

Faith in the Promise

Sovereign Grace Churches Pastors Conference 2023

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You can open your Bibles to Isaiah 9. Isaiah 9. As Jeff mentioned, this is a family meeting.

Again, an appropriate descriptor because we are a family, a family of churches. This session is primarily for Sovereign Grace pastors and wives and leaders who do such a wonderful job, faithful job of serving and leading your church. It was during the singing, that this thought came to mind -It's something that Jared mentioned in his sermon this morning: God is pleased.

I believe the Lord brought that thought while we were singing back to mind because He wants you to hear it again. He doesn't want you to doubt that. His heart and disposition toward you is that He's pleased.

Thank you for the way you faithfully care for, lead, pastor, and work so hard to care for your churches. It affects the guests that are with us.

By the way, I had a pastor come up just right before the meeting started, who's leading a church in Georgia. It's his second conference, and he was thanking me. He was so excited. I said, "I hope you feel that you're part of the family." He said, "I do. These people are wonderful." He said, "I'm a pastor who wants gospel fidelity, and I found it here." You are modeling for him gospel fidelity. He then told me, "I'm going to pursue adoption into Sovereign Grace." Who you are, God is not only pleased with who you are, has affected guests during this conference.

To our guests, by the way, even though this is a family meeting, we're so glad that you're here. We want you to come back, and we want you to listen in, and hopefully, you will benefit from this time. These are things that are on my heart, as Jeff said. I'm going to share tonight. Things that have been on my heart for months. Any time I talk about sharing my heart with you, I want to remind you that I love you and have great respect for you. I consistently pray for you and thank God for you. To share the things on my heart, I'm going to spring from one sentence in one verse here in Isaiah 9:7.

If you're fond of titles, I've entitled this ***Faith in the Promise***.

Isaiah 9:7, go to the very last sentence:

"The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this"

May God bless the preaching of His word.

It was 1854, Charles Spurgeon's first year of ministry in London, cholera struck one family after another and they called Spurgeon to the bedside of loved ones. Almost daily he stood by a grave. At first, Spurgeon threw himself into the visitation of the sick with all his youthful vigor. Soon, however, he said, weary in body and sick in heart, he began to think he was about to succumb.

He was on the great Dover Road, dragging himself home from another funeral when he saw a piece of paper in a shoemaker's window that had these words written on it, *"Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most high thy habitation, there shall no evil befall thee. Neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling."* That promise, found in Psalm 91:9-10, had an immediate effect on Spurgeon, for he says, *"The effect on my heart was immediate. Faith appropriated the passage as her own. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying and a calm and peaceful spirit. I felt no fear of evil. I suffered no harm."*

See, I share that story because it's my hope that our faith, that your faith, that my faith will appropriate the promise that we find here in Isaiah 9:7, and, like Spurgeon, the effect on our lives tonight would be immediate, making us secure, refreshed, and confident in God to work in and through us, to help us address the three things that are on my heart for Sovereign Grace.

First, let us understand the promise here in Verse 7. The promise is in the last sentence, as you know of Isaiah's prophetic pronouncement of the birth and work of Jesus Christ. Look at Verses 6 and 7. *"For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. Then the promise, the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this."*

Isaiah announces, as you know, the birth of Jesus Christ, who was given to us by the Father, to establish His eternal kingdom, which is upheld, we are told,

with justice and with righteousness that He accomplished in the sending of his son through the sinless substitutionary sacrifice of our savior on the cross for all of our sins. Then, He rose three days later, victorious over death, and over sin, and over Satan, which is why His justice and His righteousness will be now and forevermore. All of that happens, we are told in Verse 7 in the very last sentence, because of this pledge, as Motyer calls it in his commentary, because of this promise, the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this.

See, God promises that by His zeal, He will accomplish the work of salvation for sinners like you and me, and in so doing, establishes the kingdom of His beloved son, Jesus Christ. Charles Bridges says in his classic work, *The Christian Ministry*,

"How overwhelming is the thought of this affection, of this zeal possessing the heart of God, of the deep interest of His infinite mind, in the progress of the kingdom of His dear son. His thoughts engaged in it, His unsearchable plans embracing it, and controlling all the mighty movements of the world to subserve this main design. How solid, therefore, is the rock on which Christian ministry rests as the grand engine of the accomplishment of the purposes and promises of God?"

Brother Pastor, Mr. Bridges is right. The Christian ministry, your ministry, our ministry, rests upon this promise that the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish what He has promised to do through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Oh, that is a promise to appropriate our faith to tonight.

I believe that when we appropriate our faith to that promise of the zeal of the Lord of Hosts, we will then have confidence in God, in the Lord of Hosts to help us to address these three things that are on my heart tonight.

Let us approach these three things with faith, in the promise that the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will help us. Here are the three things that are on my heart for our family of churches, things that I've been carrying on my heart for months, things that I have been praying for, things that I've been looking forward to tell you about.

Here's the first one: **Faith for this current cultural and evangelical moment.**

You, the pastors of Sovereign Grace, I believe one of the reasons God is pleased with you is because of your clear commitment and devotion to preach God's Word faithfully each and every Sunday, calling your churches graciously to

obedience. That commitment, I know, drives your responsibility to protect your church from false doctrine.

Now, protecting churches from false doctrine is not a new phenomenon. We see it throughout the New Testament Epistles, and we see it throughout church history.

One of those moments in church history was a hundred years ago when J. Gresham Machen wrote,

"Christianity and liberalism in response to an attempt to unite 18 different denominations around a creed that was theologically ambiguous and was inconsistent with the doctrine found in the Word of God."

Kevin DeYoung wrote the foreword for the one 100th edition of *Christianity and Liberalism*, and this is what DeYoung says,

"If there is one recurring theme throughout the book, it is that the church of Jesus Christ cannot be sustained, and indeed, never was founded on doctrinal indifferentism. From the very beginning, Machen argues, the Christian movement was not just a way of life, but a way of life founded upon a message."

Then he quotes, Machen,

"It was based not upon mere feeling, not upon a mere program of work, but upon an account of facts. In other words, it was based on sound doctrine."

The Church of Jesus Christ, including your church, including Sovereign Grace Churches will only be sustained by being faithful to the sound doctrine that Jesus gave us in His Word.

Being faithful to that, which Jeff called us to on Tuesday - being faithful to that that Jared echoed again today in his sermon.

Now, in his foreword, DeYoung gives seven lessons, and I would encourage you to, if you don't have the book, purchase it and read those seven lessons. He gives seven lessons that we can learn from Machen's work. I'm just going to give you one of these lessons, here it is:

"It is not enough to say what is true, we must also make clear what is false. Given this cultural moment that we are living in, that is a vital lesson for us, brothers."

Because stating what is true and making clear what is false, that is vital to protect your church and to protect our family of churches from any attempt to make what is false true. Our culture is trying to normalize what is false in an attempt to make it true.

It's one of the reasons Rosaria Butterfield wrote *Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age*. She says in her introduction that there was a seismic shift, in her opinion, here in the states, in our culture in 2015 when the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in the Obergefell decision. Again, in 2020, in the Bostock decision, that denial of LGBTQ rights represents an attack on the human dignity of people that identify that way.

Then Butterfield, she says this,

"After Obergefell and Bostock, LGBTQ describes who someone is, rather than how someone feels."

Freudian ideas about sexuality replace biblical ones and became the new and preferred anthropology. In this cultural moment, the world is normalizing or trying to normalize an unbiblical anthropology.

If you look at many of the issues in the culture right now, those issues track back to an unbiblical anthropology, which is why we must remain committed to preaching it by stating what is clear and making also clear what is false.

What Rosaria does in her book, she states what is clear, and also makes clear what is false by addressing the lies in our culture that tries to normalize truth, so that what is false is true. She addresses those five lies. Let me just give two of them. Homosexuality is normal. Transgenderism is normal. She's doing that because she has a conviction to stand for truth.

Joel Beeke, in his endorsement of the book, writes,

"The world is always trying to replace Christianity with a spiritual counterfeit, that is another religion entirely, as J. Gresham Machen pointed out a century ago. Rosaria Butterfield exposes today's ideologies that seek to force the church into the mold of sexual perversion and self-deification. She reminds us that the answer to these soul-destroying lies remains the same as it always was, knowing and abiding in God's word."

Brothers, let us have faith in the power of God's word by remaining in it, by abiding in it, by remaining faithful to it and protect our churches with it by preaching what is true and making clear what is false. That responsibility, I

believe, is becoming more complex and more of a challenge because of this current evangelical moment. I'm sure you've noticed this. This is not this wonderful observation on my part. You're seeing it, evangelicalism seems to be fracturing. There are pressures on the church, both from the left and the right, that we as pastors face.

A question that we have wrestled with as a leadership team is this, how do we view this current evangelical moment as it relates to Sovereign Grace?

We don't pretend to know all that God is doing in this current evangelical moment, nor do we think we know how the dust is all going to settle. What we do see is a theological erosion and instability that is happening at a rate that concerns us. If you add in the influence of social media that amplifies the differences within evangelicalism, whether that is on the left or the right, it makes the issues more challenging for you as pastors.

Given the pace of theological erosion in evangelicalism, let me just use one example: complementarianism. As one pastor, as one leadership team member, the erosion of complementarian theology and values over the last two years is striking. It should concern all of us. That's just one example. Given the pace of theological erosion, Sovereign Grace pastors, you must exercise theological leadership and theological discernment to protect our churches, to protect your church, to guard our unity, and to prepare for our future.

Providing theological leadership and discernment now, it's important for a number of reasons for our immediate and long-term future, but let me just give you two. Here's the first one. Providing theological leadership protects our churches from drifting theologically now, and we pray from drifting in the future as well. That's why we had Jeff preach the message that he did on Tuesday. That's very intentional on our part. We want to equip you so that you can lead theologically.

In a recent elders meeting at Covenant Fellowship Church, where I am a pastor, we are talking about the theological erosion we are seeing. One of my fellow pastors, Jared Torrance, he just asked this question, "Where will Sovereign Grace be theologically three generations from now?" Then he added this, "How strong will our complementarian convictions be?"

He asked that as a younger pastor, because he's concerned. He's concerned about the younger generations in our church, and maybe you have them in your church. How are they embracing our complementarian values? What will that look like three generations from now?

Given the influence of our culture and the theological erosion that we're seeing in evangelicalism, these are the kind of question, brothers, that every pastoral team must ask. You must answer them honestly, and you must seek to address them with God's word. What I'm asking every senior pastor to do tonight is to lead your pastoral team in answering this question, where will our church be theologically in three generations? Take time to study your church. Take time. You know your people, study it.

Jared asked a similar question this morning in his message: where is our church vulnerable? Define it. Then, with God's word, make clear what is true and make clear what is false. We must do that now so that our churches do not drift theologically in any way from God's word, and we must do it for our future so that three generations from now, Sovereign Grace remains devoted to the doctrine found in God's word.

Second reason this is important. Orthodox Christians, including members of your church, members of our churches today, they're feeling marginalized. They're being described as bigoted, and they think they're losing influence. This is a trend that we must prepare our people for, brothers. Brothers, prepare your people. Prepare them by calling them to remain on the ancient paths. Call them to hold on to the sacred writings, the sacred writings of sound doctrine. Call them to be holding on to them with all of their strength, despite the pressures and the marginalization they feel. Because if they do that, tell them if they do that, there is no need to panic.

Andrew Wilson says in his new book, *Remaking the World*,

"Loss of influence is not a because for panic. The doctrines, experiences, and practices that the church needs today are much the same as the ones she needed in the 18th century and the 10th and the 2nd. We are responsible for obedience, not outcomes, faithfulness, not fruit. If we do not see the results we used to by praying, worshiping, reading scripture, serving the poor, preaching the gospel, sharing the sacraments, and loving one another, we carry on with those things regardless and walk by faith and not by sight."

Amen?

Brothers, teach your people to walk by faith and not by sight, hanging on to God's infallible word. Tell them that there is no need to panic because regardless of how the culture goes and regardless of how evangelical goes, that we are people and we are churches who hold on to our Bibles and with faith in God, and with faith in God's word, we believe that through His word, He will accomplish all that He promises.

One other thought, in any discourse that you're having regarding a stand for truth and making clear what is false, it's important to communicate with a Christ-like gracious tone. We don't want to sound like the world, and quite frankly, we don't want to sound like some of those in evangelicalism. I love this pithy sentence from Kevin DeYoung,

"Courtesy wherever possible, clarity at all costs."

In other words, tone does matter. We must be gracious in speech, but we must be clear at all costs. We must be clear about the truth and we must be clear about what is false.

Brothers have faith in this current cultural and evangelical moment by building your church and protecting your church with the sound doctrine that is found in God's word.

Second thing that's on my heart for Sovereign Grace, number 2, **faith to recruit and develop future pastors.**

Here's our vision as a family of churches: *We want to be a multigenerational global family of churches who advanced the gospel together by planting and strengthening churches throughout the world.*

We do all of that for the glory of God.

If God allows us to be multigenerational, and I believe He will, then there are future generations of people not even born yet, who will be in our churches, who need to hear the gospel, and they need future generations of pastors to preach the gospel to them.

With that vision, with that view as executive director, I feel this urgent responsibility to prepare us for that future. I want to share with you some stats that I hope stir a sense of urgency in you.

Over the next five to 10 years, the first generation of Sovereign Grace pastors will transition the primary leadership of Sovereign Grace churches to second and third generation pastors.

We have 294 sovereign grace pastors in our database, of those whom we have a recorded birth date in our database.

Here's the breakdown that I want you to see.

56 pastors are 60 and older

42 pastors in their 50s

60 pastors in their 40s

39 pastors in their 30s

10 pastors in their 20s

47% of pastors in Sovereign Grace are in their 50s and 60s.

In other words, almost half of our pastors will transition primary leadership of our churches to the next generation over the next decade.

I don't believe this is a transition that we are ready for.

I want you to feel that sense of urgency that I feel. I'm asking you brothers to fulfill to Timothy, to, by having faith to develop, to recruit and develop faithful men for pastoral ministry.

I want to call you tonight to have the same heart that the apostle, Paul had for young men.

One of those young men, as you know, was Timothy.

Paul, he took risks on Timothy. We know that because he was young. 1 Timothy 4:12. We know that Timothy had these frequent physical challenges in the text. 1 Timothy 5:23. Timothy had these frequent ailments, but Paul didn't wait until Timothy was risk-free. Rather, he developed him, he invested into him, and he deployed him.

I was talking to CJ about this recently. This is just one of the ways that CJ serves me so well.

I was saying that it seemed like in our earlier days - he's going to have a perspective as founder, I don't have - earlier days, we had more men who were interested in pastoral ministry. That seems to have dropped off. What is your perspective on what happened?

This is what CJ says:

"In the earlier years, given the abundance of guys who were desiring of pursuing pastoral ministry, it didn't require recruiting. As time passed, for various reasons, the number of guys who were inclined to pursue, pastoral ministry declined. We didn't give ourselves to recruiting for the pastor's college. For reasons like the risk involved, the finances, the 10-month relocation, and the inaccurate assumption that the local church could equip a man for ministry as effectively as the pastor's college."

Then CJ, he said this,

"Now, I am actively recruiting guys, and at 70, I am more apt to take risks, given the proven effectiveness of the pastor's college, and for the sake of the gospel and church planting."

CJ, I thank God that you are taking risks and recruiting our future pastors. I want to call you to do the same, because CJ is right, we must take thoughtful risks now to actively recruit men for pastoral ministry. We must send them to the pastor's college so that we are prepared for our future.

Guys, a decade goes by very, very quick - 10 years flies. I urge you tonight to make recruiting and developing young men for pastoral ministry a priority now and send them and get them to the pastor's college.

Brothers, don't let your church die. Nick talked about that today, this morning when he quoted Tozer. He said in that quote,

"Tozer says a local church can die. This happens when the old saints, when they fall asleep, and there's no young saints, there's no young pastors there who rise up and take their place."

May that not happen in Sovereign Grace. May that not happen in your church. May you recruit and develop young men for ministry who will rise up and take the founding generation's place in leading our churches.

Now in fulfilling 2 Timothy 2:2, you don't have to recreate the wheel because we have resources from you from our churches. There are churches among us who have these wonderful pastoral ministry development programs that they're eager to share with you. If you were at the Council of Elders meeting on Monday, you received a copy of the Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville leadership pipeline. I'm going to put that, I'm going to establish after the conference someplace on our website, and I'll let you know where, where you can access not only Louisville's pipeline but other churches' leadership development pipelines, so that you can have access to them. In other words,

you do the recruiting, we can help you with the development, and let's plan for our future.

One other resource just to mention-- Or actually, let me mention two.

The Path to Being a Pastor, a book that Bobby Jamieson has write, I would commend that to you.

Also, I think you may know this, but I want to remind you, we have a summer internship grant program that we fund every year.

We budget at least \$10,000 for that program every year. Apply for grant help, so that you can recruit a high school student or a college student to spend a summer with you and with your eldership and help get stirred for pastoral ministry.

Brothers, let's have faith to take risks to recruit and develop young men for pastoral ministry now, so we will be ready for our future.

Third, and last thing that's on my heart, **faith to plant churches**.

One of the many things that I am grateful for about our history in Sovereign Grace is a willingness to take risks to plant churches, to reach the laws with the gospel.

I'm also grateful for the faith that I see in our pastors outside of the United States who are currently taking not just average risks. They are taking great risks to plant churches.

Michael Granger, it was a risk for you to go plant in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and for having Josh Pannell join you, and to start a pastor's college there. Yet, in the midst of just about three years, there is wonderful fruit and there are pastors being developed, and you're about to plant your first church in Nairobi, Kenya.

Jeffrey Jo, he takes risk in planting churches in the Mindanao region of the Philippines, which is not only a heavy Muslim population, but it is also tribal in nature, and tribes have conflicts. If you go down there, it's very dangerous. You could lose your life. Yet, Jeffrey is planting churches in Mindanao.

It's risky for Diona Thomas to send Francis from Monrovia, Liberia, back to Waterloo, Sierra Leone to plant a church right now. Sierra Leone is a heavily

Muslim populated country. Francis will face opposition and Francis will be persecuted, but he is going with joy and faith to plant the church.

Ed planting in Torino, that requires faith, it requires risk for all the reasons that he said.

Carlos Contreras just sent out a church planning team to Reynosa, Mexico. Reynosa is a dangerous place because it's a gang infested city. Carlos and that church planting team that he sends, they are taking risks to plant churches. Given our history and given the examples of those brothers I mentioned and many more I could give you.

Many of you have asked me this question: Why is our growth, here in the United States, why does it seem so slow in comparison to seeing all that's happening outside of the United States?

It's a good question. It's a fair question. Could it be the effect of enduring a decade of crisis filled with difficult departures and false accusations? Unjust criticisms? In response to all that, are just a bit more cautious here in the States? Probably.

Could it be that in that same decade we see a shift toward an anti-Christian, post-truth culture here in the States, which does make church planting more difficult and riskier? Possibly.

Consider, brothers and sisters, consider what God did in that decade. God helped us to write and approve an updated statement of faith so that Sovereign Grace is stronger theologically than we ever have been.

He has helped us to write and to ratify our polity and book of church order so that Sovereign Grace has greater ecclesiological clarity.

That's important because we've seen movements in recent history right here in the States who planted a lot of churches, but they haven't defined themselves theologically, nor do they have the same ecclesiological clarity, which is not a path that we have chosen to go down.

Our path of theological definition and ecclesiological clarity can't be an excuse for a lack of church planting. Rather, those are good reasons to plant churches. I wonder if for whatever reason here in the States that we have lacked faith in God. To fight through risks to plant churches despite the obvious challenges we face to do so here in the States.

Will Sovereign Grace continue to be unjustly criticized? Maybe. That's a hopeful maybe. Maybe even probably, but what does God say? What does he promise? *"No weapon fashioned against you shall succeed."* Isaiah 54:17 will it be difficult planting churches in an anti-Christian culture? Of course. What does God say? Paul asks it rhetorically. If God is for us, who can be against us? Is it risky to send pastors and your best leaders and your biggest givers to plant churches? Yes. It's insane, isn't it?

Here is the promise: It is God who will supply every need.

Philippians 4:19.

Let us have faith in the promises of God to protect us and to help us and to provide for us to go and plant churches.

Let us express that faith by asking.

I said this on Tuesday night intentionally when I opened the conference. I referenced Jesus' words in John 15:7. He says this, "If you abide in me, then let's abide in him."

We see in this conference what he says next, how important it is and his words abide in us. If those things are happening, we're abiding in him and his words abide in us. He says to us, *"Ask. Ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you."*

Let me ask the brothers here in the United States. Do you wish to plant more churches?

Yes, we do, don't we?

Let us ask. Let us ask Jesus through faith-filled prayers for the planters and resources and locations to plant churches.

Then let us have faith to sow out our best. Believing his words, Jesus said the harvest is plentiful, but the labors are few, therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out, to sow out laborers into his harvest.

Let us with faith in Jesus, let us plant more churches in the state despite, the challenges of doing so in an anti-Christian age. Trusting the promise and the words of our victorious Savior. I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Brothers and sisters, let's have faith to go and plant churches.

Those are the three things on my heart. Those are the three things I'm praying for us. Those are the three things I believe that God is going to meet each of us in this coming year and beyond.

I want your faith to appropriate that promise that the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this, even when you face difficulties.

Charles Bridges says when faith is really brought into action, the extent of the difficulty is a matter of little comparative moment.

Difficulties heaped upon difficulties can never rise to the level of the promise of God.

We got the promise, don't we? We've got the promise and our difficulties will not rise to the level of the zeal of the Lord of Hosts. He will help us and he will do this as we build churches and have confidence to be faithful churches in this cultural evangelical moment to develop future pastors and to plant churches. The joy of it all is we get to do it together. Let's pray for one another and let's help one another. May our faith please God and may it bring him much glory.