

odds
and
ends



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ODDS & ENDS

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1 YEAR LATER

One year ago, I began to blog, posting the study guides I wrote for our church's small groups. I threw in a few more thoughts along the way, so to celebrate a year of blogging, I assembled ten of my favorite posts into this ebook.

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CHURCH ELDERS

Biblical, Historical, and Practical Arguments for Elder Plurality

*This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put
what remained into order, and appoint elders in every
town as I directed you.*

Titus 1:5 ESV

Given that appointing elders in every town was Paul's primary directive to Titus, it is troublesome that so few of us understand the biblical concept of eldership. In fact, thinking about a church's elders likely conjures up either wizened old men or cultish organizations governed ruthlessly by a handful of men. As you may have already guessed, the biblical idea of church elders is something else altogether. Thus, I will endeavor here to give a brief explanation of biblical eldership and then a three-pronged argumentation for why I believe in churches being led by a plurality of elders.

What Is a Church Elder?

Biblically, there are only two official offices within each local church: elders and deacons. That answer may be surprising, given the absence of a pastor. Well, allow me to explain. Titus appears to show that elders and overseers are different words for the same office.

Paul first writes, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might... appoint elders in every town as I directed you (v. 5)”. In verse 6, Paul gives a general overview of the qualifications for being an elder. Verse 7 then continues to give more specific qualifications, but this time Paul uses the word overseer.

There is a similar occurrence within Acts 20:17-38. In this text, Paul is returning to Jerusalem in spite of his probable imprisonment upon arriving, so as he passes into a harbor near Ephesus, he calls for the elders of the Ephesian church to speak with him for the last time. These men are clearly called elders of the church in verse 17, but Paul also refers to them as overseers in verse 28. Thus, it is evident that elders and overseers are simply two words for the same role, but what about pastors?

It may also surprise some to know that the title of pastor is found nowhere in the New Testament (Ephesians does use shepherd as a title once in the ESV though); however, the role and activity is certainly present. Pastor means shepherd, so a pastor is a shepherd. A pastor’s job is shepherding. Pastor’s lead and guide Christ’s flock (the congregation), feeding them the nourishment of God’s Word. Paul uses the verb for shepherding in Acts 20:28 by commanding the overseers to “care for the church of God.” Peter also exhorts church elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you (1 Peter 5:2)”, which is a command that he received from Jesus directly when He said, “Feed my sheep (John 21:16).” Finally, the verb is used negatively in Jude to refer to selfish shepherds who only care for themselves (Jude 12). Elders (or overseers) are, therefore, called to pastor (or shepherd) the church in which God has placed them.

Pastors, elders, and overseers, as described in the New Testament, are different titles for the same office, and those titles are important. Pastor emphasizes the leader’s role in tending to the church, primarily through teaching them the Scriptures. Elder connotes the maturity and wisdom that must mark the man of God. Overseer indicates the governing leadership that elders must possess in order to guide the church toward effectively making disciples.

There is no pastor who is not an elder and overseer as well. Likewise, an elder is simultaneously a pastor and overseer, and an overseer is also a pastor and elder. Though various giftings might make one feel more like a pastor than an elder or overseer, you simply cannot divorce the three titles from one another. Each is essential for healthy leading of the church.

What Does the Bible Say?

Elders are pastors, pastors are elders, and overseers are the same thing too. Hopefully we now have a better idea of what the Bible means by church elders, especially since elder is used far more frequently than overseer or pastor. Let us, therefore, now address the issue at hand: why does Paul tell Titus to appoint elders (as in plural)?

Most Baptist churches today (which is the context of our discussion) are governed by a three-branch single-pastor system, with deacons and the congregation sharing investments of authority in directing the church. Being led by multiple elders, each of whom has equal authority with the pastor, is an entirely foreign concept. This oligarchical approach is somewhat threatening in comparison to the check-and-balances of the U.S. government inspired system we commonly use (but we will discuss the three branch system later). Our authority, however, is based upon the Word of God, and we willingly allow it to dictate how we organize and lead.

I believe that the Bible teaches that local churches are to be governed by elders, meaning more than one of them. The title of elder is used nineteen times in the New Testament in reference to church leaders (beginning in Acts 11:30). Each usage in singular form is specifically about the office in general (1 Tim. 5:19) or a specific elder (1 Peter 5:1); otherwise, it repeatedly refers to the elders of various churches. In Acts 11:30, Paul and Barnabas are sent to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

Acts 14:23 shows Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in every church by prayer and fasting. In Acts 20:17, Paul meets with the elders of the church in Ephesus one last time. Paul addresses Philippians to all believers of the church with special emphasis to the overseers and deacons of the church (Phil. 1:1). In returning to our present text, Paul exhorts Titus to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5). Each city, therefore, possessed multiple elders.

Allow me to briefly raise a possible question: since each city had a plurality of elders, could they not be the collective pastors of different churches within the city? Throughout the New Testament, the only identification used for local churches is their city of location because there was only one church per city. Jerusalem, Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and all others each had elders for the church that existed in those cities. With multiple congregations coexisting within cities, the logical adaptation of this principle to modern church life is for each church to have its own body of elders. Otherwise, if we wanted a New Testament-minded system, we would need to consider each congregation a piece of one large church per city with each pastor being one of the elders for the city's church, which, for obvious reasons, would not work very well at least within our social context.

In summary, biblically each church was led, taught, and guided by a group of elders (also called pastors or overseers). There was no one man who led the church with greater authority than the others. Each elder is equal in authority to one another, and together, each reflecting the qualities listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, they lead God's people toward expanding the kingdom of God through making disciples.

What Does History Show?

As we enter the second category of arguments, I pray that the biblical case was sufficient for guiding our understanding because submitting ourselves to the God's Word ought to be the highest priority of the Christian. I hope, then, that I have outlined enough of the Scriptures to display what I believe is the most biblical answer to how a church should be governed: a plurality of elders. If the Scriptures do not persuade us, nothing will.

Nevertheless, I will present an historical case for elder plurality, and let us center our historical discussion around answering this question: if having a plurality of elders lead the church is biblical, why do most modern churches not follow this model?

The New Testament gives clear indication that local churches were originally led by multiple elders together. One of the earliest Christian writings outside of Scripture, the Didache, urges churches to “appoint therefore for yourselves bishops [overseers] and deacons worthy of the Lord (15:1)”. In fact, the first notion of a single pastor system does not arrive until later with the writings of Ignatius, who separated the titles of overseers and elders from one another. In his letter to the Trallians, Ignatius writes, “In like manner, let all men reverence the deacons, and the bishop likewise, even as Jesus Christ who is the Son of the Father; and the presbyters [elders] as the council of God, and as the bond of the Apostles. Without these there is no Church (3:1).” Thus, Ignatius developed the idea of one ruling overseer with a council of elders and a body of deacons. It is possible that this concept derived from a misunderstanding of the usage of elders and overseer in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. As both texts are similar in their usage, let us observe Titus for them both. Paul commands Titus to appoint elders (plural) in every town, but in verse 7, Paul lists the qualifications of an overseer (singular). Ignatius and others may have read these verses as suggesting that each church should be governed by one overseer and multiple elders. Even though some people still appeal to this argument today, it seems highly speculative. Given the interchangeableness of the titles in Acts 20, there is no reason to assume that Paul is meaning different things when speaking of elders and overseers. In fact, the clearest reading of the text is to understand that Paul speaks of overseers in the singular because he is describing the position generally. For example, saying that plumbers should be able to fix a pipe gives no indication as to a number of plumbers; it is simply a general statement meant to apply to all plumbers. Similarly, this is Paul’s meaning in Titus 1:7. He speaks of overseers singularly as a generality that pertains to all overseers.

Regardless of the reasoning behind a single-pastor system, it quickly became commonplace among churches. The Catholic establishment of monarchical bishops who rule over churches became the predominate practice, which has led to a plethora of extra-biblical terms and hierarchies such as archbishops, auxiliary bishops, coadjutor bishops, and cardinals. Quite simply, this shift did not arise from nor was it submissive to the Scriptures, and the trend continued until the Reformation.

As Baptists, we will now approach the history of elder plurality within our denomination. In *Elders in the Life of the Church*, Phil Newton and Matt Schmucker argue wonderfully for a plurality of elders. The first chapter, written by Newton, presents the historical nature of elders and the Baptist denomination. I whole-heartedly suggest reading the book, which for Baptists the first chapter alone is worth its price. Newton explains that while a plurality of elders was never universal among Baptists, it was not uncommon. He cites a few influential Baptist speakers in the 1700-1800s that reshaped the system. Isaac Backus and John Leland led the way. “Both men had been shaped by the developing colonial culture’s emphasis on the individual and had relegated the church to a secondary position relative to the individual (30).” The influence of the newly formed United States three-branch government is impossible to miss as, over time, the Baptists created a three-branch system within churches with authority dispersed to a single pastor, a board of deacons, and the congregation.

Allow me to close this section with Newton’s closing words of the chapter:

"The past two hundred years have witnessed the demise in elder plurality among Baptists. Pastors have begun to resemble CEOs rather than humble New Testament shepherds. Their staffs are hired for their business skills. And their churches are run like big businesses, requiring the corporate structures of a successful company.

A candid look at polity in churches at large today raises questions regarding our diligence to conform to Scripture. Specifically, how well are Christians in the West doing in being different than the world around them? Are we acting as salt and light in our communities? Are our “family values” appreciably different from our neighbors? Connected to these questions regarding the holiness of the church are

the polity questions: Are our congregations nurtured and disciplined like their New Testament counterparts? Are our membership rolls inflated, and could this be contributing to our worldliness? Are pastors and staff members held accountable to anyone besides themselves? Might the alarming rate of immoral behavior among ministers be connected to the disconnect between church staff and a plurality of godly elders, both lay and staff? To put it plainly, I believe recent experience teaches what Scripture at least implies—that the holiness of a church is tied to its polity, just as faith is tied to order.

Our Baptist forebears sought to anchor their church structures and practices in the teaching of Holy Scripture. These stalwarts did not conform their churches to the popular designs of the day, but applied the truths of Scripture to forge a path for their heirs. In the end, whether or not Baptists historically practiced plural eldership is secondary. The primary focus for church leaders today must be to understand what God's Word teaches, and then to order their churches accordingly. History merely serves to affirm the veracity of Scripture (36-37)."

What Is the Most Practical?

Having now addressed the biblical and historical arguments for and against a plurality of elders, we will next approach the pragmatics behind this governance. Obviously, the biblical case must be of prime importance with us always ready to submit ourselves to the Bible's instructions, and though secondary to the biblical arguments, reviewing history is helpful in making informed and confident decisions. With these two in mind, practicalities are also important to consider, and I believe that elder plurality is the most practical form of church governance available. With that being said, here are a few thoughts of pragmatism on multiple elders.

First, it strikes me as odd that many hesitate on a plurality of elders because they fear an abuse of power and authority by the elders. After all, the current model of Baptist churches was created to ward off such mistreatments. The obvious answer though is that if each elder matches the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 the congregation should have little fear that he would abuse his authority. However, if

an elder is found to be severely falling short of those standards, Paul gives the actions to take in 1 Timothy 5:19-20. To avoid such scenarios, great care must be taken in ordaining elders to serve the church, which is why Paul goes on to say in verse 22, “Do not be hasty in laying on of hands”. The laying on of hands was the physical action used to signify ordination as an elder or deacon. If elders are wisely chosen, the congregation will be able to confidently trust their leadership, just as a wife trusts her husband to lead her.

Though abuses can (and unfortunately will) happen, the chances and effects of them are decreased with elder plurality, and the reason is accountability. With multiple elders all being equal in position and authority, each elder is more easily accountable to the others. With one person leading the church, accountability is diminished, and for examples, look throughout history books at the bishops during the Middle Ages. Take false doctrine for example. In a single-pastor system, the church is far more susceptible to wavering from the truth if the pastor begins to teach heresy; whereas, if one elder among others begins to believe false teachings, his brothers are able to correct and rebuke him while ensuring that the congregation does not follow after him. In short, elder plurality is not subject to great abuse of authority but actually provides greater accountability in preventing it.

Second, growing up in churches traditional for our time, I quickly became accustomed to the virtual parade of pastors that many congregations experience. The church of my youth saw pastors come, stay for a few years, then move on to another church or ministry. Though each pastor struggled to leave the church in a better place than it was when they arrived, I could not help feeling cheated. Most pastors gave little more than a two week notice of their exit, and without fail the vacuum of leadership undid much of their former work. Thus, each subsequent pastor finds himself building upon a partially demolished structure that may be fortunate enough to have a solid foundation rather than improving upon the work done by the pastor before him. The vacuum of leadership does much damage to even the strongest of congregations, so I have never understood why a pastor would claim to love the flock while not preparing for his absence. After all, love of my wife leads me to have life insurance so that she will be relatively provided for should I die. What plans do pastors have for their flock should the Lord take their life next week?

Should pastors not be motivated by love to consider how they might care for the congregation even after they are no longer with them?

These are the sort of questions that haunt me as a pastor. I long to care and shepherd the congregation that I am to lead beyond my time with them, whether the Lord takes me elsewhere or to be with Him. Under a single-pastor system, the only solution is for the pastor to establish a meaningful and well-planned transition to his successor. While I think that such transitions are much needed, sometimes they are simply impossible. A plurality of elders is, I believe, a sufficient solution. Though elders are equals, that does not stop a vocational elder from assuming a larger portion of responsibility and work; however, in his absence, the church is not without leadership. The other elders will find themselves with heavier loads and shouldering more responsibility, but the congregation is still being led and loved. Having multiple elders is a pastor's life insurance for the congregation.

Finally, the third largest practicality for functioning under a plurality of elders is that together the group overcomes the weaknesses of the individuals. If an elder is called to wisely counsel the congregation, provide leading guidance, and administer sound teaching of Scriptures, there is a likeliness that he will excel at one better than the others. Rarely is a pastor ever equally skilled in the three; rather, one or two will be his strength and the others his weakness. Establishing a plural eldership helps to offset the weaknesses of one man. If the vocational elder (the primary preaching pastor) is weak in wise counseling, there will hopefully be at least one other elder who is a stronger counselor than he is. In this way, the diversity of leadership helps to account for a single man's flaws.

Conclusion


Obviously, the thoughts expressed above are far from extensive; however, I pray that they are a sufficient overview and summary of the essence of the issue. Elder plurality is, I believe, the biblical system of church governance. Regardless of cultural or historical tradition, we must ultimately submit ourselves to the Scriptures, trusting that God's Word will not lead us astray. For more reading on this topic, I have listed several books that are worth consultation.

Further Readings

Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership by Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker [As mentioned above, this book is especially great for its approach from a Baptist perspective.]

Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus by Jeramie Rinne [This is a short read, and a great way to briefly gain thorough understanding of elder plurality.]

Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons by Thabiti Anyabwile [As the title suggests, Anyabwile is more interested here in how to implement plural eldership. Importantly, he defines the function of deacons and spends most of the book looking closely at the qualifications for elders and deacons.]



SHOULD CHRISTIANS PRAY AGAINST SATAN?

This past weekend I watched the newest Christian movie, *War Room*. To be honest, I am absolutely one of the worst people to see one of these kinds of films. As a person who deeply loves well-crafted narratives, such typically cheese-filled productions usually leave my gut wrenching. However, I found *War Room* to be surprisingly pleasant. No, it was not a masterpiece of cinema, but as a film that urged believers to toil daily in prayer, I actually enjoyed it. I would even go so far as to say that I recommend it.

However, the aim of this discussion is an aspect of the film that I did not appreciate. Allow me to set the scene. Our protagonist has finally resolved to fight in prayer for her husband and her marriage. Her prayer begins in her closet (one of the film's war rooms), but she proceeds to walk throughout the house as her prayer becomes more fervent. Soon she begins to speak to Satan directly, declaring that he has no authority over her or her family. The music swells throughout, and all in all, the scene is the turning point of the film.

The prayer works, and her husband is miraculously kept from committing adultery that very evening.

My issue with this scene is not the passionate, emotional prayer. Most of our prayers likely need a good dose of fervor. I also have no problem with the protagonist praying for her husband and marriage. Biblically, we are called to intercede in prayer for all people, so we should certainly do so for our loved ones.[1 Tim. 2:1] Rather, I do take issue with the notion of praying directly against Satan. Let us, therefore, discuss why I find this thought to be unbiblical.

To Rebuke or Not to Rebuke?

First, consider the nature of Satan. Though he has legions of demonic forces at his disposal, Satan is nothing like God. He is not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. This means that Satan cannot hear our thoughts, and he cannot be in more than one place at a time. Ephesians 6 and 1 Peter 5 clearly affirm demonic hostility throughout our walk with Christ, yet it is quite unrealistic to continually assume that Satan is directly antagonizing us. Therefore, if we speak directly to Satan himself, most likely we are merely speaking to the open air or to demonic cohorts.

Next, note how Michael rebukes Satan in the book of Jude. The half-brother of Jesus writes in verse nine about Michael the archangel battling Satan for the body of Moses. Since Michael is the only angel that we know to be designated as an archangel, we could assume that if any heavenly being had the power to confront Satan directly, it would be him. However, Jude tells us that Michael “did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.”[Jude 9] The archangel, when battling Satan, relied upon the Lord to rebuke the devil. In fact, Jude’s reason for mentioning this event is because there were false teachers in his day that were blaspheming “all that they do not understand.”[Jude 10] The lesson being that we must not throw around weighty pronouncements against beings that we do not fully comprehend.

The sons of Sceva are great examples of this thought. In Acts 19:11-20, the author, Luke, tells us about seven sons of Sceva encountering a demon-

possessed man. These men were itinerant exorcists who heard of the great miracles that the apostles were doing by the name of Jesus.

Because of this, they decided to invoke Jesus' name as well, saying, "I adjure by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." [Acts 19:13] After saying this to one demon-possessed man, the evil spirit said back to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" [Acts 19:15] They are then beaten by the demon-possessed man and run away naked. This shows that the name of Jesus is not a magical mantra by which demons are forced to obey, and that we must not treat spiritual matters flippantly. Without knowing Jesus in a relationship, speaking His name will do us no good, and of course, the only way to grow in knowing Jesus is through the Scriptures and prayer.

Now let us approach the matter of spiritual warfare. If we are strongly exhorted by Jude to be careful in our accusations against the Accuser (which is the meaning of "Satan"), how then should we fight? After all, Paul does clearly tell us that we are wrestling against "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." In Ephesians 6:13-20, the apostle describes our battle armor; however, Paul emphasizes that our armor's primary usage is being "able to withstand" and "to stand firm." [Eph. 6:13] He speaks far more of defense than offense, and James seems to agree with him: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." [James 4:7]

How to Fight Spiritually... Biblically

I am not, however, suggesting that spiritual warfare is all defense; instead, it seems that Paul speaks primarily of three offensive tactics for combating the "spiritual forces of evil" in Ephesians 6.

I anticipate some people arguing that because Jesus and the apostles directly engaged demons that we should understand this as a call to do likewise. However, we are never commanded to deal with evil spirits like Jesus or the apostles did, but we are called numerous times to resist the devil, to hold fast to and proclaim the Word of God, and to prayer to the Father. I submit, therefore, that this is how spiritual warfare ought to be fought.

1. Study the Word

The only offensive weapon in the armor of God is the sword, which Paul states is the Word of God. Our primary action for fighting the devil and/or sin should be going to the Scriptures. If we doubt the importance of the Bible in battling Satan, we need to look no further than Jesus. In Matthew 4, we read about Jesus being tempted by the devil after fasting for forty days and forty nights. Satan tried three times to cause Jesus to sin.

By the way, it is worth noting that the only real power that Satan has over us is through our sin. He cannot directly cause anyone to be thrown in hell; rather, Satan can only lure us toward sin, hoping to capture us in its snare.

Each time Satan tempted Him, Jesus answered Satan by citing Scripture. It is interesting that even Jesus never enters into a lengthy dialogue with the devil; rather, He simply falls upon the Word of God. We must understand that the Bible is sufficient for resisting the devil. Too often Jesus' words to the Sadducees could also be said of us: "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." [Matthew 22:29] Therefore, let us be quick to read, study, memorize, and meditate upon the Word of God.

2. Pray in the Spirit

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul urges us to pray "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." In resisting the devil, we must be a people of prayer. But what does Paul mean by praying in the Spirit at all times? To reach an answer, we must understand the Holy Spirit's role when we pray. Prayer is naturally trinitarian. The entire Godhead is involved in our prayers. We pray to the Father, through our only mediator, Jesus. But what about the Spirit? Romans 8 tells us that "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." [Rom. 8:27] The role of the Holy Spirit is to intercede on our behalf, aligning us with the will of the Father. Furthermore, we are told that the Spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." [Rom. 8:16] Thus, all of our prayers should be in the Spirit because He teaches us how to pray the will of God and affirms that we are God's children. Praying to the Father,

through Jesus, with the Spirit, is one of the greatest blessings that we have as followers of Christ. Because the Spirit allows us to come to God as our Father, why would we ever waste time trying to speak directly with Satan instead of praying to the omnipotent God who calls us His children?

3. Proclaim the Gospel Boldly

Paul gives us the third weapon of warfare in Ephesians 6:19-20: proclaiming the gospel. The apostle requests that the Ephesians pray for him to boldly declare the “mystery of the gospel.” Because the gospel is the centerpiece of the entire Bible, this one should not come as a surprise, yet sadly, it probably does. Jesus came into the world, not to cast out demons or even heal the sick, but to proclaim the gospel. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.”[Mark 1:15] The only way to truly press back against “this present darkness” is by expanding the kingdom of God. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus left us with very clear instructions to follow until He returns: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”[Matt. 28:19-20a] Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach, that is the game plan for every Christian, and we can only do so through proclaiming the gospel. Far more important than denouncing Satan in prayer is proclaiming and exalting Jesus to others. That is how the kingdom of God will increase and the kingdom of darkness decrease.

The End of the Matter

Once again, let me reiterate: I really enjoyed *War Room*. It challenges Christians to go spend more time in prayer, which is, for me, a win. However, the notion of directly praying against or rebuking Satan simply is not biblical. Instead of fighting Satan by declaring our victory over him again and again, let’s actually expand the kingdom of God by diving into the Scriptures, praying to the Father, and proclaiming the gospel to anyone that will listen. At least to me, that just sounds like a better plan.



JACOB I LOVED

ESAU I HATED

And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."

Genesis 25:23 ESV

Here God provides an oracle declaring that Jacob would usurp Esau's firstborn place. God chooses Jacob over Esau, while they are still in the womb. If that is not enough, Malachi 1:2-5 speaks about God loving Jacob and hating Esau:

"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert" If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.'" Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!"

As we will see in the next section of text, Esau becomes known as Edom; therefore, the nation of Edom came from Esau and Israel from Jacob. God

declares that he loves Israel but hates Edom because He also loved Jacob and hated Esau. In case we try to lessen God's words by thinking that God did not really mean hate, notice that God goes into detail about how He is actively against Edom. Of course, he does not mean the sort of emotional blind hatred that comes so naturally to us, but still God has a just and righteous hatred for Esau.

We should also note that this message of Malachi is not exclusively within the Old Testament. Paul quotes Malachi directly in Romans 9. Before providing a brief overview of Romans 9, it is important to avoid two extreme views that are both equally destructive.

First is the tendency to avoid the chapter like the plague. This happens because of the controversial nature of the text and its blatant proclamation of views that many Christians reject, such as predestination and election.

The second tendency to avoid is exalting the chapter above other Scripture, making it the centerpiece of the Bible. This is the opposite of the first, yet it is equally harmful.

In reading Romans 9, we can note Paul's reluctance to write about the topic because it weighed so heavily on his heart. We cannot avoid Romans 9, nor should we gleefully run to it. Paul's words possess great gravity because he is speaking about God's sovereignty and the salvation or damnation of humans, both being thoughts that should be handled with great care and sobriety.

The message of Romans 9 is the sovereignty of God, particularly in His election of whom to save. Paul begins the letter by languishing over the thought that many of his fellow Jews were refusing to acknowledge Jesus as the promised Messiah. He even goes so far as to wish that he could be cut off from Christ in their place! But in verse 6, Paul begins to explain that God's word has not failed because of their refusal of salvation. Instead, Paul argues that even in the Old Testament not all children of Abraham were brought into God's divine covenant. Of all the children of Abraham, only Isaac was the son of promise. And the same happens with Jacob and Esau.

But in verse 6, Paul begins to explain that God's word has not failed because of their refusal of salvation. Instead, Paul argues that even in the Old Testament not all children of Abraham were brought into God's divine covenant. Of all the children of Abraham, only Isaac was the son of promise. And the same happens with Jacob and Esau.

Verses 11-13 tell us:

"Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, 'The older shall serve the young.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

God elected some of Abraham's descendants to be participants in the covenantal blessing, while rejecting others.

If this is the case, how then can God simply choose whom to save, while still being good and loving? Well, Paul aims to address these concerns in verses 14-29. He asks if God commits injustice by choosing some to save and not others, and he then answers by citing God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus. "So then he has mercy on whomever he will, and he hardens whomever he will." (v. 18)

Next comes the question of human responsibility. Why does God find fault, if He is the one who chooses? Paul's answer is simply, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (v. 20) Just as a potter has the complete right over his creations of clay, so God has total authority over His creation, which includes us. Though some may not see it as such, this divine election is truly a blessing.

Nick Ostermann preached a sermon on Genesis 25, in which he describes four views of salvation. First is a view called Pelagianism. This thought is named after a monk named Pelagius, who lived in the latter portion of the fourth century. He argued that people were inherently good and could save themselves by doing good works. So Pelagianism is unashamedly salvation by works.

Next, the Catholic view is more or less a fifty-fifty effort. No, humans cannot save themselves, but we still must essentially meet God halfway by our works.

Arminianism is third, which claims that God does all the work of salvation, but we must still choose for God to save us.

Finally, the Reformed view holds that God chooses to save by His mercy alone, with no works on our part needed.

It might be helpful to use the same analogy of these four views that Ostermann uses: drowning in a pool. Pelagianism would dictate that you have the ability to save yourself from drowning, so you should work hard to reach the pool's ladder and live. The Catholic view would be the lifeguard diving into the pool but only going so far. You must swim your way to the lifeguard or work with the lifeguard at swimming in order to be saved. We could picture the Arminian view of salvation as the lifeguard coming out to you, but you must choose to whether to hold onto him until you reach the ladder or not. For the Reformed view, we must imagine that you have already drowned. You are at the bottom of the pool, lungs full of water with your consciousness gone, but the lifeguard swan dives to the bottom, swimming your limp body to the surface, where he pounds the water from your lungs until you can breathe again.

The Reformed view is that we have been saved one hundred percent by the effort and work of God because we could do nothing. As Paul told the Ephesians, "And you were dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1) We were dead, but Christ made us alive. Dead men can provide no effort for anything. I have heard it said that if even one percent of salvation is our doing, then one in every one hundred worship songs should be sung to us.

Though our first moment of salvation appears to be our choosing to follow Christ, we begin to see as we study the Scriptures that we could only choose because God first chose us.

The Ascension



Having just concluded the Easter season, the resurrection of Christ is firmly established within our minds. After all, we cannot truly consider the work of Jesus without declaring the glory of His resurrection. The miraculous incarnation set the foundations for the redemptive work of Christ, since it provided the platform by which God was able to become a man and live a sinless life. The crucifixion was the means through which redemption would come. Because Jesus lived a sinless life without blemish, He is the only human in history not deserving of death. But also because of His great love for us, Christ died on the cross in our place, making atonement and propitiation for our sins. This atoning sacrifice, however, would not have been proven effective if the resurrection did not happen. Paul is correct in saying that without the resurrection we should be most pitied of all men.[1 Cor. 15:19] If Jesus was not able to overcome the death, then how would we have been able to trust Him to overcome death on our behalf!

Indeed, the resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. However, I believe that we often leave out one more step in the redemptive work of Christ: His ascension. I have yet to hear a sermon explicitly expounding upon the significance of the ascension of Christ. Too often, we view the ascension as simply a historical fact for why Jesus is not on the earth right now, and we

fail to see the significant theological implications and effects of Christ's ascension into glory. Therefore, my aim will be to do just that: to give account of the effects and the implications of the ascension of Christ upon the lives of His followers.

The Account of the Ascension

Our primary text from which we will springboard into other sections of Scripture will be Acts 1, verses one through eleven. This section of Scripture provides us with the clearest description of the actual act of Christ's ascension; therefore, we will first look at some important aspects from this text before launching into the effects and implications of the ascension. First, verse 3 tells us that there was a forty-day period of time between the resurrection and ascension, and during that time period, Christ spoke to them about the kingdom of God. It is important to note the patient love of Christ being reflected in this statement. We know from other Scriptures, which we will discuss later, that Christ was not fully glorified until He ascended. If we couple that fact with the severity of the humiliation received by Christ on the cross, one would imagine Him wanting to receive His full glory as quickly as possible. However, Jesus does not operate as we do; He was continuously selfless even after His resurrection. He stayed upon the earth another forty days, teaching and instructing His friends and disciples about the kingdom of God. Accounts such as the road to Emmaus give us an idea of what Christ's post-resurrection/pre-ascension ministry must have looked like, revealing to them the great plan of salvation as fulfilled through Him.

Second, in verse 6 we see that the disciples, even after forty extra days of learning from Jesus, still did not understand fully the work that Jesus had done and was still going to do. Though Jesus taught them for forty days about the kingdom of God, they still could not stop focusing upon the kingdom of Israel. They longed to see the day that God would fully establish Israel as the chief nation upon the earth, now with Christ as their king. However, this was not the intent of Jesus, at least for that time. Christ's focus was, instead, upon the kingdom of God that would not only impact Israel but Samaria and the ends of the earth as well. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that Christ will one day return as a ruling king to bring all of the earth under His submission, but such was not the plan during the days of the disciples.

Third, verse 9 describes the literal ascension of Christ into the heavens. Though some people today may find difficulty with this account of Jesus ascending into the clouds and vanishing, we cannot ignore that the gospel writers portray this event as concrete fact. Granted, there is a level of mystery to this verse. For instance, what exactly does it mean that a cloud took Him out of their sight? Since we know now that beyond our atmosphere is a massive cosmos, we assume that He did not physically ascend beyond the atmosphere but rather was taken supernaturally into the heavenly realm, which is beyond human sight. Nevertheless, since the ascension clearly involved the supernatural working of God, it is mysterious but true. We must take the ascension as clear, historical fact, just as Luke does here.

1. I Go to Prepare a Place for You

There is no doubt that Christ's ascension would have naturally caused worry and sorrow among the disciples. We see some evidence of that fact in verse 10, where it appears that the disciples are awestruck because of having just witnessed the ascension of their Lord into heaven. Though of course, we read at the end of Luke that the disciples left the ascension rejoicing and worshipping Jesus. How are we to explain the reason for their joy, when obviously it was difficult for them to lose the physical presence of Jesus? We receive part of the answer in the first verses of John 14. At the end of chapter 13, Jesus spoke to His disciples about His departure from them. Apparently, this disheartened them because Jesus begins chapter 14 by telling them not to let their hearts be troubled. He then proceeds to tell them that He will be going to His Father to prepare a place for them in His Father's house. Throughout history, the Father's house has been most commonly seen to be a reference to heaven, and I see no reason why it would not be so. Thus, Jesus is indicating that He would be leaving them prepare a place for them in heaven. Now, we must be careful with this text because some might take it to mean that the reason for Jesus' 2000-year delay is because He hasn't finished preparing all of the rooms in heaven. That seems to be a ridiculous interpretation of this text. Instead, Jesus is using imagery of Jewish matrimony to describe His relationship with the disciples. At that time, it was common for the bridegroom to return to his father's house following the couple's engagement, where he would prepare an addition onto the house

where he and his bride will live. Thus, Jesus is using this imagery to describe something of the result of His ascension into heaven: Jesus' ascension into heaven prepared the way for us also to enter into heaven.

Too often, we read this text and are too focused upon what Jesus might be describing heaven to be like. In fact, I have heard many people, on multiple occasions, declare that they cannot wait for their mansion in heaven. The problem is that they placed their focus upon the wrong part of the text. Jesus' point here is that because He is going before the disciples, He will also return for the disciples. The emphasis is not about what heaven is like but rather that Jesus' ascension to heaven is a guarantee of His bringing us into heaven. Just as Jesus is the first fruit of the resurrection, so His ascension guarantees our eternal home with Him. But how did the ascension accomplish this? Hebrews 1 verse 3 seems to give us some indication. It claims that the act of ascension was Jesus "sitting down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." This means that the very act of Jesus ascending to heaven and sitting at the right hand of the Father was symbolizing the completion of His atoning work on our behalf. Praise God for the ascension, confirming the accomplishment of the cross and resurrection!

2. The Priestly Intercession of Christ

Having seen that Christ's ascension serves as our guarantee of heaven with Him, we now turn to the second reason for the importance of the ascension: the priestly intercession of Christ. The task of explaining this role of Christ is far too great for this short sermon, but I will try to cover the overarching purpose for it. The priesthood of Christ is one of the great themes of the book of Hebrews, so I strongly suggest rereading the entire book for a better understanding of this matter. However, there are two great texts within Hebrews for viewing this matter. First, Hebrew 9:11-12 tells us that Christ, our high priest, entered into the very presence of God (not simply the man-made Holy of Holies, found within the temple), bringing before God the sacrifice of His very blood to make propitiation for our sins. The weight of this sacrifice was so great that He only needed to make one ascension into the holy place and only needed to offer that one sacrifice in order to secure "an eternal redemption." This is the significance of speaking of only one act of Jesus ascending, He did not need to do so repeatedly. There was no need for Christ to repeatedly enter into the holy place. His sacrifice was sufficient, once for all.

Still, the high priestly work of Christ does not end there. Though obviously there is major and primary significance in the mediatorial work of Christ through the presenting of His blood on our behalf, such does not completely encapsulate the intercession of Christ for us. The final two verses of Hebrews 2 give us insight into the continuous high priestly work of Christ. There, the writer of Hebrews portrays Christ as being a high priest that relates to us and is merciful upon us. Since Jesus is fully man as well as fully God, He is able to be a sympathetic high priest. This means that Jesus' work is also to continuously aid in our sanctification by petitioning the Father on our behalf.

3. The Glorification of Christ

The third effect of the ascension that we will consider is the glorification of Christ. We know, especially from texts such as the Christ hymn of Philippians 2, that the end result of Christ's humility unto death was the exaltation and the glorification of Christ; however, we rarely view the ascension as having such an integral role in the glorification of Jesus. Verses 20-22 of the first chapter of Ephesians provided a clear link to these two concepts. Paul states here that following the resurrection Christ was seated at the "right hand in heavenly places" (the ascension) and that from this seat He is far above all powers and authority. The act of Christ ascending to the right hand of the Father is the very act of placing all other things under His feet. The ascension proclaims that Christ is Lord and that all things are in subjection to Him.

However, with this discussion also comes the question of why do things appear to be outside of the control of Christ. After all, if Jesus is truly as exalted as the New Testament describes, why does everyone not yet proclaim Him Lord over everything? The answer is simply within the word "yet". Things do not always appear to be under Christ sovereign rule for now, but there will come a day when we will finally see every knee bow before Him and every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father! Thus, the ascension of Christ is both the proclamation of His present glorification at the right hand of the Father and also of His future glorification as every creature in existence declares Him to be Lord.

4. The Sending of the Holy Spirit

For the final effect of the ascension, we turn our attention once more to the main text of our study: Acts 1. The ESV divides these first eleven verses of chapter one into three paragraphs. Found within each of those paragraphs is a concept that is key not only to understanding the significance of Christ's ascension but also for understanding the nature of the Christian life as a whole: the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity is mentioned often in this text because He is of absolute importance. The first paragraph tells us that the power through which Jesus accomplished His entire earthly ministry was through the Holy Spirit, and since that is the case, the next two paragraphs are utterly astonishing. In verses 5 and 8, Jesus confirms to His disciples His previous promise of the Holy Spirit being given to them. This means that the disciples were ordered to wait for the very same power that empowered Jesus' earthly ministry. Luke goes so far as to imply that, through the Holy Spirit, the work of the apostles in Acts would be the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ! This should give us an entirely new depth of meaning when we call the church the body of Christ. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are meant to be the physical presence of Jesus in the world, even today.

Jesus gives emphasis to the importance of the Holy Spirit whenever He tells the disciples that it was better for them that He was departing from them because then He would send the Holy Spirit to them.[John 16:7] This is an incredible statement. Surely, there are times when each of us would love to be able to speak to Jesus face to face, to be able personally to be His disciple, yet Jesus Himself tells us that having the Holy Spirit is better. Why is this so? It is because the Holy Spirit dwells within us. The Holy Spirit is God Himself inhabiting our bodies just as the presence of God once occupied the temple in Jerusalem. This should be an incredible thought for any believer that God would choose to dwell within us! This Spirit within us is the "guarantee of our inheritance." [Eph. 1:14] He is the One by whom we are able to call God our Father. We also learn from Romans 8 that He makes prayers on our behalf to the Father, since we often do not know how to pray as we ought. In short, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for the life of the believer. We simply cannot live the Christian walk without Him.

Final Implications of the Ascension

Finally, brothers, after we have seen the astounding effects of the ascension of Christ, upon both Jesus Himself and every believer in His name, we must give question to how they shape and mold our everyday lives. First, if we claim that Christ is the glorious treasure of our lives, do our hearts show to be with Him? Are our hearts within Him in His heavenly realm, where He has prepared the way for us to go?

Second, if He has truly ascended into heaven in order that we might forever dwell with Him, do we long for such? Do we long to be eternally with the infinitely glorious Christ in never ending worship of His supremacy and majesty?

Third, or perhaps do we look too longingly for the His return? Are we like the disciples who stood looking at the sky, seemingly in wait for His immediate return? Or will we in true obedience serve the Lord and make Him known since His return can come at any time?

Fourth, since we are given the Holy Spirit to continue the work of Christ, how seriously are we taking that work? Are we faithfully going to the ends of the earth to carry the name of the Jesus, the ascended and glorified Christ?

Finally, if we have seen that the ascension is evidence of Christ's completed work, do we trust in that completed work? Do we have full reliance in Jesus for our salvation, knowing that our greatest works are worth nothing at all?



Teach Us to Pray

LIKE JACOB

And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”

Genesis 32:9-12 ESV

Jacob was a coward. When his mother hatched the plot to help Jacob steal Esau’s blessing, Jacob did not oppose for moral reasons; he only expressed concern out of fear of being caught. He then ran away when his brother began to plot his murder after the deception. Next, when Jacob finds himself in a polygamous marriage, he is bounced around by his wives, instead of lovingly leading his family. And when he desires to

return to his father's land, Jacob sprints away from his father-in-law, fearing that Laban would kill him.

In Genesis 32, Jacob is maturing in his walk with God, but he is still fearful. Now that he escaped his father-in-law, Jacob would eventually need to reunite with Esau in order to re-enter his father's homeland. As Jacob feared, Esau seemed to still be angry at Jacob as evidenced by the 400 men traveling with him to meet Jacob. In response, Jacob divides his family, servants, and cattle into two camps, so that if Esau attacks one, the other can escape. This was an sinful act of fear rather than faith, a predictable action from Jacob.

But then Jacob does something else. He prays. Perhaps Jacob prayed before this, but it is his first recorded time of coming to God for aid. It's a sign of Jacob's inching maturity, but it is also a great prayer from which to learn. It is an honest prayer of belief and doubt, where Jacob is desperately clinging to faith in the midst of great fear. The man with a demon-possessed child fought the same battle when he prayed to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

We would do well to learn from the honesty of Jacob's prayer. Take a moment then, if you will, to break down the prayer's components with me, studying how we might continue to strive for Christ-like prayers.

1. Remember who God is.

Jacob opens his prayer by addressing its Recipient. Before we can ever pray effectively, we must first know to whom we are praying. Jacob lived in a time of vast polytheism, and praying to a god is quite different than praying to God. And he made this distinction by calling God by His holy name, the LORD. If we are not careful, we can easily fall into the trap of merely assuming that we are praying to the LORD, the God of Abraham and Jacob. Few people have carved out household gods today, so we think that the

identity of God is presumed. Unfortunately, many pray to their own version of God instead of God Himself. They pray, but it is ultimately for their will to be done, not the will of the Father. In order to be certain that we are praying to the God (not our version of Him), we must submit our understanding of God to the Scriptures. Make a habit, therefore, of praying with the Bible open before you, allowing it to answer and guide your prayers to the Father.

2. Remember who you are and what God has done.

Next, in verse 10, we see Jacob acknowledging his dependence upon God and remembering God's past provision. If remembering God's identity is primarily important in prayer, remembering our identity is a close second. Jacob understood that he was the mirror opposite of God. The LORD is mighty in strength, but he was weak and frail. This is true for us as well. Until we recognize our utter dependence upon God, our prayers will never be effective, since we will continue to strive in our own strength.

It is also helpful to follow in the pattern of Jacob by remembering God's previous provisions. Jacob left his father's land with only his staff, and now he was able to divide his own household into two great camps. God had never left Jacob, but when preparing to meet his brother, Jacob needed to remember that truth all over again.

3. Ask for help.

Here is what we commonly think of as being prayer: asking God for help. As we have seen, prayer is more than making requests; however, bringing our supplications to God is certainly a crucial act of prayer. Unfortunately, it seems that on this matter we tend to fall into two errors, sometimes in the same prayer.

First, we treat God as our personal genie. This kind of prayer

treats God as nothing more than a prayer answering machine. There is no real relationship. No true communication between God and us. We only talk to God in order to ask for what we need. Jesus answers this pitfall of prayer by giving us a model prayer to learn from. In that prayer, Jesus only spends one phrase asking for personal, physical needs. He gives the rest of the prayer to praying for God's holiness, for God's kingdom, for God's will, for our forgiveness of sins, and for our deliverance from temptation. Bringing our daily requests before God is a crucial part of prayer, but it is still only a part of prayer.

Second, we can also trick ourselves into thinking that God does not want to hear our needs. As we consider God's holiness and our sinfulness, it can be easy to wonder why the Almighty God would have time to listen to our miniscule needs, but that kind of thinking is entirely unbiblical. God desires for us to bring our needs to Him. Christ urges us to do so. And Paul gives a similar statement, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6)

God is not our genie, ready to grant our wishes at any moment; rather, He is our Father, who takes great care and delight in hearing and answering our needs.

4. Cling to God's Word.

Jacob closes his prayer by clinging to God's Word. The LORD promised to make Jacob's descendants into a great multitude, so Jacob reminds God of His promise. This is important because it shows that Jacob's faith in God was not unfounded. He was not merely wishing that God would protect him from Esau; instead, Jacob remembered God's promise to him as the basis for his faith in God's future protection.

Though today we may not encounter the audible voice of God nor His abundant financial provision as Jacob did, we have God's

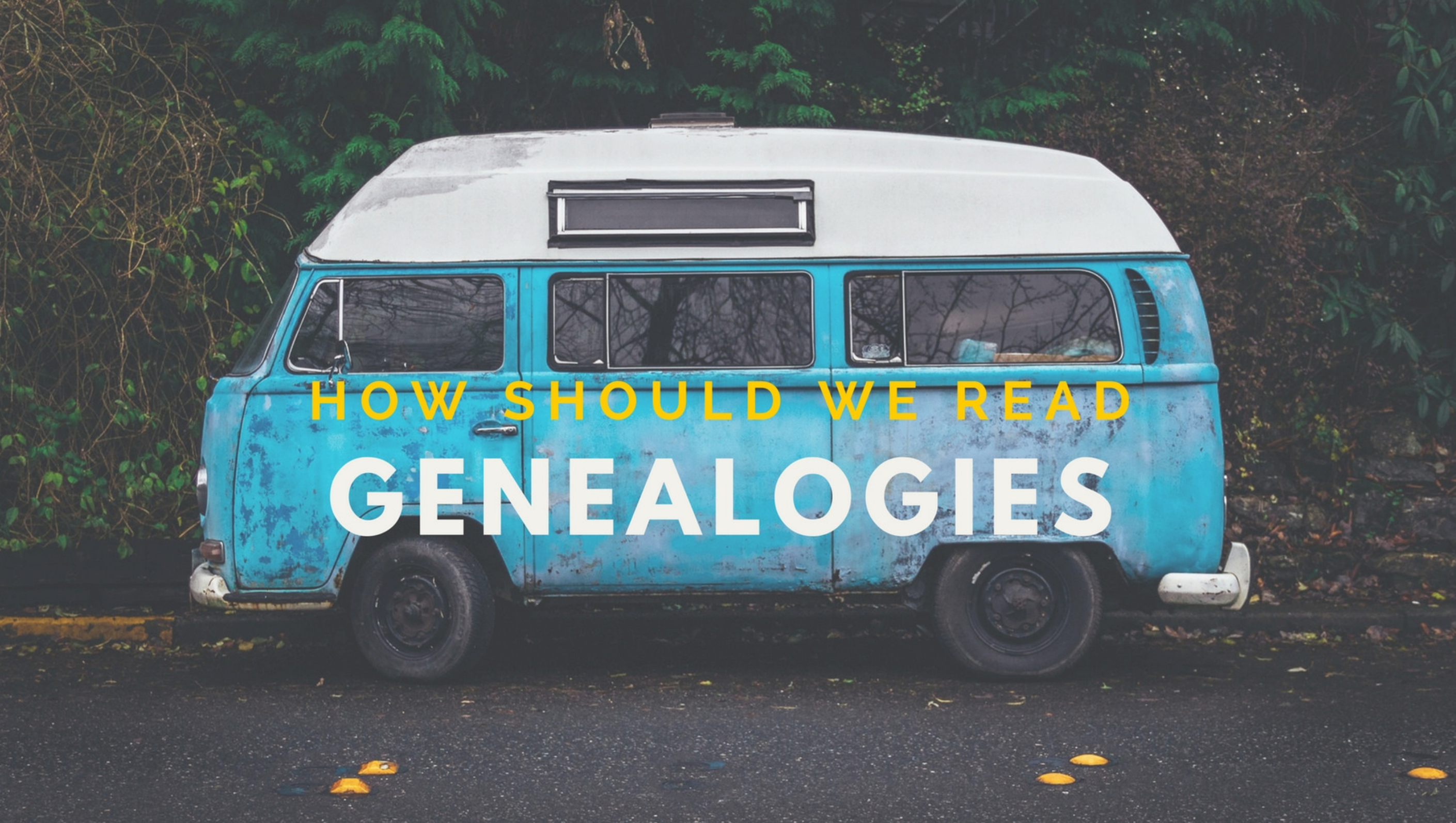
promises laid before us on a daily basis in His Word.

God may not promise us material riches, but “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28) We may continually wrestle with our sin, but “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.” (Philippians 1:6) We may often be weary, but Christ calls, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

The promises for us in God’s Word are multitude. Cling to them. In the long night of the soul, latch onto the Scriptures and cry out to the Father. For God is honored and glorified by such desperate and needy prayers.

Meditate on Jacob's prayer of desperation to God. Do you pray only to ask God for help? Do you avoid requesting anything of God? Consider how to correct either pitfall.

Pray through Jacob's prayer outline: remembering who God is, remembering who you are and what God has done, bringing your requests to God, and clinging to His Word.



As I approach Luke 3 for preaching this week, I find myself staring down upon one of the dreaded begats found throughout the Bible. As a pastor, I am uncertain if I am allowed to say this, but the genealogies in the Bible can be pretty boring. Often, they are simply scattered throughout certain places, yet occasionally, we find ourselves reading texts like the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles and end up wanting to curl into a little ball out of boredom.

Though I believe that it is fine to admit our lack of enthusiasm for particular parts of Scripture, we must do so with 2 Timothy 3:16-17 in mind. Therein, the apostle Paul writes, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." These verses remind us that genealogies are a piece of Scripture and, therefore, are just as Spirit-inspired as any other text from the Bible. But notice that Paul does not stop at inspiration, he also claims that all Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training. Once more, genealogies are not exempt from this statement. The genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3 is just as much God-breathed Scripture as, for example, the Christ hymn of Colossians.

Of course, it is one thing to claim that genealogies are profitable for teaching and such, but it is another entirely trying to figure out how to profit from them. I aim, therefore, not to leave you simply with the truth that genealogies are important; rather, I hope to give some guidance for understanding their presence in Scripture and how to study them well.

1. They Remind Us of the Bible's Historicity

The Bible is not a book of ancient myths and folk tales, as some may read it; instead, we believe that the Scriptures are completely accurate portrayals of history. Reading the Bible's genealogies can help remind us of the Bible's historicity. We may find it boring to read about some guy named Maath or Mahalaleel, but in seeing their names, we should remember that they were living, breathing people that walked this earth.

2. They Show That God Keeps His Promises

We are told repeatedly throughout the Bible that the promises of God are true, yet sometimes we have difficulty seeing them as such. Often in the Scriptures, God's promises are not fulfilled within one generation. Look at Abraham, for example. Yes, God did accomplish the promise of giving him a son within his life; however, he died having never seen the great multitude that came from him nor did he ever possess the land promised to him. These do not make the promises of God untrue; rather, God fulfilled them over the course of many generations. Genealogies can aid us in understanding that God is faithful, even if we do not see some workings in our lifetime.

3. They Reflect the Nature of Life

This one is a little bit Ecclesiastes-esque, but hear me out. Viewing a list of generations should remind us of the brevity of life. Even though some men in Genesis lived for over nine hundred years,

the fact is that all of them are now dead. Regardless of our age, power, wealth, or status, each of us will face the same end. Very, very few of us will ever be remembered in a substantial way. Some of us might be fortunate enough to have our name in a list for future generations. Most of us, however, will pass through this life, leaving behind little or nothing to be remembered.

Of course, this does not have to be terribly depressing. As followers of Christ, we do not live life for our own glory or legacy; instead, we are more interested in furthering the fame of Jesus. Countless Christians have died and been forgotten on earth, but because of their work for the kingdom of God, their lives were not wasted or without meaning. Thus, genealogies can also be a reminder for us to disciple others, so that the glory of Christ might be known throughout each generation.

4. They Give Us a Bird's Eye View of Grace

Genealogies also provide for us a large lens for viewing the grace of God. For example, Jesus' genealogy in Matthew lists people like Ruth and Rahab. Ruth was a foreigner from the pagan Moabites, and Rahab was a prostitute. Yet through the grace of God, both of these women became a part of the lineage of Jesus! Our view of grace, however, is not limited to individuals. Genealogies also show the breadth of God's common grace upon humanity. Even through generations of sin, we might find times when God would be completely justifiable in issuing another flood-level wipeout; however, generation after generation, we find our God patiently bearing with us.

5. They Are Ultimately Pointing to Jesus

This is the most important aspect to understand regarding genealogies. In listing the generations of people, we see the storyline of the Bible unfold. From Adam to Joseph, God promised a savior to the humanity. After the Fall, God told Adam

that this savior would be the offspring of woman. Abraham was promised that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his offspring. God, further, declared that David's offspring would sit upon the throne forever. Jesus is the fulfillment of all of these. The end and goal of the entire Bible, really of all of history, is Jesus, and genealogies display God's faithfulness in sending Christ.

The End of the Matter

With that said, one question still stands: will this make genealogies any less boring to read? If we are honest, maybe not, but perhaps, this will help you to see the depth of meaning and grace that can be found within them.



4 SIGNS OF A DEAD CHURCH

As we steadily approach the finish line of our present sermon series through the seven letters of Revelation, the third to the last message has hit me full force. Jesus gives to the Apostle John a letter for the church of Sardis, and His words for it are terrifying. We've already heard Jesus rebuke the Ephesian church for having solid doctrine but no love and the Thyatiran church for having love but poor doctrine. We've already read Jesus threaten to war against the church of Pergamum if they did not repent of their conformity to society rather than the Scriptures.

But His message to Sardis takes everything to a new level.

To Sardis, Jesus claims that they have a reputation for being alive, but they are, in fact, dead. This means that by human standards Sardis appeared to be in decent shape. They were probably growing numerically as a church. The Scriptures were likely taught with a great degree of orthodoxy. They may have even been known for their love of the community around them. We simply don't know what things they were doing well, but we do know that Jesus calls their bluff. Where men might have considered the church of Sardis to be growing and faithful, Jesus knew that they were flat lining.

The notion of a church appearing to be alive while, in reality, being dead ought to send shivers down our spine. This is the sort of church and the kind of members that we never want to be. So let's take a moment to consider ways that a church might be dead with the appearance of life.

1. Prayerlessness

I don't believe it's possible to overemphasize the value and necessity of prayer. Because of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, we are able to approach God's "throne of grace" with confidence, knowing "that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" from our Father (Heb. 4:16). What a privilege that we are able to speak to the Almighty God as His children with Him as our Father!

Yet it is not only a privilege but also a joy, an expression of having finally found a treasure that it worth losing everything else to possess (Matt. 13:44). Our hearts ought to be constantly (1 Thess. 5:17) in prayerful communion with God because all else is rubbish (Phil. 3:7) by comparison to His value.

In short, we pray because our hearts will be with our treasure (Matt. 6:21).

A prayerless Christian is no Christian, and a prayerless church is no church.

The lack of prayer indicates that God is not treasured. If God is not treasured, then He is not truly worshiped as God.

In fact, God opposes the prayerless. Both Peter and James tell us that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6)." There is no greater expression of pride than prayerlessness. The act of prayer is humbling. It approaches God

in His sovereignty, understanding our desperate need for His intervention, guidance, and love. A lack of prayer speaks that we do need God's grace or aid. Prayer asserts our dependence, while prayerlessness proclaims our independence.

A church that is independent of God is a dead church. Jesus explicitly states that He will build His church (Matt. 16:18). Christ's church is entirely reliant upon Him as the builder. With an utter independence from Jesus, the church is dead, even while it seems to live.

Jesus urges Sardis to wake up, to be watchful. This idea of wakefulness, watchfulness, and sobriety is at times used in relation to prayer.

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. – Mark 14:38

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. – Colossians 4:2

Isaiah 62:6-7 also describes those in prayer as watchmen on a city's walls. We ought to pray with all the wakefulness and sobriety of watchmen who were able to glimpse an enemy in the distance and prepare the city accordingly. We must keep alert, "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication (Eph. 6:18)."

A church can do any number of things and have any measure of growth, but without prayer, it is dead with only the semblance of life.

2. Lack of Discipleship

The primary mission that Jesus gave to His disciples was to make more disciples (Matt. 28:19). A church is composed of Christians

(disciples of Jesus), and if those Christians do not seek to fulfill Jesus' great objective, they are outside of His will.

Each of us are called to disciple others and be disciple by others. The church is a perpetual factory of passing on knowledge, skills, and ministries. The goal of every believer ought to be toward making the road a little easier for the next workers to expand the kingdom of God.

A lack of discipleship is evident in a number of ways.

First, the youth are neglected by the older men and women. The primary fashion that Paul seems to envision discipleship within a regular church congregation is older men and women training younger men and women. He tells Timothy to take what he learned from Paul and entrust it "to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2)." And he urges Titus to have older women train "young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled (Titus 2:4-5)." Negligence to raise up the next generation is a failure to disciple.

Second, resisting to train others in ministry is a failure to disciple. Each ministry of the church must be for the benefit of the church and the service of Jesus; therefore, a resistance toward training others in a particular ministry is a sign of selfishness. It is selfish because it places our desire to be needed above the betterment of the body of Christ. Our identity becomes entangled in our ministry rather than to Christ, so we refuse to let others into our work. The impact is only felt fully by the congregation whenever the person either leaves or dies without warning. The church is left trying to pick up the fragmented pieces because no one else was ever disciplined on how to accomplish the work.

A lack of discipleship often results from an unhealthy fixation on

the past. When in a perpetual state of remembrance of the good ol' days, the congregation is not able to sufficiently invest in the future.

A mental resolution that the better days are behind us will ensure that they are.

Jesus made disciples so that they would expand the work of the kingdom of God beyond His ascension into heaven. The disciples made disciples so that the work would continue beyond their lives. Discipleship is about living for something bigger than ourselves. It is about living for Someone bigger than ourselves. It is about aiming to ensure that the message of the gospel goes on long after we have passed from this world. If we fail to do so, our church will die with us.

3. Lack of Evangelism

When Jesus looked upon the crowds of people that came to hear Him teach and be healed, “He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36).” Jesus did not gaze at the world going to hell in a handbasket with disdain; He saw them with tender love and compassion. Being God, Jesus does not wish “that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9).”

The Great Commission's call to make disciples is Jesus' answer to this love of the lost. Christ commands us to go into all nations, making disciples by baptizing them and teaching them everything that He commanded us. In many ways, evangelism is the first stage of discipleship. Both are two sides of the same coin. Evangelism is bringing the gospel to non-Christians, and discipleship is applying the gospel to Christians. Discipleship begins with evangelism, and evangelism goes into discipleship.

A church without a love for evangelism is a church without a love for people and the gospel.

If we truly love people, we will desire to bring them the true of the gospel, regardless of the awkwardness of it. A doctor who refuses to inform his patient of cancer because it's uncomfortable is a failed doctor. Likewise, we cannot claim to love others while letting them go uninformed and without Christ to hell. Or else, we cannot claim to truly believe the gospel as truth, while failing to proclaim it to others.

In this way, without evangelism, the church is either unloving or heretical. It either lacks love along with the church of Ephesus or lacks the understanding of truth like the church of Thyatira. Without a love to share the gospel with others, a church finds itself in clear danger of having its lampstand removed (Rev. 2:5) or being made into an example of Christ's judgment for all churches to see (Rev. 2:22-23).

4. Toleration of Sin

In many ways, a toleration of sin is the only way to kill a church. Prayerlessness and lack of discipleship and evangelism are sinful behaviors. They are sins of omission rather than commission. James 4:17 puts it plainly:

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Repeatedly the Bible associates sin with death—after all, sin brought death into creation to begin with.

But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. – Romans 8:10

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. – Ephesians 2:4-5

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses. – Colossians 2:13

Sin kills. And tolerated sin kills fully. We, naturally, do not enjoy being rebuked for sin. It is never pleasant to be told that we are in the wrong; however, it is necessary. A kind admonishment is one of the most loving acts of kindness. Look at the Bible's alternative to tolerating sin:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. – Galatians 6:1

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. – Colossians 3:16

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. – James 5:19-20

This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith. – Titus 1:13

Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you. – Titus 2:15

Pointing out sin is never easy. In the Old Testament, the prophets were primarily used of God to rebuke the sins of Israel, and their lives were marked by suffering because of their message. When the sin that we love is attacked, the typical response is to retaliate against the messenger.

Yet we must understand that rebuking sin is the most loving action we can take toward our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Regardless of what sin (omission or commission) that Sardis found itself in, it died as a church because it did not “put to death” sin (Rom. 8:13).

And like Sardis, there are only two options for every church and its members: either let sin kill us by tolerating it, or put to death sin through repentance.



DID HOMOSEXUALITY CAUSE THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM & GOMORRAH?

Since I will be preaching Genesis 19 this week, it seems like a great time to discuss the reason for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Often, this chapter of the Bible is used as a warning text against the sinfulness of homosexuality as many view homosexuality as the primary cause for its desolation. But is that accurate? Was homosexuality really the foundation for Sodom's annihilation?

In discussing this topic, it is important to understand that there exist two equally common, erroneous, but also opposing answers to the proposed question.

First, let us view the negative answer to the question, which asserts that Sodom was not destroyed because of homosexuality. To support this claim, some will argue that the men of Sodom did not practice homosexuality at all; rather, God judged Sodom for being inhospitable to travelers. Such belief can only be supported via a grandiose reinterpreting of Genesis 19. It is clearly present in the text that the men of Sodom were intent on having sex with the two angels that were visiting Lot. Others, however, will admit that the Sodomites practiced homosexuality but claim that God did not judge such as sin. Instead, God judged

Sodom for various other sins, like rape, pride, and gluttony. Because they refuse to hold homosexuality as a sin, they reinterpret the Bible to support their wants and desires.

On the other hand, some people will answer the question in the affirmative, claiming that God did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their homosexual practices. To some degree, there really is not a problem with this answer until you begin to dig down into the subtext beneath it. Many people would answer the question in this manner, but the underlying presumption would be that Sodom was only, or primarily, destroyed because of homosexuality. This is where we must take care. Though the Bible clearly declares homosexuality to be sinful, it was not exclusively the sin for which Sodom was judged. We must be equally careful not to reinterpret Scripture into saying something that it never meant to say.

Though both of these answers are on the opposite end of the spectrum, they can be equally incorrect in how they interpret the Bible. For many, changing the meaning of something that is blatantly stated is clearly wrong, but few recognize the subtle danger of misplaced emphasis. Thus, in order to develop a proper answer to the question, we must consider what the Bible claims the sin of Sodom to be.

The Sins of Sodom

As we discuss what the Bible calls the sins of Sodom, I would turn your attention primarily to Genesis 19 and Ezekiel 16:49-50. These texts most clearly show the transgressions of Sodom and Gomorrah.

1. Homosexuality & Sexual Immorality

Here is the most obvious and most discussed of Sodom's sins. Despite what some may claim, the Bible definitively declares

homosexuality to be a sin. By this point, the biblical arguments for why it is sin have already been done by people who are much more studied than I. Yet for the sake of covering bases, let me present the evidence with much brevity. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both specifically state the sinfulness of homosexuality. As for the New Testament, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Timothy 1:10, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 all directly mention homosexuality as a sin. The greatest claim, of course, is that Jesus affirmed marriage to be between one man and one woman, citing Genesis 2 in His reasoning.[Mark 10:2-12]

Yet in the discussion of homosexuality, we often overlook another grievous sexual sin that Sodom was guilty of: rape and abuse. To be fair, we are never explicitly told that the men of Sodom ever raped anyone; however, because of their bloodthirsty desire for the two angels in Genesis 19, we can logically assume that such behavior was not abnormal for them. It perplexes me that the Sodomites were so clearly desiring to violate the angels, yet the topic of rape is rarely discussed from said text. Sodom was guilty of a plethora of sexual sin, including rape and homosexuality. It is wrong to think of Sodom as being a “free love” hippy-ish society where love abounded for anyone and anything... until God came along and ruined their fun. Instead, the Bible portrays Sodom as a city full of predators hungry for victims.

2. Lack of Hospitality

This one may sound strange to us, but hospitality is a biblical command. Leviticus 19:34 states, “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” In the New Testament, Peter commands us to “show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”[1 Pet. 4:9] Paul urges us to “contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”[Rom. 12:13] Furthermore, elders and deacons

are required to be hospitable in leading the church.[1 Tim. 3:2; Ti. 1:8] Because hospitality is a friendly and generous reception of visitors or strangers, who should be more inclined to hospitality than those to whom God has been exceedingly generous? God, therefore, expects hospitality to flow from His people since the lack of hospitality signifies a lack of love. Once again, the Bible does not explicitly state that Sodom lacked hospitality; however, it is evident by their treatment of the two angels in Genesis 19. Or to put it another way, attempted rape is certainly not a means of showing hospitality.

3. Pride

We now move into sins that are not seen in Genesis 19 but are explicitly stated in Ezekiel 16. The first is pride. Sinful pride occurs when we value ourselves too highly. The book of Proverbs repeatedly warns about the dangers of being prideful.[Prov. 16:5; 16:18; 29:23] In his book Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis even goes so far as to claim that pride is the great sin. But why is pride so bad? Ultimately, pride is sin because it is a form of idolatry. In being prideful, we essentially worship ourselves or give ourselves credit rather than God. Pride is about usurping the glory of God. We are often proud because we long for glory; specifically, we long for God's glory. In fact, the first sin within the Bible was a sin of pride. The serpent deceived Eve into eating the fruit because he said that upon eating it she would be like God. Sodom apparently was no different.

4. Gluttony

The people of Sodom were guilty of being gluttons. In my opinion, this is likely the great sleeping sin of the United States. Throughout the Bible, gluttony is considered a serious transgression. Proverbs declares, "And put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite"[Prov. 23:2] and "Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe

them with rags.”[Prov. 23:20-21] We often have no problem with calling drunkenness or drug usage a sin; however, the Bible frequently mentions gluttons in the same category, and alongside, drunkards. Both gluttony and drunkenness are matters of self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit for Christians.[Gal. 5:23] Though over-consumption of food is primarily of the body, it reveals the heart. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:12, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.” Food itself is not a sin. After all, God created flavors and taste buds for enjoying food, yet being mastered by food or eating to excess certainly is sin.

5. Prosperous Ease, Without Aiding the Poor and Needy

Ezekiel’s final item in Sodom’s list of sins is quite interesting. He claims that the Sodomites had “prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Evidently, Sodom was a very wealthy city. The end of Genesis 14 gives us a hint of the city’s wealth when the king of Sodom offers the treasures of the city to Abraham. Of course, wealth, similar to food, is not innately sinful. Throughout the Bible, we find a wide range of people who were quite rich; however, we must notice carefully the qualifying statement: “but did not aid the poor and needy.” God was not angry at Sodom because they were rich but because they did nothing to help the poor and needy with their riches. The subject of aiding the poor is common to the Bible. Proverbs 14:31 states, “Whoever oppresses the poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.” Jesus even claims that how we treat the least around us is how we treat Him.[Matt. 25:40] Each person is made in the image of God and, therefore, valuable. Though prosperity is not a sin, failing to use our prosperity to aid the poor and needy certainly is.

The End of the Matter

So let’s revisit the original question in order to provide a

definitive answer. Did homosexuality cause the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? Yes, but it was far from being the only reason. They were rapists, gluttons, proud, inhospitable, and stingy as well. We would also do well to understand that God used Sodom as an example for the seriousness of sin.[Jude 7] They did not need to commit a multitude of sin to deserve God's wrath. Gluttony, pride, homosexuality, or any other lone sin was enough to separate them from God, and the chances are that each of us has committed at least one of the sins listed above. We, therefore, have no moral high ground on Sodom. We only have Christ, the One who has taken the punishment for all of our sins. So when considering Sodom, let us be thankful for the mercy and grace of God in sparing us from Sodom's fate.



HOW TO FAIL AT READING THE BIBLE

If there is any topic that I am passionate about, it is the Bible. I love to study the Scriptures because I find the Bible to be the most fascinating book on earth. I mean, we believe that it is the literal word of the God who created everything in existence. How can that not be endlessly exhilarating!

Given the important nature of the Bible, there is often a significant push to get people to read it, and we formulate numerous strategies for doing so. We create study Bibles to help us understand it better without having to crack open a commentary or consult a clergyman. We develop mobile apps to make reading convenient and accessible. We urge finding at least five minutes a day, hoping that something will stick to the soul. We desperately resolve to read it all when January rolls around, only to quit with a shameful whisper to ourselves that Leviticus makes no sense.

To be clear, none of those things are bad ideas, but with a great deal of focus upon getting people to simply read the Bible, we should also ask whether there is a right or wrong way to do so.

Well, jumping straight to the heart of the matter, we can easily

read the Bible in an unbiblical fashion. In order to avoid this, let us look at some ways that we can fail at reading the Bible.

1. We Fail to See the Point

I would be willing to guess that lack of comprehension is one of the main reasons that many Christians find it difficult to read the Bible. To be fair, it is quite difficult to enjoy something when we know very little of what it's about. Luckily, the Bible gives us a fairly simple answer as to what the entire point of it is: Jesus.

In John 5, Jesus finds himself speaking with a large crowd of Jews. During this discussion, Jesus tells them,

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.[John 5:39-40]

Jesus knew that He was speaking to group of people that highly valued the Bible. They believed it to be the Word of God. They believed, as Jesus said, that they could find the path to eternal life in the Scriptures. On the surface, they appeared very orthodox.

But Jesus claimed that they missed the entire point.

They failed to see what the Bible is all about. They failed to see Jesus in the Scriptures, so they failed to correctly read the Bible. Jesus states, in no uncertain terms, that the Bible is about Him. By bearing witness to Christ, all of Scripture points toward Christ. Jesus Christ is the end and aim of the Bible. It is entirely about Him.

If the entire Bible is meant to point to Jesus as God and savior, their failure to see Jesus as such meant they failed to truly understand the Scriptures. Being the Word of God, the Bible is supposed to reveal God to us, to teach us about His will and

character. Yet God was standing before them in the flesh, and they failed to recognize Him. They missed what the Bible was actually saying because they were too focused upon obtaining eternal life, which is a more subtle form of self-focus. They were so concerned about finding their path to heaven that they missed the focal point of heaven itself standing before them.

Likewise, far too many people approach the Bible as a self-help guide or as though the whole thing is a book of proverbs with nuggets of wisdom for everyday life. Though the Bible is certainly helpful and provides wisdom for life, the overall point of the Scriptures is Jesus. When we read the Bible, the first and most important question that we should ask is: How does this point to Jesus, or what does it reveal about Him? We must approach the Scriptures as being Jesus-focused, not self-focused.

2. We Fail to Remember Its Value

Common sense tells us that we will not waste time upon things that are not considered valuable. Even when we binge watch Netflix or YouTube, we do so because we esteem the entertainment highly—even if we later look upon that time as being wasted. We give our time to that which we treasure.

I think, therefore, it is fair to say that our time given to reading the Word correlates highly with how we view its worth. If we give it little of our time, we value it little. If it receives much of our time, we then revere it much.

But how much should we value the Scriptures?

2 Timothy 3:16-17 provides for us with this statement on Scripture:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that

the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

All Scripture comes from the breath of God. This means that God has spoken all Scripture, and it is the Word of God because He said it. The value of the Bible, therefore, falls upon the worth of God because words bear the weight of the one that speaks them.

Let us then consider God briefly. In Genesis, we are told that God created everything by speaking it into existence. Atoms, kangaroos, and quasars all came into being by the power of His word. That is our introduction to God. He says, “Let there be”, and there is. At the sheer authority of His voice, nothing becomes something. In fact, the immense majesty of God’s being is so vast that there exists a word it: holy. God’s holiness means that He is completely unique, unlike anyone or anything in existence. He is distinct and set apart. There is no one like Him.

And this God chose to speak to us. We do not need to wish for God to speak to us because He already has. The same God whose words created the universe inspired the prophets of old to write His words down for our benefit. If that does not tell us the value of the Scriptures, nothing will. The Bible is the Word of God. Do you remember that when you read it? Do we cling to them as being “the words of eternal life”?[John 5:68]

3. We Fail to Memorize and Meditate Upon It

This is certainly the odd man out on this list. It is fairly easy to understand how the Bible is all about Jesus and how much we should value it as the Word of God, but are memorization and meditation really that important? I believe that the biblical answer is yes. Therefore, let us view a few Scriptures concerning memorization and meditation upon the Bible:

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.
(Psalm 119:11)

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Joshua 1:8)

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. (Deuteronomy 11:18)

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart. (Psalm 40:8)

But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:2)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16)

The emphasis of the above Scriptures is certainly upon the memorization and meditation of the Word. The call to memorize is implicit but clearly understood. Storing the Word in our hearts can only be done by willfully committing the Scriptures to memory. Likewise, we are only able to meditate upon the Bible day and night if we have it stored in our minds for 24/7 access.

The Bible's urge for meditation is a different animal. Though meditation upon the Word is more blatantly stated, it is far less understood, in general. Often a discussion of meditation conjures up mental images of Buddhism or some other form of non-Christian religious practice, and few ever imagine that Christians should meditate. This is likely because most people view mediation as a means of introspection or self-realization, but this is not so with biblical meditation. Christian meditation seeks primarily to understand and ponder the Scriptures. Meditating on the Bible is to let its words roll around in your mind, thinking

about the truths that it contains. I would argue that meditating (or thinking deeply, to put it another way) upon the Bible is crucial to our reading of the Scriptures. Reading the Bible without meditating on what was read is like chewing a piece of gum twice before spitting it out—much of its value is wasted because we do not give it sufficient time.

The End of the Matter

I am certainly not saying that these are the only ways that we can read the Bible incorrectly. Surely there are many men and women who could point out plenty of things that I missed. My point, however, is not to be all encompassing; rather, it is to help us (myself included) read the Scriptures as they are meant to be read. We do both God and ourselves injustice when we do not strive to understand His Word. May we be able to cry out with the psalmist, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.”[Psalm 42:1] If we have a longing to know God more, we will long to hear His Word.



DEPRESSING JOY

THE UNITY OF ECCLESIASTES & PHILIPPIANS

The nature of joy should not be mysterious to us, yet it often is. C. S. Lewis claims, in the book *Surprised by Joy*, that pleasure, happiness, and joy share a commonality. This common trait, Lewis remarks, is that after one has experienced them he or she will spend the rest of their life searching for them again. However, though they share this link, joy is significantly different from pleasure or happiness. For instance, the alluring aspect of happiness and pleasure is that they are both enjoyable, yet that very enjoyment of happiness and pleasure is meant to be found within the context of joy. The word “enjoy” means, after all, to find joy in something. Thus, joy is the means by which and the purpose to which we are meant enjoy pleasure and happiness. We often seek happiness and pleasure themselves as sources of joy, but if we sought joy first, then we would already have the context for accepting pleasure and happiness. Joy should be given primacy. Happiness and pleasure could best be described as momentary glimpses of joy, whereas joy is a state of being that transcends throughout the emotional spectrum. Thus, we can be joyful and happy, but we can also be sorrowful and full of joy.

The lasting appeal of joy, I believe, derives from its interconnection with satisfaction. When we are joyful, we are satisfied. Or, it could better be said that when we are satisfied, we are joyful. As Moody notes, “if man is dying for want of bread, and you give him bread, is that going to make

him gloomy?” Most, if not all, of our negative emotions can be traced to an outcome that deviated from our original desire. I will not enjoy a meal fully if it is Chinese food and my desire was for Mexican. When our desires are fulfilled, we find joy and satisfaction.

The implication of this thought is enormous because most people strongly desire to live a satisfied life. We often long, deep within our souls, for a joy that gives us true satisfaction and contentment, and we are best able to find that joy by seeing our desires fulfilled. However, if our greatest desire is to achieve joy and satisfaction, then such joy can only be found by finding... joy. And it is within this vague cycle of sought-out meaning that many throw away their search for joy. They become lost in the quest for satisfaction and, as a result, pursue one source of fleeting pleasure after another. Instead of finding lasting joy, they do their best to be satisfied with lesser things, with mere hints of the meaning and contentment that could be had.

This triviality is not lost on God nor on His chosen people throughout history. In fact, there two books within God’s Word that search out and answer how we might find a meaningful and satisfied life. The first of these is the book of Ecclesiastes. Written by Solomon, the king of Israel after succeeding his father David, Ecclesiastes is traditionally believed to be his dying thoughts. After living a life of unparalleled wealth, pleasure, and wisdom, Solomon wrote what many consider to be the most hopeless and depressing book of the Bible.

It is easily understood how one can arrive at such a conclusion. The bulk of Ecclesiastes is Solomon presenting various avenues of hope only to describe their shortcomings. However, the overarching vanity in life is not Solomon’s ultimate purpose for the book. Instead, Solomon hopes to reveal the Source of lasting joy and satisfaction, but he does this primarily by showing how other methods fail to offer such joy. In fact, the Israelite king repeatedly states that there is nothing better in life than to enjoy what you have been given by God.

Wait.

Surely the search for lasting joy cannot be that simple.

Are we meant to simply have joy?

Well, Solomon does give an answer for the Source of joy: God. The conclusion of Solomon's life is that enjoyment, and thus joy, only comes from God. Nothing else gives such lasting satisfaction. Therefore, we must understand that Ecclesiastes is, at its core, about joy and the Giver of joy.

The second book is the widely hailed epistle of joy: Philippians. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians was written towards the end of his life as well. Over the course of his letter, Paul primarily urges the church in Philippi to rejoice (another word derived from joy), despite the church and Paul himself experiencing persecution. In fact, Philippians was written while Paul was imprisoned for declaring the gospel of Jesus. But even though Paul was sitting in prison awaiting his death, he wrote with supreme confidence that he had found the complete and total meaning of life: "to live is Christ." Furthermore, Paul's central focus upon Christ gives contentment and joy in any situation and grants him the ability to view death as gain. The joy of Christ delivers unparalleled joy and satisfaction, while stripping away the sting and fear of death.

Though Solomon and Paul were separated by roughly a thousand years, the central theme of both Ecclesiastes and Philippians remains eternally tied together. These two godly and wise men present to us a thousand year, Spirit-inspired look at humanity's quest for meaning, satisfaction, and purpose in life. But even more importantly, they present the answer to that quest; therefore, over the next couple of posts, we will explore the connections and relations between these two beautiful, but challenging, books.

Two Roads

A belief that I hold is that there are two paths to hell. If eternal judgment is your desired destination, rest assured that you have at least two choices to take: the road of the "sinner" or the road of the "religious."

You see, the only method of actually securing the eternal wrath of such a loving God is to follow your own prideful heart, to reject His grace and His Son. This is the only means of sealing one's damnation because we know that anyone who turns from their sins and follows Christ shall be saved.

However, though pride is the only means of earning a hellish afterlife, such a life plays out in two broad forms, both are methods of proclaiming your own glory instead of God's. As one could probably guess, both of these views are discussed in Ecclesiastes and Philippians.

First, you can become a "sinner" and adamantly reject the inherent moral compass that God has placed within us. This way of life will almost always become some form of the philosophical thought known as hedonism. This is because, as stated above, pleasure gives us a sense of enjoyment, which we will often relentlessly pursue. When we are centered upon ourselves entirely and deny any real morality, we will seek our own happiness through various means.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon gives us the very epitome of this "sinner" approach to life. His hedonistic quest is listed in the second chapter and is basically a dream fulfilled to anyone. Is music enjoyable? Solomon hired his favorite singers and musicians to play personally for him, whenever he wanted. How about laughter? He had the best comedians around him at all times. Animals? He had the best farms and his own personal zoo. Money? Solomon made 666 talents of gold each year just for being king. That would be a salary of about \$750,000,000 in today's currency! With all of his possessions included, Solomon is widely considered to be the wealthiest person to ever live. How about sex? He had 700 wives and 300 concubines whose only job was to satisfy any fantasy that the king had. Most men today would have great difficulty building a virtual harem that large, let alone an actual harem! He ordered the building of one of the wonders of the ancient world, the temple in Jerusalem. His philanthropy was also unmatched. Surely all of those activities gave him pleasure!

And actually, it did.

But it was only a fleeting, momentary pleasure. Disillusioned by the inability to find lasting satisfaction in any of those avenues, Solomon gives himself over to despair in the very same chapter! Though he sought joy, the end result is nothing but depression.

Or we could choose to become “religious.”

This route is no less prideful than the “sinner’s” road, though it often appears to be so because of the false humility that likely follows. In many ways, this path is no less hedonistic than the “sinner.” While “sinner” ignores the moral laws and seeks pleasure outside of them, the “religious” accepts morality and hopes to find pleasure in being a good person. Following this route, our satisfaction becomes contingent upon our good works.

In Philippians, we find this other path toward damnation played out. In the third chapter, Paul gives us his religious credentials. Paul was born into one of the more prominent tribes among God’s chosen people. When it came to obeying the laws that God gave to the Israelites, Paul was a Pharisee. This group literally devoted their entire lives to obeying God’s Word, and Paul was quickly becoming one of the best. Another aspect of religiousness is passion, or zeal. Many today will argue that it does not matter what you believe so long as you believe with your whole heart and passion. Paul had unrivaled zeal, displayed in the fact that he killed those considered to be heretics. It is difficult to imagine a greater passion than the willingness to kill for your beliefs. And interestingly enough, Paul does not say that this failed to give him pleasure or satisfaction. In fact, this form of life can certainly lead to a fulfilled existence; however, the end result will not be even remotely pleasant. Jesus informs us that at the end of time many will stand before Him and confidently sight their resume as justification for their entrance into God’s presence. Shockingly, they will promptly be denied. Why? They will be sent away because all of their efforts were for their own pride and glory, not the glorification of Christ.

Nevertheless, Paul does not reiterate Jesus’ words. He does not even state that all of his best efforts were in vain. Instead, he is more concerned with what he has found to be the greatest source of pleasure and meaning, which consequently is the same conclusion that Solomon also arrives to at the end of

the second chapter in Ecclesiastes. Solomon's claim is that the ability to enjoy life is a gift from God, and Paul's conclusion is that everything else pales in comparison to Jesus Christ. Solomon's hedonism and Paul's hedonistic legalism both spring from the sin called pride and its rebellion against God. Yet both also find their hope and true joy in God and the radiance of His glory Jesus Christ.

Finding Contentment

Yet even if hedonism and religious legalism are both truly dead ends, we are forced to ask once more why people pursue these ends.

Why do we relentlessly chase after the pleasures of hedonism to the degree of ignoring our God-given conscience?

Why practice the asceticism found within religious legalism so that precious little happiness and pleasure is left in life?

Both roads are meant to accomplish the same end: contentment. A satisfied, fulfilled, and purposeful life is the goal to which almost every philosophical outlook aims. Most of us seek to live a life that is full of meaning, a life that has not been wasted.

Solomon, with all of his divinely granted wisdom, was no exception. Ecclesiastes is the Israelite king's reflection on all of the various quests that he explored to find this contentment, this meaning in life. Though he pursued many possible means toward that end, the thesis of Ecclesiastes is that he only found one path that leads to true meaning and satisfaction in life.

In the twelfth and thirteenth verses of chapter three, Solomon states simply that there is nothing better than for us to "take pleasure" in all of our toil. He would rephrase this idea later by saying that we would do well to accept our lot in life. Thus, we have to wonder if such is the extent of Solomon's wisdom. The wisest man to ever live, at the end of his life, reaches one conclusion: to find contentment and satisfaction in life, be content and satisfied with life.

Is the answer to the question truly the content of the question itself?

Fortunately, Solomon grants us more to guide us than the advice of simply being content. Instead, Solomon reveals to us the Source of contentment. He concludes the verses mentioned above with this tell-tale phrase: “this is God’s gift to man.” From whence can such contentment and purpose in life come? According to Solomon, it can only come from the hand of God, gift to humanity that He alone can give.

Paul’s letter to the Philippian church is not without its parallel in this matter.

Given the apostle’s circumstances, it would be difficult to imagine how he could find complete and total satisfaction with life. He was locked away in prison, knowing that he could be executed at any moment. And this is after most of his missionary journeys, which saw him shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and flogged. Luke the physician likely stayed by Paul’s side primarily out of necessity. After such difficulties and sufferings, is it possible for Paul to write about having contentment and satisfaction? Amazingly, he does!

In verse eleven of chapter four, Paul declares that he has learned “to be content” in any situation. Even so, this claim will inspire nothing but envy within us unless Paul is able to disclose the Source of his contentment. The thirteenth verse of the same chapter is one of the most famous and quoted verses of the entire Bible, and it is there that the answer is found. It is through “him who strengthens” that Paul finds the ability to be satisfied within difficult circumstances. We understand from the context of the letter and chapter that the “him” is Christ.

Therefore, Paul is making the same claim that Solomon made 1000 years prior. They have both found the same conclusion to one of life’s greatest questions, and the answer is that only God can give us contentment and satisfaction with life.

The Pursuit of Joy

We have now arrived at the Source of a content life. We have discovered that God alone, through Christ, is able granted us the satisfaction that our souls desire. However, if we stop merely at the Source of our satisfaction, then I

believe that we will miss an opportunity to see the glory and goodness of God at work.

You see, part of the glorious nature of God's gift of contentment is the means by which it is given. God, being God, could easily have granted us a form of contentment that offered no level of pleasure. He could have simply given us the ability to be completely satisfied with our lot in life, while also being quite unhappy. Yet, this is not how He chose to operate. God Himself is the Source of our contentment, but joy is the vehicle, the mode, through which His gift is given. This thought gives heart to what was discussed at the beginning: joy leads to satisfaction, which we know now to be because God ordained it as such.

In bringing the ideas of joy, contentment, meaning, satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness full circle, we may once again turn toward Ecclesiastes' and Philippians' persistent mentioning of joy and its derivative words.

Solomon continually reinforces that the only means of lasting value is enjoying life via the free gift of God. Paul pleads throughout for the Philippians to rejoice in Christ, even in the persecution that they were experiencing. Thus, over the span of a thousand years, Paul and Solomon both urge, through radically different writings and lives, that finding enjoyment and rejoicing in God are the only means to achieving lasting contentment and satisfaction in life, and enjoyment and rejoicing can only come from God Himself.

Therefore, God is the Source, the Receiver of the means, and the Objective that we hope to arrive upon. In short, joy, contentment, and meaning are only in God the Father through Jesus Christ. The circular quest for purpose has but one answer: the One who is, in and of Himself, the Beginning and the End. He is the summation of the very purpose of our lives.

Thus, we enjoy and rejoice because He is good and sufficient, and in Him, we are completely satisfied. It is this biblical line of thinking that inspired John Piper to form this condensed description of his theology: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. Being satisfied in Him

necessitates enjoying and rejoicing in Him.

All of this is to say that the chief end of both Ecclesiastes and Philippians is that immeasurable joy can only be found in God, which will lead to a content and satisfied life, and a life that is completely joyful in Him will be supremely glorifying to Him. Let us, therefore, glorify Christ Jesus along with Solomon and Paul, for His glory will also become our greatest joy.