

Ordinary Pastors

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ORDINARY PASTORS

A Vision for Christian Ministry

C. J. Mahaney



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Foreword

One way the church of Christ experiences God's goodness is through the lives and ministries of faithful pastors. The Lord in his kindness gives shepherds after his own heart. He provides models of Christian ministry, men who are proven faithful over decades. In other words, he gives us pastors like C. J. Mahaney.

Many of us have benefited from C. J.'s example of astonishment at God's grace. C. J. is happy in the Lord, and no one can take this from him. I rejoice that as he has grown older, his affections for the Savior have only deepened. Is anything more important for pastors as we age?

Over the years, C. J.'s teaching has been uniquely used by God to serve the church and to strengthen pastors, both in Sovereign Grace Churches and beyond. He has preached at various conferences for pastors, and we still hear stories of lives transformed by those sermons. At the Sovereign Grace Pastors College, C. J. continues to teach aspiring pastors about the nature and privilege of pastoral ministry. He has also personally counseled and encouraged many pastors, myself included.

This volume contains six sermons preached to gatherings of pastors. We cannot capture on the printed page the tears and the passion that marked the preaching of these sermons, but we can capture the biblical truths that were proclaimed with clarity and applied with skill. These sermons do not leave pastors burdened with an endless

list of tasks or pressured by a need for results. Rather, they minister the grace of God, encourage the fainthearted, equip us with biblical discernment, and lead us to Christ.

C. J.'s desire for pastors and for those they serve is summarized in the sermon text of the first chapter: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14). "May the Lord equip us," he says, "to passionately proclaim the grace of Jesus Christ, faithfully teach the love of God the Father, and consistently cultivate the fellowship of the Spirit."

We all need to be sustained and strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. This book points us to that grace, and will be a great blessing to all who read it. May the Lord use these sermons to raise up more faithful, joyful, ordinary pastors, who will one day hear the Lord say "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord."

Jared Mellinger

Director of Publishing, Sovereign Grace Churches

Trinitarian Pastoral Ministry

2 Corinthians 13:14

It happened in my hometown, in a Washington, D. C. Metro station. And I'm sure, had I been there, I would have walked past it without a single glance.¹

In 2007, the *Washington Post* organized an experiment. During the morning rush hour, world-famous violinist Joshua Bell stood incognito in the entrance to the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station and played a brilliant classical repertoire for forty-five minutes. It was, as *Post* reporter Gene Weingarten explained, "an experiment in context, perception and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste."²

Joshua Bell routinely fills up concert halls worldwide. Days before, an audience in Boston had paid around \$100 apiece to see him perform.

1. This sermon was included as a chapter entitled "The Pastor and the Trinity" in the book *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 386–404. Because this first appeared in a collection of essays for John Piper, we kept several passages honoring him in this text.

2. Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," *Washington Post*, Sunday, April 8, 2007, p. W10, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html> (accessed June 15, 2026).

In L'Enfant Plaza, he was playing a Stradivarius made in 1713, reportedly worth \$3.5 million. On that Washington morning, the virtuoso collected exactly \$32.17 from the few passersby who stopped. Most of the thousand-plus commuters who hurried through the station that morning didn't even slow down.

I don't think I would have slowed my pace either. If I had been rushing through L'Enfant Plaza that morning, I might not have even noticed him. He was hidden in plain sight.

It's quite possible for us to rush past certain verses of Scripture in a similar fashion. Sadly, I often do. We're busy, we've read this before, we assume we understand the important stuff anyway. We do not perceive the wealth of God-glorifying, grace-magnifying, life-transforming truth before us.

This is one of many reasons I am grateful for the personal example of my friend John Piper. John doesn't rush past the words of Scripture. He doesn't assume he understands what he reads the first time around. He reads slowly, contemplates a single paragraph or sentence or phrase, examines a single word. As Mark Dever eloquently puts it:

While too many of us are saying a lot of things quickly and running on to the next, John stops and stands and stays and stares at God's Word. Sometimes he stares at something that seems so obvious, but he keeps staring until it begins to expand and fill the horizon of his sight. . . . John prays and thinks until a part of God's Word which seemed simple and obvious becomes fresh and powerful.³

John has taught me to slow down, to read my Bible carefully, to ponder the meaning and implications of every line, every word. So, following his example, let's stop and stare at a single verse that's easily

3. Mark Dever, "Introduction," in Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney, *Preaching the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 15.

overlooked. It's only one sentence. In these few words, however, we'll discover in Paul's example a model for pastoral ministry.

Hidden in Plain Sight

In the closing words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, we read, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

Have you ever paused to contemplate this verse? Until recently, I hadn't. For me, these words were hidden in plain sight.

I've often been guilty of racing past the closing verses of New Testament letters. Sometimes we approach these passages like the last few seconds of a phone conversation: "Okay. Yep. Thanks. See ya later." We assume these verses are a mere formality, an expression of ancient etiquette and nothing more.

But in Scripture there are no throwaway lines. This final sentence was divinely inspired, carries divine purpose, and has particular relevance for pastoral ministry. In this simple verse, just twenty Greek words, we find a biblical model for pastoral ministry. It is right before our eyes, if we do not race past it.

Gordon Fee cautions us not to neglect or overlook the importance of this benediction. He writes:

In many ways this benediction is the most profound theological moment in the Pauline corpus. . . . It is not difficult to see why such a profound moment of theology—in the form of *prayer* for the Corinthians—should be the single most appropriate way to conclude this letter. What Paul wishes for them is all of this, and nothing less.⁴

This is one of the most profound theological moments in the Pauline corpus, yet we so easily rush past it.

4. Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 363–64.

Paul's benediction would deserve our attention no matter where in Holy Scripture it appeared, but it is particularly striking when we consider the original audience. Paul was writing to the Corinthian church, and if there ever was a church of self-absorbed sinners, these folks were it. They had been seduced by human wisdom. They had drifted from the centrality of the cross. They were splitting into four factions. The church was allowing sexual immorality of a kind, Paul wrote, "not tolerated even among pagans" (1 Cor. 5:1). Lawsuits among church members were common. They were desecrating the Lord's Supper—some were even getting drunk there. They misunderstood and misused the gifts of the Spirit. In fact, Paul told them, their meetings did more harm than good (1 Cor. 11:17). So in two letters Paul exhorts this church, rebukes them, appeals to them, and admonishes them. The second letter is his most passionate—reading it in one sitting will leave you emotionally exhausted.

And yet, as he draws the letter to a close, what does he wish for them? "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14).

All of this, and nothing less.

I don't think that would have been my closing wish for the Corinthian church. I'd have had a different wish altogether. Is Paul's prayer what you wish for your church? If not, perhaps you need to reexamine the model of pastoral ministry provided in his closing benediction.

A Model for Pastoral Ministry

In this chapter I want to draw your attention to the Trinitarian benediction of 2 Corinthians in order to remind you of what has always been true: the character and work of the triune God define and inform the heart of pastoral ministry. In 2 Corinthians 13:14, hidden in plain sight, there is a wonderfully succinct model for pastoral ministry.

Paul's pastoral ministry was theologically informed. Moreover, it was thoroughly Trinitarian—he references each member of the Godhead in his benediction. Paul's ministry was shaped by a clear

understanding of the Trinity's disposition toward the church: in the gospel, the triune God extends to us his amazing grace, his immeasurable love, and his gracious fellowship.

Are you looking for a model upon which to build your ministry? If you have been a pastor for more than a few weeks, no doubt you have heard the calls for a new kind of ministry to meet the challenges of a modern world. Hardly a week goes by without a new article, another survey, a large conference, or a new book on church growth, all proclaiming that time-tested ways of doing ministry no longer work. Something entirely new is needed, they tell us. Stephen Wellum captures the current mood: "Around us on every side are calls to 're-vision' Christian theology, to 're-imagine' evangelism, to 're-think' how we do church, and even to 're-articulate' the very nature of the gospel for our postmodern times."⁵

But as John Piper has proclaimed for decades, a biblically faithful ministry model needs no revising. What we are after is not novelty but faithfulness, not new paths but old ones, not the power of cool but the power of the gospel. Scripture is not silent on what leadership in the church should look like.

Pastor, if you are looking for a model for ministry, you'll find it here in 2 Corinthians 13:14. Through our prayers, our preaching, our counseling, and all facets of our leadership, we must position those we serve to experience the grace of the Son, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

Paul's benediction for the Corinthian church is consistent with all of his letters, and indeed with his entire ministry: he points his readers to the grace of Jesus Christ. Paul did not rely on leadership styles popular in his day, the strength of his own personality, or the quickest way to increase membership numbers. His definition of ministry was

5. Stephen J. Wellum, "Learning from John Today," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 10, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 2.

rooted in theology, and at its center was the grace of Jesus Christ. For Paul there was no other foundation. For us it should be no different.

The order of the Trinity as Paul presents it here is striking. He begins with the Lord Jesus Christ, then references God the Father, and concludes with a reference to God the Holy Spirit. Why does he not begin with the Father, the first person of the Trinity?

This verse is not intended to describe the relationships within the Trinity, but rather appears to describe for us the chronological order of our experience of the triune God. It is on the basis of the person and work of Christ that we are reconciled to God. And this priority remains consistent throughout the Christian life. All of the mercy, all of the grace, all of the blessings a Christian receives in this life and throughout eternity derive from the saving work of Jesus Christ.

So it is no surprise that Paul begins by referencing the grace of God, which is revealed through the gospel. The grand centerpiece of “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” is the salvation of sinners through the death and resurrection of Christ. This is where Paul always begins. He is gospel-centered, he is cross-centered, and he consistently reminds the Corinthians of the content and the centrality of the gospel.

Paul begins 1 Corinthians with the gospel:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus. (1 Cor. 1:4)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:17–18)

But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. (1 Cor. 1:23)

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:2)

Near the end of the letter, Paul once again reminds the Corinthians of the gospel:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3–4)

And in 2 Corinthians, Paul continues with the gospel: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Although Paul addresses the Corinthians on diverse topics, he remains steadily cross-centered. At every turn Paul’s instruction is derived from the gospel, revealing a man who never assumed the gospel and who refused to allow the Corinthian church to drift from Christ and him crucified. Down to the final words of the concluding benediction, Paul reinforces the primacy of the gospel.

All pastors have the privilege and joy of emulating Paul’s example in every area of pastoral responsibility. Paul’s example reminds me that:

- I must never assume the gospel.
- I must never assume that the church I serve sufficiently understands the gospel.
- I must inform every aspect of pastoral ministry with the proclamation and celebration of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the gospel.
- I must never teach on any topic without explaining how it relates to the gospel.
- I must preach to reveal the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- I must counsel to impart the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- I must help those vulnerable to legalism and condemnation to experience the justifying grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- I must help those fighting a besetting sin to experience the sanctifying grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- I must help those who are suffering to experience the comforting grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- I must help those who are weary to experience the sustaining grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- I must help those who persist in disobedience to experience the convicting and cleansing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In short, I must labor so that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be with them all. This is the pastor's privileged task. This is our joy and our call.

Yet if we understand our message and are committed to proclaiming it, why does the grace of Jesus Christ often seem to be an elusive experience for those we serve? If we're preaching this message week after week, why don't some folks seem to grasp it? Why isn't the message of grace taking root in every member's life?

Let me offer one possible reason.

The Doctrine of Sin: Handle with Care

Grace is what God extends to sinners. So preaching grace can be a complex task, because in order to proclaim grace we must also address sin.

We face two possible errors when addressing the doctrine of sin. One is to preach grace while neglecting sin. This we must not do. The doctrine of sin is of immeasurable value to our churches. We must never minimize its importance, nor should we apologize for preaching it. Our hearers must understand that sin is pervasive, subtle, deceptive, and deadly. Only then will grace have any meaning.

The other error, one to which many of us are prone, is to teach and apply the doctrine of sin while neglecting grace. It is possible to teach this doctrine and not reveal the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is also a sobering possibility, one we must avoid at all costs.

It takes great skill to teach the doctrine of sin in a way that reveals, rather than obscures, the grace of Christ. Sinclair Ferguson captures this challenge:

Only by seeing our sin do we come to see the need for and wonder of grace. But exposing sin is not the same thing as unveiling and applying grace. We must be familiar with and exponents of its multifaceted power, and know how to apply it to a variety of spiritual conditions.

Truth to tell, exposing sin is easier than applying grace; for, alas, we are more intimate with the former than we sometimes are with the latter. Therein lies our weakness.⁶

Have you seen this weakness in your own life and ministry? In your church? When was the last time you thought deeply about it? We are all more familiar with sin than we are with grace—therein lies our weakness.

So we must handle the doctrine of sin with great care. We must teach it with humility and apply it with wisdom. Remember, this doctrine is a means, not an end. Preaching about sin is not the same as preaching grace. If we do not unveil and apply grace, our emphasis on the doctrine of sin will leave the members of our churches devoid of hope, without joy, and aware only of their sin, not of the grace of Christ.

Pastors, our goal is not simply to convict our hearers of sin, but to convince them of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. So which are

6. Sinclair Ferguson, “A Preacher’s Decalogue Part II,” *Reformation21*, http://web.archive.org/web/20070812061418/www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/2006_Issues_1_16_Articles/Decalogue_II/149/ (accessed June 15, 2026).

you more aware of: the pervasiveness of sin, or the power of grace? Which is your church more aware of? If someone were to study your sermon notes, would he find more space devoted to exposing sin than to unveiling and applying grace?

It requires little skill merely to expose sin. But it takes great skill to unveil grace and apply it to the wide variety of spiritual conditions represented in our churches. Merely addressing sin or exposing sin is not sufficient; we must labor to show the stunning magnitude and power of the grace of Christ toward those he has redeemed. The message we deliver is the message of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which saves us from all our sin.

Make Calvary Your Landmark

Since as pastors we must handle the doctrine of sin, how do we avoid misusing this doctrine? How do we proclaim and unveil and apply the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Here is how: never lose sight of Calvary. What happened in Christ's death gives the greatest possible hope for sinners. There we find forgiveness for sin, freedom from condemnation, salvation from God's wrath, power to put sin to death and to grow in godliness, strength in weakness, perseverance in suffering, certainty amid mystery, and hope for eternity.

Some facet of gospel truth is the ultimate answer for every pastoral situation you confront—every one. But it requires discernment and skill to unveil the gospel and apply it to the apparent complexity of people's lives, the circumstances in our congregations, and the situations we face in counseling. This is what we have been called to do, and this is what we can do, if we never lose sight of Calvary.

In his study of the Puritans, J. I. Packer 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 the traveller through the Bible landscape misses his way as soon as he loses sight of the hill called Calvary.⁷

This is how to avoid misusing the doctrine of sin: never lose sight of Calvary. Keep this landmark firmly in your view.

It is frighteningly easy to lose sight of Calvary. We drift away from the cross, not toward it. And when this happens, we become aware only of our sin, the sins of our wives and children, or the sins of the church members whom we serve. So we must establish practices that enable us to maintain a clear view of the gospel.

Make this a priority in your spiritual disciplines. Dwell on some aspect of Christ and him crucified as revealed in your daily Scripture reading. Use your supplemental reading to refocus your gaze on the cross. Like Paul, resolve to know nothing except Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Let the cross be central in your public ministry as well. As you prepare your sermons, ensure that at some point you give your church a clear sighting of Calvary. No matter how obscure the passage seems to be, however unrelated to the cross it appears, we must work at it until we can show how the text fits into the redemptive storyline of Scripture. Your sightings of Calvary should be so consistent that your church expects them in every sermon. When they arrive on Sunday to hear you preach God's Word, they should be filled with anticipation. They should be able to say to someone who has never attended your church, "Regardless of what text our pastor begins with, regardless of whether he preaches from the Old Testament or the New, regardless of how obscure the text appears to be, I guarantee you that at some point in this sermon you will be led to the cross."

And when you are counseling, although you must discuss heart issues, address sin, and carefully diagnose sinful cravings, at some point there must be a sighting of Calvary. Apart from the gospel,

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

we have no basis on which to offer people hope for change. And we could continue on to every area of pastoral responsibility. No arena is exempt.

Paul never lost sight of Calvary. The man celebrated grace even more intensely than he grieved over sin. Even when writing to the Corinthian church—a church with more deficiencies than you will likely ever encounter in ministry—Paul reminded them that the grace of God was present and active among them as a result of the gospel. Paul wasn't unaware of their sins. He was just more aware of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Which are you more aware of? As you think about your church, pray for them, preach to them, and counsel them—even in your casual conversations with them—which carries more weight in your soul: their sins, or the grace of Christ toward them?

Let us, like Paul, center our ministries on the cross of Christ. Let us labor that our churches may become more aware of the grace of God.

The Love of God

After praying that the Corinthian church will experience the grace of Christ, Paul prays that they will experience “the love of God.” It is a simple phrase, easy to rush past. But I appeal to you to slow down, to ponder this prayer, to ask what Paul means when he says, “The love of God . . . be with you all.” How should the model Paul provides here shape our pastoral ministry?

In the Trinitarian structure of this benediction, “God” specifically refers to the Father, the first person of the Trinity. It is clear that Paul has in mind God's love for us, not our love for God.

Paul's closing benediction demonstrates what our prayer should be for those we love and serve: that through our ministry they might encounter the love of God the Father. True pastoral ministry seeks to convince Christians of the love of God the Father for them, a love that is specific, personal, and passionate.

And many Christians need convincing. Over the years I have spoken with many genuine Christians who are not certain of God's love for them. They tend to think that God merely tolerates them, is often frustrated with them, and is eager to punish them. Countless genuine Christians are suspicious of God.

How are we to convince these believers of God's love for them? I believe J. I. Packer gives us wise guidance. In his outstanding book *Knowing God*, Packer writes, "The New Testament gives us two yardsticks for measuring God's love. The first is the cross (see Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:8–10); the second is the gift of sonship (1 John 3:1)."⁸ We convince God's people of his love for them by leading them to the cross and by reminding them of their adoption as sons of God.

Let us acknowledge right here that to fully measure God's love is an unending and impossible (and joyous) task. Who can mark off the height and breadth and length and depth of God's love for us? Elsewhere Paul prays for the Ephesians that they will "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). When we survey the love of God for us, we are plumbing the unfathomable, measuring the immeasurable. But let us use these two yardsticks, the cross and the gift of sonship, to attempt to do just that.

The Father's Love in the Cross

How do we lead those we love and care for to experience the love of God the Father? First, we proclaim God the Father's plan to send his only Son to us, and to sacrifice him on the cross for sinners like you and me. Scripture is clear that the love of God the Father for sinners is supremely demonstrated on the cross.

In fact, the Father's love cannot be understood apart from the cross. John writes, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Later he writes, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world" (1

8. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 214.

John 4:9). Paul adds to the chorus: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

The Father’s love for sinners like you and me was the divine motivation for the cross. As John Stott writes:

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that God’s love is the source, not the consequence, of the atonement . . . God does not love us because Christ died for us; Christ died for us because God loved us. If it is God’s wrath which needed to be propitiated, it is God’s love which did the propitiating.⁹

Stott offers serious wisdom here to those committed to preaching faithfully on the topic of God’s wrath. Our sermons and our songs must not neglect the holiness and the wrath of God. We must not soften these topics or apologize for preaching them. But we must never teach about God’s holiness and wrath in isolation from his love.

One reason we cannot separate God’s wrath from his love is simple: they are joined at the cross. We must never leave the impression that it was the loving Son who placated his angry Father. Rather, it was the Father’s love—his love for sinners who richly deserved his righteous wrath—that moved him to sacrifice his only Son as our substitute. At the cross, the Father both satisfies his wrath and displays his love for sinners. Pastors, we must remind those we care for that before the cross and behind the cross and through the cross, the love of the Father is revealed. If we do this well, their contemplation of the cross will bring a fresh experience of the personal and passionate love of the Father toward them.

Sinclair Ferguson says this well:

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

9. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 174.

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.¹⁰

Is that what your church thinks? Have you ever preached so clearly about the Father's love as revealed in the cross that your church wondered if God loved them more than he loves his Son?

The cross convinces us of the Father's love because it is here that the voice of the Father says to us:

I will crush my Son under the full fury of my righteous wrath for you. In the Garden of Gethsemane, my Son will cry out for this bitter cup to pass from him. And I will remain silent. Why? Because I love you that much.

And when my Son utters that shriek on the cross, unlike any other protest in all of history, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I will again remain silent. Why? To convince you that I love you.

Behold the supreme demonstration of my love: the death of my Son on the cross. What more can I say? What else do you require to be convinced of my love for you?

Behind the death of the Son for us stands the love of a Father toward us. And there is no more effective way to persuade your church of God the Father's love than to remind them of the cross, the supreme demonstration of the Father's personal love for them.

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

The Father's Love in Adoption

The second yardstick for measuring the immeasurable—as if we required more convincing—is our spiritual adoption. God the Father not only sacrifices his only begotten Son for us; he also adopts us as his children.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us,” John writes, “that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). In our adoption, the Father's love is on full display.

Does your heart resonate with those words? How would the members of your church respond to this verse? Are they convinced that God the Father, in his great love, has adopted them as his children? J. I. Packer asks us this question in his book *Knowing God*:

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. . . .

To those who are Christ's, the holy God is a loving Father; they belong to his family; they may approach him without fear and always be sure of his fatherly concern and care. This is the heart of the New Testament message. . . .

Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater.¹¹

11. Packer, *Knowing God*, 201, 203, 207.

Do the words “closeness, affection and generosity” describe your church’s perception of God? If not, perhaps your church is more aware of their sin than they are of adopting grace.

It is indeed a great thing to be right with God the Judge through the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is a great thing to be forgiven of sin, to be free from the fear of God’s wrath. But it is possible to grasp these great realities and remain unaware of what is even greater: we are adopted and loved by God the Father. In Christ, God the Father justifies us, but he does not stop there. He adopts us as his sons.

Does your church understand the great but not the greater? Do they know about justification but not adoption? Do they celebrate being made right with God while unaware that they have been adopted by God?

The doctrines of justification and adoption are related, but they are not the same. We must distinguish between them without ever separating them. In fact, the doctrine of justification must always be foundational to our teaching and ministry, because all the saving benefits we receive depend upon justification alone. But we must also help our churches understand and celebrate the doctrine of adoption. We are not only declared righteous; we are made God’s children. We are not only right with God the Judge; we are loved by God the Father. The more we teach on adoption, the more our churches will experience God’s fatherly love, affection, care, closeness, and generosity.¹²

So are those you serve certain of the Father’s love for them? Are you laboring to convince them of it? Where do you leave your church at the end of a sermon? Where do you leave them at the end of a counseling appointment? What is the effect of even a casual conversation

12. For studying the doctrine of adoption, let me recommend three books: Sinclair Ferguson’s *Children of the Living God* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1989), particularly the chapter “Adopted Children”; J. I. Packer’s classic *Knowing God*, particularly the chapter titled “Sons of God”; and Trevor Burke’s *Adopted into God’s Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

with you? Does a member of your church leave your presence more aware of his sin or more aware of the love of God the Father? Is your church secure in the Father's personal and passionate love as a result of your ministry?

Let me ask a more personal question. Are you convinced of the Father's love for you? He crushed his Son for you so that he might adopt you, so that he might convince you of his holy love for you. Pastor, are you more aware of your sin, the weaknesses in your pastoral ministry, the deficiencies in your church, or of the Father's love? You cannot convince your church of the Father's love if you are not convinced yourself.

As Paul concludes his letter to the Corinthians, in spite of all their faults, he closes not with a parting correction but with a reminder of the Father's love for them. As pastors, we are called to lead our churches to experience the love of God the Father. And this begins with experiencing the love of the Father for ourselves.

If your church is not persuaded of God's love for them, I recommend that you lead them in studying the doctrine of adoption until they are secure in the Father's love. You may even want to restrict the teaching diet of your church to this topic for a time. As you immerse yourself and your church in an extended study of this topic, you can expect to be freshly aware of, and overwhelmed by, the Father's immeasurable love for you and those you serve.

The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

As Paul closes his letter to the Corinthians, his final prayer is that they will experience "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14). He wants nothing less than that they experience the Holy Spirit's presence, participate in his work, and partake of his fellowship—that they grow in relationship with the third person of the Trinity.¹³ Pastors, as we follow Paul's model for ministry, this must be our burden as well.

13. Although it is possible that the phrase "fellowship of the Spirit" refers to fellowship among the Corinthians created by the Spirit (a genitive of

We must depend upon the Holy Spirit, pursue his presence and power for sanctification and service, and grow in eagerness to experience his gifts as described in Scripture. Scripture does not permit us merely to affirm the existence of the Holy Spirit. Scripture calls us to grow in our relationship with him and our experience of his presence and work.

I know what some of you are thinking at this point: “Wait, this guy’s charismatic! You mention the third person of the Trinity and—bingo!—suddenly this chapter becomes an apologetic for the charismatic view.” I can already feel the nervousness of my cessationist friends. Just when you thought this was a safe volume, the charismatic guy shows up!

It’s true, I represent an odd combination: I am Reformed and charismatic. Some would say that’s an oxymoron, like being a Presbyterian televangelist or a humble Duke basketball fan. But although being Reformed and charismatic may sound historically odd, there is nothing theologically strange about it. Believing in God’s sovereignty over all things and seeing God’s glory as the end of all things provide motivation for the pursuit of the gifts, guidance for the exercise of the gifts, and evaluation for the practice of the gifts.

As a Reformed and charismatic pastor, I am aware of the many theological and practical deficiencies of the charismatic movement. When some Christians hear the word *charismatic*, they think of the nutty things they have seen on television, or stories of large healing meetings that resemble WWE wrestling matches. I sympathize with all who are troubled by the theological deficiencies and goofy practices present in the charismatic movement. This stuff disturbs me as well. One reason it disturbs me is that it reflects a disregard for the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

source), the evidence seems to favor the interpretation chosen here. See Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 939–941.

So let there be no misunderstanding: as we lead our churches in their experience of the Holy Spirit, we must always uphold the unique authority of Scripture.

Scripture Is Our Final Authority

Scripture alone is our final authority in all matters of life and doctrine. And Scripture is our only basis for helping our churches to grow in their appreciation and pursuit of the Holy Spirit's work. It is the Bible that calls us to grow in our relationship with the Spirit, to eagerly desire and practice the gifts, and to experience his power and presence. We must study Scripture carefully and lead our churches to do the same.

A weakness to which charismatics can be prone is the tendency to put more confidence in subjective impressions and feelings than in the Bible. And you don't have to be a charismatic to have this weakness. All of us tend to assign more authority to subjective thoughts and feelings than we should. I am grateful for Dr. Piper's wise teaching in this area. I still remember the first time I read his provocatively titled article, "The Morning I Heard the Voice of God." He begins:

Let me tell you about a most wonderful experience I had early Monday morning, March 19, 2007, a little after six o'clock. God actually spoke to me. There is no doubt that it was God. I heard the words in my head just as clearly as when a memory of a conversation passes across your consciousness. The words were in English, but they had about them an absolutely self-authenticating ring of truth. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God still speaks today.

As soon as I read that paragraph I wondered what had taken place in the life of my good friend. Apparently something unprecedented! John does not usually write this openly about his personal experiences (for which he has my respect).

So I kept reading until I came upon this explanation:

It was through the Bible that I heard these divine words, and through the Bible I have experiences like this almost every day. . . . If you would like to hear the very same words I heard on the couch in northern Minnesota, read Psalm 66:5–7. That is where I heard them. O how precious is the Bible. . . . This is the very voice of God.

John concludes, “Something is incredibly wrong when the words we hear outside Scripture are more powerful and more affecting to us than the inspired word of God.”¹⁴

Pastors, we must not build churches in which the words we hear outside of Scripture are more powerful and more affecting to our members than the words of Scripture. The words of Scripture must always speak to us most powerfully and move us most deeply. Let us study the Bible, celebrate it, honor its unique authority, and teach our churches to understand and treasure and obey it as their final authority.

Only when we uphold the authority of Scripture can we grow in our experience and pursuit of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks to us primarily through Scripture, and never in contradiction of Scripture. We must lead our churches to grow in their relationship with the Spirit by leading them to understand, treasure, and obey the Scriptures.

Celebrate the Breadth of God’s Work

As we examine what Scripture teaches us about the Holy Spirit, we see that his work in the church is multifaceted. As is evident in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, the Spirit’s work is diverse and broad. I think Gordon Fee got it right in his summary of Paul’s understanding of the person and work of the Spirit. He writes, “In Paul, power is not to be thought of merely in terms of the miraculous, the extraordinary . . .

14. John Piper, “The Morning I Heard the Voice of God,” *Desiring God*, 03/21/07. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-morning-i-heard-the-voice-of-god> (accessed June 15, 2026).

Paul understood the Spirit's power in the broadest possible way."¹⁵ This is a perspective on the spiritual gifts that the Corinthians failed to grasp. It appears they exaggerated the importance of the gift of tongues and saw all the other gifts as secondary. For them, the gift of tongues was exciting, spectacular, the mark of true spirituality. The other gifts were good, but not truly spectacular.

So Paul sought to expand their understanding. To illustrate the diversity of the Spirit's work, Paul gave the Corinthians two lists of gifts, neither of them exhaustive (1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–31). In each list, Paul intentionally placed tongues last, not because tongues were the least of the gifts, but because the Corinthians exaggerated the importance of this gift. In a few brilliant chapters, Paul adjusted their perspective, broadened their understanding, and taught them to perceive the breadth of the Spirit's work.

Like the Corinthians, we are sometimes inclined to see the Holy Spirit's work only in gifts or events that appear spectacular. Like them, we sometimes emphasize only one gift of the Spirit, or only one kind of gift. Make no mistake: I am convinced that the Holy Spirit does give spectacular gifts, including prophecy, healing, and miracles. I thank God for the spectacular, wherever and whenever it genuinely occurs. But Scripture teaches us that God is at work in countless ways, whether it appears spectacular to us or not.

So let us understand the Spirit's work in the broadest possible way. Let us cultivate our appreciation for, and celebration of, the diverse work of the Spirit as defined in Scripture. If you understand the multifaceted work of the Holy Spirit, your eyes will be opened to discover his work. He is at work all around you. Do not confine his work to what appears to be spectacular. And do not dismiss his work because of your particular views on the spiritual gifts.

In fact, Scripture gives us two very easy ways to identify the Holy Spirit's work in our churches. Here's your "starter kit" for recognizing his work: study the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and the gifts of

15. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 8.

the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–31; Eph. 4:11–16; 1 Pet. 4:10–11). Read these lists carefully. Then look up, and look at your church. You will see the Holy Spirit at work everywhere you look. I'd recommend you teach your church to do the same.

The Spirit is at work in you, and in the lives of those you care for. It may be easy to recognize his work when you witness the spectacular (and let's be clear: it doesn't get any more spectacular than the miracle of regeneration¹⁶). But it requires a different kind of discernment to recognize his work in daily life. When an elderly lady serves consistently and faithfully in your church year after year; when parents endure the loss of a child and continue to trust in God; when a single man gives away his time and energy to serve in a small group; when a businessman's portfolio takes a hit but he keeps giving joyfully and generously—there is only one explanation for these. It is the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit that brings the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit in your church. And that is truly spectacular.

The Spirit Leads Us to the Cross

As we lead our churches to grow in the fellowship of the Spirit, we must remember that the Holy Spirit always glorifies the Son. The primary role of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the Savior and to testify to the gospel. Our pneumatology must never take precedence over—and in fact cannot be understood apart from—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's avoid adopting the Corinthians' erroneous definition of spirituality. They equated maturity with giftedness, spirituality with the spectacular. They thought of themselves as "people of the Spirit," yet they lacked the primary evidence of the Spirit's work: love. This is why Paul labors to redefine spiritual maturity for them in both of his letters. D. A. Carson summarizes Paul's point:

16. See John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We Are Born Again* (Fearn, Rossshire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009).

What it means to be “spiritual” is profoundly tied to the cross, and to nothing else. More precisely, to be spiritual, in this passage [1 Cor. 2:6–16], is to enjoy the gift of the Holy Spirit—and this means understanding and appropriating the message of the cross, “God’s secret wisdom.” . . . Indeed, those who are most mature are most grateful for the cross and keep coming back to it as the measure of God’s love for them and the supreme standard of personal self-denial.¹⁷

What does it mean for your church to grow spiritually? They must always become more grateful for the cross, always returning to Calvary. Let the glorious truth of Christ and him crucified define maturity for your church. Let us foster an appreciation for the broad work of the Spirit and pursue the Spirit, ever and always with Calvary in view.

The Holy Spirit unfailingly testifies to Christ. Let this be the work of the Spirit that we treasure the most.

Conclusion

The concluding sentence of 2 Corinthians provides a wonderful summation of the pastor’s priorities. Here Paul shows us that it is the character and work of the triune God that define and shape the heart of pastoral ministry.

May this definition of pastoral ministry govern us and guide us. May this triune priority be the increasing experience of each of those entrusted to our care. May the Lord equip us to passionately proclaim the grace of Jesus Christ, faithfully teach the love of God the Father, and consistently cultivate the fellowship of the Spirit. What a privilege we share in caring for, serving, and leading those the Savior “obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Pastor, take this Trinitarian benediction and pray it for those you serve, desire it for them, pronounce it over them, and labor to see it

17. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 68–69.

take root in their hearts. Do everything you can to position them to experience all of this, and nothing less.

Ordinary Pastors

2 Timothy 4:1–5

Chances are, if you're a pastor, you think of yourself as somewhat ordinary.¹⁸

If you are like me, you feel very ordinary indeed. Every so often I get the privilege of having lunch with the other speakers at various conferences I participate in. At those meals the conversation is fast and furious, and I get dizzy trying to keep up with them. The discussion sweeps from century to century, dropping into a particular year, then zooming out again, a whirlwind tour of history, philosophy, literature, theology, politics—everything except sports. They kindly assume I understand what they are talking about. I can assure you that most of the time I don't.

These guys are smart. I am not. I am comforted, though, and here's why: most of the smart guys I know have no athletic ability whatsoever. I've got an extraordinary jump shot, but I am an ordinary pastor.

I want to introduce you to another ordinary pastor. His name was Tom. Tom's life began in 1911 and ended in 1992. During those

18. This is a transcript of the message "Ordinary Pastors" given by C. J. Mahaney at the 2010 Together for the Gospel Conference. It was later published in a compilation of sermons from that conference entitled *The Unadjusted Gospel* by Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 143–161.

eighty-one years, Tom was a faithful and loving husband, a kind and wise father, and the faithful pastor of a small church in Canada. I doubt that you have heard of Tom Carson. If you have, it's only because he had a remarkable son: Don Carson, the brilliant biblical scholar and prolific writer. Carson has written or edited more than sixty books, including one about his dad titled *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson*. In his introduction, Don Carson explains the purpose for this memoir:

Some pastors, mightily endowed by God, are remarkable gifts to the church. They love their people, they handle Scripture well, they see many conversions, their ministries span generations, they understand their culture yet refuse to be domesticated by it, they are theologically robust and personally disciplined. I do not need to provide you with a list of names: you know some of these people, and you have been encouraged and challenged by them, as I have. Some of them, of course, carry enormous burdens that watching Christians do not readily see. Nevertheless, when we ourselves are not being tempted by the green-eyed monster, we thank God for such Christian leaders from the past and pray for the current ones.

Most of us, however, serve in more modest patches. . . .

Most of us—let us be frank—are ordinary pastors.

Dad was one of them. This little book is a modest attempt to let the voice and ministry of one ordinary pastor be heard, for such servants have much to teach us.¹⁹

Let's be frank: most of us are ordinary pastors. We mean well. We work hard. But our sermons are average at best. Thousands of people all over the world are not listening to our sermons online. No, it's

19. D. A. Carson, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 9.

just average stuff, with maybe an occasional good sermon in the mix (or so we think until we talk with a few church members and realize, “Yeah, maybe not”). Most ordinary pastors will not write a best-selling book. Most ordinary pastors will not write a book at all.

Occasionally I’ll be flipping through channels and catch one of those other conference speakers being interviewed on television. I don’t get interviewed on television. My closest brush with celebrity status is when people stop me in airports because I bear a striking resemblance to Captain Picard from *Star Trek* (played by Patrick Stewart). This happens all the time. If you are an ordinary pastor, you are not going to be treated as a celebrity, unless by mistake.

Most of us are ordinary pastors. We are truly called, and we are genuinely gifted by God for our task, but we are not unusually gifted.

We are, however, predictably tempted.

Ordinary and Discouraged

Ordinary pastors are particularly vulnerable to the temptation to compare themselves unfavorably with other pastors when they are gathered together at conferences. Perhaps you are familiar with this temptation. I certainly am.

At pastors conferences we listen to extraordinary sermons, purchase extraordinary books, and remember that members of our churches are more enthusiastic about these guys’ sermons than about our own. We begin to wonder if we are really making a difference in anyone’s life. Eventually, a man who once was not only amazed by the grace of God in his salvation but also amazed that he was called to pastoral ministry slowly loses the wonder and joy of his pastoral calling. The inevitable result is discouragement of soul. Too often, ordinary pastors are discouraged pastors.

Tom Carson was an ordinary pastor and often a discouraged one. His son Don Carson devotes an entire chapter to this (Chapter 6, “Discouragement, Despair, and a Vow”). In that chapter we get a glimpse of Tom Carson’s private journals, entries such as this one:

Sunday, Mar. 5, 1961

Rose 6:50 a.m. Prayer and study. Preached (poorly) from 2 Cor. 2. Twenty-four present. . . . Rested. Studied. Evening 19 present. Preached from Rom. 1:1–17 (poorly).²⁰

Tom Carson wasn't writing this for anyone else. He had no idea this journal entry would one day be published. And he was obviously discouraged. His son Don writes, "The reasons for such discouragement are many, but some of them, at least, overlap with Tom's self-doubt, guilty conscience, sense of failure, long hours, and growing frustration with apparent fruitlessness."²¹ Perhaps this describes you. At some point in our lives, we can all relate to Tom Carson.

Pastoral Ministry Defined

I want to interrupt our tendency to unfavorable comparison and unattainable aspirations, and the resulting discouragement that they bring. I want to ask a question: Why are we discouraged?

Often we are vulnerable to discouragement because we have forgotten what pastoral ministry truly is. We measure ourselves against unattainable standards, and we inevitably do not measure up. So if you find yourself discouraged, you're not alone. I'm familiar with this state of soul. And the most effective way I can encourage you is to remind you of the definition of genuine pastoral ministry as revealed in Scripture.

In 2 Timothy 4:1–5, we find a biblical definition of ministry that will clarify our goals, purify our hearts, and liberate our souls. This passage can protect us from the temptation to compare ourselves with others. It can realign our motivations for ministry. It can protect ordinary pastors from discouragement. And it can sustain us through many years of joyful service to God's people. Paul writes to Timothy (and to all of us):

20. Carson, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*, 82.

21. Carson, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*, 92.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Tim. 4:1–5)

Pastors, this is your definition of ministry. But it is more than a definition—it is a charge! Paul, who is facing imminent execution, says to Timothy, “I *charge you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . .” (v. 1). When reading it, we should imagine Paul’s voice appropriately raised, infused with seriousness and urgency. In these words, Paul places Timothy, who was an ordinary pastor in comparison to the apostle Paul, under a divinely inspired obligation.

And this divinely inspired letter is not just personal correspondence between Paul and Timothy. “These words,” John Stott writes, “are Paul’s legacy to the church. . . . It is impossible to read them without being profoundly stirred.”²² These words are Paul’s charge—and God’s—to every extraordinary pastor and every ordinary one.

We all have differing gifts, influence, and even fruitfulness. Let’s be honest, I can’t match the gifting and influence of John Piper, and neither can you. But regardless of our varying gifts, we all have the same charge: pastoral faithfulness.

Pastoral ministry that is pleasing to God is not ultimately about gifting, influence, or even fruitfulness. It’s not about how many books you have written, which conferences invite you to speak, or how many of your sermons are streamed online. It’s not even about whether your

22. John Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1973), 105.

church membership numbers grow or shrink. Pastoral ministry that is pleasing to God is about faithfulness to the charge of 2 Timothy 4. You and I are called to be faithful to this charge.

On the following pages we'll look at the three areas in which Paul calls us to faithfulness: 1) faithfulness to the message (where we'll spend most of our time in this chapter), 2) faithfulness to the ministry, and 3) faithfulness to the Savior. As we examine this passage, let's allow Paul's pastoral charge to address our motivation for ministry, shape our aspirations, and protect us from discouragement.

1. Be Faithful to the Message

Paul's first charge is this: "Preach the word" (v. 2). As pastors, we are called to be faithful to preach. But we can't just preach anything; the content of our preaching is "the Word."

Timothy would recognize this as yet another reference to Scripture as a whole (2 Tim. 3:16–17) and to the gospel in particular (1 Tim. 1:15; 2 Tim. 2:8). Paul does not need to further specify or clarify for Timothy the nature of the "deposit," "sound teaching," "the truth," or "the faith." These are all references to the gospel: the "trustworthy" saying, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

The charge is to be faithful to preach the gospel. The content of our teaching, of each sermon, should be informed by this specific charge. We must never assume that those in our churches have sufficient knowledge of the gospel or have exhausted their need for the gospel. We must never address a topic isolated from the gospel. We must never exhort anyone to obedience apart from the gospel. And we must never preach more passionately about any topic other than the gospel. You and I have been entrusted with the old, old story. We must not alter, adjust, or add to that story. Instead, we must faithfully proclaim it.

Preach the Word

You will be tempted to stray from this story. If you haven't been tempted already, you will be before long. Straying from this story is sometimes an effective way to gain applause, win personal approval, or satisfy those Paul describes in 2 Timothy 4:3–4:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

But regardless of the temptations, you must be faithful to preach the Word!

Here's something I've discovered: faithful proclamation of the message requires an unwavering commitment to unoriginality. In his book *Pastoral Theology*, Thomas Oden writes this at the outset: "I hope this work will be as unoriginal as possible. This is the first time I have attempted to write an entire text with an absolutely clear commitment to unoriginality."²³ Pastors, every sermon we preach must reflect an absolutely clear commitment to unoriginality.

You see, if you don't resolve to be unoriginal, you'll be enamored by all that is new, trendy, popular, and supposedly original. If you don't resolve to be unoriginal, you'll be easily distracted by matters of secondary importance. Church structure and administration will trump gospel preaching. Your intelligence, rhetorical skill, or personality will take precedence over your faithfulness to the message of the gospel. If you don't resolve to be unoriginal, you will lose sight of what matters the most.

Dr. Harry Reeder was the senior minister of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. He helps us to appreciate what matters most with the following story:

23. Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), 7–8.

When I was sixteen, my father bought me a car at an auction for \$75. It was a pink '57 Ford, which Dad insisted was “coral.” I couldn't drive a pink car to school! I then heard words that in a not-too-distant future my children would hear, “Son, a poor ride is better than a proud walk.” It was said so convincingly I knew it was probably in the Bible. Then my Dad opened the hood, and to my surprise, underneath was a 390 engine with two four-barrel carburetors. The car had been a South Carolina State Interceptor (a highway patrol car). Nothing had more power under the hood. Space and conviction prevent me from detailing the surprises that Corvettes and Roadsters would get after they looked laughingly at my pink '57 Ford while sitting side by side at stoplights. It didn't look like much, but there was power under the hood.

Young Christian [and ordinary pastor, I would add], the world despises the gospel in its simplicity and disdains the vessels entrusted to carry and proclaim it. But there is power under the hood. Live the gospel, believe and preach the whole gospel—the gospel blessings that declare who you are in Christ, the gospel imperatives that call you to your new life for Christ. This gospel transforms the hearts, minds, and wills of sinners. Thankfully, it continues to transform mine. Preach it to yourself, to each other, and to the lost, and know the joys of the gospel-driven life.²⁴

This is what matters—the message of the Savior who died for sinners like you and me. Faithful gospel preaching is unoriginal, and whatever is unoriginal will be despised by the world. But unoriginal gospel preaching is powerful.

Fellow ordinary pastor, you might not look like much. The church property and building might not look like much. Your church might not run as smoothly as a Fortune 500 company or have the ambience of a Starbucks. You might not have a cutting-edge website as sleek as

24. Harry L. Reeder III, “The Gospel-Driven Life,” *Tabletalk*, 32, no. 1, (January 2008), 71.

the ads for the latest MacBook®. But if you are preaching the gospel and building the church upon the gospel, then there is power under the hood. Your church is being edified, and the lost will be evangelized.

So, my friends, let's maintain "an absolutely clear commitment to unoriginality." Let's be faithful to the charge to preach the gospel. And here's the thing: this is good news for ordinary pastors. You and I are ordinary, but by God's grace we can do this! Though there may be better preachers out there than you or me, there is not a better gospel.

Ordinary pastor, resolve to be faithful to this charge.

Be Ready in Season and Out of Season

Faithfulness to "preach the word" requires that you persevere in prosperity and adversity. Paul writes, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season" (v. 2). It's not clear whether "in season and out of season" is directed to Timothy and his varying temptations to timidity and fear, or to his audience, who could be either receptive or antagonistic. The smart guys who serve us with their commentaries differ on this. I'm persuaded by those who think it's a reference to the audience, because verses 3 and 4 describe hearers who "will not endure sound teaching."

Faithful preaching of the gospel isn't broadly appealing, and when the message isn't appealing you can be tempted to compromise. John Stott writes, "Whenever the biblical faith becomes unpopular, ministers are sorely tempted to mute those elements which give the most offence."²⁵ But whatever the demographics and disposition of your locale, and regardless of numerical growth or lack thereof, your charge is to be faithful to preach the gospel in season and out of season. You must preach this Word, whether your hearers are receptive, indifferent, or even antagonistic.

25. John Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1973), 105.

Reprove, Rebuke, and Exhort

But there is more. Being faithful to the message requires more than exegetical precision and homiletical skill. Faithfulness to the message requires pastoral wisdom and discernment: “Reprove, rebuke, and exhort” (v. 2).

We aren’t proclaiming this message in a vacuum. We are preaching the gospel to specific congregations, to people with names and faces. Paul’s commands to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort” have these people in view. Each Sunday we preach to a group of hearers with varying perspectives, temptations, and levels of maturity. Pastoral discernment is required so we don’t rebuke someone we should exhort, or exhort someone we should reprove.

To *reprove* is to confront or to expose. Just as Timothy was called to confront false teaching, we are called to confront false ideas. To *rebuke* is to humbly and boldly address those who are not listening or responding to God’s Word and who have hard, proud hearts. To *exhort* is to encourage those who are teachable, attentive, and responsive, and to explain to them how to live in light of the gospel. Any of these people could be in your church on a given Sunday.

Familiarity with the texts of Scripture is required but not sufficient. We must also be familiar with our church. A pastor must spend time with those he serves. He must get to know them so he can wisely, appropriately, compassionately, and skillfully address them from the text, both through his preaching and in private conversation. Someone once said, “The pastor doesn’t get his message from his people, but he does get his message with his people.” There is wisdom in that. Don’t think you can craft effective sermons while isolated from those you serve.

Faithfulness to the message requires pastoral wisdom and discernment, which you gain by taking the time to know those you serve. The better you know them, the more skillfully and effectively you can reprove, rebuke, and exhort your church.

With Complete Patience

I am brought up short every time I read the phrase “with complete patience and teaching” (v. 2). Every time. Pastoral ministry requires not just patience but “*complete* patience.” “Complete patience” emphasizes the extent to which this quality must be present in our preaching and in our entire ministry. It is essential, not optional. Yes, we must be theologically accurate and exegetically precise. But if we fail to be patient with those we are addressing, we aren’t being faithful to fulfill this charge.

I would argue that pastoral patience is more difficult than theological precision. For most of us, it’s easier to prepare and preach a sermon than to be patient with people. I think the admonition to pastor “with complete patience” is the most difficult challenge in this passage.

Every day of your pastoral ministry, you will face both temptations to be impatient with people and opportunities to be patient with them. There is that guy you have counseled for months, possibly years, who just doesn’t seem to get it. He is sincere, but consistent growth in godliness seems to be lacking from his life. Counseling session after counseling session doesn’t seem to yield any noticeable change.

It is also hard to be patient with the people who are consistently critical about minor points in your sermons, or who always notify you about what you failed to address. One time after I finished preaching, a guy approached me and said one thing: “You mispronounced a word.” That’s all he said—no greeting or small talk. Now, I grew up reading *MAD* magazine, so I have all kinds of snappy answers for what I think are stupid statements. That guy had no idea how evident the power of the Holy Spirit was in my life when I restrained myself from responding!

I once read an article by a pastor who regularly received anonymous critical letters from someone who signed each note, “The Thorn.” Attached to the first note was an explanation that, since the apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh, this writer felt that his pastor should

have one too. So he had appointed himself “The Thorn.” This pastor wanted to find out who “The Thorn” was and send him an anonymous letter signed, “The Hedge Trimmer.”

Or there’s the person who just wants to talk with you after the sermon and give you an update on his life that is completely unrelated to your sermon. He just wants to talk, and it’s as if he didn’t even hear what you just preached. You’ve finished preaching, you’re stepping down from the pulpit, you’re tired, and you can see him waiting for you.

I could give you a list of temptations. Your temptation probably involves whomever you are thinking about right now. If you don’t cultivate patience with those you serve and lead, your irritation and frustration will eventually surface. It will become evident in the tone and content of your sermons, your counseling, and your conversations on Sunday mornings. When you no longer have faith that God is working in those you serve, and instead you find yourself frustrated with them, your soul will become weary.

In an article in *Fast Company* magazine, bestselling authors Dan Heath and Chip Heath reported on a surprising study of kids who dropped out of high school. Some Johns Hopkins University researchers discovered that they could predict, as early as eighth grade, which students wouldn’t graduate. According to the article, “The school district could identify more than half of the students who would be likely to drop out before they even set foot in high school.”²⁶ I read that and immediately thought: *What if you could identify the early warning signs of a weary and discouraged pastor?*

Well, you can. One of the early warning signs is increasing frustration with people and the absence of “complete patience.” So how does a pastor cultivate complete patience with those entrusted to his care over a period of many years? Here are a few suggestions.

26. Dan Heath and Chip Heath, “Business Advice from Van Halen,” March 1, 2010, *FastCompany.com*, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1550881/business-advice-van-halen> (accessed October 23, 2025).

Remember God's Patience With You

When I am impatient with others, I have temporarily lost sight of God's patience with me. At the root of my impatience is self-righteousness and pride. Daily remembering God's patience with me protects my soul from sinful impatience with others. I love this reminder from J. I. Packer:

Think how he has borne with you, and still bears with you, when so much in your life is unworthy of him and you have so richly deserved his rejection. Learn to marvel at his patience, and seek grace to imitate it in your dealings with others; and try not to try his patience any more.²⁷

"Think how he has borne with you, and still bears with you, when so much in your life is unworthy of him"—the older I get, the more I appreciate a statement like this. I appreciated God's patience as a young pastor; I just appreciate it more now. He has patiently borne with me over a half-century of pastoral ministry. My wife, my children, and the men I serve with in ministry know how true it is: there is so much of my life that is unworthy of him.

"Learn to marvel at his patience," Packer writes. You have to marvel before you imitate. Have you marveled at it recently? If you haven't, that is an early warning sign. Learn to marvel at his patience, and seek grace to imitate that patience in your dealings with others.

"And try not to try his patience anymore." I love that little parting appeal from Dr. Packer. Immediately I think, "Okay, I will try. I am not sure how it will go, but I will try." Aren't you grateful that, as Psalm 103 proclaims, God does not treat us as our sins deserve? As you contemplate God's patience with you, your soul will be humbled and you will begin to treat others with complete patience.

27. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 165–66.

Remember That Sanctification is Slow

Sanctification is a process—an extremely slow process—for us all. Comprehending the truth, applying the truth, mortifying indwelling sin, and cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is a process that usually takes place by small increments over a lifetime. Normally, people don't grow dramatically as the result of a single sermon or sermon series. And neither do you. Look at it this way: for ordinary pastors, the slow process of sanctification is a form of job security.

Too often I expect those I serve to comprehend and apply God's Word quickly, even though it has taken me many years. I easily forget how much time my theological journey has taken. But I am glad John Newton didn't forget. As a wise and a patient pastor, he wrote:

I have been thirty years 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 would it be to expect all this should take place in another person; and that, in the course of a year or two.²⁸

So, ordinary pastor, what are your expectations of those you serve? Are you patient with them? Or do you expect them to comprehend quickly what took you years to grasp? Understanding the truth of Scripture takes place slowly and gradually, and applying it takes place slowly and gradually. That is why our preaching must be accompanied with “complete patience.”

Let me recommend a few realistic expectations of those whom you serve.

First, I think you should be amazed that those who heard you preach last Sunday come back (and even at times bring guests!). No one should be more amazed than the ordinary pastor when people

28. John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton vol. 3: With Memoirs of the Author and General Remarks on His Life, Connections, and Character*, 3rd ed., edited Richard Cecil (1820; repr. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 1:101.

return. Why should I be amazed? Because I preached last Sunday! “If some men were sentenced to hear their own sermons,” Spurgeon said, “it would be a righteous judgment upon them, and they would soon cry out with Cain, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear.’”²⁹ Keep that in mind when you think about your church. We should be grateful they come back.

Second, we should be grateful that they stay awake while we are preaching! Here’s something I find great encouragement in: Jonathan Edwards had to address people who were falling asleep in his church. J. I. Packer describes it this way:

In a sermon weightily titled “When the Spirit of God Has Been Remarkably Poured out on a People, a Thorough Reformation of Those Things That Were Before Amiss Amongst Them Ought to Be the Effect of It,” Edwards speaks against sleeping in church and urges that “persons would avoid laying down their bodies in their seats in the midst of public worship.”³⁰

I cannot imagine the sight. Edwards looks out during public worship, and there is nothing subtle about it: people are stretched out. Edwards did not deserve this. I deserved Edwards’s church in Northampton. Edwards deserved my church. I can find more than sufficient reason for gratitude in the fact that those in my church—most of them, anyway—stay awake while I am preaching. If I have realistic expectations of my church, it will be easy to be patient even when they (like me) grow slowly.

29. Charles Spurgeon, “The Necessity of Ministerial Progress,” in *Lectures to my Students*, vol. 2, Lectures, Second Series (1881; Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1990), 28.

30. J. I. Packer, “The Glory of God and the Reviving of Religion: A Study in the Mind of Jonathan Edwards,” in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 84n9.

Trust God's Timetable

You may have noticed that the most common biblical metaphors for ministry are drawn from the world of agriculture: sowing, watering, harvesting. Agriculture is slow. God is patient. Most of the time, he works out his purposes gradually. He is comfortable with seasons, years, and generations. For me, a month is a long time. My time frame is days, minutes, and seconds. I don't prefer to be patient.

My pastoral ministry can be more informed by the world of technology than by the world of agriculture. I turn on my iPhone® and I want a signal now. If I count one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi and there's no signal, I want to know what is taking so long! But if I look up from my iPhone® and bring that attitude to a conversation with a church member, someone for whom Jesus died, I am being unfaithful to the pastoral charge. My pastoral ministry cannot be informed by the world of technology; it must be informed by the world of agriculture. God won't be rushed.

So how about you? Does the way God normally works shape your view of your church? Are you completely patient? Here's a recommendation: don't assume you are sufficiently patient. Ask around. Ask your wife, ask your children, ask your staff, ask your elders. Say to them, "I want to have an unhurried time when we can evaluate my soul in this area. I don't want just my preaching evaluated; I want my heart evaluated. Am I pastoring you with complete patience?" When I am impatient with others, I have usually lost sight of God's patience with me. I have forgotten that sanctification is a process. I need to be reminded of God's timetable.

So what is Paul's charge, and thus God's charge, to ordinary pastors like you and me? Preach the gospel faithfully, in season and out of season, with pastoral discernment and complete patience.

2. Be Faithful to Your Ministry

But Paul is not finished. He begins to summarize the pastoral call, and he paints the picture this way: "As for you, always be sober-minded,

endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5). The pastor’s legacy should be a simple one: he was sober-minded, endured suffering, did the work of an evangelist, and fulfilled his ministry.

He is *sober-minded*, not like those described in verses 3 and 4 who are vulnerable to fads and trends. He is not seduced by novelty or religious innovation.

He *endures suffering*. He understands that suffering isn’t rare; it’s the norm. He is not going to avoid it. If you are a faithful pastor, it’s going to happen. You’ll be the target of criticism from within the church and slander from without. You’ll be opposed by the world when you preach the gospel. And you won’t be exempt from the personal suffering that’s part of living in a fallen world—suffering that God will use to accomplish his purposes in your life. God wants you to be confident that he is at work through your suffering so that you can endure it with a solid, not superficial, joy.

He *does the work of an evangelist*. Even though Timothy is serving in an area where evangelism and church planting are taking place, Paul wants evangelism to remain a passion in his life. This is all too easy for pastors to neglect in their preaching and personal life.

These imperatives combine to make one point: *fulfill your ministry*. Be faithful. Discharge the full range of your responsibilities. Persevere until the task is complete. Regardless of opposition or apathy, regardless of apparent success or lack thereof, regardless of church size, regardless of suffering—fulfill your ministry.

For the duration of our lives and ministries, we are called to relentless faithfulness. Today, be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. Tomorrow, be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. Do it today, and do it all again tomorrow, and do it all again the day after tomorrow. Keep doing the same things.

In an article titled “The Same Thing or the New Things,” Tony Payne recounts this story:

I once was sitting with the inestimable David Jackman in an airport, which is where we often seem to meet, and asked him what the big challenges were, looking ahead for The Proclamation Trust. He paused a moment and then said in his characteristically gentle and mellifluous tone, “You know, I think it’s to keep on doing the same thing we’ve been doing for the past 15 years.”

These were wise and very apt words for me at the time. I’d been at Matthias Media and The Briefing for about 15 years as well, and the natural thoughts running through my mind were, “Well, where do we head now? What’s the next thing, the bold new direction, the brilliant strategic shift that will take us to a new level?”

David was reminding me that for all the benefits of dreaming, scheming, strategizing and improving what we’re doing, one of the hardest and most crucial tasks for any ministry is to keep doing the same thing—the thing that our Master has commissioned and commanded us to do: to proclaim, to pray and to work with people.³¹

In a culture where innovation is paramount, and the calls to produce something new seduce not just the world but also the church, this is wisdom from above. Pastor, just keep doing the same thing. No innovation needed. This is what Paul is charging Timothy to do and what God is charging us to do: be faithful. Do the same thing. Don’t be distracted by what’s new. Fulfill your charge. And do it all again tomorrow.

3. Be Faithful to the Savior

At the outset of this passage, Paul informs Timothy that he gives this charge in the presence of God (“I charge you in the presence of God

31. Tony Payne, “The Same Thing or the New Thing,” *The Briefing*, June 1, 2008, <https://thebriefing.com.au/2008/06/the-same-thing-or-the-new-thing/> (accessed June 15, 2026).

and of Christ Jesus”) and in light of the final day of judgment (“who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom”). Paul wants Timothy to be motivated by an eternal perspective.

After a 2010 NCAA college basketball tournament game, I read the following excerpt from a press conference with Bob Huggins, head coach of the West Virginia University men’s basketball team:

Predictably, the first question Huggins was asked after his team’s victory had to do with how he felt about being one step from the Final Four so many years after his first—and only—trip to college basketball’s promised land.

“I never look back,” he said, deadpan as always. “I’ve just never been that way.”

Then he told a story. “When I was a kid growing up in West Virginia, I went to play one day,” he said. “I got in a pickup truck in Midvale with a guy and I noticed that he didn’t have a rearview mirror. I said to the guy, ‘Hey, there’s no rearview mirror.’ He looked at me and said, ‘Boy, we ain’t goin’ backwards.’ That’s the way I’ve lived my life.”³²

There is no rearview mirror in this passage, either. Paul draws Timothy’s attention to the future. Paul had fulfilled this charge, and he eagerly anticipated his reward: “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day” (2 Tim. 4:8). Those are truly remarkable words. Paul is absolutely certain that he will receive a crown of righteousness.

Pastor, when you imagine the last day, what do you picture? When you contemplate a once-for-all evaluation of your life’s work, do you

32. John Feinstein, “Bob Huggins Leads West Virginia to a Big Victory in the Sweet 16,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/25/AR2010032504537.html> (accessed June 15, 2026).

feel sufficient? Or, as you imagine that day, do your failures rise up and accuse you? It's easy for us to imagine Paul being commended by the Savior. And it's easy for us to imagine the extraordinary pastors we know of being commended on the last day. But for us ordinary pastors, what easily comes to mind is a long list of failures, shortcomings, and sins. I often expect to hear not "Well done" but "Nice try."

Ordinary pastor, here's what you can expect on the last day: a crown of righteousness. You—yes, you—can expect a commendation from the Savior.

Paul will undoubtedly receive commendation. But he writes, "There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, *and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing*" (2 Tim. 4:8). I am so glad he says, "not only to me, but also to all." If he had merely said, "I will receive a reward," I would have understood that. Of course Paul will be commended by the Savior! But the good news for ordinary pastors is that the reward is not unique to Paul. *All* who have been faithful to this charge will receive their reward. If we are faithful to preach the Word, faithful to fulfil our ministry, and faithful to the Savior, we too can look forward to receiving the Savior's commendation on the last day.

How can this be? How is it possible that I—who have sinned and so often fallen short—will receive this crown? So much in my life is unworthy of him. This is where the shadow of the cross falls over this passage. This reward is only possible because of the cross, where sins are forgiven and the service of ordinary pastors is sanctified. Stop for a moment and think about that day. On that last day there will be a parade of ordinary men, whose names you have never heard, who will hear the following from the Savior: "Well done, good and faithful pastor."

This parade will include men like Tom Carson. At the conclusion to the biography of his father, Don Carson writes these words:

Tom Carson never rose very far in denominational structures, but hundreds of people in the Outaouais and beyond testify how much he loved them. He never wrote a book, but he loved the Book. He was never wealthy or powerful, but he kept growing as a Christian: yesterday's grace was never enough. He was not a far-sighted visionary, but he looked forward to eternity. He was not a gifted administrator, but there is no text that says, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you are good administrators." His journals have many, many entries bathed in tears of contrition, but his children and grandchildren remember his laughter. Only rarely did he break through his pattern of reserve and speak deeply and intimately with his children, but he modeled Christian virtues to them. He much preferred to avoid controversy than to stir things up, but his own commitments to historic confessionalism were unyielding, and in ethics he was a man of principle. His own ecclesiastical circles were rather small and narrow, but his reading was correspondingly large and expansive. He was not very good at putting people down, except on his prayer lists.

When he died, there were no crowds outside the hospital, no editorial comments in the papers, no announcements on television, no mention in Parliament, no attention paid by the nation. In his hospital room there was no one by his bedside. There was only the quiet hiss of oxygen, vainly venting because he had stopped breathing and would never need it again.

But on the other side all the trumpets sounded. Dad won entrance to the only throne room that matters, not because he was a good man or a great man—he was, after all, a most ordinary pastor—but because he was a forgiven man. And he heard the voice of him whom he longed to hear saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord."³³

33. Carson, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*, 147–148.

Ordinary Pastors

Pastor, if you find yourself weary and discouraged, meditate on that day, ponder Paul's description of the day that is coming for all ordinary pastors who love Christ's appearing. God himself, with countless reasons to condemn us, will instead commend us, all because of the perfect life and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

That is extraordinary grace for ordinary pastors.

Watch Your Life

1 Timothy 4:16

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16).³⁴ If my historical hero, Charles Spurgeon, had been asked to write a book on pastoral ministry, I suspect he may have opened with these penetrating words from the apostle Paul. I have good reason for such speculation, for in his classic *Lectures to My Students*—a collection of addresses delivered at his much beloved Pastors College—1 Timothy 4:16 serves as an epigraph to the opening chapter, “The Minister’s Self-Watch.”

This prince of preachers knew from experience that a steady grip on these two sentences would protect, guide, and reassure young men in the ministry. Yet his weighty charge merely echoed the words of the original pastor of pastors—the author of 1 Timothy, the apostle Paul. Writing as a father to his dear and true son in the faith, Paul is intimately acquainted with Timothy’s frailties and the perils of pastoral ministry in a sinful world. He opens his letter by laying a foundation of imperative doctrinal issues and critical leadership responsibilities.

34. Originally published in *Preaching the Cross*, edited by Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 117–135.

But then Paul gets personal, and not just personal with Timothy; he gets personal with you and me, for we were all in Paul's peripheral vision as he penned these words—you and I and every man who would ever be called by God into Christian ministry.

More importantly, the sovereign God who inspired this passage had us in view. God, who saved us and called us into ministry, wants to have a word with us, a very personal word. The Savior wants to silence the shouts of professional demands and care for you personally with these words: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this . . ." In its essence, this is our job description as pastors, and it is followed closely by the fruit of faithful ministry.

" . . . for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." Do you feel the weight of this verse upon your soul? The stakes could not be higher. Nothing less than the preservation of yourself and your congregation hang upon the God-appointed means of your faithful pastoral ministry. The implications couldn't be more serious. They are, in fact, eternal.

Our Twofold Task

Watch yourself and watch your teaching. Or, as the NIV renders this verse, "Watch your life and doctrine closely." First Timothy 4:16 requires us to pay equally close attention to both. While it is appropriate, even necessary, to distinguish between life and doctrine, the two are ultimately inseparable. I cannot watch my life accurately unless I understand sound doctrine, and it does me no good whatsoever to study doctrine unless I also apply it to my life. Thus, we must not watch one to the neglect of the other; we must give full and uncompromised attention to both. And we must watch closely and consistently, not casually or occasionally.

Then there is the matter of that little pronoun *yourself*. Paul's words to Timothy are an expression of God's perfect wisdom for our good, and it begins, "Keep a close watch on *yourself* . . ." But often we behave as if this verse were directed at someone, anyone, other

than ourselves. We watch over the souls entrusted to our care and yet neglect our own soul. We pay close, even diligent, attention to the life and doctrine of the church members entrusted to us, all the while ignoring the inner workings of our own heart. While caring for the flock is certainly our pastoral responsibility, the command in this verse is unequivocal. Watch *your* life. Watch *your* doctrine. Watch them equally and watch them closely.

Watch Your Life

Ah, but one task is easier than the other, is it not? Don't you find it far more appealing and enjoyable to study doctrine than to study your heart? Isn't it much more pleasant to examine your books than to examine your motives? Aren't we far quicker to apply ourselves to a specific text in preparation for a sermon than to apply that same text to our heart and life? Puritan Richard Baxter wrote: "It is a palpable error of some ministers . . . who study hard to preach exactly, yet study little or not at all to live exactly."³⁵

Sound Doctrine Is Not Enough

Not long ago I was privileged to attend John MacArthur's annual Shepherd's Conference for pastors. At the conclusion of one of the sessions, I exited the sanctuary and immediately became aware of a charged atmosphere in the outdoor lobby. Men all around me had quickened their pace. Their faces were uniformly alert and all eyes were fixed in the same direction. In a moment I identified the source of their excitement: free books. We all know that few things thrill the heart of a pastor more than books. Free books send us into a frenzy. I love what this incident says about pastors in general and those pastors in particular: the pastors I know well place a high value on any resource that can provide insight into the Word of God. They understand that a knowledge of Scripture is essential to their ministry.

35. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 63–64.

However, we can often forget that a knowledge of Scripture alone is not sufficient. Of course, James won't let us forget that we must "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). This verse tells us that apart from obedience, knowledge can be deceptive. This puts an interesting twist on some of the favorite activities of good evangelical pastors: attending ministerial conferences, listening to sermons, and reading doctrinally sound books. All such activities afford us the opportunity for serious progress in personal godliness and ministry effectiveness. Yet each one can also be an instrument of progressive self-deception.

The problem occurs when we assume that merely attending a conference, listening to a sermon, or reading a book signifies actual change. (I understand the power of this deception. I can often feel like I'm maturing spiritually simply by *obtaining* new books!) We can even be deeply moved by profound scriptural truth but never actually grow in godliness. In his commentary on the epistle of James, Peter Davids elaborates, "No matter how extensive one's scriptural knowledge, how amazing one's memory, it is self-deception if that is all there is. True knowledge is the prelude to action, and it is obedience to the Word that counts in the end."³⁶

As pastors, our lives can be filled with reading, studying, sermon preparation, sermon proclamation, and counseling. Ironically, a busy schedule of absorbing and communicating truth can leave little time for *practicing* truth. But truth must be proclaimed and *then* applied, heard and *then* obeyed, preached and *then* practiced, for until I *practice* truth, I will not experience the transforming effect of truth on my soul. Faith practices truth by crying out to God in the midst of suffering. Love practices truth by actions of kindness and patience. Humility practices truth by specific confession of sin. Forgiveness practices truth by overlooking an offense. Hope practices truth by recalling the mercies of God.

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

Indeed, I have never truly, fully learned truth until I have *practiced* truth.

Please understand: according to James, if you consume truth without applying truth, you risk the false and dangerous impression that spiritual growth was achieved without application. But it never is—never. We must be ever wary of the self-deception of which James speaks. Let's recognize the limitations of sound doctrine, and make the practice of truth a daily priority. Never stop watching your life.

The Consequences of Neglect

Sound doctrine is not enough, because, according to Scripture, the fundamental qualification for pastoral ministry is godly character. Neither skill, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, nor reputation, nor personality, nor apparent fruitfulness of public ministry will suffice. Scan 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and you will encounter a profile of personal piety.

Yes, the pastor must be able to teach. Certainly, he must handle the Word of truth accurately and skillfully. But the foundational assumption of Scripture, both for appointment to or continuation in ministry, is that the pastor provides a godly example—not a perfect example, but an authentic one. As Spurgeon exhorted his students, "Our characters must be more persuasive than our speech."³⁷

If we neglect the command of 1 Timothy 4:16—if we fail to watch our life closely, carefully, and uncompromisingly—negative consequences are inevitable for ourselves, our family, our pastoral team, and our church. A marked or prolonged inattention to personal holiness in a pastor is a serious matter that must be addressed.

The War Within Never Ends

We often fail to watch our lives closely because we forget that within our heart lies a dangerous enemy, an enemy dead-set against

37. C. H. Spurgeon, "The Minister's Self-Watch," in *Lectures to My Students* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990 [orig. pub. 1881]), 13.

the pursuit of God and godliness. Paul vividly describes the reality of our spiritual conflict: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17). This is no pre-conversion description of a non-Christian; rather, it is a post-conversion description of the war within a regenerated heart. Indwelling sin, or remaining sin, is present in each of us. It is tenacious, destructive, and unrelenting in its opposition to grace. We are commanded to keep a close watch on our lives precisely because of this ever-active enemy within.

No one has taught me more about indwelling sin than John Owen. I agree with what J. I. Packer says:

[Owen] showed me that there is far more than I had known both to indwelling sin in believers and to God’s gracious work of sanctification. He searched me to the root of my being, bringing God awesomely close in the way that speakers and writers with unction are able to do.³⁸

So let us listen to the good Puritan that we might benefit from his gracious and skillful probing:

Many men live in the dark to themselves all their days; whatever else they know, they know not themselves. They know their outward estates, how rich they are, and the condition of their bodies as to health and sickness they are careful to examine; but as to their inward man, and their principles as to God and eternity, they know little or nothing of themselves. Indeed, few labor to grow wise in this matter, few study themselves as they ought, are acquainted with the evil of their own hearts as they ought; on

38. J. I. Packer, “Introduction,” in John Owen, *Sin and Temptation: The Challenge of Personal Godliness*, ed. James M. Houston (Colorado Spring, CO: Multnomah, 1996), xxix.

which yet the whole course of their obedience, and consequently of their eternal condition, doth depend.³⁹

Do you labor to grow wise about your soul? Do you study yourself as you ought? For Owen is surely right that the whole course of our eternal condition depends upon it. There is no pastoral privilege in relation to sin, no suspension of sin's temptations or exemption from its effects for men in the ministry; there is only a heightened responsibility to consistently fight and weaken sin—and more serious consequences for the pastor who fails to do so (James 3:1). Never imagine for a moment that God will overlook your sin because of the importance of your role. Imagining you are exempt is a grave mistake.

Because you have an opponent that never rests, your war never ends. Therefore, if you do not watch your heart and life closely, you are surely in danger. If you don't watch, you will weaken. So are you watching? Are you watching closely? Heart work is certainly hard work; it's humbling work, but it's necessary work because sin is always at work. And that, my friends, is why we need one another.

We Can't Fight the War Alone

If you're like me, you have no problem acknowledging pervasive depravity as a broad doctrinal category. It's not hard to admit that you are one of nearly seven billion living sinners who, in terms of their fallen nature, are basically all in the same boat. Sin of that sort—generalized, homogenized, the universal bottom line—isn't very embarrassing, is it? No, it's the specific, personal expressions of my own depravity that I have difficulty admitting.

Although it is not easy to confess specific sins to others, the reality is that I cannot watch myself by myself. I need others. I need the discerning eyes of friends on my heart and life to fulfill this command. God in his wisdom has designed it so. If left to myself, my discernment

39. John Owen, "Indwelling Sin," in *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 6:162.

of sin would be deficient and my growth in godliness limited. I would resemble the man described in the following story:

As I sat with my family at a local breakfast establishment, I noticed a finely dressed man at an adjacent table: his Armani suit and stiffly pressed shirt coordinated perfectly with a power tie. His wing-tip shoes sparkled from a recent shine; every hair was in place, including his perfectly groomed moustache. The man sat alone eating a bagel as he prepared for a meeting. As he reviewed the papers before him, he appeared nervous, glancing frequently at his Rolex® watch. It was obvious he had an important meeting ahead. The man stood up and I watched as he straightened his tie and prepared to leave. Immediately I noticed a blob of cream cheese attached to his finely groomed moustache. He was about to go into the world, dressed in his finest, with cream cheese on his face. I thought of the business meeting he was about to attend. Who would tell him? Should I? What if no one did?⁴⁰

As you and I walk through life, no matter how closely we watch ourselves, we are acquiring fresh blobs of cream cheese on our faces. We all have “cream cheese” moments. Let me tell you about one of many such moments in my life.

It occurred as I was meeting one day with the small group of men who take responsibility to care for my soul. I planned to share with them two areas of sin from the previous week. While fairly certain that I needed help understanding the second pattern of sin, I considered the first something of a formality. I desired to confess it in order to be transparent, but the nature and root of the sin seemed clear to me. I wanted to spend minimal time on that first sin so we could have ample opportunity to examine the second.

40. Attributed to Pastor James R. Needham in an illustration from www.preachingtoday.com (2004). See C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005), 125.

So I informed the men about the first sin, which is a pattern of complaining in my life. As I had been preparing to speak at a conference recently, a number of small, unexpected trials had come my way. In pride I thought, “These inconveniences shouldn’t be happening to me. I’m busy preparing to serve God’s people.” I failed to remember that God has not promised to protect me from trial or suspend his work of sanctification when I am preparing a message. The root of this sinful complaining, I told them, was pride. I explained that I had already confessed this sin to God and asked for his forgiveness; but before I could move on to the second sin, one of the men asked a question about my complaining. I answered, and then someone asked a second question. As additional questions were raised, I initially feigned a patient response, but I was perplexed. Hadn’t I been clear? The root of complaining is obviously pride, which I had confessed to God and to them, so why all these questions?

By outward appearances I was trying to humble myself—taking notes, making eye contact, nodding, and muttering “hmm” in all the right places—but the façade was becoming difficult to maintain. “Do you think there might be anything else at the root of this sin?” someone asked. That’s when I launched into a mini-teaching on the nature of pride and how it lies at the very heart of so many of our sins. I was irritated with my friends’ questions, and my responses were not humble.

You see, I fully expected to receive appreciation and commendation for the humility of my confession and the insightful accuracy of my self-analysis—not a succession of inquiries. Where did this group of theological ignoramuses come from? What happened to my intelligent and discerning friends? But no, these were the same guys—wise and godly men—and they weren’t convinced that I really understood the sin underlying my complaining. As we continued to talk, much more sin was revealed than I had originally perceived.

I learned a lot that day. I learned that I tend to trust my own discernment about my sin. I learned that sin had deceived and blinded me in

this area. This was obvious to them yet invisible to me. There was, in effect, a big blob of cream cheese on my face. And I had no clue. But my friends saw it, and they were kindly trying to help me wipe it away. Because I can often see other people's sin clearly, I assume that I can see my sin clearly. But it doesn't work that way. My own sin has an unusual ability to blind me, almost as if it never existed. The sin of a sinner is self-deceiving.

I love the way Paul Tripp unfolds this truth in his excellent book *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*:

Since each of us still has sin remaining in us, we will have pockets of spiritual blindness. Our most important vision system is not our physical eyes. We can be physically blind and live quite well. But when we are spiritually blind, we cannot live as God intended. Physically blind people are always aware of their deficit and spend much of their lives learning to live with its limitations. But the Bible says that we can be spiritually blind and yet think that we see quite well. We even get offended when people act as if they see us better than we see ourselves! The reality of spiritual blindness has important implications for the Christian community. [Hebrews 3:13] clearly teaches that personal insight is the product of community. I need you in order to really see and know myself. Otherwise, I will listen to my own arguments, believe my own lies, and buy into my own delusions. My self-perception is as accurate as a carnival mirror. If I am going to see myself clearly, I need you to hold the mirror of God's Word in front of me.⁴¹

Since my self-perception is as accurate as a carnival mirror, I need to *ask* others to hold up the mirror of God's Word. I need to humbly, but diligently and aggressively, *seek out* appropriate individuals and implore them to help me see my sin. And I must honestly inform them about my temptations and sins instead of presenting a carefully

41. Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 54.

edited or flattering version of myself. If I limit the evaluation of myself to myself, I will simply deceive myself—I certainly won't be fooling anybody else!

Each of us can safely assume that we have cream cheese on our face, which our wives and close friends clearly see. They have observations about our character but may be reluctant to share their concerns. Normally, to uncover these insights we must ask for them and then create an unhurried context in which they might be thoroughly explained and clearly understood. We must not wait until there is a crisis in our lives, our marriages, or our parenting before we involve others in the process. For the sake of our wives, for the sake of our children, for the sake of the Savior and those in our churches for whom he died, let us aggressively pursue the observations of others. What an opportunity this presents to put sin to death! By the very act of asking for observations, we can deal a blow to pride. What an excellent way to watch our life closely.

So let's get practical. Let me recommend that you present your wife with a gift in the form of a question. After preparing her ahead of time, sit down with her in some pleasant environment free from distractions and with ample time for a lengthy conversation. Then ask her, "What are three areas of character in which you would most like to see me grow by the grace of God?"

Then listen, very closely and very patiently. This is likely to be a "cream cheese" moment for you, so take notes. Speak only to draw out further observations and to express your appreciation for her thoughts. This is no time for you to raise objections, to make rationalizations, or to dismiss or challenge her observations. You need your wife like you need no one else, because she sees you like no one else. Recognize that you are undoubtedly blind to some of your sin and receive her insights with gratitude.

Next, ask the same question of the men on your pastoral team, or, if you serve alone, with two or three men whom you respect for their godly character and whom you trust to care for your soul.

Again, welcome every response and abstain from all explanation and justification of your actions. Take more notes. Then ask them these additional questions: “Do I confess specific instances of sin? Do I make you aware of my present temptations and my patterns of sin? Am I easy to correct?” You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by asking. Your humility will result in an experience of God’s grace (James 4:6). Their observations will help you grow, and your example will provoke others to greater godliness.

Finally, don’t keep the fight with sin private. Acknowledge to your congregation your daily battle with sin. Don’t allow the church to assume erroneously that you are above those temptations which are common to man. Where appropriate, inform them from the pulpit of your temptations and sins.

We can’t fight the war alone. We can’t watch ourselves by ourselves. But if we aggressively pursue the observations of our wife, our pastoral team, and even the members of our church, we will be fulfilling the mandate of 1 Timothy 4:16. By the grace of God and with the help of others, we can watch our lives closely.

Watch Your Doctrine

I do not have time to equip pastors in sound doctrine in this chapter. I simply want to accent one aspect of Paul’s admonition. As we watch our doctrine, we must never forget that which is central to our doctrine: the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you fail to keep the gospel at the core of your life and ministry, you have ceased to watch your doctrine closely. “The preachers’ commission,” writes J. I. Packer, “is to declare the whole counsel of God; but the cross is the centre of that counsel, and the Puritans knew that the traveller through the Bible landscape misses his way as soon as he loses sight of the hill called Calvary.”⁴²

42. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 286.

In all our preaching, we must never lose sight of the hill called Calvary, where the Son of Man was killed in our place. Regardless of the text or topic at hand, there must be some view of Calvary in every sermon. Your congregation should experience the amazing and comforting sight of the crucified Savior each and every time you preach. They should anticipate the sight of Calvary in every sermon and rejoice when it comes into view, and all the more when the cross is not immediately obvious in the text. “Where is the hill?” they should be asking. “Where is that blessed hill on which our precious Savior died?” We should exalt Christ’s finished work in our sermons so as to comfort the converted and convict the unbeliever.

Spurgeon’s example should inspire us: “I received some years ago orders from my Master to stand at the foot of the cross until he came. He has not come yet, but I mean to stand there till he does.”⁴³ Let us stand with the prince of preachers, gentlemen. As we preach the whole counsel of God, let us keep the cross central. By doing so, we will indeed be watching our doctrine.

Watch the Savior Work

As we watch our life, and as we watch our doctrine—closely, persistently, and with the help of others—we can expect a most astonishing outcome. At the end of 1 Timothy 4:16 is an unexpected promise: “Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” To be sure, Paul is not teaching self-atonement; we cannot and do not save ourselves. Instead, he is accenting God-ordained human agency in the experience of salvation. In this seemingly curious phrase we encounter the effect of godly leadership.

God, who can do all things without assistance, has nevertheless chosen to do some of his work through us. In commenting on this verse, George Knight writes, “Thus we see that the New Testament

43. C. H. Spurgeon, “The Old, Old Story,” The Spurgeon Library, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/the-old-old-story> (accessed July 8, 2026).

speaks of human agents in addition to the ultimate and absolute source, God himself.”⁴⁴ R. C. H. Lenski notes, “God alone saves, yet he saves by means, and it is thus that one who uses and applies these means can very properly be said to save himself and others.”⁴⁵ Finally, Calvin comments, “Although salvation is God’s gift alone, yet human ministry is needed, as is here implied.”⁴⁶

Simply stated, God uses human ministry and godly leadership as a means of grace. So as you and I obey the conditional elements of verse 16 we may have every confidence that God will preserve us and those whom we serve for that final day. Here’s why: this promise, like every promise of salvation found in Scripture, is guaranteed in and fulfilled by the finished work of the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Pause and consider this as you face the daunting demands of pastoral ministry. Who stands behind and guarantees the fruitfulness of your labors? Our Mediator. What assures you that by your “watching your life and doctrine,” men and women will spend eternity with God? The work of our Savior. What empowers your close watchfulness and diligent persistence? The cross of Christ.

Indeed, were it not for Christ’s finished work, the burden of this verse would be too much to bear. But because of the Savior, you can have hope for ultimate fruitfulness in your pastoral ministry. You can have hope that your life will increasingly reflect the transforming effects of the gospel. You can have hope that your preaching will faithfully proclaim your Savior. And you can have hope that your ministry will contribute to the preservation of yourself and the

44. George Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 212.

45. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 650.

46. Quoted in Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 99.

congregation under your care. As you watch your life, and as you watch your doctrine, you can be confident that *you will see the Savior work*.

The Joyful Pastor

Philippians 1:3–8

If you have ever attended a conference on pastoring, you have no doubt experienced the incredible blessing that a conference can be in the life of a pastor.⁴⁷ You likely listened to world-class preaching from world-class pastors. You were equipped to love the Savior more passionately and serve your church more effectively. You experienced the nearness of God in worship as you sang praises to the Savior. Your conversations, whether serious or humorous, prolonged mealtimes that lasted late into the night. You ate well and drank coffee like you had no budget.

But as the conference drew to a close, you began to contemplate the transition from conference life to normal life, and the challenges that awaited you at home. You began to think about the demands of preparing another sermon. You felt the weight of the unanswered emails that had accumulated in your absence. You thought about people in your church in need of care and comfort and correction. You were keenly aware that a day at a conference bears little resemblance to your normal day as a pastor.

47. Originally published in *Proclaiming a Cross-Centered Theology*, ed. by Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 185–203.

In an article in *Tabletalk* magazine, Peter Alwinson describes the life of a pastor, painting a personal and candid picture of the difference between naïve expectations and (sometimes harsh) reality:

Teach and preach the Word with accuracy, clarity, and practicality and they will come and they will mature and together we will win the world for King Jesus, with King Jesus at our side.

Not an uncommon perspective for a seminarian with divinity degree freshly in hand. It was my earnest conviction and expectation. . . .

Cracks quickly appeared in that sanguine theological position. Idealism and incomplete theology must after all eventually give way to reality. Worship attendance grows; babies die and have to be buried; a businessman becomes hungry for God and receives Christ; a convert slips back to the drug lifestyle and is on the streets again; marriage partners are reconciled; Christians bicker with their brothers in Christ. . . .

The “already-not-yetness” of the kingdom of God is in the practical theology department for pastors. We live it and witness it every day. . . . Blessing, power, and joy alternate daily and rapidly with loss, weakness, and grief. Church life is a carousel of defeat and victory.⁴⁸

Perhaps you recognize yourself somewhere in this description. If you have been in ministry for more than a few days, you are familiar with this carousel.

In this chapter, I want to have a personal word with you. I want to prepare you for the challenges that await you on the “carousel of defeat and victory” where “blessing, power, and joy alternate daily

48. Pete Alwinson, “Already, but Not Yet,” *Tabletalk* 19, no. 1 (January 1995), 54. Scripture quotations are from the NKJV.

and rapidly with loss, weakness, and grief.” I want to address your heart and care for your soul.

It is essential that a pastor is equipped with gospel-centered, doctrinal discernment. As pastors, we need to be armed to contend for the truth of the gospel and, where necessary, to humbly and courageously oppose error and protect the churches that we love and serve. We need to be reminded that there is no true pastoral ministry apart from faithful gospel proclamation and doctrinal precision.

But pastoral ministry demands not only faithful proclamation of the gospel, but also personal holiness. It demands not only doctrinal precision, but also godly affection; not only pleasing God in our public proclamation, but also pleasing God in the privacy of our hearts. Pastoral ministry is not only about our minds, but also about our souls. I want this chapter to prepare your soul to meet the challenges that await you in your pastoral ministry. When you put down this book and check your email or begin preparing your next sermon, I want it to be well with your soul.

Paul and the Carousel

I think the most effective way I can care for you is to consider with you what happened in Paul’s soul as he encountered the challenges of pastoral ministry. Here we will not concentrate on his public ministry, unequalled though that was. We will look here at what took place in the privacy of Paul’s heart and at what effect the state of his soul had on his public ministry.

Here is a man whose ministry responsibilities far exceeded our own. He proclaimed the gospel, planted churches, contended for the gospel, and suffered for the gospel. “And, apart from other things,” he writes, “there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (2 Cor. 11:28–29).

Without a doubt, Paul understood the carousel of ministry responsibilities, pressures, and anxieties better than any of us. Yet amid

his massive responsibilities, look carefully at how he speaks to the Philippian church. The man with the “daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches” writes this:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 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. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:3–8)

In just these few sentences, we see joy-filled gratitude, faith, and affection. You simply cannot read the rest of the letter without noticing Paul’s joy. Philippians is one of Paul’s most personal letters, and joy is his most dominant emotion throughout. As R. Kent Hughes points out, the letter as a whole references joy sixteen times, building to a “ringing crescendo” in the command, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).⁴⁹ The guy with the most responsibilities is also the happiest guy in the room.

It’s all too easy to forget that Paul penned this letter while imprisoned. Paul was familiar with the carousel. But it wasn’t just his ministry responsibilities that set him apart, nor was it simply his suffering and sacrifice for the gospel. What set Paul apart was the way he carried all of his pressures and anxieties. He served, he sacrificed, he suffered—and he did it all with joy. To study this man’s life and letters is to encounter this clear characteristic: Paul served the Lord not just with faithfulness, but also with gladness. He was a happy pastor.

49. R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 25.

Are You a Happy Pastor?

I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of pastors reading this are serving the Savior and his church faithfully. And for that, each of you has my deepest respect. But I am not certain that the overwhelming majority of pastors are serving the Savior and his church joyfully. I am not sure that all is well with your souls. Faithfulness is both necessary and commendable, but it is not sufficient. If we are to fully please God and accurately represent him, we must also serve our churches joyfully. So we would be wise to look carefully at Paul's example of joy and to ask ourselves, "Is joy present in my ministry and in my life?"

Please don't misunderstand: I am not speaking of superficial happiness or a cheerful personality. Nor am I denying the reality of sin, suffering, sorrow, and tears. But even in times of sorrow and grief, does some degree of joy accompany your sorrow? Even when suffering, Paul described himself as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). So do we serve, lead, work, pray, prepare sermons, preach, counsel, and care with a joy obvious to all? Seriously—do you? At the outset of this chapter, let's briefly and humbly evaluate ourselves:

- Would your wife describe you as consistently happy and genuinely joyful as you execute your pastoral responsibilities?
- How would your children describe your demeanor? They observe you each day; would they say, "My dad is a joyful pastor"?
- What about the pastors or elders serving alongside you? Would they describe you as joyful? Or would they describe you as burdened, moody, often irritable, and easily discouraged?
- What about your assistant and others who serve in administrative roles in the church? What is it like to work with you in your daily routine, outside of public view? Are you consistently joyful, or would they characterize you as busy, hurried, irritated, or demanding?

- Would the members of your congregation say that you are consistently happy and that you are glad to be their pastor?
- What is your church like? Have you built, by your example, a church with a culture of joy? Or perhaps more tangibly, if I were a guest at your church this Sunday, would it be obvious to me that joy characterizes your church?

If you answered all those questions favorably, perhaps you truly are a joyful pastor—and I hope you are. But you would be wise to confirm your assessment with another, possibly more objective, evaluation. I encourage you to humbly ask your wife, your children, your fellow elders, and your administrative assistant for their observations. Ask them, “As you watch my life and the way I execute my pastoral responsibilities, am I consistently joyful?” Most importantly, what about God? Would he say, “By my grace, because of the gospel, you have served me with gladness”?

From my observation of pastors for more than thirty years, many pastors serve the Lord faithfully but not gladly. Too many faithful pastors appear burdened and discouraged rather than joyful in the execution of their duties. Perhaps you are one of them. Though you are at times moved in worship and affected by preaching, in your heart you are weary, burdened, and perhaps angry as you think about your daily life. Perhaps you are considering resigning from your church or from the ministry altogether.

If that is you, I want to talk with you. I particularly want to have a word with those who are weary and burdened. And I think one of the most effective ways I can serve you is to draw your attention to the happiest pastor I know of—Paul. The guy with the most responsibilities is also the happiest guy! So the grace of God displayed in the gospel, reflected in Paul’s life and ministry, should provide hope for us all, regardless of the state of our soul at present or the challenges that await us on the “carousel of defeat and victory” that is church life.

Paul's Pastoral Ministry

So let's attempt to answer several questions. How did Paul consistently serve the Lord with gladness? What sustained joy in his soul despite hardship, opposition, and responsibility that none of us can relate to? What can we learn from his example as we examine it in the shadow of the cross? How can gladness and joy become realities in my life that are obvious to my wife, my children, my pastoral team, my administrative assistant, the church members I serve, and even to non-Christians?

The answers to these important questions are found in the opening chapter of Philippians. These verses provide us with a window into Paul's soul. As we overhear his divinely inspired words to the Philippian church, we learn how to cultivate and maintain joy amid ministry responsibilities and challenges. This text reveals three characteristics that marked Paul's soul and his pastoral ministry. All three are simple, profound, and easy to assume or neglect. As Paul writes to the Philippians, let's study what happens in his soul. In the process we'll see what will sustain joy in our lives and ministries.

1. Gratitude to God

Apart from our Lord, I don't think there ever was a more grateful man than Paul. In studying Paul's letters, I've become aware of the priority of gratitude in his life and ministry. His gratitude was sincere, specific, and diverse. In private he gave thanks to God for people and churches, and then he expressed his gratitude in public, written form. The opening verses of this letter are just one example: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:3-5). Paul's expressions of gratefulness to God, particularly his gratefulness for God's people, are neither subtle nor occasional. They are pronounced and frequent. In fact, it's been noted that "Paul mentions the subject of

thanksgiving in his letters more often, line for line, than any other Hellenistic author, pagan or Christian.”⁵⁰

The expressions of gratitude at the beginning of Philippians are not merely superficial formalities or ancient etiquette. Nor was Paul’s gratitude some unique personality trait present before his conversion. His thankfulness was theologically informed. As scholar Peter O’Brien has observed, “Paul’s introductory thanksgivings were not meaningless devices. Instead, they were integral parts of their letters, setting the tone and themes of what was to follow.”⁵¹ Paul’s gratitude, he points out, “is always a response to God’s saving activity in creation and redemption.”⁵²

Scholar David Pao makes similar observations about Paul’s writings:

The grounds [of thanksgiving] are usually acts of God within the lives of the believers and the faithful response of the audience. Thankfulness as a result of the experience of grace by others became a *dominant category*.⁵³

Is thankfulness a “dominant category” in our hearts and ministries? If not, it should be.

Paul’s habitual gratitude was rooted in theology. It sprang from an awareness of God’s grace, of God’s activity, and of the gospel’s effect and advance. When we discern God’s grace in our churches, we too will be grateful to God.

50. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 69.

51. Peter O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgiving in the Letters of Paul* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 263.

52. Peter O’Brien, “Thanksgiving within the Structure of Pauline Theology,” in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday*, ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 62.

53. David W. Pao, *Thanksgiving: An Investigation of a Pauline Theme* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 20; emphasis added.

So how grateful are you? What is it like to have a conversation with you? Is it immediately evident that gratefulness is a priority in your pastoral ministry? Have you created in your church a culture of gratitude that is plain to anyone who visits? If not, perhaps you don't yet share Paul's conviction about the importance of gratitude.

If gratitude does not characterize you, I encourage you to study this topic in Paul's life and to discover its life-altering relevance for your soul and your ministry. You will experience God's transforming grace for your family, for your church, and ultimately for the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And you will avoid becoming vulnerable to the subtle, serious, and predictable sin of complaining.

I want to prepare you for this temptation, because pastoral ministry provides countless daily opportunities to complain, and, from my experience, many of us do not realize the seriousness of this sin.

I know I was unaware.

My Not-So-Insignificant Sin

A number of years ago, my friend David Powlison taught the Dynamics of Biblical Change course to the church where I was pastoring. In his opening session, David suggested that we choose just one area of our lives to address during the course, so we would not be overwhelmed by the day-long deluge of information that was to follow. As an example, David volunteered the topic of complaining and began to illustrate it from his life. Rather than thinking creatively, I adopted his topic. Throughout the seminar and in the weeks and months that followed, I focused on the area of complaining and began to seek biblical change. Little did I know what was providentially underway in my life.

What David Powlison inadvertently set in motion for me was a two-year study of the topic of complaining in Scripture and in my life. I gave more careful attention to familiar passages such as Numbers 11 and 1 Corinthians 10 and supplemented this study with the works of Puritans such as Jeremiah Burroughs and Thomas Watson.⁵⁴

54. I highly recommend Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian*

As I studied the sin of complaining, I soon realized it was as subtle as it was pervasive. It colored not only my speech but my behavior as well. And I discovered something even more serious: my complaints weren't innocent statements of how I felt about my circumstances, uttered in complete privacy, with no consequences. When I complained, I had an audience. I was complaining against *someone*: God himself.

The unexpected discovery that impressed upon me the seriousness of my sin was this: complaining reveals the pride in my heart. God is not indifferent to my complaints, since when I complain, I am wise in my own eyes. I am arrogantly challenging God's wisdom. As Thomas Watson puts it, "Murmuring . . . is a rising up against God."⁵⁵ Why is this? "For thou settest thyself above God . . . as if thou wert wiser than he."⁵⁶ And if you aren't feeling this yet, I dare you to read these words from John Calvin without experiencing some degree of conviction:

Why is it that men fret so when God sends them things entirely contrary to their desires except that they do not acknowledge that God does everything by reason and that He has just cause? . . .

As soon as God does not send what we have desired, we dispute against Him, we bring suit, not that we appear to do this, but our manner shows that this is nevertheless our intent . . . But from what spirit is this pronounced? From a poisoned heart; as if we said, "The thing should have been otherwise, *I see no reason for this.*" Meanwhile God will be condemned among us. This is how men exasperate themselves. And in this what do they do? It is as if they accused God of being a tyrant or a hairbrain who asked

Contentment (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964) and Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1835; repr. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2001).

55. Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment*, 30.

56. Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment*, iv.

only to put everything in confusion. Such horrible blasphemy blows out of the mouths of men.⁵⁷

I vividly remember the first time I read those words, and they have been convicting and guarding my soul ever since.

How often during the day I am tempted to complain about hardships, whether trivial or severe! Each time, the pride in my heart says, “I see no reason for this.” When I complain, I am calling into question the sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness of God. “Trouble? Sorrow? Inconvenience? I see no reason for this.” Calvin says that “such horrible blasphemy blows out of the mouths of men.” It was blowing out of my mouth daily.

So how do you respond to adversity, perplexing circumstances, criticism, or suffering? As you put this book down and receive a discouraging phone call, or the next time you are criticized after preaching a sermon, what will happen in your soul? The occasions for complaining are endless, and each time we will be tempted to say, “I see no reason for this.” When we respond to difficulty in this way, we are—in our arrogance—presuming to be wiser than God.

Cultivating Gratitude

One primary way to weaken the sin of complaining is to cultivate gratitude for the many evidences of God’s grace in your church. Paul could be grateful for the Philippian church because he perceived God’s activity among them. The church, while impressive, was in need of adjustment: pride and selfish ambition were threatening to undermine its unity, and two church members were in conflict with each other. Yet Paul was more aware of God’s grace than of their deficiencies.

He begins this letter by reviewing God’s work for, within, and through this church. He gives thanks for all of them, praying for

57. John Calvin, *Sermons from Job*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 29–30, quoted in Robert D. Jones, “Anger against God,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1996), 17; emphasis added.

them with joy “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,” a day which he appears to remember vividly (vv. 4–5). In these opening verses, as we overhear how Paul prayed for this church, we hear sounds of joyful gratitude to God for his grace at work in the Philippians.

If someone were to listen in on our prayers, would they hear the sound of specific, sincere, joyful thanksgiving to God for the churches where we serve? There is a direct correlation: where we lack joy, complaining has replaced gratitude. When we are discouraged, we are more aware of our churches’ deficiencies than of evidences of God’s grace. If that is you, gospel-informed gratitude will alter your soul and change your pastoral ministry dramatically.

A grateful heart will affect our preaching. It’s easy to discern the difference in tone and demeanor between a grateful pastor and a self-righteous, irritated pastor

A grateful heart will affect our counseling. If, before we begin counseling, we remind ourselves of God’s grace in that person’s life, we will be freshly grateful for him. As we counsel, our gratefulness will be obvious, and we will transfer the hope of the gospel to him in that conversation.

A grateful heart will affect our relationships with the leaders in the churches where we serve. We will view them as brothers, friends, and co-laborers. These leaders are gifts from God, not professional colleagues or a means of sanctification.

A grateful heart will affect our wives, protecting them from bitterness, offense, and discouragement.

A grateful heart will affect how our children view our churches. What do our children hear from us about the church? Do they hear criticism and complaining or thankfulness? When they hear us celebrate God’s grace in our churches rather than complain, they will be protected from bitterness or offense.

A grateful heart, as we model and teach it, will affect our churches. Every Sunday, God’s grace is evident throughout the churches we

serve in countless ways because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's teach the churches that we serve to see and celebrate these evidences of grace and to glorify God for them. Let's model and teach this, so that we create and cultivate a culture of gratitude.

Gratitude was, as Pao writes, a "dominant category" for Paul. If we resolve, by God's grace, to make gratitude a dominant category in our lives, we will be joyful pastors—and most importantly, we will please and glorify God.

2. Faith Toward God

What other explanations do we find for Paul's gladness despite ministry challenges and hardships? How could he write to the Philippians, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy" (1:3–4)? The second explanation for Paul's pronounced joy—the reason he could serve the Lord with both faithfulness and gladness—was faith. "And I am sure of this," he writes, "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6).

Trust in the promises and purpose of God informed Paul's service. He was confident that God would fulfill his purpose for this church through the gospel of Jesus Christ. His confidence in the Philippians' future was rooted in their past, and in the One who had begun this good work. He knew that this church began with the effectual call of God through the proclamation of the gospel. Paul was sure of this: what God begins, he sustains and completes.

This is impressive confidence from a guy imprisoned for the gospel. Sometimes, even when I am sitting in the comfort of an elders' meeting, I am not sure that God will finish what he started. How can we share Paul's confidence? Our confidence for those entrusted to our care should be no different from his. If the members of your church are regenerated—if they have turned from their sin and trusted in the Savior as a substitutionary sacrifice for their sin—they are no different from the Philippians. So you can and should share Paul's certainty

about God's work in their hearts and lives. This faith toward God for your church will change your perspective of your church and your ministry. It will even change the way you speak to your church. Paul's confidence for the church was rooted in theology, not in a naturally optimistic outlook. And the same theology, which leads to the same confidence, is available to you.

Want of Faith

Pastor, if you aren't confident in God for those entrusted to your care, I encourage you to set aside a season of time for a fresh study of the nature of faith and its importance as you cultivate joy in your pastoral ministry. Let me recommend that you allow the nineteenth-century pastor Charles Bridges to assist you in this study. His book *The Christian Ministry* is outstanding (it has been the second-most influential book in my pastoral ministry⁵⁸), especially one short chapter titled "Want of Faith," which you should certainly read, and perhaps even memorize. In this chapter Bridges writes:

All our failures may be ultimately traced to a defect of faith . . .
The life of faith, therefore, is the life of the Minister's work and
the spring of his success . . .

The main difficulty, therefore, is not in our work, but in ourselves;
in the conflict with our own unbelief . . . Difficulties heaped upon
difficulties can never rise to the level of the promise of God . . .

It is faith that enlivens our work with perpetual cheerfulness. It
commits every part of it to God, in the hope that even mistakes
shall be overruled for his glory; and thus relieves us from an
oppressive anxiety, often attendant upon a deep sense of our
responsibility. The shortest way to peace will be found in casting

58. The most important, influential book has been D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

ourselves upon God for daily pardon of deficiencies and supplies of grace, without looking too eagerly for present fruit. Hence our course of effort is unvarying, but more tranquil . . . Unbelief looks at the difficulty. Faith regards the promise. Unbelief therefore makes our work a service of bondage. Faith realizes it as a “labour of love.” Unbelief drags on in sullen despondency. Faith makes the patience, with which it is content to wait for success, “the patience of hope” [1 Thess. 1:3 KJV]. As every difficulty . . . is the fruit of unbelief; so will they all ultimately be overcome by the perseverance of faith.⁵⁹

The primary difficulty is not found within our work, but within us. “All our failures,” Bridges says, “may be ultimately traced to a defect of faith.” Surely not *all* of them? Yes, every one.

Rare is the day that this passage doesn’t have some influence on my soul. Since reading this, I have sought to make the life of faith the life of my work, and I have grown to understand that my daily difficulty is never the work. It is my unbelief. I have learned that when I lack joy and ministry is, or appears, difficult, my soul is giving way to unbelief. As Bridges says, “It is faith that enlivens our work with perpetual cheerfulness.”

Is your pastoral ministry marked by perpetual cheerfulness? If not, Bridges has a simple but profound diagnosis: what you need is faith. In fact, you cannot please God, or by implication pastor effectively, without faith toward God. There are no substitutes for faith. Without it, Hebrews 11:6 tells us, it is not merely difficult to please God; it is impossible.

59. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1830; 1991), 173–75; 178–79.

No Better Gospel

Where is your confidence when you stand behind the sacred desk to preach? Is it in the One who began a good work and will sustain and complete it, using the preaching of his Word as a means to do this? Is your confidence in the power of God to transform lives through the proclamation of the gospel? Or are you trusting in your eloquence, relevance, awareness of culture, or humor?

When listening to a world-renowned preacher, it's easy to think, "I can't do that." Let me confirm your discernment: you can't. Neither can I. Only a few can preach like they do. But if that discourages you, your confidence is misplaced. If your confidence is in your gifting, your education, your preparation, your eloquence, or your wit, then it is not in the One who began this good work. Our confidence must be in the gospel we proclaim.

Spurgeon captured this in a characteristically witty statement to his Pastors College students: "Your ministry is poor enough. Everybody knows that, and you ought to know it most of all."⁶⁰ You have got to love hearing that from your mentor in ministry. "Your ministry is pathetic, and everybody knows it. You ought to know it most of all."

But he went on to remind his students that their preaching was effective only because God keeps his promise. "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). You can step into your pulpit this Sunday with confidence in God and in his promise for your church.

On another occasion Spurgeon said, "Whitefield and Wesley might preach the gospel better than I do, but they could not preach a better gospel."⁶¹ I would agree with him myself. There are many preachers

60. Charles Spurgeon, "The Holy Spirit in Connection with Our Ministry," in *Lectures to My Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1954), 194.

61. Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Pulpit*, vol. 28 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1973), 339.

who can preach the gospel better than I can. But the good news for me, and for all of us, is this: they cannot preach a better gospel.

This should bring joy to every average pastor. As you approach your pulpit this Sunday, go in the confidence that God will continue the good work he has begun in your church through the proclamation of the gospel. And let this faith enliven your work with perpetual cheerfulness.

3. Affection for Others

As we overhear Paul's words to the Philippian church, there is one more explanation for the consistent joy in his soul. How could he pray, preach, write, and serve, and do all this with gladness? How did he avoid discouragement as he faced the challenges of pastoral ministry?

The third source of Paul's joy is found in a verse that is easy to overlook. This statement is stunning: "For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all *with the affection of Christ Jesus*" (1:8). Paul cared for this church with the very affection of Christ himself. This kind of love permeates Paul's ministry and letters. This was not because Paul was naturally a relational guy, a "people person." It was not a personality trait. We find the explanation for his affection in verse 7: "for you are all partakers with me of grace." Paul's affection for the Philippians had a theological basis. It was rooted not in personality but in the gospel. Each church Paul planted and served was the object of his affection, because each was the object of Christ Jesus's affection.

Paul's statement is both a challenge to us and a source of hope. By the grace of God, we actually can care for those in our churches with the affection the Savior has for them. The gospel, understood and applied, creates affection for those whom the Savior bought with his own blood.

So how do you feel about those you serve? Could you say that you feel this affection for them—for all of them? Or do you view your role as merely preaching to them? Are you irritated with certain members of your church, or perhaps indifferent to large segments of

its population? Is your church more aware of your correction or your affection? If, when you consider your church, you do not find affection in your heart for them, do not rest until you find out why. Cultivating love for God's people must be a priority for pastors. Members of our churches must encounter the affection of Christ through our conversations, prayer, encouragement, counseling, and preaching.

When I don't feel this love for somebody, it's usually because I have lost sight of Christ's love for him. I find that a simple practice renews my affection: I contemplate Christ's death on the cross for him. I follow the wise counsel of Charles Spurgeon and "dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard."⁶² The Savior loved this person enough to bear the wrath of God on his behalf. As I consider the amazing affection of Christ for him, a fresh affection for this individual is awakened in my soul.

At some point each of us will grow tired of caring for those temporarily entrusted to our charge. If you are weary, I commend to you an extended season of surveying the wondrous cross and contemplating the Savior's love for your church. Only by the contemplation of Calvary can your affection be refreshed and sustained. As you consider Christ's death for those in your church, your heart will, by the grace of God, be filled with love for them—not superficial feelings or an expression of your personality, but the very affection of Jesus Christ. If Paul were here I think he would say to us, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, *to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood*" (Acts 20:28). There is an inseparable relationship between your affection for the church and your contemplation of Calvary.

When you stand at your pulpit this Sunday looking out over your church, say to yourself, "I address those whom he obtained through his own blood. These are those for whom the Savior died. Our Lord cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' for those

62. Charles Spurgeon, "To Lovers of Jesus" (sermon, Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, August 8, 1886).

I am about to address” (Matt. 27:46). Never attempt to care for your church apart from an awareness that Christ died for them.

And as this love grows in your soul, seize every occasion to express it to them! Cultivate affection for your church as you pray and prepare your sermons. Express it as you greet the people in your church on a Sunday morning. Never correct your church or an individual member of it if your heart lacks affection for them.

As you gaze upon the wondrous cross, as you consider the affection of Christ for the people you serve, your affections will be transformed. Your church will become to you, as Spurgeon once described it, “the dearest place on earth.”

Conclusion

As pastors, we should regularly be refreshed and equipped for our primary work of serving local churches. We are called to stay on the carousel, working to maintain joy over the long haul. But we can be certain that what sustained Paul will sustain us. Like Paul, we have every reason to be grateful to God. We have every reason to trust God. And we have every reason to love those for whom the Savior died. What a privilege it is to be a pastor. We have every reason to be joyful pastors.

We Do Not Lose Heart

2 Corinthians 4:1–18

I was recently at a conference with one of the best-known preachers of our time. Prior to him speaking at this conference we were having dinner, and at one point I asked for three ways I could pray for him.

“Pray that I would not bomb so regularly when I preach.” Those were his exact words. I stopped writing his request and looked up.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, “You don’t bomb!”

Later that evening my friend proceeded to preach one of the finest messages that I and the others listening had ever heard. As he descended from the platform, I walked over to him and said, “You didn’t bomb!”

But later, on the way to the parking lot, he lamented that he had bombed once again. I began to encourage him, to take him through what I had observed in his exegesis and illustration and application. I even reminded him of how attentive the audience was, so attentive that there was not a single cough! This still did not move him. So I was forced to resort to my old fallback of name-calling, and proceeded to tell him that he was an idiot.

Have You Lost Heart?

Later that evening, I reflected on this interaction. While my friend is unique in his preaching gift, international influence, and writing

ministry, he is not unique in his temptation to discouragement. In fact, no pastor is exempt from this temptation. I cannot help but wonder how many pastors reading this right now feel this temptation. Perhaps in the last few months or years, you have been losing your heart for pastoral ministry. Perhaps you have remained faithful and even fruitful in your ministry, but you are no longer joyful.

Friends, we are not alone as we confront this temptation. And while we may find it somewhat heartening that other pastors can relate to our struggle, there is one pastor in particular whose experience can provide us with singular and significant encouragement: the apostle Paul.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes his temptation to discouragement. Here, in chapter 4, Paul reveals his own temptation to lose heart, but also a remedy for this pastoral problem:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of

Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:1–18)

There is much for the pastor in 2 Corinthians, but in chapter 4 there is something uniquely personal for him. In this chapter we are informed about certain temptations that are common to pastors, and one temptation in particular: the temptation to lose heart. We encounter this idea of losing heart in 4:1 and it appears again in 4:16. Paul was very familiar with this temptation to lose heart in the midst of the challenge, difficulty, and opposition that he encountered as he proclaimed the gospel, planted churches, and cared for those churches. In chapter 11, he concludes his extensive list of trials and sufferings by referring to the daily pressure of anxiety he feels for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28). This was a man who was familiar with the temptation to lose heart, and particularly with regard to the Corinthian church, given his intense and often painful relationship with them.

Here in chapter 4, however, we encounter not only Paul's temptation to lose heart, but his resolve to not lose heart. In light of all he suffered, in light of all the responsibility he carried, in light of all the

opposition he endured, this is a remarkable statement. *Though tempted to lose heart, he resolved, by the grace of God, to not lose heart.*

What informed his resolve? How can we follow his example? What does a pastor do when he begins to lose heart? Here are three heart-protecting, heart-strengthening realities that Paul provides in this chapter for the pastor who is tempted to lose heart.

1. The Call of Christian Ministry

Paul's awareness of his call, and the nature and purpose of that call, strengthened and protected him from joyless ministry. He references this call in 2 Corinthians 4:1 with the phrase, "having *this* ministry." He goes on to describe the nature of this ministry:

- "An open statement of the truth" (v. 2)
- "Our gospel" (v. 3)
- "The gospel of the glory of Christ" (v. 4)
- "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (v. 5)

Paul's ministry—like every pastor's ministry—was a call to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. His ministry was fundamentally one of proclamation. And it was the call to this ministry that strengthened Paul's resolve to not lose heart.

This ministry made all the difference for Paul when he originally arrived in Corinth and experienced opposition to his gospel proclamation. When he was tempted to lose heart, the Lord revealed himself one night in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:9–10).

So Paul did not lose heart. He remained in Corinth so that through his preaching those whom God had chosen would come to faith. The Corinthian church was created by the grace of God, through Paul's

ministry of gospel proclamation. In effect, the Corinthians became a living illustration of 2 Corinthians 4:4–6. The glorious nature and effect of this call to proclaim the gospel is what sustained Paul in ministry.

Proclaiming the Power of Christ

Though Paul's call and ministry were certainly unique, we too have been called to "this ministry." As we declare the truth of the gospel to those who have been blinded by the god of this world, the same God who dispelled darkness at creation will dispel the darkness in their hearts. And what a sight they will see! "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). As we proclaim him, God gives sight to them.

Pastoral ministry is an ongoing confrontation with the god of this world, with blindness, with hardness of heart, and with remaining sin. But we do not lose heart, because we have been called to this ministry: to proclaim the gospel that gives light, reveals glory, and transforms lives.

And because we are called to preach this message, we must do so with integrity. Paul says in verse 2: "We refuse to practice cunning or tamper with God's word." We must resist the impulse to tamper with or alter this message in any way. Those who tamper with or try to add to this message underestimate it. We are proclaimers, not innovators.

Not only are we proclaimers, we are proclaimers of a particular message: "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (v. 5). We don't preach to draw attention to ourselves. We preach to draw attention to him. After being captured and captivated by the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, who would want to preach about themselves? When you have truly been called to this ministry, you will desire to proclaim him and to please him, and will live every moment aware that you were called purely by the mercy of God.

Marveling at God's Mercy

The mercy of God is where Paul begins this chapter: "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God . . ." (2 Cor. 4:1). Paul did not lose heart because he never stopped marveling at the mercy of God. Some thirty years after his conversion, he wrote to Timothy, "though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent . . . I received mercy" (1 Tim. 1:13). He never lost sight of mercy, and thus he never fully lost heart.

How about you? Have you lost sight of mercy? Are you still amazed that you have been called to this ministry? No doubt there was a time when you were very conscious that your call to this ministry was because of the mercy of God. But do you still live, like Paul, with a keen sense of God's mercy in your life?

If you have lost sight of mercy and lost heart in ministry, let's review how we got here. Every day there is sinful stuff that takes place in our hearts. Every day we fall short of our calling as Christians and as ministers of God's Word. We are not worthy of this task. In fact, we are decidedly unworthy. But because of God's mercy, we have been entrusted with and called to preach this gospel.

When we preach this gospel, God, in his marvelous mercy, dispels the darkness of sin and Satan that captivates hearts. God gives sight to the blind. They see his bleeding sacrifice. They hear the cries of Calvary. They recognize him as their sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing substitute. When sinners see these glorious truths, turn from their sins, and trust in the Savior for forgiveness, their lives are transformed. By the mercy of God, we have the privilege to proclaim this message. Friend, if you are discouraged in ministry, remember this!

Keeping our Calling in View

If we look at verse 4, the situation appears hopeless: "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." But look at verse 6: "For God, who said, 'Let light

shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." From hopeless to glorious! God does what only he can do. But how does he bring this about? Through verse 5: "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Pastor, you are in verse 5. An individual with no hope experiences the power of God through you as you proclaim the gospel. Keep this in view and you won't lose heart.

How do we put these verses to work in our soul? Quite simply, we resolve to think about our congregation in light of 2 Corinthians 4. As pastors, it is too easy for us to become preoccupied with the sins of those we serve. We can forget their conversion, losing sight of the moment when this creative act of God took place. This tempts us to lose heart, to become impatient and irritated. That is why we must constantly remind ourselves of the work of grace in their lives. We must recall the moment when they turned from their sins and trusted in the Savior for the forgiveness of their sins. We must work to keep the conversion of those we are serving in view.

God recently sent someone to help me keep this in view. It was a friend of mine who was converted through my preaching and who wanted to say thank you. So in the midst of all that could have preoccupied my time and attention, all the difficulties and challenges related to pastoral ministry, I found myself sitting across from this friend. As he described his experience of conversion to me again—what Paul is describing in verses 4–6—his smile filled the room. He thanked me again for preaching the gospel and told me of the difference it has made in his life. I returned to my office that day with a fresh heart for the work, amazed that I have been entrusted with the privilege of proclaiming the gospel.

Brothers, may we as pastors forever marvel that we have been called to proclaim the wonder of Jesus Christ and him crucified. That was one way Paul resolved to not lose heart: by remembering that he had been called to this ministry by the mercy of God. But it wasn't the

only way. Not only was Paul called to the ministry of proclamation, he was also called to the ministry of suffering.

2. The Context of Christian Ministry

Paul marveled at being called to ministry, but he harbored no illusions that it would be easy. His resolve to not lose heart was strengthened by his understanding of pastoral ministry. Paul understood that he was called not only to proclaim, but also to suffer and to serve.

This glorious ministry of proclamation takes place in the context of weakness and adversity. Paul references personal weakness (v. 7) and then details the harsh realities of ministry in a fallen world: affliction, bewilderment, persecution, being struck down (vv. 8–9). These are harsh realities of Paul’s ministry experience, not abstract hypotheticals. Paul had vivid illustrations of each of these from his own life (see 2 Cor. 6, 11). While Paul’s suffering was unique to his calling as an apostle, our ministry in this fallen world will also, by definition, involve trial, suffering, opposition, and persecution.

It is too easy to assume that verses 7–15 apply to Paul and not to us. But glance again, and I think you’ll see your face in the photograph of these verses, for all those called to pastoral ministry appear in this picture of the Christian life. In every place where there is genuine gospel proclamation taking place it will always be accompanied by some degree of opposition, persecution, and suffering. No pastor is exempt from this; but it is possible for a pastor to be unprepared.

The Perplexities of Ministry

If you are a young or aspiring pastor, I want to help you to prepare for this. Too often, pastors begin ministry aware of the mercy of God and confident in the gospel, but unaware of the suffering that awaits them. Let your theology of suffering inform your interaction with more seasoned saints. Ask an older pastor: “How have you experienced affliction? How have you been bewildered? How have you been persecuted? How have you been struck down? And how do

you respond in a God-glorifying way?” Learn from those with more pastoral experience, and let them help you prepare for suffering.

Young pastors need to learn these lessons because pastors will experience affliction in unique ways. What is your affliction? Perhaps it is chronic illness. Perhaps it is rejection by family members because of your commitment to Christ. Perhaps it is financial challenges. It is probably whatever you are thinking about as you read through these categories.

Every pastor knows what it is like to be perplexed or bewildered. A much-loved member of your congregation dies in a car accident. He was a godly father of three, only twenty-nine years old. You return home from the funeral and encounter your neighbor. He is ungodly, yet he is prospering. So why is he enjoying a long and prosperous life while your friend’s widow and three small children are facing a future without a husband and father? No doubt, people in your church are looking to you for answers. But you are bewildered as well.

Or maybe you go to the hospital to celebrate the birth of a child to a new family in your church. That weekend you conduct the funeral for that child. In a matter of days you have gone from rejoicing with that family to mourning with that family. And you’re bewildered.

Perhaps you have three kids. Two are converted, one is not. How did this happen? You preached the same gospel to them, parented in a similar way, and served them in a similar way. And now two of your children love the Lord, but one loves the world. You are bewildered. Frankly, I am so glad Paul was bewildered. I am so glad Paul understood what it was like to be perplexed—that he had an “I don’t know” in his pastoral toolbox. It serves my soul to know that even the apostle Paul was sometimes stumped by his experiences in ministry.

Struck Down in Your Soul

But Paul was not only perplexed; he was also persecuted. Persecution is more subtle in the United States, but it is present. Perhaps an article appears in your local paper misrepresenting you and the church.

Perhaps your church is banned from using a school facility. Perhaps you minister in a community where there is some form of hostility to the gospel. Pastors experience opposition and even persecution because of our proclamation of Christ and the ethical entailments of the gospel. As I write, I am aware that many of our brother-pastors around the world are faithfully and boldly leading their churches and proclaiming the gospel in the midst of severe persecution and suffering. May this passage remind us to pray that God would give these men strength to not lose heart.

What pastor isn't familiar with being struck down? You may not have been stoned like Paul in Lystra, but every pastor knows what it is like to be struck down. Maybe it is a trusted friend who has served the church for years, who abruptly leaves, slandering you as he goes. You are struck down. Or a staff member that has served alongside you does the same thing, leaving the church and misrepresenting you as he makes his way to the door. You are struck down.

Encountering Depression

I think the most common way pastors are struck down is through depression. Even some of the best pastors throughout church history were familiar with this temptation. This is why I think Charles Spurgeon's book *Lectures to My Students* should be required reading for all pastors, particularly the chapter titled "The Minister's Fainting Fits."

Spurgeon knew what it was like to be struck down in his soul:

As it is recorded that David in the heat of battle waxed faint, so may it be written of all the servants of the Lord. Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down.⁶³

63. Charles Spurgeon, "The Minister's Fainting Fits," in *Servants of Christ, Lovers of Men: Spurgeon on Pastoral Ministry*, ed. Alex DiPrima (West Lorne, ON, Can: H&E, 2023), 115.

Spurgeon goes on in this chapter to explore possible reasons for pastoral depression, including both physical and mental maladies. He wonders, no doubt with a twinkle in his eye, “Is any man altogether sane? Are we not all a little off the balance?” But, as Mr. Spurgeon observes, there are some people who are more vulnerable to being struck down than others: “Some minds appear to have a gloomy tinge essential to their very individuality.”⁶⁴

Regardless of our individual tendencies, the prince of preachers provides wise pastoral counsel for us all:

The lesson of wisdom is, be not dismayed by soul trouble. Count it no strange thing, but a part of ordinary ministerial experience. Should the power of depression be more than ordinary, think not that all is over with your usefulness. Cast not away your confidence, for it hath great recompense of reward. Even if the enemy’s foot be on your neck, expect to rise and overthrow him. Cast the burden of the present, along with the sin of the past and the fear of the future, upon the Lord, who forsaketh not his saints. Live by the day—ay, by the hour. . . Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are. When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed of being full, except in the Lord. Set small store by present rewards; be grateful for earnestings by the way, but look for the recompensing joy hereafter. . . Between this and heaven, there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our covenant Head. Come fair or come foul, the pulpit is our watchtower, and the ministry our warfare; be it ours, when we cannot see the face of our God, to trust under the shadows of his wings.⁶⁵

Friend, count it “no strange thing” when you encounter depression. If you pursue pastoral ministry, you will encounter the harsh realities of being bewildered, persecuted, and struck down. And be warned:

64. Spurgeon, “The Minister’s Fainting Fits,” 115.

65. Spurgeon, “The Minister’s Fainting Fits,” 129.

it isn't like they take turns. On occasion, you are likely to experience them all at the same time. You can be afflicted, bewildered, persecuted, and struck down all in a weekend.

God's Power in Our Suffering

But these harsh realities aren't accidental or meaningless. They have a divine design. They are all purposeful. *Every experience of weakness and suffering is an opportunity for God to display his grace and glorify himself in our lives.*

That's the point of verse 7: the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. His power is demonstrated most fully in the midst of our weakness. In the midst of being afflicted and bewildered and persecuted and struck down, we discover that God is wonderfully at work. What a happy discovery!

Not only do we discover that God is wonderfully at work, but so does our congregation. Your congregation doesn't just listen to your sermons; they study your life as well. If you never suffered, if you were never acquainted with your weakness, then they wouldn't be able to observe the power of God in your life. Your congregation is studying you all the time, but particularly when you are suffering. They want to see if the gospel makes a discernible difference in your life. They want to see if you trust God. They want to see if you remain charitable and cheerful. They want to see if you endure and don't lose heart.

"But Not"

While we all encounter the harsh realities described in verses 8–9, notice that the accent is not on those realities but on the grace of God. Notice the recurring refrain in these verses: "We are afflicted in every way, *but not* crushed; perplexed, *but not* driven to despair; persecuted, *but not* forsaken; struck down, *but not* destroyed."

Do you see how the accent in this passage is on the "but not"? Paul certainly acknowledges the harsh realities of pastoring in a fallen world. But he is actually drawing our attention to the grace of God

that preserves us when we encounter those harsh realities. He is celebrating the grace of God that sustains us in the midst of trials. And this should bring great strength to our souls when we are tempted to lose heart.

Ultimately, these verses are not about Paul's resolve. He is not focusing on my resolve or your resolve. The point isn't that Paul had an unusually strong constitution, or that I as a pastor must have an equally strong constitution. At their core, these verses are about the power of God's sustaining grace. Left to myself I would be crushed. Left to myself I would be driven to despair. Left to myself I would be forsaken. Left to myself I would be destroyed. "But not!" Every pastor has this "but not" written over his life. Do you see it? Does your wife see it? As we walk through these afflictions and bewilderments, we must return often to these two grace-stuffed words: "but not." It is then that we will discover the treasure hidden in trial.

Let me add that a pastor's wife needs to be as certain of this truth as her husband, both for the sake of her own soul and in order to help you when you are struck down. As a pastor, there have been many times when I have been struck down. And over the years, my wife, Carolyn, has encouraged me, challenged me, and sought to bring a biblical perspective to my suffering. Sometimes her words help me immediately, bringing me right back to faith-filled joy. Other times I have remained unresponsive for a while, and Carolyn has learned to speak truth and then wait patiently for the Lord to do this work in my soul. She is confident that in time there will be a "but not" moment. Sometimes it is a matter of minutes, sometimes hours, sometimes days, but she knows this "but not" will happen in her husband's life, because of God's grace promised in 2 Corinthians 4.

The Paradox of Ministry

Paul goes on in verses 10–12 to describe a great paradox of ministry:

[We are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. For we

who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:10–12)

Mark Twain allegedly said, "Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand. But as for me I have always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those I do understand." This is one of those passages for me. I find myself troubled by these verses because they show me that this ministry not only involves a call to proclaim the gospel, but also involves the sanctifying work of the gospel in our lives through trial.

Pastors are always dying, but never lifeless.⁶⁶ Pastors are called to proclaim and to perish. Sometimes they proclaim the most through their perishing. Some of the dying we experience is mundane, like weekly sermon preparation (or, for pastor's wives, releasing your husband so that he can prepare his sermon). Some of the dying is more significant, like accepting a call to ministry in a difficult, dangerous, or hardened place. Or serving as a support pastor, not a lead pastor. Death is at work in you as your preferences and priorities are set aside for the sake of serving the Savior. This is what this ministry is about. Pastors are weak and dependent men who are dying to themselves as they serve and suffer.

The Dying Pastor

But look at the result: "Death is at work in us, but life in you" (v. 12). Spiritual life comes about through sacrificial death. This life is at work in conversion, growth, sanctification, the building up of the church, the advance of the gospel, and the transfer of the gospel to the next generation. Death at work in us, life at work in you. This is how the local church is built.

66. Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 347.

If you look behind every genuinely fruitful church, you will find a dying pastor. That's the condition. That's the context. It's all too easy to assume that a church is fruitful because the pastor is gifted, because they have a great building, because they have a gifted team, or because their website is attractive and their programs are well-organized. But the truth is that none of these traits make a church fruitful. Behind every genuinely fruitful church is a dying pastor. Not a lazy pastor, or a pastor who desires recognition, but a dying pastor.

D. A. Carson makes this point so well:

The more leaders are afflicted with weakness, suffering, perplexity, and persecution, the more it is evident that their vitality is nothing other than the life of Jesus. This has enormously positive spiritual effects on the rest of the church. The leader's death means the church's life. It is why the best Christian leadership cannot simply be appointed. It is forged by God himself in the fires of suffering, taught in the school of tears. There are no shortcuts.⁶⁷

There are no shortcuts. Those are the conditions of ministry. Paul understood the purpose of God in and through those conditions, and it strengthened his resolve. In the midst of those harsh conditions of pastoral ministry, he became aware of the sustaining grace of God in his life.

3. The Hope of Christian Ministry

Finally, Paul's heart was strengthened by the hope of Christian ministry. We see this in verses 16–18. Paul does not lose heart because he maintains an eternal perspective. Likewise, pastors who maintain an eternal perspective will endure and not lose heart in their ministry.

The opposite is also true: the absence of an eternal perspective leaves you vulnerable to lose heart. Paul doesn't lose heart because he realizes that the proclamation of the gospel, and the service and

67. D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 90.

suffering in the cause of the gospel, are producing something in him—he calls it “an eternal weight of glory” (v. 17). As Paul studied the unseen realm and gave careful attention to the future, he realized that an inner work of renewal was taking place that foreshadowed his future resurrection.

“Light and Momentary”

But Paul isn’t just aware of future renewal, he is also aware that his “outer self is wasting away” (v. 16). In this present moment we are not only experiencing all kinds of weakness and suffering, we are wasting away. (Anyone over fifty is becoming increasingly aware of this fact!) But look at the difference an eternal perspective makes to those who are wasting away. Paul, contemplating his present suffering and his future glory, concludes that there is no comparison. Yes, he is experiencing severe suffering. Yes, he is wasting away as he seeks to advance the gospel. But as he peers into the unseen future, he decides that his present suffering is “light and momentary” (v. 17) compared to the eternal weight of glory that is to come.

This isn’t my impulse when making comparisons. When I encounter someone experiencing difficulty, I normally offer a different comparison: “Well, you know, it could be worse. I mean, I know you have it bad, but let me just tell you about somebody else I know.” I hope that my comparison will somehow provide a form of comfort.

That’s not how Paul worked. He didn’t work with that type of comparison. Paul makes a completely different kind of comparison, a comparison that completely changes our perspective: light and momentary trouble vs. eternal weight of glory. No contest! One so far outshines the other that there really is no comparison at all!

This comparison is all the more shocking if we keep in mind the nature and severity of his suffering. Imagine spending a few hours listening to him describe his life. You would come away from time with Paul resolved never to complain about your sufferings again. Who has a story that can top his? When this man says he was struck

down, you see the scars on his body. He can tell you firsthand what it's like to be imprisoned. Shipwrecked. Starving. Sleepless.

And yet, after providing us with an extended list of all manner and variety of suffering, he goes on to identify his trials as “light and momentary.” *Say what?* This list doesn't sound “light and momentary” to me! And neither do my own trials in ministry feel “light and momentary” at the time when I am experiencing them. So how can Paul say this?

Looking to the Future

Paul can only call his significant hardships “light and momentary” because he is comparing them to future glory. And in order for you and me to have this perspective, we have to look. We have to look in the right place. We have to look where Paul tells us he is looking in verse 18: to the glories of the unseen world, purchased by Christ's work on the cross. Paul endures the affliction of the present visible world by fixing his gaze on things unseen. The older you get, the more important this becomes. Because the longer you continue in pastoral ministry, the more you will suffer, the more you will find you are wasting away, and the more you will need to look to things unseen. I still spend far too much of my time looking at the present; I want to learn how to look more into the unseen, and into the future.

Contemplating this future glory transforms our perspective of the present and alters our assessment of affliction, bewilderment, persecution, and discouragement. But to lay hold of this sustaining grace we must look to the unseen, we must direct our attention to eternity future, looking to the eternal purpose of God and not preoccupying ourselves with the trials of life and ministry. When we do this we will, by the grace of God, not lose heart.

Conclusion

It won't be long until you bomb another sermon (and unlike my friend, I really do know what it's like to bomb when I preach!). It won't be

long until you feel ineffective in counseling. Or someone leaves your church. Or your church doesn't grow numerically. Or you encounter suffering on a scale you didn't expect. If we are not going to lose heart, we need to be constantly infused with the wonder of our calling to this ministry of proclaiming the gospel. We need to remember the context of our ministry: death at work in us, life at work in our church. And we need to fix our eyes on the hope of Christian ministry, that eternal weight of glory that far outweighs the sufferings of today. We will find fresh hope in the knowledge that we have this ministry by the mercy of God, and we will not lose heart.

Patiently Sowing God's Word

Psalm 126

In 1882, Charles Spurgeon observed, “It is to be feared that the Psalms are by no means prized as in the earlier ages of the Church.”⁶⁸ One can only imagine what Spurgeon would say if he were alive today, especially to those of us who are pastors. I think he would wonder if we treasure the Psalms adequately and deploy them appropriately in our personal lives, our preaching, and our ministries.⁶⁹

Do you share Spurgeon’s fear in relation to the Psalms? Are they prized in your church? Do they function in the daily and weekly life of your congregation? What about in your own soul and in your own ministry? Do you prize the Psalms personally and devotionally? Do you bring the Psalter with you into ministry as an indispensable tool?

The Gift of the Psalms

In his helpful book, *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, Richard Wells quotes J. I. Packer saying, “The older I get, the

68. Charles H. Spurgeon, quoted in C. Richard Wells, “Conclusion,” in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, ed. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 203n1.

69. Originally published in *Scripture and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Wayne Grudem*, ed. by John DelHousaye, John J. Hughes, and Jeff T. Purswell (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 280–293.

more the Psalms mean to me.”⁷⁰ Do you find that to be your experience? As the years pass, is your love for the Psalms deepening? Is your skill in interpreting and applying them maturing? Pastor, if we don’t cherish the Psalms personally, if we don’t value the Psalms pastorally, and if we don’t preach the Psalms consistently, then it is highly unlikely that the churches we serve will prize the Psalms. Spurgeon’s fear will be realized in our hearts and in our congregations. The opportunity lies before us to rediscover the Psalms and their value for us personally and pastorally. Consider with me just a few reasons why the Psalms are a unique gift from God to us.

First, *the Psalms inform our experience*. There is not an experience of triumph or trial that hasn’t been captured in the Psalms. There is not an emotion you will feel that hasn’t been described and articulated in the Psalms. When we come to the Psalms, we discover that we are not alone. The Psalms equip us to interpret our experiences rightly by understanding our circumstances in relation to God.

Second, *the Psalms shape our expression*. The Psalms give us words to tell God our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, our praises and pains. Because of the Psalms, there is no moment or season of your life, be it adversity or prosperity, where you will lack a divinely inspired song for your soul to sing. God has kindly provided us with soul-comforting, heart-strengthening, burden-lifting songs for every conceivable experience, from the dark pit of unrelieved suffering and depression in Psalm 88 to the boisterous celebration of God’s greatness and grace in Psalm 150. When the Lord gives, the Psalms provide us with a divine perspective of his gifts and prod us to gratefulness. When the Lord takes away, the Psalms teach us to lament and trust. As we humbly submit to these words, we will, as one writer put it, “grow into these words,” even if we don’t presently feel these words. The Psalms become a potent means of spiritual growth. Most importantly, the Psalms were the hymnbook of our Savior: this was his songbook, even on the cross. Ultimately, these songs point to him.

70. J. I. Packer, quoted in Wells, “Conclusion,” 110.

Third, *the Psalms equip our ministry*. Pastoral ministry involves preparing God's people for both prosperity and adversity. The Psalms are uniquely designed to equip God's people to respond appropriately to grace and to suffer well. The Psalms direct our gaze to the sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness of God so that we can trust and obey in every circumstance.

The Psalms are a unique gift from God, and therefore must inform our personal lives and pastoral ministry. The Psalms are to be prized, cherished, loved, explored, contemplated, sung, and experienced. If we do not have a plan to ensure that those we love and serve prize the Psalms, they will find many reasons to neglect them. In his book *Forgotten Songs*, Richard Wells identifies some of these reasons:

Of course, even apart from the malaise of biblical illiteracy, there are special reasons for neglect of the Psalms. The language of poetry doesn't easily connect in a sound-byte culture. The Psalms call for time, not tweets—time to read, ponder, pray, digest. It's easy to be too busy for the Psalms. Then again, the strong emotions of the Psalms make many modern people uncomfortable—which is ironic since our culture seems to feed on feelings . . . On top of everything else, strange to say, the Psalms are just so . . . well . . . God intoxicated. We are fascinated with ourselves, the Psalms are fascinated with God.⁷¹

Let us not become pastors who are too busy for the Psalms, uncomfortable with the emotions of the Psalms, or more fascinated with ourselves than with God himself. As goes the pastor's appreciation of the Psalms, so goes the church's.

I want to draw your attention to a psalm I have found particularly helpful in pastoral ministry, Psalm 126. This psalm should inform a pastor's prayer for the church and labor in the church. This psalm has served me immensely in lean seasons of ministry: times when fruitfulness hasn't seemed readily evident, times when sermons haven't

71. Wells, "Conclusion," 203–4.

seemed particularly inspiring, times when I've tended to be more aware of deficiencies in the church than of evidences of grace, times when joy in ministry has been a distant memory rather than a present reality.

These few verses contain a reflection on God's saving activity (vv. 1–3), a request for deliverance (v. 4), and a realization that sowing God's Word precedes the reaping of all manner of joy and fruitfulness (vv. 5–6). Let us reflect on Psalm 126 and find fresh encouragement for the challenges of pastoral ministry.

The Psalmist's Reflection

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;

then they said among the nations,

“The LORD has done great things for them.”

The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad. (Ps. 126:1–3)

The psalmist begins this song with a reflection upon a time when the people of God were liberated from captivity and exile. Scholars debate the exact occasion of this psalm. But regardless of the historical context, what is indisputable is the significance and suddenness of the liberation. This psalm reflects both the painful experience of captivity and the dramatic deliverance.

Derek Kidner notes, “Whether Zion's [restoration] was from famine or siege, captivity or plague, it had been obviously miraculous and widely talked about. It remained a vivid national memory.”⁷² In his reflection on this vivid national memory, the psalmist draws our attention to the experience of those set free. His description of their

72. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III–V of the Psalms*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 439.

experience is animated and noisy, characterized by serious joy: “We were like those who dream.” It was so good that they wondered, *is it real or is it a mirage?*

Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy. (v.2a)

Even the Gentile nations noticed and remarked: “The LORD has done great things for them” (v.2b). In the next verse, the psalmist summarizes the experience:

The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad. (v.3)

So glad, their mouths were filled with laughter.

What makes you laugh? You can tell a lot about a person by what makes him or her laugh. Often we laugh when we observe or hear something we don't expect, particularly if it is absurd. Allow me to demonstrate: Jason Gay is an author who writes primarily about sports for *The Wall Street Journal*. He can be insightful and funny. He once tweeted from a New York City coffee shop, “There's a guy in this coffee shop sitting at a table, not on his phone, not on a laptop, just drinking coffee, like a psychopath.”⁷³

Perhaps, like me, you laughed when you read this. What is funny about this tweet? Well, you weren't expecting him to identify this guy as a psychopath when all he was doing was drinking a cup of “joe” in a coffee shop. The ending was a surprise—an absurd conclusion. You didn't see it coming, so it made you laugh.

Now consider this: nothing was more unexpected, unanticipated, or undeserved than your deliverance from the captivity of sin by the grace of God through the gospel. There is nothing funny about the wrath of God, but those who understand what they have been saved

73. <https://x.com/jasongay/status/646301750346010624>.

from can't help but experience the kind of overwhelming joy that leads to spontaneous, holy laughter.

In light of God's holiness and our sinfulness, the gracious provision of the Son of God to die as a substitute for our sins was the most unexpected event and undeserved expression of mercy in all of history. If you haven't humbly and gratefully laughed before God in response to the grace that he has shown you through the gospel, then it's possible you haven't understood how unexpected your salvation was. Maybe you have forgotten how unlikely it was that you would become an object of mercy. Pastor, are you still amazed at the grace of God in your life? Do you still marvel at your conversion? Are you still astonished at the "difference between your receivings and your deservings?"⁷⁴

When the psalmist reflects on the experience of gracious, sudden, dramatic liberation from captivity by God, he describes the response of those who were freed. They erupted in unrestrained laughter and shouts of joy. They were humanly incapable of liberating themselves from captivity because of their sin, but God graciously took action—action they did not deserve. He intervened and set them free from their captors. Their fortunes were restored. Once again, they found reason for joy. Once again, they found an occasion to laugh.

There is a very real sense in which every Christian can relate to this experience, having been captive to sin and delivered from sin by the grace of God through the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Every Christian shares this experience.

Think about your conversion. Was it not a surprise? In light of God's holiness and our sinfulness, your conversion and my conversion were most unexpected. It is all too easy to spend our days reflecting on many other things while failing to reflect on this most important thing. We must not let our pastoral role, which is temporary, obscure our personal deliverance, which is eternal. Remember how the Bible

74. Arthur Bennett, ed., "The Mover," in *The Valley of Vision* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), 8.

describes our deliverance? I pray you have not grown so familiar with these words that you are no longer affected by them:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. [Here comes the unexpected—the unfathomable] *But God*, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved . . . (Eph. 2:1–5)

This description of our liberation from the captivity and consequences of sin manifested in the wrath of God is most unexpected, because it is most undeserved. The effect should be delirious happiness gushing forth in unbridled laughter and joyous shouts. Perhaps you don't associate your story of coming to Christ with laughter. But your conversion should make you laugh for joy because of its unexpected and undeserved nature. What other experience in life could possibly leave us more surprised and more delighted than our salvation in Christ?

Alec Motyer writes about this outbreak of joy, "So throughout this psalm laughter, singing and rejoicing often . . . are evidence of a salvation to which the recipients have contributed nothing but subsequent joy. We took no part in it. It was done for us—we woke up to find it was true."⁷⁵ Perhaps it is time to wake up again and remember that you took no part in it. It was done for you. You and I contributed nothing but "subsequent joy."

We must never tire of reflecting on the miracle of our conversion, the miracle of our liberation from captivity to sin—a liberation which

75. Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day: A New Devotional Translation* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2016), 375.

we did not initiate, to which we could not contribute, and for which we can only give thanks. When was the last time you reflected on the mercy and miracle of your conversion? It is well known that seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal kept a handwritten account of his conversion sewn into his coat. In his book *Union with Christ*, Rankin Wilbourne explains:

Pascal kept this parchment on his person for eight years, moving it from coat to coat, so that it was literally next to his heart wherever he went. Pascal knew that while God would never forget him (Isa. 49:15), he was prone to forget God. So he sewed a reminder into his life, a daily tutorial. . . . And if Pascal, a genius, needed a reminder sewn into his coat, then how much more do we need to sew reminders into our lives?⁷⁶

My fellow pastor, how can you sow a reminder of your conversion into your daily life? How can you regularly review the grace that has been shown to you in order to delight in God and his grace? Think of where you would be today if you weren't converted by the grace of God. It is a miracle of mercy, and we must remind ourselves of this often because we are so prone to forget. This most important thing is so easily eclipsed by the daily demands of pastoral ministry.

In light of this mercy, we can experience true joy that erupts in joyous laughter. This happiness is a God-given gift to the pastor who feels overwhelmed by pastoral responsibilities. When you find yourself overwhelmed by the cares of ministry, it's possible that you've lost sight of this mercy. Notice the difference this reflection made in the prayer life of the psalmist. As he reflected on his experience of liberation from captivity, it energized him to pray for revival in the present.

76. Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (East Sussex, UK: Cook, 2016), 242–43.

The Psalmist's Request

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb! (Ps. 126:4)

Reflection on the experience of deliverance in the past provokes the psalmist to pray for a fresh experience of God's mercy in the present. This prayer reflects the challenges of real life. Time has passed, and the experience of dramatic deliverance and its accompanying joy has faded. It is no longer a felt reality. The vividness of the memory, however, inspires the psalmist to pray that his good and gracious God would do it yet again. So the psalmist prays for God to restore his people's fortunes.

The psalmist prays for another sudden and dramatic work of God where dry land is suddenly filled with water and comes to life, like the streams in the Negeb. It is a prayer that captive hearts would be suddenly liberated and laughing. These words are strikingly similar to the language in verse 1, only here they've been crafted into a prayer. In his commentary on the Psalms, Kidner helpfully points out that the psalmist presents two images of revival and renewal in verses 4–6: "The two images of renewal (4b, 5–6) are not only striking: they are complementary. The first of them is all suddenness, a sheer gift from heaven; the second is slow and arduous, with man allotted a crucial part to play in it."⁷⁷ So revival and renewal can be both sudden and slow.

The ancient world was familiar with sudden changes. Although the desert region of the Negeb was dry for much of the year, after a heavy downfall the barren wasteland would bloom into a desert garden overnight. The psalmist views his life and the life of God's people as a barren desert. His appeal is for God to act suddenly and to rain down torrents of transforming grace.

Our past experience of mercy can provoke our prayer and inspire our expectation for revival personally, in our city, across our country, and around the world. Our experience of mercy should inspire us to

77. Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 439.

pray and not tire of praying for others to have the same experience. Our hope is that they will discover grace suddenly and unexpectedly, like the Negeb flowering overnight. But the psalmist knows that God doesn't always act swiftly. In the final two verses of Psalm 126, he describes a second image of renewal and revival. While verse 4 describes the desert breaking out in sudden and surprising blooms, verses 5 and 6 depict a process that is slow and arduous, with man allotted a crucial part to play in it through sowing. This is particularly relevant to pastoral ministry and makes all the difference.

The Psalmist's Realization

Those who sow in tears
 shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
 bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
 bringing his sheaves with him. (Ps. 126:5–6)

Here, the psalmist recognizes that he must not only pray, he must also sow. In the earlier image, the results were as sudden as they were undeserved. In this second image the psalmist uses to depict God's intervening grace, the results come only after the hard work of sowing and a lengthy period of waiting. These results are undeserved as well. Both images must inform our pastoral ministry. There are times when God works suddenly and unexpectedly, and it appears we make little or no contribution. Those are my personal preference. That is how I prefer to roll. But normally the fruit comes only after the hard work of plowing and sowing and watering and weeding and waiting. Normally the slow precedes the sudden. The slow prepares the way for the sudden. Verse 4 depicts an appeal for the sudden work of God. Verses 5 and 6 describe slow and arduous work, "with man allotted a crucial part to play in it."

In these verses, the psalmist draws his imagery from the world of agriculture. It is a world of sowing and waiting. Take note of this imagery. Remember that the metaphors of the Bible are drawn from the world of agriculture, not technology or business. For most of us, this is a world we are unfamiliar with. When I was young, I was too cool for the 4-H Club or Future Farmers of America, so now I'm at a disadvantage and my ignorance doesn't serve me. But if we are going to benefit from this imagery, our ministry must be informed and inspired by this metaphor.

There is nothing idyllic about this illustration. This work of sowing is backbreaking, and it can be heartbreaking. Did you notice that this hard work of sowing is often done with tears?

Those who sow in tears . . .

He who goes out weeping . . .

To be faithful in pastoral ministry is to be familiar with having tears in your eyes. John Piper helps us to understand and apply this with these words:

This psalm teaches the tough truth that there is work to be done whether I am emotionally up for it or not, and it is good for me to do it. Suppose you are in a season of heartache and discouragement, and it is time to sow seed. Do you say, "I can't sow the field this spring, because I am brokenhearted and discouraged"? If you do that, you will not eat in the winter. Suppose you say instead, "I am heartsick and discouraged. I cry if the milk spills at breakfast. I cry if the phone and doorbell ring at the same time. I cry for no reason at all, but the field needs to be sowed. That is the way life is. I do not feel like it, but I will take my bag of seeds and go out in the fields and do my crying while I do my duty. I will sow in tears."⁷⁸

78. John Piper, *A Godward Life* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1997),

The hard work of sowing God's Word, sowing the gospel, sowing through serving, is often done with tears. It's often done with a broken heart and tear-filled eyes. My fellow pastor, where do you need to sow, even if you are in a season of heartache and discouragement?

- It could be continuing to sow Scripture into your own heart and preach the gospel to yourself when joy is a distant memory rather than a present reality.
- It might be continuing to sow into your children. It's all too easy to grow weary and tired from the exhausting work of teaching and training and disciplining, particularly when there are no immediate results and no indication of fruitfulness. (When our children were growing up, my wife, Carolyn, would banish discouragement from my soul and put fresh faith and resolve in my soul by reminding me, "Dear, you are sowing; stop looking for immediate fruit.")
- For you, faithful sowing might mean continuing to sow the gospel with the lost even if you can't remember the last time someone you shared the gospel with was converted.
- Often, sowing involves preparing yet another sermon even if you don't feel like it, even if those you serve don't seem particularly appreciative of your preaching and appear to be more animated and appreciative when there is a guest speaker.
- Continuing to sow might mean faithfully reaching out to guests at your church, even when your soul is weighed down by the lack of growth in your church, or after you've been informed that one of your most active families is leaving the church.
- It means discipling men, even while knowing they will be sent out from your church and that another congregation will reap the fruit of your sowing.

- It can mean continuing to sow by serving and leading and not giving up even after you hear from other pastors about how their churches are prospering and growing.

Where do you need to sow, even through tears? What do you need to sow? Do you have a strategy for sowing? You should. Every farmer does, whether he feels like it or not. In God's kindness, the psalmist doesn't simply inform us of the challenging work of sowing, he also provides us with hope for our tear-filled sowing!

If we could look the psalmist in the eye, we would not only see tears; we would also perceive hope. In his tearful sowing he is certain of the graciousness of God. He is certain of the promise of God. He is certain of the purpose of God. He is certain that those who sow—even in tears—shall reap! And when (not if) they reap, their tears will be replaced by shouts of joy!

Psalms 126 calls us to share in this certainty! We are to sow the gospel in our hearts and in our churches and in our communities with this certainty! Those who sow in tears, those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy bringing their sheaves with them. James Montgomery Boice explained that this verse has “been taken as a proverb by countless generations of God's people as they have looked up from the difficulties of their present work expecting blessing from God.”⁷⁹

So let me encourage you to look up from the plow, look up from your desk, look up from your seemingly fruitless labor, look up and be strengthened by this promise. Keep sowing God's Word; keep sowing the gospel; keep serving, even with tears in your eyes. Keep praying and keep sowing and don't be surprised or dismayed that the work is hard and sometimes heartbreaking. Keep sowing because the way to reap with songs and shouts of joy is to sow the seeds of those future blessings with tears, certain of the reaping that is to come.

79. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 3, *Psalms 107–150* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 1113.

Sowing precedes reaping. The slow precedes the sudden. Tears precede joy. John Piper has one more thing to say to us on this:

So here's the lesson: When there are simple, straightforward jobs to be done, and you are full of sadness, and tears are flowing easily, go ahead and do the jobs with tears. Be realistic. Say to your tears: "Tears, I feel you. You make me want to quit life. But there is a field to be sown (dishes to be washed, car to be fixed, sermon to be written). I know you will wet my face several times today, but I have work to do and you will just have to go with me. I intend to take a bag of seeds and sow. If you come along then you will just have to wet the rows."

Then say, on the basis of God's Word, "Tears, I know you will not stay forever. The very fact that I just do my work . . . will in the end bring a harvest of blessing . . . I believe that the simple work of my sowing will bring sheaves of harvest." And your tears will be turned to joy.⁸⁰

My fellow pastor, I commend you for continuing to sow in the midst of heartbreak and tears. Take heart: your tears will be turned to joy. A harvest awaits. And if you've been contemplating quitting because you are tired of sowing with no sign of reaping, I want to say to you, "I understand, but that is not an option for you."

My friend, all is not over with your usefulness. Continue with double earnestness to serve your Lord when no visible result is before you. You must not stop sowing. And if you've put down your bag of seed, I want to encourage you—even challenge you—to pick it up and get back to work. Let us resolve afresh to die sowing the seeds of the gospel. For we shall reap, if not in this lifetime, then surely in the one

80. John Piper, "Talking to Your Tears," *Desiring God*, July 15, 1991, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/talking-to-your-tears> (accessed June 17, 2026).

to come, when we hear the Chief Shepherd himself say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant; your labor was not in vain."

Conclusion

Finally, we can't read Psalm 126:5–6 without thinking of the ultimate fulfillment of these verses in the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus himself would have been familiar with this psalm and would have understood it as ultimately being fulfilled in himself. Imagine the Son of God reading and reflecting on this psalm, knowing it pointed ultimately to him.

In his Gospel, Luke reminds us of a particular moment as the Son of God drew near to Jerusalem, knowing that the hour of his death for which he had come was fast approaching: "And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!'" (Luke 19:41–42). He would then proceed to a hill called Calvary, where he would sow himself through his death. He was the seed that had to fall into the ground and die, resulting in massive fruit. He died, certain the Father would raise him from the dead. He died, certain he would come home with shouts of joy bringing his sheaves with him. The author of Hebrews reminds us to look to Jesus, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2). And in just a matter of weeks after his death, resurrection, and ascension, we read that in response to Peter's proclamation of the gospel, "there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

Jesus entered Jerusalem weeping, sowing his life through his death on the cross. It was all so unexpected and surprising—stunning really. And the fruit was all so unexpected, surprising, and stunning. The fruit included sinners like you and me. And so the only appropriate response in light of the unexpected mercy is one of laughter, singing, and shouts of joy, for it is all the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.



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