, we're different ..." Oh no. "We're better." We all do that. The human heart is ordered so that our strength becomes a dividing wall of hostility. The human heart is ordered so that our identity operates comparatively through superiority to the different. We find people who are different and we look down at them. We despise them, and that's how we feel good about ourselves. That's how it works.

One more example. We talk about political polarization. We have liberals and conservatives in America, and there's a lot of polarization politically. I think everybody knows you have some liberals and some conservatives who are rather civil and respectful, and you have some liberals and some conservatives who are absolutely disdainful of the other side. For a long time I thought, "Some people are just more liberal or more conservative." I don't think that's right.

For some people being liberal or conservative is just your politics, but for some people being liberal or conservative is an identity factor. If it's a very important part of who you are and if it gives you a sense of self and a sense of worth, then here's what happens. You can't just disagree with the other side; you have to despise them. Why? Because ordinary human identity operates comparatively through superiority to the different. We have to look down at the different. It's our way of shoring up our sense of self-worth.

That's the reason why it's our strengths. Your politics, your violin playing, your career, all these things. You say, "I'm a hardworking person." The way you know that being hardworking is a very important part of your identity, an important part of your sense of self and sense of worth, that being hardworking is something you're proud of, is you really can't stand lazy people.

There are some people who are hardworking and it's not a big identity factor. They see lazy people. Oh well. There are some people who are hardworking and it's a big identity factor. You can't stand people who are lazy. It just irritates you. You despise them. That's why not just the law of God but *any* good thing becomes a dividing wall of hostility.

What are we supposed to do about it? The gospel does surgery. It destroys the hostility in your heart. It removes the hostility through two strokes. Do you know what they are? It's the two parts of the gospel. The first stroke of the gospel is that both the near and the far, both the moral and the immoral, are lost. Both need to be reconciled to God and are, therefore, spiritually equal.

Notice how up in verses 11–13 Paul talks about the Gentiles as being far from God. "Now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away ..." Why were they far? They didn't have the Scriptures. They didn't have the law. They were living in licentious, immoral ways. They *were* farther from God. They really were. The Jews were closer to God, obviously. They had the Bible. They understood who God was. They knew his attributes. They knew the law.

Yet look at what's so amazing. How did God bring Jew and Gentile together? It says in verse 16, "To reconcile both of them to God through the cross, he came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to you who were near." What's *preach peace*? That's the gospel. The gospel is that a person needs to be reconciled to God, that there is hostility between God and a person and a peace has to be made between the two.

This is saying that the people who are far away and immoral and the people who are near and moral both need to be reconciled to God, both need the gospel, are

both lost. You say, "How could that be?" Well, here's a little summary in 90 seconds of the rest of the New Testament. Watch. It's true that non-religious people are trying to achieve their identity. Sure. They're trying to achieve their identity through money or career or talent or music or art. They're trying to say, "I'm a good person because I've achieved this."

What that means is you have a fragile identity, because you always know you're not perfect and you never are sure whether you've achieved enough, and therefore, to bolster it, that's the reason you look down at other people. That's the reason your identity operates on superiority to the different. Religious people do the same thing. Religious people are people who say, "I'm a good person and I'm going to heaven, because I'm obeying the Bible."

We have a great example of such a person in Luke 18, where a man is getting up and praying, and he's saying, "Lord, I thank thee that I'm not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and like this tax collector here." Oh my goodness. What is that? Superiority to the different. Here's a very religious person, a Pharisee, a person who understands the Bible, trying to live very much according to the Bible, but because he's being his own savior, because he says, "I'm going to save myself. I'm going to be so good and so moral that God will have to bless me ..."

He has the very same kind of identity. In fact, his identity is operating through superiority to the different. "I thank thee that I'm not like them. I thank thee that I'm not like them." That's how everybody else's is working. Bible-believing, moral people who think their goodness will take them to heaven are every bit as lost as immoral people. They're every bit being their own savior and lord as immoral people, and they're dividing the human race through hostility just like everybody else.

That's the first thing the gospel tells you. If you believe the gospel, the first thing the gospel tells you is no matter who you are, you're not better than anybody else. If you're a prostitute, if you're a pimp, if you are a drug dealer, if you are a mafia hit man or, on the other hand, if you are a pillar of your community, if you're very moral and very good, it doesn't matter. You're all lost. You're all in the same spot.

The first thing the gospel tells you is you're not different than anybody else and you have no right to ever look down on anyone or feel superior to anybody. Secondly, the gospel doesn't just humble you; it affirms you. It affirms you infinitely. Why? Well, here's what it says. Literally, in verse 16, on the cross God "put to death their hostility." That's a really strange statement. It literally says on the cross God slew the hate.

How could God put to death hostility on the cross? The only thing that died on the cross was Jesus. Here's what we have. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made Jesus sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Listen carefully. Think about this. When it says on the cross God made him sin, it doesn't mean he made him *sinful*. It means God made him *sin*.

It doesn't mean, by the way, that on the cross Jesus Christ became *hostile*. It means he became *hostility*. God treated Jesus as sin should be treated, as hostility and hate should be treated, as you and I deserve to be treated. Jesus Christ stood in our place and received what our sins deserve. God treated him as we deserve so that, when you believe in Jesus Christ, God treats you as *Jesus* deserves.

Do you know what kind of affirmation that is? When you believe in Jesus Christ, God now treats you as if you deserve everything Jesus Christ deserves, as if you're as beautiful, as noble, as courageous, as righteous as Jesus. In Jesus Christ, God looks at you and sees you as more precious than all of the jewels that lie beneath the earth.

3. *Radical new identity.* What does that do? You now have an identity that's not achieved; it's received. An achieved identity is fragile and it needs to bolster itself in its insecurity through superiority to the different. A self-worth that's achieved is one thing, but to be received is to say, "It's mine." It's not because of anything I do. It's received. It's a gift. It's mine right now. It doesn't go up and down depending on your performance and the insecurity is away.

Therefore, not only does it humble you so you can't feel superior to anybody else, but there are two blows that take out the hostility. Now you're too affirmed to need to look down at anybody else. Oh my. Do you know what this is? Because you have a received identity ... The superiority to the different. Your identity operates in a radically new way. That's what it means to be a Christian. By the way, the other identity factors don't stop.

If you're an artist, you're still an artist. When you become a Christian, you're a Christian artist. If you're Asian, you don't become European when you become a Christian. You become an Asian Christian. If you're African, you don't become a Latino. You become an African Christian. All of those other identity factors are still there, but notice they're demoted. Being a violinist is only just being a violinist now. It's not your identity.

Making money is no longer about an identity. Now the money is just money. Now you can give it away. Before you couldn't. You had to have it. Why? Because that's how you felt good about yourself. If you're a white Anglo like me, being a Christian lifts me up a little bit out of my race and my culture so I have a little bit of distance. I'm able to be critical of it now in a way that I couldn't before.

It really means a Christian is somebody whose identity ... This radical new identity means no longer do you look down at other people who are different. You're too humbled. You're too insightful. You're too affirmed to need to do it. It says in Hebrews 2 that Jesus Christ is not ashamed to call us brethren. Do you know there's only one inferior race? Some of you are wondering how in the world I'm ever going to get out of this. No, it's the human race.

Jesus Christ, who was divine, was not ashamed to identify with our race. That means that once you understand what he has done for you, you'll never, ever

sneer at any other race. If you look at any group of people you despise and think about what Jesus Christ has done for you on the cross, it'll destroy the hostility you have in your heart toward them. If it doesn't, you don't know what he did yet. You don't really understand it yet.

How does this radical identity play itself out altogether? Two ways. Let me be really practical. On the one hand, it means that inside the church you have the ability to grow, to innovate, to be creative. Here's what I mean. There's a statement that goes like this. "What does he know of England who only England knows?" Many of you know the best way to understand your own culture is to go live in another culture for a year or two.

It gives you a perspective that you never had on your own culture, because, back in your own culture, so many of your assumptions are invisible to you. You don't even think of them as cultural. You just think, "Well, this is the way it is." You go and live with another culture and you begin to get a perspective, but you don't have to do that. You don't have to move to another country for two years.

Here in the church, especially in a place like New York, you have the ability to do this. Find another Christian brother or sister who is deeply different than you are, who has the same bond but is radically different culturally, radically different in some other way, racially, in class, educationally, and really be their friend. Wait till you see. It will be like going to another country.

When two people who radically trust each other but also challenge each other ... That's how you become a person of wisdom. That's how you begin to get a perspective on yourself and your own culture. You have the ability to do that right inside the church. Secondly, all Christians ought to be agents of peace and reconciliation in the world. We ought to be not only able to work together *inside* the church with people who are deeply different; we should be able to do that *outside* the church because of the heart surgery.

Miroslav Volf in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* says there are four ways to exclude a group of people: *decimation*, *assimilation*, *subjugation*, and *ignoring them*. *Decimation* means you kill them or drive them out. *Assimilation* means you do not accept them unless they become just like you. *Subjugation* means, "You can't have these jobs and you can't live in these places and you can't go to these schools." *Ignoring them* just means you don't care about their needs or issues and you don't engage them.

We know that throughout history Christians have done all those things, but when they do, they are denying the very heart of their faith. Why? Some years ago, I was reading a newspaper with my wife Kathy, and I said, "Here it says the real problem with the world today are fundamentalists." Kathy says, "I think that depends on what your fundamental *is*."

If a man dying on a cross for his enemies, if a man breathing his last breath praying for his enemies is the heart of your life, if that's your fundamental, then that cannot enable you to do any of those kinds of exclusion. It'll mean you reach

out to people. You'll be agents for peace and reconciliation in the world. The church has the ability, the resources, to make us agents of peace in the world. Jesus Christ gave himself to destroy the hostility between human beings. Now go and do likewise. Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for showing us what the church can be. Thank you, Father, for giving us an idea of what our friendships can be. Thank you for giving us a vision for what the church could be doing in the world. Forgive us for being like everyone else. Forgive us for not taking hold of these resources and letting the cross destroy our hostility to other people. We pray, Lord, that you would change us and make us people who live in light of the great truths of this passage. We ask it through Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.

The End of History

What We Believe: Foundations—November 22, 2015

Revelation 21:1–6; 22:1–5

1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.”

Revelation, chapter 22:

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life,

bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The Word of the Lord.

We're looking at the basic beliefs of the Christian faith this fall. We've been looking at these beliefs by using the outline of the Apostles' Creed, which is the earliest summary of biblical doctrine the church ever used. When you get to the very end of the Apostles' Creed you say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Which brings us not only to the end of the Apostles' Creed but the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation, where we learn what Christians believe about the end of history, about the end of time.

Ancient cultures and philosophies and religions all believed that history was cyclical, that it wasn't going anywhere. Robert Nisbet years ago wrote a book called *History of the Idea of Progress*. He and many other historians will tell you that the very idea of progress, of history going someplace good, going toward a hope, something we hope for, comes from the Bible. That's where the idea came into human history: from the Bible.

If you are a modern person, you probably believe in historical progress and, therefore, you ought to discover, no matter what you believe, the origin of your idea is here. Let's see what the Bible says, what Christians believe about the end of history and the hope that history is going toward, and let's see what these texts in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation say under these three headings. Let's learn *the hope they needed* (Who are *they*? The original readers of Revelation); secondly, *the hope they got*; and thirdly, *how you and I can take hold of that hope ourselves*.

1. *The hope they needed.* Verse 1: "**Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ...**" It's so easy when you read the book of Revelation to forget the original readers. The book of Revelation is about the future. Here you see the passages we're reading are talking about the future, so we immediately start to say, "What is our future?" and we forget the fact that this book was written to a specific group of people at a specific place in time who were going through a specific experience.

The author wrote this for *them* originally. It's for us too, of course, but it's easy to forget them. We're not going to learn what this means for us unless we see why it was written to them. Here's what they were facing. We know what the original readers were facing by going to the beginning of the book of Revelation, to

chapters 2 and 3, where Jesus addresses certain churches at that time. When you go there you'll see they were facing persecution. They were facing suffering. They were facing having their goods plundered, being put in prison, being put to death.

So there's great suffering coming. What do you do for people who are going to face suffering? How do you get them ready for it? You have to give them hope. You can't deal with difficulty unless you have hope. Hope is something you expect in the future that actually enables you to handle the present. Your expectation of the future has to be sufficient so it enables you to experience the present.

I'm going to argue right now that that hope has to be both transcendent enough and realistic enough to help you face the present. Now why would I say *transcendent* and *realistic*? Well, *transcendent*. On the one hand, of the many books I've read over the years on history and about World War II, an era of particular interest to me, one book about the death camps in Germany that has been most interesting and helpful to me was written from someone who had survived the death camps.

He wrote about the fact that some people in the death camps seemed to lose all hope and seemed to just wither up and die, and other people did not. They actually seemed to be able to get through it. The question is ... *Why was it that some people seemed to get through it and some people didn't?* The answer, according to this writer, was it had to do with their hope, what they were living for. If their hope was sufficient, if it was transcendent enough, it got them through. If not, it didn't.

For example, if the thing you were living for before you came into the death camp, if your hope was your career, success, or more nobly, if it was your family, loving your family ... If that was your hope in life, then when you got into the death camp your hope was destroyed, because the death camp just took your hopes away. You had nothing.

There was one man who was mentioned in this book I was reading. He was a prisoner in the death camp. He had a wife who was deceased, and he stayed strong there, because he used to say, "I believe my wife is looking down upon me from heaven, and I don't want to disappoint her. Someday I want to be with her, and I want her to be proud of me."

I think the average New Yorker would think that was so quaint and kind of sentimental, but I want you to know it was a transcendent enough hope that got him through in a way that those secular hopes, living to improve life, living for your family, living for career ... All of those secular hopes were dashed by the death camp, but he got through because it was transcendent enough.

Your hope has to be transcendent enough for you to have endurance and poise in all circumstances, but it also has to be realistic enough. I remember my first pastorate down in Virginia. I remember I met a young couple that was trying to

turn over a new leaf. That's one of the reasons they started going to church. They'd lived a kind of wild life, and they had cleaned their life up, they said.

They stopped partying. They stopped cheating on each other. They stopped having affairs on each other. They stopped all their shady business practices. They started a family. They started to clean up, and they started going to church. They thought they were doing everything right. As they cleaned up their act, everything started going wrong for them, especially major health issues came to them.

I remember they talked to me, and they were decimated. They were just melting down, because they said, "We're finally living the way we ought to live, and when you're living right your life ought to go right. We're living right; our lives ought to go right. What's going on? What's going on? We're going to church. We're living right. Doesn't God want us to live like this? Why is he letting all these bad things happen?"

Back then, when I was considerably less wise and compassionate than I am now, I looked at them and said, "Well, you know, Jesus Christ lived a far better life than you will ever live, and yet he had a terrible life. He was rejected. He was homeless. He was tortured and put to death." They stared at me like cows stare at a new gate. Like, "What?"

They had a supernatural aspect to their hope. They thought, "Well, if we live a good life, then God in heaven is going to bless us," and all that. It was still too simplistic, too naïve, too unrealistic to handle real life. A hope that will give you endurance and poise in all circumstances needs to be multidimensional. Not too mundane but at the same time not too naïve. It needs to be multidimensional.

Before moving on, here's what I'm trying to establish to start with. John the apostle, who wrote the book of Revelation to these people who were about to face horrendous suffering, gave them the hope we're about to unpack in this passage, and it is a simple fact of history that it worked. A couple of years ago, I read a lot of books on the history of how various cultures handled suffering.

What I learned from the historians was one of the reasons Christianity had so much credibility and why it succeeded as it did was because Christians were able to handle death and suffering and difficulty in ways that their neighbors could not understand. It gave them enormous credibility. Yes, when they were persecuted, when they were thrown to the lions, they did sing hymns. Yes, when the plagues came and everybody else was running out of the cities because of fear of contagion, the Christians stayed there and took care of the sick and very often died.

The people looked around and said, "How in the world are these people able to handle this kind of difficulty and suffering?" I'll tell you how. It was their hope, the hope that's right here. It's a historic fact that it worked. What are *you* facing? What might be happening to you in the future, or what are you facing right now? I can tell you this will enable you to face it. What is *this*?

2. *The hope they got.* I already told you a hope that is enough to get you through anything has to be multidimensional, and indeed it is. One of the beauties of Revelation is its literary genre. It's called *apocalyptic* genre. It's a kind of mixture of poetry and history. It's filled with dizzying images. For example, we have here a lamb on a throne. We also have a city in a dress. A wedding dress, by the way.

You say, "Whoa, what is that?" That's how apocalyptic works. It's these symbols juxtaposed, and it's a way of getting across the richness and multidimensionality of this hope. Let me just give you three, even though actually we could list 20 or 30, just out of this passage. Let me show you three things that are part of the hope that Christians, people who believe in Jesus Christ, know are waiting for them at the end of all things. Those three things are *a love of infinite density, personal beauty, and fantastic reality.*

A. *A love of infinite density.* Here's the first thing. "**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ...**" Notice what it *doesn't* say for a minute. It doesn't say, "And I saw the holy suburb coming down out of heaven." It's not a suburb. It doesn't say, "And I saw the holy national park coming down" or "I saw the holy farmland." No, no. It's a city.

What's the difference between a city and a suburb? There are more people in a city. There's more density of people. Those of you who live in New York City know what it's like to live in a place that is incredibly people dense. There are 60,000 people per square mile who live in Manhattan, and on a weekday, when everybody is here, it's almost 200,000 people per square mile. It's the most densely populated part of North America.

What does that mean? There are people above me, below me, around me. Above me I hear them thumping. Out there I hear the sirens. I hear the buzz. Below me they hear *my* thumping. What is that? In this world and in this day and time, to be filled with people density is both good and bad. Why is it good and bad? Well, the book of Genesis explains it. On the one hand, Genesis 1 and 2 tells us that we were made for love relationships.

That's the reason it says that in the very beginning the man and the woman were naked and unashamed. To say "naked and unashamed" was really a way of saying there was absolute transparency, absolute acceptance, no blockage in their relationship at all. The minute the man and the woman lost their relationship with God, the minute they fell into sin, the minute they were ashamed and had to hide from God because they knew there was now something wrong ... They ran away.

The moment they started hiding from God, they also started hiding from each other. They had to make fig leaves. They were embarrassed. Why? Because when you know there's something wrong with you, even though you want the love of the other person, you want that other person to look into your heart and see everything and love you, you also know that if they actually saw everything in there, if *anybody* ever saw everything that was in there, you wouldn't be loved.

So now the debilitating dilemma of human nature is we want relationships and we're afraid of relationships. Why do you think Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Hell is other people"? But here's the problem: heaven is other people. We want that love, and yet we can't have it, because the relationships are filled with conflict. We have to control what people see about us. That's what the fig leaves are all about. We can't let anybody know who we really are for fear we'll be rejected, and yet we really want to be accepted. We really want to be loved.

To be not known because you have all your masks on ... To be not known but loved is actually quite unsatisfying. To be exposed and well known and rejected is our deepest nightmare, but to be known fully and loved fully, to be naked and unashamed, would be joy unlimited. Here's what the Bible is saying. In heaven that's what you have. It's joy unlimited. It's people above you and below you and around you, and yet it's perfect love. Heaven is a world of love. The new heavens and the new earth are just filled with love. In other words, it's an infinite intensity of love.

That's the reason why it's a city. Cities are good and bad, but not in the future. Once all that is gone, once all the barriers are gone, once you know that every relationship is one of infinite, perfect, deep love, then you'd *want* to be in a city. You'd want to have the greatest density possible, because the more dense the population, the more wonderful the love. That's your future. That's the first thing. In other words, a love of infinite density. But why is it possible? Why can we have those kinds of love relationships?

B. *A hope of personal beauty.* What do I mean by that? Look at the next part of what it says here. "**I saw the Holy City ...**" Not the holy suburb. "**... the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride ...**" Here we go with the multidimensionality of all this. Suddenly we have a city that's a bride. That gets across two things. There's a sense in which when you become a Christian you become citizens of a city, because the Lord now is your King.

However, the Bible says the Lord does not just relate to you the way a king relates to subjects. The Lord also relates to you the way a spouse relates to a spouse, the way a husband relates to a wife. He does not just want to rule you; he wants to know you. He wants to love you. He wants you in his arms. Therefore, there's a sense in which we are not just a city; we are also a bride. That's why the mixture of the metaphor.

Here's what's interesting. It's not just talking about being a bride in general, just having an intimate love relationship with God. It goes on and says, just to fill out the metaphor, "**... as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.**" It wants us to think about wedding dresses. It wants us to think about how beautifully dressed everyone is on their wedding day. Here's the reason why.

There are some exceptions to what I'm about to tell you. There have been people, for example, who have been married underwater. Have you ever seen that? Every so often somebody gets married underwater. I want you to know I've

never performed a wedding like that. Everybody puts on the goggles and the scuba gear and goes underwater, and you actually have the wedding underwater. It happens.

I'll tell you why that doesn't happen very often. Not many brides and grooms look good in a bathing suit. On your wedding day you want to look good. You know, . 0001 percent of the population looks great in their bathing suits, because some people have pretty much perfect bodies, but I just want you to know it won't last. Even if you think you have it, it won't last. Here's what I want you to see.

The reason very few people have weddings underwater is very few people look good in a bathing suit, but everybody looks good in a wedding dress. Wedding dresses are designed to cover the flaws. They're designed to cover the imperfections. This is almost a deliberate reference to what we know in Ephesians 5, where Paul says that when you enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, he doesn't just become your King and Savior; he becomes your husband. Like a husband who loves his wife, he is making us beautiful and spotless and without blemish.

What's interesting about Ephesians 5 is we're told that when you become a Christian, Jesus Christ loves you not because you are lovely but in order to *make* you lovely. There's a sense in which he clothes you in his righteousness, in the wedding dress of his righteousness. When the Father looks at you in Jesus Christ, he sees you as something absolutely gorgeous, just the way everybody looks gorgeous on their wedding day in their wedding duds. We sing about it.

*Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to thy cross I cling
Naked, come to thee for dress
Helpless, look to thee for grace.*

Or this one:

*Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress
In flaming worlds, in these arrayed
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

Here's what's interesting. Jesus doesn't just objectively, externally make us beautiful in the Father's sight by covering us externally with his righteousness. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives, and the text of Ephesians 5, when it says he's making us something holy, spotless, blameless, and pure ... The Holy Spirit starts to actually make us beautiful. Bit by bit by bit, he takes away some of that shame. He takes away that selfishness and pride. He turns it into love, joy, humility, and self-control.

Solely and finally in the future, in the new heavens and new earth, in the city of our God, in the New Jerusalem, we are beautiful through and through, absolutely perfect in every way. That's the reason why it can be a heaven of perfect love. There's nothing to hide anymore. The fig leaves are gone. We're naked and

unashamed, because we're all beautiful. We're *personally* beautiful. This is important. All of the images here are personal, because the Bible says over and over again that you're still yourself. You're a person. You're a conscious person.

Do you know how important that is? In *The Lion King*, the great father lion is saying to Simba, "Now, Simba, yes, we die, but when we die our body fertilizes the ground, and that enables the grass to grow greener and higher, and then the antelopes eat the grass, and then the lions eat the antelopes, and then they die and fertilize the ground. You see, Simba? We're always part of the great circle of life."

That's supposed to be comforting, and in a way it is. Yes, I die, but I stay part of the circle of life. I've seen some secular websites that say, "When you die, yes, you're no longer a person consciousness or anything like that. We don't believe in all that. However, you're stardust. You become part of the stardust." Of course, a lot of other religions actually say that when you die you become part of the All Soul of the universe.

All of them are saying when you die you're not a person anymore. You're not a conscious self. You're not someone who's thinking and feeling anymore. You just become part of the great circle of life spiritually, physically, and so on. Oh my goodness. Here's what I know. I think you know this too. The best times in my life are when I'm with people I love. The most meaningful times in your life are when you're with people you love.

The worst times in your life, by far the worst times in your life, are when you lose somebody you love. Now you're going to try to comfort me by saying, "In the future you're not a person, you're not a self"? That means what you're saying is, "At death, you will be stripped of everything that made life meaningful to you ... forever." Ah, but that's not the Christian hope.

John Updike, the great writer, explains why Christianity was important to him in the last chapter of his memoir, which is called "On Being a Self Forever." That's the Christian hope. On being a self forever. Not just stardust. Not just part of the circle of life. On being a person, on being a self of infinite beauty finally, the person you know you ought to be, and you are. As a result, that enables a world of love.

C. A *fantastic reality*. What do I mean by that? Look at this. Verse 4: "**He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**" In 1940 or 1950, if you walked into a bookstore probably anywhere in the Western world and looked for the fantasy section, you wouldn't have been able to find anything. They would have had fiction, nonfiction, travel ... They would have had all the stuff you have now, but not fantasy.

Today, you walk into any bookstore in the Western world and fantasy might be the biggest literature section of all. What's in fantasy? You have science fiction. You also have fairy tales and ancient legends and myths, and so on, but you also

have a lot of modern fantasy literature. Why is it so big? The one man a lot of people would say probably almost single-handedly created that part of your bookstore was J.R.R. Tolkien.

Tolkien has a very famous essay in which he tries to explain why modern people, who know what reality is like, still have such a voracious appetite for fantasy literature and stories. He says what they all have in common ... science fiction and ancient and modern fantasy ... is being able to step outside of time, escaping from death, having love relationships that never end (love without parting), communication with non-human beings, and good finally triumphing over evil. Those five things.

He says that literature constantly scratches an itch we cannot ever seem to satisfy. We are fascinated by any literature that depicts in a realistic way, even though we know it's not true, that this is not how reality works, escape from time and death, love without parting, communication with non-human beings, good triumphing over evil. We love it. We can't get enough of it. That's just fantasy. It's not reality. We know, and yet we can't stop. It's so consoling. Why?

Tolkien, being a Christian, said it's because we have a memory trace deep in our souls. No matter what we think we believe, deep in our souls we know that's how things *should* be. That's what we were made for, but there's this concrete wall between fantasy and reality ... until Jesus Christ came. The moment Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he punched a hole in the concrete slab between fantasy and reality.

If Jesus Christ rose from the dead ... I don't know who you are or where you are in your belief system. You'd better find out if Jesus rose from the dead. Do you know why? Because if Jesus Christ rose from the dead and you believe in him, all of those things that you right now call *fantasy* will be true. Fantasy will become reality. In fact, a lot of fantasy is actually becoming reality very slowly, but on that day fantasy will be reality.

Look. It's all there. We're talking to angels. That's non-human beings. See the angel? "The angel showed me the river of life." There's love without parting. There are no tears. There's no death. There's no suffering. Stepped outside of time, escape from death, love without parting, good triumphing over evil. It'll all come true ... or not. It depends on whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Here's what I want you to know. If it's really true that the deepest longings of your heart might actually be fulfilled someday if Jesus is raised from the dead, there is no rational being who shouldn't at least be exploring whether Jesus was raised from the dead or not. I could understand why you'd come to the conclusion that it's not true, but I have no idea why you wouldn't *want* it to be true. No idea at all. Do you see how wonderful this hope is? That's the hope, and there's more we could say, but we need to finally talk about this.

3. *How you and I can take hold of that hope ourselves.* I said it was a plain historic fact that people who believed that this was their future could face

anything. How can you make it your own? You can make it your own if you notice three kinds of languages. In this passage, there's *the language of stage*, *the language of gift*, and *the language of substitution*.

A. *The language of stage*. Look at the stages. Verse 4 says, "He *will* wipe every tear from their eyes." All this hope is future. "There *will* be no more death," which means there's death now and there's crying now. So in a sense, this hope is future, but then look at verse 5. It's interesting. "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I will make everything new.' " No, that's not what it said. Are you reading? "I *am* making everything new."

What we're being told here is, on the one hand, this hope is not yet, but it's also to some degree happening now. In the future, relationships are perfect (perfect love), but when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, when Christ comes into your life, there can be some supernatural healing of relationships now. In the future, you will be gloriously personally beautiful, and yet when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, to some degree you can see miraculous changes in character in yourself right now.

When you experience, you might say, a down payment on the future, that makes you so sure of the future you can really face everything. You know it's coming, and yet you're realistic about the fact that it's not here yet. That was the problem with that young couple I met in Virginia. Their understanding was legalistic. They felt like, "As long as I live a good enough life, everything should be fine right now."

It's also a problem with a lot of secular people, who say, "If we have the right people in office, if we do the right social policies, we can overcome our problems." That's utopian. That's simplistic. That's not realistic. You might say that's not a pessimistic enough hope. It's not a realistic enough hope, but on the other hand, if you're too optimistic, if you're too naïve, *that* isn't going to help you either.

Dorothy Sayers shows the perfect balance of the "already but not yet-ness" of Christian hope for handling life. She wrote this in 1940. She's applying it to the fact that in 1940 in Britain, after World War II broke out and there was all this carnage ... It was a dark time. She said so many of her enlightened, educated friends were just shocked. "How can human beings do this? How can civilized European human beings do this?"

Here's what she wrote. This is called "Creed or Chaos." She wrote this essay in 1940. She says something like, "One of the greatest sources of strength in Christianity lies in its profoundly pessimistic view of human nature. The people who are most discouraged and despondent at the barbarity of our time are those who still cling to an optimistic belief in the civilizing influence of progress and enlightenment.

To them, the appalling bestial ferocity of the totalitarian states and the persistent selfishness and greed of capitalistic societies are not merely shocking. It's the

utter negation of all they have believed. It's as if the bottom has dropped out of their universe. The delusion of the perfectibility of humankind through a combined process of scientific knowledge and unconscious evolution has been responsible for a great deal of the heartbreak.

The Christian doctrine of the double nature of man, that he is imperfect in himself yet closely related by a real unity of substance to an eternal perfection within yet beyond him, makes the present state of human society less hopeless and less irrational." She says if you're a Christian, you're always ready for whatever happens. Christianity is so much more pessimistic than any human pessimism and yet so much more optimistic than any human optimism, at the same time.

B. *The language of gift.* What's that? Verse 6: "**He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.'**" Who gets into this city? The courageous? The bold? The moral? That was the mistake of my young couple in Virginia.

Who gets into the city? The thirsty. "Well, what do you mean?" You just have to say, "I'm empty." Not "Look at what I've done. Look at how I'm living. I've cleaned up my life. I've stopped my shady business practices. We stopped cheating on each other." No, no. It's those who know they need to be saved by grace. It's those who just say ...

*Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to thy cross I cling
Naked, come to thee for dress
Helpless, look to thee for grace.*

Do you want to have this hope? Do you want to make it yours? Then say, "Father, save me by grace." Sheer grace. Then you say, "Well, why should he save me by grace?"

C. *The language of substitution.* Over and over again it says, "The throne of God and of the Lamb." He could have used all kinds of images here at the very end of history. He could have talked about the throne of God and the Son or the Shepherd. It could have been anything. Why the Lamb? I'll tell you why. This is hearkening back to the book of Exodus.

God says back when the Israelites were in Egypt, "I'm going to send my angel of death to Egypt. I'm going to send my sword of judgment." What is the *sword of judgment?* "Because of your sin, the firstborn of every family will die." We're an individualistic culture. We do not understand the meaning of that. In more patriarchal cultures, the hope of the family was in the firstborn.

If the firstborn was strong, if the firstborn was able, then the firstborn could lead the family, keep the family together, keep the family status, maybe increase the family's status in the world. The hope of the family was in the firstborn, and God was saying, "Because of your sin, you need to be judged and you need to lose all hope. The firstborn of every family is going to die." But God said to the Israelites,

"If you slay a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on the doorpost, the angel of death will pass over you and your firstborn will not die," and that's what happened.

Centuries later, John the Baptist sees Jesus Christ walking along, and suddenly he gets it. He says, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world." Do you know what he's saying? By divine revelation, he says, "Now I get it." Our sins weren't atoned for by those sweet little furry lambs. God is giving up *his* firstborn. God's Son is going to die in our place on the cross so that *our* firstborn don't have to die, so that *we* don't have to die.

If you understand the language of substitution, if you can say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," if you say, "Father, I need the water of grace, the water of life, as a free gift, and I know it can come to me because of what Jesus Christ has done," this hope is yours. So what should we do with it? I'll tell you two things to do.

God loves cities, obviously, so get out there into your city and work on holistic relationships. Serve it. Care for the poor. Do what you can to make it a good city. Not in a utopian way that thinks somehow you can create a perfect city. Of course not. But if you see that the end of history is a perfect city, then you, as a Christian, will go out there and you will have the impetus and the motivation to do what small things you can do to make our earthly city more like that heavenly city.

The second thing is don't care whatever people say, and don't worry whatever may come into your life that seems like it's taking something important. Whatever happens right now, it is nothing compared to what we're going to have. Let the multidimensionality of this hope help you with your own suffering and difficulty. John Newton puts it like this in the last verse of "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken."

*Savior, if of Zion's city
I by grace a member am
Let the world deride or pity
I will glory in thy name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure
All his boasted pomp and show
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

Let's pray.

Our Father, when we sing that, help us to remember everything we know, not only from this sermon today but everything we know from the rest of the Bible, and let us sing knowing what those solid joys and lasting treasures are going to be like. Make it possible, therefore, for us to never give up, to never get weary in our well-doing, to never stop serving the people of our city, to never stop moving forward and loving you and loving our neighbor, no matter how much suffering comes into our lives. We pray that you'd make us people of hope, we pray that

you'd make us individual Christians of hope, and we pray that you would do all this through Jesus. It's in his name we pray, amen.

The Wisdom of Generosity

What We Are Giving: The Dynamic of Grace—November 29,
2015

Proverbs 10:16

**16 The wages of the righteous is life,
but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death.**

Proverbs 11:1, 4, 24:

**1 The Lord detests dishonest scales,
but accurate weights find favor with him.**

**4 Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.**

**24 One person gives freely, yet gains even more;
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.**

Proverbs 18:10–11

**10 The name of the Lord is a fortified tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.**

**11 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city;
they imagine it a wall too high to scale.**

Proverbs 30:8–9

**8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.**

**9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, “Who is the Lord?”
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.**

The Word of the Lord.

As we get near the end of the calendar year, our thoughts go to giving. Christmas is coming, so you're thinking about buying, giving, and receiving gifts. It's also true that at the end of the year, there are a lot of appeals for giving. You get appeals from this church, for example. Therefore, I think it's very appropriate, at the end of the year, for Christians to give some attention to what the Bible in general says about your attitude toward money, possessions, and generosity.

The gospel brings about a radical change in the way in which a believer regards money and possessions. The way in which the gospel leads us to understand things is so different than the way the culture leads us to regard money and possessions. For a couple of weeks, we're going to take a look at what the Bible says about money, possessions, giving, and generosity.

We're starting with the book of Proverbs, which is a very hard book to study. Every verse is on a different subject, so in order to gather a set of proverbs on any particular subject, you have to kind of go into the mine, pull out the nuggets, and arrange them. We went through and pulled out 8 proverbs on the subject of money, possessions, and generosity for our sermon tonight.

What they are going to show us is money has tremendous power. It exerts a huge power in our lives. We also want to see why and how it does that, and then how we can break the power of money over our lives. In a sense, we're going to learn three things here. We're going to learn that *money exercises great power over us*, *why it exercises great power over us*, and *how to break that power over us*.

1. *Money has a great power over us.* In itself, money is neither good nor bad. The problem is money never exists in itself. It always exists in somebody's life, and there it magnifies and amplifies whatever is in the heart. For example, Proverbs 10:16, is a fascinating verse and says, "**The wages of the righteous is life, but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death.**" It's a very striking statement.

In other words, here's a righteous person, and there's a wicked person. When money comes into the life of the righteous, it creates life. When the same amount of money comes into the life of a wicked person, it creates death. What? That means something like this. We have to understand the words *righteous* and *wicked* for a moment. Bruce Waltke, a great Old Testament and Hebrew scholar who has written the best commentary on the book of Proverbs, says when you and I see the words *righteous* and *wicked*, he doesn't know what we think.

He essentially says, "I have studied how the word is used in the book of Proverbs over and over again, and this is what the word means." Get this. "In the book of Proverbs, the *wicked* person is someone who disadvantages the community to advantage himself. The *righteous* person is a person who disadvantages himself in order to advantage and build up the community."

Therefore, righteous people look at the money they've made and feel, to some

degree, that money belongs to the community, not just them. Wicked people look at the money they have and believe it belongs to them and them only." Isn't that interesting? *Righteousness* means you see your money as not just yours but belonging to the community to some degree. The wicked see the money that has been made as just belonging to them.

That means the more money that comes into the righteous person's life the more it creates life. Why? Because here's what the righteous person would do. I'll just give you an idea, according to the book of Proverbs. The more money the righteous business owner makes the more generous the salaries of his employees and the more generous the prices for his customers.

If a righteous person says, "The money I'm making is not just mine; it belongs to the community," what will the business owner do? They're not going to try to take every bit of profit out of the company for themselves. They're going to try to share the profits by paying their employees more than most businesses pay.

They're also going to pass on their wealth by giving very low prices and, therefore, also enriching their customers. If you get the highest price and pay the lowest salaries you possibly can in order to get the highest profit you possibly can, you're wicked. The book of Proverbs said that, not me. I'm just here to tell you. Don't shoot the messenger. It's true.

Another way to put it would be this: A righteous person and a wicked person are thinking of buying a business. The wicked person says, "All I care about is profits. Will this give me the highest profits?" The righteous person is interested in profitability, but he also asks, "Does the business produce a product that helps the town or the people? Does the business do business in a way that helps society?"

The righteous person sees his or her money as belonging to the community to some degree. The wicked person says, "It's mine and mine alone." Therefore, the wages of the righteous creates life all around, but the same money coming into the wicked's pocket is a cul-de-sac, a dead end. It leads only to societal disintegration and spiritual disintegration of the person who hoards it and uses it for himself or herself.

Do you see the power of money to make or break communities? Isn't that something? I'm glad you're taking this seriously. I don't know if you can tell, but you are, and you should. What the Bible says about money is very hard-hitting. Money has the power to make or break the community depending on whether you have a number of people who operate on the basis of what Proverbs calls righteousness, as opposed to selfishness. The righteous are the unselfish, and the wicked are the selfish, basically.

A. *Money brings temptation for dishonesty.* Money doesn't just have the power to make or break communities, but it also has the power to make or break your soul. In these verses we see money has enormous power to make you dishonest, shallow, and arrogant. How so? Let's start up here near the top.

Proverbs 11:1 says, “**The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him.**”

You know what *dishonest scales* means. In ancient times, when you went into a store, how did you buy grain? Grain had a price to it. It was so much per pound (not that they had pounds and ounces back then, but you know what I’m talking about). The store owner would take a weight (let’s say a pound) and put it on the scale. You put the grain on the other side of the scale, and when it got even, you would pay per pound.

Of course, what if the store owner has secretly shaved off some parts of the weight? Even though it says it’s a one-pound weight, it’s actually less, so you’re paying for a pound, but not getting a pound. That’s called *dishonest scales*.

Today we have a lot of other ways of doing that, generally not using weights. We usually use accounting. There are all sorts of misleading and outright deceptive accounting practices that are designed to do the very same thing, to not let customers, investors, stakeholders, or other people really know what they’re getting for their money. It happens constantly and all the time.

The point is it’s a temptation. Honestly, the more money you have, and the more money you make, the more money you can make through dishonesty. As time goes on, you will constantly be coming up on little opportunities for little lies, misdirections, and deceptions that will make you a lot of money. As you make money, the temptations to be dishonest get really strong. It’s a tremendous temptation to become dishonest and corrupt.

By the way, the text says something interesting. It doesn’t just say, “The Lord doesn’t *like* dishonest scales.” Do you see what it says? The English word is *detest*, but the Hebrew word is the same as *abomination*. In the old King James or the older translations, I think it says, “The Lord *abominates* dishonest scales.”

The reason that’s interesting is, as some of you know, the word *abomination* is often used in the Bible to talk about sexual immorality, that this or that sexual immorality is *abomination*. What’s interesting here is we’re being told God regards greedy, dishonest business practices as every bit as heinous and abominable as sexual immorality. That’s a very important thing to keep in mind.

B. *Money has the power to make you shallow and superficial.* Look at Proverbs 11:4 near the top of your text. “**Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.**” Oh my, what a convicting verse. The day of wrath is maybe not what you think. Modern (especially Christian) readers look at the phrase “day of wrath” and think judgment day.

That’s not what it’s talking about. The *day of wrath* was a Hebrew term for a really, really, really bad day, a day of sorrow and grief, the day you get news that someone you love most in the world is going to die or has died. It’s the day you find somebody you thought was your best friend or a trusted companion has betrayed you in a major way. It’s the day you are told you have a debilitating or fatal disease. That’s the day of wrath, sorrow, and grief.

This is saying wealth is worthless in a day like that. This can be taken at a couple of levels. First of all, it means on those terrible days when the news is terrible and the danger is awful, on the day of tremendous grief, your money is totally worthless. It will not help you face it in any way. Only character will enable you to face those days of wrath.

Here's what's interesting. It's not just that it's worthless in the sense that it doesn't help you, only character, but the implication here, and other places in the Bible explain this, is that a lot of emphasis on making and spending money can hollow out your character so that you're not ready for the day of wrath.

For example, have you ever noticed making money takes a lot of time? You might have to have two jobs to make the money you want to make, or maybe you take a job where you make a good amount of money, but it takes up all of your time. Making money is extraordinarily time-consuming. It makes you incredibly busy. Not only that, spending money makes you incredibly busy.

In a life in which you're spending and making money, you're so busy that you can't develop character. You don't have time for being alone with God. You have very little time alone with yourself. You don't even get to know who you are. You don't have time alone with friends. Those are the things that make character, that get you ready for the day of wrath.

When you spend all of your time making and spending money, you are not ready for the day of wrath. You're not ready at all. You're not working on the part of your life you need to. It can hollow out your character, so you don't have the poise, endurance, strength, patience, and fearlessness you need.

Frankly, if you spend all your time making and spending money, you have to constantly be making financial decisions which are always cost-benefit, return on investment (ROI) decisions. Because you're always doing that, it becomes an instinct. It becomes part of who you are, and it starts to seep out into the rest of your life, your friendships, how you spend your leisure time, and how you conduct your family relationships.

It hollows you out. It doesn't make you a person of character but a person of superficiality, a person who's concerned mainly about optics, externals, and how things look. You're concerned mainly about material things, not the immaterial things, not character, and on the day of wrath, you're not ready. You're shallow and hollow.

Money can make you dishonest and superficial, and money can make you arrogant. Down at the bottom in verses 8 and 9, in a very famous part of chapter 30, it says, "**... give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' "**

Who said, "Who is the Lord?" Pharaoh did. Moses said, "Hey, we're from the Lord. The Lord says ..." Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord? I don't need anybody

telling me how to live.” I’m not going to stay here, because we’re going to get back to it in a second, but it is very, very difficult to be successful and making money and stay humble.

Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the great ancient church theologians, once said, “To see a man [or woman] humble under prosperity is the greatest rarity in the world.” It is extraordinarily difficult not to generalize and say, “Because I was smart in making money, that means I’m just smart.”

That means you don’t take advice and you don’t really listen to other people’s judgment. There’s an arrogance, a “Who is the Lord?” that comes in. We’ll get back to that. The main point is money has an enormous power to distort your life, destroy a community, and make or break a soul.

2. *Why does it have so much power?* What’s going on there? I think the answer to that is in these two verses more in the center of you text list. Proverbs 18:10–11 says, “**The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale.**”

These are two remarkable texts. The first one can be and has been an entire sermon all by itself, but it’s the juxtaposition, the putting them together, that’s so interesting. To understand it, you have to understand the idea of the city. Cities were the only places where things were really secure in ancient times.

Outside of cities, you had wild animals, wind and dust storms, vigilante justice, tribal warfare, marauding bands of robbers, and foreign armies that would come on through. Of course, a city could be sacked, but the point is inside the city was stable human life, but outside the city things were never stable.

Inside the city jurisprudence, a market economy, and art and culture could develop. To live inside the city wall, the fortified towers of a city … There was no greater security in ancient times, and there was actually no greater status. People wanted to live in cities. There’s no greater metaphor for security, status, or significance than the idea of a city.

Verse 10 says, “**The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.**” Forgive me for giving you an entire sermon in about 90 seconds, but this is what this is saying. When bad things happen and the day of wrath happens to you, there’s only one safe place: The name of the Lord. There’s only one fortified city, one tower to run into. It’s the name of the Lord.

It doesn’t just say “The Lord.” It says “The *name* of the Lord.” God’s name, in the Bible, is always who he is. It’s his attributes and qualities. Let me be as practical as I possibly can. When things are really unsafe in the world and things are really ready to overthrow you, when you’re frightened, scared, and worried, and you can’t sleep at night, where do you go? Where is a safe place? The answer is the name of the Lord.

Let me give you a practical example of that. If you’re a Christian, you know I can

give you four things you know are true of God, four aspects of his name: He's your Father, he knows everything, he is in absolute control of history, and he loves you infinitely and everlastinglly. He would do anything for your good.

If you drop any one of those four out, and you don't have the real God, the biblical God. If you keep them together, run into it. Rejoice in it, grasp it, meditate on it, and think of it, and you will start to feel finally safe. It's the only thing in the world that will make you safe. It'll make you say, "If that's who he is to me, and that's who I am to him, what in the world am I worried about?"

But that's not where we go. I'm going to be honest about where we go. It says in verse 11, "**The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale.**" By putting these two things together, we're being told that of all the things of the world you could look to to give you what only God can give you, of all the possible God substitutes, of all the things that most seem to offer what God can give you, it's money.

We should be running into the name of the Lord for our significance and security, but we use money. How so? Money offers to be not just money. It offers to be your god by giving you a false sense of security, giving you an inflated identity, and fueling your idolatries.

A. *It gives you a false security.* Every so often, you hear about somebody who died. Maybe you read about it in the newspaper, or maybe you just know about somebody who died and you find out about this. Sometimes, people die living rather ordinary lives, but after they die it comes out that they were zillionaires. They had an enormous amount of money stashed away in savings and investment.

They didn't spend it on themselves, they didn't live in nice homes, they didn't wear nice clothing, they didn't give a lot of it away, and they didn't start any foundations. It was all socked away, because it was their fortified city. Money is so seductive. Money gives you the impression that, "If you have enough of me, you can spit in the eye of the world." That's just not true. "If you have enough of me, you're totally secure. You're safe. I'm your fortified city."

It's eccentric for someone to live in a way that nobody notices ... They don't spend their money or give it away, then they die and have \$500 million in the bank or something like that. That's eccentric, but I want you to know every single person in this room, including me, is not as generous as they should be, because money says to us, "If you have enough of me, you're safe." That's just not true.

Money is worthless on the day of wrath. It's only the name of the Lord that will help you on the day of wrath. On the day of your death, money is useless. It's useless in getting you through death. In fact, on the day your heart breaks, money is useless. Money can't help you with a broken heart; only God can. Money can't help you face death; only God can.

There is no real security in money. Betrayals, reversals, death of loved ones, and fatal diseases happen whether you have money or not. Money promises security

and that it's a fortified city, but it can't give you security.

B. *Money inflates your identity.* We talk about this all the time, do we not? If you go back to the beginning of the Bible, say Genesis 3, the minute the man and woman in the garden of Eden, the minute the human race lost its relationship with God and became alienated from him, deep down inside we knew there was something wrong with us. We experience shame. We don't want people to see us.

Before, we were with God naked and unashamed. We were known and loved and had no problem with people seeing us, but after we lose our relationship with God, we have to control what people see about us. Fig leaves, right? That means every person is radically insecure. Every person feels like they have to prove themselves. Every person is unsure of their worth and value. Every person is struggling to prove to themselves and other people that they're worth something.

In all of creation, in all of the world, there is nothing that offers to give you this like money does. That's the reason this happens. If you start to make any money at all, you take credit for it. Your heart goes after it. This is toxic. The reality is you're smarter at making money, but your heart starts to say you're just *smarter*.

The reality is you've done better financially than other people, but your heart says you *are* better than other people. The reality is you've done better, but your heart says you are better. The fact is there are people who are now economically below you on the socioeconomic scale, but your heart says, "They're just below you. You're better and smarter, and you're above them."

The heart desperately wants to believe that. It's the fig leaves. That is, we use money to give ourselves an identity. It is extraordinarily important for us to think of ourselves as being people who make this kind of money, this kind of salary, or this kind of place. That's toxic to human community, and it's toxic to your soul.

C. *For many people, money is a false god.* It *can* be your security. It *can* be your identity. It *can* be your fortified city. I need to add this, because it's important to see. I want you to see there's one other thing you need to know. Even when money is not your false god, your alternate significance and security, money will always tell you where your false god and salvation is. Even if money is not your idol, it will tell you where your idols are. Jesus Christ said, "Where your treasure is, there is your heart."

Let me give you an embarrassing example. It's an effort for me to give money away. I think it's an effort for most people. It's not easy. You have to discipline yourself, and it always takes your breath away a little bit. It is no effort for me to buy a book. I want books, because I want to know the stuff that's in the books. I'm not a collector; I want to know the stuff.

As my wife would say while rolling her eyes, if she were here, "You've never met an expensive academic press book at \$75 for 100 pages that you didn't love. Why do you want it?" It's okay, I can do it on a Kindle too, but I want that book. I want to know this stuff. Why? I'll tell you why. My primary identity is who I am in

Jesus Christ, that God the Father loves me in Jesus Christ. That is and should be my value and significance, but I get a lot of significance out of knowing things. I'm a minister! I'm a teacher.

On the one hand, all I really should need is to know God says to me through Jesus Christ, "You are my child." But I must say, I get an awful lot of significance out of people saying, "I learned so much from that sermon. You know so much. You quote so many books. I just learned so much." I get a lot of significance out of knowing things.

Let me show you what this means. I hate spending a lot of money on clothes. This won't come as a huge shock, even if you're a first-time visitor, but the fact of the matter is my danger is I can get a lot of significance out of what I know. I get almost no significance out of what I look like. That shouldn't be a shock to many of you.

Let me turn the tables on you quickly. Some of you know you love spending money on clothes. It's just as effortless for you to spend money on clothing as it is for me to spend money on a book. Why? Because the approval you get from looking good is really important to you. It's effortless. It doesn't hurt at all. You just do it. You have to stop yourself, right? There are other people who will spend an enormous amount of money to get a home in that high-status neighborhood, yet they don't give a lot of money away to the poor or to ministries.

The point is, if God were the only god you had, if Jesus were the only savior you had, if you didn't have these other false sources of identity, security, and significance you would be so much more generous. Because, you see, where your treasure is, there is your heart. That means whatever has captured your heart your treasure flows to effortlessly.

If you want to know what you really worship, because even the Christian heart is always contesting God as the real Lord and Savior of your soul, find out what it is so easy to spend money on. Where your treasure is, there is your heart. Where your heart is, there goes your treasure. Only if you see that money is either a false god or it shows you your false god will you see and understand the power money has over you. It has enormous power over you.

Our problem is not just that we're stingy or that we spend too much money on books or clothes. Our problem is not that we ought to give more away. It's not that we work too hard. All the things I'm talking about have spiritual roots, because God is not our only god. Jesus' salvation is not our only salvation. As a result, money rules, shapes, and distorts us. It takes hold of us.

3. *How are we going to break the power of money over us?* The answer is to do two things. The first thing is to grasp a principle, and the second thing is to bring it into your heart through the cross of Jesus Christ.

A. *We need to grasp a principle.* Now what's the principle? The principle is here in verse 24 up near the top. I want you to know that even though you see it here, it's all through the wisdom literature. It's all through Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and

the Psalms, that part of the Old Testament. It says here, “**One person gives freely, yet gains even more ...**” The more you give away, the more you get. “... another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.”

Over and over again this is said using an agricultural metaphor. The more you sow and scatter your grain, the more of a harvest you will reap. The more you hoard your grain ... In other words, the more you sow your seed, the more you will reap fruit, but the more you hoard your seed, the less you’ll eat. The more you sow, the more you reap. The less you sow, the less you eat. It’s an agricultural metaphor. By the way, it’s crucial to realize that.

The Old Testament says you reap what you sow, which means if you give away your money, you become rich, and if you hoard your money, you become poor. Right away, what people think is, “What that means is if I give money away, I’ll make more money.” But think about the agricultural metaphor. When you sow seed, do you go out later on in your harvest and reap seed? No, you reap fruit. Your seed does not come back to you in the form in which you gave it away.

In the same way, when the Bible talks about scattering your money and being extremely generous to the poor and the church, it says giving it away will bear real fruit. In other words, real riches will come to you. This is the principle: Scattering gathers, and gathering scatters. Scattering your gifts, you money, gathers. How so?

When you scatter your gifts to the poor, you’re uniting society. If the well-off hold on to their money and spend it all on themselves, you have a divided society. Gathering, which means hoarding, scatters, but scattering gathers. If you give your money away to the church, the job of the church is to bring God and humanity together. We’re going to sing about it in “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” in a couple of weeks. “God and sinners reconciled.” It’s uniting God and humanity. That’s what I’m doing right now.

B. *We need to bring it into our hearts through the cross of Jesus Christ.* How do you bring that into your heart in such a way that it destroys the power of money? You see the cross is the ultimate example of that principle. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 9, says you reap what you sow. He’s talking to the Corinthian Christians and trying to get them to be as generous as the Macedonian Christians.

The Macedonian Christians were poor but gave a lot of money to the famine relief, and the Corinthian Christians had a lot more money but weren’t being generous. Paul uses the Old Testament and says, “You reap what you sow. If you hold on to too much, you become spiritually poor. If you’re willing to give your money away, you become spiritually rich. Scattering gathers, and gathering scatters.”

Then he also says this in 2 Corinthians 8: “**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich [in heaven], yet for your sake he became poor ...**” He emptied himself of his glory and went to the cross. “... so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

He's saying the ultimate principle and example of scattering to gather was the cross, because on the cross, Jesus Christ was broken to pieces. He was scattered. They whipped him with 39 lashes. They pulled the very flesh off his body. They broke him, speared him, and nailed him. The bones crunched and splintered as they drove the nails through his hands and feet.

On the cross he was broken to pieces. He was scattered to gather us. The cross is the ultimate example of wealth distribution. Jesus Christ scattered his glory and gave everything away. Jesus Christ was scattered in order to gather us. Why are we gathered here tonight? Why do we have each other? Why do we love each other? Because Jesus Christ was scattered and destroyed on the cross.

When you see that Jesus Christ did that for you, that everything else your heart would treasure, anything else you set your heart on as your main treasure, will demand so much from you ... It'll demand you work and sweat for it, but Jesus Christ is the only treasure who sacrificed for you. "I want to make this much money." "I want to be able to have two homes." Any other treasure you set your heart on will make you sacrifice, but Jesus Christ is the only treasure who sacrificed for you. He's the only treasure who *could* sacrifice for you.

When you see him scattered in order to gather you to his Father and to each other ... Oh, my goodness. Now there's real security. The cross proves Jesus Christ will do anything for you. There's security, and secondly, there's significance. Jesus Christ valued you enough to do anything for you.

When you see the security and significance you have in him, suddenly, money no longer becomes an identity, and it no longer becomes security. It's just money. It loses its divine qualities. It stops being security and identity. It just becomes money, and now you can give it away. Jesus Christ scattered himself in order to gather us. Now you go do the same thing. Scatter your gifts.

By the way, you might say, "But how much should I give? Typical pastor ... You're not being practical. How much should I be giving away?" My response is, first of all, that's the wrong first question. The first question is ... *Why don't you want to give away more?* I just gave you the answer tonight.

If you take the cross into the center of your economic life, seeing what he did for you, scattering himself in order to gather us, will make you want to give more away. It'll demote money. It'll stop being a fortified city, something that gives you security and identity. You'll finally be able to send it away.

The first question is ... *Why don't you want to give away more?* The answer always is, "Because you haven't taken the cross into the center of your heart the way you should." Then the second question is ... *Well, if I want to give away more, how much should I give away?* I would suggest two rules of thumb.

In the Old Testament, every believer was required to give away 10 percent of their income to the poor and to ministry. If you, by the way, decide you're going to give 10 percent of your income, congratulations, you have attained Old

Testament standards. So don't congratulate yourself. If you go to the New Testament, here's what we see. Jesus Christ on the cross did not tithe his blood or his life. He gave it all. He sacrificed.

That means the Old Testament rule of thumb is 10 percent, but the New Testament rule of thumb is you give away so much that there's a measurable sacrifice for how you live. You should be giving away so much of your money to ministry and to the poor that it makes a measurable difference in vacations you take and clothing you buy.

If it's not making a measurable difference, you're not sacrificing yet. Look at what Jesus Christ did on the cross for you. Take that to the center of your life until money become just money. Scatter your gifts, and wait until you see how he works through that. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you for giving us both information about money and inspiration about what your Son did. We want to be a generous church and generous people, and we can't imagine the sorts of things you'll be able to do through us if we bring the cross, the ultimate principle of scattering to gather, into our hearts.

Let us do that as a church and as individuals, Lord, please. Thank you, Father, that your Son did this for us. Give us the excitement we should have as we consider how, as a generous people, you will work through us in this city. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

The Grace of Generosity

What We Are Giving: The Dynamic of Grace—December 6, 2015

Luke 18:18–30

18 A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **19** “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. **20** You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’ ”

21 “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said. **22** When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow

me.”

23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.

24 Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! **25** Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?” **27** Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” **28** Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!” **29** “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God **30** will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

This is God’s Word.

When you get near the end of the calendar year, your thoughts turn to giving, do they not? Not only is it a time for gift-giving at Christmas, buying, giving, and receiving gifts, but it’s also the time of the year in which there are many appeals for good causes, appeals to please give, including to your congregation, the church you go to. Therefore, we thought it was very appropriate at the very end of the year to spend a couple of weeks looking at what the Bible says in general about money, possessions, giving, and generosity.

The gospel changes the way in which we look at our money and possessions. It radically changes us so that, if we understand the gospel, we should have a radically different attitude toward and relationship to our money and possessions, at least very different than the one the culture puts out as normal.

This week, we’re going to look again at what the Bible says about this subject. We’re going to look at this very famous passage, which is Jesus’ encounter with the rich young ruler. By the way, it doesn’t say he was young here. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they all give the same basic story. Only in Matthew does it say he was young. We’re going to mention that because, I think in a place like New York in which so many people who do have wealth are young, it’s actually quite appropriate.

We’re going to take a look at the rich young ruler, and we’re going to learn from him that *money has great spiritual danger attached to it*. Secondly, we’re going to learn *how money is spiritually dangerous*. Thirdly, we’ll learn *why money is spiritually dangerous*. Finally, we’ll learn *how to escape it*.

1. *Money is spiritually dangerous.* Briefly, but very simply, the most famous verse in this very famous passage is probably here in verses 24 and 25 where it says, “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a

needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ”

Right off the bat, he's saying something that's very striking. Like I said, it's the most famous verse, but what does the metaphor mean? The metaphor is one of impossibility. The largest land animal anybody in Jesus' day and time would have ever known was a camel. The needle was the smallest human-made object they would encounter, as well. To talk about a camel going through the eye of a needle was a metaphor of impossibility. It's a little bit like saying, “A snowball's chance in hell,” or something like that. It's a way of saying, “Impossible.”

Is Jesus saying it is literally impossible for the rich to be saved? No, for a few reasons. One is there are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph of Arimathea ... There are lots and lots of people in the Bible who were great in the kingdom of God and were incredibly wealthy. But even here, if you see the proposition and the metaphor, the proposition is, “It's hard [not impossible] for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Even down when Peter says, **“Who then can be saved?”** Jesus says, **“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”**

By the way, notice when Peter says, “Well, who can be saved?” that shows us we have a tendency to read the Bible through our own cultural lenses. When you and I hear Jesus say, “Well, it's really hard for the rich to be saved,” I think a lot of people today, especially if you've lived in America in the last decade, you'd say, “Oh, yeah, yeah, the rich. They're kind of bad people, aren't they? They're the ones who are creating all the inequality.”

That's not what Peter is saying. Peter is saying, “Well, then, *who* can be saved?” They thought the rich were the blessed ones. They thought if you were rich, that meant you were good, that you were blessed. How else did you get rich but that God blessed you? God must be favorable to you.

So when Jesus says it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, Peter's question is, “Well, then, how can anybody get in?” That's probably not how you read it, is it? The Bible actually is saying to beware of reading the Bible through your own cultural blinders and thinking the way you see things.

Jesus says it again in verse 27: **“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”** He's saying, “Look, the Bible says everywhere it's impossible that anyone would be good enough to be saved.” Romans 3 says, **“No one is righteous, no, not one.”** Therefore, every person's salvation is a miracle.

It's impossible that anyone would be saved. Notice it doesn't say, “What's impossible with the rich is possible with God.” He's not trying to say, “Well, the rest of you are possible to be saved, but not the rich.” Jesus is simply reiterating what the rest of the Bible says: “All salvation is a miracle.” Then why is he picking on the rich?

If you put it all together, and I've been thinking about this over the years, I think Jesus is saying the things that keep human beings, all of us, from God, are accentuated by money. Money magnifies and amplifies them. So money makes

the things that tend to keep us from God worse, and that is a really, really serious warning. The first thing we see in this very famous place about the camel and the needle is that wealth is spiritually very, very dangerous.

2. *How is wealth spiritually dangerous?* In order to answer that question, I think Jesus, when he makes this statement about the danger of wealth, is assuming knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. If you were in church last week, we did a kind of survey of part of the Old Testament proverbs. The Old Testament says an awful lot about wealth.

In general, by the way, the Bible sees wealth creation in more positive light than socialistic societies do. It sees wealth as a more powerful corrupting influence than capitalistic societies want to admit. The Bible's attitude toward wealth does not really fit into a spectrum between free-market capitalism and socialism. It sees it as so absolutely crucial and powerful that, in a way, the Bible has a more positive and a more negative view of money than any of our existing economic systems, because it sees the spiritual power of money.

The background is actually pretty rich, but all I can do here is not look at the positive. The Bible says plenty of positive things about the relationship of wealth to hard work and lots of positive things about the importance of wealth creation. I would like to show you, because Jesus is highlighting it here, the negatives, the dangers. How is money a spiritual danger? Let me give you four ways the Old Testament, the Bible, says money is spiritually dangerous. It's the background to what Jesus is talking about here.

First of all, *money is a huge, huge temptation to be dishonest*. The more money you have, the greater the temptation. Do you understand that? I do know at one end of the spectrum (in fact, if you were in church last week you heard about this) poverty does tempt people to steal. Proverbs 30:8–9 tells you so.

What's intriguing about this is as your wealth grows, the temptation to dishonesty grows too. If you're making hundreds of dollars, cheating will make you hundreds more. If you're making thousands of dollars, cheating will make you thousands more. If you're making millions of dollars, cheating will make you millions more.

In other words, the more money you have, the more money you can make through cheating, accounting sleight of hand, deception, and dishonesty. Therefore, the pressure grows and grows and grows. The more successful you are, the more pressure there is to be dishonest. I'm not going to spend more time on that. That's just a fact. That means if you are dishonest, what can that do to you?

When you start to do things that aren't really on the up and up, yet they're making you money ... Whenever you lie or deceive other people, you always, to some degree, justify it in your own heart. That means you never fool other people without fooling yourself. You never deceive other people without deceiving yourself. You never lie to people without lying to yourself. Therefore, dishonesty, deception, and lack of integrity are always incredibly hardening and blinding. The

more money you have, and the more successful you are, the more that temptation grows.

Secondly, *money can make you an addict*. It deceives you about how much you actually have. The more money you have, the more in denial you are about how much money you have. It's a simple empirical fact that the more money you have, and the more money you make, the smaller the percentage of that income you give away.

That's true across the board. All the studies, all the statistics ... The smaller your income, the greater percentage of your income you give to charity. The larger the income, the smaller the percentage of your income you give to charity. Why? It's addiction. It's denial. In other words, the more money you have, the less money you feel you have. That begins to show there's something really spiritually bad about money when it comes to what it does to your heart.

One way that works is whenever your income increases, in very small ways, usually very subtly, but inevitably, you increase your expenses. "I can afford this now. I can do this, and I've always wanted to do that." As your income goes up, your expenses go up. That means you can be making five times more than you used to be making, and you feel strapped. You don't feel like you have any more money at all. Wait a minute. You have five times more money. But you don't feel that way. That's the power of money, to put you in denial.

Here's the other thing. Money always gets you into places, right? In other words, if you have the money to buy an apartment or home in this particular neighborhood or in that building, next thing you know, you're hanging out with people from that building. Inevitably, those people in that building make a lot more than you.

In other words, whatever socioeconomic rung of the ladder you're on, there are other people on that rung who are making more than you inside your bracket. If you're worth \$10 million, and yet you're in a club with somebody who's worth \$100 million, you don't feel like you have that much money. You say, "Oh, I'm not rich. That guy is rich. You want rich? I only have this, but that person has that and that and that ..."

So you don't feel like you have enough money to give away. You don't feel like you're all that rich. You feel kind of strapped. That's addiction. The rest of the world is not fooled. They know how much money Americans have. They know how we live. When we say, "Oh, we don't have enough money to give any more away than we do," the rest of the world laughs. We are addicted, see?

Thirdly, *money absolutely has the power to lull you into false security*. If you have savings and investments, there are very few things that can give you a greater illusion that now you're ready for life. If you just have this and that, and you know you could lose your job and be fine for a pretty good period of time ... Wow, now you feel like you're ready for everything. There are a lot worse things in life than losing your job, and you're probably not ready for those things.

Money lulls you into thinking, “I’m ready for life.” Okay, are you ready for the death of a loved one? Are you ready for a debilitating or fatal disease? Are you ready for a betrayal from someone you thought was your friend, and that person stabs you in the back? Are you ready for the disaffection of someone who you thought loved you, and now somehow they’re alienated from you?

Listen. Money is not going to stop any of the worst things in life. They’re coming, they’re going to get through, and you may not be ready for them. It’s not money that enables you to meet those things. It’s character, faith, and spiritual joy. The problem, of course, is it takes so much time to make money that you don’t have the time to develop character or a relationship with God or even get to know who you are.

Lastly, and very briefly, because it’s actually what we’re facing with this rich young ruler, *money can make you proud*. The single most practical life skill is ... You’re not ready to take notes? You should be getting your pens out here. The single most practical life skill is the ability to repent and admit you’re wrong without it being traumatic, the ability to admit you’re wrong quickly without it taking five years before you admit it, the ability to repent eagerly, quickly, and without making the other person feel horrible for making you do it.

In marriage, it may be *the key skill*. In friendship, it may be *the key skill*. In decision-making ... Unless you’re able to do it, you don’t learn from what you’re going through. It’s *the key skill* in developing wisdom. It’s *the key skill*. Pride destroys your ability to learn that skill, and there’s nothing I know that can create more pride than making money.

If you make money, that means you’re smart about making money, but that’s not what your heart is going to say. Your heart is going to say, “I’m smart.” If you have made money, it means you have done better than many other people economically, but that’s not what your heart is going to say. Your heart is going to say, “You’re better.” That destroys your ability to repent and a lot of other things.

Can the rich be saved? Yes, they can be saved, but none of us can be saved without the miracle of God because of various things that keep us all from him, but money makes those things worse.

3. *Why does money have this kind of power?* Why can it addict us, blind us, puff us up, and corrupt us? Why can it do these things? We will find the answer as we see how Jesus interacts with this rich young man. The first thing is we’re told Jesus is basically at a theological Q&A. **“A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ”**

Jesus was a rabbi, so this guy is basically trying out his theology. He says, “Okay, what do *you* think I have to do to inherit eternal life? How can I be saved?” That’s a perfectly good question to ask any religious teacher or professor, because it’s a way of getting to the heart of what their system of salvation and theology is.

Almost everything Jesus says after this question is kind of a surprise. If you’ve

been reading the New Testament and Luke 18, you get to this place, and almost everything Jesus says for the next several verses is kind of like, “What?” The first impression is, “Huh?” He says, “**... what must I do to inherit eternal life?**”

Look at verse 20: “**You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’**” In other words, “Obey the Ten Commandments, and you’ll be saved.” Is that surprising that Jesus said that? Yeah, especially if you’ve been reading Luke 18.

Just before this, in Luke 9–14, Jesus has told a parable called the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. It’s a parable of two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector, who go in to pray. The Pharisee says, “O Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men. I thank you that I have not committed adultery like the adulterers. I give my money away and obey the commandments.” Jesus said, “Here’s a person who’s confident in his own righteousness.”

Then there was the tax collector, and he couldn’t even look to heaven. All he did was call and say, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus says the lesson of the parable is if you think you are good and have obeyed the commandments and are confident in your own righteousness, you will be lost, because nobody is good enough to be saved. No one can be saved by their works, but only if you ask for God’s grace and mercy will you be saved.

Therefore, there are those two men. One is confident in his obedience to the law, one says, “Just be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus says, “I say unto you, it’s that second man, the tax collector, who went down to his house justified.” Jesus has just said you can’t be saved by obeying the Ten Commandments. Here’s a guy who says, “What must I do to be saved?” He says, “Oh, obey the Ten Commandments.”

This is the joy of reading the New Testament. You’re going along, and Jesus says one thing and, almost the next moment, says something that just totally seems to be wrong. It’s one of the ways Jesus gets you to think. Here’s why he said that. You say, “Well, why didn’t he say, ‘Oh, you need to be saved through grace. Receive me as your personal Lord and Savior. I’m going to the cross, and if you believe in me, you’ll get God’s forgiveness.’ Why didn’t he say that? Isn’t that the right answer?”

Yeah, it’s the right answer, but the guy would’ve said, “I don’t need grace.” He has the confidence successful people often have. Did you notice what he said in verse 21? “Oh, I’ve kept all these since I was a boy. I’m completely obedient. Sure, I obey all the commandments.” Jesus knew if he told him, “You need to be saved by grace,” the guy would have just laughed. He has no need for grace.

What Jesus is trying to show him is he does. Jesus signals his purpose and where he’s going up here in verse 19. The first thing Jesus says is, “**Why do you call me good? [...] No one is good—except God alone.**” Again, at first sight, that looks a little surprising, but if you watch very carefully, Jesus is extremely

careful.

He doesn't say, "I'm not good." What he's actually saying is, "Why are you going up to a human being (as far as you're concerned), just a plain, human rabbi, calling them good when only God in heaven is good?" Jesus is doing nothing but invoking a very important strand in Old Testament theology.

Psalm 130:3 says, "O Lord, if you marked iniquities, if you kept a record of iniquities, who could stand?" Even the Old Testament said nobody can be saved. If God really starts looking at everybody, nobody keeps the commandments perfectly. Jesus is trying to get there, but he starts by saying, "Well, obey all the commandments."

By the way, theologically, there's nothing wrong with saying that. If you live a completely righteous life, obey all the commandments absolutely fully, and if you give God the life God asks for from a human being perfectly, of course there would be no barrier between you and God. What Jesus is saying is not wrong.

Then he makes his move. Verse 22 says, "**When Jesus heard this, he said to him ...**" What is he saying here? It's really kind of surprising. "**You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**" I told you, almost everything Jesus says here makes you go, "What?"

Is he saying the only way for anyone to be saved and go to heaven is to give away all your money to the poor? The reason we can be certain he's not saying that is because he's often confronting people like Nicodemus and the woman at the well (we'll get back to her in a second). Other people have come and asked the similar question, "What must I do to be saved?" He's never ever ever before said, "Give away your money to the poor."

Therefore, the real question is ... *Why is he doing it for this guy?* Obviously, it's not a requirement for salvation, but why is he doing it for this guy? I think what's going on is he's actually saying, "Oh, you obey the commandments do you? Well, let's just take a look at one of those commandments. First commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. You should love nothing more than God. Let's just see how you're doing on that one."

The reason he brings up money is because it's this guy's issue. Let's go for a moment to the woman at the well. The reason he goes after this guy like this is because Jesus Christ is the Wonderful Counselor. We already sang about it here, or at least, they sang about it. He's a skillful surgeon. He knows what the tumors are in your soul that are destroying you and squeezing God out of your life. The reason he goes after money is that's the tumor in this man's soul.

To help you see this, do you remember Jesus Christ's encounter with the woman at the well in John 4? He meets a woman at the well in Samaria. How lovely is it that Jesus always contextualizes his message? He does not have a little formula he always hits people with. Here he's talking about, basically, salvation and spiritual treasure, because that's the guy's issue.

With the woman at the well, she's drawing water, and he says, "Oh, I have a living water that, if you drink it, you will never be thirsty again. It's the water of eternal life." The woman says, "Give me that water, sir." He says, "Okay, go get your husband." She says, "I don't have a husband." He says, "I know. You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with right now is not your husband."

What is Jesus doing? That's just as strange as this one. Where is he going? The reason he doesn't talk about money to her is that's not her issue. Her issue is romance, love, and men. Everybody's heart has to look to something for hope, meaning, significance, and security. Everybody has a heart faith in which the entire weight of your soul, your hopes, dreams, and need for value, significance, and security, is all resting on this.

In her case, it was romance and love. If Jesus had just said to her (or this guy), "Oh, you need to have faith in me as your Lord and Savior, and then you'll get eternal life," for all I know, both of them might have said, "Okay," but they don't know what that means. Jesus is telling them what that means.

He's saying, "Look, I don't want you to just mentally assent that I'm the Messiah. Do you not see that right now romance and love is your living water? That's your salvation, hope, meaning, significance, and security, and if you want my living water, you have to transfer that heart trust from these things to me. You must not look to anything to give you what only I can give you."

Jesus is saying the same thing now to this guy. He doesn't bring up romance and love with this guy, and he doesn't bring up money to her. Over the years, when people have asked me, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" I say, "Well, you have to have faith in Jesus Christ." "Oh, I wish I had faith. I just can't believe. It's so hard. You Christians have faith."

I had somebody who said, "I wish I had your faith," and I just wanted to strangle them. I said, "Listen, you haven't killed yourself, have you? No? Well, then, you have faith in something." Your heart is looking to something for meaning. The point is, you have faith. It's just in the wrong place. Don't tell me you don't have faith.

If you're looking to money, romance and love, your family, a political party, or anything but Jesus Christ to be your hope and meaning, it will destroy you. It will make you dishonest and shallow. It will addict you and bring false security, and if you succeed, it'll make you incredibly self-centered.

He says, "Hey, let me give you a thought experiment. Do you see all my disciples? Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fisherman. They left their professions, and they're following me. We're all living together, we're ministering to people, and we're living off the generosity of the people we're ministering to. I want you to do the same thing. I want you to leave your nets, but in your case, I want you to leave your wealth. I want you to love me enough to give up your wealth and to love the poor enough to give them your wealth and follow me."

He knew he couldn't do it. He was sad and grieved, because his money wasn't just money. His money was his identity, his living water. It was who he was, and he couldn't do it. It was too spiritually important to him.

Is money too spiritually important to you? Somebody once sent me these things, or I found them somewhere. One of the ways you know money is too important to you is the envy/resentment test. When you see people around you making a pretty good amount of money, do you envy them? Do they get under your skin? Another is the anxiety test. Are you always thinking and worried about money?

Another is the spender or miser test. That gets you coming or going. In other words, are you someone who feels better by shopping and buying new things, or, on the other hand, do you feel better by not buying anything at all for days and days? In all those cases, it could be that money is your issue, and if Jesus were here he'd be talking to you about that.

4. How do we escape the power of money? The only way to do that is to look to the rich young ruler. You ask, "Why? He was kind of a failure. He didn't get converted. He was rich and young, and he had the opportunity to love other people with his money, but instead he held onto it." I wasn't talking about that rich young ruler. There are two rich young rulers in this story. Didn't you see the other one?

Jesus was 31 or so, probably. He was quite young. Jesus had been rich. Matthew and Mark tell us before Jesus went for the jugular and confronted him about this, he looked at him and loved him. In a way, Jesus could have been looking at him and saying this: "Oh, my friend, I am a rich young ruler, too, or at least I was. For the love of people like you, I let go of my glory. I became mortal. I was incarnate, born a human being in a manger."

That's what Christmas is all about. He might have been thinking in his heart, "Oh, my friend, I've already been stripped of my glory, but I'm about to go into the depths of poverty. I'm going to go to the cross and stripped not just of my glory but of my friends, my garments, and every single possession I have."

I'm going to be stripped of my Father's love, and I'm going to be stripped of my life, and I'm going to do it all for the love of you. You wouldn't love others enough to give your money away, but I'm going to love you enough to give away the most incredible wealth anyone has ever given up, so that you can have the only wealth that lasts, God himself, eternity, forgiveness."

Do you believe that? If you say, "I'm not sure I believe in the incarnation, the deity of Jesus, the atonement, and all this ..." Do you see the resources for deep, infinite comfort and joy that are there? Then learn, explore, come, figure it out, and believe it.

Those of you who do believe it, are you thinking about how Jesus Christ, the rich young ruler, gave up everything for you? Do you think about that until it makes you weep and you begin to say, "There's security, significance, and value, that he

would love me like that"? When that begins to sink in, your money will become just money. It won't be your identity anymore. It won't be all the other things it is right now. You'll be able to give it away and heal the world with it.

Somebody says to me, "Typical minister ... You're up here making generalities. How much do I really have to give away to be generous? Just tell me. Be practical, will you, for once? I know you're a liberal arts major, but be practical." The answer is, first of all, that's not the right first question. The first question should be ... *Why don't I want to give away more than I do?*

I took the entire 30 minutes to answer that, because you're not looking at the ultimate rich young ruler who says, "I gave my enormous all away for you because I love you. Now, why don't you take your little all and be willing to treat it as not yours for the love of me, your neighbor, and others?"

The first question is ... *Why don't I want to give away more?* The answer is, you're not actually looking into the gospel until it catches fire and begins to melt your hard heart. The second question is ... *How much do I have to give away?* In the Bible, there are basically two rules of thumb. There are the Old Testament rule of thumb and the New Testament rule of thumb. Put them together, and it's powerful and also practical.

The Old Testament rule of thumb was 10 percent, a tithe. What percentage of your money should you give away to ministry, charity, and the poor? In the Old Testament, it was a minimum of 10 percent. By the way, if you today, as a Christian, are giving away 10 percent of your income every year, congratulations. You've just come up to the level of the Old Testament, which means don't pat yourself on the back, because the New Testament has an additional guideline. That guideline is this: sacrifice. Jesus did not tithe his blood. He sacrificed.

By the way, you can tithe your blood and still survive, but you can't do what Jesus did and survive. What that means is whatever you're giving, even if it's 10 percent, if it isn't cutting into how you live or creating a measurable sacrifice in where you go to eat, where you go for vacation, and what you buy for clothing, it's not enough yet. "Oh, my goodness," you say, "how could we give that much away?" It will be a joy to the degree that you grasp what the ultimate rich young ruler did for you. Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for your generosity to us. Father, you did not begrudge giving us the most infinitely precious thing in heaven, your own Son. O Jesus Christ, God the Son, you did not begrudge giving us your greatest good, your most infinitely precious possession, your very life. Because you were so generous with us, now we pray you would make us generous people.

Break the power of money in our lives so it would not make us dishonest, blind us, corrupt us, woo us into false security, or make us proud. We pray that you would protect us from all the spiritual dangers of money through the blood of your Son Jesus Christ and the inspiration of your Holy Spirit. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

The Power of Generosity

What We Are Giving: The Dynamic of Grace—December 13,
2015

2 Corinthians 8:8–15; 9:6–12

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. **9** For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

10 And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.

11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. **12** For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. **14** At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, **15** as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

Second Corinthians, chapter 9:

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. **7** Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. **8** And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. **9** As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also

supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

The Word of the Lord.

Why is it that we celebrate Christmas with gift giving? We don't do that at Easter. We don't do that at Thanksgiving. We don't do it at the Fourth of July. At anniversaries and birthdays we give one person gifts, but at Christmas everybody gives everybody gifts. Why do we do that? It's really the only holiday we have like that.

I'm not actually looking for a literal answer, because I think you'd have to be a social historian to explain how that happened, and I'm not even sure social historians would exactly know. It's more of a rhetorical question. "Why is it that everybody gives gifts to everybody else at Christmas?" It's a rhetorical question, because I'm here to say it's profoundly appropriate, because it gets at the theological heart of Christmas: that Jesus Christ is the only human being who wasn't just born but was given. I'll get back to explaining what I mean by that.

I'd like to take a look here at this subject. Everyone will tell you who knows something about the Bible that this is the longest and the most involved and explicit passage in all of the Bible on the subject of giving and generosity. When we read it, we're being told there's a *problem with regard to giving and generosity, what will happen if we don't solve that problem, and how we can solve it.*

1. *The problem.* I said it's a very long passage, so even just to read it we took selections of it. The situation, which isn't that hard to see if you start at the beginning of chapter 8 and read all the way through, is the Corinthian church was pretty well off and was Gentile, and Paul was seeking a collection from them. He was trying to raise money from them for famine relief, for victims of a famine in Judea, where most of the people who were the victims were Jews.

He was trying to raise money from relatively wealthy Gentiles to give to relatively unwealthy Jews and famine-stricken people. One of the main themes, maybe *the* main theme of this whole passage, has to do in Paul's mind with the motivation. Look at what he says three times. At the very top he says, "I am not commanding you. I want you to give, but I'm not commanding you to give. I want to test the sincerity of your love."

Or you can go down to verse 11. "**Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it ...**" He wants them to be eagerly willing. "I don't want to command you. I don't want to ask you to do something you don't want to do. I want you to want to do it." The strongest is in chapter 9, verse 7, where he says,

“Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion ...”

Another way to put it is God wants generosity ... It says, “For God loves a cheerful giver.” That kind of trivializes what he’s saying here. You should have so much joy that your giving is a response to that joy. No compulsion. Right off the bat, in the area of moral philosophy, let me just tell you this is an extremely interesting set of statements.

Can you imagine Paul saying to Christians, “I don’t want to command you to be faithful to your spouse, not to commit adultery; I just want you to be faithful only if you want to”? He’s not going to do that. No, he’s not. Then what is he doing here? I’ll just use the technical term to explain it. The moral philosophers would say the difference between adultery and greed ... They’re both sins. Greed is the opposite of generosity.

Adultery and greed are both sins, but greed in some ways is a more slippery sin. It’s more difficult to define, because there is no definite external behavioral referent for it. What does that mean? It means you can’t set a dollar number, or whatever the currency is. You can’t set a number and say, “If you give *that* number or above you’re generous, and if you give less than that number you’re not generous.” So if you’re over here, you’re in generosity. If you’re under here, you’re in greed. It’s nice and simple.

Adultery, lying ... Obviously, there are always some questions around all of those things, but they have behavioral referents. You know if you’re committing adultery. You don’t just say, “Wait a minute. Am I committing adultery?” You know if you’re committing adultery. In this case, though, do you ever know when you’re greedy or whether you’re generous? The difficulty is there’s not a simple line. It’s not that easy to figure out what that means.

Well, what that means (and this is almost scary) is in God’s eyes, greed or generosity is almost completely a matter of the heart. Your motivations, your emotions, your attitude toward your money are absolutely crucial in God’s eyes. You say, “Wait a minute. What about the tithe?” Which is the idea that you have to give 10 percent of your income away. In the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was absolutely required. It was a law.

If you were a believer, you gave away 10 percent of your income to ministry and charity, you might say. You gave it to support the tabernacle and to the poor, and so on. Ten percent. Absolutely. In the New Testament, it’s intriguing that Paul doesn’t mention it here, and it’s even intriguing that when Jesus Christ mentions it, he mentions it positively, and yet in the context you see why the New Testament doesn’t talk just about tithing.

In Luke 11, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and he says, “You tithe everything. You don’t just tithe your money. You tithe the vegetables you eat and all that sort of thing.” They tithed everything. They were really strict. He says, “That’s fine,” and then he condemns them. He condemns tithers. He condemns people who

give away 10 percent. Do you know why? He says, “Because you neglect justice and the love of God.”

What he’s saying there is, “You legalistically are complying with a percentage, and yet your passion, your attitude, your motivation ...” See, if you give in order to get respect from other people, if you give in order to say, “Well, what do I have to do in order to please God so I’m getting his blessing? I want to get God’s blessing. I want God’s respect. I want people’s respect, so what do I have to give?”

If you say, “How much do I have to give?” you’re automatically giving for yourself. You’re actually giving to yourself. You’re self-centered. You’re giving, but actually you’re giving in order to get. It’s actually kind of a deal. You’re actually *not* giving. You’re investing. You’re saying, “I’m going to give. I’m going to give to charity. I’m going to give to ministry, but then I’m going to feel good about myself. I’m going to have other people think I’m generous, and God is going to bless me.”

Jesus looks at the Pharisees and says, “Because that’s your heart, I condemn you, even though you’re giving 10 percent.” Here’s what’s fascinating. If your heart is generous, if your attitude toward your money is no more begrudging and no more anxious, if, as he says here, your heart is so filled with joy and so filled with grace that you want to give, the amount takes care of itself, because all of your life you’ll be pushing and pushing to give more and more and more.

You’re not going to be capped at 10 percent. That’s the reason the New Testament is careful to, on the one hand, say, “Yeah, the tithe is a great guideline.” Jesus doesn’t say to the Pharisees, “That’s too much. What are you doing there?” Instead he slams them, because it’s *why* they’re giving. Let me go back and say what the point is. It’s a scary point. As far as God is concerned, greed or generosity is mainly a matter of the heart.

Unless you’re giving joyfully, eagerly, unless you’re always trying to give more, you actually don’t have a heart of generosity. Do you see the problem? By the way, if you want a good example, he gives you a good example in the very beginning of chapter 8. He gives the example of the Macedonian Christians. They were Gentiles. Macedonia is part of Greece today. They were actually quite poor, and yet they’ve already given generously to famine relief. This is what he says. This is chapter 8, verses 1–4. Paul is writing to the Corinthians.

“And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people ... They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then ... also to us.”

Wow. When Paul says, “They gave beyond their ability,” I don’t think that means, “They gave all their money away, so now they’re starving and we have to give to

them.” I don’t think that’s what he was saying at all. Instead, here’s what he said. First of all, they’re giving sacrificially. They have needs of their own and they’re not living on much, but when they saw the greater needs of their starving brethren in Judea, they actually took the little they were living on and made that even smaller and gave some of it away. That’s what he’s saying.

Do you know why? “They gave themselves to the Lord, and they gave themselves to us.” A person who says, “How much do I have to give?” you’ve held on to yourself. In fact, you’re being selfish. You’re saying, “What do I have to give in order to have my own self-esteem, in order to make sure that God is not mad at me, in order to make sure other people think I’m pretty generous?”

You’ve held on to yourself. But you give yourself away. They gave themselves to the Lord, and they gave themselves away, and then they were as generous as they could possibly be. If generosity is really a matter of the heart, here’s the problem: we just don’t have hearts like that. We really don’t.

2. *The serious results if we don’t solve the problem.* I’m thinking about this interesting section in the middle. I’ve read it many times and never really got what Paul was talking about. It’s near the end of the section from chapter 8. Paul says:

“Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: ‘The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.’ ”

When you read that, unless you find where that quote is from, go back and read that whole section, you will not see the pretty deep insights that are being given here. This is a quote from Exodus 16. **“The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”**

It’s talking about the fact that when the children of Israel had left Egypt and were out in the wilderness, they were not going to be able, either through hunting or gathering or through agriculture, to support themselves. They could not accrue enough food for a large body of people to be marching through the wilderness. So God did a miracle.

Every morning, except on the Sabbath day, early in the morning when they got up, there on the ground was manna. Now I’m not going to get into it. There are all sorts of interesting discussions about what it was, but we do know what the Bible says. The Bible says this was something that when you gathered it up, put it into bowls, and took it back, it could be turned into cakes. It was like a kind of flour. It was obviously something that could be eaten.

What was interesting was when you went out, you must not take more than your family needed for one day. One of the rules was that when you went out there, you must not take more than the family could take for one day. If you tried to hoard it, if you tried to take too much, it would rot and stink, and the next day

there would be maggots and worms all through your tent.

What is Paul talking about here? It's kind of interesting. First of all, by likening the money you have to manna, he's telling you two things. The first thing is it's a wonderful way of saying that you need to start to learn to look at all the money you have earned with your hard work as nonetheless a gift from God. Why?

Well, on the one hand, how did you get the manna? It didn't just jump into your bowl. You had to go out and do something. You had to go out and gather it. There was work involved. It's also interesting that, physically, some people would do a better job than others. Younger people would be able to get around and do more than older people, but it was absolutely crucial that when you gathered it you shared it so every family had what they needed.

If you had a little bit more ability to gather more, then you should share with the people who had less ability, and you must not hoard it and try to keep it overnight. So on the one hand, it tells us that our money is like that. You can say, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I don't look at my money as my own. I've worked hard for that money." Yes, this is like the manna. Yes, there's something you have to do.

On the other hand, one of the reasons your hard work has given you what you have is because, in God's grace, you were not born in a rice paddy in China in the fifteenth century. You weren't born into a peasant family in France in the twelfth century. You weren't born on a mountain in Tibet in the thirteenth century. If you had been, which you easily could have been, you could be working back then every bit as hard as you're working now and not have much to show for it.

Ultimately, the fact that you have your health (if you do), that you've had the opportunities you've had ... These are all gifts of God. What's interesting is, on the one hand, certainly the Bible says you need to work. You can't expect to have anything without work, and yet after you gather it in, it is a gift. Yes, go out and gather the manna. On the other hand, if God is not giving you that manna, you're starving.

So first of all, the illustration is trying to say you need to start to look at everything you have as a gift. That's the first step to dealing with your heart problem. Here's the second thing. If you keep too much money, if you're not generous with it, if you store up too much for yourself, it'll rot your soul. There will be maggots.

There will be worms. I know I'm drawing the metaphor out a little bit. I'm a minister. I'm a preacher. You know, rhetoric, that sort of thing. I think that's what Paul is talking about. There's great danger involved in not having a generous heart.

3. *How we solve the problem.* There are two things, and they're wonderful, wonderful things. There are two ways to do it. To a great degree, it depends on how much attention you pay to these two things. Most of the people in this room, I'm going to tell you something you already know.

What's great about what Paul is saying here is that if you don't have a generous

heart, in spite of the fact that you know certain things that ought to be affecting your heart and making you more generous and giving you more freedom to give, you don't have to be passive about it. There are things you can do. You can look. For example, one thing you need to look at is you need to get a vision for the harvest that your giving can produce.

Notice it says here in chapter 9, verse 6, "**Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.**" There are people who don't think about the metaphor here far enough. If you just take a look at that ... "Oh, if I sow generously," which means give my money away generously, "I will reap generously," and reaping is seen as "I'll make more money."

There are plenty of people who turn this into a kind of prosperity gospel verse, which says, "The more money I give away, the more money I'll make. I'll get richer and richer the more I give away." That's not what it's saying. Not only does that not fit the metaphor ... You sow seed, but you harvest fruit. You don't get the same thing back that you gave out. If you're sowing seed, if you're planting seeds, you don't want to go out at harvest time and just get seeds. That wouldn't be what you want. You have to get things you can eat.

Well, if you're giving your money, how does it come back, then, if it's not coming back exactly the same way, if it doesn't mean you're just making more money? It tells you. Again, Paul quotes an Old Testament text. Verse 9: "**As it is written: 'They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.'**" That's a quote from Psalm 112. I want you to know what the word *righteousness* is, what that means.

In the Old Testament, *righteousness* generally does not mean what you and I think it means, which is moral goodness. A slightly better translation of the word would be *justice*. Even there, when you and I hear the English word *justice*, we almost immediately think of jurisprudence and people getting what they deserve. That's actually not what this word *righteousness* means either. The Hebrew word for *righteousness* means right relationships, people relating to one another rightly.

When the Bible talks about *righteousness* and "his righteousness endures forever," what it's talking about is because he's scattering his gifts to the poor, right relationships are happening, poverty is being healed, conflicts are being healed, families are being put back together again. For example, in 2 Peter, chapter 3, verse 13, Peter talks about the future in which everything is going to be put right. The world is going to be renewed. No war, no poverty, no suffering, no death.

This is what he says: "**Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.**" He doesn't just mean everybody is going to be obeying the law. It's saying everything is going to be healed. Everything sad is going to come untrue. It means the relationship between God and humanity will be healed. The relationship will be

put back together again.

The relationship between the races, the relationship between the classes, the relationship between us and the environment ... There won't be hunger. There won't be disease. There won't be suffering. Everything will be righteous. Everything will be right. Things will be finally put right. Get this. When you scatter your gifts, when you're generous, when you are sowing generously, you are healing the world. You are reaping a harvest of righteousness.

Doesn't that excite you? You're supposed to get excited. That's the idea here. That's one of the things that starts to make you more generous. It's one of the things that starts to heal your heart, get you out of yourself, make you give yourself away and give yourself to the Lord, along with giving your money. So that's one of the things you need to do. That begins to change the heart. I can feel it changing my heart just now as I'm telling you about it.

On the other hand, you don't just get a vision for the harvest. You don't just get a vision for a renewed world. You also get a vision of the Savior himself. Let's go back to what I said in the very beginning. Chapter 9, verse 15, says, "**Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!**" It's Jesus. When I said that Christmas doesn't just tell us that Jesus was born but given ... Do you know why?

Because Jesus Christ was the only human being who was older than his parents, the only human being who ever existed before he was born. Therefore, he wasn't just born; he was given. John 3:16: "The Father so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life." Then you have Isaiah 9, verse 6: "For unto us a Son is born, unto us a Son is given." He's not just born; he's given.

Arguably the most wonderful verse in the Bible (I'm not saying it's my favorite verse; I'm just saying it may be the most wonderful verse) is Romans 8:32. "**He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**" If you receive Jesus Christ as a gift, eventually you'll have every other gift.

Here's the thing. Jesus Christ the Son was the jewel of the Father's heart and the greatest treasure heaven had, and God gave him. Christmas, incarnation, born in a manger. The Father gave him. That is radical generosity. The Father gave us his Son. The Son gave us his life. That's the reason Paul can say what he says in verses 8–9.

I want you to know even though this is about generosity, these two verses changed not only my own thinking about how I would change my own heart where it needed to be changed but how I, as a pastor, would try to help other people have their characters changed. Look at verse 8. "**I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love ...**" He says, "If you're going to make a change, it needs to be from the inside out."

Then he says, "**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through**

his poverty might become rich." What's he doing there? He's saying, "Look, you don't have enough love and enough joy to be generous, but that doesn't mean you have to be passive and say, 'Well, I guess I just don't have the right motives.' You can work on your heart." How do you do it? Think. At one level you know.

What he's doing here is taking the gospel and putting it into economic terms. He's affecting your heart attitude toward money by bringing the gospel into the economic world, by saying, "He was rich. He was incredibly rich. He had all the riches of the universe, and yet he became poor. He became mortal. He became vulnerable. He became killable. He eventually walked the earth, and at the very end he was stripped of everything. He was stripped of every possession. He was spiritually rich and he became spiritually poor. He was even rejected by the Father so you could have the only riches that will last forever."

He does this, by the way, when it comes to sex too. In Ephesians 5 he's saying, "Husbands, be faithful to your wife (don't have sex with other people) as Christ loved the church. Look at how faithful he was to you. Look at him in the garden of Gethsemane under so much pressure to say, 'I've had it,' but he was faithful to you and he loved you, not because you were lovely but to make you lovely."

Over and over again, the Bible says, "Don't take a look at your heart and say, 'Well, I guess it's just too hard. I just don't have the right motives.' You know. You know the gospel. You know the grace. You know the love of Jesus our Husband. You know the grace of Jesus the great giver. You know these things. Bring the gospel into that part of your life and think about what he did for you until it makes you weep and rejoice, and let it melt you into becoming more like him."

One last thing. When God made himself a gift, he really did it. When God appeared to Abraham, he was a smoking furnace. When God appeared to Moses, he was a blazing tree. When God appeared to Job, he was a tornado. Not very cuddly. In none of these situations could you say God *gave* himself. He *revealed* himself. But a baby. For God to become not a blazing tree or an earthquake on a mountain or a smoking furnace or a hurricane but a baby ...

I have a baby living with us right now. I have a grandchild 3 months old. There's nothing more vulnerable. He can always kiss, and he's always glad. He can always hug, and he's always glad ... usually. A baby is not just an image of vulnerability. God became a baby at Christmas. His way of saying, "I'm making myself vulnerable. I'm giving myself away to you. Now you give yourself away to me. Give yourself away to one another. Heal the world through your giving. Get a generous heart, for you know the grace." Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you've given us in the gospel all the power we need to change those parts of our lives we need to change. We've just looked at one tonight, but we pray that you would make us generous people. There's so much we can do in this city if we're generous. There's so much we can do in each other's lives if we're generous. There's so much you can do in our lives if we're generous. So make us so, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's

in his name we pray, amen.

SERMONS BY DATE

2014

January 5	In the Beginning—John 1:1–14
January 12	The Lamb—John 1:19–34
January 12	The Feast—John 2:1–11
January 19	The Healing—John 4:46–54
January 30	A Meaning That Suffering Can't Take Away—John 5:1–18
February 2	The Pool—John 6:1–14, 27–35
February 6	A Strong Basis for Doing Justice—John 6:16–25
February 9	The Feeding—John 9:1–7, 35–38
February 13	An Identity That Doesn't Crush You or Others—John 11:18–44
February 16	The Crossing
February 20	Hope that Transforms
February 23	The Man Born Blind
February 27	Questions About God
March 2	Out from the Grave
March 6	Questions About the Bible
March 9	Scripture
March 13	Questions About Jesus—Luke 4:1–13
March 16	Mission—Luke 5:4–25
April 13	Worship—Luke 19:28–40
April 20	Clothed With Power—Luke 24:36–49
April 27	Encountering the Risen Jesus—Mark 14:27–31; John 21:15–19
May 4	Our Birth: Cosmic—1 Peter 1:3–12
May 11	Our Identity: Joyful Exiles—1 Peter 1:1–2; 2:9–12
May 18	Our Call: Holy Living—1 Peter 1:13–17
June 1	Our Cross: The Path of Suffering—1 Peter 1:6–9; 3:13–18
June 8	Our Power: Spirit-Filled Living—2 Peter 1:3–11
June 22	Our Walk: The Freedom of Submission—1 Peter 2:13–17; 4:1–5; 5:5–11
June 29	Our Vocation: Lay Ministry—1 Peter 2:4–10
August 17	Patience—James 5:7–12
August 24	Goodness—Micah 6:6–8
September 7	The Great Question: Are You the One?—Matthew 11:1–6
September 14	The Great Promise: Rest for Your Soul—Matthew 11:25–30
September 28	Family: Our Father—Galatians 3:26–4:7

October 5	Awe: Hallowed Be Thy Name—Psalm 63
October 12	Hope: Thy Kingdom Come—Luke 6:20–26, 46–49
October 19	Struggle: Thy Will Be Done—Matthew 26:36–46
November 2	Reality: Forgive Us Our Debts—Psalm 51
November 9	Battle: Lead Us and Deliver Us—Psalm 73:1–3, 13–26
November 16	Repose: The Power and Glory—Psalm 27
November 23	Word: Teach Us to Pray—Psalm 1
November 30	The Mothers of Jesus—Matthew 1:1–17
December 7	The Fathers of Jesus—Matthew 1:18–25
December 14	The Magi and Jesus—Matthew 2:1–12
December 21	The World and Jesus—Matthew 2:13–23

2015

January 4	Light in the Darkness—Isaiah 60:1–5, 10–16
January 18	Called to the Kingdom—Mark 1:14–34
February 1	A Paralytic Forgiven—Mark 2:1–12
February 8	A New Sabbath—Mark 2:23–3:6
February 22	Prayer of Confession—Psalm 32
March 8	Prayer of Thirst—Psalm 42–43
March 15	Prayer of Rest—Psalm 91
March 22	Prayer for the World—Psalm 98
March 29	The True King—Psalm 110
April 5	Prayer for Security—Psalm 16
April 12	Hannah's Prayer—1 Samuel 1:3–11, 18–20; 2:8–10
April 19	Saul's Rejection—1 Samuel 15:10–26
April 26	David's Anointing—1 Samuel 16:1–13
May 3	David's Courage—1 Samuel 17:32–50
May 10	Saul's Jealousy—1 Samuel 18:1–14
May 17	David's Friend—1 Samuel 18:1–4; 19:4–7; 20:40–42; 23:15–18
May 24	David's Mercy—1 Samuel 26:7–14, 21–25
May 31	David's Passion—2 Samuel 6:1–23
August 30	Sight for the Blind—2 Kings 6:8–23
September 13	The Bible and History—Luke 1:1–4; 24:25–32
September 20	The Bible and Experience—2 Peter 1:12–21
September 27	The Bible and Finality—Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:6–13
October 4	I Believe—Acts 17:16–34
October 11	God—Exodus 3:1–14
October 18	Sin—Genesis 2:16–17; 3:1–9
October 25	Incarnation—Philippians 2:1–11
November 1	Salvation—Ephesians 1:3–10
November 8	The Holy Spirit—John 14:15–26
November 15	The Church—Ephesians 2:11–22
November 22	The End of History—Revelation 21:1–6; 22:1–5
November 29	The Wisdom of Generosity—Proverbs 10:16
December 6	The Grace of Generosity—Luke 18:18–30

SERMONS BY SERIES

Seeing Jesus

- 1 In the Beginning—*John 1:1–14*
- 2 The Lamb—*John 1:19–34*
- 3 The Feast—*John 2:1–11*
- 4 The Healing—*John 4:46–54*
- 5 The Pool—*John 5:1–18*
- 6 The Feeding—*John 6:1–14, 27–35*
- 7 The Crossing—*John 6:16–25*
- 8 The Man Born Blind—*John 9:1–7, 35–38*
- 9 Out from the Grave—*John 11:18–44*

Questioning Christianity

- 1 A Meaning That Suffering Can't Take Away
- 2 A Strong Basis for Doing Justice
- 3 An Identity That Doesn't Crush You or Others
- 4 Hope that Transforms
- 5 Questions About God
- 6 Questions About the Bible
- 7 Questions About Jesus

Knowing Jesus

- 1 Scripture—*Luke 4:1–13*
- 2 Mission—*Luke 5:4–25*
- 3 Worship—*Luke 19:28–40*
- 4 Clothed With Power—*Luke 24:36–49*

Following Jesus

- 1 Encountering the Risen Jesus—*Mark 14:27–31; John 21:15–19*
- 2 Our Birth: Cosmic—*1 Peter 1:3–12*
- 3 Our Identity: Joyful Exiles—*1 Peter 1:1–2; 2:9–12*
- 4 Our Call: Holy Living—*1 Peter 1:13–17*
- 5 Our Cross: The Path of Suffering—*1 Peter 1:6–9; 3:13–18*
- 6 Our Power: Spirit-Filled Living—*2 Peter 1:3–11*
- 7 Our Walk: The Freedom of Submission—*1 Peter 2:13–17; 4:1–5; 5:5–11*
- 8 Our Vocation: Lay Ministry—*1 Peter 2:4–10*

Growth in the Spirit

- 1 Patience—*James 5:7–12*
- 2 Goodness—*Micah 6:6–8*

The One Who Gives You Rest

- 1 The Great Question: Are You the One?—*Matthew 11:1–6*
- 2 The Great Promise: Rest for Your Soul—*Matthew 11:25–30*

The Prayer of Prayers

- 1 Family: Our Father—*Galatians 3:26–4:7*
- 2 Awe: Hallowed Be Thy Name—*Psalm 63*
- 3 Hope: Thy Kingdom Come—*Luke 6:20–26, 46–49*
- 4 Struggle: Thy Will Be Done—*Matthew 26:36–46*
- 5 Reality: Forgive Us Our Debts—*Psalm 51*
- 6 Battle: Lead Us and Deliver Us—*Psalm 73:1–3, 13–26*
- 7 Repose: The Power and Glory—*Psalm 27*
- 8 Word: Teach Us to Pray—*Psalm 1*

Matthew's Messiah

- 1 The Mothers of Jesus—*Matthew 1:1–17*
- 2 The Fathers of Jesus—*Matthew 1:18–25*
- 3 The Magi and Jesus—*Matthew 2:1–12*
- 4 The World and Jesus—*Matthew 2:13–23*

Light in the Darkness

- 1 Light in the Darkness—*Isaiah 60:1–5, 10–16*
- 2 Called to the Kingdom—*Mark 1:14–34*
- 3 A Paralytic Forgiven—*Mark 2:1–12*
- 4 A New Sabbath—*Mark 2:23–3:6*

Pilgrim Prayer: Psalms for the Journey

- 1 Prayer of Confession—*Psalm 32*

Pilgrim Prayer

- 1 Prayer of Thirst—*Psalm 42–43*
- 2 Prayer of Rest—*Psalm 91*
- 3 Prayer for the World—*Psalm 98*
- 4 The True King—*Psalm 110*
- 5 Prayer for Security—*Psalm 16*

David: The Man of Prayer

- 1 Hannah's Prayer—*1 Samuel 1:3–11, 18–20; 2:8–10*
- 2 Saul's Rejection—*1 Samuel 15:10–26*
- 3 David's Anointing—*1 Samuel 16:1–13*
- 4 David's Courage—*1 Samuel 17:32–50*

- 5 Saul's Jealousy—*1 Samuel 18:1–14*
- 6 David's Friend—*1 Samuel 18:1–4; 19:4–7; 20:40–42; 23:15–18*
- 7 David's Mercy—*1 Samuel 26:7–14, 21–25*
- 8 David's Passion—*2 Samuel 6:1–23*

Faith in an Age of Unbelief: Elijah and Elisha

- 1 Sight for the Blind—*2 Kings 6:8–23*

What We Believe: Foundations

- 1 The Bible and History—*Luke 1:1–4; 24:25–32*
- 2 The Bible and Experience—*2 Peter 1:12–21*
- 3 The Bible and Finality—*Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:6–13*
- 4 I Believe—*Acts 17:16–34*
- 5 God—*Exodus 3:1–14*
- 6 Sin—*Genesis 2:16–17; 3:1–9*
- 7 Incarnation—*Philippians 2:1–11*
- 8 Salvation—*Ephesians 1:3–10*
- 9 The Holy Spirit—*John 14:15–26*
- 10 The Church—*Ephesians 2:11–22*
- 11 The End of History—*Revelation 21:1–6; 22:1–5*

What We Are Giving: The Dynamic of Grace

- 1 The Wisdom of Generosity—*Proverbs 10:16*
- 2 The Grace of Generosity—*Luke 18:18–30*
- 3 The Power of Generosity—*2 Corinthians 8:8–15; 9:6–12*

SERMONS BY REFERENCE

Genesis

Sin—*Genesis 2:16–17; 3:1–9*

Exodus

God—*Exodus 3:1–14*

1 Samuel

- Hannah's Prayer—*1 Samuel 1:3–11, 18–20; 2:8–10*
Saul's Rejection—*1 Samuel 15:10–26*
David's Anointing—*1 Samuel 16:1–13*
David's Courage—*1 Samuel 17:32–50*
Saul's Jealousy—*1 Samuel 18:1–14*

David's Friend—1 Samuel 18:1–4; 19:4–7; 20:40–42; 23:15–18
David's Mercy—1 Samuel 26:7–14, 21–25

2 Samuel

David's Passion—2 Samuel 6:1–23

2 Kings

Sight for the Blind—2 Kings 6:8–23

Psalm

Word: Teach Us to Pray—Psalm 1
Prayer for Security—Psalm 16
Repose: The Power and Glory—Psalm 27
Prayer of Confession—Psalm 32
Prayer of Thirst—Psalm 42–43
Reality: Forgive Us Our Debts—Psalm 51
Awe: Hallowed Be Thy Name—Psalm 63
Battle: Lead Us and Deliver Us—Psalm 73:1–3, 13–26
Prayer of Rest—Psalm 91
Prayer for the World—Psalm 98
The True King—Psalm 110

Proverbs

The Wisdom of Generosity—Proverbs 10:16

Isaiah

Light in the Darkness—Isaiah 60:1–5, 10–16

Micah

Goodness—Micah 6:6–8

Matthew

The Mothers of Jesus—Matthew 1:1–17
The Fathers of Jesus—Matthew 1:18–25
The Magi and Jesus—Matthew 2:1–12
The World and Jesus—Matthew 2:13–23
The Great Question: Are You the One?—Matthew 11:1–6
The Great Promise: Rest for Your Soul—Matthew 11:25–30
Struggle: Thy Will Be Done—Matthew 26:36–46

Mark

Called to the Kingdom—Mark 1:14–34
A Paralytic Forgiven—Mark 2:1–12
A New Sabbath—Mark 2:23–3:6
Encountering the Risen Jesus—Mark 14:27–31; John 21:15–19

Luke

The Bible and History—Luke 1:1–4; 24:25–32
Scripture—Luke 4:1–13
Mission—Luke 5:4–25
Hope: Thy Kingdom Come—Luke 6:20–26, 46–49
The Grace of Generosity—Luke 18:18–30
Worship—Luke 19:28–40
Clothed With Power—Luke 24:36–49

John

In the Beginning—John 1:1–14
The Lamb—John 1:19–34
The Feast—John 2:1–11
The Healing—John 4:46–54
The Pool—John 5:1–18
The Feeding—John 6:1–14, 27–35
The Crossing—John 6:16–25
The Man Born Blind—John 9:1–7, 35–38
Out from the Grave—John 11:18–44
The Holy Spirit—John 14:15–26

Acts

I Believe—Acts 17:16–34

2 Corinthians

The Power of Generosity—2 Corinthians 8:8–15; 9:6–12

Galatians

Family: Our Father—Galatians 3:26–4:7

Ephesians

Salvation—Ephesians 1:3–10
The Church—Ephesians 2:11–22

Philippians

Incarnation—Philippians 2:1–11

Hebrews

The Bible and Finality—Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:6–13

James

Patience—James 5:7–12

1 Peter

Our Identity: Joyful Exiles—1 Peter 1:1–2; 2:9–12
Our Birth: Cosmic—1 Peter 1:3–12
Our Cross: The Path of Suffering—1 Peter 1:6–9; 3:13–18
Our Call: Holy Living—1 Peter 1:13–17
Our Vocation: Lay Ministry—1 Peter 2:4–10
Our Walk: The Freedom of Submission—1 Peter 2:13–17; 4:1–5; 5:5–11

2 Peter

Our Power: Spirit-Filled Living—2 Peter 1:3–11
The Bible and Experience—2 Peter 1:12–21

Revelation

The End of History—Revelation 21:1–6; 22:1–5