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CONTINUE IN WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Sermons from C.J. Mahaney that Shaped a Family of Churches

Edited by Jared Mellinger

SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCHES

"It was before your eyes
that Jesus Christ was publicly
portrayed as crucified."
GALATIANS 3:1

"Never be content with your current grasp of the gospel. The gospel is life-permeating, world-altering, universe-changing truth. It has more facets than any diamond. We will never exhaust its depths."
C.J. MAHANEY

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INTRODUCTION

Not every preacher is given a pulpit that shapes numerous churches. Not every pastor is used by God to help found a denomination. And not every Christian leader proves faithful over decades of ministry. But at times, God in his kindness delights to raise up such men—pastors who are used not only to bless one local congregation, but also used to bless many churches. They are often men of great gifting who make great sacrifices and endure great trials. They are gifts from the risen Christ to his church, to be honored, learned from, remembered, and esteemed highly in love for their labors.

One such man is C.J. Mahaney. C.J. is not only a friend and mentor to me, he is an example of an ordinary man used by God in extraordinary ways. Some of my earliest memories of C.J. are listening to him preach at the annual Celebration conference. Each May, my parents would pack up our family and drive three hours from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to Indiana, Pennsylvania for a gathering of Sovereign Grace churches. It was there that C.J. preached many of the sermons that were formative in our family of churches.

Over the years, Sovereign Grace has taken steps to formalize our partnership as churches, which includes developing a *Book of Church Order* as well as ratifying a new *Statement of Faith*. We've also transitioned from a founder-led movement to a denomination, complete with a Regional Assembly of Elders in each region, a national Council of Elders, and committees of various kinds. It could be assumed that our present and future exist in significant

discontinuity with our past. This, however, would be a serious mistake, because the beliefs and values that inform our life and mission today are the same ones C.J. was preaching decades ago. Indeed, the story of Sovereign Grace Churches cannot be understood apart from the preaching, leadership, and example of C.J. Mahaney.

For those of us in Sovereign Grace, C.J. is our "brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Phil. 2:25). For some of us, he is not only a guide; he is a father (1 Cor. 4:15). C.J. continues to lead and serve Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville, in Louisville, Kentucky. He also preaches at our Pastors Conferences, models gospel-centered ministry for our Pastors College students, teaches at the Pastors College, serves as Regional Leader, and invests in younger pastors. I know I speak on behalf of all Sovereign Grace elders when I say that we owe a debt of gratitude to C.J. We are also indebted to his wife Carolyn, who has faithfully stood by his side and supported him in ministry these many years. Sovereign Grace Churches would certainly not be what it is today apart from her. Our appreciation for the Mahaney's has only grown over the years, as we have observed their example, their steadfastness, and their love for our churches.

This collection of C.J.'s sermons is entitled *Continue in What You Have Learned*. In 2 Timothy 3, Paul nears the end of his life. He laments those who have been ungodly lovers of self and have opposed the truth. But he reminds Timothy, "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings" (2 Tim. 3:10–11). Paul is certainly unique in his apostolic role

and authority, but he is not the only one who set an example for future generations. Many of us desire to follow C.J. in these same things: his teaching, his conduct, his love, his steadfastness. It is notable that faithfully enduring hardship and mistreatment is part of the example of the Apostle Paul. It is certainly part of the Christ-honoring example C.J. has left for us.

Paul is able to say that the Lord rescued him from every trial, and affirms that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (v. 12). "But as for you," he says to Timothy, "continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it." When Timothy was young, he had learned the Old Testament Scriptures from his mother and grandmother, and when he grew up, it was Paul who introduced him to the gospel and instructed him in Christian life and ministry.

Now, Paul had run the race, knowing nearly all his life and ministry were behind him. "The time of my departure has come" (2 Tim. 4:6). But he looked to Timothy and to others as those who would continue to be faithful to Christ and to the message of the gospel when Paul was no longer with them. The Apostle's desire is that Timothy and a future generation "guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Tim. 1:14). This is the same challenge and opportunity that is presently faced by pastors and members in the churches of Sovereign Grace. Our desire in publishing these sermons is that we would continue in what we have learned and have firmly believed—that we would remember and not forget what we have been taught.

The sermons in this volume are among those that have been uniquely used by God to define, shape, and influence Sovereign Grace. These are denomination-shaping sermons. It is our hope that

by making them available in print, these sermons will continue to influence us long into the future, and will serve future generations.

In editing these sermons, I have attempted to keep C.J.'s voice so that those who have had the privilege of sitting under his preaching recognize his voice in these pages. We have not included sermons that C.J. developed into books, but we highly recommend *Living the Cross-Centered Life* and *Humility: True Greatness*. C.J. has also had various sermons previously published in other volumes, and those sermons do not appear here. The content of the sermons has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity, and language has been updated so the text refers to Sovereign Grace Churches even when our family of churches had other names.

It is a great joy to publish these sermons for the benefit of our churches and in C.J.'s honor. C.J. is certainly not impressed with himself—he considers himself an ordinary pastor, a sinner in need of a Savior. But in the sight of God and to us, he is much more: a faithful founder, a humble and godly example, and a passionate preacher of the cross of Christ. We know there is a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to him on that day (2 Tim. 4:8).

May these sermons be used to help future generations of Sovereign Grace pastors and members continue in what we have learned, that we might be faithful to the gospel and to the mission God has given us.

JARED MELLINGER
August 2022

1

THE TRANSFORMING EFFECT OF A DIVINE PERSPECTIVE

Pastors Conference 1999

C.J. preached two messages at the Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference in 1999. The first was from 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 on the resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. The second was the following message from 1 Corinthians 1, originally titled "Grace and the Adventure of Leadership." Both sermons have helped us see God's grace: grace displayed at Calvary, and grace displayed in the lives of God's people. To this day, the pastors and members of the churches of Sovereign Grace are committed to identifying and celebrating evidences of God's grace in others. God has used C.J.'s personal example and this sermon to establish this priority in our denomination.

"Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

(1 Corinthians 1:1–9)

2

Calvin and Hobbes is a popular comic featuring a mischievous little boy named Calvin, who has an unusual and vivid imagination. Hobbes is his close friend, a tiger, who seems to only appear when there are no adults. In one comic strip, Calvin sits up in the middle of the night and calls for his mom. Mom appears, turns on the light, and asks "What's the matter?" Calvin says, "Do ugly things like octopuses and hairy bugs reproduce? Are they actually attracted to each other?" Calvin's mom yells, "IT'S 3 AM! GO TO SLEEP!" And in the final frame, Calvin is in bed and Hobbes appears next to him. Calvin looks at the reader and says, "Come to think of it, I wonder how *people* are attracted to each other?" Hobbes replies, "I'll bet that's why they close their eyes when they smooch."

I'm not going to attempt to explain how people are attracted to each other. But I would like us to consider a much more difficult and relevant question: *How could Paul be attracted to the Corinthian church, in light of their serious deficiencies and their opposition to him?*

The Corinthian church was a piece of work. They had drifted from the centrality of the cross and they had been seduced by human wisdom. They needed serious help.

In 1 Corinthians 1:10–12 we are informed that there was division, and factions were emerging in the church. In chapter five, we learn that there was sexual immorality in their midst of a kind that does not occur even among pagans. In chapter six, we discover that there were lawsuits between believers. In chapter 11, we learn that some were intoxicated during the Lord's Supper. In chapters 12–14, we learn of their misunderstanding and misuse of the gifts of the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 11:17 Paul informs them, "I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse."

"I Give Thanks to My God Always For You"

Clearly, the Corinthian church was in desperate need of correction and adjustment. And yet Paul writes in 1:4, "I give thanks to my God always for you." I read verse 4 and I think, *What's up with that?! Always thanking God… for the Corinthians?* This is extraordinary!

Here's the lesson for us: *Paul's exemplary attitude and affection can only be explained by his divine perspective of the Corinthians.* And this is the perspective God calls each of us to have towards the local church to which we belong.

To be clear, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is primarily corrective in nature. The correction begins in the opening paragraph. Paul finds it necessary to assert his apostolic call in verse 1 because there is widespread opposition to him in the church. In verse

2, the correction continues. He addresses their arrogance and independence, reminding them that they are not the only ones who call upon Christ as Lord. Correction continues in verses 4–7. He directs their attention away from the gifts of the Spirit, to the gracious activity of God in providing these gifts. And in verse 7 he adjusts their eschatology, setting their giftedness in the proper perspective of the "already but not yet."

So the primary purpose of this letter is adjustment and correction, but it is Paul's faith-filled and affectionate attitude toward the Corinthians that makes the adjustment so impressive, so persuasive, and so effective. *A divine perspective of others is seen in our awareness of three realities: 1) The call of God, 2) The grace of God, and 3) The faithfulness of God.*

1. The Call of God

First, consider Paul's understanding of the call of God. Three times in the first nine verses there is a reference to calling: In 1:1, "called by the will of God to be an apostle"; 1:2, "To those... called to be saints..."; 1:9, "You were called into the fellowship of his Son." Theologian Sinclair Ferguson wrote that "One of the New Testament's most frequent one-word descriptions of the Christian is that he is 'called.'"[1]

The Christian is called, and without a doubt this is a central theme in Paul's thinking and writing. Whenever Paul makes a reference to the call of God, whether it's a reference to election or vocation, he is acknowledging and accenting the sovereign grace of God. He is drawing attention to divine initiative. He is in effect

1. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1997), 33.

succinctly stating that divine action precedes human decision.

Now this isn't to minimize or dismiss the importance of human responsibility. Scripture teaches divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but the accent and emphasis in Scripture is on the sovereignty of God. And this must be the accent and emphasis in our hearts and lives as well. So Paul at the outset is drawing attention to the initiative of God. He is drawing attention to the prior activity and sovereign grace of God. God acted upon me! God acted upon you! If you are regenerated, if you have indeed truly been converted, God acted upon you before you acted in response to him.

Consider for a moment the relational benefit of this truth. Paul is aware of serious deficiencies, but he begins relating to this church in this letter by accenting the prior activity of God. He was more aware of God's prior activity in creating this church than he was aware of their present deficiencies.

And listen, here's what I have to ask myself, and here's what you need to ask yourself as well: which are you more aware of? Which are you more aware of in your relational network? Which are you more aware of in the context of your local church? Which are you more aware of in those you have the privilege to serve and serve with? Are you more aware of God's call, God's initiative, and God's sovereign grace in their lives, or are you more aware of their present deficiencies?

Faith for Change

Our understanding of God's call will radically affect the way we relate to others. This divine perspective makes a dramatic difference. An awareness of God's call imparts faith for change and perseverance for the process of sanctification.

Before offering any observation of a corrective nature to your friends and those you are called to serve, take time to consider the call on their lives, the prior activity of God in their lives. As you do so, it will impart faith for change. It will inform the content and tone of your communication. It will make a difference to those who are on the receiving end of your correction. Because it won't just be an expression of your frustration with them, self-righteously communicated. Instead, it will be a humble communication, filled with faith, that will make a difference in their reception of this adjustment.

Paul's leadership is so impressive here. What does he begin with in the first paragraph? Yes, this letter is going to be filled with corrective statement after corrective statement. But from the outset, he has this understanding of the call of God. This divine perspective of the Corinthian church affects his attitude, creating faith and affection. And it can have the same effect on our lives as well.

2. The Grace of God

Second, the divine perspective is evident in a recognition of the grace of God. Look carefully with me again at verse 4: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in

any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4–7).

I find this remarkable! Gordon Fee writes, "What is remarkable here is the apostle's ability to thank God for the very things in the church that, because of the abuses, are also causing him grief."[2]

Had this been the letter from C.J. Mahaney to the Corinthians, what I would have written in this opening paragraph would bear no resemblance to what you are reading here! I would not begin this letter thanking God for them. But Paul gives thanks for the very things in the church that because of abuse are also causing him grief! He recognized that the gifts present among the Corinthians were evidences of God's grace, and therefore he could give thanks for them while adjusting their attitude toward the gifts and their practice of the gifts.

See, only the humble can identify evidences of grace in those so obviously in need of adjustment. The self-righteous are not capable of such leadership.

There is a Peanuts comic strip that opens with Lucy and Linus in their living room. Linus is curled up in a chair. He's quietly reading a book. Lucy is standing behind him and she has a funny look on her face. She turns to Linus and says, "It's very strange. It happens just by looking at you." "What happens?" replies Linus. And Lucy calmly answers, "I can feel a criticism coming on."

Apart from a divine perspective, and apart from the grace of God, we all become like Lucy. When you think of your church, and when you think of certain individuals within your church, what do you feel coming on? Do you feel criticism coming on, or are you aware of evidences of grace in their lives?

2. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 36.

Seeing Blemishes, Seeing Grace

Having three daughters means that a father is required to watch *Pride and Prejudice*. The last time, I endured *Pride and Prejudice* with my family while lying on the couch. At one point, Elizabeth's father received a letter from Mr. Collins, discovering that the arrogant and self-righteous Mr. Darcy was interested in his daughter.

What does the father say about Mr. Darcy? "Mr. Darcy, who never looks on a woman except to see a blemish." I was laying on the couch, enjoying time with my family. I'm engaged with *Pride and Prejudice*. And suddenly, I am interrupted by what seems to be the Holy Spirit saying to me, "That would too often describe you, not just Mr. Darcy."

What do you see when you look on another man or woman? Do you see a blemish, or do you see grace at work? Which are you more aware of: evidences of grace or areas that are in need of growth?

Becoming aware of evidences of grace will transform your attitude toward those you serve and those you serve with. It will transform your attitude toward your spouse and your children. If those in your home are more aware of areas needing adjustment than evidences of grace you observe—whether it is saving grace or common grace—you will eventually exasperate them. When is the last time you informed your spouse and your children of evidences of grace? May our children grow up in an environment of being the rich recipients of our affection and encouragement.

Here's another application: As a senior pastor, it is my privilege and responsibility to draw attention to the evidences of grace I observe in the lives of the pastoral team I serve. This is true on our pastoral teams, and it is true as we labor with other pastors in our family of churches.

We must be intentional about drawing attention to evidences of grace. I encourage the regular exercise of isolating a particular individual, and then asking others to participate in a process of identifying an evidence of grace that you have observed in that individual's life. When you are praying together as pastors, consider taking a period of time to do nothing but give thanks to God for evidences of grace in the church.

The Church as it is in Christ

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians David Prior writes, "The sad thing is that dissatisfied church members will often naively think that another church in the area will somehow be better than the one they now attend. ...We need to register this primary truth—Paul looks at the Corinthian church as it is *in Christ* before he looks at anything else that is true of the church."[3]

Too many of our churches are populated by individuals who assume that it is their role and responsibility to provide critique. They are self-appointed and they are self-righteous. They are like Lucy and Mr. Darcy. We must learn to see the church as it is in Christ.

Are you aware of the ways God is at work in your church? Are you more aware of evidences of grace or areas in need of growth? There are certainly areas in need of growth, and pastors are often most aware of these areas. But we will never be able to understand or address areas of deficiency if we aren't first aware of evidences of God's grace.

We are natural-born experts at critique. But I want to become an expert at discerning evidences of grace. If Paul can find grace in the Corinthian church, surely we can find grace in our churches.

3. David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 23.

That's the transforming effect of a divine perspective. By seeing and celebrating grace, we not only emulate Paul's example; we emulate the example of God himself.

Each Will Receive His Praise

1 Corinthians 4:5 is another remarkable verse—one of the most remarkable verses in all of Scripture. Remember, Paul is being sinfully judged by the Corinthian church. They were motivated by self-righteousness. They were sinfully judging him and assuming that they could judge Paul and themselves with certainty. He is confronting them.

And in verse 5 we read, "Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart." What do you anticipate reading in the following line? I did not expect what comes next: "Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

This is amazing! Though omniscient, the Lord will find evidences of his grace in the elect! Though omniscient, though aware of all sin in motive and action, the Lord will find evidences of grace to reward on that last day! On that day, he will study your life from conversion to death and he will find evidences of grace and bring them to your attention. This is not in any way to minimize sin or the importance of correction. It is to accent the divine perspective and the evidences of God's grace. I not only want to emulate Paul's example; I also want to emulate the example of God himself.

3. The Faithfulness of God

Third, we must view others in light of the faithfulness of God. 1 Corinthians 1 makes clear that Paul is full of confidence for the future of this church. He says in verse 8 that God "will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

How can he write this? How can the Apostle express such confidence about a church whose current behavior is anything but guiltless? The source of his confidence is clearly stated in verse 9: "God is faithful." The source of our confidence for the future of others is nothing other than the faithfulness of God.

Trusting God

When I first met my wife Carolyn, I was deeply concerned about her father's approval. I had very long hair and I knew that, as a Mennonite man, he was not appreciative of long hair on a man. I asked Dad just a few months after meeting him for permission to marry his daughter. And I am grateful beyond words that he granted me permission.

Just before the special music in the wedding ceremony, I was in a side room with him. I extended my hand and said, "Dad, thanks for your trust." He took my hand firmly, looked me in the eye, and said, "I don't trust you."

"I don't trust you," he said, "I trust the Lord." I thought quickly about my options at that moment and decided that protesting wouldn't be wise.

Fast forward many years from that day to a day not that many years ago, when my middle daughter Kristin was getting married. I found myself standing at the end of an aisle with her on my arm.

We were getting ready to make that very long and emotional walk down the aisle.

I had told Kristin the night before that when that moment arrives, before we walk, I had something special to say to her. I wanted to draw our attention away from all that was taking place to the grace of God that made it possible. And I wanted to thank her.

I said, "Kristin, you have honored and obeyed your parents. Therefore we can take this walk together without any regrets." I said, "And after this walk, you will no longer be under my authority. You will no longer be under my care. You will be under Brian's authority and care, but you will always be my Kristin. And I will always be your father."

Now tears were filling her eyes. We walked down the aisle, and I walked up to the platform. I took Kristin's hand and I placed it in Brian's hand. And I made several public statements. One of the things I said is, "Brian, I trust you. And I am entrusting to you my daughter. I'm making a loud statement of my trust in you today." And I made other comments as well. Carolyn's Dad is sitting in the front row. I'm not doing this as a means of revenge! In fact, as I put Kristin's hand in Brian's and walked away, I thought to myself, *Dad had it partially right*.

I don't just trust Brian. I do trust him, but my confidence in the future fruitfulness of their marriage is not my trust in them, but my trust in God. That is the source of my confidence in their future together. Dad had it right. He had the most important part right.

The Future of the Church

Do you have it right? Do you believe that the future of the church depends on the faithfulness of God? 1 Thessalonians 5:24 says,

"He who calls you in faithful; he will surely do it." Paul says in Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." God will surely bring his individual and corporate work to completion at the day of Jesus Christ!

Paul had a divine perspective, and that divine perspective transformed his attitude toward the Corinthian church. It created this extraordinary affection for the Corinthian church. Paul had an understanding of the call of God, which related to their past. He had an understanding of evidences of the grace of God, which related to the present. And when he thought about the future of the Corinthian church, he had a confidence in the faithfulness of God.

God calls each of us to follow his example. This is the transforming, God-honoring effect of a divine perspective.

2

EXTRAVAGANT DEVOTION

Celebration 2001

At the annual gathering of Sovereign Grace churches in 2001, C.J. preached a memorable sermon on extravagant devotion for the Savior from the example of Mary anointing Jesus with precious ointment. C.J. learned from R.C. Sproul that effective preaching finds the drama of the text, and he had learned from Charles Spurgeon to dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard. He has frequently preached through tears when he speaks of Jesus, so great is his personal love for the Lord. This sermon was no exception. Many who listened were likewise moved to tears, and hearts were deeply stirred with wonder and gratitude for the gospel. Over 20 years later, God continues to use this sermon to increase extravagant devotion in our hearts and lives.

"It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.'

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, 'Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for

them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.'

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him."

(Mark 14:1–11)

2

A columnist for *Sports Illustrated* once wrote an article lamenting the overuse of superlatives. "Certain words," he wrote, "have been turned upside down and had all the meaning shaken from their pockets. In sports there have been enough Historic Moments, enough Epic Games, enough Greatest Players of All Time to render those phrases empty. Superlatives, even when appropriate, are bees that sting once and then die."[4]

Our culture is skilled in the degradation of words, the trivialization of profundity, and the exaltation of hype. We have become largely desensitized to the profound, no longer capable of discerning that which is truly extraordinary. Nothing can be awesome if everything is awesome.

And so this presents a unique challenge for me this evening. How can I teach you about that which is truly profound, how can I use superlatives appropriately and effectively tonight, if in our culture they have become bees that sting once and then die?

4. Steve Rushin, *That Magic Moment, Sports Illustrated*, March 15, 1999.

How can I bring to your attention a truly historic moment from Scripture when everyone in this room, including myself, has been conditioned to think of the Super Bowl each year as a truly historic moment?

Well, obviously tonight I will need the help of the Holy Spirit and I am assured I have his help. And I'm grateful that I have your hearts as well.

This passage reveals a truly historic moment. And in verse 9, our Savior makes a profound promise regarding this moment: "I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has just done will also be told in memory of her." This is a truly profound pronouncement, for no other individual has ever received this promise from the Savior. Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, she is going to be a part of the story. *Why her? And what can we learn from the example of this woman commended by the Savior?* That is what we will attempt to discover tonight.

Welcome to the Party

This chapter begins with some very disturbing and distressing news. The chief priest and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and to kill him. The religious leaders are continuing in their conspiracy to arrest and execute the Savior. It was an intention that began early in the Savior's ministry in Mark's gospel.

At this point, the only thing restraining the religious leaders from arresting Jesus is the Savior's popularity among the people and the increase of population in the city at this time—it was festival season, and estimates are that the population would increase five times. So rather than just 50,000 people, there would be 250,000 people in Jerusalem at this time. And for fear of a riot due to the Savior's popularity, the religious leaders are momentarily restrained. But then we read in the end of this section, in Mark 14:10, that the religious leaders are going to receive some unexpected support from one of the Savior's own disciples. Judas Iscariot will eventually betray Jesus and in verse 11, the religious leaders were delighted to hear this.

Notice that in Mark 14, verses 1–2 and verses 10–11 contain disturbing news. These verses reveal hostility toward the Savior, hatred of the Savior, opposition to the Savior, and eventually betrayal of the Savior. And then notice that in between these verses, there is a party. And the good news this evening is that we are invited to this party.

It is a unique gathering. It is taking place in Bethany, and Mark is providing us with a front row seat for this historic and profound moment. What's unique about this particular party is that it would appear to be a gathering of only those who are grateful to the Savior. In the midst of this hatred, in the midst of this hostility, a party is taking place in Bethany. And with the exception of Judas and his opposition, which they were not aware of at that time, those who have been invited to this party are only those who are grateful to the Savior.

Now, let me introduce you to our host. Mark introduces us to him in verse 3. He is simply known as Simon—"Simon the leper." I think we can be assured that Simon the leper was a leper no more, for by law he would be quarantined. If he was still a leper, he would be forbidden from even having casual interaction or contact with people, much less hosting a party.

There is some speculation in what I am about to say, but it is informed speculation. It seems likely that this man Simon, the leper who clearly is a leper no more, was among the many lepers who had been healed by Jesus. He was healed of the most dreaded disease of his time—what has been described as death by inches.

Think of the difference this would make in so many contexts for him to introduce himself as Simon the leper! Imagine Simon the leper obtaining a table from the host or hostess at a local restaurant: "Yes, sir. How many? Your name please?" And he replies: "Simon the leper." Everywhere this man went he was a testimony to the healing power of the Savior! And he's our host tonight. He's greeting us at the door. Try to imagine his facial expression, having been healed of this dreaded disease. He welcomes us to the party.

Once Dead, Now Reclining at Table

It seems likely that the same event is recorded in John 12 and Matthew 26. John in his account gives us details concerning the guest list that we don't have in Mark. And John informs us that Lazarus was there as well. Lazarus was there reclining at table. Now what a story he has to tell! Just imagine that you've finished greeting Simon the leper—a leper no more—at the door. You enter only to discover that there, reclining at table, is none other than Lazarus who has been raised from the dead. Is it a privilege to be at this party or what? It's not often you meet somebody who has been raised from the dead, and there he is. He's reclining at table. This man who has died is there with his story to tell. Wouldn't you be immediately filled with questions? Don't you want to know what death is like? And up until this point, there's nobody that you can go to or talk to about this who can speak to you from experience. But now you're actually in a party with a guy who's died and yet he's reclining at table. This guy's done death. Wouldn't you have some questions for Lazarus? I would have many questions. I would want to know *What was death like? Is it a bummer that you have to die again?*

See, when I read passages like this, my imagination runs wild. Lazarus, after you died, who broke the news to you that you had to go back? How did they inform you?

"Yeah, Lazarus. Uh, I'm sorry. I know you just got here. Uh... you gotta go back."

"Why do I have to go back?"

"Your sister Mary won't stop crying. Your sister Martha won't stop crying. Now the Savior's crying. Everybody's crying. I'm sorry. The Savior wants you back. You're going back, pal."

And then what was it like when he went from paradise back to the tomb? He was buried. What was that like? What was that moment like when he opened his eyes? He would've been buried customarily. He would've been completely covered with a linen cloth. He would have been bound at the ankles and his arms would've been bound to his body, his entire face would've been covered. What was that initial moment like when he went from paradise and hanging with the saints, back to the tomb where he was initially buried? If you're at the party, I think you are asking these kind of questions.

Now, John also informs us that Martha was there and as you would expect, she was serving. So this is quite a guest list. We've got Simon the leper, a leper no more. We've got Lazarus, who's been raised from the dead, so he's got quite a story to tell. The whole thing's being catered by Martha, the quintessential servant. And we haven't even gotten to the guest of honor yet! For the purpose of this gathering, obviously, was for the Savior himself. Jesus is there! He's the guest of honor.

Love for the Savior

Now here's what's unique about this party. There are many things that are unique, but one thing that's particularly unique is the fact that there are no Pharisees present. So this would've really been a wonderfully festive occasion. It would've been a tension free occasion. It would've been unique because so many of the previous parties were either initiated by a religious leader or a religious leader

was present so that everyone else who had gathered was just waiting for trouble. In other words, the tension in the room was tangible and everyone present knew that it was inevitable that at some point in the evening, there was gonna be a conflict between the Savior and the religious leaders that were gathered.

This party was completely different. There were no Pharisees. There were no scribes present. This was a wonderfully festive occasion. Our host is Simon, the leper who possibly was healed by the Savior of this dreaded disease. Lazarus is there, having been raised from the dead. Martha is there. Everyone who is there save Judas is grateful to the Savior and grateful to be with the Savior to express his or her love for the Savior. Place yourself in the midst of this party and hear the sounds of joyful conversation.

And then suddenly a woman appeared standing over the Savior as he reclined at table. Now, again, we're not given this detail in Mark, but John informs us that this is Mary. This is the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and she has this alabaster jar of perfume. And as she breaks the flask, the fragrance of that very expensive perfume immediately begins to fill Simon the leper's home. And she begins to pour this perfume over the Savior's head. So I think within a matter of seconds, this loud and festive occasion, with joyful conversation taking place—a tension free environment where conflict wasn't inevitable because of who the guests were and their heart intent toward the Savior—Suddenly, one by one, all those conversations cease. There is quietness and there is only Mary pouring this perfume on the Savior, beginning with his head.

It was an act that was impossible to ignore. It was public. It was dramatic. It was a passionate display of affection. Kent Hughes in his commentary on this passage writes, "It was an intensely fervent

expression of devotion, as fervent as found anywhere in sacred Scripture!"[5] And then some of the disciples led by Judas react to what they cannot ignore. And their reaction is not a good reaction. This is just another instance where the disciples once again play the part of knuckleheads in the gospel. They are indignant, and according to Mark, rebuked her harshly.

They didn't rebuke her *privately*. They rebuked her publicly. They didn't rebuke her *gently*. They rebuked her harshly—suddenly, without any formal announcement. And certainly without any expectation on behalf of those who are guests. This festive atmosphere of joy and joyful conversation is suddenly interrupted. And suddenly Mary is there pouring this perfume over the Savior. And just as suddenly, the disciples led by Judas react indignantly and they rebuke her harshly. And then just as suddenly, another voice is raised above their voice. And it's the voice of the Savior who said, "Leave her alone." His righteous and intimidating voice rebukes them. And then following this rebuke, we hear this profound promise that wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what Mary just did will also be told.

The Transforming Effect of the Gospel

Why did he make this promise to her at this moment? What provoked the Savior to make what is truly a profound promise to Mary—a promise he made to no one else in the gospels?

His death is fast approaching. And yet in this moment, he looks beyond his death to the gospel, his gospel, being preached throughout the world. He looks beyond his death in effect to his resurrection, to his ascension, to his vindication, to the outpouring

5. R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior, Volume Two* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989), 146.

of the Spirit, to the gospel being proclaimed throughout the world. He looks down through the corridors of time, right up until his return, and says that wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she just did will accompany that story.

Her story will accompany the old, old story. What she just did should be told wherever the gospel is preached. Why? Here's why: *Because Mary uniquely demonstrates the transforming effect of the gospel.* That's why. And what is the transforming effect of the gospel? The transforming effect of the gospel is extravagant devotion to the Savior. So Jesus intends that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, her extravagant devotion will be proclaimed as well so that everyone will understand the effect of the gospel.

Mary here is pronounced by the Savior to be an example for the church universal throughout time. Matthew Henry says that here Jesus "recommended this piece of heroic piety to the applause of the church in all ages."[6] The Savior recommends this example to the applause of the church in all ages, obviously including all those gathered here this evening. This is worthy of our applause tonight. Her example is unique, and yet Jesus is also saying her example is to be the norm.

How Does She Make You Feel?

Since Mary is commended by the Savior as an example to the church universal, we must ask this question: *How does she make you feel? How does Mary make you feel this evening?* Listen, you can't ignore Mary because the Savior says wherever the gospel is preached, her story is gonna be told as well. So you can't ignore

6. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on The Whole Bible, Volume V* (McLean, VA: Macdonald Publishing Company), 546.

her. How do you feel about her? Are you indignant toward her? Like some of the disciples, are you embarrassed by her? Had you been present that evening, would you have been indignant? Would you have been irritated with her? Would you have thought, "Well, that's a sincere, but a very unwise public display of affection?" Or, would you have been provoked and inspired by her?

You know what's truly profound this evening? This promise uttered by the Savior in verse 9 at this moment has once again been fulfilled—wherever the gospel is preached, what she has done will also be told. Let me tell you one of the reasons I chose this message tonight: I don't think Celebration history would be complete if her story were not told. And do you know what she reminds us? She uniquely reminds us why we gather at Celebration each and every year. Her story must be told so that we might evaluate whether we have been appropriately and effectively transformed by the gospel. You see, her story is being told this evening, not simply for our *applause*, although that's appropriate, but for *application*, so that we might evaluate ourselves in relation to her.

And therefore, I just want to make two simple points about extravagant devotion, which is the transforming effect of the gospel: *Extravagant devotion is 1) An evidence of conversion, and 2) The increasing experience of the converted.*

1. An Evidence of Conversion

Mark's gospel was written with evangelistic intent throughout. In Mark 12:34, Jesus is answering a scribe and he is commending this man. When Jesus saw that he had answered a question wisely, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." That's a profound statement for him to make to a teacher of the law: you

are *near*, but you are not *in*. It's an encouragement and a warning in a single statement. He was near, not far; that was encouraging. But he wasn't in, and that was intended to be a warning and a provocation.

Mary, in chapter 14, on the other hand, is not someone who is near, but someone who is *in*. This is what being *in* looks like. Extravagant devotion is a demonstration that one has truly been converted. One who is genuinely *in* and not simply near is one who is passionate about the Savior. In other words, there is a dramatic change. There is a definable change. There is a discernible change. It is impossible to be in and not be changed. You cannot be secretly in. If you are in, you are to some degree like Mary.

Alec Motyer says, "Saving faith results in a distinctive life. ...A thing as potent as the new birth, if it has taken place, cannot be hidden; it cannot fail to make its presence felt. To have the life of God in us and to remain unchanged is unthinkable."[7] So where there is a profession of faith in the Savior without affection for the Savior, without obedience to the Savior—however immature that affection or obedience is—we should question the genuineness of that profession.

A Distinguishing Mark

I want to choose my words very carefully. I do not want to unsettle anyone in this room who is genuinely converted. If you are genuinely converted, I want you to have a genuine assurance of your salvation. And actually this passage can provide you with a genuine assurance of your salvation. If you are truly converted, Mary will speak to your assurance because you will be able to relate to her,

7. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James* (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity, 1985), 109, 78.

and you'll be able to identify similar dramatic changes in your life as a result of your conversion as well. So rather than unsettling you, this could impart fresh assurance to you. If there is in your heart tonight a genuine affection for the Savior, if there is in your life a glad obedience to the Savior, then I want you to receive fresh assurance from the Savior.

Being genuinely converted is not about the categorical and complete absence of sin. It is about the presence of extravagant devotion as exemplified by Mary. We are not talking about the perfection of grace, but the presence of grace. Here is my deeper concern this evening. Given the number of people who are assembled here, I am sure that there are some who have not been genuinely converted, but who assume they are converted, even though there is no evidence of conversion in their life. And it is you I am most concerned about right now.

If you are unresponsive in worship, if you are uninterested in teaching, if you are unaffected by your reading of Scripture, if you are uninvolved in the local church, if you are unaware of your sin, if you are unlike Mary who tonight, no one here can ignore—then perhaps you are unconverted. Maybe you came into this conference with false assurance and false confidence based in a profession you made years ago, or a prayer you prayed a decade ago, and yet in your life at this moment, there is no evidence of converting grace. Because I care for you, I want to challenge that confidence. I would hope you do not sleep well tonight until you flee to the cross of Jesus Christ, recognizing this evening that you bear no resemblance to Mary. May you this evening begin to experience genuine conviction of your sin, and recognized that you are an object of God's righteous wrath.

When Charles Spurgeon was preaching this passage to his congregation, he addressed those who were non-Christians in his midst, as he did every time he preached. And this is what he would say to you this evening:

> *"As for you that do not love the Lord Jesus, God be merciful to you! …I am sore grieved for your sakes. I am, moreover, sore vexed for Christ's sake that he should be deprived of your love and service. What has he done that you should slight him? Oh, blind eyes that cannot see his beauties, and deaf ears that cannot hear the charms of his voice! God be merciful to you, and help you to trust your Savior, and then you will love him for his salvation!"*[8]

So, extravagant devotion is an evidence of conversion. And it is an evidence of God's mercy tonight that we have Mary's example—that her story is being told this evening, along with the gospel, so that we can see a living demonstration of the effect of the gospel, and so we can evaluate our lives and truly discern and discover if we have genuinely been converted. If we have, we can rejoice and receive assurance afresh. If we have not, may all false confidence be shattered, and may the wonderful fear of the Lord fall on every unconverted individual here.

And may there be numerous conversions from this Celebration event because of the gospel and because of Mary's example. I plead with you! I appeal to you! There is a day—it is fast approaching—a day of judgment that is irreversible. On that day, God's righteous wrath will be poured out on all those who have not put their trust in the Savior. That day is coming! No matter how foreign that day feels to you right now, that day is fast approaching. And God has

8. C.H. Spurgeon, "To Lovers of Jesus: An Example" (#1834) delivered by C.H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on Nov. 2, 1884.

brought you here *this day*, so that instead of experiencing his wrath on *that day*, you can flee to the Savior and experience his mercy. Please turn from your sin, which does not satisfy! Please turn from your sin! And please, I beg you, trust in the Savior.

2. An Increasing Experience of the Converted

Extravagant devotion is not only an evidence of conversion, it is also an increasing experience of the converted. In his book *Holiness by Grace*, Bryan Chapell writes the following:

> *"She took her children to the park to break the monotony of schoolchildren now homebound for the summer, and instead she broke her own heart. She had watched her children run to the playground equipment as another car drove into the parking lot. The new car ground to a quick stop in the gravel. A young, attractive woman with a beaming smile leaped out of the driver's seat and virtually skipped to a secluded table near an adjoining lake.*
>
> *The mother's imagination began to race. Who could this attractive young woman be meeting in such a secluded spot with so much enthusiasm? Was this a long-awaited and carefully planned rendezvous with an over-busy husband, a lunch date with a best friend, or a tryst between secret lovers? She determined to stay on the lookout for whoever got out of the next car that parked.*
>
> *No one else came immediately. The mother soon grew preoccupied with her children, and forgot to watch for whomever the young woman was meeting. When she finally did glance again at the secluded woman, what the mother saw made her own heart hurt. The attractive, young woman was reading a Bible. The person she had leapt from the car to meet with such enthusiasm was the Lord.*

The mother recognized—with pain that penetrated her spirit—that she no longer had that same enthusiasm. Once the excitement of her relationship with the Lord had overwhelmed her. Once the joy of her salvation burned warm and bright. But the fervor was gone. Faith had become a dreary duty. God had become a detached, frowning bystander. Something had happened over the years of her walk with the Lord. She didn't know exactly what it was, but she did know that she was not now the kind of person who would skip to meet him. She had lost something wonderful, and she wept there in the park for her loss."[9]

All of us who have been genuinely converted can relate to that mother's testimony—her regret that at present, she wasn't still skipping to meet the Savior. At different times, I recognize myself in that illustration. I recognize that at times, I can more closely resemble those criticizing Mary than Mary herself.

Here is what everyone present at the party that evening should have done. As soon as they smelled that fragrance, as soon as they observed what Mary was doing, the entire room should have broken into applause. And as the applause died down, a line should have formed behind Mary and everyone should have taken their place in that line. And the person immediately behind Mary should have said to Mary, "Mary, thank you. Thank you for your example. Thank you for directing our attention away from all the Savior has done for us to the Savior himself. Mary, can I pour some of that perfume? Could you save some of that perfume for me to pour on the Savior?" That's what should have happened.

9. Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace: Delighting in the Joy That Is Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 183–184.

Emulating Mary's Example

Here's what I'm jealous for. I'm jealous that everyone here emulate Mary's example each and every year at Celebration and throughout the year. How can we do that? One simple point I want to bring to your attention: we must review and we must reflect upon the gospel. How do we become like Mary? How do we create and cultivate extravagant devotion? We review and we reflect upon the gospel of Jesus Christ.

My historical hero, Charles Spurgeon, has written the following:

> *"Are you content to follow Jesus from a distance? ...Let me affectionately warn you, for it is a grievous thing when we can live contentedly without the present enjoyment of the Savior's face.* Let us work to feel what an evil thing this is—*little love to our own dying Savior, little joy in His company, little time with the Beloved! Hold a true Lent in your souls, while you sorrow over your hardness of heart. Do not stop at sorrow! Remember where you first received salvation.* Go at once to the cross. *There, and there only, can you get your spirit quickened. No matter how hard, how insensible, how dead we may have become, let us go again in all the rags and poverty and defilement of our natural condition. Let us clasp that cross, let us look into those languid eyes, let us bathe in that fountain filled with blood—this will bring back to us our first love; this will restore the simplicity of our faith and the tenderness of our heart."*[10]

10. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), Evening, March 30.

Spurgeon also says, "The more we dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard, the more noble our lives become. Nothing puts life into men like a dying savior."[11] The more we dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard, the more we will be affected. How often, brothers and sisters, are you dwelling where the cries of Calvary can be heard? The cries of Calvary create an increasing extravagant affection and devotion to the Savior. Listen again to the cries of Calvary!

There the Savior cries, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." "I tell you the truth," he cries, "this day you will be with me in paradise." Hear this cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Hear this cry: "I am thirsty." Hear this cry: "It is finished!" Hear this cry: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Let us dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard. These songs we sing enable us to dwell where we hear the cries of Calvary. The teaching from God's Word has as its purpose, enabling us to dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard. All that's available in the bookstore is so that we might draw near and hear the cries of Calvary. And what is the result? The result is extravagant devotion to the Savior. We will emulate Mary's example.

A Sweet Foretaste

And do you know what else? Extravagant devotion is not only an evidence of conversion, not only an increasing experience of the converted, but do you know what else? This passage is, as J.C. Ryle says, "a sweet foretaste of things yet to come in the day of

11. C.H. Spurgeon, "To Lovers of Jesus: An Example" (#1834) delivered by C.H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on Nov. 2, 1884.

judgment,"[12] for here you have the disciples assessing what Mary is doing as a waste. And here you have the Savior saying to Mary, "She has done a beautiful thing to me."

And I want you tonight to have this foretaste of that last day. There are mothers present who have given up other pursuits to care for and to train their children. We live in a culture that says these women are wasting their lives. And for every mother who is well aware of painful words and that painful assessment, remember the divine assessment tonight. Hear the assessment of the Savior about what you are devoting yourselves to: you are doing a beautiful thing to him.

There are men and women here who have refused to accept promotions and relocate, because it would mean either neglecting their family or limiting their involvement in the local church. This is completely perplexing to those in the office context where you work, and the word about you around the water cooler is, "What a waste." Hear the Savior's assessment of your choices to devote yourself wisely to your family and ultimately to build the local church: "You have done a beautiful thing to me."

Oh, this room is filled with individuals who give joyfully and give generously—well beyond 10%. And when a relative discovers what you're doing, or if a non-Christian works on your taxes, well, what is their assessment going to be? As they see 16, 18, 22 percent of your income devoted to the local church, what are they gonna think? "What a waste! Do you realize the sum total you are investing each and every year?" Yes I do. And let me give you a divine assessment of that investment. Though the world would say, "It's a waste," the

12. J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 301.

Savior would say, "You are doing a beautiful thing to me."

Listen, there are heroes all around here in the form of small group leaders who are devoting countless hours to serve and care for others. And these individuals know what it is like to carry people in their hearts, to invest countless hours into others. And at times, someone doesn't seem to be grateful for what you're doing, or they don't seem to be changing, or they sin against you. It can be easy at times to conclude that all you are investing is ultimately a waste. It is not! Hear the divine assessment tonight, that you have done a beautiful thing. You are doing a beautiful thing to the Lord!

This is a foretaste of that final day. So much that we are doing this culture would say is a waste, but on that day, we will hear from him that it was beautiful. And it was a beautiful thing done to and for him. The Savior said it this way, "She did what she could."

So what can we do? I'll tell you what we can do right now: we can pour out the perfume of our affections through song, and emulate Mary's example of extravagant devotion. Oh yes, it extends far beyond this. It extends to countless ways of serving. It extends to financially investing. It extends to involvement in the local church. Extravagant devotion has countless ways of being expressed. And may those countless ways be expressed in the context of the local church—may our local churches become filled with one expression after another, by one individual after another, of extravagant devotion to the Savior. But we can begin *right now*. We can do what we can *right now*. And what we can do right now is the only appropriate way to begin this Celebration conference. And that is to pour out our hearts to him in worship for being the wonderful and beautiful Savior he is to us.

3

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Celebration 2004

One of the great marks of C.J.'s ministry is that he is a preacher of Christ crucified. The thousands of men and women who have had the privilege of hearing him herald the glories of Calvary have been transformed by the power of the cross and led into a deeper appreciation of the love of God for sinners. C.J.'s cross-centeredness has not only been a mark of his preaching, but a mark of his leadership as well. Before the language of gospel-centeredness was popular in evangelical circles, C.J. was intentional in helping us center our lives and our churches on the gospel, exhorting us to keep the main thing the main thing. This good news is what Sovereign Grace Churches is all about. Although C.J. has authored an entire book on this central theme of his ministry (*Living the Cross-Centered Life*), it seems essential to include in this collection his preaching of the cross.

"Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of
the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces

he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,

he shall see his offspring; he shall
prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities."
(Isaiah 53:1–11)

2

Like countless children before him, my grandson Andrew has recently been captured by the content of the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. He can be heard asking his father to read to him. His excitement is really obvious to all by the request as well as the tone of his voice, and adults who have read this particular work by Lewis are very familiar with Andrew's excitement. The following is a brief synopsis of the opening book in this series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*:

> *"In the first book of the Narnia chronicles,* The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, young children go through the back of a wardrobe and enter into a whole new world, the world of Narnia. But that world is enslaved under the spell of a Witch. It is the middle of winter, and as the book says, 'It is always winter and never Christmas.' But rumor has it that Aslan, the great king from far beyond, is coming, and spring is beginning to burst forth. Aslan finally does come, but one of the children betrays the group for a piece of Turkish delight, and comes under the dominion of the Witch. Aslan, to free this betraying young person, gives himself to the witch, who gleefully kills Aslan on a great stone table. Of course the children are horrified as*

they see their beloved Aslan being killed. When they go back the next day to find the body, it is gone. They approach the hill and see the altar on which Aslan was slaughtered and they're mystified and confused because they see that there's a big crack in the stone."[13]

C.S. Lewis picks up the story:

"The rising of the sun had made everything look so different—all colors and shadows were changed—and for a moment they didn't see the important thing. Then they did. The stone table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end, and there was no Aslan.

"Oh, oh," cried the two girls, rushing to the Table. "Oh, it's too bad" sobbed Lucy, "they might have left the body alone."

"Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?"

"Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs, "It is more magic." They looked around. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself.

"Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad.

"Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy.

"Not now," said Aslan.

"You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say the word ghost. *Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich*

13. From *Modern Reformation*, Volume 10, Number 6, November/December 2001, page 6.

sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her.

"Do I look it?" he said.

"Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses."[14]

Susan asked the most important question one can ask: "But what does it all mean?" What does this death and resurrection mean?

What It All Means

Well, a more important question simply does not exist. And I believe attempting to address and answer this question from sacred Scripture is the wisest way to begin Celebration East 2004. *What is the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ?* This all-important question about the meaning of his death has been asked, not only by Susan, but recently by the popular media as well. Perhaps you noticed that last month, a *TIME* magazine cover story asked, *Why Did Jesus Have To Die?* It's another form of, *What does it mean?*

And if you're a Christian, you can relate to the response of Lucy and Susan to the resurrected Aslan. Immediately following our conversion, we are passionate about God and filled with affection for God. But we are limited in our understanding of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Our zeal is sincere, and though sincere, it greatly exceeds our theological understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. For our passion and our affection to be substantive and sustained, we must understand what it all means.

And we must consistently be reminded what it all means for the non-Christian present here this evening. And let me just say to

14. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), Chapter XV, "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time."

all our non-Christian friends who are in attendance, we are so glad you are here. For each and every non-Christian in attendance this evening, there is nothing more important than for you to hear this evening what it all means. And I pray that in hearing this evening the meaning of Christ's death, that these words—the words of the gospel—would find entrance into your heart and bring about a transformation of your life.

If you're a non-Christian, you need to hear this evening what it all means. If you're a new Christian, you need to understand what it all means. If you are a suffering Christian, you need to be comforted this evening by what it all means. If you're a weary Christian, you need to be refreshed this evening by what it all means. If you are a mother of multiple small children, you need to be strengthened this evening by what it all means. If you are a father of teenage children, then you need to be encouraged by hearing this evening what it all means. And if you have been a Christian for decades—if you are the old Christian representing us here this evening—there is nothing more important than for you to hear yet again what it all means.

Listening to Isaiah

So that's what we're gonna do this evening. We're gonna devote this evening to answering that question from Holy Scripture. This evening, our hearts and our imaginations are going to be captured by the prophet Isaiah. He's going to tell us what it all means with his inspired and unique vantage point.

He's going to tell us what the crucifixion of Jesus Christ means for each of us and why there should be nothing more meaningful to each of us. The passage that

is going to capture our attention and I trust capture our affections this evening is Isaiah 53.

Now a few comments to prepare you for this passage. My historical hero, Charles Spurgeon, described Isaiah 53 as the Bible in miniature and the gospel in essence. Dr. Kyle Yates, professor of Old Testament at Southern Seminary, calls Isaiah 53 the Mount Everest of Old Testament prophecy. Derek Tidball, in his book *The Message of the Cross*, wrote the following about Isaiah chapter 53: "Here then is one of the peaks of the Old Testament's revelation of God. From this vantage point we obtain a clear view of His work on the far-off summit of Calvary and gain a definitive perspective on its meaning."[15] And, Franz Delitzsch wrote of this chapter, "It looks as if it had been written beneath the cross upon Golgotha."[16]

This song takes us to the heart of the human problem and the heart of the divine mind. So look carefully with me. There is no place in all of Scripture where we have such a detailed account of the suffering and glory of Jesus Christ. All Scripture is blood-stained, but his death is particularly pronounced in this passage. As a Christian, one can't read these words without finding oneself on holy ground and affected by what one reads here. God is speaking! He is speaking to us. God is revealing the heart of the human problem and the heart of the divine mind. God is speaking to his people about someone he identifies as "my servant." Now, there can be no question about this designation and this passage; this passage reveals and refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew, Mark, Luke,

15. Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 101.

16. Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament: Updated Edition* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), introductory comments on Isaiah 53. Originally published in 1866.

and John are all in agreement about the true identity of the servant.

In Acts 8, when Philip is asked by the Ethiopian eunuch to identify the subject of Isaiah 53, he identifies the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 as the Lord Jesus Christ. Philip told him the good news about Jesus. And the issue is certainly settled by the Savior himself, in Mark 10:45 and in Luke 22:37, where Jesus says, "For, I tell you this, this Scripture must be fulfilled in me"—and he quotes Isaiah 53:12, the suffering servant.

Isaiah reveals to us why he suffered and what it all means. There are three points that I want to bring to your attention from this sacred text, that reveal what it means: *1) The appearance, 2) The reality, and 3) The significance.*

1. The Appearance of His Suffering

In his fine commentary on Isaiah, Alec Motyer describes verses 1–3 as "Suffering observed and misunderstood."[17] In these verses we encounter the limitations of human observation and the influence of sinful expectation in relation to the Savior and his sacrifice.

Isaiah is writing for the people of God. But in this passage, we are all identified with those who looked upon the suffering servant without understanding, without comprehending his uniqueness or the uniqueness of his sacrifice, without comprehending what it all means. And so the passage begins with the question in verse 1, "Who has believed what they heard from us?" It's an appropriate question, and the appropriate and accurate answer to the question posed in verse 1 is: no one. No one has believed by mere human observation. No one has believed this report apart from divine illumination. There can be no genuine faith without prior divine

17. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 426.

illumination. One cannot discern the identity of the suffering servant by mere human observation. Prior to regeneration, prior to the gift of illumination, we were all numbered among those who are described at the end of verse 3, "We esteemed him not."

Why wasn't he esteemed? Well, he wasn't esteemed because he wasn't impressive by human standards. To merely observe the Savior and be governed by human wisdom was to be unimpressed with the Savior. The one who was sent to save us was not particularly impressive to us. In verse 2, his birth and background are referred to. We are informed that his birth and his background were unimpressive. As we read these verses we can hear New Testament voices saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Is this not the carpenter's son?" (John 1:46; Matt. 13:55) His birth, his background, were most unimpressive. No royalty. He was not from the religious establishment. He was unimpressive. And his appearance was unimpressive as well. Just notice this repetition: no form, no majesty, no beauty that we should desire him.

This suffering servant was not striking. He was not attractive. He was not handsome. He was quite plain. He was quite ordinary in human appearance to human observation. He looked like a typical Palestinian Jew. If we could project a picture of the suffering servant with the disciples onto the screen this evening, you would not be able to identify him by mere human appearance. He was quite ordinary. From a human perspective, there was nothing impressive about him. One writer said the more he grew, the less impressive he became. Consequently in verse 3, he wasn't esteemed. He wasn't esteemed, he wasn't followed, he wasn't celebrated. Instead, in verse 3 we are informed he was despised and he was rejected and he experienced all forms of rejection and hostility and sorrow that

ultimately, as we know, culminated in his crucifixion—the horror and the shame and the apparent rejection by God himself through his death on the cross.

Now, for just a moment, try to put yourself in the sandals of the original recipients of this inspired book. Because beginning in chapter 40, where God says "Comfort my people" and proceeding for the following 12 chapters, God is promising a glorious deliverance to a nation that is facing judgment and devastation and exile. In chapter after chapter, God promises a glorious deliverance to this needy nation. And given the previous chapters and given the previous history of Israel, they would have anticipated that when you arrive in chapter 53, well, there would be the description of a mighty warrior to deliverer them. Certainly someone similar to David, who is ruddy and handsome and strong. They would've been anticipating a warrior king. And contrary to those expectations, God reveals his servant as unimpressive, as weak not strong, unattractive, as rejected not acclaimed, and ultimately as crushed rather than conquering.

And if you were an original recipient, you would've read these verses and said, "*This guy* is going to deliver us? The guy described here in verses 1–3? This guy is going to come and rescue us? This guy is going to uniquely reveal the power of God to deliver and save?" No wonder Isaiah starts out in verse 1 saying, "Who has believed our report?"

We find that human expectations of the Savior prove to be consistent down through the ages. They don't change. Paul would've encountered similar expectations when he preached the gospel of a crucified Savior in Corinth. And so we read in 1 Corinthians 1, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. ...

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

See, by divine design, the gospel is foolishness to all who through pride are governed by the wisdom of this world, restricted to mere human observation, and impressed by human appearance. Apart from God's gracious self-disclosure we don't have a clue as to the uniqueness of his servant. Mere human observation is insufficient—God's gracious self-disclosure is necessary, and that gracious self-disclosure begins in verse 4.

2. The Reality of His Suffering

Look carefully with me in verses 4–6. Isaiah brings us right up to the cross and through his inspired writings, we stand directly under the cross and behold the Savior on the cross in order to understand what it all means. And so beginning in verse 4, a transition takes place. We transition from mere human appearance and human expectation to the divine revelation. Here is divine revelation. Here is what it all means. Here we discover the unique identity and purpose of his suffering. Here we discover the servant who suffered as our substitute for our sins. He is suffering for us.

We make a discovery in verse 4: this individual was full of sorrow, but not his own sorrow. It was our sorrow and grief. He was suffering for us. At least 10 times in verses 4–6 we have the pronouns "we," "us," and "our." Notice the repetition and description of our sin in these verses. Our sin is described in the language of grief, sorrows, transgressions, iniquities, gone astray, and in verse 6, his own way. See, this is all for us. And this is about us and our many sins.

In late August, 1992, hurricane Andrew ripped through Southern Florida, leveling many homes and buildings that stood in its path. In the quiet aftermath a young mother stepped out onto her porch to survey the damage with her little six-year-old boy named Timmy. The young woman looked at the community that used to be, amazed at the rubble that had replaced so many homes. And then she began to wonder what could be going through the mind of this young child, seeing such severe destruction. Timmy saw his mother was looking down at him and he got nervous. So before she could ask him, he piped up and said, "I didn't do it."

Now, Isaiah is aware that a defensive tendency resides in each of us. "I didn't do it." But here we encounter repeated references to our sins. The Savior was suffering because of our sins, and he was suffering as our substitute for sin, dying in our place.

A Substitutionary Death

Ernest Gordon was a World War II prisoner of war. He survived the horrors of the Japanese death camp by the river Kwai in Burma. He wrote of his experience in his monumental work, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*.[18] There he described how P.O.W.s were turned into slaves and forced to build a railroad of death for transporting prisoners to death camps and Japanese soldiers to the battlefront. These prisoners were tortured. They were diseased. They were starved and they were worked to the point of exhaustion. At the conclusion of one particular day, as the tools were being counted and the prisoners were about to return to their camp, the Japanese guard declared that there was a

18. Ernest Gordon, *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1962). Republished as *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

shovel missing and he demanded to know which prisoner had stolen the shovel.

He began to rant and rave, and he worked himself into a paranoid fury. He ordered whoever was guilty to step forward and to take his punishment and if no one stepped forward, all would die. "All die" shrieked the guard. He cocked his rifle, aimed it at the prisoners, and promised to shoot them all. And at that very moment, one man did step forward. Standing at attention, he calmly declared, "I did it." The guard viciously clubbed the hapless prisoner to death. His friends, having been spared, then took up his body. They carried it to the shed where all the shovels were stored only to discover there on the basis of recount that there was no missing shovel.

I want you to try to imagine for a moment the effect that man's substitutionary death had on his friends and fellow soldiers. It's a profound story of sacrifice and heroism. Yet it falls short of being an adequate illustration of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Unlike the prisoners in this account, you and I don't gather here tonight as those under the threat of death from a fellow sinner. We gather here tonight, apart from a substitute, under the threat and sentence of death from a righteous and holy God. And this is what Christ did for us: He left the glory he experienced at the Father's right hand. He left that position and place and became a man, became the mediator between God and man. He left that place, not simply for this place, but for the place suspended between heaven and earth, where he would suffer for us because of our sin and take our place, as our substitute, receiving into his body the full fury of the wrath of God.

He did this so that those who at that moment, and down through history, despised him could be transformed by this substitutionary sacrifice into those forgiven by him, reconciled to him, and called now to serve, worship, and adore him throughout their lives and throughout eternity. He suffered for us! He suffered because of our sins!

J.I. Packer writes,

> *"Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption, and glory. To affirm penal substitution is to say that believers are in debt to Christ specifically for this, and that this is the mainspring of all their joy, peace and praise both now and for eternity."*[19]

Sin and its penalty must be addressed! He suffered for *my* sins! He suffered in *our* place! He paid the penalty that *we* owed and he did it all alone! Listen, this wasn't at our request. This wasn't with our encouragement or our support. We are only mentioned here as contributing the sin, which made this horrific suffering necessary. While we were straying in verse 6, he was suffering the wrath of God we deserved for our straying and for our sin. He suffered the punishment that we so richly deserved.

Smitten by God

Now, those who were limited to human observations, they concluded erroneously in verse 4, that he was stricken, smitten

19. J. I. Packer, 'What did the Cross Achieve?: The Logic of Penal Substitution', in *Tyndale Bulletin* 25, 1974, 25.

by God, and afflicted. That was the word on the street—the word on the street was that Jesus of Nazareth was justly judged by God, because everyone who hangs on a tree is indeed cursed by God (Gal. 3:13). So from mere human observation as covered by the local media, Jesus of Nazareth would've been considered as justly judged by God, smitten by God, stricken by God, and afflicted by God for his sin. But those who have been given new eyes realize—oh yes!—He was indeed smitten by God. He was indeed stricken by God. He was indeed afflicted by God, *but not for his sin, but for our sin!*

We need to ponder this. We need to contemplate this deformed and disfigured body that appears before us. We want to look away, but Isaiah won't let us look away. He's addressing the tendency to say, "I didn't do that. I'm not responsible for that." And then he's also taking us to the foot of the cross and revealing the essence of the suffering we observe there. Isaiah is taking us where no movie, however sincerely created, can take us. He is taking us to the foot of the cross, not simply to be overwhelmed by the physical suffering. He's taking us to understand that the essence of what's happening there is a substitutionary sacrifice for sins, satisfying the wrath of God and securing our justification.

You see, the excruciating pain that the Savior is experiencing—the deformed body that is appearing before those who are standing there, the disfigurement that is taking place so that it is said of him, that he is beyond human recognition—that isn't merely suffering he's experiencing at the hands of cruel, Roman authorities! What is happening before us? This disfigured one who groans before us, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"—this individual is not merely experiencing physical suffering! This individual is

drinking the cup of God's wrath as the substitute for sinners like you and me.

Isaiah, and more importantly, God, fixes our attention on this despised and rejected one and says, "That's my Son. That's my servant. He hangs suspended, experiencing the fullness of divine righteous wrath as a substitute for those who esteemed him not, who despised and rejected him." And wisely does John Calvin write that "When we behold the disfigurement of the son of God, when we find ourselves appalled by his marred appearance, we need to reckon afresh that it is upon ourselves we gaze, for he stood in our place."

We gaze upon the disfigured one. We gaze upon the judgment we so richly deserved. He died in my place! He died in our place, for our sin! The innocent one endured the punishment that I, the guilty one, so richly deserve, that I might be spared that punishment of the wrath of God. That is the heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel is the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God "made him who knew no sin to be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

3. The Significance of His Suffering

Finally, the significance of his substitutionary suffering is revealed in verses 10 and 11. But first, consider the motivation of the Father in sacrificing his Son that is uniquely revealed in verse 10. I would submit to you that Isaiah 53:10–12 is the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. And here we find the love of God revealed in a most unexpected place, and displayed in a most unexpected way. Shockingly and strikingly, verse 10 reveals, "It was the will of the Lord to crush him." It was the will of God!

Recently, a Newsweek magazine cover story asked the question, "Who really killed Jesus?" Well, look no further. This passage provides the answer. God the Father, working together in full and willing cooperation with the Son and the Spirit, is ultimately responsible for this death.

This is the love of God on display. You cannot get near verse 10 and remain unaffected by the Father's love for sinners like you and me. This verse reveals the plan and the purpose of God. This sending of the Son and sacrifice of the Son was not the product of human initiative or human design. It was the Father's initiative and the love of God for sinners like you and me that is vividly revealed here. The Father's love didn't originate after the cross; it was the Father's love that sent his Son to the cross.

Know God's love! Experience God's love! Feel God's love! God so loved the world that he crushed his only innocent, begotten Son! He bruised him and he ultimately crushed him. He punished—He—Oh, God, help me. I've been trying to outrun my emotions this whole sermon. And I just can't. You just can't spend the time I've had the privilege to spend in Isaiah 53 and not be captured by it. And if I were to show you my notes, I could show you the tear stains. God says to sinners like you and me tonight, "Here's how much I love you. I love you so much that I crushed my beloved Son beyond human recognition. I love sinners like you so much that I crushed by beloved Son beneath the weight of my furious wrath for your sin." Christ says, "I love sinners like you so much that I willingly and voluntarily gave my life for you."

Listen, when you are tempted to doubt God's love, would you just turn quickly to Isaiah 53:10 and read again that he crushed his Son for you, that he bruised his Son for you? I think God would

say to us tonight, "Is that not sufficient? What more could be done? What else could I do to convince you of my love for you?" In the future, whenever you say "God is love," I want you to think of Isaiah 53:10, and that will deliver you from all inaccurate and sentimental perceptions of love. There's nothing sentimental about this love at all. God is love. How do you know? He crushed his Son for sinners like you and me.

Sinclair Ferguson has written,

> *"When we think of Christ dying on the cross we are shown the lengths to which God's love goes in order to win us back to himself. We would almost think that God loved us more than he loves his Son! We cannot measure such love by any other standard. He is saying to us, I love you this much.*
>
> *...The cross is the heart of the gospel. It makes the gospel good news: Christ has died for us. He has stood in our place before God's judgment seat. He has borne our sins. God has done something on the cross which we could never do for ourselves.*
>
> *But God does something* to *us as well as* for *us through the cross. He persuades us that he loves us."*[20]

Yes, he does! He does something to us as well as for us through the cross. He convincingly persuades us that he indeed is love! Amazing love, and amazing grace! Behold, God is love. He crushed his Son!

20. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Grow in Grace* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1989), 56, 58.

The Perfect Sacrifice

The significance of this sacrifice in relation to God is indicated in verse 10. It's an offering for sin. Before God, you must bring a sacrifice. You do not relate directly to God. You must bring a sacrifice for your sin and the original recipients of this prophecy would have been very familiar with an elaborate system of sacrificial offerings for sin. God is announcing to them that there will be a decisive and definitive offering for sin.

See, there is nothing we can do to satisfy God's wrath or turn his wrath away from us. We richly deserve his wrath. We deserve hell. And this is what we need to be saved from: the righteous wrath of God. There isn't a more frightening present or future reality than the righteous wrath of God. The last thing you want to encounter on the other side of the grave as an unrepentant sinner is God as your judge. The most serious error anybody in this auditorium can make in this lifetime is to assume that through human accomplishment you will survive divine judgment after you die. Woe to those who have no savior on the day of wrath! But here is the good news. The suffering servant was crushed by the Father for sinners like you and me, satisfying his wrath completely so that we could be rescued from that future wrath. That is the good news!

Non-Christian friend, could I appeal to you to flee now to the Savior? Oh, I hope all the references I've made to wrath frighten you. They should frighten you. And along with those references, I want to announce to you, *there is a Savior provided for you.* Flee to that Savior and receive rescue from that future day of wrath.

And for those of us who have turned from our sins and trusted in that Savior, let us be freshly reminded tonight: "There is therefore now no condemnation" (Rom. 8:1). We have been freed from the

fear of future wrath. That pronouncement in the future has been brought back to us, into the present, to transform our lives. That's the significance of this sacrifice. We can live in this life free from the fear of future wrath because of this offering for wrath and its significance for us is articulated in verse 11: "He will make many to be accounted righteous." My servant will justify many. His substitutionary sacrifice not only satisfies God's wrath, it also secures justification for the many.

There is this legal, judicial declaration by God where the sinner is declared to be righteous in the sight of God. The sinner who turns from his sin and trusts in the Savior is no longer liable for the punishment of his sins, for they have been borne by another. And the sinner now has been granted a legal standing of righteousness based on the righteousness of another. Verse 11 says, "My servant will make many to be accounted righteous." That's what it all means. On the back of the Celebration T-shirts that many of you have already received is this verse, 1 Peter 3:18: "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."

What does it all mean for us? "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would

start working backward."[21] Oh, that's what it means. It means that he ultimately is worthy of all our adoration and affection.

No wonder the song in heaven is "Worthy is the lamb who was slain!" (Rev. 5:12) It would be very appropriate for us to get in on that song, to add our voices this evening to that song, recognizing afresh, what it all means. We can now with intelligence and affection, theologically informed and filled with passion, add our voices to the heavenly host, singing "Worthy is the lamb who was slain!"

21. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), Chapter XV, "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time."

4

THE TROUBLED SOUL

New Attitude Conference 2008

C.J. has had a significant impact on a younger generation through his preaching at conferences for young adults. On May 24–27, 2008, many college students and young adults gathered at the Kentucky International Convention Center in Louisville, Kentucky, for the New Attitude Conference. C.J. preached from Psalm 42: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" This sermon highlights C.J.'s unique ability to connect with a younger generation, along with his pastoral instincts and desire to care for others. Drawing from Martyn Lloyd-Jones, David Powlison, Paul Tripp, and Charles Spurgeon, C.J. counseled from God's Word and led those present to hope in God.

"As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,

'Where is your God?'
These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession
to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.
By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock:
'Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?'
As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,

while they say to me all the day long,
'Where is your God?'
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God."
(Psalm 42)

2

Author Paul Tripp has devoted much of his life to studying biblical counseling. And Paul has written the finest single volume I've read on the topic of biblical counseling. It's titled *Instruments In The Redeemer's Hands*. Paul is a true Puritan, a most effective physician of the soul. And recently I came across the following insight in Paul's writing. Listen carefully as Mr. Tripp describes the most influential voice in your life. In the midst of all the voices that are vying for your attention, Mr. Tripp insists that there is one voice raised above all other voices that always has your attention. See if you don't recognize this voice in the following description.

Mr. Tripp writes,

"I find myself saying it all time. When people hear it, they laugh. But actually I'm being quite serious when I say it. Here it is: no one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do. You are in an unending conversation with yourself. You're talking to yourself all the time, interpreting, organizing, and analyzing what's going on inside you and around you.

You may be talking to yourself about why you feel so tired. Or maybe you woke up this morning with a sense of dread and you are

not sure why. ...Perhaps you're reliving a conversation that didn't go too well. Or maybe you're preparing yourself for a conversation that may be difficult, conjuring up as many renditions as you can imagine so you can cover all the contingencies. Maybe your mind has traveled back to your distant past, and for reasons you don't understand you are recalling events from your early childhood.

The point is that you are constantly involved in an internal conversation that greatly influences the things you decide, say, and do.

What do you regularly tell yourself about yourself, God, and your circumstances? Do your words to yourself encourage faith, hope, and courage? Or do they stimulate doubt, discouragement, and fear? Do you remind yourself that God is near, or do you reason within yourself, given your circumstances, that he must be distant? Do you encourage yourself to run to God, even when you don't understand what he's doing? Or do you give yourself permission to back away from him when you are confused by the seeming distance between what he has promised and what you are experiencing? ...When others talk to you is your internal conversation so loud that it's hard to concentrate on what they're saying?

Here's the question: How wholesome, faith-driven, and Christ-centered is the conversation that you have with yourself every day?"[22]

The Internal Conversation

No one is more influential in your life than you are because no one talks to you more than you do. You are in an unending conversation with yourself. This conversation never ceases. It began when you awakened this morning and it will continue until you fall asleep this evening. It's actually taking place within you right now, even as I speak. And this evening, we're going to consider and examine this unending conversation, taking place within yourself each and every day.

Even though this conversation is constantly taking place within us, rarely do we examine this conversation or evaluate the content of this conversation. Rarely do we consider the influence of this conversation upon our lives. And most of us don't consider this unending conversation as significant or serious or ultimately influential, but we are mistaken because this internal conversation has the most influence on your soul each and every day. You are more influenced by this internal conversation than you are by your parents, your pastors, your friends, your teachers, your circumstances, and at times even more than God and his Word.

This conversation and the content of this conversation is the difference maker in your soul each and every day. And there is a direct relationship between the content of this unending internal conversation and the state of your soul each and every day. So,

22. Paul David Tripp, *A Shelter in the Time of Storm* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 56–57.

evaluating the content of this internal conversation in light of Holy Scripture and informing this conversation with the content of Holy Scripture and the gospel in particular will, by God's grace, make all the difference in your soul and in your life.

In Psalm 42, we have the unique opportunity of listening in on the internal conversation of the Psalmist. We have the unique opportunity to overhear the Psalmist as he examines and evaluates the unending conversation taking place in his soul. This Psalmist shares with us his internal conversation so that we might examine and evaluate the content of our internal conversation and the influence of that conversation upon our lives.

1. The Troubled Soul

In Psalm 42, it is immediately obvious to all of us that all is not well within the soul of the author. This man's soul is troubled. And the conversation within his soul is troubling. His soul in verse 5 is downcast. His soul is in turmoil. And there is a repetition of this in verses 5 and 11.

Perhaps you're familiar with this experience yourself. I think to a degree we are all familiar with this experience—the experience of the troubled soul, the soul in torment. Certainly no one who is present is exempt from this experience. But if you're not prepared for this experience, then you will be vulnerable to temptation and sin when you have this experience. The Psalmist identifies with us in this experience and he teaches us how to respond to this experience. If you're familiar with a downcast soul, then this Psalm informs you this evening that your struggle is not unique and you are not alone.

David Powlison writes, "The Psalms have always been favorites of God's people because they press honest human experience and

emotion in the context of faith. In the Psalms, you meet God where you are."[23] So, prepare this evening to be freshly introduced to God, right where you are.

The Absence of God

Now it would appear that the author's soul has been troubled by three different experiences—experiences that we are all familiar with. *First*, his soul is troubled by the apparent absence of God. We see this in verses 1–4. The author of this Psalm is a godly man. He's numbered among the sons of Korah. He's numbered among the Levites who were involved in temple worship and leading temple worship.

Note that the Psalm does not begin with a reference to his troubled soul. Instead, at the outset of this Psalm, we encounter a thirsty soul: "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, Oh God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" Initially the Psalmist portrays himself as thirsty for God, not cast down or troubled in his soul. The author is passionate about God. And the author of this Psalm is passionately pursuing God. He is not indifferent to God. He is not maintaining a distance from God. He is not openly or secretly pursuing sin against God. Oh no—There is a pronounced thirst for God in his soul. And this passion for God is so pronounced that he likens it to a dear, desperate for water in a time of drought or when pursued by hunters. And the opening line seems to reveal amazing intensity. He begins with a reference to God, and then he references the living God, and then finally he cries out, "When shall I appear before God?" The author has

23. David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 218.

an intense, impressive, compelling appetite for God. He is thirsty for God.

Yet, his soul is downcast and in turmoil. He is thirsty for God, and troubled in his soul before God. How can that be present simultaneously in this man's soul? Why is he downcast? Why is his soul in turmoil? Well, his soul is downcast and in turmoil because even though he longs for God, he feels distant from God. Though he is thirsty for God, he feels alienated from God. He longs for God, yet he feels forgotten by God. He is passionate for God, yet he feels abandoned by God.

Meet this evening a man who desires God's presence but feels God's absence. Meet the Psalmist.

His sense of estrangement from God is only heightened by his geographic separation from the temple and its worship. He writes in verse 6 from Palestine, and he remembers the joy of former days in verse 4, how he would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. He passionately desires an experience of that very special communion with God that he experienced in public worship during the appointed festival season. He is thirsty for this, but it ain't happening. It is quite possible to be thirsty for God, to seek God, to serve God, and yet at times not sense the nearness of God and instead feel the absence of God, resulting in a downcast and troubled soul before God.

A Lesson from Great Saints

Would you be surprised tonight to learn that those we rightly respect and revere in and throughout church history are

familiar with this experience? Charles Spurgeon wrote the following: "Why, I tell you, young Christians, that the most experienced believers, the men who have great doctrinal knowledge and much experimental wisdom, the men who have lived very near to God and have had the most rapt and intimate fellowship with the Lord and Savior, are the very men who have their ebbs, and their winters."[24]

And Mr. Spurgeon himself was very familiar with those ebbs and the winter season of the soul. John Piper, in giving a biographical address about Mr. Spurgeon, noted his recurrent battles with depression. John Piper writes,

> *"It is not easy to imagine the omni-competent, eloquent, brilliant, full-of-energy Spurgeon weeping like a baby for no reason that he could think of. In 1858, at age twenty-four, it happened for the first time. He said 'My spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for.'*
>
> *...He saw his depression as his 'worst feature.' 'Despondency,' he said, 'is not a virtue; I believe it is a vice. I am heartily ashamed of myself for falling into it, but I am sure that there is no remedy for it like a holy faith in God.'"*[25]

Spurgeon would later write, "This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry."[26] Charles Spurgeon was very familiar with a downcast, troubled soul.

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24. Charles Spurgeon, "Sweet Stimulants for the Fainting Soul" from Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 48, preached December 16, 1860.
25. Charles Spurgeon: Preaching Through Adversity, 1995 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, www.desiringgod.org/messages/charles-spurgeon-preaching-through-adversity
26. C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students, Book I*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 173–174.

So was Jonathan Edwards. George Marsden in his biography on Edwards wrote, "We know that he also suffered from depressions throughout his life. ...Even as he kept the disciplines of the faith, he was frequently afflicted by times of spiritual deadness."[27]

And so was Martin Luther. On one particular occasion when he was greatly discouraged—which was not unusual for Luther—he was forcefully reminded of this by his wife, Kathrine. Seeing him unresponsive to any word of encouragement, one morning she appeared dressed in black mourning clothes. No word of explanation was forthcoming, and so Luther, who had heard nothing of a bereavement, asked her, "Katherine, why are you dressed in mourning black?" "Someone has died," she replied. "Died?" said Luther. "I have not heard of anyone dying. Whoever can have died?" "It seems," his wife replied, "that God must have died." Luther got the point.

These men were familiar with the experience of the Psalmist. And if this is your experience at present, or when this is your experience in the future, these stories should give you hope. And most importantly, we should derive hope from the divinely inspired author of this particular Psalm. His soul is downcast. He is thirsty for God. He is passionately seeking God. He longs to experience communion with God. And yet his soul is downcast, in turmoil, and troubled because it seems God has forgotten him. He is more aware of God's absence than he is of God's presence. And the result is a troubled and downcast soul.

The Presence of Trials

Secondly, his soul seems to be affected by the presence of trials. He

27. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Harrisonburg, VA: R. R. Donnelley and Sons, 2004), 112–113.

references trials in verse 6 and 7. Rather than the joyful sounds of temple worship that he identifies in verse 4, all the Psalmist seems to hear is vividly described in verse 7: "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." These waters symbolize trials and suffering. These waterfalls, these waves and breakers, are continuous and they are relentless and they are overwhelming. And the sound of this waterfall and these breakers is deafening.

Perhaps tonight you, in some way, can relate to the Psalmist. Perhaps you are lonely. Perhaps you came alone, and it doesn't appear you have friends. It appears to you that everyone else has friends. You, in the midst of this large congregation, feel alone. You are intimate friends with loneliness on a daily basis. Or, perhaps you thought you would be married by now, yet lately you've begun to think, "Will I ever get married?" Perhaps this evening you are familiar with chronic, debilitating sickness in some form, quite uncommon for someone your age. At an age when most are experiencing the fullness of youth, full strength, not you. No, you have a chronic, debilitating illness, which for you makes even the simplest task so very difficult each day. Your soul is downcast. It's trapped. You are in turmoil. There are trials like waves, like breakers, that ceaselessly overwhelm.

The Opposition of Others

Third and finally, it appears he was affected by the opposition of man as well. He is familiar with opposition in verse 3: "while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" And in verse 9, "Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemy?" In verse 10, "As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries

taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" His soul is downcast and troubled because of opposition.

That opposition can come in a spiritual form as well. It can come in the form of the demonic. It can come in the form of fiery darts from the evil one, taunting us on a daily basis, arguing with us that not only is God invisible, he appears to be quite inactive in your life. You appear to be abandoned by God. You appear to be forgotten by God. And we too are familiar with those tormenting thoughts, those secret fears that we are suspicious at times might be true because they in some ways seem to be true as we evaluate and assess our circumstances.

The opposition that we are experiencing comes in the form of individuals as well. If you are a college student, and the majority present are college students, you will know opposition. If you identify yourself as a Christian, if you identify yourself with the authority and content of Holy Scripture, you will experience opposition because this culture is hostile toward God and his Word. And regardless of how humbly you hold your biblical position, you will experience to some degree opposition from this culture.

Opposition is inevitable. We live in a culture hostile to all we believe and proclaim: hostile to masculinity and femininity as defined in Scripture; hostile to the commands of God that forbid fornication, adultery, and homosexuality; hostile to the prescribed commands of God for sexual purity prior to marriage and fidelity in marriage; hostile most of all to the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross as the only way to be reconciled with God. Regardless of how humbly you hold those positions, and I pray you do hold them humbly, you will know opposition. You will know opposition from relatives. You will know opposition

from teachers. You will know opposition from employers. You will know opposition from coworkers.

You will know opposition, and that opposition can affect your soul. It was affecting the soul of the Psalmist. He was downcast and he was troubled in his soul. And as he conversed with himself in his soul about the seeming absence of God and the presence of trials and the ridicule from those around him, well, his soul was troubled and in turmoil as a result. These themes in his life formed a ceaseless conversation within him. But by God's grace, these voices did come to an end.

Notice that there is an intervention in this unending conversation in the soul of the Psalmist.

2. The Hopeful Soul

When your soul is troubled and in turmoil, what is the appropriate response? Well, the Psalmist models the appropriate response, and if the Psalmist were present, he would tell you personally that the appropriate response when your soul is troubled is to talk to yourself. We must talk to God and talk to ourselves, which is exactly what he does in verse 5 and verse 11.

The Psalmist does not repeatedly and endlessly review and rehearse and describe the state of his troubled soul. He does not ignore his soul. He does not excuse his soul. Instead, he interrupts his soul. He interrupts this unending conversation taking place within his soul. And he interrogates his soul. He challenges his soul. He rebukes his soul and he exhorts his soul to trust in God. And this ultimately makes all the difference in his soul. And this will make all the difference in your downcast soul as well.

Talking to Yourself

I first became aware of this practice of talking to your soul, or talking to yourself, years ago while reading a book called *Spiritual Depression*, by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I highly recommend this book, which begins by examining Psalm 42. Lloyd-Jones writes the following:

> *"I say that we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing 'ourselves' to talk to us! Do you realize what that means? I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow ourself to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Am I just trying to be deliberately paradoxical? Far from it. This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talk talking to you, they bring back the problem of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [in Psalm 42] was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.'*

> *The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand. You have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down?'—What business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, ...exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God.'"*[28]

That's exactly what we must do. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Each day, throughout the day, we have two simple choices. We can either spend the day listening to ourselves and our constantly changing feelings and circumstantial interpretations, or we can spend each day talking to ourselves. We can talk truth to ourselves. We can preach the gospel to ourselves and we can address our troubled and tormented soul with Scripture and the message of the gospel.

Most of us have spent years listening to ourselves and have rarely talked to ourselves. Talking to yourself is a learned skill. It requires practice, and it involves effort. One conversation with yourself normally won't be sufficient to alter your troubled soul. Our troubled souls aren't immediately cooperative. Our troubled souls need continuous addressing with the truth of the gospel. And that actually is illustrated in this Psalm. This Psalm does not end in verse 5. Notice in verse 5, he begins to talk to himself. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

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28. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 20–21.

Keep reading. "My soul is cast down within me. Therefore, I remember you." And then verse 11, "Why are you cast down O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me?" Note the rhythm and the repetition of the Psalm. The Psalm doesn't conclude in verse 5, because talking to yourself requires perseverance. You must persevere with this practice in order to experience the transition from troubled soul to hopeful soul. And if you employ this practice by God's grace, this practice will have a transforming effect on your soul. It will make a noticeable difference in your soul.

Now, perhaps you're wondering, "Okay, I'm convinced of the practice, but what do I say to my soul?" Here's the good news. The good news is that the Psalmist really provides us with a starter's kit for talking to your soul. He provides us with content. The content of your conversation with yourself is actually explicitly presented in this song. Verse 5 says, "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." That is repeated in verse 11, "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

There is the content of your conversation with your troubled soul: Hope in God! It begins with looking outward and looking upward. The Psalmist is aware of the sovereignty of God and the faithfulness of God and the kindness of God. And the Psalmist is certain that God himself will intervene, and in his good timing, fulfill his promises in the life of the author. He refuses in this moment to be governed by the subjective or by his circumstances. Troubled souls cannot be trusted. And circumstances often lie to us. They lie to us, telling us that God isn't sovereign. God isn't wise. God isn't kind, God isn't active. God isn't present. God isn't for us. In fact, he has forgotten us. We, by the grace of God, must not be

governed by our troubled souls. We must not be governed by our faulty interpretation of circumstances. We must hope in God. We must wait on God. We must be certain as a result of hope that God is sovereign and he's faithful. And he's kind! We must be certain and convinced that he will intervene, that he will fulfill his promise and his purpose for our lives.

The Psalmist determines in verse 6 to remember God. God hasn't forgotten the Psalmist; it's the Psalmist who has forgotten God. And he exhorts himself to remember God, to hope in God, and to praise God. "I shall again praise him." Oh, I love that phrase! I shall again praise him, at some point in the future. I will behold the goodness of the Lord. I shall again praise him. Circumstances presently hide his hand, but hope assures the soul that you will eventually see and discern his hand. Charles Spurgeon has been credited as saying, "When you cannot trace God's hand, we must trust God's heart." I shall again praise him.

And finally, "my salvation and my God" is a reminder of his relationship with God. My God will save me—the God who initiated this relationship with me, the God who established covenant with me—my God will save me. He is my God. And he has pledged himself to me and he will be faithful to act on my behalf.

What do you say to your soul? Well, in some ways it depends on what is troubling your soul. What you can begin doing tonight is search the Scriptures for the appropriate promises that address the trouble of your soul, that address the turmoil and trials in your soul. Find your way to these promises in and throughout Scripture. And then by the grace of God, speak to your soul. By the grace of God, cease listening to your soul and instead speak to your soul

with the promises of God. And these promises will transform your soul from a troubled soul into a hopeful soul. Talk to yourself.

Talking to God

In addition to talking to yourself, you must also talk to God. In verse 8, the Psalmist turns his knowledge of God into a prayer, ultimately into a song. "By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life." The Psalmist rehearses God's Word and he sings God's Word to God. And his troubled soul becomes a hopeful soul as he addresses God with his Word. I love the reference to singing. I love it because—you've really already experienced the fruit of talking to God and talking to your soul through singing. It's what we've been doing for two days together. Troubled souls become hopeful souls as we sing truth to our souls.

The reason we are rarely troubled in the midst of corporate worship is because we are talking to our soul and singing truth to our soul. In worship, we are talking to God and rehearsing the truth of the gospel and the promises of God. And the effect of that upon our soul is hope and joy and affection and awareness of God and trust in God. So each time we sing together, we really are experiencing the fruit of this practice, talking to ourselves and talking to God. God desires that we humbly but boldly remind him of his promises. He invites us to do this.

Charles Spurgeon, it seems to me, had a gift of faith. I can't read his writings without experiencing a transfer of faith to my soul. And Mr. Spurgeon wrote the following about God's promises, which we are to rehearse before him.

"God's promises were never meant to be thrown aside as wastepaper; He intended that they should be used. ...Nothing pleases our Lord better than to see His promises put in circulation; He loves to see His children bring them up to Him and say, 'Lord, do as you have said.' We glorify God when we plead His promises. Do you think that God will be any poorer for giving you the riches He has promised? Do you dream that he will be any the less holy for giving holiness to you? Do you dream that He will be any less holy for giving holiness to you? Do you imagine He will be any less pure for washing you from your sins? He has said, 'Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though, your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.' Faith lays hold upon the promise of pardon, and it does not delay, saying 'This is a precious promise—I wonder if it's true?' but goes straight to the throne with it and pleads, 'Lord, here is the promise. Do as You have said.' Our Lord replies, 'Be it to you even as you will.' When a Christian grasps a promise, if he does not take it to God, he dishonors Him; but when he hastens to the throne of grace and cries, 'Lord, I have nothing to recommend me but this, You have said it,' then his desire shall be granted.

Our heavenly Banker delights to cash His own notes. Never let the promise rust. Draw the word of promise out of its sheath and use it with holy violence. Think not that God will be troubled by your importunately reminding Him of His promises. He loves to hear the loud outcries of needy souls. It is his delight to bestow favors. He is more ready to hear than you are to ask. ...It is God's nature to keep His promises; therefore go at once to the throne with 'Do as You have said.'"[29]

Yes, that's exactly what we are exhorted to do in this Psalm: to talk to ourselves, to talk truth to ourselves, to talk to God and to remind him of his promises. Listen, the more time you spend talking to yourself and speaking to God, the more time you spend speaking the gospel to your soul and humbly reminding God of his promises, the less time you will spend listening to your soul. And the more you will experience a joyful and hopeful soul, rather than a downcast and a troubled soul.

Finally: one cannot read this Psalm without remembering someone else whose soul was troubled—without remembering our Savior's uniquely troubled soul as his death on the cross drew near. As the hour for which he came drew near, it would appear that he was alluding to this Psalm when he said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father save me from this hour'? But for this purpose, I have come to this hour" (John 12:27). And in the garden of Gethsemane, we overhear a similar cry: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matt. 26:38). The Savior's soul was uniquely troubled and sorrowful. And as he encountered the wrath of God, as our substitute for our sin on the cross, he would

29. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), Morning, January 15.

cry out in indescribable agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46)

The Psalmist *felt* forsaken by God; the Savior *was* forsaken by God. The Psalmist was troubled in soul as he felt the absence of God; the Savior was troubled in soul as he contemplated being crushed by the righteous wrath of God and truly abandoned by God. The Psalmist's soul was downcast, but the Savior's soul would be crushed. The Psalmist's soul was temporarily downcast; the Savior's soul was uniquely troubled and tormented, so that the souls of sinners like us might be forgiven. He was forsaken so that we might never be forsaken because of his sacrifice on the cross.

We can sing—as we did sing, and as we will sing again—we can sing about the steadfast love of the Lord because of his sacrifice on the cross. We can say with the Psalmist now informed by the cross, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

5

CRAVINGS AND CONFLICT

Celebration 2004

Christian maturity finds expression in community, especially in how we resolve conflict. In Sovereign Grace Churches, we have been well-taught on the inevitability of conflict, the internal cause of conflict, and wise principles for resolving conflict and cultivating relational harmony. The value we place upon humility and repentance transforms our relationships by applying the gospel to our relationships. God has used C.J.'s insightful teaching on cravings and conflict to grow us in wisdom and to strengthen unity in our churches, marriages, and friendships. If our denomination is to bear fruit into the future, we must continue in what we have learned from C.J. and others, navigating conflict with maturity and striving to be peacemakers.

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel."

(James 4:1–2)

2

Over the past 15 years, three godly men have approached me and asked my permission to marry my three daughters. These men have ventured where angels feared to tread. In approaching me about my daughters—and Carolyn and I are very grateful that God gave them the necessary courage to do so—it was our joy to give them our blessing. We derive great joy from observing how they have cared for and led our daughters and our 12 grandchildren.[30] Along the way, Carolyn and I had the privilege of participating in the premarital counseling for each of these couples. It was our responsibility to interrupt their romantic trance and to prepare them for some of the harsh realities of marriage that awaited them.

James 4:1–2 played a critical role in their preparation for relational conflict in the context of marriage. It has served them well since their wedding day. All three couples have returned and communicated their gratefulness for the difference this passage has made in their marriages.

Here's what I discovered over the years: this passage is relevant not simply to those who are engaged to be married or for those who are married. This passage is relevant to everyone. It is relevant regardless of age. It is relevant whether you are male or female. It is relevant whether you are married or a single parent or a child. It is relevant because we are all familiar with the harsh reality of relational conflict.

Addressing Relational Conflict

Perhaps you are in the midst of a relational conflict. If so, this passage, when understood and applied, can be a difference-maker

30. This sermon was originally preached in 2004, but has also been preached more recently. The descriptions of C.J.'s season of life reflect a later sermon.

in resolving conflict. If you don't presently find yourself in an unresolved relational conflict, well, there is one awaiting you in your future. And I'm not talking about your distant future, I'm talking about your immediate future. Conflict is coming.

Carolyn and I sought to interrupt the romantic trance of our daughters and their future husbands prior to marriage and prepare them for their inevitable relational conflicts. In James 4:1–2, God himself interrupts our romantic view of life and graciously prepares us for conflicts, identifies the root issue in conflicts, and provides life-transforming wisdom for resolving conflict.

In his commentary on the book of Acts, John Stott wrote of the early church, "It wasn't all romance and righteousness."[31] No it wasn't. In our marriages, in our families, in our churches, in our workplaces: it will not be all romance and righteousness. And in this passage what we have is wisdom from above for the resolving of relational conflict. It's wisdom from above for the promotion of relational harmony, whether it's in a marriage or family or local church.

31. John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 24.

Let me briefly mention two qualifiers at the outset, to avoid misunderstanding. *First*, in cases where conflict has surpassed the norm and evolved into abuse, you should seek help and, where appropriate, involve the authorities. What James is describing in our passage is not situations of abuse, but the quarrels and conflicts we are all familiar with. *Second*, we should keep in mind that it is not always within our ability to resolve conflict, and sin at times changes the nature of relationships. Romans 12:18 says we should live peaceably with all "if possible, so far as it depends on you."

Having made these qualifiers, let's discover the wealth of life-transforming grace and wisdom present in this passage.

> *"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel." (James 4:1–2)*

This passage is no flattering portrayal of the early church. Serious relational conflicts existed among the original recipients of this letter. Although they were genuinely converted, there was the distinct presence of relational hostility in their midst and the absence of relational harmony. Just note in verse 1: quarrels (plural) and fights (plural). The plurals reveal that these quarrels and fights were not occasional, they were common.

James is addressing a chronic condition in their midst. And notice as well that James does not specify the nature of these conflicts. We could speculate as to the nature of these conflicts after reading the entirety of the letter. But James doesn't identify the specifics of these conflicts. It is not necessary for him to do so because the occasion or the circumstances involved are not of

primary importance to James. They are not of primary importance to James because they are not the source or the cause of the quarrels and the fights.

That's good news for us, because regardless of the occasion in our life, or regardless of the circumstances in our lives and what's taking place in the midst of our quarrels and fights and relational conflict, this passage remains relevant for each of us. James 4:1–2 was written not only for them but it was written for us as well. God was speaking not only to the original readers of this letter but God is kindly and authoritatively addressing us as well. In just a few words, James reveals the root issue of their conflict and provides them with a solution to conflicts. So few words! So much wisdom!

So, what do we learn about relational conflict in these two verses?

1. Worse Than You Think

First, we learn that relational conflict is normally worse than you think. It is normally more serious than we think it is, because in general, we have a sinful tendency to minimize the seriousness of conflict. In particular, I have a sinful tendency to minimize my role and responsibility. We are quite comfortable describing conflict with non-moral or non-objective generalities: We are just temperamentally different. Our personalities clash. We aren't wired the same way. We have issues.

Somehow we are satisfied that these are insightful explanations for what is taking place. James won't allow it. James will not allow a superficial assessment of relational conflict. James insists that we examine our quarrels and fights more closely and more carefully. Ultimately he insists that we examine our hearts. James leads us

on a theologically-informed examination of our hearts and as we examine our quarrels and fights more closely and carefully, we discover that they are worse than we thought.

Notice in the passage the language of James: what begins as a *quarrel* at the outset of verse 1 is described as *war within* at the end of verse 1. What begins as a *fight* in verse 1 is described as *murder* and *coveting* in verse 2. Notice that James' language doesn't soften as the verse progresses. No, it strengthens because the verse begins with human observation of a relational conflict and it proceeds to a divine assessment of a relational conflict.

There is a divine perspective of conflict that is revealed in this passage, because quarrels and fights with each other reveal the presence of sin—not simply against one another but ultimately and most seriously against God himself. James is a wise pastor. He turns our attention away from the quarrels and fights, away from the occasions and the circumstances, and he directs our attention to our hearts.

As we contemplate this divine perspective, we realize this: that while it is worse than we originally thought, there is good news in this discovery. There is very good news here because you will never make progress resolving a quarrel or a fight unless you first recognize the severity of a quarrel.

This is, in effect, theologically-informed instant replay for our hearts. If you watch any football game, no doubt at some point a coach will throw a flag onto the field. He is protesting the call of the official. He is arguing that the official did not get the call right. Then they go to the replay and watch the play in slow-mo, from every angle. Often at home we realize that the ref on the field did indeed miss the call. Then the referee returns to the field and

overturns the original call.

This passage functions that way: it serves as theologically-informed instant replay of our conflict. So as we examine ourselves in light of what is revealed here in James 4, we throw the flag for instant replay on ourselves and where appropriate, return and say to someone we have sinned against: "upon further theological review, I realize what I said to you and how I've acted toward you is more serious than I originally thought."

So, now we know, informed by James, that relational conflict is worse than we think, which helps us to realize we need God's grace in the form of forgiveness and empowering for change. When we experience relational conflict it can feel complicated and difficult to figure out why this is happening, but James has another surprise in store for us: it is simpler than we think.

2. Simpler Than You Think

Relational conflict can sure seem complicated. It can certainly feel complicated when you're in the midst of it. I cherish my bride of more than four decades. We have had a most blessed and romantic four decades of marriage, by the grace of God. But we are also familiar with conflicts in the midst of those decades. And there have been times when in our attempts to resolve the conflict we can't even agree on how the conflict started, and it started just 20 minutes ago! And there have been a few occasions where as I have presented my perspective of the origin of the conflict that a smile has appeared on Carolyn's face because what I'm communicating confidently is so confusing it's amusing. Conflict can just feel so complicated, appear so mysterious, and seem so confusing. James is here to help. James provides us with the biblical perspective of

relational conflict. James isn't confused. In James 4:1–2 we discover that relational conflict really isn't confusing. It is not mysterious. It is not demonic. And it's not necessary to remember how it began.

James locates the source of conflict for us in verse 1. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" There it is, the source or cause: it is within you. Now, so there is no misunderstanding, I'm assuming you are participating in the conflict. You don't have to participate. You have the option of not participating. I would encourage you to take that option.

But if you have either initiated or you're actively participating, then there is wisdom from above in this verse for you. The "cause" of the conflict is not somewhere else. It is not because of someone else. It's within you. That is where we need to begin our examination and evaluation of a conflict where we are participating.

And did you notice that James describes the root issue three times in just two verses? Verse 1, "Your passions are at war." Verse 2, "You desire and do not have." Also verse 2, "You covet and cannot obtain."

The source of relational conflict is the sinful cravings within those participating. And applying this can make all the difference when you find yourself in a quarrel, so remember this: remember that most likely, it is *worse* than you think, and *secondly*, discerning the cause is actually *simpler* than you think. Because the root issue is not complicated; it's not somewhere else and not in someone else. It is within you.

Cravings Underlie Conflicts

See, conflicts don't create sin, conflicts reveal sin. And what do

conflicts normally reveal? Conflicts reveal a certain unsatisfied sinful craving. James wants his readers to discern the cause of their quarrels and fights. The original readers lacked discernment as to the cause of their conflicts. Perhaps you need discernment as to the cause as well. I know I do. What causes quarrels and what causes fights? Sinful cravings within are the cause of quarrels and fights and recognizing that can make an immediate and significant difference in both avoiding conflict and resolving conflict. This can make all the difference.

David Powlison helps us to understand the difference this discernment can make when he writes:

> "*One of the joys of biblical ministry comes when you are able to turn on the lights in another person's dark room. People usually don't see their desires as lusts. Souls are cured as the ignorant and self-deceived are disturbed by the light of God's analytic gaze and then comforted by the love that shed substitutionary blood to purchase the inexpressible gift.*
>
> *I have yet to meet a couple locked in hostility (and the accompanying fear, self-pity, hurt, self-righteousness) who really understood and reckoned with their motives. James 4:1–3 teaches that cravings underlie conflicts."*[32]

That last phrase is worth memorizing. David's summation of the discernment revealed in this passage is so helpful. *Cravings underlie conflicts*. He goes on:

32. "Powlison on Lusts of the Flesh: Question 4," www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/powlison-on-lusts-of-flesh-question-4/

"Why do you fight? It's not 'because my wife/husband...'—it's because of something about you. Couples who see what rules them—cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life—can repent and find God's grace made real to them, and then learn how to make peace."[33]

If you look underneath an unresolved conflict you're going to find a sinful craving. Underneath every conflict is an unsatisfied sinful craving. It's really not complicated. Why do we fight? Here's why: because we don't get what we want. That's why. Nothing complicated about it. That is the root issue. There is nothing deeper than this. It is so very kind of the Lord to reveal this to us so that we might give attention to our hearts in the midst of conflict for the purpose of resolving conflict.

Actually, resolving conflict is easier than we think. Yep, you heard that right.

3. Easier Than You Think

Let's look at verse 10 and experience the grace present in this verse and promised by this verse: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

In order to really and fully appreciate this verse, one must remember the context in which it appears. This chapter began with references to quarrels and fights and coveting and all manner of sinful cravings that do great damage to personal relationships. We are all familiar with this sin and its consequences. And yet in

33. "Powlison on Lusts of the Flesh: Question 4," www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/powlison-on-lusts-of-flesh-question-4/

the midst of this sin there appears this verse promising grace.

Verse 10 informs us that grace is greater than our sins! Verse 10 informs us of God's disposition towards those who are in the midst of quarrels and fights. Verse 10 shows us the disposition of a merciful God: he is eager to give us grace in the midst of the cravings and desires that are worse than we initially thought. Listen, verse 10 gives us hope!

And humbling ourselves before the Lord shouldn't prove difficult for us once we've perceived the specific nature of our sins as revealed in verses 1–2. And this is where resolving relational conflict begins. Always. If we don't first humble ourselves before the Lord, acknowledging our sinful cravings, then there is no way we will be able to resolve a conflict with someone else. No way. Our conflict with God and sin against God must first be resolved before there can be any hope of resolving conflict with someone else.

The Most Serious Conflict

So, this is where resolving all relational conflict begins: resolving relational conflict with the Lord. How do I do that? How do I humble myself before God? Well, it's easier than you think! We humble ourselves before the Lord by confessing our sins to the Lord, the one we have offended first and foremost. Listen to these familiar words from 1 John: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Confession here implies a genuine conviction of sin and includes a forsaking of sin. But if we sincerely confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Doesn't this appear easy to do? Have you ever wondered, or asked

yourself: how can forgiveness possibly be that easy?

When I have offended God by my sin, how can it be this easy to be forgiven by God for my sin? Listen, it can only be this easy because our Savior has done the unimaginably difficult work on our behalf. He has resolved the greatest and most serious conflict: the conflict between the holy God and sinners like you and me. He has resolved that more serious conflict through his substitutionary conflict on the cross for our sins. Therefore, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse all our unrighteousness.

And since the most serious conflict has already been addressed by the Savior, there is hope for the resolving of human conflict as a result. But it begins with humbling ourselves before God and asking forgiveness of him where appropriate. And here we discover that grace is greater than our sins. It is amazing.

As we humble ourselves, he exalts us, he forgives us and gives us grace we obviously don't deserve. So humbling ourselves involves first and foremost, acknowledging our sins to God. But it also involves—where appropriate—acknowledging our sins to others and asking their forgiveness. If you have contributed to a conflict, then the means of humbling yourself is sincere confession.

Genuine confession is specific. If it is sincere, it will be specific. And if it is sincere it will also be brief. Be suspicious if your confession to someone you've sinned against is lengthy. When mine are lengthy I've learned to be suspicious. Here's why. If it is lengthy, there is a good probability that you are not asking for forgiveness, but instead asking for understanding. You might be in the process of excusing your sin, explaining your sin, requesting understanding of your sin, rather than asking forgiveness for your

sin. So be suspicious of a lengthy confession. Normally, a genuine confession of sin is evidenced by a sincere, specific, and brief confession of sin.

Resolving relational conflict is easier than you think and only because the Savior has done the unimaginably difficult work, so that we might humble ourselves before the Lord and receive his forgiveness for our sins and then where necessary ask forgiveness of others.

Wisdom from Above

Sorry to inform you of this but there is a relational conflict awaiting you, and it is not in your distant future. There is certainly the potential for relational conflict in your life this week, even this day. So let's take this wisdom with us into this day. Let the wisdom from above revealed in this passage serve your soul, so that you might receive the grace that is revealed in this passage. So that you might avoid conflict with others by identifying sinful cravings. And if you initiate or participate in conflict, these verses will help you discern the cause of it so that you can humble yourself before God and acknowledge your sin to him and those you have sinned against.

Passages like this protect us from sinful cravings and preserve unity in our churches, families, and friendships. Participation in a church, in a family, or in a friendship is not "all romance and righteousness." Therefore, I am grateful for passages like this and the difference they can make. And I am most grateful for the Savior's sacrifice on the cross for our sins, that we might have hope for the resolving of human conflict.

6

A CULTURE OF JOY

Worship God Conference 2016

To attend a church led by C.J. is to experience an unusually happy congregation. And to have an interaction or conversation with C.J. is to encounter an unusually happy Christian. Creating a culture of joy begins with pastors, who are commanded to serve the Lord with gladness, not under compulsion but willingly. One of the pronounced evidences of grace in C.J.'s life is that, through trials and sorrow of many kinds, including being mistreated by many, his joy in the Lord has remained strong and has even grown deeper over the years. Joy is one of the Shaping Virtues of Sovereign Grace Churches. The pastors of Sovereign Grace want to intentionally prioritize the cultivation of joy in our lives and in the churches we serve. The following teaching from 1 Peter 5 focuses on addressing a group of pastors and wives, but has broad application for all Christians.

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

(1 Peter 5:1–4)

2

According to Peter's instruction to pastors in 1 Peter 5, it is strikingly evident that motives for ministry matter to God. Pastoral

ministry involves not only the task of shepherding and the faithful proclamation of the gospel. Peter also gives attention to the manner in which we carry out this task. It is possible to be devoted to this sacred task, to be diligent about this sacred task, to be competent in this sacred task, but fail in our service of the church because our motivation for this task was not pleasing to God.

In order to protect us from this plight, Peter provides us with a series of three contrasts. And we would be wise to pay careful attention to them and let them perform their gracious sanctifying work in our hearts. And this afternoon, I just want to draw your attention to the first exhortation and command, as most relevant to our topic: shepherd the flock of God, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you.

The Worn Out Pastor

It would appear that some who were at one time willingly serving are now reluctant to serve. They are less enthusiastic about serving in this role. Given the occasion of this letter in relation to suffering and escalating persecution, perhaps that is the explanation for their diminished motivation for the shepherding role and tasks. This exhortation is particularly relevant for pastors who are serving in countries where opposition to the gospel and persecution because of the gospel is a daily, harsh reality that can involve physical violence, imprisonment, and even death for one's faith. Peter Davids in his commentary observes that the elders would presumably work long hours and be the first targets of persecution, both of which could quench their desire to continue.[34] And certainly, any pastor serving

34. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 177–178.

in this kind of context has our deepest respect and admiration.

But it's not just overt opposition and persecution that can dampen and diminish willingness in pastoral ministry. There are numerous experiences and circumstances that can wear down the heart of a once willing pastor, reducing his heart to obligatory and joyless service. For example, weekly sermon preparation is a repetitive task that over time can cease to be a joy and instead come a burdensome work—work that a pastor no longer looks forward to, no longer marvels that they have the privilege to prepare a message to preach to the local church. Weekly preaching can be tiring, particularly if those you are serving don't seem to be particularly attentive or responsive to your preaching. There's something about repetitive tasks in pastoral ministry that can leave pastors vulnerable and take a toll on the heart of a once excited pastor.

When someone you have been counseling and caring for—pouring your life into them, devoting weekly meetings with them—does not seem to make consistent progress in their understanding and application of the gospel, over time that can wear on one's soul. Caring for those who are suffering can wear down the soul of a once willing pastor. The pastor can find himself not wanting to look at his email because he is afraid of what he will discover, what he will read, and what it will require.

When a friend or a trusted staff member—someone who has served at your side for years, someone you assumed would be there for the entire run—when they abruptly and unexpectedly inform you that they are leaving the church, it breaks your heart. They leave because they are offended, and they leave slandering you and the church. So you've invested years of service in them, and this is

what you receive from them in return.

These are the kinds of experiences that can wear down the soul of a once happy pastor. It is possible over time to lose the wonder and the joy of being called to pastoral ministry. It normally happens slowly and imperceptibly, but eventually you drive to work under compulsion. You actually begin to look like everyone else driving to work. And perhaps you've begun even to wonder what it would be like to have a different job. You just start to fantasize about what it would be like to do something different. You find yourself no longer amazed that you have been called by the Chief Shepherd to shepherd the flock of God. In his excellent commentary on 1 Peter, Tom Schreiner writes, "Those who serve only because they feel they must will lose their joy. And the church will suffer as a consequence."[35]

Glad Volunteers

We are commanded to shepherd the flock of God, not under compulsion, but willingly. The word "willingly" is used in the Old Testament for free and voluntary service. Those who serve willingly embrace God's will eagerly and gladly. It speaks of an inclination of the heart that doesn't begrudge responsibility but instead embraces responsibility freely.

In J.N.D. Kelly's commentary, he writes "Elders are to serve, not for their own satisfaction in the job, but as glad volunteers in God's service."[36] I love that phrase. "Glad volunteers." Edmond Hiebert says, "like a volunteer who delights in doing the work."[37] So pastor,

35. Thomas R. Schreiner, 1, *2 Peter, Jude: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 234.
36. J.N.D. Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: A. and C. Black, 1969), 201.
37. David Edmond Hiebert, *First Peter* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), 285.

let me ask, Are you a glad volunteer? Do you delight in doing the work, or do you do it simply because it is your job? We are called to be glad volunteers. We are commanded to be glad volunteers. We are commanded to serve the Lord with gladness in our pastoral role and responsibility.

By the way, this is just a common call of the people of God. All Christians are to "serve the Lord with gladness" (Ps. 100:2). Charles Spurgeon writes, "Our happy God should be worshiped by a happy people; a cheerful spirit is in keeping with his nature, his acts and the gratitude which we should cherish for his mercies."[38] Pastors are to model this. Our service is to be joyful. We are to serve as glad volunteers. The writer of Hebrews makes clear that leaders are to serve with joy and not groaning. So faithfulness to the task of pastoral ministry is important, but it is not sufficient in order to please God and effectively serve the church. Our service must be done willingly. It must be done joyfully. It must be done gladly.

I would argue that most tasks can be done effectively without the presence of gladness or joy. You can be a competent dentist without being a happy dentist. I'm not choosing my dentist based on whether they are happy or not, whether they are cheerful or not, whether they're glad or not. No, here I want a competent dentist, Okay? I wanna walk into the office, and I wanna see all kinds of diplomas on the wall. That's what I want. And then I want the legal limit of anesthesia. Every time I go in, that's what I want. I don't care if the dentist is cheerful, and it's actually not my preference if the dentist talks to me. It's always struck me as odd that with my mouth open and implements that are sharp, dentists want to have

38. Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume 2* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), 233.

a conversation! If you're a dentist, I don't get that.

I had my car worked on recently. I don't go asking people, *"Do you know a happy mechanic? Do you know anybody who works on cars who's cheerful?"* I don't care if they're cheerful or not! We needed a plumber recently. I'm not asking people, *"Do you know a happy plumber? A cheerful one?"* These tasks can all be done competently without joy and without gladness. Most specialties don't require joy. They just require skill. But not pastoral ministry. Pastoral ministry requires more than faithfulness, more than diligence, more than competence—not less, but more. Pastoral ministry that pleases the Chief Shepherd and reflects the Chief Shepherd must be done joyfully and willingly.

And by the way, this isn't simply Peter's preference. This is the command of God. Note verse 3, "As God would have you." God would have us serve in this way because of who he is and what he's done for us through the person and work of his Son. And in light of the task that he has graciously called us to, God wants happy pastors. Any other kind of pastor misrepresents the Chief Shepherd who has called us to shepherd the flock of God.

The Priority of Joy

So creating a culture of joy in your church begins with a pastor who has a theologically informed conviction about serving the church with joy. So let me ask you my fellow pastor, Do you have a conviction—a theologically-informed conviction rooted in texts like this and others—Do you have a conviction about the priority of joy in your job description as a pastor? Because this command should inform every aspect of our service. Be aware, my fellow pastor, that those you love and serve are studying you. They're

studying you up close and personal, and they are studying you from afar. What do they learn as they study you? What do they observe as they study you?

I encourage you to humbly conduct an evaluation. Would your wife describe you as consistently and truly glad to be a pastor? Would your children as they observe you describe your demeanor as joyful? Would your children say, "My dad is a happy pastor. My dad serves as a glad volunteer?" How about those you serve with: your pastoral team, your staff, your assistant? Would they describe you as a glad volunteer or would they describe you as busy, burdened, moody, easily irritated, often discouraged? Would the members of your church think of you and describe you as glad to be their pastor?

In *Lectures to My Students*, Charles Spurgeon makes the following recommendations for pastors. He writes, "I love a minister whose face invites me to make him my friend."[39] All of us need to ask ourselves, What does our face reveal? What does your face invite? Mr. Spurgeon goes on to write,

> *"No one knows what a smile and a hearty sentence may do. A man who is to do much with men must love them, and feel at home with them. An individual who has no geniality about him had better be an undertaker, and bury the dead, for he will never succeed in influencing the living. ...A man must have a great*

39. C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students, Book I* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 183.

heart if he would have a great congregation."[40]

So I want to make three simple recommendations on creating a culture of joy in the church. These recommendations apply to pastors and to all Christians: *1) Preach the gospel to yourself, 2) Identify evidences of grace, and 3) Express your gratefulness.*

1. Preach the Gospel to Yourself

Each and every day, we must preach the gospel to ourselves. I'm not aware of a more important practice for the cultivation of joy in one's life. In verse 1 of 1 Peter 5, Peter reminds these elders that he is a witness of the sufferings of Christ. In fact, he has been reminding them of the gospel throughout this letter: 1:11, 2:21, 3:18, 4:1, 4:13. Peppered throughout this letter are references to the gospel because Peter's glad service was rooted in the gospel. And this is where a pastor must go when we need a fresh impartation of joy for the pastoral task.

Joy is not rooted in one's temperament. It's not rooted in one's circumstances. Joy is the fruit and effect of the gospel. There is no more joy-inducing topic than the gospel, and joy dissipates in the heart of a pastor when the gospel is assumed or neglected. John Piper warns pastors, "The greatest threat to your ministry, dear brothers, is that you lose your joy in God."[41] And Piper draws our attention to the remedy when he writes, "Seek to see and feel the gospel as bigger as years go by rather than smaller."[42]

40. C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students, Book I* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 183.
41. This quote is from a message John Piper preached at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in January, 2014.
42. Desiring God, "Never Let the Gospel Get Smaller," March 17, 2009.

He continues,

> *"Our temptation is to think that the gospel is for beginners and then we go on to greater things. But the real challenge is to see the gospel as the greatest thing—and getting greater all the time. The gospel gets bigger when, in your heart: grace gets bigger; Christ gets greater; his death gets more wonderful; his resurrection gets more astonishing; the work of the Spirit gets mightier; the power of the gospel gets more pervasive; its global extent gets wider; your own sin gets uglier; the devil gets more evil; the gospel's roots in eternity go deeper; its connections with everything in the Bible and in the world gets stronger; and the magnitude of its celebration in eternity gets louder. So, keep this in mind:* Never let the gospel get smaller in your heart."[43]

Pray that it won't. Read solid books on it. Sing about it. Tell someone about it who is ignorant or unsure about it. Listen, if there is an absence of joy in our hearts—and there will be at times an absence of joy in our hearts—it reveals that the gospel has become smaller in our hearts. And when that takes place, the once joyful pastor becomes a professional pastor. Oh my, this frightens me—the potential that as I age, I could grow in competence and skill and I could maintain a certain diligence and faithfulness, and yet there'd be diminished joy in my heart. The potential that I could one day become a professional pastor is sobering and frightening to me.

So for the pastor, giving attention to the gospel in some form every day is not optional. My fellow pastor, this is simply not optional for us. For it is in reminding myself of the gospel

43. Desiring God, "Never Let the Gospel Get Smaller," March 17, 2009.

each day, that a certain gladness of heart is created—a gladness that is discernible to those I have the privilege to serve each day, beginning with my family. This discernible joy must be evident in your personal life.

Preaching the Gospel with Joy

This discernible joy also needs to be evident in your preaching. Again, please do not misunderstand, this isn't a personality type. You might not be as loud and obnoxious as I am, as expressive as I am. That's not the issue. If you'd meet my wonderful wife who I don't deserve, she is quiet, but it's not as if I am more joyful than her. So, I'm not appealing here for a particular expression of one's personality or temperament. But I am insisting that joy must not only be evident in our hearts personally, but discernible in our preaching as well. Preaching the gospel joyfully creates a culture of joy in your church.

Are you aware that those listening to you aren't just studying the content of your sermons? They're studying your heart. They are students of your heart and they are giving very careful attention to your heart, to your passions, and to your affections as you preach. So let me ask you, do you preach with gladness? Is joy a distinctive when you preach the gospel?

Don Carson said,

"If I have learned anything in 35 or 40 years of teaching, it is that students don't learn everything I teach them. What they learn is what I am excited about, the kinds of things I emphasize again and again and again and again. That had better be the gospel. If the gospel—even when you are orthodox—becomes something which you primarily assume, but what you are excited about is

what you are doing in some sort of social reconstruction, you will be teaching the people that you influence that the gospel isn't really all that important. You won't be saying that—you won't even mean that—but that's what you will be teaching. And then you are only a half a generation away from losing the gospel.

Make sure that in your own practice and excitement, what you talk about, what you think about, what you pray over, what you exude confidence over, joy over, what you are enthusiastic about is Jesus, the gospel, the cross."[44]

My fellow pastor, what you ultimately will transfer to your church is not simply what you teach, but what you are most excited about when you teach. And those listening to you perceive what excites you the most. They should perceive a unique joy whenever you preach the gospel, that isn't as present and distinctive in relation to other topics. We help create a culture of joy in our church when we are most excited about the gospel in our preaching.

The Hill Called Calvary

If we are to pursue and cultivate a culture of joy, the manner of our preaching must be joyful, and the content of our preaching must be the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have nothing new for you. I just want to appeal that you never assume those you serve have sufficient knowledge of the gospel or have somehow exhausted their need for the gospel. And remember, no sermon is truly a sermon without the gospel. J.I. Packer captures this very effectively when he writes, "The preachers' commission is to declare the whole counsel of God; but the cross is the centre of that counsel, and the Puritans knew that

44. From an unknown audio lecture that C.J. was listening to while driving in the car one day. He immediately pulled over and wrote it down.

the traveller through the Bible landscape misses his way as soon as he loses sight of the hill called Calvary."[45] So in each sermon, there must be a sighting of a hill called Calvary. From every text, in ways appropriate to the text and not imposed on the text, you and I have the privilege and joy of drawing people's attention to Calvary.

So your church should arrive each Sunday, anticipating this sighting. Your church should arrive knowing no matter what the text, no matter how seemingly obscure the text, at some point in this sermon, there will be a sighting of a hill called Calvary. In Philippians 3:1, Paul says, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you." I love that verse! That's the reflection of his intentional leadership: to write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. I think that verse should inform our service of the church. We, brothers, are not called to innovate. We're just called to preach the same things. We are called to proclaim the gospel to those we serve. We are called to rehearse the gospel with those we love. We are called to apply the gospel and the ethical implications of the gospel to their lives.

Early on, I informed the wonderful church that I presently serve that we are a same-things church. I said, "We're a same-things church. We are not gonna try to impress you with new things and we will never tire of this." This should be no trouble for us as pastors. And by doing this, by being a same-things church, thecongregation will be safe and joyful.

45. J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 286.

2. Identify Evidences of Grace

Pastors create a culture of joy in the church when they serve the church by identifying evidences of grace in the church. We must discern how God is at work in the church, draw attention to these diverse evidences of grace, and celebrate each and every evidence of grace in the church.

Now, I find Paul's example of this practice compelling, particularly in relation to the Corinthian church. Years ago I did a careful study of his example, and that study changed my life. And I can say with no exaggeration or hyperbole that from the time of that study, Paul's example informs my pastoral ministry each and every day. I am sure you are aware, the church in Corinth was in serious need of correction. And yet, Paul can write with sincerity and not as a mere, polite formality, in 1 Corinthians 1:4–7, "I give thanks to my God always for you, because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift."

Those are remarkable words. Paul's view of this church, greatly in need of correction, was informed by his awareness of the grace of God in Christ at work in this church. So Paul discerned genuine evidences of grace in a church that was needing much correction. He had a divine perspective of the church.

When you think of your church, what comes to mind? Which are you more aware of: evidences of grace or areas of deficiency? It is our privilege and joy to emulate Paul's compelling example. The common temptation and tendency that one never outgrows or matures beyond is the temptation and tendency to be preoccupied

with areas of weakness and deficiency in the church. Our evaluation of our churches must be informed by a divine perspective of the church.

And this will make all the difference in your leadership of your church. All the difference! Any evaluation of your church must begin with an awareness and appreciation of evidences of grace. Because if you are a gospel proclaiming pastor, God is at work in your church. There's just no question about it! God is at work. My concern and my question is, *Do you perceive how God is at work in your church?* Because we create and cultivate a culture of joy in the church by drawing attention to how God is at work in the church.

The Fruit and the Gifts of the Spirit

And if this hasn't been a practice in relation to your church, and you're wondering how to get started, here's my recommendation: freshly familiarize yourself with the divinely inspired lists in Scripture of the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. Study these lists and the details that are specified in these lists, and then look up from your Bible and carefully study those you have the privilege of serving. And here's what you're gonna discover. Pastor, it's gonna be a happy discovery for you! You are going to discover that God is at work all over the place in ways you have not noticed.

These two categories of the fruit and gifts of the Spirit should inform our leadership of the church. They should inform each and every gathering. They should inform the daily life of the local church. This is a great gig, okay? Here's what we get to do—and we get paid to do this! I mean, I could argue this is scandalous. We have the privilege and joy of discerning where God is at work in the hearts and lives of those we love and serve. Then we have the

privilege and joy of drawing their attention to the different ways God is at work. And then we celebrate these evidences of grace in their lives. We do so through words, and we leave behind a joyful soul, which eventually results in a culture of joy in our church.

See, in my experience, many Christians live largely unaware that God is at work in their lives. Too many Christians are primarily aware of temptation. They are aware of sin. They are aware of trials. They are more aware of temptation, sin, and trials than they are of grace. And the evidences of grace that are in their lives are often not obvious to them. God's work in our lives is always merciful, and to some degree miraculous, but it's not always obvious. It is not always sensational or spectacular. And theologically uninformed Christians tend to think that if God is at work in their lives, then it will be sensational—it would be a crisis experience of some kind. They often lack a broad understanding of the person and work of the Spirit in their lives.

Gordon Fee helpfully describes Paul's perspective of the Spirit's power when he writes the following: "In Paul, power is not to be thought of merely in terms of the miraculous and the extraordinary. ...Paul understood the Spirit's power in the broadest possible way."[46] Oh my, that'll change your life! Because in your church each Sunday, there is a diverse manifestation of grace as your church gathers. In your church, the fruit of the Spirit is present and evident. The gifts of the Spirit are everywhere.

When someone is convicted of sin, that is God at work in their lives. When someone is trusting God in the midst of severe suffering, God is at work in their lives. When someone who serves,

46. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8.

serves consistently and joyfully, that is in evidence that God is at work in their lives. When someone is giving joyfully, consistently, and with a certain sacrifice involved, that is an evidence that God is at work in their lives. When someone is listening to Scripture being read or a sermon preached and they experience the gift of illumination, that is God at work in their lives. When there is incremental growth in godliness, God is at work in their lives.

The Smallest Measures of Grace

The Puritan Christopher Love captured this wonderfully in his book, *Grace: The Truth, Growth, and Different Degrees*. He says, "God exactly takes notice of, tenderly cherishes, and graciously rewards the least beginnings and the smallest measures of grace in the hearts of his people."[47] Oh, don't you want to imitate God?! Don't you want to take notice of the least beginnings? Don't you want to discern the smallest measures of grace in the hearts of those you have the privilege to serve? Christian, model this for your church! Pastors, teach your church to discern and celebrate evidences of grace.

Listen, it was this discernment of God's work in their midst that created Paul's affection for this church and appreciation of evidences of grace in this church. This then informed his exercise of authority toward this church. Divine perspective made all the difference. And I'm just saying, if Paul can do that in relation to the Corinthian church, Christian, you can discover evidences of grace in your church. And if you discover them and draw attention to them and celebrate them—Oh my!—it will create a culture

47. Christopher Love, *Grace: The Truth, Growth, and Different Degrees* (London: W. Baynes and W. Button, 1810), 66. The old english of the original quote has been updated.

of joy in your church. Because when you identify evidences of grace, then your church comes aware of the gracious God who is at work in your church rather than continuously aware of areas of deficiency within the church. Areas of deficiency must still be addressed, but we can address those areas of deficiency with faith and in hope, because we are already identifying and celebrating that God is at work.

Do you know what I've seen countless times by drawing attention to evidences of grace and at times having to repeatedly draw attention to evidences of grace and drawing attention through carefully crafted words that encourage and impart grace? I can leave you and leave behind an edified, happy soul. Not superficially happy. Not flattering. No, God is at work in your life! Are you aware of how he is at work in your life? And are you celebrating that God is at work in every gospel proclaiming church?

What we ask for right now, Lord, is that you give us eyes to see. That's what I pray for all of us: give us eyes to see how you're at work so that we might draw people's attention to how you're at work, celebrate them and ultimately assign all glory to you.

3. Express Gratefulness

Finally, you create a culture of joy in your church when you express your gratefulness for the church. I commend to you again a study of Paul's letters, because Paul assigned a high priority to gratefulness. In private prayer he gave thanks to God for individuals in churches. And then he expressed that gratefulness to individuals publicly in written form. And he no doubt did the same when he was with a church in person. Apart from the Lord, I don't think there was a more grateful man than Paul. In *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, we read, "Paul mentions the subject of thanksgiving in his letters more often, line for line, than any other Hellenistic author, pagan or Christian."[48]

So what would it be like to encounter Paul? To encounter Paul was to observe and experience a compelling example of gratefulness to God for the Savior, gratefulness to God for those he served, and gratefulness of God for the evidences of grace he discerned in their lives. So let me ask you, pastor, what's it like to observe and interact with you? Is it evident in your pastoral ministry that you assign a high priority to the communication of gratefulness? Is gratefulness a dominant category in your leadership? Paul's gratitude was sincere, pronounced, and theologically informed. Peter O'Brien notes that "Paul's introductory thanksgivings were not meaningless devices. Instead, they were integral parts of their letters, setting the tone and the themes of what was to follow."[49] So let me ask again, is gratefulness a priority in your life? Are you modeling this for your family and your church? If not, here's what I recommend: spend concentrated

48. Ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 69.
49. Peter T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 263.

time studying this theme, particularly in the life and leadership of Paul. And you're gonna discover the life-transforming relevance of this topic for your soul and ministry.

If you don't assign a high priority to gratefulness, you'll be vulnerable to the sin of complaining. And complaining pastors are not happy pastors, and they don't create a culture of joy in the church they serve. So the cultivation and practice of gospel-informed gratefulness makes all the difference in creating a culture of joy. Think of how you can apply this in your role and responsibilities. Think of how you can apply this in your preaching. There are times, particularly when the sermon text naturally lends itself to this, that you should be able to turn from the passage to your congregation and communicate your gratefulness to God for them, and they should know those experiences in the midst of the preaching event.

It's not difficult to discern the difference between a grateful pastor and a critical pastor when you're listening to a sermon. So Paul's letters are just peppered with these expressions of gratefulness to God for those he served, and where and when appropriate, our sermons should be peppered with them as well.

In 1 Thessalonians alone, three times in that letter he is specifically expressing his gratefulness to God for them. At one point he says, "I simply cannot thank God enough for you"—"For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?" (1 Thess. 3:9) Paul actually would express this gratefulness to the church in Colossae, even though he'd never even been there. That's how dominant this category was in this life.

So, is the communication of gratefulness by you a common experience for those in your church? We have countless reasons to do so. It really shouldn't be difficult for us. Most of us have much more to be grateful for than we are aware of. And here's what I can tell you: if you want your little starter kit, just be grateful they came back! I'm serious. You should just be grateful, and to some degree amazed on Sunday, they're back! They not only came back, they're serving again. And, they gave again. They came back, they're serving, they gave. God is at work in your church and you should be overwhelmed by gratefulness!

You should be overwhelmed because they came back, even though you are preaching! Think about that. That's what's really amazing about them coming back: you were the one who preached last week, and they know you're the one whose gonna preach this week! Charles Spurgeon said, "If some men were sentenced to hear their own sermons, it would be a righteous judgment upon them. And they would soon cry out with Cain, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'"[50] Well, pastor, take that with you!

You should also be grateful that they stay awake while you're preaching. I came across something in a footnote that I find a great encouragement. Listen to this: a number of years go in a sermon entitled "When the Spirit of God has been remarkably poured out, a thorough reformation of those things that were before amiss amongst them ought to be the effect of it." That's Jonathan Edwards, the title of his sermon. In this sermon, Edwards speaks against sleeping in church and he urges "that persons would avoid laying down their bodies in their seats, in the midst of public worship"!

50. C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students, Book II* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 28.

Well, is that going on in your church? I mean, have people just been stretching out to sleep? Most likely not. So you got something to be grateful for! I'm grateful that most Sundays, at least people are making an effort to stay awake. And when I look out, there's not people making room, moving chairs, and lying down.

We have so much to be grateful for. It's a dominant category in Paul's leadership. I pray that it becomes a dominant category in ours as well. Let's strive to create a culture of joy by preaching the gospel to ourselves and others with joy, by identifying evidences of grace in the church, and by regularly expressing gratefulness for the church. And by God's grace, may our happy God be worshipped by a happy people!

7

THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH

Celebration East 2003

C.J. has served many Sovereign Grace churches on Sunday mornings over the years. At times he served churches by bringing this message from Hebrews 13:17, originally preached at a Celebration Conference in 2003. C.J. had learned the priority of the local church, and desires members and pastors in Sovereign Grace churches to experience their local church as the happiest place on earth. Behind this sermon was C.J.'s love for the local church, and his concern that Christians tend to esteem guest speakers, conference preachers, and popular authors more highly than their local pastors. His desire was always to strengthen local churches, and to deepen the love and solidarity between church members and pastors. This sermon also shows the value of pastoral leadership, and the blessing pastors and church members experience in devoting themselves to a particular local church for the long haul.

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

(Hebrews 13:17)

2

It is doubtful that many present here today have ever heard of John Fawcett. John Fawcett was born in 1739. He was converted

through the preaching of George Whitefield. And at the age of 26, he was ordained a Baptist minister. In 1777, he became the pastor of a church in an obscure, impoverished village named Wainsgate, located in Northern England. He opened a school for preachers. He wrote a number of books on practical Christianity, and in 1811 Brown University in the United States awarded him a doctorate in light of his accomplishments.

After pastoring at Wainsgate for several years, with a small salary and a growing family, he received an offer to pastor a much larger and more influential church in London. The Fawcett's packed and prepared for the move. The story has been told as follows: "As the day for the scheduled departure from Wainsgate arrived, with the saddened parishioners gathered around the wagons, Mrs. Fawcett broke down and said…". What did she say?

I want you to picture this scene with me. There's a godly pastor and his wife, there's a horse drawn wagon filled to overflowing, there's a saddened congregation gathered around them. What would you expect Mr. Fawcett's wife to say in this moment? What would you expect him to say? Well, at the conclusion of this message, I will tell you what they said. And I trust that it's relevance to this message will be particularly apparent to you at that time.

Pastoral Leadership in Hebrews 13

Hebrews 13 is filled with important and specific exhortations and application. The writer of this letter is aware that, apart from very specific personal and corporate application, the previous profound 12 chapters of this inspired letter will not have their intended effect. It's also obvious that this writer understands the vital role of leadership in the plan and the purpose of God. For in this very

brief concluding chapter, we have three references to leaders: verse 7, verse 17, and verse 24.

In the context of the local church, the writer of this letter not only understands the vital role of pastoral leadership, he understands the critical relationship between the congregation and leaders. And in verse 17 we encounter both. We encounter both in verse 17, although I submit to you that the undeniable emphasis in this verse is not the vital role of leaders, but the responsibility of the congregation to the pastoral team. The effectiveness of pastoral leadership is dependent upon a response to pastoral leadership.

There are three points that I want to draw to your attention today from this verse: *1) The role of leaders, 2) The responsibility of church members, and 3) The relationship between leaders and church members.*

From the outset, I don't want anyone here to misunderstand: this is not a corrective word. One of the joys of bringing this word to your attention is that it actually gives me an opportunity to commend you, not correct you. Now, given the number of people assembled here, I'm sure it has, to differing degrees, some corrective application. We should all assume God's Word has some corrective application to us this morning, but primarily it is an opportunity to commend you and to encourage you to excel still more.

1. The Role of Leaders

We begin with the vital role of leaders. It would appear that the original recipients of this letter had experienced the recent death of some significant and impressive leaders. In verse 7 the writer exhorts them to "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God," to "Consider the outcome of their way of life,

and imitate their faith." This seems to be a reference to leaders now having gone on to glory. In verse 8, there are these wonderful words of comfort, as he reminds the original recipients that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever"— a particular comfort with the possible recent passing of leaders who were so exemplary and so influential.

And then in verse 17, we have this command to obey existing leaders. So one must not isolate verse 8 from either verse 7 or verse 17. The vital role of leaders is clearly emphasized here. Yes, undoubtedly Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, but that does not make leaders optional or non-essential, for that same Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever has provided leaders for the church as his under shepherds.

Attention is drawn to leaders who have passed from the scene, possibly because there might be a temptation among the original recipients to compare present leaders unfavorably with past leaders, particularly past leaders who were impressive and exemplary. So there is not only the reminder of Jesus Christ being the same yesterday, today, and forever, but also an exhortation that they obey their leaders and that they submit to the authority God has delegated to them.

Keeping Watch

In verse 17, we have a brief but rich description of the role and function of pastors: "for they are keeping watch over your souls." Good and godly leaders effectively watch over the souls of those entrusted to their care. And I want to commend the Sovereign Grace pastors present, because they excel in watching over your souls.

Watching, in fact, forms a primary practice for pastors. We are commanded to watch our life and doctrine closely, 1 Timothy 4:16. And I want to remind you today that we take this most seriously in Sovereign Grace Churches. We are called as pastors to watch our life and our doctrine closely. And we are to watch over each other at the pastoral level. In Acts 20:28, Paul addresses the elders of the church in Ephesus and exhorts them, "Keep watch over yourselves; pay careful attention to yourselves." And that's how we function as pastors and as pastoral teams. We don't just work together. We watch over each other.

And then finally, in our passage today, "for they are keeping watch over your souls." This phrase is not an exhaustive description of the role and responsibility of a pastor, but it is a most important aspect of pastoral ministry: watching over your souls.

Now at first reading, being watched might not be immediately appealing to you. That is understandable! Being watched is often not our preference. While driving one day, I noticed in my rear view mirror, a police cruiser directly behind me. And I don't know why—I'm sure there is some sinful reason why that I've yet to discover—but there's always that momentary panic. But I don't wanna let on that I'm afraid. So I try to remain cool. *I'm fine. I'm under the speed limit.* Through a series of turns, I noticed that with each turn, he was still there, very close behind me. It ended up, really, that I was going like 15 miles per hour in a 65 mile per hour zone. I was so intimidated by this police cruiser following me, and it appears he was for some reason watching me.

I didn't enjoy that whole lengthy segment of driving where my hands were positioned at 10 and 2 on the wheel. I was probably more prone to an accident because I was spending so much time

studying the speedometer rather than the road—constantly looking in the rearview mirror, wondering what this was about, reviewing my past life, confessing all recent sins. I don't like being watched like that! But listen—when we read "watch" in this passage, it bears no resemblance to that kind of watching and being watched.

Our souls need watching. Your soul and my soul needs the caring and watchful eye of a godly pastor. If you aren't convinced, let me give just a sampling of reasons from Hebrews, for your consideration.

Reasons We Need to be Watched

Number one, our souls need to be watched because of the continued presence and influence of remaining sin. Sin is subtle. Sin is active. Sin is pervasive. And so in Hebrews 12:1, we are exhorted, "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely." So the continued presence of indwelling sin and remaining sin is why we need our souls watched by caring and godly pastors.

Number two, the deceitfulness of sin. Not only the *presence* of sin, but the *deceitfulness* of sin. Hebrews 3:13 commands us to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Sin is deceptive. I need, and you need, the caring and discerning eye of pastors, for so often I am blind to that which is obvious to others.

Number three would be the possibility of drifting, and this is a primary concern of the writer of this letter. So in Hebrews 2:1 we read, "Therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." Hebrews is really about the importance of perseverance and the possibility of drifting. Pastoral care is a means of imparting God's preserving grace so that we

might persevere.

Pastors are called to watch over our souls, and they do so through the Sunday celebration, through teaching, and through small groups. They do so through prayer, hospitality, personal care, personal correction, discipleship, encouragement, and church discipline. These are all means of watching over our souls. And, please don't misunderstand—this "watching" isn't restricted to or primarily about the identification of sin. Watching over souls primarily involves alerting people to evidences of grace in their lives. Pastoral ministry in Scripture and in Sovereign Grace Churches is about identifying evidences of grace and alerting Christians to where God is active in their lives.

Even in the conviction of sin, faithful pastors will want to help church members discern where and how God is at work in their hearts and lives. That's our passion and purpose as pastors. Our passion and purpose is not to convict you of sin, it is to convince you of the amazing grace of God.

So it is the privilege and responsibility of your pastoral team to watch over your soul. And, it is your soul that is most important to them. The writer of this letter intentionally uses the word "soul" here, because the soul is the main concern of a caring and godly pastor. The language of "soul" draws our attention to that which is of eternal importance and significance. See, the concern of faithful pastors is not primarily with the present, but with the future. The concern of your pastors is to prepare your soul today for that final day.

We are prone to neglect this perspective of our souls. We are prone to neglect this eternal perspective of the future. We are prone to neglect this perspective, and your pastors are given as

gifts from the ascended Christ to remind you of this perspective and to care for your soul, as those whom will give an account. Your pastors have a very unique role and responsibility. And I think a most appropriate way to end this conference is to take these few moments to remind you of their unique role and responsibility.

Esteeming Local Pastors

You might not be aware of the invaluable contribution your pastor has made to your experience at this conference, because your pastor probably hasn't spoken at this conference. And I am very jealous this morning that your local pastors receive your deepest respect and appreciation. And I know that resonates in your hearts! I have a concern that you not ascribe exaggerated significance to either me or any other conference speaker. The Bible tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5 that we are to hold those who are over us in the Lord, who labor among us in the Lord, in the highest regard in love, because of their work. Here's what I want to build into Sovereign Grace Churches: I thank God for guest speakers, I want us to hold guest speakers in high regard, but I never want us to hold guest speakers in the highest regard.

I want us to hold local pastors in the highest regard. I often find that there is an enthusiasm about conference speakers and various authors, that I think is exaggerated and misplaced. I think we all have this temptation and tendency to hold those in the highest regard who aren't among us. We grow overly familiar with those who are among us. And then we misplace our appreciation, instead identifying with those who we have little or no contact with. I exhort you to hold your own pastors in the highest regard.

This is not some kind of sentimental exhortation. I can tell you right now, conferences are a context for reaping, but too often when we reap, it's too easy to forget about those who sow. Because reaping is dramatic. Reaping is very obvious. Reaping is normally public. Sowing is not dramatic. It is done in obscurity. It is done consistently. And so it is too easy for us, when we reap an experience in the context of Celebration East, to forget all those who have prepared our hearts for years for that experience and to think of that experience divorced from all those who have served us. This extends beyond pastors. We must thank God for parents and small group leaders and friends.

In Sovereign Grace Churches, the highest regard should be reserved, not for famous guest speakers. I want it to be directed toward those unknown on the national scene—local pastors, your pastor. After the Small Group Leaders Conference in November of last year, I received a rich word of encouragement in the midst of much encouragement. A man came up to me from another Sovereign Grace church, and he said, "You know what? I enjoy hearing you once a year, but you're no..." and then he named his local pastor. I immediately rejoiced as tears filled my eyes and I said to him, "You are exactly right. I do not play in his league. Thank you for recognizing and holding your local pastor in the highest regard." I told him that I will receive no more meaningful encouragement at this conference than what he just said.

There should be nobody you are more enthusiastic about hearing in the preaching experience than your pastor. Because there's nobody you know better. There's nobody whose example you're more aware of. There's nobody who cares for you more. There

should be more faith for your pastor next Sunday than there was faith for any guest speaker at this conference or any conference in the future. There must be appropriate appreciation directed toward your local pastors—their role is vital.

2. The Responsibility of Church Members

When it comes to the responsibilities of church members, the Bible has much to say. Every member plays an important role in the life and mission of the church. We are all called to a shared life together, experiencing fellowship, caring for each other, and serving one another. Church members are involved in welcoming new members, evaluating and affirming elder candidates, holding fast to sound doctrine, and maintaining unity and love in the church.

But there is one responsibility that is often neglected or minimized. Look with me again in verse 17, at the opening phrase: "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Obey and submit. Now, listen, your pastor is understandably reluctant to preach from this passage. To preach from this passage can appear self-serving. And there are many pastors who are very aware that this is a most unappealing passage to the average American evangelical. And so they avoid this passage, or if they do preach on this passage, they make so many qualifying statements about it that they actually weaken the intended content and effect of this passage.

And you need to know, your pastors didn't ask me to preach on this passage. So in the weeks prior to Celebration, I wasn't getting emails and phone calls from people—"Hey, could you put in a word for us? Could you please say something to them about us?" It's not like your pastors are sensitive souls. "When is somebody

gonna honor me? Nobody's ever made a video of me or my life."

This isn't a verse your pastors are eager to preach. I doubt you've ever heard your pastors preach on this. If they did choose the book of Hebrews, they certainly wouldn't isolate this first. They are reluctant to preach it. The good news is, I'm not reluctant to preach this passage. It is my privilege to preach this passage. This passage needs to be preached, and ideally, preached by somebody who isn't your immediate pastor. So I'm preaching today unapologetically. And I know I'm preaching to responsive people who appreciate having their attention drawn to this passage so that you can excel still more at obeying and applying this passage.

But let us recognize, if you survey the religious landscape—and I'm sure it's applicable to differing degrees here today—that many evangelicals would be uncomfortable with this language: "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Many are uncomfortable with this language. But do you know what I find interesting? The Scriptures aren't uncomfortable with this language. If we find ourselves uncomfortable with this language, could I appeal that you take some time to examine why? If you are uncomfortable, if you find this abrupt, if you find this harsh, if you find there's some reaction to this and it's an unfavorable reaction, examine why.

Now there are a number of reasons that exist as possibilities. It could be that you're just unaware of teaching related to biblical authority. Or, it could be a sinful response. Or—and this breaks my heart to consider—it could be because you have had a bad past experience, where in a church context you regretfully experienced authoritarian leadership. And if that's making some contribution to your unfavorable reaction to this passage, I just want you to know I am sorry that has been your experience. And I want you to

know that by God's grace, we will strive to ensure that is not your experience in a Sovereign Grace church.

A Few Qualifying Statements

I want to make some qualifying statements about the nature, extent, and purpose of pastoral authority. I think these statements are necessary and appropriate given the topic and given the potential for misunderstanding. I am going to make these qualifying comments briefly and quickly. And it is my hope that these qualifying statements not weaken the content of this passage. I hope instead, they position you to understand and apply this passage. Because that's my role and responsibility this morning: to impress upon you the content and the claim of this text and not distract you from the clear teaching of this text. So I hope this contributes to that and doesn't distract from it.

I don't have time to elaborate on these, but I hope they prove helpful. *Number one*, the passion of your pastor and pastoral team is that you love and obey the Chief Shepherd, the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is their passion and their purpose. They didn't die for your sins! But it is their passion to draw your attention to the one who did. That is what motivates your pastors as they lead you, serve you, care for you, and watch over your souls.

Number two, their authority is derived from Scripture. Their authority should never be confused with the authority of Scripture. Your obedience and submission to Scripture is absolute. Your obedience and submission to your pastor or pastoral team is not absolute. However, because of this clear command in Hebrews 13:17 and elsewhere, your appropriate obedience to leadership is ultimately an expression of your submission to Scripture and not

in contradiction to the authority and content of Scripture.

Number three, their authority is defined by Scripture as well. It's not only derived from Scripture; it's defined by Scripture. Their sphere of ministry involves teaching God's Word, directing the affairs of the church, and watching over your souls. And I want to assure you this morning that they understand the nature, the extent, and the purpose of pastoral authority.

Number four, normally they lead you as a plurality of pastors. Now there are other situations such as church plants where that doesn't exist immediately, but it is going to exist. Eventually they serve you and lead you as a plurality of pastors. Their authority is defined by Scripture, and that authority is exercised by a team of men. It is not located in a single leader.

And finally, *number five*, your pastors have no greater joy than to observe you walking in the truth (3 John 4).

Now, those are all important statements. Those are qualifying statements. It's important that you be informed by those statements, but it is equally important that none of those statements weaken this particular text, because obeying and submitting to godly pastors is a divinely imposed privilege and responsibility.

You are responsible as members of a local church to obey and submit to the leaders of the church as they teach God's Word, as they direct the affairs of the church, and as they watch over your souls. Obey your leaders and submit to them. This bears no resemblance to the response of a subordinate in the military. This is not the obedience of a child to a parent. But this is a very definite and specific submission and obedience that is being commanded here.

Responding to Godly Leadership

Let me just briefly describe what I think is the appropriate biblical response to godly leadership. *Number one*, there should be a joyful responsiveness to their doctrine in teaching. *Number two*, there should be a joyful inclination to comply with their methodology. *Number three*, there should be a joyful disposition to trust and protect your pastor and pastoral team. This means that any slanderous comment about your pastor or pastoral team should be challenged. Because what the enemy wants to do is to undermine the unity of a local church through slander as he sows suspicion about a pastor or pastoral team. You must protect your church from the enemy's success in sowing that suspicion over a lengthy period of time. *Number four*, there should be a joyful, consistent, participation in the meetings of the church. See, it's hard for your pastors to watch over your soul if you're not there. And I want to thank you for being a people who are committed to not neglecting gathering with the saints.

3. The Relationship Between Pastors and the Congregation

Having made a distinction between the role of pastors and the responsibility of church members, I just want to take a few moments in conclusion to impress upon you the nature of this relationship.

The effectiveness of pastoral leadership is in a sense dependent upon a proper response to pastoral leadership. The text says, "Let them do this"—lead, teach, direct affairs of the church, watch over your souls—"Let them do this with joy and not with groaning." And then I love this final phrase: "for that would be of no advantage to you." God wants happy pastors. He wants joyful pastors. Any other kind misrepresent him.

The religious landscape of American evangelicalism—I say this with great sadness—is filled with unhappy pastors in part because they do not know the encouragement, the obedience, the submission, and the support of their local congregations. That is a serious issue that hinders the body of Christ, the local church in particular, from being as effective as God intends. And I believe it grieves God as well. I want to thank you for your commitment to make your pastor happy. This is biblical. Every member, myself included, should ask themselves this question: *Am I a joy to pastor?* And by the way, don't confine your evaluation of this to yourself. We should be a little more suspicious. We should want to broaden the evaluation and participants. Consider asking your pastor, "Am I a joy to pastor? And if not, would you please tell me why not? Because I am submitted to Holy Scripture. And I want pastoring to be fun. Am I fun to pastor? Do I bring you joy?"

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the text says this is to your advantage. It's as if God is appealing to self-interest here. It is in fact just another illustration that God's commands are always for our good. If I bring my pastors joy, it will be to my benefit. And if we don't do that, it would be of no advantage. It's for your good. Ultimately, it will make the church more effective.

Biblical Leadership and Biblical Ministry

John MacArthur has pastored a large and influential church for many years. And at the 26th anniversary of his congregation, I read the following excerpt from an interview. He said, "People often ask me what I think is the secret to Grace Community Church's development over the past twenty-six years." He said, "I always point out, first of all, that God sovereignly determines

the membership of a church, and numbers alone are no gauge of spiritual success." How true and how wise! "However, the spiritual vitality of our church has been remarkable." So he's transitioning from numerical growth to spiritual vitality and listen to what he says. "I am convinced God's blessing has been on us primarily because our people have shown a strong commitment to biblical leadership and biblical ministry."[51]

That's a wise pastor. He's exactly right. He's in effect stating, I believe that God's blessing has been on this church because this church has put into practice Hebrews 13:17. And that is the secret explanation for not just the size but the fruitfulness and the influence of this particular church. The people have a strong commitment to biblical leadership and biblical ministry.

I submit to you that this would often be an overlooked evidence of grace in Sovereign Grace churches. And this would explain the fruitfulness of Sovereign Grace churches—the understanding and application of this passage, the strong commitment to biblical leadership and biblical ministry, the vital role of leaders and the convergence of the responsibility of church members with the vital role of leaders. Not just any pastors will do! We need pastors who care, who are godly. They qualify in character and gifting. They take seriously their responsibility, knowing that one day they will give an account. They watch over the souls of those allotted to their charge. And local congregations hold them in the highest regard, obeying them and submitting to them as they teach God's Word and as they direct the affairs of the church. And that combination leads to fruitfulness and effectiveness and influence.

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51. These quotes were later published in John MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry: How To Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), xiii. At that point, MacArthur references the past 35 years of the church.

What did Mrs. Fawcett say as she surveyed the gathered and saddened congregation on that sad day of their departure? Mrs. Fawcett said to her husband, "John, I cannot bear to leave. I know not how to go." And John responded, "Nor can I either." He then gave the order to unpack the wagons. And John Fawcett stayed with this simple church until he died on July 25th, 1817.

In one of the ensuing sermons, Fawcett shared the words to a hymn that he had composed—a hymn that has been meaningful to the church for two centuries. You might recognize this hymn. It was that pastor, John Fawcett, who wrote,

"Blessed be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."

When I read that, do you know what I thought of? I thought of your pastors. And I thought of your church. I thought of the pastors represented here, and I thought of the churches represented here. Mr. and Mrs. Fawcett represent the heart of your pastors and their wives toward you. Please understand, in Sovereign Grace we are committed to a mission, which at times does involve sacrifice and relocation. For various reasons, there will be times when pastors transition from one church to another. But we are looking for pastors who want to settle in a location and live there for a long time, Lord willing, and die there by the grace of God, laboring in one location. That's what we're looking for.

It was said of the Puritan pastors that they were looking for a place to settle. We're not looking for unsettled pastors. We're not looking to give pastors temporary assignments. No, we're looking

for pastors who want to settle. We're looking for pastors like John Fawcett. Obviously in the providence of God, at times it does involve relocation. But listen: for us in Sovereign Grace, that's the exception, not the norm.

As I grow old, I've got more stories. I was reflecting even this weekend on how in my early twenties, I found myself in a large conference context where I had the privilege to speak. And though I had to teach, whenever I was in private, I listened. I wanted to learn. These men were older than I was. They had built a movement, a family of churches. And I wanted to learn from them so that I could serve effectively in the future. And one thing I noticed as I returned to this conference, numerous times, was that so many people were in so many different locations each and every time I went. I think it was maybe the second or certainly the third time I participated in this conference, I'd never assume anymore that when I met somebody who I had previously interacted with that they were in the same geographical location. It was a movement that was passionately committed to mission. And for that, I applaud them and respect them and have learned from them. But their understanding of mission just involved continually moving pastors around. That movement doesn't exist anymore. It's gone.

Now, there are many reasons why, but one reason why, I think, is that pastors didn't make it a priority to settle. See, it was radical to go. But I would argue, it's more radical to stay. I think John Fawcett is as radical as any missionary you've ever read about. How radical is this?! "Unpack the wagons here. I will stay here." He didn't know then, but John Fawcett is having an effect on us today.

And you know what? I know that on that last day, one thing that's going to happen is that there will be a period of time where

John Fawcett and his congregation appear before the judgment seat of Christ. And John Fawcett and his wife are gonna boast about that congregation. Let me tell you what else is gonna happen. That congregation is gonna interrupt John Fawcett and boast about him and his wife. And it's almost as if this mass argument is gonna be erupting right before the Savior himself, as they honor one another back and forth. And the Savior will be there, seeing this wonderful fruit of his grace in the form of that pastor and his congregation. Can I tell you, I anticipate the same experience for you, your church, and your pastors? On that last day, I anticipate that when your church is called out and your pastor and pastoral team are called out, there will be the same eruption of joy.

And so I want to thank you. Thank you for making it a joy to pastor today. Thank you for giving your pastor something to anticipate on that last day. Thank you for obeying your leaders and submitting to them. They are keeping watch over your souls as those who have to give an account. I want to exhort you, as you return home: "Let them do this with joy not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

8

APPLICATION: PRESERVING OUR FUTURE

2005 Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference

In 2005, C.J. preached an important sermon for our pastors and wives on the role of application in our lives and leadership. Reviewing the history of this value in Sovereign Grace, C.J. exhorted us from James 1 to be doers of the Word, and cautioned us against drifting from this biblical priority. The application of God's Word to our lives has been an emphasis for our churches from the beginning, and by God's grace will continue to be a distinguishing feature of Sovereign Grace Churches long into the future. Near the end of the sermon, C.J. shared his concern for one particular application in our future, which has proved to be remarkably discerning: the transfer of biblical manhood and womanhood to the coming generation. C.J. closed the sermon with a passionate prayer for future generations, that God would preserve what has been built in Sovereign Grace Churches, for the glory of Christ alone.

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

(James 1:22–25)

In his commentary on the letter of James, Doug Moo says the following about James 1:22: "With this exhortation we find ourselves right at the heart of James's pastoral concern; and v. 22 is rightly the best-known verse in the letter."[52] This verse not only represents the heart of James' pastoral concern, it represents the heart of my pastoral concern for Sovereign Grace Churches this evening. Most importantly, this verse reflects God's kind concern for us and his wise command to us as pastors.

An Early Distinctive

Before we consider the relevance of this verse for the present or the future, I want to remind you of the historic significance of this passage to Sovereign Grace Churches. From the beginning, we have valued the grace-motivated application of God's truth to our lives. It forms a crucial part of the history of our churches, and continues by God's grace to be a distinctive of our churches.

There may be some in Sovereign Grace who are unaware of the role this emphasis has played in our history. So I'm going to seize this moment to review our history because I don't want to lose the distinctives of our past. We must remember them, and we must carry them into our future.

We are a family of churches with humble beginnings. There are men and women still in Sovereign Grace who joined us in the early years. And you have stayed. You have remained. You have persevered with us. And without these men and women there would be no story to tell. So please receive my gratefulness for

52. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 89.

the way you have served and the difference you have made. Your presence here is an evidence of God's preserving grace and his kindness to Sovereign Grace Churches.

A Context for Application

In 1975, I was twenty-one years old. I had the privilege of teaching at a Tuesday evening meeting called TAG, which stood for Take and Give. This ministry began during the Jesus Movement and it was unrelated to any local church. But over a seven-year period, our meetings were unusually blessed by God. I thank God for his kindness to us during those years. TAG unexpectedly grew, with attendance exceeding 2,000 each week.

But during this period of significant blessing, I found myself increasingly dissatisfied. As I preached at TAG and at other conferences and festivals, I was grateful for the blessings, but I was also troubled because these contexts for public proclamation were not accompanied by a context for personal and relational application. And during this season of time, I was increasingly captured by a vision for the local church.

I was certainly not alone in this growing vision. But as I read a description of the church in the book of Acts and a definition of the church in the letter to the Ephesians, I was increasingly convinced that the local church was the God-ordained context for the proclamation and application of the gospel. God was calling us to be doers of the Word, not hearers only.

And so in 1977, we did something unpopular and started a church. And later we did the unthinkable and ended TAG.

We wanted to build a local church. We wanted to provide pastoral care and create a context for application and accountability.

We wanted to grow in grace and godliness, while avoiding the deception that accompanies a mere hearing of truth.

A Humbling History

When I think back to our origins, I think there are many aspects of our origins that are worthy of consideration and emulation. I think there are even more that are worthy of humiliation.

Any review of our history should have a humbling effect. Such reviews are never to celebrate human leadership. I thank God for the vital role different individuals played in our history, but any review of our history is not to celebrate human leadership, but to celebrate the kindness and the grace of God.

God's kindness has been evident from our earliest days. He is the one who caused us to love his Word. Had you met any of us in 1973–1975, I think you would have observed in us a deep commitment to Holy Scripture. And I hope you still do. At the same time, you would have rightly perceived a certain ignorance about much of the content of Scripture! We were aware of our ignorance and we were concerned about it. We attended conferences and listened to sermon tapes and devoured books in order to grow in our understanding of Scripture. I don't view that period and that aggressive pursuit of conferences and teachers and counsel and reading of books as some impressive expression of humility on our part; it was simply an obvious necessity, given that the leadership had not received any formal theological training!

But God has been kind to us since our inception, to provide us with godly, discerning teachers and scholars who are not a part of Sovereign Grace, but are friends of our churches. And he's given us a smart guy of our own in Jeff Purswell.

I pray that this initial distinctive, this love for and commitment to Scripture, would be transferred to the next generation, and eventually transferred to a future generation that we won't be around to see. But our history involves a second distinctive as well. If you met us in 1977, you would have also noticed a passion for the application of truth and the cultivation of godliness in the context of personal relationships in the local church.

A Desire for the Churches

I have never been more concerned about the transfer of truth and the application of truth in Sovereign Grace. My concern is for the good of our churches, the future of our churches, and the glory of God in our churches.

Perhaps it's because I'm aging. I know I'm playing somewhere on the back nine. Or, perhaps I'm concerned because in my travels, I've been in settings where I've noticed a commendable and appropriate accent on sound doctrine, but a deficiency in relation to application.

Regardless of the origins of my concern, one thing is certain and history confirms this: *mere doctrinal orthodoxy alone won't preserve Sovereign Grace Churches*. This is not to minimize the importance of doctrinal definition and precision. But the health of our future also demands the pursuit of a vigorous, consistent application of truth.

That is my concern this evening. My concern is the erroneous assumption that doctrine alone is sufficient. By God's grace, we are indeed a doctrinally rich movement, and I want to use this conference to remind you of the importance of applying this doctrinal wealth so that we may experience the transforming effect of the truth and transfer the truth to a future generation.

Richard Baxter, a contemporary of John Owen, called Owen "The Great Doer."[53] And it was John Owen who said that our happiness consists not in knowing the things of the gospel, but in doing them.[54] God has designed that we be blessed in our doing. Therefore, we must give attention to this priority.

Application in Preaching

We believe in the primacy of preaching. But we also believe that faithfully expositing God's Word demands applying God's Word. Preaching is a means, not an end. The goal of preaching is the edification and transformation of the church by grace-motivated obedience to the Word of God.

Peter Davids, in his commentary on the letter of James, writes, "True knowledge is the prelude to action, and it is obedience to the Word that counts in the end."[55] True knowledge is the prelude, not the pinnacle. The prelude to what? To action.

Teaching is critical! Teaching is essential! But teaching alone is not sufficient. Pastoral responsibility involves both the proclamation of truth and the application of truth. Without sufficient attention given to application, our preaching will have a minimal effect and, over time, possibly a deceptive and detrimental effect.

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53. Quoted by John Piper, "The Chief Design of My Life: Mortification and Universal Holiness, Reflections on the Life and Thought of John Owen," 1994 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-chief-design-of-my-life-mortification-and-universal-holiness

54. Quoted by John Piper, "The Chief Design of My Life: Mortification and Universal Holiness, Reflections on the Life and Thought of John Owen," 1994 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-chief-design-of-my-life-mortification-and-universal-holiness . From Owen, Works, XIV, p. 311.

55. Peter H. Davids, *New International Biblical Commentary: James* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 41.

Application in Counseling

Small groups and counseling exist in the church as strategic means to apply God's Word in our lives. Historically, when counseling an individual or a couple, my approach has been to provide them with as much biblical information as possible, assuming that was the most effective way to serve them. I have learned a different and a more effective approach from my friend, David Powlison.

David Powlison's goal in counseling is simple: transfer one truth to one area of life. Impressively, he restrains himself from communicating a large body of biblical information. He instead believes the most helpful way to serve the counselee is to limit the biblical information to that which is easily memorable, and to isolate one area for application. *One truth to one area of life*.

Powlison explains, "Just as we don't change all at once, so we don't swallow all of truth in one gulp. We are simple people. You can't remember ten things at once. Invariably, if you could remember just ONE true thing in the moment of trial, you'd be different. ... When you actually remember, you actually change. In fact, remembering is the first change."[56]

I think that is wisdom. There is wisdom in limiting the biblical information and in isolating or identifying one area for application. Why one area? Well, here's why: we are simple people.

I remember the first time I heard David Powlison teach many years ago. Prior to numerous sessions, he was pastorally sensitive and aware that there was the potential for all of us to be buried under a mass of material and paralyzed by condemnation. So from

56. David Powlison, Making All Things New: Restoring Pure Joy to the Sexually Broken (Part 2), www.ccef.org/making-all-things-new-restoring-pure-joy-sexually-broken-0/

the outset, he alerted us to that possibility. And he encouraged us to just choose from the outset a single area where we wanted to apply grace and grow in godliness. And then he went on to inform us that as we apply grace and grow in godliness in this one area, the change that occurs in that area can't be restricted or confined to that area.The change in that area will find its way and make its way throughout our entire lives.

Leading with Patience

One implication of this for the pastor is that we must lead with patience. Patience is a priority for biblical leadership because normally growth is a gradual and incremental process, not a dramatic crisis experience. Comprehending truth takes place slowly and gradually. Applying truth takes place slowly and gradually. Growth takes place slowly and gradually.

John Newton, reflecting on three decades of ministry experience, wrote, "I have been thirty years in forming my own views; and, in the course of this time, some of my hills have sunk, and some of my valleys have risen: but, how unreasonable within me to expect all this should take place in another person; and that, in the course of a year or two."[57]

When I fail to be patient with others, I have forgotten to consider the Lord's patience with me. As I remember his great patience, I am empowered to relate with similar kindness and patience to others. We must recognize that whether it's growth in godliness or the building of a local church, it takes *decades*—not weeks, not months, not even years—it takes decades. So as we accent application, we must be exceedingly patient.

57. Quoted by John Piper in "John Newton: The Tough Roots of His Habitual Tenderness," 2001 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, www.desiringgod.org/messages/john-newton-the-tough-roots-of-his-habitual-tenderness)

A Particular Application

I want to highlight a particular concern for Sovereign Grace Churches, and that is, the transfer of biblical manhood and womanhood to the next generation. That is the predominant concern on my heart for the immediate and distant future.

My concern has only increased with time. Sadly, the American evangelical landscape is primarily egalitarian in their view of men and women. And it appears that this will only increase. Christian leaders, seminaries, campus ministries, publishers, and many others have abandoned biblical complementarianism. I believe a future generation of pastors will face challenges in this area that are greater than what I have faced in the past.

Are you prepared? Is your church prepared? We must equip the members of our churches to be informed complementarians, not just instinctive complementarians. What is your strategy over the next year to transfer teaching on biblical manhood and womanhood to the members of your church? How are you celebrating biblical manhood and womanhood in your church?

This matters because it is in part through biblical manhood and womanhood that the life-transforming effect of the gospel is on full display. I think the most effective apologetic for the complementarian position is marriages and families and singles that radiate the beauty and wisdom of God's plan for a man and a woman. And when a church is devoted to teaching and practicing and honoring God's design, it testifies powerfully to the beauty of the truth.

For the Sake of the Gospel

Whether it is applying the truth about gender or any other truth, it's always about the gospel. All application must proceed from the gospel of Jesus Christ and aims at the glory of God alone.

This is why we must continue to devote ourselves to this distinctive of application: so that by God's grace, the gospel will advance in the future through another generation to a time we won't see. As we devote ourselves to applying the gospel in our generation, God is using us to transfer the truth of the gospel.

Father, may this be an expression of your mercy to all who are present. Lord, we want to serve the next generation and we want to serve a future generation in a time we won't see. We pray that by remembering and cultivating this distinctive, which characterized the churches of Sovereign Grace in our infancy, that you would preserve what has been built. May it endure and may it make a difference for our children and our children's children and our children's children's children. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.