

Route 66

A Survey of the Bible

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Route 66: A Survey of the Bible

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This volume was compiled using the notes from a 66-part series of sermons surveying the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments that Pastor Paul delivered to his congregation at Branch of Hope OPC in Torrance, California.

At the end of each of his sermon notes, Pastor Paul has included a section of “Questions for Study and Meditation.”

We hope the reader will find these helpful in their study of and meditation on the Word of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Part I - Genesis

John 5:39; Luke 24:27

January 6, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:27).

Introduction

A movie by the name of *Saving Mr. Banks* was made in 2013. It chronicled the difficulties Walt Disney faced in seeking to convince P. L. Travers to allow her books to be made into the sixties blockbuster *Mary Poppins*. There is an intriguing scene where Travers is ridiculing the whimsical nature of Disney's approach to the film. She seemed to detest the notion that all children need is a "spoonful of sugar" to be equipped for life's inevitable difficulties.

In her idea of the movie, whimsy and sentiment should not prevail. Disney makes the near fatal mistake of seeking to punch back with the words, "Says the woman who sent a flying nanny with a talking umbrella to save the children." Horrified at the shortsightedness of the movie mogul, Travers laments, "You think Mary Poppins has come to save the children, Mr. Disney?"

I saw *Mary Poppins* in the theatre when it came out in 1964. Having four children, I've watched it numerous times since. I never realized Mary Poppins was not there, primarily, for the children but for the father. It made me want to re-watch the movie.

God the Son entered human history at a time and place where the religious community was very conversant with the Scriptures. But very few of them seemed to truly grasp what the Scriptures were about. One of the routine criticisms from the mouth of Christ was the blindness on the part of His detractors to properly read the Scriptures in such a way as to ascertain who He was. From His birth to His miracles to His resurrection, had they read the Scriptures aright, they would have discerned **"the sign of the times"** (Matthew 16:3).

In the midst of one Jesus' heated discussions, He informs them of their blindness in their studies.

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

They're reading their Bibles seeking to extract eternal life. But like so many of us, they are only seeing what they want to see and refusing to see what they need to see. What a wonderful Bible study it must have been when, on the Road to Emmaus, Jesus, beginning with...**Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:27).**

Beginning with Moses

So let us also begin with Moses. The first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch - *five volume book*) are written by Moses. This morning we begin with Genesis. The Hebrew title of Genesis is *In The Beginning* (after the opening words). The Greek title is *Genesis* (origin). How is Genesis about Jesus?

Jesus: Creator God, Covenant Established, Gospel Proclaimed

Genesis begins with God creating all things out of nothing. Not out of thin air, but out of nothing. Oh, that we would have the wisdom to plumb the depths of the implications of that simple fact. It would change our thinking entirely. But let us move forward. In Colossians 1:16, the Apostle Paul makes the astonishing proclamation that it is through Jesus that all things, both visible and invisible, were created. From the very beginning we learn that Jesus is not merely another character in the unfolding drama of history and redemption. Jesus, as the Second Person of the Trinity, is the Creator. He will, as a man, enter the very history He created. But He will never lose His God-hood.

In the first three chapters of Genesis we also see the establishment of a covenant. It was a covenant of works by which Adam and all of his posterity was bound. This covenant required personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience which would receive

the promise of life, the breach of which would result in death. Adam was told that on the day he disobeyed **“you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17)**.

Adam ate the fruit and things have not been right ever since. Life can be a wonderful experience. But even at our best, we know something is amiss. And even if we can convince ourselves nothing is amiss, death is inevitable. But God would not leave man at the mercy of his own fatal failure. Shortly after Adam’s breach, God would clothe him with animal skins (this is the first blood sacrifice); we then read the Scripture’s first pronouncement of the gospel.

At the dawn of history the promise of Christ is heralded. The seed of the woman (this is why two gospels begin with genealogies) will crush the head of the enemy of God’s people. Sin and death will not be the ultimate victors. Where Adam would fail in the covenant of works, Jesus would not. Jesus would be the covenant keeper and extend His victory to us by faith. It is now a covenant of grace for those who are in Christ.

Noah, Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah

One would think that such a glorious promise by God would be blissfully embraced. But the fall of man cast us not merely from God’s good pleasure but to a frame of mind that had no regard for God’s good pleasure. Simply put, we didn’t care that God had made a promise of redemption. The consequences of the fall resulted in an unquenchable desire to obtain god-hood in ourselves.

The rejection of God, and the embracing of evil, was universal and abject. Every thought of every person was **“only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5)**. We might call this an experiment of what happens to the human race when God leaves men to their own devices. By the grace of God, Noah was the only one who valued peace with God. He preached, but no one responded. We learn from the flood that if left to our own natures, judgment is inevitable.

So maybe heaven is something we should desire. How does one get there? I can almost imagine Jesus asking Cleopas that question during their Bible study. “I suppose one might build a tower,” he could have said. We might consider it silly that people think a tower to heaven can be built. And yet our lives are full of vain attempts toward self-fulfillment and self-actualization, as if we are

capable, on our own, of reaching the zenith of human potential. If the zenith is heaven, then a tower to get there is folly. There was a corporate cognitive dissonance of humanity that led to the efforts of Babel. Those building the tower did not realize that the book is not about the children. God may be the finisher, but we think we can be the author.

The entire world may never again fall into the type of judgment we saw during the time of Noah. But neither will we obtain the requisite wisdom, holiness and righteousness to ascend into heaven. God's promise that there will not again be a worldwide judgment by water does not mean He will not continue to judge in history, as evidenced by Sodom and Gomorrah. Love of carnality and hatred of anything good or truly heavenly still plagues humanity. We are in desperate need of help, help which God supplies.

Abraham and Isaac

We can only speculate that when Jesus was teaching His Bible study that He asked what they thought of the story of Abraham and Isaac. The nail-biting story of a father called to sacrifice his only son ends with the audience wiping their brow in relief that God withdrew His command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. Again, we can only guess that Jesus, in His instructions on how the Scriptures were about Him, taught that His Father did not hold back the dagger of death. Although there are lessons about faithfulness and human idolatry to be learned from the story of Abraham and Isaac, the primary story is how *the Father did sacrifice the Son*.

Jacob and His Sons

Isaac, of course, lives and he has his own sons, Jacob and Esau. Much can be learned from Jacob and Esau about God's decrees and providence, but we will move forward to Jacob and his twelve sons. What jumps out in that story is the jealousy of the brothers toward Joseph. His own brothers conspire to either kill him or sell him into slavery. Do we not see a similar disposition at the incarnation?

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him (John 1:11).

In Jesus' own parables, He teaches of the cold response He would receive:

But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us (Luke 19:14).

But Joseph ascends to the right hand of Pharaoh. He is given all authority, and the evil done to him by the hands of men becomes the means by which he saves many.

All the Families of the Earth

When we reread Genesis in light of the person and work of Christ, we begin to see how it all anticipates His great work of redemption. We have here merely given a very brief survey. But there is one recurring theme: a covenantal theme that we see repeatedly. There is a covenant promise that through the seed of Abraham **“all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).** How is this talking about Jesus?

We are not left to guess or speculate here. We are taught, quite specifically, what it means when we read that in Abraham **“all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** But interestingly enough, in the midst of the New Covenant church, there is still great need to clarify and emphasize how this blessing works and how it is obtained.

The context of our answer is in the midst of a chastisement. The Apostle Paul is calling out the churches in Galatia. He begins his reprimand in Galatians 3:1 with the epithet **“foolish”** (*anoetoi*: unintelligent, dull-witted).¹ They are then informed that they have been **“bewitched”** (*baskaino*: deceived, beguiled). What was this foolish bewitchment?

They somehow thought they could approve themselves before God by their own efforts, actions and even religious observances. There is an endless barrage of fig-leaves and towers seeking to make

¹ It actually begins with the interjection O, as an exclamation.

their way into the church, into the hearts of men and women. This is not, and since the fall never was, the means by which we find peace with God. *So, how is Genesis about Jesus?* This glorious and oft repeated promise that the seed of Abraham would be a blessing to all the families of the earth is the gospel of Christ itself.

To an audience of church members who were beginning to believe (to be bewitched) that their own ethnicity, goodness or religious observances could somehow set them apart as favored in the eyes of God, Paul explains this great promise found in Genesis.

Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham (Galatians 3:7-9).

One of the great points of emphasis revived during the Reformation was that of *Sola Fide*, that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. This great, oft repeated Abrahamic blessing in Genesis is that we are “**justify-ied**” (*dikaioi*: that is, acquitted of our sins and declared righteous) by faith in Christ alone.

A works-righteousness ever knocks at the door of even the regenerate heart. We need to be continually reminded of what our flesh wants us to forget: that peace with God is found through the righteousness of another.

Genesis ends with Israel being happy and well-fed, but in Egypt. Joseph’s final request recorded in Genesis is that when God brings them to the promised land, that they would “**carry up my bones from here**” (Genesis 50:25). And the very last line of Genesis is that they embalmed Joseph “**and he was put in a coffin in Egypt**” (Genesis 50:26). Things were good in Egypt, but only for a while.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Who or what is the Bible about? How do we know this?
2. Discuss Jesus and creation.
3. What do we learn about a covenant in the first three chapters of Genesis?
4. Where is the first blood sacrifice recorded? Why is this significant?
5. What do we learn about the human race in the account of Noah?
6. In what ways have mankind sought to build towers to heaven?
7. How are Abraham and Isaac similar to God the Father and God the Son? How are they different?
8. Discuss the similarities between Joseph and Jesus.
9. What does the promise to Abraham refer to, that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed?”

Part II - Exodus

John 5:39; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8

January 13, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:7, 8).

Preface

I've always been struck by the brevity of the Gospel's descriptions of the actual crucifixion of Christ (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18). It generally amounts to the simple words, "They crucified Him." Yet when we read Psalm 22, we encounter bone-chilling details of His crucifixion.

We read of His bones out of joint, heart melting like wax, the ability to count His bones, His tongue clinging to His jaw, and more. The New Testament/New Covenant certainly contains the fulfillment of the types, shadows and promises of the Old Testament/Old Covenant, but there is a depth in the Old that should not be ignored.

When John the Baptist beheld Jesus coming toward him and declared...**Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!...**those conversant with the Old Testament would have had their minds directed to a history that both defined and preserved their very existence. A reference to Jesus as the Lamb of God (in the Jewish ears) reminded them of the preservation of their past and the hope of their future: the promise of an eternal victory over the slavery of sin and death.

I've entitled this series *Route Sixty-Six* because Jesus taught that the whole of Scripture (which, including the, New Testament amounts to sixty-six books) is about Him. *Where do we see Jesus in Exodus?*

A New King, A Beautiful Child, A Deliverer/Mediator

At the end of Genesis we saw God's people (seventy in the family of Jacob) well taken care of in Egypt. But Exodus (which means exit or departure) opens with "**a new king over Egypt**" (**Exodus 1:8**). We must be wise and careful to recognize that comforts given by anyone but God can be quite tenuous and fragile. This new king did not know Joseph and grew very uncomfortable with so many Israelites in the land. He made them slaves. Where do we see Christ? *Christ came to set us free from the slavery of sin and death* (Romans 6:20-23).

Similar to the events surrounding the birth of Christ, Pharaoh also ordered the midwives to engage in the unthinkable task of killing male babies born to the Hebrews, an order they did not accommodate. It is in this context that we read of a beautiful child being born in the house of Levi (Exodus 2:1, 2). They put him in a little ark, place him in the river, and he is found and cared for by Pharaoh's daughter. They called him Moses which means *drawn out* because they drew him out of the water. Moses grows and ends up fleeing from Egypt to Midian because he killed an abusive Egyptian and feared for his life.

At this time we read that God indicates that He hears the prayers of the Israelites and chooses a very reluctant Moses to deliver His people from slavery. Moses wonders why anyone would even listen to him, and God promises to do signs and wonders through his hands. We begin to see here the purpose for miracles, which is to confirm the message of the one performing them. Israel's initial response to this promise of deliverance is very positive: "They bowed their heads and worshiped." But there would be limited consistency in their worship.

Harder Work, Bitter People, A Hardened Heart

It wasn't as if Pharaoh welcomed the notion of a deliverer of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Deliverance would come with tribulation. He made their slave labor more difficult than it already was. Not only would they have to make bricks, they would now have to gather their own straw for the bricks while still maintaining the same amount of production.

Of course this was not well received by the Israelites. There is in Exodus a recurring theme of preference of the comfort of slavery. One question a people must ask themselves from time to time is whether, as Jefferson put it, they prefer **“dangerous freedom over peaceful slavery.”** Or, as another founding father said, **“Those who would give up Essential Liberty to purchase a little Temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.”**

We ask where we see Jesus in Exodus. Truly, there are too many places for one sermon! But one thing we learn from the book of Exodus is that the people will not get what they deserve (as evidenced by Moses needing to intercede for them as God threatens judgment). In this respect, Moses foreshadows Jesus who intercedes for us, holding back the hand of God’s righteous judgment.

Another very remarkable recurring theme in Exodus is God’s declaration that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart. A great deal of theological tap-dancing is generated to assuage the shock of this. Some will say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first, or some such explanation. But couldn’t that be said of any of us? It is true that Pharaoh hardened his heart. It is also true that he bears the guilt for hardening his heart. But in a primary sense, God informs us of His sovereignty.

People under oppression and in slavery (as with Joseph) are informed and comforted that not one sparrow falls to the ground **“apart from your Father’s will” (Matthew 10:29).**

The king’s heart *is* in the hand of the Lord, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

It is God who **“fashions the hearts”** of all men (Psalm 33:15). The readers of Exodus become acquainted with a fickle Pharaoh who lives under the fantasy of being in charge. In the midst of the Ten Plagues that God pours on Egypt in judgment for their oppression of Israel and disobedience to God, Pharaoh changes his mind numerous times. Again, how uneasy the souls of those who place their trust in the weak and shifting sands of humanity rather than a Jesus Christ who is **“the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).**

Passover, Deliverance

Although Pharaoh appears to finally relent, he actually never does. The final plague will be the impetus for a feast/sacrament that the Jews will continue to observe. God will visit a final judgment upon Egypt: the death of the firstborn. It is here that we first see *Passover*. Those who would kill a lamb and place the blood upon the lintel and doorposts of their homes would find that death passed over their homes in this judgment. In Genesis we saw circumcision. In Exodus we are met with Passover. They are the bloody sacraments of the Old Covenant and are types of the bloodless sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper which will continue until Christ's return.

God's promise of this deliverance is followed by God leading the people, under the leadership of Moses, toward the Red Sea, which was a point of no return. There apparently was a shorter way, **“by the way of the land of the Philistines.”** But God didn't lead them that way **“lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt” (Exodus 13:17).** God is quite effective at keeping us from returning to our desired slavery. The Israelites were held, as it were, in the hand of God. How is Christ seen in Exodus? We are held in His hand.

And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father's hand (John 10:28, 29).

Life seems to have inevitabilities (death and taxes being the most famous). God brought Israel to a place where it seemed inevitable that they would be crushed by the armies of Egypt. They were entirely dependent upon Him and Him alone. Here is one of the many places we see Jesus in the Exodus. We face the inevitability of death: **“...all day long,”** writes the Apostle Paul, like **“sheep for the slaughter.”** Yet in Christ we are **“more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:36, 37).**

Provision, Law, Tabernacle

Being delivered after 430 years of slavery you would think that worship would be easy. But it was easier to complain. And the Israelites did it in abundance. *Where is Christ in Exodus?* We see Him in the manna (bread from heaven) and in the water from the rock (1 Corinthians 10). The Apostle Paul uses the behavior of the Israelites during the Exodus as an example of how we shouldn't be.

After 430 years under the oppression of sinful leaders, God graciously pronounces a clear, wise, just and holy law. God also gives detailed instructions on worship, the tabernacle, the priestly garments to be worn. It makes us wonder if, on the Road to Emmaus, Jesus pointed out that His body was the true temple (John 2:19), that He was the true High Priest (Hebrews 3:1) and that He was to be the sole object/person of our worship (Philippians 2:9, 10).

It is in the midst of this deliverance and glorious wisdom and instruction that we see the apex of sinfulness among the delivered people. They want a god of their own design, so they fashion a golden calf. It is here that God threatens judgment and Moses pleads for the people. And God hears the prayer, the intercession of Moses, as He hears the intercession of Christ. The confidence of the Israelites in terms of their own deliverance had little or nothing to do with their own power, might, goodness or strength. Similarly, our confidence over the great enemies of sin and death is firmly placed upon the shoulders of Christ. It is with this knowledge that Paul issues the challenge:

Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us (Romans 8:34).

Exodus ends with the tabernacle construction completed. We read that it was filled with the **“Glory of the Lord.”** The cloud by day and the fire by night, God led the Israelites in all their journeys.

Christ, Our Passover

As you can see, there are numerous occasions and events in Exodus which prepare us to understand the person and work of Christ. When one left Chicago on Route 66, all the signs essentially pointed to its end: the Pacific Ocean. Likewise, the signs on the road of the Old Testament all point to Living Waters of Christ.

Of all the signs, there may be none as profound as the Passover. The Apostle Paul is not unclear when he references this greatest of Old Covenant events and assigns it to Christ, **“Christ, our Passover.”** Interestingly enough, Paul brings this to our attention in the context of church discipline. In the same way the Israelites were called to purge out every particle of leaven during the Passover, Christians are to continually search and seek to purify their own hearts.

We are not to keep the feast with the leaven of **“malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8)**. It must be said here that our sincerity, our truth, our efforts at overcoming malice and wickedness are not the gospel. There are two very distinct things in the Passover as there are two very distinct things in the Christian faith. There was *the sacrifice* and there was *the feast*.

We are to keep the feast (and by *feast*, I extend it to all our thoughts, words and deeds) in sincerity and truth, seeking to extract all the leaven of sin in our lives. But the feast is not the sacrifice. It is Christ and Christ alone who is the Lamb of God. It is His blood and His blood only that He applies, as it were, to the doorposts of our hearts by faith; it is His blood that diverts the snare of death. Similar to the Israelites, God will hear the prayers of His enslaved children.

The pangs of death surrounded me, and the floods of ungodliness made me afraid. The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears (Psalm 18:4-6).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Describe some advantages of reading about Christ in the Old Testament.
2. What would the Jews have thought when John referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God?
3. Why is it dangerous to put too much faith in or extract too much comfort from worldly people or things?
4. How was the birth of Christ similar to the birth of Moses?
5. Were the Israelites always happy with their deliverance and freedom? How is this similar to our walk as Christians?
6. Why would God harden Pharaoh's heart?
7. Why would God, so to speak, lead the Hebrews into a point of no return? How is this similar to the Christian faith?
8. What are some ways we see Jesus in the Law, Tabernacle, Priesthood, etc.?
9. Elaborate on how Christ is our Passover and why the Apostle Paul would bring this up.

Part III - Leviticus

John 5:39; Hebrews 10:507

January 20, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God’” (Hebrews 10:5-7).

Introduction: The Casual God

Early in my Christian walk I encountered a believer who was seeking to help me develop a little maturity. As we talked I began to detect a level of discomfort he had for my very casual descriptions I was using when I spoke of God. It was many years ago and I don't recall the exact language I was using, but it apparently bordered on irreverence. I might have been referring to God as 'the big man upstairs' or making some indication that the faith was very cool.

My friend finally chastised me. “Why are you talking this way?” he asked. “God is holy! The things we're talking about are holy!” I don't recall how I responded to his reprimand, but I have never forgotten it. I didn't mean to be insulting to God. I was more intent on bringing God into the vernacular of the common people. I would speak of God the way I would speak of other things that I admired or respected. I wanted to make the Christian faith relevant to my surroundings.

Now, I do think there is something to be said for that. The New Testament itself is written in *koine* (common) Greek, which replaced existing ancient Greek dialects with an everyday form that people anywhere could understand. At the same time, this mentality, as well meaning as it might be, has introduced a very casual God. I've often opined that one danger of a contemporary church service is that we begin to think of God as a contemporary.

Sometime our focus on the imminence of God (the God who is *right here*) sacrifices the transcendence (the God who is *out there*) of God. The opening words of the Lord's Prayer gives us both. **"Our Father"** is intimate and close, and is followed by **"in heaven,"** which is vast and incomprehensible. It is true that Jesus stated that He no longer called followers **"servants...but...friends (John 15:15).** That is a comforting and wonderful condescension on His part. At the same time, we never hear His followers refer back to Jesus in that way. Paul would not open Romans, **"Paul, a friend of Jesus,"** but rather **"Paul a bonds slave of Jesus."**

I open with this because one thing we learn in Leviticus (about Levites) is the difficulty of an audience with God. The word **"holy"** is used almost one hundred times in twenty-seven chapters. And there is a recurring call for us to be holy because God is holy. The last thing on earth a person would conclude after reading Leviticus is that God can be approached in a casual manner. God is anything but a contemporary.

In Genesis we saw the creation, fall and pronouncement of the Covenant of Grace. We read of wonderful promises given directly after the fall then with Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those promises all pointed to and would be fulfilled in Christ. In Exodus we began to see a great drama that teaches us what that promise would look like. As Moses was a deliverer, so Christ would be the ultimate deliverer. His blood would effectively be applied to the doorposts of our hearts by faith, and death would pass over. Christ is truly our Passover.

But deliverance from slavery had a purpose. And it was not that we might embrace a false notion of freedom which is merely bondage to some new taskmaster. Repentance is not merely turning from something but turning to something. The purpose of deliverance was that we might worship the true God and receive the eternal benefits of His favor.

This morning we ask, where do we see Jesus in Leviticus? If we read Leviticus and notice that the vast majority of requirements in Leviticus are no longer extant in the worship of the New Covenant church, we begin to have appreciation of where we see Jesus in Leviticus. Leviticus is replete with instructions for the priests and the sacrifices, and the reason we have neither is because Jesus is both.

Offerings, Priests

Leviticus opens with very detailed instructions on numerous offerings. There is a burnt offering, grain offering, peace offering, sin offering and trespass offering. We do none of these in the New Covenant because these provide a multi-faceted understanding of the single and sufficient sacrifice of Christ. In the burnt offering we learn of the sweet aroma, pleasing to God. In the grain offering we see the sinlessness of Christ, free of leaven. In the peace offering we see communion with God. In the sin offering we see Christ being made sin for us. In the trespass offering we also see restitution of a fifth more, showing that the sacrifice is more than the mere removing of sin. It is the righteousness of Christ and thus more glorifying to God and comforting to man.

In the early portions of Leviticus we are also given laws regarding the proper function of the tabernacle, the restrictions regarding touching unclean things, and the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests. The instruction regarding the offerings is now applied. In chapter nine God consumes the burnt offering, but in chapter ten God consumes Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, for approaching God with **“profane”** (*zara*- unauthorized, strange) fire.

Though this might seem austere, this behavior on the part of Nadab and Abihu (especially in light of the sacred place and detailed instruction given to them by God) was clearly irreverent. But perhaps we can view this a bit differently. Events like these, recorded for our benefit, should give us a renewed appreciation for the torn veil.

When Christ was crucified, that veil which separated the holy place from the Most Holy (Exodus 26:33) and illustrates our separation from God was torn *from the top to the bottom*. The notion of viewing worship as a dangerous activity has seemed to have gone the way of all flesh. This is a notion that proved to be quite destructive to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:30), and who knows how many churches today?

Dietary Laws, Clean/Unclean, Leprosy, Day of Atonement

Reading on in Leviticus, you begin to get the feeling that God had developed an environment among the Israelites where they were reminded on a daily (if not moment-by-moment) basis of what it

meant to be holy or unholy, clean or unclean. These reminders included the institution of dietary laws, laws on what could and could not be touched, leprosy and other illnesses, even childbirth, served as instructional tools in these matters as well.

Many of these laws were abrogated (removed) in the New Covenant. Some were abrogated because they were fulfilled by Christ, others because of the unique role Israel played in redemptive history versus the international nature of the New Covenant. These determinations are not always easy and there have been very creative and some dubious methods to simplify that which is not simple at all. For now we will submit that the offerings and priestly duties are clearly fulfilled by Christ (including those things relating to leprosy, etc.). In addition, the dietary and garment restrictions seemed unique to Israel and were clearly repealed (Mark 7:19).

But this does not mean we have nothing to learn, appreciate and praise God for when it comes to the instructions on these matters. It is also a mistake to assume that the morality revealed by God in the Old Testament is no longer the basis of morality. Morality (right and wrong, good and evil) is determined by the character and nature of God and is, therefore, as immutable as God Himself.

In this midsection of Leviticus, we read of God laying out the instructions for the Day of Atonement. This event would take place once a year by a high priest who would offer an atoning sacrifice himself and for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16).

Morality, Love of Neighbors, Civil Laws, Feasts

Leviticus offers clear teaching on morality which should be a source of great wisdom for believers of any era. One thing we learn here is the refutation of the false notion that the law of God is merely for Israel. The surrounding nations were vomited out of the land due to their violations of God's statutes. God warns the Israelites not to be like the Egyptians, where they dwelt, or like the people of Canaan, where He was bringing them. We must not underestimate the power of the influence of the cultures by which we are surrounded.

We also learn in Leviticus that we should make provision for the poor (corners of fields), to consider the deaf and the blind (at a time when they would have been easily disposed of), honest in our

weights and measures (honest in business), and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are not merely New Covenant notions.

Leviticus is also instructional when it comes to which sins should be crimes and what is a reasonable punishment for certain crimes. Here again we tend to lose an appreciation for the holiness and graciousness of God. Modern, very entitled, man often views these punishments (death penalty for various offenses) as unreasonable. Very creative methods of reading the Bible have been used to explain these things away. Let me offer just two things in explanation.

First, the Scriptures do not advocate vigilante justice in either making civil laws or enforcing them. For example, kidnapping is a capital crime according to the Scriptures. If I live in a land where kidnapping is not a capital crime, I may wish to work toward it becoming a capital crime, but I also need to submit to the process of God's providence in changing hearts and laws. I do not have the authority to walk in the street and declare kidnapping a capital crime.

I also do not have the authority to enforce civil law as a private citizen. I am not talking here about seeking to stop the kidnapper in the process of kidnapping one of my children (that is quite a different matter for which the Scriptures make provision). I certainly do not, however, have the authority to try and execute kidnappers in my garage.

At the same time, if we live in a culture where kidnapping becomes an acceptable behavior, kidnappers will likely begin to view the death penalty for kidnapping as ridiculous. Where the kidnapper should probably view the fact that he is alive as a testimony to God's providential forbearance, he will often view the law itself as something unreasonable. King David deserved death for what he did with Bathsheba and Uriah. We, like David, should rejoice in the lovingkindness and tender mercies of God, rather than think we don't deserve what we truly do deserve.

Leviticus ends with instructions on various feasts: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles. These feasts had various structures and messages. We ask where Christ is in Leviticus. He can be shown in all of these various feasts, but this morning we will consider just one: The Day of Atonement.

Day of Atonement

To atone (*kapper*: from where is derived Yom Kippur) means to cover, pacify, appease or propitiate. In very simple terms we might think of how one person, paying for another, might say, “I’ve got you covered.”

There is perhaps no place in Leviticus where we see Christ as clearly as in the Day of Atonement. Once a year, only the priest (wearing appropriate garments and having offered a sacrifice for himself) would enter the Holy of Holies (which typified heaven or the presence of God). The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement would involve two goats. It is here that we get the term *scapegoat*. A scapegoat is a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings of others.

Of all the feasts and offerings, the Day of Atonement is quite unique for it is the only one that has, as it were, two sacrifices essentially operating together. The two goats cannot be separated in terms of what they typify. One goat will die and the other will live. The one who lives provides the only example in the Old Covenant involving an animal where we see a bloodless sacrifice.

The one goat is sacrificed. The priest then lays his hands upon the other goat, confesses, and throws the sins of the people on the goat. The goat then bears all their iniquities and is released into the wilderness. There is a bit of speculation as to how this specifically foreshadows Christ. The goat sacrificed seems obvious, but what about the scapegoat (the ones with the sins put on his head who lives)?

Some speculate that this foreshadows Christ as the outcast. So in the two goats we see Christ the Lamb sacrificed and Christ rejected by His people. Others speculate that the scapegoat typifies Christ as our living High Priest. However one looks at it though, it is undeniable that we have a sacrifice where one animal was insufficient for the desired effect. This is one sacrifice that included both a dead and living offering.

How do *people of the book* explain such a thing apart from a Savior who was dead and is alive? As Jesus taught:

I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death (Revelation 1:8).

Knowing that it is **“not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4)**, how can mere sinful men and women know they can have peace with God and their sins not counted against them?

In Christ, we have both the Priest and the Offering, Christ having become a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). He ever lives, interceding for us. See how Leviticus is about Christ in the words of the author of Hebrews:

But Christ came *as* High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:11-15).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are the benefits of seeking to speak of God in common terms? What are the dangers?
2. What word is used almost one hundred times in Leviticus? Why do you suppose that is?
3. What is the purpose for deliverance from slavery?
4. How do the offerings in Leviticus tell us of Christ?
5. How do we determine which rules or laws in the Old Covenant continue into the New Covenant?
6. Is God's law for everyone? Explain.
7. Discuss the civil, cultural and moral instruction in Leviticus.
8. How is Christ the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement?

Part IV - Numbers

John 5:39; John 3:14-15

January 27, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:14, 15).

As I sat in the Marie Callender's restaurant, I could not help overhear the conversation in a nearby booth. Two men were speaking about the conversion experience of the younger man. It was uplifting to hear...for a while. The dialogue then took a bizarre turn. They both began to speak as if the young Christian would never sin again. He somehow drew the conclusion that because Jesus had forgiven him of his sin (and in that respect removed his sins) that there would no longer be sin in his life at all.

This is a fatal error of confusing justification with sanctification. When we are justified, God counts us as righteous. When God sees us He does not see our sin (He remembers our sins no more-Hebrews 8:12; Isaiah 43:25). But in sanctification, God remembers our sins quite clearly. Sanctification is the ongoing process of God forming Christ in us (Galatians 4:19), or being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). Good instructors are aware of the weaknesses and faults of their students.

With a bit of trepidation I approached the table. I didn't want to sound negative. The young man was excited at the prospect of never sinning again. It felt odd, even a bit discouraging, to suggest that sinning was an inevitable part of his future. But I felt that if I didn't at least make an effort at explaining this to him, he was in for a rude awakening when he discovered that his Christian faith was not what he thought it would be. I think the Apostle John conveyed it well when he wrote:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin,

we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

We should wage war against sin. John Owen taught that we should...**be killing sin or it will be killing you.**”

At the same time, to approach the faith with the perfectionist attitude (that perfection can be achieved in this life or that you will never sin again) is a recipe for catastrophe. The young man responded respectfully, but made it quite clear that he thought I was in error and that he would never sin again. After leaving the restaurant, I have not seen him again.

One thing we learn in Numbers is that even though the Israelites had been delivered from slavery and were a blessed and chosen people (Numbers 22:12), sin was a very active participant in their journey through the wilderness.

The Battle

In *Genesis* we saw the creation, fall and pronouncement of the Covenant of Grace-the Gospel. We read of wonderful promises given directly after the fall then with Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those promises all pointed to and would be fulfilled in Christ. In *Exodus* we begin to see a great drama teaching us what that promise would look like. As Moses was a deliverer, so Christ would be the ultimate deliverer. His blood would effectively be applied to the doorposts of our hearts by faith and death would pass over. He would deliver us from sin and death. Christ is truly our Passover.

But deliverance from slavery had a purpose. In *Leviticus* it is emphasized that the purpose of being delivered is that we might worship the true God and enjoy Him forever. In *Numbers*, the focus turns to preparation for battle.

Numbers

I've entitled this series Route Sixty-Six since Jesus taught that the entirety of Scripture is about Him (all sixty-six books in the Bible). This morning we ask, *where do we see Jesus in Numbers?* But first I will begin with a survey of the book.

The Hebrew name for Numbers is “**in the desert,**” which are words taken from the opening verses. The Greek name is *Numbers* because the opening chapters begin with a census. God calls Moses to number the troops for battle. There are over 600,000 men twenty years of age and older who are ready for battle.

One might ask, *why battle? Have they not already been delivered?* They had. But it is after our deliverance that the battle begins. It is not a battle to be delivered; that has already happened. The battle is against sin and darkness. In one sense Israel is a macrocosm of how God works in the lives of individuals, delivering us from the slavery of sin and calling us to ever battle the remnants of it in our lives. In another sense Israel is a microcosm of what God is doing throughout all the earth.

**...but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled
with the glory of the Lord (Numbers 14:21).**

There is a temptation to read this call of God to take the land of the surrounding nations as if the surrounding nations are peace-loving people who are kind, gentle and would be just fine if left to their own lives. But these surrounding nations were evil almost beyond our imagination. Think of the most evil people your mind can conjure up, Nazis, terrorists, serial killers. They are not as evil as these surrounding nations. When Abraham is informed by God of the slavery his descendants would endure in Egypt and their subsequent deliverance, one reason it would take so long was because “**the iniquity (sin) of the Amorites is not yet complete (full)**” (Genesis 15:16).

This is not boiler-plate depravity or sin in the general, universal sense. One does not need to wait or reach sinfulness in a general sense. What we are talking about here is full surrender to, and embracing of, the world, the flesh and the devil. The behavior this conviction, or lack thereof, produces reached nightmarish levels. We’re not talking about loving families, walking their dogs and having community barbecues. They were barbecuing each other and even their own children (Leviticus 18:21). We are speaking of those under the full “**sway of the wicked one**” (1 John 5:19). Calvin said of this Genesis verse:

And this passage is remarkable, as showing, that the abodes of men are so distributed in the world, that the Lord will preserve quiet people, each in their several stations, till they cast themselves out by their own wickedness.²

We read in Numbers of the structuring of the tribes and where they were to camp in relation to the tabernacle. In the preparation for battle we do not see neglect when it comes to the worship and obedience within the covenant people. As the church seeks to move forward, it can never abandon the heart of its own message and purity. There is still priestly instruction, a reiteration of what is clean and unclean, a focus on appropriate vows, instruction on sexual morality, offerings. God would lead them through a cloud by day and fire by night.

Yet the recurring theme of complaining would never end. Moses would have to intercede in prayer due to their rebellion. Their irreverence was astonishing, referring to the manna as **“worthless food” (numbers 21:5)**. At one point, when they cried out for meat, God gave them more quails than they could handle, which became a plague to the people who were yielding to their cravings (Numbers 11:34). A disposition against which we are must continually war. A craving is a powerful thing.

There was continual haggling about whether Moses was a suitable leader. It is reminiscent of churches that question the suitability of the Scriptures as a sufficient guide. At one point Moses became so frustrated that he disobeyed God’s instruction to speak to the rock to provide water and he struck the rock instead. This infraction is what kept Moses from the Promised Land. God is particular when it comes to presenting Him as He determines to be presented.

They send spies to view Canaan in preparation for taking the land. Ten of the twelve spies come back advising the Israelites not to obey God in taking the land because of the imposing size of the inhabitants. Only Joshua and Caleb encourage them to enter, for which the congregation wanted to stone them. Israel’s lack of willingness to trust that God was capable of granting them the victory consigns them to forty years’ wandering in the wilderness. An eleven

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Genesis* (electronic ed., Ge 15:16).

day journey ends up taking forty years. When God says *go*, even against our own fleshly calculations we are to go. Rebellions in the camp would become intense at times. Korah and his followers end up being swallowed into the earth.

Yet in all of this, God is with Israel. This is perhaps never more clearly seen than with Balak, the king of Moab and his efforts to get Balaam to curse Israel (it is here we read of the episode with Balaam's talking donkey). The promise made to Abraham is still with Israel, even in their rebellion: **"Blessed is he who blesses you, and cursed is he who curses you" (Numbers 24:7)**. It is truly the grace of God and not the excellence of men that ensures the perseverance of our deliverance. Balaam can only bless Israel (though he offers pretty damning counsel when it came to tempting the Israelites to fall into sin).

Toward the end of Numbers we begin to read of early victories of the Israelites over the Midianites. We also see the appointed boundaries of Canaan and the division of the land for the tribes. We read of God appointing **"cities of refuge"** for those who unintentionally commit certain crimes to protect them from vigilante justice.

Though Numbers very much addresses Israel going forth in battle, it also contains God's counsel for how His people should conduct their lives in order for there to be peace, harmony and justice in the covenant community. Churches or nations (for Israel was both) will never powerfully advance if it has feet of clay. *If we are not loving each other, if we are not faithful to God by being faithful to each other, if we are not honest in our economics and business, we will be powerless to advance and bring glory to God on the earth.*

If we have only an outward focus, we are forgetting Leviticus and the primary call of our deliverance, which is to worship God. If we have only inward focus, we are forgetting Numbers' and God's call for us to do battle and advance His kingdom. Both are necessary.

Where do we see Christ in Numbers? There are too many places for even a brief summary. He is the water for life and the rock for safety. He is the red heifer for sacrifice and He is the bread for sustenance, and so much more. But Jesus Himself references an event found in Numbers that ultimately points to Him, **"the serpent in the wilderness" (John 3:14)**. We will finish with a look at this.

The Son of Man Lifted Up

Just prior to the most popular verse in all of Scripture (John 3:16) we read of Jesus saying that He must be lifted up the same way serpent was lifted up in the wilderness. These words are followed by the reason He was be lifted up, **“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14, 15)**. What is the event to which Jesus refers?

In the 21st chapter of Numbers the Israelites were growing impatient in the battle (even though God had just given them a great victory). Once again we see the grumbling. **“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”** They didn’t care that their descendants would benefit from their struggles. They wanted their best life now. Here is one of the places where their irreverence spikes. They refer to the manna as **“worthless food”** which they **“loathed”** (*ballehem*-to be disgusted by). One cannot help think of the church of Corinth and their thoughtless participation in the Lord’s Supper with its ensuing similar afflictions (1 Corinthians 11:30).

God responds to the Israelites’ grumbling by **“sending fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many of the people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6)**. Again, very similar to the afflictions of those at the church of Corinth who ate and drank in an unworthy and thoughtless manner, the consequence being the sickness and death of some. This affliction of the fiery serpents had the desired impact of revealing to the Israelites the egregious nature of their offense, and they acknowledged their sin against God and Moses (an offense against God’s word {Moses} is an offense against God) and they plead with Moses to intercede on their behalf. Once again we see Moses as a type of Christ, interceding for His people.

God provides a very interesting remedy for this plague that had entered the camp. The people wanted Moses to pray that God would remove the serpents (which He eventually did, no doubt). But God did not answer the prayer in the manner in which it was brought to Him. He didn’t remove the serpents (at least there is not a record of that being His response); instead...

And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Numbers 21:8).

God had Moses make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole and when someone saw it, they lived. Why is this a superior answer? And how is Christ seen in this Old Testament account?

First, the afflictions in our lives are numerous and inevitable. Though we should seek to avoid them as much as possible, the greater wisdom lies in looking to the One who overcomes them all. God did not want the Israelites to look at barren sand and breathe a sigh of momentary relief, but instead to look to Him for eternal peace. We are continually seeking to traverse a sin-plagued world with our own sin-plagued hearts. Our peace is intermittent. *It is only when we fix our eyes upon Christ that we can enjoy a full and eternal hope that our enemies, including death itself, cannot be victorious over us.*

Second, the ease at which the healing comes to those afflicted. Though we are to work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12), we are not to work for our salvation. The healing did not come to the Israelites by their helping build the serpent, or lift up the serpent, or crawl toward the serpent or touch the serpent or even have certain thoughts about the serpent. They were merely *to look*.³ One can hardly come up with a less participatory action than looking! We in similar fashion are to look unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). Is this a recipe for easy-believe-ism? As if a person must merely look a certain direction and mouth a certain prayer or stand under a sufficient amount of baptismal water? May it never be!

The call is, in truth, quite impossible for any person (Matthew 19:26). It is quite impossible to look unto Jesus unless one is given sight to see and ears to hear (as Jesus so often taught and demonstrated). The better question might be, how do you know if this has happened to you? For the Israelite, it was quite easy...they were *alive*. But how do we know if we're spiritually alive? The evidence that you have truly looked to Jesus is the lifelong walk of faithfulness. We ever trust Him as our Savior and ever follow Him as our Master.

³ The word order is slightly different in Hebrew: “and it shall be anyone who is bitten when he looks at it he shall live.”

Third, the answer is superior to the prayer and Christ is seen in the very irony of the method of healing. This bronze serpent on a pole (which is almost undoubtedly the source of the today's medical symbol of the same) seems at first blush like the most inappropriate remedy for the affliction. It is the serpent that killed me, how can it be appropriate that the serpent will also heal me? It is difficult to say what the original Israelites thought. They eventually started worshiping the thing (2 Kings 18:4). Clearly, many of them saw the serpent and were healed. But what comes into focus with Christ is how one death is an affliction (a consequence of sin and rebellion) and the other death delivers from affliction. Why would I look at something that caused such a curse? Because I am to look to Christ **“in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3)**, who became **“a curse”** for me (Galatians 3:13). We find salvation from the curse by looking to Christ who became a curse.

It is for this reason that Christ must be ever lifted up. Some think by saying He must be **“lifted up”** He speaks of the cross. And while that does paint a somewhat apt picture, it certainly is not the job of the church to re-crucify Christ. The word **“lifted up”** (one word in the Greek-*hypsōthenai*) also means to exalt (see Acts 2:33). And that is the job of the church and of every Christian who has by looked by Christ by faith, that we might not leave our neighbors in their spiritual affliction, and may ever praise Him for the gift of life given to us at such a cost.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is it dangerous to think that as a Christian you will never sin again? What is the confusion that leads to this type of thinking?
2. Review the themes of Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. How is the emphasis in Numbers a bit different?
3. How is Israel a macrocosm? How is it a microcosm?
4. What error is commonly made when one considers the nations surrounding Israel?
5. What must the church never abandon as it seeks to move forward? Why was Moses disallowed entrance into the Promised Land? Explain.
6. How is God's answer to the bitten Israelites superior to their prayer? In what respects is the account of the fiery serpents similar to Christ?
7. What does it mean that Christ must be 'lifted up'?

Part V - Deuteronomy

John 5:39; Romans 10:9, 9

February 10, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

But what does it say? “*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:8, 9).

Preface

The number of unborn babies murdered in the womb since Roe v. Wade (which was passed my senior year in high school, 1973) is now over 18 million. This issue has received renewed attention lately due to bills currently being passed which opens doors for terminating babies in the third trimester. This legislation is not designed to protect mothers from life-threatening situations. Laws are already in place to address that possibility. The term now is *life and health of the mother*, and the “health” can be either physical or mental. Of course, the ambiguous nature of mental health would turn this into a death sentence for even more children.

Time disallows me from launching into all the Biblical and secular/scientific arguments for why this should be considered the taking of an innocent life. Biblically speaking, David speaks of himself as a person at the point of conception *yehemat* (Psalm 51:5). In the New Testament the same word is used for a baby that is born and one that is still in the womb (compare Luke 2:12 to Luke 1:41). A more scientific/secular argument would be that if you simply left the growing fetus alone, eighteen years and nine months later they would be graduating from high school.

I would encourage you, if you investigate this issue, to beware of getting lost in a crowd of meaningless terms and false criteria. Whether it's heartbeat, brain-waves, sentience or anything else.

These are all man-made standards designed to confuse and justify a horrible act.

Years ago I was leading a Bible study where this issue surfaced as a topic of discussion. A person in the study contemplated the potential judgment we might face as a nation as a result of this sin. I began to think, ‘What would be the most ghastly thing that could happen to a nation?’ Very high on the list was the death of its children. It would appear a judgment could come as a direct result of the infraction. We’re under judgment and we’re too stupid to realize it.

Introduction

Why do I mention this as we examine where Christ is found in Deuteronomy? I will answer this in a moment, but first a brief introduction. Deuteronomy in Hebrew is called *The Words* from the opening phrase, but in Greek its title means *second law*. It is not a second and distinct law but rather a restating of the law and a renewing of God’s covenant as they were about to enter the promised land. Deuteronomy has been called Jesus’ favorite book due to the numerous times He quotes it (all of His quotes when tempted by the devil are taken from Deuteronomy).

In *Genesis* we saw the creation, fall and pronouncement of the Covenant of Grace-the Gospel. We read of wonderful promises given directly after the fall then with Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those promises all pointed to and would be fulfilled in Christ. In *Exodus* we begin to see a great drama teaching us what that promise would look like. As Moses was a deliverer, so Christ would be the ultimate deliverer. His blood would effectively be applied to the doorposts of our hearts by faith and death would pass over. He would deliver us from sin and death. Christ is truly our Passover.

But deliverance from slavery had a purpose. In *Leviticus* it is emphasized that the purpose of being delivered is that we might worship the true God and enjoy Him forever. In *Numbers*, the focus is preparation for battle. In *Deuteronomy* we see final cautions prior to entering into spiritually and morally dangerous territory. The Israelites are called to do what we should all do on a daily basis: *Recall* that which causes us to stumble, *reflect* upon own

vulnerabilities and how that stumbling happened, and *resolve* to walk more faithfully in the days before us.

Moses seeks to accomplish this through a series of sermons given throughout the book (three in total—chapters 1-4; 5-28; 29-32). They had been forty years in the wilderness. The men of the generation to whom the law had initially been given were dead. The people needed to be reminded, as we all do. Moses would both preach it and have it written (Deuteronomy 27:3). It has been said that the law was to be conveyed “**both by word of mouth, that it might affect, and by writing, that it might abide.**”⁴

Deuteronomy, A Survey

We see in Deuteronomy much of what we see in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. The Passover and the Feasts are reviewed. The word of God is to be ever before them (doorposts, foreheads). There is to be justice and fidelity among the people of God. They are to be charitable toward the oppressed, the hired servants, the poor, fatherless and widows. But there is something unique in Deuteronomy that we don’t quite see in the earlier books.

If you look up the word love in Genesis through Numbers, it is never used in relation of God to His people. But in Deuteronomy we begin to read that what God had been doing in the first four books was an act of God’s love.

And because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them; and He brought you out of Egypt with His Presence, with His mighty power (Deuteronomy 4:37).

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of

⁴ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 236). Peabody: Hendrickson.

bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:7, 8).

The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as *it is this day* (Deuteronomy 10:15).

It is one thing to raise your own children in your own household. It is quite another thing when they are about to go off to college. It is as if God is reaffirming His love for His children prior to their going into lands where the temptation—morally, philosophically, religiously—will be extreme.

The theme unique to Deuteronomy is: *will God's people succumb to the attractions of the surrounding culture, or can they live differently?* This is the question posed. So it is no wonder the Shema is in Deuteronomy (6:4)!

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4).

It is within the surrounding nations that the children of God will be enticed to follow other gods (even if they try to be clever enough to call themselves by other less-religious titles). We are to ponder prior to every thought, word or deed: just who or what is the god that is leading me in this direction?

In a world where the nations are continually devouring themselves, God's people are called to be unique, wise, faithful and observant of His laws.

Therefore be careful to observe *them*; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is *there* that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever *reason* we may call upon Him? And what great nation is *there* that has *such* statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this

law which I set before you this day (Deuteronomy 4:6-8)?

But, like a parent observing his/her child leave the home, there is also the caution that the influence might flow in the opposite direction. There is the caution against following false gods and the inevitable behavior which those false gods produce: Everything from sexual misconduct to the notion that it was acceptable, and even expeditious to sacrifice their babies for some greater good (Deuteronomy 12:31).

There are some in this room who are old enough to remember a time when the thought of making it legal to kill babies (or the elderly or infirmed) would have been unthinkable! And yet here we are. And this was the impetus for my preface. But I must mention two things first before I focus on one aspect of where we find Christ in Deuteronomy.

Good Old Days? America, God's Kingdom?

Firstly, I am not here pining away for the old days, as if it would be best if we could revert back to the fifties. For it was the fifties that led to the sixties and the exposure of the dimness of theology which inevitably leads to moral vulnerabilities. In fact, the problem goes back way further and is profoundly deeper. For one, we have embraced a theology that teaches that the demise of the world is the plan of God. But beyond that, perhaps the greatest warning we have failed to heed as a nation is found in chapter eight where Israel is told that they should not think that it was by their own **“power and the might”** that they had gained the things they had. Or put another way in the next chapter:

Do not think in your heart, after the Lord your God has cast them out before you, saying, ‘Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land’; but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the Lord is driving them out from before you (Deuteronomy 9:4)

We, as a nation (or any nation) should, similar to Israel, *recall* that which causes us to stumble, *reflect* upon own vulnerabilities and how that stumbling happened, and *resolve* to walk more faithfully in the days before us.

Secondly, there are those who will bristle at the hearing of this sermon, and accuse me of equating America to the Kingdom of God. There are a variety of theological positions wafting through the culture in opposition to what I am suggesting. There are some who hold that God has an entirely different kingdom in mind (and even a different system of ethics) for the world than He does for the church. They believe we should view God's dealings with Israel as distinctly for the church and that it is a mistake to nationalize this message.

Somebody should have shared that with the surrounding nations of Israel, because it was due to their ungodliness in the very things of which we speak that God cast them out of the land! People say we should not view the many blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28 and 29 as warnings for today's nations even though the very things warned against and the very curses pronounced are rampant in the world today.

I do not hold that America (as great a country as it has been) is the kingdom of God. I do believe that Israel is God's Old Covenant church and that the primary audience for this message is to be the church. But Israel was also a nation. And to the extent that any nation is influenced by the church and God's word, it/they should have as their goal, their charter:

And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day (Deuteronomy 4:8)?

Christ in Deuteronomy

But *where is Christ?* Heaven help me if I preach that the primary message in Deuteronomy is a national constitution void of Christ! One thing we learn looking through the very detailed system found in the Old Covenant is that apart from Christ, the best system (be it political, economic, ceremonial, educational, etc.) has no hope

apart from Jesus Christ taking as it were His divine finger and transforming our granite laden hearts.

It is in the final sermon of Moses that we read familiar words. God is offering the choice of life or death, of good or evil. He is calling Israel to **“walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments” (Deuteronomy 30:15)**. It would be a mistake here to restrict these words to the life or death of a mere nation (though it would certainly include that). We will learn elsewhere, more clearly, that it is eternal life and death that are put before us.

It is not always clear, either in the New or Old Covenants that *salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*. There are times when people are merely called to **“follow”** or **“trust”** or **“keep.”** Moses is certainly not offering a works-righteousness to Israel, as if it is through their own power or righteousness that success will be obtained (things he earlier rebuffed).

But through the words of the prophet we can clearly see Christ in Moses’ sermon. For in the midst of Moses’ call to **“walk”** and **“keep”** we read the words:

But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it (Deuteronomy 30:14).

The Apostle Paul brings Christ into unambiguous and accessible focus with his exposition of this passage. The contemporaries of Jesus (and indeed many today) think the Old Testament/Covenant (if not all of Scripture) contains a ‘do good and live’ message. The Apostle Paul clears the air by teaching how this passage should point us to Christ.

For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, “The man who does those things shall live by them.” But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your

mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:5-9).

I wrote in detail on this passage in my sermon series through Romans, so I will not go into great detail here. Simply put, since the fall, eternal life is only found through the instrument of faith, *faith in Christ*. The promise of eternal life, whether in the Old or New Covenants, should never be thought of as something we can merit, but is a free gift through the merits of Christ alone. To look anywhere for our redemption but to Christ is to seek to nullify both His humiliation and exaltation (death and ascension).

When Paul quotes Deuteronomy with infallible exegesis, the “word” is that word of faith which he preached. It is the word that *if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Does the Bible have anything to say about abortion? Explain.
2. Review the themes of Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. How is the emphasis in Deuteronomy a bit different?
3. What is uniquely found in Deuteronomy, as opposed to Genesis through Numbers? Why do you suppose that is the case?
4. How should surrounding nations view the law of God?
5. What is the danger of being surrounded by those who do not believe in the one true God?
6. Why is it a mistake to pine away for the good old days?
7. Is America the kingdom of God? Does this mean that the Bible has no message for nations? Explain.
8. How does the Apostle Paul understand “*the word is very near you?*”

Part VI - Joshua

John 5:39; Hebrews 4:8-11

February 17, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:8-11).

Introduction

We had a rather animated conversation with one of the residents at the Beacon Light Mission last week. This man had clearly been reading his Bible and when he realized that we were more than eager to answer questions and discuss the things of God, he became like a kid in a candy store.

One question which seemed to occupy and antagonize him a bit was this notion of eternal security. *Eternal security* is a term conveying the idea that once a person comes to faith in Christ, they will remain in that state of grace. In simple terms, they cannot lose their salvation. Yet the Bible, and our own personal experiences, give numerous examples of people falling away from the faith (Hebrews 6:6; 1 Timothy 1:19, 20; 2 Peter 2:1).

We explained that perhaps his difficulty resided in the common terms used to describe the subject under our consideration. The more well-known terms such as *eternal security* or *once-saved always-saved*, though perhaps technically accurate, fall short of sufficiently describing the substance of the matter. The more precise, and Biblical, term is **“the perseverance of the saints”** described as those who **“keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus” (Revelation 14:12).**

The call to perseverance is primary in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Notice the conditional conjunction in the following verse:

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:14).

The Apostle John offers an example of those who failed to heed the call to persevere:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us (1 John 2:19).

And Jesus, in the *Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13), explains some potential reasons why certain people fail to persevere. The Christian faith is often described as a battle or a war (Romans 7:23; 2 Corinthians 10:3; James 4:1; 1 Peter 2:11). And those who have called upon the name of the Lord are also called to endure in that war to the end. It was in the midst of Jesus anticipating intense persecution that He conveyed this message:

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved (Matthew 10:21, 22).

It is here that we begin to see Christ (if not the entirety of the Christian faith/walk) in the book of Joshua. More on that in a moment.

History of Israel

This morning we begin a new section of the Bible addressing the *History of Israel*. The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah, the Pentateuch or the Law. All of these books were written by Moses and describe events prior to Israel entering Canaan (the Promised Land). Although the gospel is certainly contained in those

five books, it has been suggested (at least in an illustrative sense) that at the end of Deuteronomy the law had served its purpose. The Law can lead us *to* the Promised Land, but it cannot bring us *into* the Promised Land. We might stand like Moses, gazing but not entering. In order to enter the Promised Land we need a Joshua.

It is worth noting here that the Greek (the language of the New Testament) form of the Hebrew (language of the Old Testament) name *Joshua* is Jesus (which means *savior* or *Jehovah is salvation*).

The next twelve books we study will contain the *History of Israel*. From Joshua to 2 Chronicles we will see God's people in Canaan. Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther record events after they are expelled from the land.

A Survey of Joshua

So, a brief survey of Joshua: Joshua records events that take place after the death of Moses. Joshua will now lead the people where Moses could not—across the Jordan to the Promised Land. Events we see in Joshua include:

The story of Rahab, the harlot (and also ancestor of Jesus, Matthew 1:5) who takes allegiance with God's covenant people in their battle against Jericho. We read of the Israelites called by God to follow the ark across the Jordan. In order for the Jordan to be halted, allowing safe passage, those who bore the ark were required to stand in the Jordan. This was the second time God had halted water for safe passage. But it was a little different.

When God split the Red Sea through Moses, the people were in fear, being pursued by the Egyptians. They were not required to stand in the sea prior to it splitting. But now the Egyptians were on the pursuit and God called Israel to, as it were, put their toes in the water. It would be foolish to think that their toes somehow stopped the Jordan from flowing. A recurring theme in Joshua is that God had given the victories into the hands of His people even prior to the battles taking place. There is nonetheless a call to move forward, to trust, to put our feet in the water.

A new generation will be circumcised. The covenant renewed. The manna will now stop. They will no longer live in tents but eat of vineyards and olive groves. It is in Joshua that we read of the walls of Jericho coming down and of many other great conquests

through Joshua. As we read of these military conquests, we must be reminded that these nations had climbed to the upper crest of evil (Genesis 15:16). They were sacrificing their own children and were engaged in vicious darkness. Israel under Joshua would be like the flood of Noah, but in a surgical and specific sense.

Also, the uniqueness of Joshua's mission (unlike any military mission today) had the special and prophetic command and presence of God in very supernatural ways (hailstones from heaven and the sun standing still in the sky). Large portions of Joshua contain the assigning of the land to the various tribes of Israel.

The people would also be reminded of what they were warned against in Deuteronomy, the dangerous spiritual and moral territory, and the potential influence this would have on them. They were not to come in contact with the other nations. This is similar to the admonition given by the Apostle Paul where Christians are called to be careful regarding the fellowship they have with unbelievers and the potential contamination of our souls (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

The book of Joshua will end with the death of Joshua, but not before he cautions God's people regarding false gods. Keep in mind that this warning is not primarily directed at the world but the church. There is a great temptation within the boundaries of the church to follow and promote the gods of the age. The congregations are to be astute and judicious. We are to **"test all things; hold fast to what is good"** (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We are to **"weigh what is said"** (1 Corinthians 14:29) and to **"test the spirits"** (1 John 4:1) against the word of God; as Jesus taught, **"thy word is truth"** (John 17:17). Or as we read in Hebrews:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:12, 13).

Jesus in Joshua

Where do we see Jesus in Joshua? As we already observed, it is in the very name (*Jehovah is salvation*)! But the mission of Joshua is referenced specifically by the author of Hebrews just prior to the passage we read on the powerful nature of the word of God:

For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:8-11).

What do we make of this? Those who like to critique the Scriptures might find yet another difficulty for their list. For the words of Hebrews do, at first blush, seem to conflict with the words recorded (numerous times) in Joshua:

The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand (Joshua 21:44).

Had He given them rest or not? In a certain sense they had been given rest and in another sense they had not been given rest. They may have had *military* rest, even by the hand of God! But that does not always translate into or result in *eternal* rest. Would it not be the epitome of short-sightedness for the Israelites to enjoy the military victories while failing to grasp the eternal power and infinite goodness and mercy of the God who had delivered them?

Is there not a greater land than Canaan?! Is the summit of our faith contained in the possessions He grants us within the grasp of our hands or perception of our eyes? We read so many accounts of Jesus healing the blind, sick and lame. Yet how transitory are these blessings? They lack permanence. If someone gave you sight then promised you life, would you not still be blind if you were to refuse it?

I must say, it makes me a little nervous (although it can be appropriate) when a positive event happens in somebody's life and they react by proclaiming that God is good. It is true, and I don't mean to downplay the value of praising God for our blessed events. But we must be a people with deeper minds and more profound hearts.

God may give us certain levels of rest and victories on this side of glory. But it will never be true rest until we enter our eternal Sabbath rest. We must not be overly attached to our external things, even those given to us as a blessing from God, lest we forget to whom all those blessings are to point.

There are lessons about Christ and our life in Christ to be found in Joshua (and in all the Old Testament Scriptures). Indeed, at times it can be difficult to grasp the typology⁵ of the events. But we must understand the limitations of types and foreshadows.

Is deliverance from the slavery of Egypt a type of deliverance from sin? Yes. But what of those who died in the wilderness due to unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-12)? Is Canaan a type of heaven? Perhaps. But if so, why the conflicts and threat of expulsion? The types and events of the Old Covenant are not always easy to grasp and they almost always fall short (as signs tend to do in relation what they signify).

But we do learn in Joshua that it is God who delivers while at the same time calling us to do battle. This is very similar to the salvation presented in the New Covenant:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13).

In a world full of darkness, we are to bring the light of Christ to the nations, not just in Canaan, but to all the world. And we are not to **“grow or fainthearted” (Hebrews 12:3)**, but we are to be diligent, persevering to the end.

⁵ A 'type' is an Old Covenant event, thing or person which foreshadows a fulfillment in the New Covenant or in eternity.

To what extent the world will be subdued by the love, grace, mercy and wisdom of God, is an eschatological argument. I happen to think the effects of the gospel will be globally very significant. But even if you don't think that to be the case, even if you are unclear regarding the global victories this side of the final resurrection, what should not be unclear is the call of Christ to be diligent and persevering in the **“commandments of God”** and our **“faith in Jesus” (Revelation 14:12)**, that we might enter our eternal rest in Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is eternal security? Why is that, perhaps, not the best term? What would be a more precise and biblical term?
2. What do we make of those who appear to fall away from the faith?
3. What are the limitations of the Law? Discuss what else is needed.
4. Highlight some of the more significant events and themes we see highlighted in Joshua.
5. Had Joshua given the people rest? Explain your answer.
6. What is a 'type' and what are its limitations?
7. How does the author of Hebrews use Joshua as a lesson in the New Covenant?

Part VII - Judges

John 5:39; John 14:27

February 24, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

History of Israel

This morning we are in the second of twelve books (seventh book overall) in the Bible addressing the *History of Israel*. The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah, the Pentateuch or the Law. All of these books were written by Moses and describe events prior to entering Canaan (the Promised Land). Although the gospel is certainly contained in those five books, it has been suggested (at least in an illustrative sense) that at the end of Deuteronomy the law had served its purpose. The Law can lead us to the Promised Land, but it cannot bring us into the Promised Land. In order to enter the Promised Land we need a Joshua (which is the Hebrew form of the Greek name, Jesus).

Joshua had replaced Moses and successfully led the campaign to bring Israel against the extremely corrupt surrounding nations. But Joshua ends with the death of Joshua and the beginning of a new period in Israel's history entitled *Judges*. Judges covers a period of about 350 years, from the conquest of Canaan (1400 BC) until just before Samuel, who anointed the first king of Israel (1050 BC).

Judges should not be understood the way we generally define the word. A judge would periodically be placed in Israel as a temporary deliverer from precarious situations into which they had placed themselves. There were twelve judges. The six more notable ones were Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson.

The book of Joshua ends with the somewhat glowing commendation:

Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the Lord which He had done for Israel (Joshua 24:31).

But how would Israel do now that one of the great types of Christ (and those strongly influenced by him) was gone? The repetitive theme in Judges is conveyed in the words we read over and over:

Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord (Judges 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

Not to overstate the significance of Joshua, but he serves well to demonstrate that a deliverer is not merely needed to obtain deliverance but to preserve deliverance and continue to bring deliverance to others. Jesus may start a church, but that church should not be deceived into thinking that it will continue to function, to be a lampstand for Christ, if they lose their love for Christ and faithfulness to ever follow Him. How many beautiful chapels in Europe have become skate parks and bars!

Judges conveys, with horrifying clarity, what a flickering wick Israel had become. It is not a dull book. But it is one that might make the family Bible reading quite uncomfortable. The recurring theme in Deuteronomy which was obeyed by Joshua (not to be conformed or influenced by the surrounding nations and their idolatry and subsequent evil) had been all but ignored. Israel had become a spiritual and moral vacuum. One is hard-pressed to find a hero, a suitable role model for the youth. How does this happen?

A Survey of Judges

It has been suggested that the theme of Judges is “Failure Through Compromise.” A brief survey of Judges begins with very subtle (almost unnoticeable) compromises which inevitably lead to its corruption. They did continue to battle, but chose not to entirely drive out the Canaanites (which serve as a type of ungodliness). What harm

is there in allowing a certain amount of evil to continue? Would that not demonstrate a forbearing spirit? This should be clearly ridiculous.

Paul writes of the sexual immorality at the church of Corinth and how, instead of mourning, they are “**puffed up**” (1 Corinthians 5:2). There is a bizarre and thoughtless notion buzzing the hallways of churches that because Jesus receives us just as we are (how could it be otherwise) that He endorses and chooses to leave us just as we are. Let me make it clear, no true encounter with the Living God in the person of Christ leaves a person the same as they were!

It did not take long for Joshua’s absence to result in an Israel who...

**...did not know the Lord nor the work which
He had done for Israel (Judges 2:10).**

Many of us who were not raised in Christian homes can recollect the regenerative and transforming work of Christ in our lives. But our hearts are concerned for those raised within the boundaries of a delivered people (a covenant people) and yet do not know that work nor the Lord who does it. And we begin to notice the remnants of the sin of the world we left, seeking to cling to the next generation. The enemy ever wants them and will find numerous avenues to reach them. This was the course seen in Judges, so God raised up individuals, Judges (Judges 2:16), to keep them from going entirely off the rails, as it were.

In time, the mild compromises became more severe. The sinful nations were not merely tolerated; they intermarried, then engaged in the worship of their false gods and inevitably became grotesquely immoral. The idolatry, immorality and violence in Judges (not merely by the surrounding nations, but by Israel as well) is astonishingly unsettling.

We read of one woman hammering a tent peg into the temple of a man she pretends to be friendly with. Abimelech (Gideon’s son by a concubine) kills all 70 of his brothers (except for the youngest) and is eventually indecorously killed himself by a woman dropping a millstone on his head. We read the terribly sad story of Jephthah the Gileadite and his rash vow to sacrifice his daughter.

We then have the very popular story of Samson. This great hero of Israel had all sorts of strength but glaring weakness when it

came to women. Not only did he marry a Philistine (which itself was the source of untold troubles for him and Israel and the Philistines), but he was easily manipulated if nagged long enough; this eventually cost him his life.

But one of the most disquieting events in Judges has to do with the Benjamites (who were Israelites) and their perversion which was remarkably similar to the Sodomites. The story is told about a **“certain Levite”** who took for himself a concubine (which itself is a sign of moral degeneration). This concubine then plays the harlot. The Levite responds by seeking to win her back by **“speaking kindly” (Judges 19:3)** to her and so forth. On their way home it’s getting dark, but he does not want to spend the night in the city of the Jebusites because they are not **“of the children of Israel” (Judges 19:12)**. He thinks it would be a better idea to stay in Gibeah because the **“men of the place were Benjamites” (Judges 19:14)**. They were descendants of Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob.

As they are sitting in the town square an old man offers them a place to stay (we can assume he realized that it would not be safe for them to hang out in the open square). The text indicates that the Levite accepts the invitation and that they were **“enjoying themselves”** (interesting how this is added, as if to add to the heinous nature of the event) when **“perverted men surrounded the house,”** demanding the man be brought out so they can have their way with him.

Similar to the story of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah, the master of the house does the unthinkable and instead offers his own virgin daughter and the concubine. So they take the concubine, have their way with her all night and leave her dead at the door. The Levite then divides her into twelve pieces and sends her throughout the territory of Israel. This caused a war between Israel and the Benjamites, which almost resulted in their extinction.

Aside from Israel’s somehow disallowing this to go unpunished, there is no positive spin on this story. Maybe there were ten righteous Benjamites (Genesis 18:32), but by all outward evaluation, that portion of Israel had become like Sodom and Gomorrah. The men of the city were perverted and the men in the house were cowards.

But even in a story like this we begin to see the subtle failure through compromise. If we live in a world where it is appropriate to

have concubines, why is it inappropriate for the concubine to play the harlot? If we live in a world where there are harlots, why is it inappropriate for the doors to amorous relations be open to any types of attraction between any types of genders or species? And now, since all the walls have been removed, by what standard will you say it is wrong for one to force their affections upon another?

I have little doubt that many would view the final statement in the previous paragraph as a non-sequitur. And that should serve to notify us how like Israel we have become. We arbitrarily set barriers based upon our own comfort and affections. And the enemy of our souls mounts the earth-movers of our own fleshly inclinations against those flexible papier-mache walls, and in time the blade of the bulldozer is before us and the cliff behind. This is the inevitable outcome of a people who engage in another of the repeated theme in Judges that **“everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25).**

The bruised reed of Israel remained in covenant with God for the simple reason that when they would hit the bottom of the spiritual, moral and impoverished well, they would **“cry out to the Lord” (Judges 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6, 7; 10:10).** In a moment of divine instruction God bid them **“cry out to the gods which you have chosen” (Judges 10:14).** But like a loving parent, we read that God’s **“soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel” (Judges 10:14).**

We are a fickle people. When cancer strikes, when planes hit buildings, when confronted with plagues and oppression, the churches become full. But the nature of such a fickle faith cannot endure.

Where is Christ in Judges?

Where is Christ in Judges? One is hard-pressed to find a suitable type of Christ in Judges. It might be easier to use Judges as an example of what happens when the church chooses to supplant Christ with what is right in its own eyes. But operating under the assumption that a true altar in the Old Covenant served as a place where God and man would meet, one of the few examples of an altar being built to the glory of God is found in Judges 6:24 and is erected by Gideon.

Gideon (the fifth judge of Israel), though far from perfect, is where we find Christ as we see Gideon find Christ. Gideon, like

many of us, begins as an insignificant symbol, seeking to hide his goods from the oppressive Midianites. When the Angel of the Lord appears to him, he asks questions we might ask: **“...if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles” (Judges 6:13)?** Gideon’s initial response to the call of God contains, “Oh!...if...why?...where?...Show me a sign.”

But by the power and grace of God, Gideon is *converted*. He builds an altar. In the New Covenant the point of contact is not an altar but is word and sacrament. It would be to eat and drink in remembrance of that to which the altar pointed—the cross of Christ. Gideon’s altar would be called, **“The-Lord-Is-Peace” (Judges 6:24).**

Gideon would now meditate upon a peace he had never known. Even still, it would be a mere shadow of the greater peace of which Jesus would speak:

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

With his new found peace, Gideon now moves forward for Christ. Thus is the nature of a *sanctified* soul. For, the building of a true altar is to be followed by the tearing down of the false altars. These were altars in his own house, erected by his own father (Judges 6:25-27). How joyous it must have been for Gideon to see the conversion also of his own father, Joash. And when the men of the city wanted to kill Gideon for his act of courage and righteousness, Gideon’s father uttered a statement I fear many Christians today are hesitant to utter.

“Would you plead for Baal” (Judges 6:31)?

In a world of sin and darkness, it is expected that when one advertises their commitment to ungodliness, their fellow pagans will rejoice with them. But it is an act of contempt for God and hatred and negligence for our fellow man to endorse or even hold our lips (or to put it in Ezekiel’s terms: fail to blow the trumpet, cf. Ezekiel 33:6). We are not to walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers (Psalm 1:1). We are not to

approve of those who practice ungodliness to the peril of their own souls (Romans 1:32), but rather expose them (Ephesians 5:11).

Gideon was now a new man. The **“Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet” (Judges 6:34)**. With a mere 300 men, Gideon would defeat an entire army almost 500 times its size. All this to demonstrate what Israel so easily forgot and what the church must ever remember, which is: no matter how powerful we think we are, we are of ourselves impotent to succeed. We are utterly dependent upon the hand of God for any true and eternal deliverance.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are the limitations of the Law?
2. Define “Judge” as it pertains to the book of Judges.
3. Compare the end of Joshua with the beginning of Judges. What differences do you see?
4. What is a suggested theme of Judges? Why?
5. How can compromise affect the church? What are examples of the infractions seen in 1 Corinthians 5:1, 2 in the church today?
6. Are there dangers for those in the covenant community who have not seen God work in certain ways? Explain.
7. How are the events in Judges very unsettling?
8. Why is the notion of *everyone doing right in their own eyes* so bad?
9. Where and how do we see Christ in Judges?

Part VIII - Ruth

John 5:39; Hebrews 10:9, 10

March 3, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

...then He said, “Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.” He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all* (Hebrews 10:9, 10).

Introduction

Years ago, I was disappointed about having lost my Bible. It had become familiar. I knew what part of the page to look at in order to find familiar verses. Having become dog-eared, it would automatically open to sections that had a certain appeal to me. But I lost it. Years later, the church secretary buzzed me that I had a visitor. She sent the person to my office. A woman walked in holding a very old and weather-beaten looking Bible. It was mine.

She said she'd found it on the curb. In loading my car I evidently had left it. The woman was not a Christian but she picked it up, brought it home and put it on her shelf. She told me that after a few months she decided to take it off the shelf and read a bit. After a little reading, she came to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to go to church. She did. In time, she came to faith. After many years in the same community she came to recognize the name written in the Bible—my name. And she felt the need to return my lost Bible.

She hunted me down, and there she stood with my old Bible and the story of how the Bible (with no help from anyone) started her down a journey which led to her redemption. I had acquired a new Bible, so I told her she was free to keep the one used by God in such a wonderful way in her life.

I shared this story with the man who had led me to Christ. His takeaway from this was how important it is to just get the word out there. The word of God has great power (Hebrews 4:12, 13). There is value in getting the word out. As Jesus taught:

Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops (Matthew 10:27).

At the same time, like the ark of the covenant, that power can go bad if abused (1 Samuel 4). Partial truths or the twisting of the truth will find large followings. It is very easy for the Christian faith to be reduced to a product where people are motivated financially or through pride. Christ can be presented as if we're selling laundry detergent. There is a temptation to evangelize in a cold, distant and disconnected way.

Don't misunderstand me; I believe there is a place for massive presentations of the gospel to as many people as will hear. But most of you who are here, most people listening to this in their cars on the way to church, are attending church because somebody who cares about you invited you. A caring, loving, thoughtful relationship is developed and evangelism is woven into a way of life rather than a singular message (again, not downplaying the value of a singular message).

I mention this because in *Ruth* we see the fruit of a loving and caring relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. Ruth is a very short book and we are not given the details of all that led up to these words of Ruth's, but one gets the impression that Naomi (Ruth's mother-in-law) must have had an amazing impact upon Ruth. What must that relationship have looked like in order for these words to proceed from the lips of Ruth?

Naomi is leaving Moab to return to Bethlehem and encourages her daughters-in-law to remain for their own best interests. Yet Ruth lovingly pushes back:

But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, *or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me*" (Ruth 1:16, 17).

It makes me wonder if I have had, or have even attempted to have, that kind of effect upon another person. This is not thoughtless, emotional gushing by Ruth. She is going to leave safety, comfort, familiarity to be with her mother-in-law. But more than that. Ruth will leave Chemosh (the god of the Moabites) and embrace the true and living God, the God of Naomi. Perhaps the fact that Chemosh, similar to other Canaanite religious cults, offered human sacrifice (2 Kings 3:27) played a role in her willingness. Either way, one gets the strong impression that Naomi's love, wisdom, faithfulness and overall goodness was instrumental in Ruth's conversion.

As we shall shortly see, Naomi and Ruth were not in a comfortable situation. This, no doubt, tested their mettle. Difficulties are that way. They tend to reveal the real you. There is a depth in the relationships we examine in Ruth which should serve to arouse a deep and abiding godliness in our hearts and actions.

A Survey of Ruth

What is the short book of Ruth about? Unlike the books leading up to Ruth, you don't see miracles, wars, revolutions, devastations or the disquieting and disgusting events we just examined in Judges. Ruth offers a very sweet, loving and gentle (even romantic) microcosm. In Genesis we saw the creation, the fall, and Christ in the promise of redemption. In Exodus we saw the great drama of deliverance and Christ in the Passover. In Leviticus we saw the reason for deliverance that we might worship the true and living Christ and enjoy Him forever.

In Numbers we saw the call to prepare for battle. Following Christ means we are in a spiritual battle with the world. In Deuteronomy we read of the final cautions regarding the morally and spiritually dangerous territory that we will inevitably find ourselves. So ended the Law.

The Law brought the Israelites to the Promised Land, but it could not bring them into the Promised Land. It would take a Joshua (the Hebrew name for Jesus). There is no entering into God's promise without Jesus. In Judges we began to see what happens if God's people forget their need for Christ, the horrifying outcome to doing what is right in our own eyes.

Ruth is the third book addressing the history of Israel. But this book is different. It is not a *big picture* book. Up until now all the books are a sort of State Of The Union report. We are looking at the world through the major networks. But in Ruth, it is more of a personal diary. It's local news. It asks the question: How is God working intimately in the lives of individual people who have been negatively affected by the major lapses of society?

The story of Ruth took place during the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1) and was likely written during the time of David (who is referenced in the brief genealogy in the end of the book-Ruth 4:18, 19). As we discovered in our last time together, good things were not happening during the time of the Judges. In the opening setting for Ruth we read that there was "a famine in the land" (Ruth 1:1). Why would there be a famine in a land where God promised abundance? The land flowing with milk and honey now had neither. Remember the numerous warnings God gave His delivered people (see Leviticus 26). There is a call to persevere in holiness and there are consequences. God is not a God of idle threats.

We are ever called to draw near to Christ. God does not promise a life free from difficulty. In fact, He seems to offer just the opposite. But He does promise an infinite and eternal peace, which on this side of glory is found in hope. Like David in the wilderness of Judah, we are to ever seek after God.

O God, You *are* my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory. Because Your lovingkindness *is* better than life, my lips shall praise You (Psalm 63:1-3).

Israel, as a people, were in rebellion and found themselves in a famine. So the individuals in that parched land begin to look elsewhere for nourishment. That itself is a reminder for the church to continue to present Christ as food for the soul.

Elimelech (Naomi's husband) decides it would be of benefit to head for the land of Moab (a historical enemy of God's people). He goes there with his wife and two sons. In time, he and both of his

sons die. Yet another example of the temporary sustenance the world has to offer. As has been said, “They sought bread but found graves.”⁶

Add to this that the two sons married Moabite women, which was also prohibited (Deuteronomy 7:3). So the entire context of Ruth is what we call in sports, *out of system*. Israel was in rebellion resulting in famine and its inhabitants were tempted to go where they should not have gone and do things they should not have done.

Yet their time in Moab had not entirely snuffed out faith. Naomi, like the prodigal son (Luke 15:17), had become aware that the Lord **“had visited His people by giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6)**. She would now head back and willingly be like one of the hired servants. Her two daughters-in-law clearly love her and desire to go with her. But it is Ruth who clings to her. It is Ruth who demonstrates genuine conversion in her willingness. A truly converted person is unwilling to share the preeminence of Christ with lesser gods. As Jesus taught:

So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:33).

We may not excel or reach perfection in following our Master. But we are to always know who our Master is and ever seek to follow Him. We see the unwavering conversion of Ruth in those words we read earlier. It was not a conversion that would immediately yield comfort.

Arriving in Bethlehem, Ruth becomes a poverty-stricken gleaner. Gleaners are people who wander the fields picking up scraps according to God’s law to provide for the poor (Leviticus 19:9, 10). As providence would have it, Ruth gleanes in a field owned by a relative of Naomi’s husband. He is a wealthy man named Boaz. Long story short, Boaz takes notice of Ruth and makes sure she is provided for and protected. But he is a noble, older man and makes no gesture of advancement toward Ruth. It is precisely here that having a Jewish mother-in-law can become immensely helpful!

Naomi advises Ruth to **“wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your best garment and go down to the threshing floor” (Ruth 3:3)**. Boaz is clearly dragging his feet, so it’s time to fish or

⁶ Baxter, *Explore the Book*, p. 35.

cut bait. Naomi's advice continues (and it must be said that there was nothing inappropriate about this somewhat odd yet message-bearing ritual). Ruth is told to wait until Boaz has finished eating and drinking (his heart being "**cheerful**" **Ruth 3:7**) and goes to lie down on the threshing room, then uncover his feet and herself lie down. This ritual apparently served as an appeal (as the following verses so indicate) by a widow for protection.

Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled, and turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet. And he said, "Who are you?" So she answered, "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative" (Ruth 3:8, 9).

How wonderful this must have been for Boaz! But there was still yet another hurdle, for there were laws within the context of Israel when it came to a kinsman redeemer. What is a "*kinsman redeemer*?" There were land considerations. Naomi, no doubt out of desperation, "**sold the piece of land which belonged to Elimelech" (her husband, Ruth 4:3)**. It was up to the "**nearest redeemer**" (**Leviticus 25:25**) to purchase back the land. Boaz was a "**close relative**" (**Ruth 3:12**), but there was someone, unnamed in the text, who was closer.

The offer of kinsman redeemer had to be given to this unnamed man first. And he initially seems interested. How Boaz' heart must have sunk! But then the nearest kin was informed of Ruth and how he would be required to care for her and "**perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance**" (**Ruth 4:5**). In other words, if you want the property, Ruth comes with the deal. For some reason, this addition to the transaction would negatively affect his own inheritance, so he was out.

The story ends very happily. Naomi becomes the grandmother she had always desired to be. It is worth noting the elation experienced by Naomi with the birth of her grandson. The whole event is described in the most celebrative of terms:

Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a close

relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him. Also the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “There is a son born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:14-17a).

It is also worth noting that this delight and jubilation was in the heart of Naomi even though none of her blood was in the child, for he was the son of her daughter-in-law and so a relative of her husband.

Christ in Ruth

So, where does one find Christ in Ruth? When Jesus taught that the Scriptures testify of Him, where do we see that testimony in Ruth? One obvious reference is found in the closing verses. Ruth ends the way the gospels begin, with a genealogy:

Now this is the genealogy of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David (Ruth 4:18-22; compare Matthew 1:3-5).

We see Christ in the lineage presented in Ruth. We also see in Ruth a seminal preview of the international nature of the New Covenant. Ruth, a Moabite, is grafted into the covenant people of God, and not in a secondary role: She is named as an ancestor of Jesus.

Not to overstep the boundaries of poetic/typology, but at least in an illustrative sense we see in Ruth, Naomi and Boaz the church, the Spirit and Christ.

As has been stated, it was Naomi who would ensure that the application of these redemptive events take place. Without Naomi there would be Ruth and Boaz but they would never have met. So necessary is the Holy Spirit! It is the Holy Spirit who directs our hearts to our Redeemer and we would be lost and directionless without Him.

And Ruth, like the those in the church, begins as a person seeking not after God. One thinks of the words of Isaiah quoted by Paul:

I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me (Romans 10:20).

God reached out to a Moabite while in Moab. But He did not leave her there. Her journey was not an easy one. She began as a beggar in the field, but then was led by Naomi to the threshing floor, and ends with the riches and protection of Boaz. God finds us in our blindness. He loves us first and bids us to follow, to count the cost, and by His Spirit we enter into what may very well be a costly journey which ends with the riches of heaven.

And Boaz, like Christ, faithfully fulfills the role of kinsman redeemer. It has been said that there are three things necessary for the kinsman redeemer to redeem. He must have the *right* to redeem, the *power* to redeem and the *will* to redeem. It has been suggested that this other, closer kinsman was the Law. It certainly had the right. The law is **“just, holy and good” (Romans 7:12)**. But the Law has not the power. It is weak due to our flesh (Romans 8:3) and has not the power to redeem. And it most assuredly has no will to redeem, but rather condemns (Romans 3:20). This closer kinsman retreated when he realized that redeeming had a cost that he did not wish to pay.

But Christ, like one greater than Boaz, has the *power*. As He stated, His reason for healing the paralytic was for them to **“know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” (Mark 2:10)**. And unlike all others, Jesus most certainly has the *right*, for He has been given **“all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18)**. But perhaps most beautifully, He has the *will*. And it is will consistent with His Father’s.

...then He said, “*Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God*”...By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all* (Hebrews 10:9a, 10).

May we, like a faithful Ruth, ever place our hopes and trust under the covering of Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is there power in the word of God? Is it possible for that power to be abused? How so?
2. Are there any observations or assumptions we can make when it comes to Ruth and her relationship with her mother-in-law? What kind of effect did this have on Ruth?
3. What era in Israel's history do we find Ruth? What were things like at this time? Discuss the context in which Ruth was written. How was Ruth different than the other books in the Bible leading up to it?
4. How were the events in Ruth "out of system?" How was Naomi like the prodigal son?
5. Was Ruth's conversion an easy transition for her? Explain.
6. Where can we see Christ, the church, the Spirit and the Law in the relationships in Ruth?

Part IX - 1 Samuel

John 5:39; Hebrews 2:14, 15

March 10, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14, 15).

Introduction

Our nation is in a bizarre and tumultuous political season. Rational dialogue is near impossible. This is likely due to an increasing lack of any point of philosophical contact. If we do not agree on what the end should be, we most certainly will not agree on how to get there. Pundits launch ambiguous terms in hopes of applause and votes (perhaps also power). *Freedom, choice, education, happiness* are all words which appeal to our flesh.

What we do with our *freedom* is often left undiscussed, at least from the platform. *Choice* is heralded as a virtue irrespective of however abominable the decision might be. *Education* is the happy ending to the movie without heed to the curriculum and the recognition that the vilest despots in human history were academically refined. And the nefariousness of *happiness* may be the most subtle. Not only is happiness difficult to define (who is not caught off guard with the simple question, “so are you happy?”), but happiness at what expense?

In an effort to fill the void in an increasingly godless society in the early 1700s an Irish reverend⁷ brought a political and irrational interpretation of the primacy of happiness to the west, which has regained traction among today’s neo-atheists. It reads:

⁷ Francis Hutcheson

“That Action is *best* which accomplishes the *greatest Happiness* for the *greatest Numbers*; and that worst, which in like manner occasions Misery.”

When put to the test, such a shallow aphorism fails instantly and miserably. One simply need ask, “What if the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers includes the intense misery of the minority?” Now the maxim must move into the arena of ethics and it all becomes much more complicated.

But a thoughtless people will still be moved by the nebulous. Ambiguity has become its own skill. *Freedom, choice, education, happiness*, left undefined, is the platform. All people will rally behind, and wish to be governed by those, and similar, words with very little thought given to the chief end of all these disciplines. What should I do with my freedom? What choices are best to make? Why am I being educated? From where or whom may true happiness be derived?

In all of this, there is one word that will not make an appearance. Whether the speaker is religious or irreligious, theist, atheist or agnostic, the uninvited word is *theocracy*. Theocracy, as the compound word suggests (*theos*-God and *kratos*-rule), means the rule of God. About now we are greeted with the corporate and amplified grinding of teeth by those indoctrinated by a phrase which is *not* in our Constitution, that phrase being the *separation of church and state*.

Though not in our Constitution, I will argue that I agree with the separation of these two institutions. I do not believe the church should have the power of the sword or that the state should have the power of word and sacrament. But the separation of church and state is not the same as the separation of *God and state*. This is a fact that anyone perusing our founding documents should immediately recognize with its numerous allusions to a Creator.

I begin with this discussion in our meditations upon 1 Samuel because 1 Samuel records a transition from God’s people being ruled by Judges (which might be called a strict and unmediated theocracy) to God’s people being ruled by a king (generally called a monarchy). In the history of Israel, we have moved from theocracy (rule of God) to monarchy (rule of a king). Let that settle in our minds while we present a brief survey of 1 Samuel.

Survey of 1 Samuel

First Samuel opens with the miraculous birth of Hannah's son Samuel (the first of three primary personalities introduced in the book). Hannah utters a beautiful prayer (so similar to Mary's *Magnificat* in the gospels). The condition of Israel had become deplorable. Eli, the priest, had corrupt sons and we are told that the word of the Lord was **"rare"** (1 Samuel 3:1). Samuel grows in stature and favor with the Lord and men (words used to describe Jesus—1 Samuel 2:26; Luke 2:52).

The most formidable enemy of Israel at this juncture is the Philistines who have formed a virtually unbeatable military (1 Samuel 13:5). They defeat the Israelites and so the elders of Israel decide (on their own and without seeking the wisdom of God) to bring the ark into battle. Let this be a warning that even the elders can go south. It's been said that they had a committee meeting instead of a prayer meeting.⁸

The death of Eli and his sons is accompanied by the birth of Eli's grandchild. He is given a name that appropriately captures the condition of Israel—*Ichabod* (meaning *the glory has departed*. 1 Samuel 4:21). In their victory, the Philistines capture the ark of the covenant which does not prove beneficial to them. God cannot be used in such a utilitarian manner. Let the church be cautioned that the things of God are to be lived out in a manner directed by God and to the glory of God. It causes my heart to bristle when I see the Gospel presented as if it is a lucky charm for my personal fortune. The Philistines end up being cursed with tumors and are advised to send the ark back to Israel, along with a very odd ritual which included rats and tumors made of gold.

Israel's vulnerabilities, which included an aging Samuel, who himself had corrupt sons, motivates them to ask for a king. Whereas there is some debate regarding the appropriateness of having a king at all, the request is viewed by God as a rejection of Him. That they want a king **"like the other nations"** is likely their primary offense. They want a king who will fight their battles (1 Samuel 8:20). There is an undue trust in what a human potentate can actually accomplish.

⁸ In an effort to avoid this, the elders in our church will have meetings where we don't do business but only pray. We call them shepherding meetings in an effort that we might ever remember our primary call to shepherd the flock.

In our country we do not today live in a monarchy, but we must be cautious of this same mentality-that we would have the government be the hands and feet of good deeds. It has been said:

A nation of individuals who do not love their neighbors will never create a government that does.

In a very interesting exchange, God tells Samuel to forewarn the people of the behavior of the king who will reign over them. This king will take your sons to drive his chariots. He will take your daughters to be his perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will take your fields, vineyards and olive groves. He will take your servants and your sheep. In short, if you give this kind of power to a mere man, he will take all of your stuff. Their response:

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, “No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles (1 Samuel 8:19, 20).

So, Israel gets Saul (the second personality introduced in the book), the tallest and most handsome guy available. Enter *Personality Politics*. Personality politics works in an environment where people don't believe in ideas, they believe in people who believe in ideas. Statements of mission or conviction are replaced with images of the person's face plastered in the town square or on the bumpers of cars.

One can hardly help think of Kennedy defeating Nixon in 1960 (the first televised debate) largely due to how much better-looking he was.⁹ King Saul hits the ground running. We read of wonderful, sanctifying interactions between Saul and God. We are told that Saul is turned into another man. God gave him “**another heart**” (1 Samuel 10:9). And he immediately wins a battle over the Ammonites.

⁹ Television audiences thought Kennedy won the debate by a landslide, while radio audiences thought Nixon won it by a landslide.

As Samuel grows older, he gives counsel to Israel that they are to obey the king and the Lord, and the king is to obey the Lord. And if they do so, it will go well. But it does not take long before Saul starts taking small steps in the wrong direction. Saul feels compelled to offer a burnt offering that he should not have offered (a responsibility belonging to the prophet and not the king) and it is here that he is informed that a replacement is on his way: **“a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14).**

It’s all downhill for Saul at this point. He offers rash vows. He fails to obey God in his dealings with the enemy. Saul’s heart problem is aptly stated in a phrase from Samuel that today’s statesmen (indeed, any person who the Lord has deemed fit to place in a position of leadership) would do well to take to heart.

So Samuel said, “When you *were* little in your own eyes, *were* you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the Lord anoint you king over Israel” (1 Samuel 15:17)?

We are then introduced to the final major personality in the book, David. David is just the opposite when it comes to impressive stature. In Samuel’s hunt for David, he is instructed not to look for someone like Saul, with his height and beauty. It is in the context of Samuel’s search that we read:

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him (Eliab, the eldest and most impressive son of Jesse). For *the Lord* does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

There is now a changing of the mantle as the Spirit of the Lord comes upon David and departs from Saul. In fact, Saul is sent a distressing/harmful/evil spirit. So Saul hires a musician to play when the spirit is vexing him and the musician happens to be David.

It is at this juncture that we read the very famous account of David and Goliath. And here, understandably, the tide of public

opinion does not so much turn against Saul as it elevates David. Even though what David accomplished through Goliath was beneficial to Israel, it did not please the king of Israel to see credit given elsewhere. Pride and envy are killers. Add to the drama that David becomes best friends with Saul's son Jonathan and is given in marriage to Saul's daughter Michal (which was designed to be a snare to destroy David).

It is remarkable how evil people (even people who were once so hopeful and godly) can get. Saul, in his pursuit to kill David, engages in the slaughtering of eighty-five priests. His own men wouldn't obey his order. He relies upon the Edomite Doeg, his lap-dog, to carry out the horrible task.

Something remarkable in Saul's pursuit of David are the two times David had easy opportunity to kill Saul and refused to do so because Saul was still God's anointed king. Saul, like Pharaoh, momentarily relents but it doesn't take long before he is once again seeking to kill David, even though David had done nothing to do deserve it other than serve his nation.

The darkness which subdued Saul's heart finally culminates in his efforts in the dark arts and the consulting of a medium (which in sounder times he had put out of the land. Cf 1 Samuel 28:3). Saul receives no comfort here (nor should we seek comfort in dark places). He is informed of his impending defeat and death, which sadly takes place (along with his family) shortly thereafter.

A Monarchial Theocracy

Referring back to our introduction, it may be true that a pure and unmediated theocracy (as in the time of the Judges) is quite impossible today. When the last Apostle died, the pure, authoritative, infallible and inerrant communication from God to man came to an end. We have all the information necessary for faith, practice and life (in every category of life) in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (2 Timothy 3:16).

But the time of Saul should have been a monarchial theocracy.¹⁰ It is God ruling through a king. It should not have been a ruling king who happened to believe in God. And regardless of the system of government, whether a monarchy (a king), an oligarchy (rule of a few), a democracy (rule of the people), plutocracy (the rule

¹⁰ Dt 17:14–20

of the wealthy) or a constitutional republic (where leaders are voted in and must yield to a set of laws), if there is a lack of willingness to bow before an ultimate and absolute Law-Giver the product will be political anarchy (disorder due to no legitimate leader). This is one clear message in 1 Samuel.

Jesus in 1 Samuel

Finally, *where is Jesus in 1 Samuel?* Perhaps the most beautiful and powerful (certainly the most popular) foreshadow of Christ in Samuel is found in the account of David against Goliath. Goliath stands as a champion in opposition to the people of God. He stood six cubits and a span (approximately nine feet). Six is the number of a man (Revelation 13:18), the span seeking to be more than a mere man. He carried all the weapons of death and was covered with impenetrable armored protection.

Like death itself, he would taunt. For forty days morning and evening he like the devil with Christ **“presented himself” (1 Samuel 17:16)**. **“Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me” (1 Samuel 17:8)**. It might be said that Goliath was the federal head (the singular representative of a people) of darkness, seeking a conflict with a federal head of light and life. Whoever wins, wins for all those he represents!

Saul and all of Israel were **“dismayed and greatly afraid” (1 Samuel 17:11)**. Who would Israel send? Nobody is stepping up. It is here we see the description of David. He was the youngest of Jesse’s sons (three of whom were in Saul’s army); he occasionally would feed his father’s sheep. And David’s initial exposure to this episode with Goliath was as a delivery boy. He was to bring some bread and cheese to the fearless warriors who stood petrified on their side of valley.

As David greeted his brothers, he finally hears the words of the Philistine. As the men of Israel fled, one can imagine an incensed David turning and looking. **“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God” (1 Samuel 17:26b)?** And like Christ, the prospect of David’s mission was not well received by the Israelites. Israel had no answer for Goliath, but they were unwilling to allow the answer to be found in David.

Finally Saul, almost reluctantly, grants that David be the man. And like many of the zealots during the time of Christ, Saul wanted David to fight the way he would have fought, so he seeks to dress him in armor. But David could not function in armor. David was the anointed one of God (*anointed* is translated into the New Testament as *Christ*). The Christ figure would not fight as men fight. He would use a sling, a seemingly useless weapon against such a great foe.

It is in the verbal exchange between David and the giant that we learn the lesson of ultimate deliverance:

Then all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle *is* the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands (1 Samuel 17:47).

Then David struck the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sank into it. After this he took Goliath's own sword and killed him and cut off his head. It is the head that is used in God's own prophecy of His promise. The seed of the woman will crush the head of the seed of the devil. We see in David's slaying of Goliath a foreshadow of Christ's ultimate victory over the devil and his death.

It is worth noting that David uses the very instrument of death (the sword of Goliath) to conquer death. Truly, death is the final enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). But we, in sanctified awe, must come to appreciate that it is death itself (the ultimate enemy of God's people) that becomes the means by which that enemy is conquered. As Hebrews so indicates,

...that through death he (Jesus) might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14).

David's victory became a victory for the entire nation. Similarly, Christ's victory becomes a victory for all who trust in Him. As Paul so indicated, that even though they were being killed all day long, in Christ **"we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss some reasons why our nation seems to be in such a tumultuous political season?
2. What were things like in Israel as we open 1 Samuel?
3. Was it profitable for Israel to bring the ark of the covenant into battle with the Philistines? Why or why not? Are there examples of this type of thing happening today?
4. Why was it wrong for Israel to ask for a king? Do we see this disposition anywhere today?
5. Evaluate the downfall of Saul. How did it happen?
6. In what sense is a theocracy today impossible? In what sense is it necessary?
7. In what ways do we see similarities between Jesus and David in his conflict with Goliath?

Part X - 2 Samuel

John 5:39; John 2:19-21

March 24, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).

Introduction

I encountered an old friend this week who indicated that he finally stepped down from a job he'd been doing and enjoying for many years. When I asked why he stepped down, he indicated that the job requires a great deal of energy and, pushing seventy, he's just running out of gas. But then the story went a little deeper.

This man is local and a committed Christian. In the past year or two he and I interacted as I sought to help him through a difficult season with some challenging personalities bringing troubling times into his life. He said he felt he could have lasted longer in his post, but these recent trials proved very fatiguing and he felt it accelerated his road to retirement. He also conveyed that these trials showed him weaknesses in his own faith which he felt he wanted to address. It was both lamentable and encouraging.

A recurring theme I have noticed among people who have raised their children and are nearing retirement is that they thought things were going to get easier, but they have not. The golden years can bring many challenges. There are the natural physical challenges that come with age, but that is not what I am focusing on here. I am speaking of spiritual, psychological and moral challenges.

These types of things can be exhausting and tempt you to step out of the race, to think it appropriate to ride the sidelines of any ministerial or redemptive undertaking. After all, you completed your education, raised your family and faithfully provided. You deserve

some down time. This can also happen in a microcosmic way with younger people. You've had a trying year, month, week or day and you deserve a break.

And most certainly there is a place for respite. The sabbath was designed for this very thing (Exodus 20:8-10). Green pastures and quiet waters are to be enjoyed (Psalm 23). In the midst of the Apostles' tumultuous schedule Jesus bid them,

Come aside by yourself to a deserted place and rest a while (Mark 6:31).

But rest is something to be earned. It is one thing to rest from your labor, it is quite another thing to so habitually rest that you have no true labor to rest from.

How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep—So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man (Proverbs 6:9-11).

The saying "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" may not be found verbatim in the Bible, but in principle there is no shortage of passages that teach this very thing (Ecclesiastes 10:18; Proverbs 12:24). God has designed us to work, even before the fall (Genesis 2:15). And to pursue a lifestyle of leisure is to open oneself to unguardedness and indulgence.

Such is a central theme in 2 Samuel. Second Samuel covers a forty-year period of David's reign as king. For the first half of the book, which is also the first half of David's reign, we see God's kingdom and His king at the pinnacle of glory. It may all be summed up in the simple phrase,

And the Lord gave victory to David wherever he went (2 Samuel 8:14).

But at the midpoint of the book, and the midpoint and high point of David's reign, we read:

...at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel (2 Samuel 11:1).

“All Israel”...but not David. It is while all his people are working in obedience to the call of God that David crawls out of his bed, spies a woman and engages in an act that will be the downturn of 2 Samuel, his reign as king, the victories of his kingdom and the peace of his own household.

Survey of 2 Samuel

More on this before we conclude, but first a brief survey of 2 Samuel. Second Samuel begins with David hearing the news of Saul and Jonathan’s (Saul’s son) death. It is a bizarre account of a man (an Amalekite) lying to David about killing Saul at Saul’s own request (being in anguish). The man, no doubt, thought this would place him in good standing with David since it was common knowledge that Saul sought David’s life on numerous occasions. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

David had the man put to death for killing the Lord’s anointed. Apparently, in the mind of David, you don’t kill the Lord’s anointed, even if he asks you to. And as horrible as Saul was to David, David offers a beautiful song (*The Song of the Bow*) in honor of Saul and Jonathan. Saul had become wicked and he deserved his end. But like God Himself, David took no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23).

David is not immediately made king over all the nation. He is first made king of Judah, then later over Israel. He is rapidly recognized as a great leader. First Samuel ended with the crushing blow of the Philistines over Israel, but David leads his people in victory over what had been an almost unbeatable army.

In the midst of these great victories, David is committed to proper worship. Chapter seven is highly significant in that it is here that David, having recognized the great house in which he lived, thought it was improper for the ark of God to dwell “**inside tent curtains**” (2 Samuel 7:2). David wanted to build a permanent structure for the ark, a house for God. It is here that God responds by

saying that He will build a house for David (2 Samuel 7:11). God is the one who builds the house.

It would be David's son, Solomon, who would build the house, who would also write,

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain (Psalm 127:1).

And the house God would build would be superior to the one pondered by David or constructed by Solomon. But we will finish with that momentarily.

It is during these high points that we observe the touching story of David's kingly and redemptive acts to Jonathon's young, lame son, Mephibosheth. We might not pay much attention to something along these lines in our culture with our great and appropriate sensitivities regarding disabilities and their attending laws and organizations.

But this is all a relatively modern phenomenon. Kings throughout history were about preserving and advancing their kingdoms. And spending time with a disabled child had no pragmatic, political, economic or military advantage. It is here where we see a foreshadow of Christ the King, who would utilize His great power and authority for the weak, sick and sinful.

Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31, 32).

It is about here that we begin to read of what has been called *Triumph Turned To Troubles Through Sin*. Time does not permit a full treatment of this great sin of David, though few observations are worthy of mention:

As stated, David was enjoying what might be viewed as well-earned leisure with his many great victories. But ease of life and great victories can leave us with a perceived lack of need for prayer and watchfulness in terms of our own vulnerabilities. His guard was down.

The crushing troubles to the kingdom and his own family all began with a glance. How different his life would have been had he, as Job, made a covenant with his eyes not to gaze inappropriately (Job 31:1). Such a temptation was somewhat unique to a king who had a rooftop to gawk and gander. Today it is at anyone's fingertips.

David had no accountability. There was no one willing to speak sense into him (something that may have proved very costly considering David's power). And as sin tends to do, one sin led to an even greater one. The Scriptures are forthright about Uriah (Bathsheba's husband) and what a noble man he was. Yet David, because of self-interest, is unmoved and plots the death of one of his own **"mighty men" (2 Samuel 23:39)**. It is also worth noting that David makes Joab, his commanding officer, an accomplice in his sin. Add to this the pain infliction upon the woman herself. Bathsheba **"mourned for her husband" (2 Samuel 11:26)**.

It might be asked (as it has been many times) how could it be possible that David would be considered a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14) after such a nefarious sin/crime? Some things to consider, none of which excuse the sin:

David lived in an environment where kings did as they pleased. They took who they want. They killed whoever they desired. Human history is barbaric. David was in this sense a product of his time. Even still, David's entire life was generally marked by faithfulness.

...because David did *what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and had not turned aside from anything that He commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite (1 Kings 15:5)*.

Of course, **"the matter of Uriah the Hittite"** was monstrous! But let us not think for a moment that David walked away unscathed. Sin is a destroyer. Truly, we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. Truly, as far as the east from the west, God has **"removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12)**. When it comes to being justified before a holy God, because of the blood of Christ, we

are seen as righteous (Romans 5:1). But none of this should suppose that there are no consequences for sin *in this life*.¹¹

David's life would be full of affliction. Not only did notable victories come to an end in the second half of 2 Samuel, but David's own home would be corrupt beyond measure. The sword would never depart from his house (2 Samuel 12:10). His own children would abuse and murder each other. His beloved son Absalom would rise up against him and eventually be killed. Incest, fratricide, rebellion, civil war, revolt and more are all **"traceable to David's sin."**¹²

In reading this, a thought comes to my mind (and I could give an account of many) of a person who had committed a painfully devastating sin. Maybe twenty years have come and gone, yet the collateral damage of this sin still dwells. But within weeks of a **"you are the man"** moment (2 Samuel 12:7-where Nathan informs David that he has been found out), this person's dismissive attitude of their destruction surfaced with the words "but there's grace, right?" So unlike David's words, **"I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13)!**

One last word on David before we conclude with where Christ is found in 2 Samuel. We can trust that David was a man after God's own heart when we read Psalm 51. This is an account of that which took place in David's heart **"When Nathan the Prophet Went to Him, After He Had Gone in to Bathsheba" (Psalm 51 heading).**

¹¹WCF, 19:6. 'Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.'

¹² Baxter, J Sidlow, Explore the Book, p 81.

One is hard-pressed to find a more penitential passage in all of Scripture, nor one which more beautifully expresses what it means to be forgiven of God. It's been said:

David's fall should put upon their guard all who have not fallen, and save from despair all those who have fallen.¹³

Jesus in 2 Samuel

It might be sufficient to end here, for Christ is beautifully and powerfully center-screen in the referenced Psalm. But we must briefly touch upon the house that God had promised in chapter seven to construct. For there is the Davidic Covenant, the promise that God will establish an everlasting kingdom—a throne upon which Son of David, the Son of God will ever reign.

The kingly office of Christ is anticipated with the words:

When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son (2 Samuel 7:12-14a).¹⁴

The redeeming power, strength and salvation found in David was not that he would build a house for God, but that God had promised to build a house for him (2 Samuel 7:11). And to the extent that the church continues to preach Christ and Him crucified, that house continues to advance.

¹³ Baxter, J Sidlow, Explore the Book, p 80.

¹⁴ There is an immediate fulfillment through Solomon, but the ultimate fulfillment is through Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss the need for and dangers of leisure.
2. Why would David kill the person who killed Saul?
3. What do we learn of David in his interactions with Mephibosheth?
4. Note the variables surrounding David's fall into sin.
5. How can David still be considered a man after God's own heart?
6. Where is Jesus found in 2 Samuel?

Part XI - 1 Kings

John 5:39; Matthew 11:4-6

March 31, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: *The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me (Matthew 11:4-6).*

Introduction

As a young student I would read and not understand because I didn't have a clear picture of what I was reading about. Reading history was confusing until I began to grasp where the events took place, what led to them and what is happening today as a result. Biology and anatomy were confusing until I asked: where these organs I was studying are in our bodies and what is their function? How do they interact with the rest of my body and why is this important? I needed to understand the big picture in order for the smaller things I was studying to come into focus.

When it comes to the Bible, the big picture question is put forth in the third question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. 3. *What do the Scriptures principally teach?*

A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Jesus dials it in even more specifically, in terms of the big picture, when He indicates that the Bible is essentially about Him (John 5:39). This has been our quest in our Route Sixty-Six series. Where is Jesus, at least in the Old Testament, prior to the virgin birth?

In the first five books of the Bible (the Torah, Law or Pentateuch) we read of the duty of man and his failure in fulfilling that duty, commonly called *the fall*. But we immediately see Christ in God's promises and covenants. In *Genesis* we read that the seed of the woman (Christ) will destroy the enemy of God's people. We see that this will be through Abraham.

In *Exodus* we see Christ in the Passover Lamb, and in *Leviticus* in the Day of Atonement and the scapegoat. In *Numbers* we learn of the power of Christ in salvation through the bronze serpent that the afflicted people need merely look to for deliverance. In *Deuteronomy* we learn of Christ with the word being near us, in our mouth and in our hearts.

As we move from the Torah to the history of Israel, Jesus is seen in *Joshua* in that Joshua (the Hebrew name for Jesus) is the one who delivers into the Promised Land. We discussed how the altar of Gideon provided a foreshadow of Christ in *Judges*, and in *Ruth* we learned of Christ, the kinsman redeemer. In *1 Samuel* we saw Christ in David's defeat of Goliath and in *2 Samuel* we learned of Christ in the Davidic Covenant, that there were always be a King on David's throne.

What we also see in all these books in the recurring theme of human failure. The duty that God requires of man is a duty man has never and can never meet adequately for salvation. The duty, which might in a general sense be called *the law*, is addressed in question 14 of the Shorter Catechism:

Q.14. *What is sin?*

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

Conversely, the gospel is what God does for us. It is a saving grace distinct from but not separated from the law (those who have saving faith will seek to walk in obedience but are not saved by that obedience). And the instrument by which that saving grace is applied is faith and faith alone. Let us pray that God would grant us to know our duty and our hope as we briefly examine 1 Kings.

Survey of 1 Kings

First Kings begins with the end of David's life and reign. David's fourth son Adonijah seizes the opportunity and postures himself to be the heir to the throne. The desire for power and notoriety can be one's undoing. In the New Testament, Simon the magician wanted power which was met by a harsh rebuke from Peter (Acts 8:18-20). The disciples wanted to know who would be **"greatest in the kingdom of heaven"** and Jesus placed a small child in their midst (Matthew 18:1-4).

My young son and I were talking recently about the power of leadership in the context of coaching. I sought to explain that I generally don't view being a coach, a father or an elder as a position of power but as a call to serve and take responsibility. The supreme example of course is Jesus Himself, as head of the church and possessing all power and authority, but one who came to serve (Matthew 20:28). Adonijah's plans are quickly upset by the prophet Nathan and Bathsheba who bring David into the loop, and David proclaims Solomon king.

A dying David exhorts Solomon to **"be a man"** and gives him advice on how to run the kingdom. The advice may seem harsh since it includes punitive and severe warnings and indictments against people who had served with David, but David recognized that certain people were an inherent threat, not only to Solomon but to the well-being of the entire nation. Solomon was very young and needed to beware.

One of the very notable, early actions of Solomon (in light of his youth and inexperience in leading-saying **"I am but a child" 1 Kings 3:7**) was his request for wisdom. This is an attribute we should all seek.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

And even though we may not receive the supernatural gift of wisdom experienced by Solomon, the deeper we know, love, meditate and embrace Jesus, the richer our wisdom will be, for **"all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ**

(Colossians 2:3). God was very pleased with Solomon's request (and that Solomon did not use the opportunity to ask for long life or riches) and granted that Solomon would be the wiser than all before and after him (1 Kings 3:12). It is here that we read of Solomon's wise judgment over the two women both claiming the same baby.

Oh, that our leaders would have, or even seek, the wisdom of Solomon! Solomon would later write:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10).

The necessary implication of a verse like this is that true wisdom and understanding cannot even begin until one is captured by the love, grace and mercy of God.

Solomon will now accomplish that which his father David desired but could not do: build the temple. The temple is described in great detail and is one of the most astonishing architectural endeavors in history. Not so much that it was it big. It was not. But the gold, the detail, the art was beyond compare.

In chapter eight, the ark of the covenant is brought to the temple and Solomon utters a beautiful speech. Ancient man is so often characterized as naïve in his thinking that God was found in statues or natural elements like the sun. And there are many today who fail to recognize the finite and error-laden views of their gods (which they will seldom call god but treat as a god).

But Solomon, with great wisdom, articulates how heaven cannot contain God, much less can a temple contain Him. He appeals to God that He might hear in heaven and forgive sinners when we come to know the plague of our own hearts: a way we begin every gathering for worship. He views the temple as instrumental in reaching beyond Israel and to foreigners. We once again see, in seminal form, the universal nature of redemption. It is Solomon's desire that...

...all the peoples of the earth may know the Lord is God; there is no other (1 Kings 8:60).

In the first half of 1 Kings we are struck, not only with the wisdom of Solomon, but his riches as well. But in chapter nine, God calls Solomon to remain faithful lest Israel become a byword (an object of ridicule). Directly after this warning we read of Solomon entertaining the Queen of Sheba. She is enthralled by the wisdom of Solomon. She enjoyed asking him hard questions, which he answered with excellence. She also noticed how well things were run in his house and how happy the servants who served in his presence were.

But similar to 2 Samuel, it is halfway through 1 Kings that we begin to see the downturn, or what has been called *Discontinuance Through Disobedience*. The kingdom would be forever divided into two kingdoms. We read of an almost always corrupt northern kingdom called Israel and an occasionally obedient southern kingdom called Judah. They would remain divided until the north went into captivity to the Assyrians and the south (150 years later) to the Babylonians (commonly called *the exile*). *Why or how did this happen?* What a lesson for the church! When we lose our zeal and love for Christ, we, similar to Israel, will find ourselves in turmoil. The Lord will remove our **“lampstand” (Revelation 2:5)**. And many churches are no longer churches at all. *What was the beginning of this downturn?*

Chapter eleven records that Solomon’s heart turned from the Lord to foreign women and their gods. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines (a live-in woman with less rights or privileges than a wife). Solomon accommodated Ashtoreth, Milcom, Chemosh, Molech and other false gods. And this would cause God to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon’s son. Generally, the church begins to crumble due to some carnality in the leadership. It might be money, lust or our desire to receive the **“praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43)**.

We also see in chapter eleven the death of Solomon and the folly of his son and heir to the throne, Rehoboam. Rehoboam rejects the counsel of the elders to be a servant leader and heeds the advice of the young men who tell him to be tougher than his dad. How unlike Christ the King!

This leads to the divided kingdom (commonly called The Disruption). At this point Jeroboam begins to reign in the northern kingdom and devises a worship system according to his own heart. This is in stark contradiction to the wisdom of God which instructs us

in worship, **“not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes” (Numbers 15:39).**

We live in an era where the church pays little attention to the biblical admonition that God is the one who regulates or determines what is to be done in worship. Following our own hearts can be a modern-day evangelical mantra when it comes to worship. I haven't the direct quote, but Calvin was known to have said that he doesn't trust any worship that his flesh enjoys too much. It is possible that there is an overstatement there, but the point should be taken to heart. It would be a fine objective that our flesh be so sanctified that it truly enjoys a Christ ordained and regulated worship.

The remainder of 1 Kings chronicles the various good and evil kings of the two kingdoms (almost all of the northern kingdom kings being evil). Baal worship becomes very common, and we read of Ahab and his horribly evil wife Jezebel.

Then enters one of the most notable figures, Elijah. Here we read of the challenge between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Similar to Christ's call to be either hot or cold (Revelation 3:15, 16),¹⁵ Elijah calls out the fence-sitting.

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people answered him not a word (1 Kings 18:21).

Elijah was a bringer of genuine inconvenient truth which continually disturbed Ahab who called Elijah a **“troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17)**. The truth can be troubling to those who peddle falsehoods. Elijah has been called the Old Testament's Martin Luther, who was willing to challenge the whole priesthood and the state of religion in the entire realm. The New Testament speaks more of Elijah than any other Old Testament prophet. He appears with Christ and Moses in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8), and was a

¹⁵ Interesting to note, many commentators reject the notion that “hot or cold” in Revelation 3 is referring to fervent for the faith or spiritually cold since He would never desire a coldness in faith. Yet Elijah appears to be doing that very thing here. Someone who is cold can be called to repentance. It is the lukewarm fence-sitter whose soul is in jeopardy due to their false assurance.

fearless prophet of words and deeds. Yet we see him lovingly caring for the widow and supernaturally restoring life to her dying son.

First Kings ends on a very sour note. The son of Ahab becomes king and does evil in the sight of the Lord. He served Baal and provoked the Lord. But the word of God has not failed. The failure of man does not equal the failure of God. He has made a promise to save His own, to redeem the world, and that promise will most assuredly come to pass. Let us fast-forward about 960 years to Jesus teaching in the synagogue where He compares Himself to these two premiere personalities in 1 Kings: Elijah and Elisha, the one to whom the mantle (investiture of prophetic office) of Elijah was given.

Jesus in 1 Kings

It may be true that Elijah was a type of John the Baptist, but this is for another time. As Jesus sits in the synagogue in Nazareth, where He grew up, and reads from Isaiah, He proclaims Himself the fulfillment of God's promise of a Deliverer, the Messiah. Their familiarity with Jesus caused them to question this, **“Is not this Joseph's son” (Luke 4:22)?**

It is here that He compares Himself to Elijah and to Elisha. There are two points Jesus makes in these comparisons. One is that “no prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4:24). When there was a three-and-a-half-year drought and famine throughout the land, Elijah was sent to a widow, a woman who belonged to a foreign nation, Sidon (1 Kings 17:9). Similarly, Elisha healed no lepers among his countrymen, but he healed Naaman, a Syrian (2 Kings 5:10).

What Elijah contended with, what Jesus even more so contended with, and what we, as Christian must be read to contend with, is a culture (even a religious culture) who has no room for the true Christ.

What is also worthy of note in Jesus' discourse as He compares Himself with Elijah and Elisha is that He does not speak of the miracles of fire from heaven (1 Kings 18) or the bears who attacked the mockers (2 Kings 2:23-25); though there are certainly lessons by our Savior addressing what it means to ever mock and reject the truth. No, Jesus appeals to acts of mercy; the feeding and caring for a widow and her young son, the healing of a leper.

How beautiful the picture of Christ, who came to love, to heal, to embrace and to redeem those who, by the grace of God, have come to grasp their desperate need for help; who along with David say:

**To you, O Lord, I left up my soul. O my God,
in you I trust (Psalm 25:1, 2a).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is it important to grasp the big picture in our studies? What is the Bible principally about?
2. Briefly review how we see Christ in the first ten books of the bible.
3. What is sin? Answer by heart.
4. What is the danger of desiring power? How should legitimate power be used?
5. For what did Solomon ask? Where do we find this?
6. Discuss some of the points of Solomon's speech.
7. What was the beginning of the downfall for Solomon and his kingdom? What lesson can the church learn from this?
8. Following our hearts is often used to devise worship and make other decisions in the church. Is this a good idea? Explain.
9. In what ways do we see Jesus in 1 Kings?

Part XII - 2 Kings

John 5:39; Galatians 2:20

April 7, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

Introduction

I've always enjoyed documentaries of historical events and period piece non-fiction cinema. At the same time, I find the poetic license taken by many productions borders on the promotion of falsehood. Having watched a documentary or historical account of an event, I am occasionally motivated to do a little research of my own to see how accurate it was.

In a recent *Noah* movie, the director apparently thought it would be a good idea to introduce giant rock creatures (think *Never Ending Story*) who would help cut down the trees for the ark. In case you were unaware, that is not in the Bible. More subtle errors I have noticed, even as a youngster, had to do with fashion. TV westerns that were popular when I was a child (*Bonanza* or *Gunsmoke*) would certainly don their actors with boots and a cowboy hat. But their hairstyles were often more suited to *That 70s Show* than the old west.

But one of the most difficult things to capture from generation to generation might be called socio-psychological-anthropology. Or, to put it simply, *what were people actually like?* It is a mistake to assume that all people from all generations from all lands are similar to the neighbors who live on my cul-de-sac in evangelized American suburbia.

And this is a critical mistake for two reasons: first, it tempts me to believe and promote an inaccurate understanding of history. We should not read history anachronistically (from the wrong time). Today we might reckon it a horrible thing to hang someone for

merely stealing a horse. But in a certain historical context, to steal someone's horse was to impose a death penalty on them. They needed the horse in order to live.

Second, if I think all people in all lands in all of history are the same, I become unaware of what I am capable of if left to my own human, carnal, sinful inclinations. Sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists are still scratching their heads as to how otherwise ordinary people in the 1930s and 40s were convinced that it was acceptable to exterminate innocent men, women and children. We all are firmly convinced we would never do such a thing. But the vast majority of people who pulled the triggers or turned the levers had been teachers, accountants and mailmen.

I open with this because 2 Kings is one of the most tragic books in the Bible. In a relatively short period of time (as far as history is concerned) we have transitioned from deliverance from slavery in Egypt to the magnificent reign of David as king to the division of the kingdom due to Solomon and his son Rehoboam to the captivity of both those kingdoms (generally called the *Dispersion* and *Exile*).

It would do us well to be reminded that the Israelites were God's covenant people and His sole redemptive contact with humanity. Think of a nation or a world with just one church. But what we learn in 2 Kings is how that one church (now divided into two churches) became as corrupt as the world by which it was surrounded. It is not without cause that Jude found it **“necessary to write”** that those who have been **“called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ...**

...contend (*epagonizesthai*-to agonize) earnestly for the faith” (Jude 1, 3).

We are not to coast, ever. The advancement of the kingdom, either in our hearts individually or as a church or its affects in the world, can be compared to a shark. The shark moves forward or it dies. Israel and Judah died.

A Survey of 2 Kings

Briefly surveying 2 Kings, we see at the onset how the king (Ahaziah, the son of Ahab) of the always ungodly northern kingdom, having injured himself, seeks help from Baal-Zebub (lord of flies/dung/demons, take your pick. Cf Matthew 12:24, 27). Elijah intercepts the messengers and calls out the king on his ungodliness. The unhappy, evil king thrice sends fifty men to Elijah. The first two groups were consumed by fire. The third group was a bit more respectful. It is worth noting that when James and John came up against resistance on the journey to Jerusalem they thought it might be a good idea to bring fire down **“just as Elijah did” (Luke 9:54)**. But the immediate and primary mission of Jesus is summed up in His very ministerial response,

**For the Son of Man did not come to destroy
men’s lives but to save them (Luke 9:56).**

Beware of people who seek to don themselves with the mantle of Elijah!

Time does not allow us to address the number of miracles recorded in 2 Kings. Elijah and Elisha both split the Jordan. Elijah becomes one of only two people (Enoch being the other) taken up to heaven without dying. Elijah and Elisha are not merely partners in ministry, they are clearly devoted in loving fellowship. The prophetic ministry of Elijah is given to Elisha.

The first ten chapters of 2 Kings are largely devoted to the northern kingdom. One of the recurring themes of this kingdom and their kings is how they **“persisted in the sins of Jeroboam...who made Israel sin”**. Jeroboam was the first king of the northern kingdom. And this indictment is said of fifteen of the eighteen kings who followed him.

Many were the sins of Jeroboam, but we would do well (especially in light of our current Christian culture) to recall that one of his great sins was devising a worship service **“in his own heart” (1 Kings 12:33; Numbers 15:39)**. We should all consider what shadows we are in and what shadows we are casting. The dark shadow of Jeroboam extended for hundreds of years.

In these first ten chapters everything bright and life-giving revolves around Elisha. One great and encouraging moment comes in chapter six when Elisha's servant wakes up early to find that he and Elisha are surrounded by a massive Syrian army. **“Alas, my master! What shall we do” (2 Kings 6:15)?** cries the servant. Elisha answered with the counter-intuitive words, **“Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16).** Then Elisha prayed. But he didn't pray that things change. He prayed that his servant might have the eyes to see what it would almost appear that Elisha always saw (or at least was aware of, based upon his courage and very settled heart):

Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:17).

Oh, that we might all have the eyes to see!

It is difficult for the twenty-first century western Christian to get his/her arms around just how evil, how monstrous, people can become. Stories become almost unreadable. Ahab's seventy sons are killed. Ahaziah's forty-two brothers are killed. After king Ahaziah dies his mother, Athaliah, kills all the potential heirs, which likely included some of her own relatives. Zedekiah's sons are all killed before his eyes and then his eyes are put out.

We read of numerous accounts of divination, witchcraft, soothsaying and human sacrifice. In the midst of this is the very odd statement,

They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away (2 Kings 17:33).

These words should not be viewed as an endorsement of some sort of syncretism (an amalgamation of various religions). This marked the beginning of the end. The camel's nose was in the tent and soon it would be torn asunder.

Again, let us beware of the shadow in which we stand. Is our own shadow making it even darker? If there is to be one non-compromising person, it is to be the Christian. If there is to be one non-compromising institution, it is to be Christ's church. And there is only one way the shadow is lifted:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).

Conspicuously absent from the covenant people who were to find themselves **“removed”** from the **“sight”** of God (2 Kings 17:18) was word and sacrament. There had been no **“Passover...since the days of the judges”** (2 Kings 23:22), which means it had not been celebrated for been hundreds of years, and the **“Book of the Covenant”** (2 Kings 23:2) was more or less inadvertently **“found”** by the high priest (2 Kings 22:8). One might have a ‘chicken or the egg’ discussion regarding this: Was Israel's neglect of word and sacrament the cause of their apostasy or the consequence? Not to over-simplify, but since word and sacrament is safely and biblically said to be the means by which God saves and sanctifies, we must view such a neglect as the heart of the problem.

Although there were a few shining lights toward the end of Judah, King Josiah and Hezekiah, in their efforts to reinstate the Passover, the reading of the word of God and the tearing down of the **“high places”** (places for pagan worship), the hearts of the people had waxed cold and they would be cast off (2 Kings 23:27).

Heaven forbid God give us what we want, as an individual, a church, a nation or a world! It is a great judgment which follows the person or people who deny the knowledge of God which He plants in our very minds and shows us by His very creation. It is a judgment of letting us do what we want (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

Our statesmen of today could do nothing more profitable than to study the principles of God's disposings among the earth's peoples as revealed in the Scriptures, and as exemplified in the nation Israel.¹⁶

¹⁶ Baxter. P. 155.

In the place of “statesmen” one can easily place, person, church, all the earth.

Jesus in 2 Kings

So, *where do the Scriptures testify of Jesus in 2 Kings* (John 5:39)? One almost feels remiss in duty to so briefly pursue such a grand subject. And a sermon or an entire book could be written on how if Elijah is a type of John the Baptist, in what respect in Elisha a type of Christ? Could it be in Elisha’s willingness to be a servant? As Christ washed the disciple’s feet (John 13), Elisha was a servant to Elijah, washing his hands (2 Kings 3:11).

We could observe Elisha’s gentle and warm intimacy toward Elijah and his own family (1 Kings 19:20). Or we can point to Elisha’s strong desire to serve in the power of the Spirit, requesting a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. We also see the multiplying of barley loaves similar to Christ feeding the 5000. We see the healing of a foreigner similar to the centurion’s servant. We read of Elisha weeping over the evils of Israel as did Jesus, and the numerous life-giving illustrations of Elisha making deadly water the source of sustenance and deadly stew harmless and nourishing. We also see him raising the son of a Shunammite woman, and much more.

But what struck me most was what was accomplished after the death of Elisha. Having been placed in his tomb, it happened that another man had died who they were seeking to bury. But they were interrupted by a **“band of raiders”** so, in apparent haste, they placed the man in the tomb with Elisha and his dead body, having touched **“the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet”** (2 Kings 13:21).

The similarities here are numerous yet the difference eternally significant. It is similar in that neither the dead man nor those burying him were contributors to the man’s revival. We may find God, but it is not because we have been looking. **“I was found by those who did not seek Me”** (Romans 10:20) is beautifully and powerfully portrayed by this incident at the tomb.

It is similar in that a setting of mourning becomes a habitation of life and joy. Meditate upon the joy of Martha at the loss of her brother, Lazarus. How marvelous the words of Jesus:

And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this (John 11:26)?

Oh, how the mood must have shifted at the raising of Lazarus! It is similar in that one must be dead in order to truly live. The man being buried was not partially alive. We are posed with a similar call.

And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:38, 39).

Taking up the cross does not (at least in a primary sense) mean having a difficult day. If someone was carrying a cross in the first century, they were walking toward their death.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

The dead man was not revived until he “**touched the bones of Elisha**” (2 Kings 13:21). Similarly, we are not regenerated until and unless we eat of His “**flesh**” and “**drink His blood**” (John 6:53). This is no mere external call by Christ. We are to eat and drink in faith. The instrument by which we are revived and stand on our feet is faith: *faith in Christ*. The final similarity (and I don’t doubt more can be found) is how victory is found in Elisha’s death. In Elisha’s death, life is given to another.

But there is one great dissimilarity, which is that the man who touched the bones of Elisha would later die again. He was rescued only temporarily from the death. He would die again, and then face the second death: the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). Unique to the redeeming victory of Christ is deliverance from that death: the eternal and severe death. To be touched by Christ, to know God, “**or rather**” to be “**known by God**” through faith in Christ (Galatians 4:9), means life, life everlasting. It is something which begins the moment we first believe.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life (John 6:47).

The bones of Elisha cannot atone for our sins. The death and victory of Christ most assuredly does!

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What does it mean to read the Bible anachronistically? What errors can we fall into when we do this?
2. Jude writes that we must “contend” for the faith. What does that look like?
3. Second Kings opens with a story about the king seeking counsel from Baal-Zebub. What does that tell us right up front about where Israel was as a nation?
4. Elijah brought fire from heaven, but Jesus told His follows not to. Why?
5. What were the “sins of Jeroboam” and how long did they persist? How you ever noticed how you’ve been influenced by those who have gone before you? What are some good or bad examples?
6. How are you challenged or comforted by the story of Elisha and the chariots of fire?
7. Were the people we read about in 2 Kings the same as our current neighbors? If yes, how; if no, then how not?
8. What is the only way to lift the shadow of our own darkness?
9. Two things had disappeared during the period of 2 Kings. What were they and why did it matter?
10. List the similarities between the bones of Elisha and Jesus. What is the biggest dissimilarity?

Part XIII - 1 Chronicles

John 5:39; Matthew 12:6

April 14, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6).

Introduction

Once while I was watching a baseball game, the couple next to me learned I was a pastor. Excitedly, they asked if I thought the temple was going to be rebuilt soon. I answered with reciprocating enthusiasm that I thought it had already been rebuilt with a brief reference to the Gospel of John.

Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).

The wind came out of their sails a bit. “Well,” they responded, “yeah, that temple has been rebuilt, but what about the one in Jerusalem?” At that point, we had a friendly conversation that went deeper than I have time to pursue right now. My only current point is that our Christian culture has been captured with the notion that the rebuilding of a stone structure is a matter of greater excitement than that (or the One) to whom the structure was always meant to point.

I open with this because in 1 Chronicles the temple is given a place of prominence. And in light of the words of Christ, that the Old Testament testifies of Him, there may be nothing in the Old Testament which gives a fuller and more robust foreshadowing of Christ than the temple. We will finish with a brief examination of

how the temple is a type of Christ in so many ways, but for now a quick survey of 1 Chronicles.

Survey of 1 Chronicles

Reading 1 Chronicles, two things strike you immediately. First, there are nine chapters of genealogies. Second, it seems that everything you read you have read before, since 1 & 2 Chronicles covers the same ground as 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. So, *why the genealogies and why cover the same historical landscape?*

If you recall, 2 Kings ended with the city sacked, the temple destroyed, the entire country demolished, and the people deported into exile. It would be a matter of decades (70 years) before the Israelites would be allowed reentrance into their land and have their kingdom restored.

In light of this, the genealogies become critical. Some theologians have argued that “no part of the Chronicles is more important” than the genealogies. How could that be? Because God’s covenant people needed to be reminded that they were the possessors of His divine promises. To them were committed...

...the oracles of God...the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” (Romans 3:2; 9:4).

Families had been displaced, connections and responsibilities had been shattered. Redemption is not random. How sad and desperate would the human condition be if God had left us to search the entire cosmos in hopes of refurbishing our souls and overcoming the looming and inevitable outcome of our existence, which is death. It would be like a father hiding a single meal in North America and bidding his hungry children find it prior to starving.

No, God had made a promise, and the Chronicler (perhaps Ezra) records its specificity. From Adam through Seth, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Judah to David. The New Testament writers track this directly to Christ (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). It was critical for the restored kingdom to be reminded of who they were and what responsibilities they had if they were to faithfully fulfill their role in redemptive history, the history of Israel.

In order to be faithful in this they also had to be reminded of the historical landscape. This is not vain repetition. The Chronicler is offering a perspective as he reminds them of those already covered events. As you might notice in reading it, the temple is given prominence. So, even though many of the events recorded are similar, we are reading with the notion of a rebuilt temple in mind.

The reader is reminded in chapter ten of King Saul's (and his sons') sad and inglorious end. What a grim picture that his head is placed in an ungodly temple, the temple of Dagon, because he did not keep the word of the Lord and consulted a medium.

David is made king, and we read of his mighty men and great victories. His army grows and his warriors are said to have the face of a lion and speed of gazelles. We read of his bringing the ark to Jerusalem and the worship surrounding that event. We read David's Psalm (Psalm 105) of Thanksgiving.

We are reminded that David will not build the temple; his son Solomon will. David had shed too much blood, but Solomon was a man of **"rest" (1 Chronicles 22:9)**. Something we do see in 1 Chronicles that is noticeably absent in Samuel and Kings is David's preparation for the building of the temple. This demonstrates David's concern for the spiritual well-being of those who are not in his generation.

As a parent, a pastor or a citizen, there is a danger of thinking too short term. One lamentable attribute of Israel was that **"she took no thought of her future" (Lamentations 1:9)**. We should certainly live in the present. How can we but? Yet we should learn from the past and prepare for the future.

Thinking long term enhances our future and the generations that follow us. In an article called *The Millennium Clock* in a magazine called *Scenarios* there is a remarkable reference to a building in England.

I think of the oak beams in the ceiling of College Hall at New College, Oxford. Last century, when the beams needed replacing, carpenters used oak trees that had been planted in 1386 when the dining hall was first built. The 14th century builder had planted the trees in anticipation of the time, hundreds of years in the future, when the beams

would need replacing. Did the carpenters plant new trees to replace the beams again a few hundred years from now?

Considering our legacy is a most unselfish act. It means being concerned with the spiritual and physical welfare of descendants who we may never know. This is difficult because it's so far out there. If I had just had one ancestor who thought this way, it would have affected our family forever. I can't tell you anything about my great-grandfather's religious beliefs. I don't own anything that was his. I don't even know his name. If there is a spiritual or physical heritage in my family, it is going to begin with me.

David not only provided the material for the building of the temple, he had a God-given understanding all the works of the plans (1 Chronicles 28:19). In his wisdom and kingly and fatherly counsel, he exhorted Solomon to serve with a **“loyal heart and a willing mind” (1 Chronicles 28:9)**. One is hard-pressed to think of greater counsel than this.

We also see in David's prayer something that it would have done well for Solomon (who would be one of the richest kings in history) to remember. All the abundance that he had amassed for the building of the temple, the incalculable riches, were themselves from the hand of God (1 Chronicles 29:16).

1 Chronicles records the end of David's reign as king and the anointing of Solomon. Bestowed upon Solomon would be an exaltation of **“royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel” (1 Chronicles 29:25)**.

Jesus in 1 Chronicles

How does 1 Chronicles testify of Jesus (John 5:39)? In all of our studies, there may not be a greater type—a more apt foreshadow of Christ—than the temple. Hence my grief when our minds are swept from the temple as a lesson in Jesus to a structure to be built accommodating popular eschatology.

There is one time, and one time only, when the New Testament speaks of rebuilding the temple and that is the earlier referenced passage in John 2:19 where we are told He is speaking of

His body. Jesus also compares Himself to the temple, in almost shocking terms, with the words:

Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6).

A statement like this would not make sense unless there was a legitimate comparison to be made. Much can be said about how the temple teaches us of Christ. I will only mention a few things.

In the holy place of the temple was the lampstand of pure gold (Exodus 25:31). The number of passages in the New Testament which assign light to Christ are too numerous to mention (Matthew 5:14; John 1:4, 5; 1 Peter 2:9). We have been called out of the darkness into His marvelous light. Revelation mentions the lampstands seven times and is generally referring to churches which are the body of Christ (Revelation 1:20). To the extent that a church believes, presents, and is in communion the true Light of the world (who is Christ), it will serve as a lampstand.

The temple contained an altar (Exodus 27:1-8). An altar is where sacrifices are made. When John the Baptist beheld Jesus and uttered **“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29)**, there is no mistaking that John beheld Jesus as the sacrificial lamb.

The temple contained a laver of bronze designed for ceremonial cleansing (Exodus 30:17-21). When washed by Jesus, we are not merely ceremonially clean but **“completely clean” (John 15:10)**.

The temple contained **“the showbread” (Exodus 25:30)**. This typified that which is necessary to true survival. Jesus refers to Himself as the **“the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32)**. This has reference also to the manna which was in the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. Jesus also calls Himself **“the bread of God” (John 6:33)**, **“the bread of life” (John 6:35; 48)** and **“the living bread” (John 6:51)**.

The temple also contained the **“Holy of Holies”** a type of heaven (Hebrews 9:24) where only the High Priest would enter to present the sin offering. Again, we see that which teaches us of Christ.

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Hebrews 9:24).

Between the Holy Place and Holy of Holies was a thick veil which taught of the separation between sinful men and a holy God. It was through the victory of Christ that the veiled was ripped from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51).

The Ark of the Covenant was in the Holy of Holies. It contained the law, the manna and Aaron's budding rod. We see in these things the wisdom found in Christ. The eternal sustenance of Christ and the power, authority and guidance of Christ.

There was a single entrance to the tabernacle. There was no alternative route to the Holy of Holies. When Jesus refers to Himself as **"the door"** (John 10:7) He does not use an indefinite article (not "a door" but **"the door"** *ho thura*).

We can go on and on. Suffice it to say that the temple for Israel was God in their midst. When Christ came...

...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The focus of 1 Chronicles is the temple and the focus of the temple of Jesus. What we shall soon see is that before Nehemiah is sent to rebuild the city, Ezra and Zerubbabel are sent with the remnant of the faithful to rebuild the temple. And it may be safely stated that there will be no true lasting city without a temple and apart from Christ, a temple is a meaningless structure.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose there is such a focus on a physical temple being built? What was Jesus referring to when He spoke of rebuilding the temple?
2. Why does 1 Chronicles begin with nine chapters of genealogies?
3. Many things already taught in 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 King are repeated in 1 Chronicles. Explain some possible reasons for this.
4. What role did David play in building the temple? What do we learn from this?
5. What do we learn about Jesus when we study the temple?

Part XIV - 2 Chronicles

John 5:39; 2 Chronicles 7:14

May 5, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Introduction

The recent synagogue shooting by a young professing Christian has reintroduced a question into the minds of our entire citizenry: *What in the world is going on? Where is this coming from?*

And this cannot be thought of as an older person's question. This is not the parents of the 1940s dismayed about the flat-top hairstyle of the fifties or the parents of the fifties shaking their heads about the mop-tops of the sixties. No, there is a radical transition which digs deeper than mere styles. And the shift appears to be in overdrive. We might compare it to flight. Throughout the course of human history, we couldn't get off the ground. But there was a mere sixty-six years between Kitty Hawk (first flight of twelve seconds) and the manned moon landing. I knew people who had both read about Kitty Hawk and watched the moon landing. They were enthralled about the world, and the generation, in which they lived.

The advancement of immorality has rapidly hit a fever-pitch. We are enthralled now in a different, negative sense. We are spellbound and the experts are without an answer. Not only are we nowhere near figuring out why we are being overcome by moral darkness, we have systematically sought to remove from the equation of human thinking any objective means by which morality/ethics can be determined. The fire is no longer at our feet, it is at the back of our necks. And we're scratching our heads wondering why it's so hot in here.

This recent shooting is particularly disquieting because we cannot relegate it to a far-away people living in a far-away land. You'll notice that when there is an international plane crash, the American news outlets will inevitably mention how many Americans were on board. They do this because there is an intimacy that hits close to home. We can no longer ask, *what is wrong with them?* We have to ask, *what is wrong with us?*

This is what was so unsettling (if I may go back) about the Manson incident. Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel and Leslie Van Houten were like the girls next door. Or more recently, the Columbine shooters (1999) Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were two boys, similar to this young man in San Diego, who looked like our own children.

We are living in a world where young and old alike have been overtaken. Sexual immorality, gender dysphoria, abortion, violence, suicide, illicit drug usage have become so prevalent that parents can't understand how their children are not shocked. Simply answered, that which becomes common is no longer shocking. But I will once again ask: *What in the world is going on? Where is this coming from?* Equally important is, *how are we to respond?*

Survey of 2 Chronicles

I opened with this introduction, not merely to force a current narrative upon an ancient text, but because 2 Chronicles reviews the indictment recorded in Samuel and Kings against Israel. But it also lays the groundwork of incitement. Knowing we did something wrong is only half the battle. Judas knew he did something wrong, but he didn't respond by doing something right.

The chronicler is not merely recording events as a sort of *I told you so*. There is a call to do right, to avoid repeating errors. The indictment contains an incitement. Second Chronicles is written to encourage and guide those who had returned from exile in Babylon. It explains the reason for their captivity so that they might learn from their past.

Second Chronicles mirrors our current religious, moral, political and cultural climate in that it records the decline of Judah. They are not yet in captivity. They are not on the rise. Things are moving in the wrong direction. The first nine chapters record the

wisdom and glory of the era of Solomon. The temple is built and furnished. The Ark is brought to the temple and the glory of the Lord **“filled the house of God” (2 Chronicles 5:14).**

Some might balk at the notion of comparing current nations to Israel and Judah. The United States, Great Britain, Canada, Spain, Italy, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco, etc. are not Old Testament Israel. But God makes kings and the statutes by which they should govern. God makes nations, and the righteousness by which the citizens should live is determined by God and His own immutable nature. It is here that I found myself in agreement with Baxter, who wrote:

The nation’s response to God is the decisive factor in its history and destiny. And this lesson, we may add, is just as true of modern Britain and America as it was of old-time Israel and Judah.¹⁷

In chapter ten we begin to see the steady decline of Judah (Israel is not much examined, since its decline was more rapid). There are some good kings and some moments of true rest in God. During the reign of Asa (a king who did good and trusted God) we see Judah attacked by an Ethiopian army that had a million men. God had proved Himself faithful and powerful.

But later, Asa lost his trust in the power of God to deliver and he made a treaty king of Syria to help protect him from an invasion by Israel. Hanani reminds Asa that God had delivered him from the huge Ethiopian army. It is here we read those wonderful yet challenging words,

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of *those* whose heart is loyal to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Asa responded by getting angry and putting Hanani in prison. The word of God is not always well-received.

Over the remaining chapters we read of a series of kings—some who did good, some who did evil. There were times when the

¹⁷ Baxter, *Explore The Book*. P. 180.

kings did right (as with Jehoshaphat), but the high places (where idolatry took place) were not removed because **“the people had not directed their hearts to the God of their fathers” (2 Chronicles 20:33)**. We also read of Amaziah, who did right but **“not with a loyal heart” (2 Chronicles 25:2)**. We read of good and very industrious kings like Uzziah who overstepped his boundaries and burned incense in the temple, resulting in the curse of leprosy until the day of his death (2 Chronicles 26:21).

As time goes on, we read of a degrading influence of both throne and temple. Children burned in the fire of false gods. The kings became purely pragmatic, following gods who outwardly and superficially seemed to pay off. We read of Ahaz:

...he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, saying, “Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.” But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel (2 Chronicles 28:23).

God is not to be thought of as a tool for my personal expediency.

Second Chronicles ends with Judah being carried off into captivity in Babylon. The temple is burned, God’s word is despised, His messengers mocked and His prophets scoffed at. This all culminates with the very sad words,

...till there was no remedy (2 Chronicles 36:16).

Seventy years would come and go before God would put it in the heart of Cyrus, the king of Persia, to rebuild the house at Jerusalem. This is the sad ending of 2 Chronicles. Is this merely a history lesson or is there something of vital importance to learn?

Where is Christ in 2 Chronicles?

Where is Christ in 2 Chronicles and how are our initial questions (What in the world is going on? Where is this coming from? How are we to respond?) to be answered?

Similar to 1 Chronicles, Jesus is found in the Temple. Last time, we discussed in some detail how the temple foreshadowed Christ and how apart from Christ the temple is a meaningless structure worthy of demolition (something which God ordained more than once). But in 2 Chronicles we see an interaction between the throne, the temple and the prophet. If I can simplify this, the throne is the king, the temple is the priest and the prophet is the one providing the communication.

Perhaps I can simplify it even further (keeping in mind there is much more to it than this) that the throne is the state, the temple is the church and the prophet is the word of God. The word is necessary in order for there to be a true church (temple) and the church is necessary for there to be a safe and solid state/government/culture.

There is a religious, anthropological methodology wafting through the church which suggests that humans are so endowed with the image of God that they are capable, apart from the word of God and the church of Christ, of ruling each other equitably, informed merely by their nature and nature itself.¹⁸ I respectfully disagree. This seems to demonstrate a lack of grasp of human nature, human history and what the Scriptures state about the direction we will take if left without the word of God. You have heard the proverb, “**Where there is no vision, the people perish.**” But the better translation is,

**Where there is no prophetic vision the people
cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the
law (Proverbs 29:18).**

Where is Christ in 2 Chronicles? He is the Prophet, Priest and King. The throne needed the temple, the temple and the throne needed the prophet, and their faithlessness left them with no throne, no temple and an imprisoned prophet. Today’s world, nations, states and culture need a faithful church. A faithful church needs a faithful word. It is our lack of willingness to bow before a King who loves and protects us, a Priest who provides His own blood to redeem us and a Prophet who grants us the wisdom to know these things that has resulted in our current insanity and captivity to sin (and perhaps, one day, captivity to another nation).

¹⁸ *Nature itself*, meaning the creation.

The Apostle Paul was not unclear when He indicated that if left to our own natures in our rejection of God, God will turn us over to sexual confusions (Romans 1:26, 27) and a debased, dark and immoral mind. Paul was not unclear that apart from the grace of God in the gospel of Christ, even though we know what we do is worthy of death, we not only will do these **“but also approve of those who practice them” (Romans 1:32).**

Why are these horrifying things taking place? Because this is where our natures lead us. How are we to respond? At a personal level, we need to respond by being intolerant yet patient, uncompromising yet forbearing. There is a temptation to lash out at a generation that has been the victims of our faithlessness.

It requires little wisdom, nor is it particularly helpful, to tell young people that murder, and suicide, is wrong or that their passions and proclivities are sinful. All that may be true and must be said. But we've reached a point where overcoming our natural inclination for evil is a high and difficult call. Homosexuality may very well be sinful, but for a person overtaken with the passions of it to restrain themselves can be as difficult for a heterosexual man or woman to be called to overcome their heterosexuality. None of this is to call good evil or evil good. It is merely to recognize the difficulty of the battle.

At a national level, the remedy is given in 2 Chronicles itself. It should seem obvious, yet I have heard more than one Bible teacher indicate that the following passage should not be applied to America or any modern nation. I respectfully and vehemently disagree.

The verse is not complicated:

...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you noticed a decline in moral behavior in the cultures you have observed? How do you determine morality and how do you explain the decline?
2. Is knowledge of having done wrong *necessary* for correction? Is it *sufficient* for correction?
3. How is 2 Chronicles similar to the western world today?
4. Should the counsel given to Israel and Judah be utilized by nations today? Why or why not?
5. Give a brief survey of the people, kings and general spiritual and moral ups and downs recorded in 2 Chronicles.
6. Discuss the relation between the temple, the throne and the prophet in 2 Chronicles. How does that inform how we can and should respond to Christ all through history?
7. How do we combine intolerance with patience, and uncompromisingness with forbearance?
8. Does 2 Chronicles 7:14 apply to nations throughout history? Explain your answer.

Part XV - Ezra

John 5:39; Ezra 1:3

August 11, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Who *is* among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which *is* in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He *is* God), which *is* in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:3).

Introduction

Having completed a twelve-week sabbatical, I was quite encouraged that the church moved seamlessly forward in my absence. There is something to be said for the expendability of the pastor. Not the expendability of *a* pastor, but of a specific pastor.

When I hear that churches are decimated with the death, absence or moral failure of their pastor, I must conclude that they were, at some level, building their ministries upon the weak and shifting sands of personality, secondary considerations (e.g. how to be a better husband, wife, worker or overcoming addictions and depressions—as important as these things are) or something other than the person and work of Christ.

At the risk of overly extolling our elders and deacons, I was/am delighted with their faithfulness, tenderness, ministerial dispositions and theological acumen. I am also very grateful to our congregation for your faithful attendance and willingness to grant me some respite. Sadly, we live in a culture where such things are becoming rare. It is woven into our natures to rally behind a person or project (I am speaking of a person other than Jesus and a project other than the Gospel), and that can easily be the undoing of our souls.

The most recent, high-profile, example of this is found in a young man named Josh Harris. As a twenty-one-year-old he wrote a book entitled *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* which sold millions. He and his parents were home-school notables at a time when home-

schooling was becoming a national phenomenon. He then became the pastor of a large church, without having gone to seminary (not that seminary is always the answer, but it does often put potential ministers under a healthy level of scrutiny).

In time, he decided he needed a seminary education, but within a couple of years he left his wife and three children and has since renounced his faith. It is understandable that such a move by a well-known person would be a source of difficulty for those to whom he ministered. Yet, God ordains such events as these (among other things) in order that our eyes might be retrained to be fixed upon Christ and Christ alone as the author and finisher of our faith and the anchor of our souls (Hebrews 12:2; 6:19).

I was once told of a type of plant where branches, as they grew away from the vine, would begin to plant themselves in the soil. It would appear that they now had two sources of nourishment; the vine and the soil to which they had independently attached themselves. But such wasn't the case. Their independent attachment to the soil disrupted the nutrition from the vine. The farmer would find it necessary to periodically pull the branches up. They had to be uprooted from their natural inclination to attach to, and seek to be fed by, that which was not the true vine, the source of their genuine health.

I mention this as we approach Ezra because the context of Ezra addresses the covenant people of God (those who are members of God's visible church in the Old Covenant/Testament) at a time when they had taken their eyes off of Christ (they had neglected the Passover, were following false gods and their false teachings, and had engaged in gross immorality). They had been warned numerous times to be cautious of the falsehoods, idolatry and immorality by which they were surrounded and not plant their roots in a soil that would siphon their godliness and faithfulness.

The consequences of this rebellion was exile, captivity to foreign nations, in this case for a seventy-year period. In Ezra we read of the road back. On this side of eternity, there is always a road back. This is true for the religious leaders who have lost their way and those under their misguided shepherding.

A message contained in Ezra can be summed up in a powerful phrase found in Lamentations:

For the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies (Lamentations 3:31, 32).

Ezra records the end of the seventy years of servitude to Babylon and Persia. The exile was over and we're reading of the road back. As long as there is breath in our lungs, there is a road back. But what do we make of this disobedience, exile and restoration? This is the history of Israel. How does it speak to us and where is Christ to be found in Ezra (remembering that the theme of this series is how all of Scripture testifies of Christ)?

We will finish with that, but first, a brief survey of Ezra.

A Survey of Ezra

Ezra begins with the very odd account of God stirring up the spirit of the most powerful king on earth at the time. Cyrus, the king of Persia was moved by God to order the rebuilding of the temple which had been destroyed. Remember, the temple is a type/foreshadow of Christ, so this can be thought of as an evangelistic move by a pagan king (although some of the language used in his proclamation sounds as if he had come to faith; cf Ezra 1:3).

But the rebuilding of the temple would not be some monolithic effort. True ministry is not merely a top-down enterprise. This can be said of many things. Whether we speak of a family, a business, a team, a church or a nation: without the commitment and conviction of the individuals, the corporate effort will surely fail. God had not merely turned the rivers of the king's heart (Proverbs 21:1), He had moved the spirits of the people (Ezra 1:5). The captives who Nebuchadnezzar had carried away would now return.

I would interject here that there is a great deal of talk about how Christians are exiles, sojourners, pilgrims and strangers on the earth (Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). The well-known spiritual *This World Is Not My Home*, followed by the line, "I'm just a passing through," accentuates the fleeting and transitory nature of our time this side of glory. And there is certainly a great deal of truth to this. But there was also a very literal sense in which the saints of both the Old and New Testaments were pilgrims.

More than once I've heard chastisements come against those who would seek to transform their culture. A question such as "Why are you trying to transform Babylon?" would be an example. The easy answer is because Babylon, like every other nation, belongs to Christ. The deeper answer would be because I love the Babylonians and desire to see them blessed with the Law and Gospel of Christ.

Suffice it to say that in Ezra they are called to depart from Babylon, but many did not. It's been said:

Thus when the providential opportunity came for the repatriation, the bulk of the nation, to their shame, preferred their tolerable and perhaps even lucrative life under Persian rule, to which they had now become accommodated.¹⁹

Not only did many not leave, but many who did leave had been morally and philosophically overtaken by the culture of the Persians and Babylonians. This, among other things, is what concerns me with today's language regarding a "common kingdom" and "common notions." The Bible does not speak of the "world" as if the Christian can peacefully walk in lockstep with it. It addresses that relationship as spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 10:4). It can be concerning to hear the way the modern Christian speaks of their faith in Babylonian terms. There appears to be a lack of discernment in prevalent political, religious and moral issues where many Christians fail to see how the world has imposed upon them.

The record in Ezra notably records the restoration of worship before the temple is built. Similar to the sacraments, the temple was significant, but it was not magic. It was only valuable (again, similar to baptism and the Lord's Supper; really any religious undertaking) to the extent that it taught of the person and work of Jesus. Yet understandably, there was mixed reaction to the new temple. Those who had never seen Solomon's Temple sang and shouted for joy while the older generation wept (how things never change).

Keeping in mind that the building of the temple could be thought of as a ministerial/evangelistic effort, it should not surprise us that there would be resistance. The attempt at dousing of ministry comes in many forms. The three recorded in Ezra were: (1) The

¹⁹ Baxter, p. 194.

deception of offering to work with them. There will always be wolves seeking entrance into the church (Acts 20:29). (2) By hindering through discouraging the people. There is a temptation to think our ministerial labors are meaningless, which is why the Apostle Paul entreats us to be...

...steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).

(3) Finally, the adversaries hired counselors to frustrate and accuse the workers. In time, they succeeded in halting the building of the temple! But in chapter five, the word of God arrives. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah arrive and speak the word of God, the temple is completed, and the Passover is celebrated. The primary person God uses in all of this is Zerubbabel. In chapter seven, Ezra arrives.

Ezra was said to be a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses. Those who would seek to minister are to follow the example of Ezra who...

...had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

Those who had returned with Ezra fasted in order to seek the right way for them, for their little ones and their possessions. It was truly a time of renewal. Yet the end of Ezra (keeping in mind that in the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are one book) we read of how God's covenant people had abandoned His clear admonition to not marry the pagans, and the consequences were dire. Life can be difficult, being single can be difficult and being married can be difficult. But generally speaking, the most difficult social condition is marriage to one who sees no need in their lives for the truth of God's word and the provision of God's Son.

Christ in Ezra

Where is Christ in Ezra, in this book that was written four hundred years before the virgin birth? It might help to recognize that the earthly ministry of Jesus was almost entirely dedicated to a captive and exiled people. Politically they were under the rule of Rome and religiously under the guidance of false shepherds (Matthew 23). This was true both individually and corporately.

It can easily be argued that the parable of the Prodigal Son is a story of the Israelites who had abandoned the covenant in their pursuit of sin and how they might be received to those who remained. All this to say, a great deal of the New Testament is written to guide back to Christ those who have gone astray.

Those who truly belong to God through Christ may be cast *out*, but they are never cast *off*. The true believer...

...can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.²⁰

There is a great deal of talk about...

once saved, always saved

or

eternal security

...but the biblical and more accurate term is the

perseverance of the saints

As Jesus taught:

And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me,

²⁰ WCF, 17:1.

is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father's hand (John 10:28, 29).

I cannot tell you the state of the heart of Josh Harris, or of any other person's for that matter. I can say with certainty though that if God saves a person, God will preserve that person.

This is not to say that a true believer will never lapse into "grievous sins, incur God's displeasure, grieve the Holy Spirit, become deprived of graces and comforts, hurt others and bring temporal judgments upon themselves."²¹ Ezra records the road back because Israel, in their rebellion, did exactly those things.

But they, like any true believer, were never cast off. It was with great ministerial hearts that the pastors of the Westminster Confession of Faith conveyed what they had no doubt experienced with their congregations: God holds on to His people that they are never...

...utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this (their) assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair."²²

The Psalmist offers similar comfort with the words:

The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds *him* with His hand (Psalm 37:23, 24).

We see Jesus in Ezra in that God always provides a road back. I daresay in a certain sense that the road back is a daily theme touching numerous temptations and falterings in our lives. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was seven hundred miles. That meant five months of daily travel. The journey for the believer begins

²¹ WCF, 17:3.

²² WCF, 17:4.

when God opens our hearts and grants life to our hearts in Christ. He ever beckons us to come...not to a temple but to Himself

Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Upon what should true ministries be built? What are some considerations that might detract from the true focus of ministry?
2. What is the context of Ezra? What is happening during this time in the history of Israel? What led up to it?
3. How is the rebuilding of the temple evangelistic?
4. Is true ministry merely monolithic (a single, top-down effort)? Explain your answer and give examples.
5. In what respect are Christians pilgrims and sojourners? Name ways this can be taken too far.
6. Why was it significant that worship in the book of Ezra happened prior to the temple being rebuilt?
7. What forms of resistance did the Israelites encounter when they were seeking to rebuild the temple?
8. How did captivity affect the Israelites in a moral/spiritual sense?
9. Where is Christ in Ezra? What do we learn in Ezra in terms of our walk with God in Christ?

Part XVI - Nehemiah

The Sword and the Trowel

John 5:39; Nehemiah 4:17; 8:10

August 18, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon (Nehemiah 4:17).

Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

Introduction

At the end of World War II, there were seven border walls or fences in the world. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, there were 15. Today there are at least 77 walls or fences around the world — many erected after, and in response to, 9/11. Historically, borders walls were necessary due to threat of invasion. They also protected trade routes and helped monitor immigration and refugees. Prior to 9/11 most nations felt comfortable with a mere sign or a lift-gate. Things have changed.

This is not a speech for or against our current discussion about a wall on the southern border of the United States. It is rather an explanation of what a wall signifies, nationally, culturally, historically, psychologically and biblically. There is a great deal of talk about how people build walls in their hearts, hindering relationships. Pink Floyd’s famous song *The Wall* spoke of how the educational system was yet another brick in the wall, ostensibly contributing to the generation gap, which was a popular cultural concept at the time. Walls can be thought of both negatively and positively.

Even the “**holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God**” is said to have “**great and high**” walls and gates (Revelation 21:10, 11). This paints a picture of the exclusion of those who die apart from redemption found in Christ, who names aren’t written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Revelation 21:8; 27).

I open with this because Nehemiah teaches of the building of the walls around the city of Jerusalem. In *Ezra* we saw the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and the restoration of worship. In *Nehemiah*, we learn of the reconstruction of the walls of the city of God’s covenant people.

This should not be thought of as a mere history lesson in the fortification of an ancient city. The temple taught us of Christ and our worship of Him. But what does this wall represent? In an intimate and personal sense, it should represent our own souls. We, with resolute hearts, should be protective of what we allow into our minds and morals.

Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm (Proverbs 13:20).

In a corporate sense these walls represent a communal mission. The antagonists of the gospel serve a ruthless master. There is a guise of wholesomeness under which lies cruel and sharp fangs. And the targets are young and old, weak and strong. There is a portion of Nehemiah where he is preparing them for battle and seeking to instill courage. He informs us what is at stake:

Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses (Nehemiah 4:14).

How Nehemiah teaches of today’s Christian faith and Christian battle will not be a difficult connection to make. But first, a brief survey.

Survey of Nehemiah

Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes (445 BC). We should not think of the position of cupbearer as a menial office. To the contrary, it was quite a lofty and important post at the time. The book opens with Nehemiah being informed of the condition of the wall of Jerusalem, which is broken down and the gates destroyed by fire. Nehemiah weeps and prays upon hearing this news. His sorrow is not governed by nostalgia, as in the closing of a favorite restaurant or the tearing down of a childhood home. His people are left vulnerable and the faith under attack. Think of beloved missionaries exposed to evil and oppressing atheistic despots.

The king notices that Nehemiah is downcast. This was quite dangerous for Nehemiah. He was **“very much afraid”** (Nehemiah 2:2. See also Esther 4:2). It was apparently a capital offense to appear sad in the presence of royalty. Nonetheless, the king is gracious toward Nehemiah (which speaks fondly of their preexisting relationship) and grants that Nehemiah might rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

That the king granted this request did not mean Nehemiah would not be met with resistance. It has been said, “Whenever the saints say, ‘Let us arise and build,’ the enemy says, ‘Let us arise and oppose.’” It was in his perhaps greatest work²³ that J. Gresham Machen opined:

In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.

Nehemiah was in for a fight. And though we should not be looking for a fight (Nehemiah would have been quite content to have been left alone to reconstruct the walls), we should not back down either. In a quote that is generally attributed to Edmund Burke we are told that...

...evils triumphs when good men do nothing.

²³ *Christianity and Liberalism.*

Or, in the Apostle Paul's words:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Ephesians 5:11).

Was not our Savior's entire ministry marked by confrontation?

Nehemiah is one of the more wise and faithful Christians we read of in Scripture. The resistance he encountered was never met with fear or lethargy. He would pray and continue to work. He was a supreme example of the words of Cromwell, "Pray, and keep your powder dry." *Trust in an Almighty God is never an excuse for lethargy.* The picture we are given in chapter four inspired the title for Charles Spurgeon's periodical, *The Sword and Trowel, A Record of Combat With Sin and Labour for the Lord.* It reads:

Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon (Nehemiah 4:17).

In Spurgeon's own words:

We would ply the Trowel with untiring hand for the building up of Jerusalem's dilapidated walls, and wield the Sword with vigour and valour against the enemies of the Truth.

Again, this can be applied individually and corporately. Individually, the temple of my own soul should ever be committed to the Lordship of Christ. And as that temple is being built, I must be ready to "**make a defense**" for the hope that is in me (1 Peter 3:14, 15). Corporately, we must recognize that we are "**living stones...being built up as a spiritual house**" (1 Peter 2:5).

In these pursuits, we are to keep our sword and trowel at work. Ministerially, this is not a call to take up physical arms and build a literal structure (although there may be a context for those types of things). With the trowel we build up the body of Christ, the city of God, essentially the Great Commission. With the sword we battle falsehoods:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Nehemiah's detractors came from without and from within. In this challenging enterprise there was oppression of the poor and needy from within the covenant. There was **“a great outcry of the people against their Jewish brothers” (Nehemiah 5:1)**. The church must ever work toward an uncompromising unity. This is no easy task.

The wall is finally finished (Nehemiah 6:15) and the Old Covenant church will engage in the study of Scripture. We learn a great deal about worship in chapter eight: The unity of corporate worship as the people gathered as **“one man” (Nehemiah 8:1)**; Ezra stood upon a platform to deliver the lesson (Nehemiah 8:4); we read of a corporate **“Amen”** and the people stood at the opening of the book (Nehemiah 8:5). They bowed their heads, lifted their hands and they wept as the instructors helped the people **“understand the Law” (Nehemiah 8:8)**.

The Law of God can be so undressing. It was in response to the weeping at the reading of the Law that Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites encouraged the people that **“this day is holy to the Lord”** and they need not **“mourn or weep” (Nehemiah 8:9)**. Rather, they were to celebrate with good food and sweet wine (helping the poor to do the same) ...

...for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10b).

What is the meaning of this wonderful verse? There are certain people in our lives, by whom, when it is well with them, we are invigorated. As I sat at my computer, I noticed my wife had left an unexpected note of affection. It was quite transformative in terms of my day.

Yet how much more for the Christian to know we have found favor with our Father in heaven! That our lives are marked with this

glorious pardon and benediction: **“Your faith has saved you...peace be with you” (Luke 7:50; John 20:21).**

It is a lifelong pursuit to ensure that the joy of the Lord be our treasure, that it is center-stage with all rivals briskly shuffled into the wings. This is seldom an easy task. The trowel is ever building, and the sword of the word and truth ever sharpened and active.

Christ in Nehemiah

Where is Christ in Nehemiah? Jesus is the temple and the city belongs to Him. The extent to which all cities will be blessed by the always-expanding city of God is a matter of eschatology (end-times), which we cannot take up here. But the source of everlasting light, life, peace and strength is found in Christ alone. It was in reference to the gathering recorded in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah that we read the uplifting and strengthening words, words that can be applied when the body of Christ gathers:

Because the day is holy to the Lord, they are to desire it with holy joy. It is a joy founded on the feeling of communion with the Lord, on the consciousness that we have in the Lord a God long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth. This joy is to be to us (them), a strong citadel or refuge, because the Almighty is our (their) God.²⁴

May our hearts be strengthened as we participate in that Communion together this morning!

²⁴ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Vol. 4, p. 146). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. In what sense can walls be good or bad, necessary or unnecessary? What do walls teach us?
2. What does the wall of Jerusalem represent in the life of a Christian? What does it mean individually and corporately?
3. Why was Nehemiah sorrowful? Why was he afraid to show sorrow before the king?
4. What can Christians expect when they seek to advance the Kingdom of God? Give examples of this in your own life.
5. What are some examples of how a sword is used in a spiritual sense? How is a trowel used in a spiritual sense?
6. How did the people respond to the reading of the Law? How were they comforted?

Part XVII - Esther

If I Perish, I Perish

John 5:39; Esther 4:15, 16

August 25, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Then Esther told *them* to reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which *is* against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:15, 16)!

Introduction

During a time of great turmoil and darkness shrouding the church and the advancement of biblical Christianity, over one hundred of the best living theologians gathered together to discuss what the Scriptures taught regarding the Christian faith. It was in from 1643 until 1649 that these pastors and scholars met more than a thousand times. Many of their statements still form the substance of understanding of what it means to believe in and follow Christ.

In many respects the statements are unremarkable; that is, we take them for granted. But other statements are quite remarkable. One of those more remarkable statements is found in the twenty-fifth chapter, paragraph five. It reads:

The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.²⁵

²⁵ WCF, 25:5

The first sentence in this paragraph should yield both humility and discernment. There are no perfect churches. The ease at which people openly criticize the church is not terribly healthy. God often addresses the church very affectionately, even with its many faults (1 Corinthians 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 1 Timothy 3:15). With an eye toward shepherding and guarding the flock, the Apostle Paul accentuates his admonition by reminding the elders that the church is that body which Christ has **“purchased with His own blood”** (Acts 20:28).

At the same time, error needs to be addressed. We are called to **“test all things; hold fast what is good”** (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We need to **“weigh what is said”** (1 Corinthians 14:29). The synagogues of Satan did not become so overnight! It was a slow step-by-step slide into darkness. But it is the second sentence in this excerpt from the confession that I find extraordinary: ***“There shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.”***

The Scriptures promise that the name of God will **“be remembered in all generations.”** He shall be praised **“forever and ever”** (Psalm 45:17).

His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed. Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things! And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen (Psalm 72:17-19).

There is a great and glorious promise given to the covenant people of God, represented by Israel in the Old Covenant and the church in the New Covenant. It is a promise that God will **“bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you”** (Genesis 12:3).

Of course, the blessing of God does not always appear to be on display. There are vast seasons in history and in our lives where God seems absent. With the Psalmist we lamentably sing:

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from

me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, *having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me (Psalm 13:1, 2)?*

There are times when our souls feel like we are in a **“dry and thirsty land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1)**. As much as the natural mind will resist the love, grace and wisdom of God, the lack of such knowledge is likened to a famine:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord God, “that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

I have little doubt that many of God’s covenant children during the time of Esther felt as if God had abandoned them.

A Survey of Esther

In many ways the book of Esther mirrors our current condition. Esther is a Jew (one of God’s covenant children) living among the exiles in Persia. She is one of the many victims of her people’s rebellion, which resulted in a seventy year period of captivity. Ezra and Nehemiah recorded the remnant of the faithful who went back to Judea to build the temple, the wall and reengage in worship; Esther is among those who preferred, as it were, the ‘comforts’ of captivity.

This should not be thought of as an indictment against her individually (or against her cousin Mordecai). As an orphan female, it would have been almost impossible for her to make the journey to Jerusalem on her own. But similar to our current condition (no doubt worse than our current condition) we see believers under the power and authority of those who have no interest in the things of God.

It is of note that Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God by name. But we should not conclude that God is absent in the book of Esther. That we don’t see God does not mean that He does not see us. And it has been argued with great merit that the major theme of Esther is God’s providential care of His children,

though we never see His Name, hear from His prophets or see any miracles.

In the first chapter we are introduced to King Ahasuerus. He is a powerful yet fickle ruler. It is one thing when a small child is fickle; it is quite another when the most powerful person on earth is fickle. The Scriptures and history both indicate that Ahasuerus should be numbered with the Herods and Neros of powerful madmen. The context of Esther contains the recognition that the lunatics are truly running the asylum. And they are well-armed.

Esther opens with the king throwing a 180-day party where he was showing off his riches. But that wasn't enough. He also wanted to put his beautiful wife Vashti (which literally means 'beautiful woman') on display. But she wouldn't have it, so she loses her royal position and they begin a hunt for a replacement, a new queen.

In chapter two a new character enters the story: Mordecai. He is a Jew who had been carried away from Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar. He was bringing up his orphaned cousin, Esther (who was also very beautiful). The king liked Esther, though she did not reveal to him that she was a Jew. In the meantime, Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king. He tells Esther who tells the king and the plot is foiled. Clearly now Esther is finding even more favor in the king's eyes.

We then meet the final notable character in Esther: Haman. He is a high official among the Persians and a hater of the Jews. For various reasons the king took a liking to Haman and commanded that all would bow and pay homage to Haman. But Mordecai (similar to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego before the golden image) refused to bow. It is worth reviewing the words of Daniel's three friends when confronted by the king:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But *even* if He *does* not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Daniel 3:16-18).

Oh, that we would all seek similar resolve!

Haman's response is quite severe. He decides that he will destroy all the Jews and hatches a presentation to Ahasuerus, which the king casually grants, even though it would mean the death of thousands of his own subjects.

Naturally, the response to this is one of national sorrow. Mordecai is in sackcloth and ashes. He reaches out to Esther and warns of the consequences for her if she remains silent. Mordecai does not doubt God's ultimate promise and deliverance. He realizes that if Esther fails **“deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place” (Esther 4:14)**. But if Esther remains silent, she and her family would die. It is here where Mordecai offers Esther the soul-searching, **“Yet who knows whether you have come to the king for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14)?**

It is a healthy endeavor to ask ourselves this same question, to ask ourselves how we should respond to being placed by God in a certain circumstance. Esther would fast and request others to do the same as she prepared for the very dangerous mission of petitioning the king on behalf of Israel. An uninvited stroll into the inner court of the king's palace could easily result in a death sentence, let alone questioning the choice of the king's favored servant, Haman.

Similar to Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego, Esther throws her very life into the providential hands of God. She seems to take very little comfort in what her king/husband might do. But it is with a resolute heart and firm, yet no doubt quivering, faith that she utters the words, **“If I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16)**.

But again, Esther finds favor in the king's sight, so much so that he offers her half the kingdom. But all she requests is a party, which the king gladly gives. She also wants Haman to be a guest, and the king grants this as well. For some reason Esther extends the party into a second day. It is during this delay that two things happen: Haman notices Mordecai, and he becomes so angry he orders gallows be made (fifty cubits high, which is about 75 feet).

As the time, the king can't sleep so he has a record of the chronicles read to him; he is reminded that Mordecai had saved his life. He decides Mordecai should be honored. The plot thickens. Haman wants all the Jews dead, which would include the king's wife and the man who saved the king's life. The banquet becomes quite interesting.

As the banquet begins, the king asks Haman what should be done for a man in whom the king delights. Haman thinks the king is talking about him, so he offers quite a wish-list: robes, horses, royal crests, etc. Then the king orders Haman to give all this honor to Mordecai! And once Esther informs the king of Haman's plot to kill her, Mordecai and the Jews in the nation, he has Haman hanged on the very gallows Haman had built for Mordecai.

This book ends with Esther being given Haman's house, and the plot Haman devised also is revoked. Naturally, there is great joy among the Jews and also a fear of them because they were now protected by the king's decree. Purim is initiated, which is a Jewish festival celebrating their deliverance from Haman. Mordecai is also highly honored. Similar to Joseph, he became second to the king...

...and was great among the Jews and well received by the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen (Esther 10:3b).

Christ in Esther

To be frank, I have found much of the proposed typology in Esther to be a bit strained. It might be suggested that we see Christ in the actions of Esther, who enters the inner court and makes petition for her people. Truly, it is Jesus who enters into the presence of the Father, interceding for us by virtue of His own blood.

Perhaps we see Christ in Mordecai, who refuses the temptation to bow to Haman as Christ refused to worship Satan. We might learn of Christ when we read of Mordecai at the right hand of the king, utilizing that post for the **“good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen” (Esther 10:3b).**

But what strikes me about these things is how God used the sinful choices of evil people to bring redemption. What we learn in Esther is that there is a Hand above all hands. There is a God in heaven **“who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11).** And this is never more clearly seen than in the cross itself. As recorded in Acts:

‘The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:26-28).

We are not left at the mercy of the random happenings of an ungoverned universe. As difficult as our moments might be, in a glorious eternity, when our eyes are truly opened to see the excellence of our Father’s Divine hand, we will praise Him for every moment of our existence, even our darkest hour.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. All churches are subject both to mixture and error. How does this affect your understanding and attitude toward church?
2. What is one of the great promises in Scripture concerning the church?
3. Are there times when God seems distant and as if He has forgotten you? How do you respond to such times?
4. Review the book of Esther. Why do you think there is no mention of God or miracles?
5. What do we learn about providence from the book of Esther?

Part XVIII - Job

Out of the Whirlwind

John 5:39; Job 42:5, 6

September 1, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:5, 6).

Introduction

Controversy rears its head in all the corners of the church and it's attending theology. In recent years a controversy formed around something many of you have heard numerous times, perhaps without giving it a thought. It pertained to the third question in our denomination's membership vows. It reads:

Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?

The controversy dialed into the word *abhor*. Does this vow encourage some level of unhealthy self-loathing? Is there great piety in the notion of hating oneself? The quick answer is *no*. But we might be looking at this backward. The answer is 'no' not because we don't deserve (at least in some context) to be loathed, but rather because we are not qualified to be the one who is doing the loathing.

It can easily be argued that both self-love and self-loathing are self-centered dispositions. Self-love (contrary to many who would argue that if I'm called to love others and I love myself, I must begin with love of self) is never commanded but assumed. And self-loathing assumes you have lofty enough moral credentials to hate (at least from a Christian perspective) the one who God has chosen to love. Truly, the whole conversation is a bit narcissistic.

Yet the book of Job culminates with Job engaging in self-abhorrence. The word gives an indication of being *horrified with oneself*. But this self-horror appears to have been the objective of God for Job as well as the beginning of a much richer chapter in Job's life. This morning we will briefly pursue what leads to this painful yet glorious sanctification in the life of Job.

Survey of Job

This morning we're studying not the oldest events in history (nothing can be earlier than the "In the beginning" of Genesis 1) but what many scholars have determined to be the oldest book, and not merely the oldest book in Scripture but the oldest book in the world. It has also been deemed the greatest poem in the world's literature.

A quick word about the poetical books. Having finished the seventeen historical books (Genesis to Esther), we now move to the five poetical books (Job through Song of Solomon). That these are poetical does not mean that the events contained in them didn't happen. It does mean that the writing style within the books are presented poetically. If I write a poem about my wife's brown hair or hazel eyes, it doesn't follow that my wife doesn't exist nor that my description of her is false. My wife does exist, and Job and his friends existed.

We are informed right up front that Job was a man of impeccable character. We are not to assume he was sinless, but certainly blameless, upright, fearing God and shunning evil. He was a hard and wealthy worker. He was **"the greatest of all the people of the east" (Job 1:3)**. We are meant to read this book knowing that there was nothing about the character of Job, similar to many nations and people in the Old Testament, that would make him the target of God's righteous judgments.

Yet there is a conversation between God and Satan that I would be quite nervous about if it were me. **"Have you considered My servant Job"** God seems to brag, **"there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?"** When it comes to Satan, I personally would prefer to remain invisible.

But Satan doesn't buy it. The only reason Job is so admirable, according to Satan, is because God has given him so much stuff. Let

us all beware of brands of religion today that promise so much stuff. Religious pursuits that promise health, wealth, and even emotional, psychological and familial equanimity are the types of fragile religion that the devil desires people to pursue due to their very tenuous nature. And herein lies the great challenge in Job: Take away Job's stuff and **“he will surely curse You to Your face” (Job 1:9).**

Job's trials come in two phases (actually more, as we shall see). First, his stuff and then his health. It is worth noting here that Satan is a mere tool in the hand of God. As Luther stated, Satan is “God's ape.” Satan can go only as far as allowed by God. Like the sea...

When I said, ‘This far you may come, but no farther, and here your proud waves must stop’ (Job 38:11)!

Strong is the testimony in the book of Job that *it is God who ordains whatsoever comes to pass*. The loss of his property and family in a secondary or penultimate sense came at the hands of the Sabeans, the Chaldeans and Satan. But in an ultimate sense, Job had no misgivings regarding whose hand was/is behind all things. It is in the context of all this loss that we read those very familiar words:

‘The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong (Job 1:21, 22).

This healthy disposition was going to be short-lived. Soon, things would happen which would prove a bit dismantling for Job. The support system of his wife, for example, was rapidly extracted.

Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2:9)!

Once again Job acknowledges God's divine and sovereign hand with the words:

“Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips (Job 2:10).

One gets the feeling that Job is hanging by a thread. He begins strong and full of conviction. But the chipping away of his resolve by his wife’s discouragement is followed by the entrance of his three well-meaning friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar). As I have said many times, they seemed to do so well sitting silently with Job in the ashes for seven days, until they started talking.

Not to be overly harsh on his friends. It was no doubt difficult to see Job begin to deplore his own birth. Things got worse before they got better. Essentially, Job began to wish he had never been born. And then comes the big question from Job’s perspective: *Why is this happening to me?* Now enter the counsel of Job’s friends.

Their motives seem good and there is enough truth in their words to hold Job’s attention. But in the end, their consoling is reduced to condemning. Their understanding of God’s providence is much too wooden. Within the boundaries of their limited wisdom, they conclude that these things are happening because Job is a sinner and a hypocrite. Clearly they had not read the opening chapter of the book!

It is not as if there is no merit to their position.

If they break My statutes and do not keep My commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless My lovingkindness I will not utterly take from him, nor allow My faithfulness to fail (Psalm 89:31, 32).

Being in a covenant of grace with God (whether Old or New) does not mean there are no consequences for sin. Though we are not saved by our keeping of the law, it has been said that the **“threatenings” of the law show what our sins deserve; and what “afflictions, in this life, (we) may expect.”**²⁶

But it does not necessarily follow that if bad things happen to you or me that it *must* have been due to some particular sin in our

²⁶ WCF, 19:6

lives, as Job's friends seemed to indicate. As well-meaning and even half-right as Job's friends appeared to be, it was no small thing for them to inaccurately teach the things of God. God would later respond,

My wrath is aroused against you (Eliphaz) and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right (Job 42:7).

It is no small thing to speak on behalf of God. There are most certainly stricter judgments against those who do this (James 3:1).

A fourth, younger friend enters the dialogue in chapter thirty-two. Elihu seems a little closer to the mark. He engages less as a judge and more as a brother. He, with perhaps more tenderness and accuracy than the other three, indicates that suffering from the hand of God is not necessarily punitive or retributive but corrective and sanctifying. Was not our Savior perfected through suffering (Hebrews 2:10)?

Interestingly enough, Elihu did not so much suggest that the suffering was a result of Job's sin but that Job was currently sinning because of his suffering. This may have contained a nugget of truth.

In chapter thirty-eight, the wisdom of man comes to a conclusion and the Lord speaks **"out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:1)**. The whirlwind is a symbol of divine revelation (Psalm 18:7-15; Nahum 1:3; Zechariah 9:14). We are so fond of asking questions of and about God. There is a place where this is a healthy pursuit. But there does come a point where we have reached our boundaries and are at risk of crossing a line. A god who is comprehensible (in the strict definition of the word, which means to know completely) would not be God at all; it is necessary for there to be a degree of incomprehensibility in God for Him to be God.

This is not to suggest that God is irrational, illogical or not apprehensible to a certain degree. But I, as a finite creature, will never get to the end of God. We will so comfortably make that statement regarding finite nature. The naturalist will acknowledge that the study of the cosmos will never end. Yet we somehow want to fit God into the tiny skulls.

We have reached the place in Job where God is, as C. S. Lewis puts it, no longer in the dock. We are not asking him questions; He is now the one asking.

Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me (Job 38:3).

For four chapters God presents what is called His ‘natural government.’ By simply exposing Job’s lack of insight vis-à-vis the natural order, he will conclude his utter incapacity to grasp that which is significantly more elusive: God’s moral government. God begins with asking Job where he was when He created all things: the earth and the heavens; light and dark; the stars; and the laws of nature. He wants to know if Job is present when the goats bear their young or when the animals are hungry.

For four solid chapters God does not answer Job’s question of why he was suffering. He could easily have told Job of His conversation with Satan. He could have offered to Job the rationale that Satan doubted the perseverance of the saints. Satan doubted that the grace of faith would outlast the fiery darts of the evil one. God’s simple yet (to many) unsatisfying answer is that *I am God and you are not*.

There are times when it becomes obvious that our afflictions are the consequences of our behavior or even the behavior of our cultures. But there are times when the reason for our trials is concealed from us. Let us recognize that God is as wise in what He reveals as He is in what He conceals. Sometimes to know the *why* of our trial diminishes the value of the faith and patience the trial is designed to produce.

In the depths of Job’s despair, we see a desolate soul seeking a God who could not be found, living inside an anguished self which could not be escaped, rifling through the fires of difficulty which could not be explained. Like Peter, Satan had asked if he could sift Job as wheat (Luke 22:31) and the Lord granted the request.

Peter and Job (and at a certain level most of us at one level or another) stand as consciously naked souls before our Maker. And the answer, the peace and the consolation is not found in an explanation from God; it is found in God Himself. God has not presented to Job

an explanation (not that explanations are always necessarily wrong or bad), but God presents Job with *Himself*.

It is because of that personal encounter with God that Job puts on the secondary level that he had **“heard of (God) by the hearing of the ear.”** What is now elevated is presented with the words: **“But now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5).** And it is with a new sight, as if a blind man had been given sight, that Job now **“abhors”** himself. It would be the gravest of errors to conclude that this self-abhorrence in the presence of God was bad news for Job. On the contrary, it was the beginning of the Good News.

As a poverty-stricken man might walk into a palace of pure gold, take a glance at his own rags and feel grotesquely out of place and under-dressed, and then be transformed by the revelation that he has become the heir to all these riches, so was Job when his eyes were truly opened to see the glory of his God and the riches of his inheritance.

Christ in Job

Where is Christ in Job? Christ is the means by which we find ourselves embraced by our heavenly Father. As Jesus told Philip, **“He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).** Jesus has prepared a place for those who trust in Him that He might receive us to Himself, so that where He is we might be also (John 14:2, 3).

When our Lord speaks to us by word and sacrament, it is an encounter with God. All that Job lost was restored and he even gained so much more. **“Now the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning...” (Job 42:12).** But such a blessing was merely a foretaste of the immeasurable riches that would await Job in glory and await all who call upon Christ. And although it is difficult for our corporeal, limited, fleshly selves to grasp and appreciate this now, there will be nothing richer than the joy of fellowship with Christ Himself that His people will experience for all of eternity.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss what it means to abhor oneself. Is this good or bad? Explain your answer.
2. When a book in the Bible is *poetical*, does that mean the things recorded in it didn't truly happen?
3. The book of Job opens with a description of Job's character. Why do you think that is?
4. What kind of religion(s) does Satan like?
5. Awful things happened to Job. Who did those things?
6. What explanations did Job's friends give to explain why Job was suffering? Did these explanations have any merit at all?
7. How was Elihu's explanation different than the others?
8. How does God answer Job's dilemma? Why do you suppose God answers this way?
9. Have you ever had a Job-like experience? What helped you during/through it?

Part XIX - Psalms

Forgives, Heals, Redeems, Crowns and Satisfies

John 5:39; Psalm 51:2, 7

September 8, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin...Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:2, 7).

Introduction

I would not be entirely honest if I didn't confess that for the majority of my life, I have been a *Romans* man more than a *Psalms* man. I sadly must admit that I enjoy the experience of a courtroom over that of a concert. Perhaps you can psychoanalyze me, but the rhetoric of Paul's "***Who shall bring a charge against God's elect?***" (**Romans 8:33**) provides me with a more settled heart than David's "***the Lord is my shepherd***" (**Psalm 23:1**).

There is little doubt that I have quoted the first two Psalms far more than the following one-hundred-forty-eight. The first Psalm commends those who meditate on God's word and the second speaks of the power and authority of Christ. But in the third Psalm we read the record of David's trouble when he was being pursued by his own son: "**Lord, how they have increased who trouble me.**" This makes me think: I've got troubles of my own; I don't need to hear David complaining.

But as time marches on (again, feel free to psychoanalyze) I find myself planting my heart and mind in the Psalms. I feel as if God has established a firm erector-set of theology in my mind (thank you Romans). But as the tectonic plates of life shift to and fro and I am encountered with all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares and anxieties of this fallen world, these inevitable agitations of my mind direct me to the Psalms.

The Psalms are where the existential passions and realities of experience test the foundation of our faith. The Psalmist is not trying to kid anyone. The Psalms could not be written by Mr. Spock. They do not contain the pure logic of a stoic automaton. They contain feelings of guilt, indignation, doubt and impatience. They plead for deliverance, question God's judgments and praise God for His yet unkept promises: promises that will ultimately be filled in Christ.

There is no book from the Old Testament that is quoted in the New Testament as often as the Psalms. Whatever was sung by the early Christians in the first century church, it most certainly included the Psalms (Colossians 3:6; James 5:13). Most of them were written by David, but there are some by the sons of Korah, Moses, and others. The 150 Psalms are broken into five groups, which are marked by a doxology or some special ascription of praise. Strictly speaking, the word *Psalm* can be defined as a poem to be sung to a stringed instrument.

Survey of Psalms

Seeking to do a survey of the Psalms in one sermon is like seeking to do a survey of all the countries of the world in one half-hour television special.

We see a number of jubilant *Hallelujah Psalms* (Psalm 106; 111; 112; 135; 146-150). These generally start off with **“Praise the Lord...”** praise Him angels, sun and moon, stars, waters above the heavens. We are to sing a new song in the assembly with timbrel and harp. We are to praise the Lord in His sanctuary, for His mighty acts, according to His excellent greatness. The Psalms conclude with the words, **“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6).**

Then there are the somewhat controversial *Imprecatory Psalms* (35; 58; 59; 69; 83; 109; 137; as well as many individual passages contained within other Psalms). Imprecation carries the idea of calling upon God to judge or curse evil-doers and the evil that they do. Some suggest that these imprecations are out of line with the spirit of the New Testament and its call to love and forgive our enemies. Yet we do see Paul using imprecatory language in reference to Alexander the coppersmith, saying, **“May the Lord repay him according to his works” (2 Timothy 4:14).** Add to this Paul's

language regarding those who preach a false gospel, that they **“be accursed” (Galatians 1:8, 9).**

Today’s western resistance to the Psalms of imprecation reflect a coddled, if not spoiled, generation who have not contended with the type of evil that marked the enemies of David and Israel in the Old Testament or the evil which rears its head quite regularly in human history. No one with an even cursory understanding of Pol Pot, Tojo, Amin, Stalin, Hitler, Zedong and the atrocities committed under their rules would resist the notion of praying for God to stop them and the evil they perpetrated. The imprecatory Psalms are directed toward those who hate God, those people whose actions inevitably result in the oppression of the vulnerable.

Should we pray that God would save them? Emphatically, *yes*. David’s Psalms of imprecation often include how they had rewarded him **“evil for good” (Psalm 35:12)** or **“hatred for love” (Psalm 109:5).** So, goodness and love are always the first priority. But there comes a point where evil must be halted. If we are called to **“rescue those who are being taken away to death” (Proverbs 24:11)** this may involve aggressive actions accompanied by aggressive prayer.

It can easily be argued that the Psalms that provide the greatest comfort are the ones which reference the greatest sins by the writer of the Psalm. These are the *Penitential Psalms* (6; 32; 39; 51; 102; 143). The psalmist communicates his own languishing, troubled bones (Psalm 6:2). God’s hand was **“heavy upon”** him and his **“strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:4).** These Psalms are not addressing the oppression of some enemy but rather the consequences of one’s own sin. This is never more clearly seen than in Psalm 51, which begins:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba (Psalm 51—title).

One is hard-pressed to find a more beautiful expression (in the Old or New Testaments) of man’s guilt relieved by God’s grace than what we meet in Psalm 51. In his old age, David discovered more deeply how desperately he needed the compassion, mercy and clemency of God.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin...Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:2, 7).

At the risk of sounding paternal, a lack of appreciation of Psalm 51 (and of the other Penitential Psalms) is a sure sign of immaturity in the faith.

In saying this, I am not seeking to turn the Psalms into Romans, but one can establish a quite thorough systematic theology with use of the Psalms. *Bibliology* is how the Psalms open with reference to God's law as our source of wisdom and strength. There may not be a single chapter which does not address *Theology Proper* (the doctrine of God and His attributes). We find *Pneumatology* (the study of the Holy Spirit) and His omnipresence in that beautiful Psalm 139, **"Where can I go from your Spirit" (Psalm 139:7).**

The study of Biblical *Anthropology* abounds in the Psalms, addressing man's sin, guilt, joy, love and more. The Psalms teach us of God but also of ourselves. There is no shortage of lessons on *Ecclesiology* in the Psalms with its many references to the assembly of the saints (Psalm 7:7; 27:12; 89:5; 107:32; 149:1). And how powerful the *Eschatology* of the Psalms! Numerous times we read of how **"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord" (Psalm 22:27...see also 65:8; 67:7; 72, etc.).**

And, as already stated, we see *Soteriology* (salvation) in full color.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18).

And the means by which this salvation is eternally applied to the soul is by the precious blood of Christ. *Soteriology* and *Christology* (the study of Jesus) come to a blessed and holy union in the Psalms. At the risk of sounding harsh, apart from Christ the Psalms become old stories by the dead writers of an ancient nation that provides no eternal hope for either them or us.

Christ in Psalms

Following the theme of our Route 66 series, there is little difficulty finding Christ as the central figure in the Psalms. There is an entire category marked off as *Messianic Psalms*, accomplishing this task for us (Psalm 2; 8; 16, 22, 23; 24; 40; 41; 45; 68; 69; 72; 87; 89; 102; 110; 118). In Psalm 2 we read of the Son being granted the nations as a heritage. In various Psalms we read of Christ's birth (Psalm 89:3, 4), betrayal (Psalm 41:9), agony (Psalm 22:14), death (Psalm 22:2), resurrection (Psalm 16:8-10), ascension (Psalm 68:18) and glory (Psalm 16:11).

A brief comparison of Psalm 22 with Psalm 51 brings into clear focus the great mission and ministry of Jesus. David, in the depths of his own sin, calls upon God to **“purge” him “with hyssop”** in order that he might be clean and **“whither than snow” (Psalm 51:7)**. This describes the use of a plant in a ritual found in Exodus and Numbers. They were called to dip a plant called hyssop into blood and paint the doorposts or the tent and its furnishings as a means to accomplish cleanness. Again, as the risk of sounding irreverent, this ritual is meaningless if all it contains is the blood of an animal sprinkled by means of some vegetation, because...

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:4).

But Psalm 22 brings into sharp focus (sharper, it may be argued, than we read in the New Testament) how Psalm 51 accomplishes this glorious redemption. God does not forsake us because He forsook His own Son in our stead. Hundreds of years before Christ uttered the words on the cross, we read in Psalm 22:

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me (Psalm 22:1a)?

Again, hundreds of years before the Romans invented crucifixion, the psalmist records, **“They pierced My hands and feet” (Psalm 22:16)**. And for those who might suggest that Jesus, conversant with the Psalms as He was, was merely reciting a script, we also read the words of His detractors:

**“He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him;
let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him”
(Psalm 22:8)!**

To be compared:

**He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he
desires him (Matthew 27:43).**

The Messianic fulfillments of the work of Christ are too numerous for one sermon. Let it be emphasized that the blood of the hyssop spoken of in Psalm 51 which truly atones for our sins is found in Psalm 22, pointing undeniably to the cross of Christ. And it is to this, ever since, the Lord’s Supper has pointed back to. Let us all find a deeper appreciation of this as we now engage in the Lord’s Supper together this morning.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How is Romans different than the Psalms?
2. Who wrote the Psalms? How many groups are the Psalms broken into?
3. Comment on the various types of Psalms. Which types of Psalms do you find yourself naturally gravitating toward and why?
4. What systematic doctrines or theological lessons do you see addressed in the Psalms?
5. Where do you see Christ in the Psalms? What does this mean to you?

Part XX - Proverbs

Hidden Treasure of Wisdom

John 5:39; 1 Corinthians 1:30, 31

September 15, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:30, 31).

Introduction

When I was a child, a television commercial aired that was so successful that it doubled the sales of the product it was endorsing. The lyrics of the little song went, “*Plop, plop, fizz, fizz...* (see if you know the rest). One of the reasons it doubled sales was due to the doubling of the dosage that the little jingle recommended. Up until this little ad campaign, the dosage was one tablet, but “plop, plop” perhaps unwittingly suggested two tablets. Another reason it was successful was due to the catchy nature of the song. The end of the song was “...*oh what a relief it is.*” Of course, the product was Alka-Seltzer.

I find it moderately disquieting how many commercials, theme songs and rock songs are lodged in my head. I can only guess how much control this data has over me. It is not without cause that the Apostle Paul writes,

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Or, as the Proverbs teach,

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm (Proverbs 13:20).

One might argue that knowing the lyrics of a song or commercial is not companionship. But that would be a very short-sighted conclusion. What could possibly constitute more intimate companionship than inclusion in one's mind? And it is not mere inclusion but memory. As the saying goes, "We know it by heart." These things are in our hearts. Good things hidden in the heart produce that which is good. As the psalmist writes:

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You (Psalm 119:11).

Conversely, bad things in the heart produce that which is sinful and destructive. God has accommodated our natural weakness in this area by providing Proverbs. Proverbs can be hidden in our hearts.

A proverb is a brief saying of condensed wisdom. The Proverbs catch our mind and are generally easy to remember because of the elegance of diction or the beauty of the rhetoric. But the brevity and depth of the Proverbs can, like parables, make them a bit difficult to understand. For example, a superficial look at Proverbs 26:4 & 5 appears to be paradoxical:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:4, 5).

Which is it? Do we answer the fool according to his folly or not? Yet, deeper examination of these two verses unearths great value in how to engage in a fruitful conversation. Briefly, we are not to embrace an ungodly view of the world in an effort to persuade others. At the same time, there is value in understanding and showing the inconsistencies of a view of the world where God, and the things of God, are rejected.

Most of the Proverbs are written by Solomon but not all. There are the *Thirteen Sayings of Agur* (Proverbs 30) and the *Oracle of Lemuel's Mother* (Proverbs 31). Most of the Proverbs are *contrastive*, where the first line is in contrast to the second line, usually using the conjunction, “**but.**” For example:

**He who disdains instruction despises his own soul,
But he who heeds rebuke gets understanding
(Proverbs 15:32).**

Some Proverbs are *completive*, where the second line completes the thought of the first. An example would be:

**In the fear of the Lord *there is* strong confidence,
And His children will have a place of refuge
(Proverbs 14:26).**

Other Proverbs are *comparative*, where a certain attribute or possession is compared to another:

**Better *is* a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure with trouble.
Better *is* a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred (Proverbs 15:16, 17).**

Survey of Proverbs

Similar to the Psalms, a thorough survey of Proverbs cannot be contained within a single sermon. Yet it does appear that the wisdom contained in Proverbs is in short supply. One need merely listen to interviews with people of high profile in our culture to grow despondent at the lack of prudence and understanding that prevails. Politicians, rock stars, movie celebrities, professional athletes, contemporary authors can instigate a bristling in our souls and a concern for the future of our children by the lack of judiciousness which the Proverbs supply.

The reason for this pandemic lack of wisdom and knowledge is cited early in Proverbs, then again in later chapters:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10).

Succinctly stated by Augustine...

credo ut intelligam,

...meaning, *"I believe in order to understand."* According to Proverbs, God is not found at the end of our studies, our studies can't even begin until we acknowledge and bow before the Lord.

For the first nine chapters of Proverbs there is the extolling of wisdom. This is communicated in many different ways, ways which I fear we all tend to ignore. There is the generational conveyance of wisdom from parents to children. This requires an already held wisdom on the part of the parents as well as eager, listening ears on the part of the children (Proverbs 1:8).

Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck (Proverbs 1:8).

This is in contradistinction to the very popular despising, rebelling and blaming of parents, along with many parents abandoning the role of being the primary source of wisdom for their children.

We also see a repetitive theme of shunning evil.

My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent (Proverbs 1:10).

This is taught with a warning of the consequences of those who choose to ignore the counsel of God's wisdom.

Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices (Proverbs 1:29-31).

Those who desire godless folly will find themselves ruled by it.

The Proverbs often direct our attention to women, both good and bad, both literally and metaphorically. It speaks of the **“forbidden woman...the adulteress with her smooth words...who forsakes the companion of her youth...and the covenant of her God” (Proverbs 2:16, 17)**. We see here the tendency of those who go astray to isolate themselves from those who would seek to lovingly bring accountability. Sadly, this is a common theme in the church today.

There are numerous allusions to women as contentious, immoral, clamorous and willing to destroy their own house.

The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down (Proverbs 14:1).

Yet other passages use women as a personification of wisdom:

Happy is the man *who* finds wisdom, and the man *who* gains understanding; for her proceeds *are* better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She *is* more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her (Proverbs 3:13-15).

And, of course, the final chapter of Proverbs speaks of the inestimable value of a virtuous woman/wife.

The book of Proverbs addresses laziness strongly and in detail; the word “lazy” is seen no less than fifteen times in thirty-one chapters.

The desire of the lazy *man* kills him, for his hands refuse to labor (Proverbs 21:25).

A people that accommodates laziness, a lack of willingness to work, will find that...

...poverty will come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man (Proverbs 24:34).

Another repeated theme in Proverbs is the lack of restraint when it comes to words.

In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips *is* wise (Proverbs 10:19).

It is not without a touch of humor that we read:

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Proverbs 17:27, 28).

There is something to be said for being selective about when and where we might offer an opinion on a topic of which we may lack expertise. Gossip or “**tale-bearing**” is also a matter of much concern in Proverbs. In light of our current political pandemonium, it might also be worth giving an eye to the wisdom in the words:

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin *is* a reproach to *any* people (Proverbs 14:34).

It is difficult, in a survey of Proverbs, to avoid the power and beauty of Proverbs 3:5, 6 or the warnings surrounding the seven things which God hates named in Proverbs 6:16-19 or the

unsearchable comfort of Proverbs 16:9 which interweaves the plans of man with the direction of God. But I would prefer to conclude with Proverbs 29:18, and explain how this points us to Christ.

Christ in Proverbs

Carved into the cement of an exterior wall at the local junior high that both of my older sisters attended were the words: ***Where there is no vision, the people perish.***

There was no reference as to where these words originated nor any explanation of what they meant. I spent most of my young life thinking these words meant that we must dream big; we must develop a vision for our future if we wish to thrive. I later discovered that that was not at all what those words mean.

The reference is from Proverbs 29:18 and is more suitably translated:

Where there is no revelation ('hazon'-prophetic vision), the people cast off restraint ('yippara'-unbridled) (Proverbs 29:18-parenthesis mine).

In short, this Proverb teaches us that where there is no word of God (for us, the vision/revelation of God are the Scriptures), there is no hope for order in this life. And it is a short step to conclude that a more dire condition is that there neither will be glory in the life to come.

Let us see if we can pull this all together. Without the word of God there will be no fear of God. Without the fear of God there will be no wisdom or understanding. And all of this results in disorder in this life and condemnation in the next. This unbridled condition is what Jesus walked into in His earthly ministry.

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things (Mark 6:34).

The teaching of Christ brought order to their lives (though not necessarily ease) and life to their souls. And this continues to this

day, for **“faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17)**. And the wisdom of Solomon will ever be rejected by those who would have nothing to do with Christ Jesus, **“who became to us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30)**. For truly it is in Christ that **“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden (Colossians 2:3)**.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Do you remember words, songs, sayings from your youth? Why do you suppose you remember them?
2. What are the dangers or benefits of knowing things by heart?
3. What is a Proverb? Are they always easy to understand? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the different types of Proverbs?
5. What must we know before we can have true knowledge or wisdom?
6. Discuss some of the different topics covered in Proverbs. Which ones jump out at you and why?
7. What is true “vision” and where does one get it? What does it lead to?

Part XXI - Ecclesiastes

A Well-Lived Life

John 5:39; Matthew 16:24-26

September 22, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul” (Matthew 16:24-26)?

Introduction

Interesting, pleasant, informative, humorous, yet often empty are words which describe a great many (and perhaps even most) of the casual social conversations in which I find myself. I recently caught up with a long-time acquaintance. This is very common for me since I’ve lived in the same community all my life. We talked about our current occupations, the directions our children were taking and the state of our health. It was all very nice.

Yet these types of conversations leave me feeling the way I felt when I first came to faith and started watching the old movies my father and I had enjoyed as a child. The movies generally had a happy ending (Depression-era films), but I began to realize that the characters (at least in the movie) gave no indication of having made peace with God. How could this be a happy ending? Today when I watch those old movies everyone who was in them is currently dead. (Maybe I’m not the best person to watch a movie with. Depressing!)

And yet this type of message can have popular appeal. As a teenager (in the sixties) the song entitled *Is That All There Is* by Peggy Lee was a top 40 hit. It was a miserable, yet captivating, song about how, as a young girl, she saw a fire, the circus and fell in love, all followed by the refrain “Is that all there is?” The song ends with a

dismal, ‘you’re probably wondering why I don’t just end it all’ with the answer being ‘I’m not ready for the final disappointment.’

The appeal of the song was its gloomy honesty, the type of honesty most prefer to avoid. The joyful cockeyed, unrealistic optimism of Tigger is just more fun to be around than the disconsolate, more realistic negativism of Eeyore. Yet we ignore the honesty at our own peril. Ecclesiastes is brutally and uncomfortably honest.

Survey of Ecclesiastes

The author of Ecclesiastes (Solomon) refers to himself as **“the Preacher” (Ecclesiastes 1:1)**. This word, *Koheleth*, may not be precisely synonymous with our use of the word, but more along the lines of a master of assemblies or a teacher. The recurring theme is **“Vanity of vanities...all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)**, highlighting the emptiness or meaninglessness of his experience as it pertains to life.

Ecclesiastes might be compared to a vast sociological experiment where the subject of the experiment and the one administering the experiment are the same person. Add to that, his resources were virtually without limit, both in terms of budget and also the wisdom needed to conduct the experiment (Ecclesiastes 2:9).

Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom (2 Chronicles 9:22).

And what was that experiment? The experiment explores where things go in this life on the grounds of natural experience. It all begins with a sort of ‘what’s the point?’ monologue. One generation dies and another one comes (Ecclesiastes 1:4). We seek to comfort ourselves with the suggestion that our departed friends and loved ones will live on in memories, but Solomon won’t countenance such a falsehood:

For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Most of us don't know the names of our departed great-great grandparents. The sun goes up and then goes down, the wind blows, the rivers flow and **“nothing is new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)**. *What is the point?*

Solomon then seeks to apply wisdom to the matter. Someone might here ask: If Solomon was so wise, why couldn't he see in advance the folly of this entire pursuit? We must keep in mind that the supernatural gift from God to Solomon was not goodness or faithfulness; it was *wisdom*. He applied wisdom in many good ways, but his flesh (as evidenced by his many wives) often ran roughshod over his wisdom. We are now called to take advantage of his findings. Yet, I wonder how many of us, like the foolish youth, must learn the hard way and carry the baggage of our failures through life. We may learn through our sins and failures, but we are never better off for having sinned.

The Preacher, in his wisdom, came to conclude that the fall has left this world in such chaos that our basic and worldly observations cannot naturally lead us to certain conclusions:

Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

Trying to make sense of, and bring purpose to, this world apart from God is a fool's errand. One will hear everything from “have fun” to “family is everything” to “you only live once so grab for all the gusto.” Epicureanism (a focus on the enjoyment of life), Stoicism (seeking indifference to the pains and pleasures of life), Hedonism (human pleasure being the highest good), Nihilism (meaninglessness), etc.—Solomon dabbled in them all.

At one point he made the astonishing statement:

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure (Ecclesiastes 2:10a).

And still he concluded that **“all was vanity and grasping for the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:11)**. Shortly after this is recorded,

Solomon laments, like a disillusioned child, **“Therefore I hated life” (Ecclesiastes 2:17a).**

Pleasure, providence, injustice, inequality, enigmas prevail. Is wisdom superior to foolishness? His answer is yes. We should seek to encourage a world full of goodness, wisdom, trustworthiness, and peace. But in a godless world, the wise, the fool, the good, the evil, the winner and the loser all ultimately have the same fate.

He pushes it even further, to a point that many animal activists would assuredly applaud. The human does not have a superior ending to the animal:

For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

When I was in high school, a Christian singer came and sang at an assembly. I recall speaking to her briefly after the concert. I don't recall the topic of the conversation, but I do remember one answer she gave to something I must have asked. Her answer was, “We don't just die, like dogs.” It is with abundant thoughtfulness that Solomon arrives at the inevitable conclusion that, in a world without God (or even a world with some distant acknowledgment of a god), humans and animals are ultimately indistinct.

All of this can leave us in a state of melancholy. Even as I write this, I ask myself how far down the rabbit hole am I willing to take this message. At the same time, I think I can say (at the risk of sounding braggadocios) that the message contained within Ecclesiastes (perhaps more so than from any other book in Scripture) has yielded in me an ability to enjoy this life. Before I explain what I mean, something needs to be said about how a book like Ecclesiastes is to be read.

Ecclesiastes must be read in its entirety, with the context always in mind. For example, what do we do with this verse?

Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself (Ecclesiastes 7:16)?

Is he truly advising us to avoid too much righteousness or too much wisdom? If so, in obeying this advice, are we not violating it at the same time? If the counsel of God is the source of wisdom, would it not be in my obedience to His counsel that wisdom is gained? We're stuck in a catch-22 (a classic Kobayashi Maru).

No, a passage like this must be read with the context (which is, good and evil things happening to the just and wicked alike) in mind. Three potentially acceptable ways of understanding this are: don't allow your identity to be wrapped up in how wise or righteous you are; or, don't trust in your own wisdom or righteousness to somehow yield a superior condition in this life; or, don't trust in your own wisdom or righteousness over the superior wisdom and righteousness which comes from Christ.

A similarly perplexing verse is found in the twelfth chapter.

**And further, my son, be admonished by these.
Of making many books *there is no end, and much
study is wearisome to the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12).***

No doubt, many a seminary student has had this verse framed in their dorm room! Yet this is not a passage endorsing lethargy in our studies, as should be evident by the numerous times he extols acquiring wisdom through study. One acceptable interpretation is for the student to realize that there is a time to put the book down and engage in life.

Another related interpretation is to discriminate regarding who you will spend your time reading. Years ago, I made a critical comment about a paragraph from an author in a book of his that I was reading. I was subsequently told that in order for me to truly grasp his meaning I needed to read all thirteen of his published works. It didn't seem a wise use of my time to accommodate the request.

Christ in Ecclesiastes

Back to my earlier statement. How has the message contained in Ecclesiastes yielded in me an ability to enjoy this life, perhaps more than any other in Scripture? Because woven throughout Ecclesiastes is the notion that the things that are done "under the sun,"

which are vain, are designed to bring our attention to that which is done, as it were, *over* the sun.

A theme in Ecclesiastes is the appropriate enjoyment of a wise, temperate, grateful engagement in this life with a steadfast faith in God. We are to enjoy our spouse (9:9), enjoy our food and drink (5:18), enjoy our rest, enjoy our neighbors, our work (3:22), our years (11:8); our possessions (5:19). Please note that the findings of this experiment do not lead to monasticism or some extreme denial of the joys of this life.

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17).

I can enjoy who I am, who I know, what I have and whatever the day may bring, precisely because I am not trusting in those things but rather merely enjoying them. And a good test to gauge how much I am trusting rather than enjoying them is how deeply I crumble at the threat of losing them.

Sprinkled throughout the “under the sun” message of Ecclesiastes is an over the sun focus. Heed the value of a memorial service because it highlights our own mortality (Ecclesiastes 7:2). God has put “**eternity in our hearts**” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We are to “**walk prudently**” when we go to the house of God (Ecclesiastes 5:1). The book ends:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

This is the message of Christ from beginning to end. “**Do not love the world**” (1 John 2:15); “**do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy**” (Matthew 6:19). Hear the sobering words of Christ:

For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul (Matthew 16:26)?

People mistakenly read these words as if true, pious faith holds all of God's worldly gifts in contempt. That is not the message of Ecclesiastes or of Christ. Years ago, my house needed a new roof. It was difficult for me to enjoy my house because I knew the rain would leak through and ruin what I owned. A peaceful and reasonable enjoyment of my house required the roof be replaced. A reliable covering was necessary. Those who are covered by the blood of Christ can, and should seek to, enjoy the home of this life given to us by God, with a sure knowledge that this life ends with a judgment of glory.

A wonderful Academy Award winning movie (with the biblical title: *Chariots of Fire*) came out in 1981. The movie compared two athletes who competed in the 1924 Olympics: One was a Christian, the other was not. I recall two lines from that movie that I think expresses my point: The nerve-wracked non-Christian coach, seeking to comfort him by explaining that the 100 meter is "tailor-made for neurotics," pathetically exposes his underbelly:

"I'll raise my eyes and look down that corridor.....4 feet wide.....with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I?"

Now we compare this to the words of the believer. He is trying to convince his doubting sister that he is not neglecting his missionary efforts in order to compete in the race. He explains:

"I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure."

Who do you think it was who enjoyed running more?

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Do you find that many of your conversations or interactions are not entirely fulfilling? If so, why?
2. Is honesty always comfortable? Why or why not?
3. What is the recurring theme in Ecclesiastes? What does it mean?
4. How is Ecclesiastes like an experiment?
5. What are some of the methods of living that Solomon tried? What methods do you see in our current culture?
6. What is Solomon's initial conclusion?
7. What are some errors to avoid in reading Ecclesiastes?
8. How can what is taught in Ecclesiastes yield a life that is well-lived?

Part XXII - Song of Solomon

I Am My Beloved's

John 5:39; Song of Solomon 6:3a

October 6, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

I *am* my beloved's, and my beloved *is* mine (Song of Solomon 6:3a).

Introduction

During my undergraduate years I read a book by a French author/pilot named Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The name of the book was *The Little Prince*. The book was published during World War II and there is some debate as to whether it was meant to be a child's book or intended for adults. In the book, the Little Prince lived on Asteroid B-612, which was a planet about the size of a small truck.

The story is told from the perspective of a pilot on earth who encounters the Little Prince when his plane crashes in the desert (something that had actually happened to Saint-Exupéry). It is a short book and worth reading. Although some have speculated that it is Christian allegory, this is not obviously the case. It does, nonetheless, carry many thoughtful and significant themes worthy of consideration.

I open with this in our study of the Song of Solomon because of a very unique relationship found in the story of the Little Prince. On his small planet (on this planet there are three volcanoes and a dangerous weed called baobabs, which some thought represented the Nazis) there was a talking rose. The rose was pretentious, petulant, given to exaggeration, a prima-donna and entitled. And the Little Prince *loved her*. He built her a wind-break and put her under a glass covering. Her attributes that others might view as irritating were appealing to him. He thought she was the only rose in the universe.

In his travels, he came to find that there were millions of roses. This saddened him because he felt like his rose had lost her

uniqueness. He also felt that she had deceived him into thinking she was the only rose in existence. As these thoughts brought him to tears in the desert, we are introduced to a fox with a very unusual request. The fox wanted to be tamed.

In the fox's mind, something moves from being ordinary to special, and becomes unlike all other things, when someone takes the time and effort to tame you. The Little Prince came to realize (really, the reader came to realize) that the Little Prince's care, love, pampering and taming of his rose truly made her rare and precious. She was not just *a* rose. She was *his* rose. And he was *her* person.

It is this type of unique relationship that we read of in the Song of Solomon. To be sure, the Bible uses many metaphors to describe our relationship with Christ. He is the head and we are the body. He is the Foundation and we are the building. He is the Vine and we are the branches. He is the firstborn and we are the brethren. These are all apt and serve their purpose. But marriage is the most intimate and sublime metaphor describing Christ and the church.

One can get lost in the *body* metaphor. Am I an eye or a hand? This is true also in the *plant* and *building* metaphors. I am one of many branches, and one part of a massive structure. But the intimacy of marriage does not allow one to get lost in a crowd. It's been argued that Christ is married to the church collectively and not to the individuals within the church. But such an argument ignores the necessity of recognizing that which is collective is made up of that which is individual.

It may be true that I am but one member of that body referred to as the bride of Christ. But I should not make the mistake that Saint-Exupery corrects: Viewing myself as lacking individual significance because I am one of a billion roses. It may be unfathomable to us, due to our limitations as creatures, to grasp this, but we are individually loved, cared for, sanctified, and (if you will) tamed by Christ. We are His bride both collectively and individually, and He is ours. Herein lies the passion and intimacy of the Song of Solomon. As the heroine expresses:

**I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine
(Song of Solomon 6:3a).**

A Survey of Song of Solomon

What is this short book about? It has been suggested that the Song of Solomon is just the opposite of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes the world is too small to fill the heart whereas the Song of Solomon finds a heart that is filled. But, what is this Song of Solomon? Is it just a natural collection of love poems, as some suggest? Is it a grand allegory where everything has a separate meaning from the obvious romantic phraseology? Is the hair of the bride an allegory for the mass conversions of the nations? Or is it typological of Christ and His church and not to be thought of as instructive in terms of intimacy?

This should not be terribly difficult to answer. Since the Lord uses marital intimacy as a means by which we are to grasp the dimensions of our union with Him, it is critical that we develop a godly understanding of what constitutes that relationship in its proper sense. In other words, if marriage is going to help me better understand my association with God, it would do me well to understand how God wants marriage to work. And we have a whole book dedicated to precisely that.

Song of Solomon tells the story of Solomon meeting a fair Shulamite (a young shepherd girl), falling in love with her and making her his queen. Their affections for each other are recorded quite strongly, affectionately and poetically (though, it is true, this language may not have the same force today, e.g. **“your hair is like a flock of goats...your neck is like the tower of David...your nose like the tower of Lebanon”**).

Yet many things do hold up, such as (as understood by some) the lifting of his bride over the threshold (Song of Solomon 1:4). There is also ample record of the physical enjoyment that a spouse is to have with their mate (Song of Solomon 2:6; 7:1; 8:3). There is kissing and perfume and dining and compliments. There is heartbreak when she has a dream that he is gone.

It would be difficult to walk away from the Song of Solomon (recognizing marriage as a metaphor of our relationship with Christ) with a cold, stoic, detached or even unemotional view of our faith. The intimacy and affection are borderline uncomfortable.

I mention this recognizing that we are not all wired the same way. And even if we are wired a certain way, the years tend to have

an effect upon the wires. Nonetheless, there should be a very unique warmth pursued in marriage all the days of our lives. The appreciation, encouragement, tenderness and devotion that we read of in the Song of Solomon should be reflected in the covenant of marriage and enjoyed in the covenant of grace.

We are to love as we have been loved.

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12).

We are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

...bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do* (Colossians 3:13).

We are to serve as we have been served.

If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you (John 13:14, 15).

Though we do not hold to foot-washing as a sacrament (Jesus here provides an example of servitude which should characterize our general dispositions), nonetheless there is a humble, uncomfortable intimacy to anyone who has done this for another.

I have seemed here to move away from marriage to Christians' relationships in general. And there is something to be said and learned. At the same time, the Song of Solomon seems to be dialing in on the exclusive relationship of marriage. But I mention these more general attributes for a couple of reasons:

First, because we tend to be better at serving strangers (or at least people we're not married to) than we are at serving our spouse. With greater ease do we forgive strangers than do we forgive our spouse. In a certain sense, it is easier to love others than it is to love our spouse. I've seen it in myself and in others; we have much kinder

and patient words for the acquaintance than we do for the woman of our vows. Why is that? This leads to a second explanation.

There is a comfort and history with the spouse. Our display of patience with the stranger (or a mere friend) is because they've only done it to us once, where our spouse does it over and over. How often in counseling are the words "*You don't know what I have to put up with*" spoken, as if their spouse has reached uncharted territories of selfishness, ignorance, carnality and insensitivity.

But we must keep this in mind as we seek to enjoy this great intimacy which belongs to us as the bride of Christ. *He knows us well.* He is betrothed to us, and not because we are beautiful. It is rather through our union with Him and due to our union with Him that our road to beauty even begins. I think it is healthy for us to ask ourselves if we are making our spouse more beautiful.

In the Song of Solomon we see a glorious snapshot of striking marital intimacy which should elevate our understanding of the love by which we are loved. Even as Paul had prayed that we...

...may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:18, 19).

The knowledge of that love should burst forth in our worship, then be displayed toward others...first and foremost our spouses, or the spouse that we will one day have or in our thoughts of how a spouse is to be loved. As John Fawcett said, this should be our aim:

Through all the ages of a blissful eternity I humbly hope to proclaim the wonders of redeeming love, and tell to listening angels what that love has done for my soul.

Christ in Song of Solomon: His Banner, The Cleft, The Latch

I think we have already seen Christ in this short book. But I would like to finish with three brief observations.

He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love (Song of Solomon 2:4).

In a Christmas movie, the young man interrupts a business meeting excited about his new found love and he sings out, "I'm in love, I'm in love and I don't care who knows it." A banner was often a display of victory over an opponent. Christ has defeated the enemies of the world, the flesh and the devil. He has put His own Name upon us (Revelation 3:12; 22:4) and He is not ashamed to call us His brethren.

For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified *are* all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: "*I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You*" (Hebrews 2:11, 12).

We may think it a small thing now to be openly acknowledged by Christ, but there will be a time when it will be breathtakingly glorious.

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice *is* sweet, and your face *is* lovely (Song of Solomon 2:14).

We are familiar with the hymn *Rock of Ages* and the words: "**Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.**" The cleft of a rock is where the doves would find refuge from storms and predators. This great act of love (that of God providing a cleft in the rock) includes protection. It is through the blood of Christ that we find true and eternal protection from the wrath of God. Let us ever find ourselves to be hidden in Christ!

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and

your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is our life* appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

Finally, let us rejoice in Christ's effectual calling. It is during this troubling dream where the heroine hesitates to open the door for her beloved. She finds an array of excuses to leave him outside. Then we read of this odd account.

My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door, and my heart yearned for him (Song of Solomon 5:4).

It is very difficult to grasp exactly what he did that changed her heart. The indications are that she saw his hand and that in itself was sufficient.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

Literally that word “**draw**” *helksye* means to pull or drag. God is quite effective at changing our heart of stone to a heart of flesh. He does this through His love, His goodness (Romans 2:4) and the Gospel (Romans 10:17).

It should be a quest in our lives to find out just what needs to happen with that latch when it comes to our beloved life-long companions in matrimony. But let us praise His name that He knew precisely what had to happen in order to win our hearts.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some examples of things that make people unique? How can we take pleasure in being unique in the eyes of God?
2. Briefly state what the Song of Solomon is about.
3. Is the Song of Solomon an allegory, a type, or merely poems on romance? Explain your answer.
4. Why is it important for us to know how we are loved, forgiven and served by Christ?
5. Discuss the use of the banner, the cleft and the latch. What do they mean in terms of God's disposition toward us, and our disposition toward others?

Part XXIII - Isaiah

Hear, O Heavens, and Give Ear, O Earth

John 5:39; Isaiah 1:2a

October 13, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 1:2a).

Introduction

One of my children entered my study and asked why Jews do not believe in the New Testament, why they don't believe in Christ. There are a number of layers in answering such a question. The most obvious, surface-level answer would be the influence of their tradition. Tradition has been at war with Christ from the beginning (Matthew 15:3). At a deeper level, there is a veil upon the hearts of men that can only be removed by the grace of God.

But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2 Corinthians 3:15, 16).

But a passage like this should not be read in such a way as to conclude that the truth of God's word is masked or hidden under a shroud, as if only the wisest scholars and shrewdest investigators have the intellectual integrity to unearth the cryptic mysteries of redemption. And though Paul was writing in regard to Moses, the same truth applies to all of the Old Testament, which is the theme of our current series: Route Sixty-Six. Jesus was not unclear that the Scriptures testify of Him, as even a cursory reading of Isaiah makes manifestly obvious.

It is with glorious repetition that we see (in a book written seven hundred years before His birth) allusions and predictions that can only pertain to Christ. It's been said that...

...the prolonged description of chapter 53 suits only one figure in all human history-the Man of Calvary.²⁷

The magnitude of the conspiracy, and the madness of a false Christ to perpetuate such a hoax at the price of His own excruciating death, crosses the border of sound thinking. And though it is not merely chapter 53 that yields no other reasonable alternative to Christ, let us glean from the ministry of Philip as he instructed the Ethiopian Eunuch who was reading Isaiah (Acts 8:28).

So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him (Acts 8:30-35).

May there be no veil upon our eyes as we seek to preach Jesus in our examination of Isaiah.

²⁷ Baxter, 253.

Survey of Isaiah

Whether we compare him to a Beethoven, a Shakespeare or an Einstein, Isaiah as a prophet is said to be without peer, even among prophets. This is not because what he said is somehow more true than the words of other prophets, but due to the sheer length of his ministry (a prophet for, some say forty, perhaps sixty years) and scope of his message (during the reign of four kings and numerous adversaries).

Beyond being a prophet, he was also said to be bold, patriotic, tender, sympathetic, indignant (in a good way), reverent and spiritual (also in a good way). Jewish tradition indicates that it was probably Isaiah who was placed in the trunk of a tree sawn in two (Hebrew 11:37).

The historical setting is during the oppression of Israel (Judah and Jerusalem) by the surrounding, evil nations and the anticipation and prophecy of their exile. It is a time of great political and moral turmoil. Isaiah goes back and forth in his rebuke of Israel and his rebuke of their oppressors. At the same time, he also speaks glorious words of deliverance which have their sights initially on Judah and Jerusalem, then the surrounding nations, then the entire world.

Many of these great rebukes, judgments and promises of deliverance had a more immediate historical fulfillment that his original readers would (more or less) have endured or enjoyed. But the book of Isaiah is no mere history lesson of something that happened twenty-seven hundred years ago. It speaks to and anticipates all of history, to the very end. Perhaps this is why, after the introduction of the prophet in chapter one, verse one, it opens with a heralding:

**Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the
LORD has spoken (Isaiah 1:2).**

The book opens with a chastisement of God's own covenant people (1:3). It is Israel that is a **“sinful nation”** from head to toe (1:6). Only a remnant remained faithful, lest they would have ended up as Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9). Their worship became a stench and God would not hear their prayers (1:15). But even here, in the midst of this reprimand, we begin to see hope for those with a willing heart (1:19).

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18).

There is always a promise of restoration for those who are willing (1:26). The magnitude of this promise is great. The Lord establishes His house and the nations will flow to it, beating swords into plowshares. Christ is the hope of the nations and of true peace. But even God’s people are tempted to follow “soothsayers” (2:6) over the word and promise of God Himself. And our ability to discern with any sense of justice or righteousness becomes compromised and disabled.

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to *those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight (Isaiah 5:20, 21)!*

There is truly a timelessness to words such as these. Evil is said to be not merely tolerated but sanctified.

There comes a bit of a turning point in chapter six. It has been suggested that in the history of the church, there has not been a chapter in Scripture that has more influenced the liturgy of the church than this chapter. In chapter six, we are called into God’s thrice-Holy presence, behold His glory and receive His pardon. Isaiah’s ministry will have a worldwide focus, but not until his lips are touched by the forgiving power of God. Truly the coals themselves are even typical of Christ.

And he touched my mouth *with it*, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged” (Isaiah 6:7).

And it is not unclear from whence this deliverance comes. In the next chapter we read words the angel spoke to Joseph (Matthew 1:20-23).

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

Yet even amidst these wonderful promises they sought mediums and wizards over God.

And when they say to you, “Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,” should not a people seek their God? *Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living* (Isaiah 8:19)?

The word of God is sufficient to equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16). Yet it is in our nature to look elsewhere. Again, God’s hand is not too short to overcome our natural defiance. In the midst of rebellion, the promise is once again stated.

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of *His* government and peace *there will be* no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

The church will be established and the Great Commission fulfilled not by the will of man but by the **“zeal of the Lord.”**

Yet this straightening out of that which was made crooked by sin is not always a straight line. The world is full of evil and darkness. Yet we should never think God is on the sidelines, inactive, waiting to make an entrance. The greatest evil power on the earth during Isaiah’s time was the king of Assyria. But what the king of Assyria meant for evil and for his own glory was, in a deeper and more primary sense, decreed by God.

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation... Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it? (Isaiah 10:5, 15).

We are ever reminded that we are mere clay in the hands of the potter (Isaiah 29:16; 30:14; 41:25; 64:8). Yet we are again reminded of Christ, “**a Rod from the stem of Jesse**” (11:1), anticipating the baptism of Christ:

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2).

Also, see the vast power and range of His redemption.

For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9b).

But this is no mere crusade. It is personal and eminently conciliatory and comforting to the soul.

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 25:8).

It is not without cause that Isaiah pens the words:

You will keep *him* in perfect peace, *whose mind is stayed on You*, because he trusts in You (Isaiah 26:3).

It should ever be the quest of the Christian to keep our minds “**stayed**” (*samuk*-lean, lay, rest) on Christ.

It is worth noting the prophecy contained in Isaiah 28:11. The “**stammering lips**” of 1 Corinthians 14:21 was a sign of God keeping His promise of the New Covenant. This is why it is called a *sign* gift.

In chapter forty the tone of Isaiah appears to focus upon Divine grace and comfort. So much so that higher critics will say it was written by someone other than Isaiah, though with no solid evidence. Someone might as well say that C. S. Lewis could not have written the Chronicles of Narnia because the tone of it is so unlike Mere Christianity. It is not a different author, it is a different subject.

It is here that we are reminded, as Jesus even taught (Matthew 24:35), that the...

...flower fades but the word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

Isaiah bids us to have a Divine perspective with the words,

Behold, the nations *are* as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales (Isaiah 40:15).

Conversely, we are encouraged...

But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew *their* strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

May our hearts and minds always be fixed upon such uplifting truth! But before the uplifting truth and exaltation, there would be the humiliation and suffering. Isaiah specifies and individualizes. It would not be the victory of a nation or a people but of a person. Jesus would set His “**face like flint**” for Jerusalem (Isaiah 50:7; Luke 9:51).

I gave My back to those who struck *Me*, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting (Isaiah 50:6).

We will finish with a brief perusal of the ultimate message of Christ in this book. But first let us appreciate the cosmic victory of

the One Man who truly donned **“the breastplate of righteousness and a helmet of salvation” (Isaiah 59:17).**

Isaiah uses the largest and smallest images available to express the galactic and minute nature of the victory of Christ.

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you; but the Lord will be to you an everlasting light, and your God your glory (Isaiah 60:19).

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust *shall be* the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,” says the Lord (Isaiah 65:25).

These promises are so glorious that some don’t believe they can happen apart from Christ returning and completing what the cross has apparently left undone. Let us not doubt the power of the cross. There is a great deal to discuss in terms of eschatology (end times) and heaven when we read these words, words which speak of the new heavens and the new earth. Suffice it for the time to say that the beginning of these promises are found in the resurrection and they will be fully consummated in glory. But let us complete our study of Isaiah with a focus upon the heart and power of this redemption.

Christ in Isaiah

The heart of all redemption is found in the sin-bearing **“Servant”** whose **“visage was marred more than any man” (Isaiah 52:13, 14).** It is against the mentality of image-makers that Isaiah informs us that there was nothing about the way Jesus would appear that would or should attract us to Him.

He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, *there is* no beauty that we should desire Him (Isaiah 53:2b).

By nature, men would reject Him and hold Him in contempt (53:3). But He would bear **“our griefs”** and carry **“our sorrows”** (53:4). He would step in and endure that which we could never endure: being **“smitten by God”** (53:4). As the great substitute, He would not merely stand before a bus or a train but stand before the wrath of God and be **“wounded for our transgressions...bruised for our iniquities.”** The **“chastisement for our peace was upon Him”** (53:5).

We had gone astray, and the Lord **“has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”** (53:6). And we serve no reluctant Savior, but one who endured the depths of hell **“for the joy that was set before Him”** (Hebrews 12:2). Isaiah says it this way:

He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:11).

From this verse we learn that true righteousness, our justification (our declaration of righteousness) comes by faith, by **“knowledge”** of God’s **“righteous Servant”** (53:11).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some reasons people give for not believing the Scriptures? Is there a deeper way to understand this? Explain.
2. How was Isaiah unique as a prophet?
3. Describe the historical context during the writing of Isaiah.
4. What was the condition of Israel at the time of Isaiah?
5. God calls us to “reason.” What is the conclusion of our reasoning?
6. Explain how a rejection of God leads to a compromised ability to discern good from evil.
7. Isaiah chapter six chronicles a unique event. What was this event and how was it unique?
8. How does a child fit in to Isaiah’s prophecy of deliverance?
9. How does Isaiah bid us to have a Divine perspective?
10. Discuss the cosmic significance of the victory of Christ.
11. Meditate upon the beauty of Christ in Isaiah 53.

Part XXIV - Jeremiah

No Balm in Gilead?

John 5:39; Jeremiah 9:23, 24

October 20, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty *man* glory in his might, nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I *am* the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

Introduction

Often have I pondered and been stirred and encouraged in comparing the ministries of Jeremiah and Jonah. One might even say that contrasting these two prophets has formed a theme by which I have sought to govern my ministerial efforts. How were these two similar and how were they different?

One might argue that their only similarity was their prophetic office. Their audience was different. Their attitudes were different. And their outward effectiveness was different.

Jeremiah prophesied right in the bosom of the covenant people, Judah and Israel. Jonah prophesied to the enemies of God’s people, Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria. Jeremiah was obedient and heartbroken as he sought repentance among his fellow countrymen. Jonah was resistant and cold in the mission God had set before him. Jeremiah was utterly ineffective in achieving any form of grateful response or repentance in the target of his ministry. Jonah, by some estimates, had a million converts. So, who would (or should) a church hire? Jeremiah or Jonah?

We should be a bit careful before we blurt out an answer. It is not as if numbers have no significance at all. At the beginning of the

New Covenant church, the Spirit of God found it fitting to give a tally of the converts.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41).

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand (Acts 4:4).

It is possible to have an unhealthy contentment with outward ineffectiveness. We might be quick to comfort ourselves that our churches are empty due to the “**offense of the cross**” (**Galatians 5:11**), when there might be many other offenses that are not so flattering. The offense of neglect, coldness, self-centeredness, indifference may all contribute.

At the same time, the mega-church movement might be too quick to hire a Jonah due to his utilitarian value. How ideal for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, not to mention the church budget, to have a man in the pulpit who converts millions! Of course, my illustration has its limitations. The message of judgment that Jonah will bring (we will examine when we get there) would not be easily accepted in the western mega-church. When we get right down to it, Jonah still spoke the word of God.

In this introduction I am not focused on the pragmatism of successful ministry (at least not in what I have always drawn from the comparison of the two prophets). I am talking about that which is precious to God, over and above outwardly successful ministry.

When we look at Jonah, we see many things to avoid: Disobedience to God; disinterest in the salvation of sinners; impatience and frustration. When we look at Jeremiah, we see one of the greatest Old Testament prophets exhibiting the obedience, love, sorrow, courage and patience of Christ. How Jeremiah would have loved to have been as effective as Jonah! If you truly desire to minister at any level, never be a Jonah at the expense of being a Jeremiah.

In forty years of ministry, Jeremiah never had a single convert. Truly, Jeremiah provides an example of true biblical love, a love that

“endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). The true laborer of Christ labors not for reciprocation but in response to Christ having labored for us, to deliver us from death and darkness. We, along with Jeremiah, are to imitate Christ:

...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

Survey of Jeremiah

What is the book of Jeremiah about? He prophesied roughly eighty to one hundred years after Isaiah (roughly 600 BC). His ministry lasted about forty years and extended through the reigns of five kings: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. The book is not an easy read because it is not all organized in chronological order. The historical context of Jeremiah has been called *Judah’s Midnight Hour*. Where Isaiah still was a distance from the captivity and exile of Judah, Jeremiah was in the midst of it. God’s people were about to enter a very difficult chapter in their existence.

How does God prepare us for the trials that are ahead? Jeremiah’s ministry would be so marked with difficulty that he is known as *The Weeping Prophet*. What do I need to know that will prepare me? We see in the opening chapter:

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” Then said I: “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I *am* a youth.” But the Lord said to me: “Do not say, ‘I *am* a youth,’ for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for I *am* with you to deliver you,” says the Lord (Jeremiah 1:4-8).

Let us not enter any quest or any season without a hearty acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God in the events before us

and His preparation and choosing of us for whatever the day may bring. Jeremiah needed to know that God knew him before he was yet formed. Let all Christians enjoy and be emboldened and comforted that God **“foreknew”** us (Romans 8:29).

And God did not merely foreknow but He also ordained Jeremiah to his office. Similarly, all believers are to embrace that **“whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son” (Romans 8:29)**. We have not accidentally fallen into the kingdom of God. Let us be comforted and given resolve in knowing there is Divine and sovereign purpose to all things.

We also see in the above, there is a Divine equipping. We, similar to Jeremiah, must recognize that God will equip us for the task at hand. We often hear this in the benediction at the close of our service: May the **“God of peace...equip you with everything good that you may do his will” (Hebrews 13:20, 21)**.

Jeremiah is also informed in advance that there will be difficulties. Again, God charges and comforts, **“do not be afraid...for I am with you” (Jeremiah 1:8)**. So should every believer also be charged and comforted with the knowledge that Christ is with us always, **“even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20)!**

The Old Testament Covenant people of God had become faithless and disobedient. First, they would deny and then defy the living God. They had played the harlot and God would issue **“a certificate of divorce” (Jeremiah 3:8)**. The consequence of this sin would be exile. To be sure, there is a promise of restoration, but let us be mindful of the wretched condition into which Judah had fallen.

They had evil thoughts (Jeremiah 4:14), accompanied by evil deeds. Jeremiah’s soul had become **“weary”** in contemplation of the **“murderers”** by whom he was surrounded (Jeremiah 4:31). But there is a continual punish/restore, theme through the book.

But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you’ (Jeremiah 7:23).

In all of this, Jeremiah was no mere transmitter of information. He felt the ministry. Truly, we are to be governed by the truth of God's word. But true ministers will find in time (some sooner, some later, some more, some less) that they cannot be indifferent to the joys and plights of their congregants. It is an all-call, but how much deeper for those who would minister, to...

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

And Jeremiah's weeping was great, for there was...

...no balm in Gilead (Jeremiah 8:22).

Gilead was rich with this medicine, this balm for human wounds. But the balm for the iniquities of Judah would not be applied, nor would they even recognize their need for it.

Yet you say, 'Because I am innocent, surely His anger shall turn from me.' Behold, I will plead My case against you, because you say, 'I have not sinned' (Jeremiah 2:35).

How like the Pharisees during the time of Christ!

Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31).

As earlier stated, Jeremiah was ministering within the boundaries of the covenant people of God. Unlike the Ninevites, they were in a state of apostasy/backsliding/turning away from the things of God and God Himself. And in this respect, it mirrors our own western evangelical culture.

It is true that evangelicalism has never been pristine, but neither was Judah. We should not think of *going back to better days* in some sort of foggy nostalgia (keep in mind, the past led to the present). No, we are to move *forward* to wiser and more godly days.

This, we shall see, is the promise given: a future superior to the past. But let us be aware of that which deteriorates a people. It was true of Judah and it is just as true today.

National decline is due to the disregarding and disobeying of God. And it has been said:

Once national downgrade has set in, it is not easy to check the momentum. The wrong which is indulged in by those in authority soon becomes the fashion among the people at large.²⁸

The answer to their swirling into the pit was on the lips of Jeremiah: the word of God. Yet the king burned God's message in the fire (Jeremiah 36:27) and put God's message and messenger in a dungeon (Jeremiah 38:6).

I spoke to you in your prosperity, *but* you said, 'I will not hear' (Jeremiah 22:21).

To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed their ear *is* uncircumcised, and they cannot give heed (Jeremiah 6:10).

God spoke to them in their prosperity and they *would not* hear. He spoke to them in their adversity and they *could not* hear. In the midst of their rejection of the truth, there was no shortage of liars and their lies. False prophets were in abundance. But the lies do not fear the truth, though they should.

"The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What *is* the chaff to the heat?" says the Lord. "*Is not* My word like a fire?" says the Lord, "And like a hammer *that* breaks the rock in pieces" (Jeremiah 23:28, 29)?

²⁸ Baxter, 269.

It is little wonder that those who promote lies, as moved by the father of lies (John 8:44), are not merely concerned with telling lies, but halting the truth.

Judah would end up in captivity in Babylon, where God would not entirely abandon them but preserve and instruct them. They were to live there peacefully, build houses and have families, pursue and pray for peace (Jeremiah 29:5-7). There is much to say on this, but all I will briefly state here is that there are some who view the entire world as Babylon and see us as exiles. As one Christian said to me as I sought to apply my Christian faith in life and culture, “Why are you so concerned with Babylon?” as if I should remain in my Christian cloister. I am concerned with Babylon, because I love the Babylonians! God would have me minister to Babylon. I am called to pray for it (Jeremiah 29:7). How should I pray?

Of course, the Babylonians would eventually be destroyed by the Medes, the Medes by the Greeks, the Greeks by the Romans, and so forth. But there is a wonderful promise that outlives all those kingdoms, and we shall now discover where He is present in Jeremiah.

Christ in Jeremiah

Where is Christ in Jeremiah? Yes, there is the more immediate fulfillment of these promises and the rebuilding of the wall, city and temple. But the promise goes beyond the history of Israel and extends in a deeper, stronger, larger and more vital way to the ends of the earth through knowing God.

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty *man* glory in his might, nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I *am* the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

From Adam to the last man standing, our peace is found in knowing and seeking to understand God—the God who exercises

lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness on the earth. It is He who is the true balm of Gilead.

It was in anticipation of their return to the Promised Land that God uttered those comforting and strengthening words:

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

To what extent this applies to any people in the course of history is determined by their inclusion among the covenant people of God. This is a promise made to God's people and may apply to the individuals, families, churches, communities, cultures and nations made up of those people. For the promise extends across the borders of time and nations. Jeremiah, on more than on occasion, sets his sights on the ultimate fulfillment of restoration and redemption. Let us finish with a consideration of these words:

In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this *is the name* by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS For thus says the Lord: 'David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel' (Jeremiah 33:15-17).

And what Man would sit on the throne of David, the king? Who would be that King? Speaking of David, Peter taught:

Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption (Acts 2:30, 31).

The ultimate promise from the lips of Jeremiah, the promise of the true and eternal future and hope, is the promise kept in and by Christ. He is the means by which we come to know and understand God unto life. This is most certainly contained in those words uttered from the lips of our Savior Himself:

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Compare Jeremiah to Jonah. How were they similar? How were they different? What can you learn from this?
2. Are numbers important to God? Explain your answer.
3. What was the condition of Judah during the ministry of Jeremiah?
4. Is it important to understand the sovereignty of God in our Christian life? Why or why not?
5. What is the balm of Gilead?
6. How can the leaders of a nation affect its citizens?
7. To what extent should we fear the lies? Explain.
8. How is today's world like Babylon? How is it not like Babylon? What are some dangers here?
9. Jeremiah was written six hundred years before Christ. Do we see Jesus in Jeremiah? How and where?

Part XXV - Lamentations

Death of a Nation, Birth of a Kingdom

John 5:39; Lamentations 3:22-25

November 3, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him (Lamentations 3:22-25).

Introduction

Perhaps I am hoping against hope that someday Reformation Day will surpass Halloween in popularity. Not that I am seeking to invoke a false, man-made holiday (for Christians, their only true holiday is the Lord’s Day). Yet there is something to be said for commemorating significant historical events, either in the life of families or cultures.

Having read Lamentations during a week where two starkly different types of activities were running the gamut of dialogue (Halloween and Reformation Day), my mind was rattling between darkness and the light, life and death. For Lamentations very much chronicles the painful intimacy behind what might be called the *Death of a Nation*. But so like the theme of new life, sown through God’s history of redemption contained in His word, darkness and death is not final. The *Death of a Nation* foretells *The Birth of a Kingdom*.

Again, I pondered the Reformation. How early in the sixteenth century the city motto of Geneva was “*Post Tenebras Spero Lucem*.” After darkness I hope for light. But when the Reformation had its affect upon that community, the motto changed. The new motto was “*Post Tenebras Lux*.” After Darkness Light. The difference may appear slight, but in reality it is massive.

Our tendency to view the difference to be minor may have to do with the weak way the word “hope” (*elpis* in Greek) is often used. We regularly use hope to express a faint wish or desire for some unlikely outcome. But in the Scriptures, the word conveys a sure expectation of an unseen or future event or promise. One has current hope due to the surety of a promise of something unseen or future.

For example, in medicine a patient may be experiencing the weak hope of recovery because their insurance company is holding back, or the physician gives the procedure a small chance of success. But, by analogy, a Biblical hope would be more akin to the doctor communicating, as you go under, that he has done this surgery over a thousand times and has every time succeeded.

The distinction between “*Post Tenebras Spero Lucem*” and “*Post Tenebras Lux*” were adages which showed how the assurance of the Gospel had been recaptured. The tenor of the faith leading into the Reformation was one of self-dependence. Perhaps not entirely self-dependence and maybe not even primarily self-dependence, but self-dependence nonetheless. It only takes a bit of poison to contaminate the cup. And there is nothing that contaminates the cup of blessing found in Christ than to seek to interject a bit of self!

The glory and peace of the Gospel which motivated the change from a hapless hope to a blessed assurance was the knowledge that we are “**justified**” (*dikaio*, declared righteous before God) by faith alone in Christ alone. *Our hope is not found in the will or strength of man but in the promise of God.* This promise is founded and fulfilled in the love, grace and power of the cross of Christ *alone*.

This all seems so simple, yet it is constantly the fight of the faithful to maintain this message, this news, this Gospel. But one might ask, “Where are the good works?” Simply put, good works are the necessary fruit of salvation, not the seed or ground of salvation. And when a people abandon the faith they will inevitably and necessarily abandon the practice; this is the necessary order.

Or to more fully present the vicissitudes of redemptive history in the Old Testament: God calls a fallen people out of the darkness and they, for a time, will believe and walk in a manner consistent with that belief/faith. In time (perhaps generations), they begin to walk away from the faith which is always accompanied by dark actions, very dark. But God has made a promise to His beloved that this

darkness will not ultimately prevail. After the darkness there will be light: ultimately and finally the light of Christ.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Survey of Lamentations

It may be argued that in the peaks and valleys of redemptive history, Lamentations lies in the bottom of the lowest valley. It is the death of a nation. It opens with the grim description:

**How lonely sits the city *that was full of people!*
*How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations (Lamentations 1:1a)!***

Jerusalem's plight is presented through a series of acrostic poems, likely designed for memory. The first, second, fourth and fifth chapters each have twenty-two verses. The third chapter has sixty-six. In the first, second and fourth chapter, each verse begins with the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which contains twenty-two letters (in English it would be A for 1 or B for 2, etc.). In the third chapter the Hebrew alphabet acrostic is contained in every three verses. The fifth chapter does not contain the acrostic but still has twenty-two verses.

These poems also give varying perspectives. We observe Jerusalem's affliction through the eyes of the prophet, from Jerusalem's own eyes, from the perspective of Jehovah's righteous anger and so forth. The event of Lamentations is the destruction and humiliation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

What we read of in this sorrowful book is how the Lord afflicted His own covenant people due to their transgressions. Truly, it can be said that they were led into captivity for their own good. This is how God would preserve the remnant, lest the entire nation become as Sodom. Captivity has its own way of producing and preserving true salt. But this is not to say that it was a pleasant ordeal.

In her destruction, Jerusalem would be reminded of the pleasantries of her past **“that she had in the days of old” (Lamentations 1:7b)**. How easily and quickly we forget what leads to a happy and healthy culture! We learn how Jerusalem became short-sighted:

...she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible (Lamentations 1:9).

There are numerous ways one can bring a cautionary remembrance of a statement like this to bear in our lives. First and foremost is our eternal future. The path of darkness directs to an eternally dark and damned destiny, while the path of the light will find its ultimate destination in true light and glory and endless joy. But there is also a call to think of the future in terms of past history.

Much of today’s economic plight (as some have argued) can be traced back to a statement made by a man advising Roosevelt during the thirties and forties, the statement being, “In the long run we are all dead.” There is some debate as to what he meant by that, but my only point here is how dangerous and unhealthy it is to fail to consider the future. This is something that some of the more popular brands of eschatology today have contributed to.

As we read on in Lamentations, we learn that often times the means by which God brings His judgment to nations is not earthquakes and lightning, but rather His use of other nations. In this case, it was the nation of Babylon. And though we haven’t the time, in one sermon, to plunge ourselves into deep descriptions of each type of affliction, the judgment is so severe that it is highly uncomfortable to even mention in a public message. Suffice it to say that the hand of oppression becomes so terrible that the most intimate familial relationships go beyond most of our worst nightmares (see Lamentations 2:20).

Going back now to the events in Jerusalem which lead to this righteous, yet severe judgment, we get a glimpse of the condition of the practice of true faith. The Scriptures are not unclear that the world will view the church with contempt. But we live in an age now where even *believers* view the church as expendable. There is a Biblical form of judgment where God gives us what we desire (Romans 1). And if we desire true impiety, God will grant it.

He has done violence to His tabernacle, *as if it were* a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly; the Lord has caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest (Lamentations 2:6).

A great and popular error says that if we ask God to leave, He will do the gentlemanly thing and obey our wishes. In a certain sense we may say that God leaves. He leaves us to ourselves and to the creation of our own religions which, in our guile, we won't call *religion* but *reason* or *sensibilities* or *the will of the people*. It is a great judgment when God brings our minds to forget His word and sacraments! And the resultant condition is often repeated in Lamentations:

You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. And I said, "My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord" (Lamentations 3:17, 18).

The never-ending quest for a soul endowed with peace may be offered but is never delivered by the things of the world. How true are the words of Augustine:

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.

You will sometimes heard it argued that the blessings and curses as applied to nations based upon their faithlessness and rebellion was unique to Israel and therefore should not be applied to nations throughout history. Yet the nations surrounding Israel were judged and brought to nothing due to their rebellion against God, and there is no good reason to conclude that God no longer has anything to do with nations in terms of their longevity and blessedness. It will be true throughout the course of history:

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord (Psalm 33:12).

Christ in Lamentations

As mentioned earlier, *Post Tenebras Lux* is clearly a theme in Lamentations. And there would be deliverance for Israel, and the city, the wall and the temple would be rebuilt. But all of those temporal blessings were designed to bring their hearts to the true **“light of the world” (John 8:12)**, who is Christ Himself.

When Jesus taught that the Old Testament testified of Him, how can we but appreciate one of the most comforting and well-known passages in all of Scripture, which jumps out like a trumpet in the midst of a dirge?!

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him (Lamentations 3:22-25).

Kingdoms come and go. The faithfulness of the most altruistic, philanthropic, ardent and self-controlled believer is marked with failure and iniquity. But the **“steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.”** We grow impatient of others and, if we’re honest, we come to the end of our ropes even in our self-examination. But **“his mercies never come to an end.”**

I’ve grown quite fond of saying *his mercies “are new every morning because our sins are new every night.”* Though we should never view God’s mercy and grace as a license for sin (1 Peter 2:16), it is beyond comfort to know (as one translation puts it) **“His compassions fail not” (Lamentations 3:22 NKJV)**. It is worth noting that God’s mercies being new every morning is a bit of a literary device for the benefit of the reader. It’s not as if God runs out of mercy at the end of a long day. It is I who need to wake up and be reminded of them.

As if he is speaking in his deepest honesty, Jeremiah is telling us what his soul says: **“The Lord is my portion.”** “Portion” is a funny word and can be used many ways. It can refer to the spoils of war or food eaten in a ceremonial meal. It can refer to an inheritance or an affiliation in a person’s company or community. Almost any

one of those translations would appropriately refer to Christ. We belong to Him, He belongs to us, His inheritance is ours and we ever feed upon Him for the nourishment of our souls.

**The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup
(Psalm 16:5).**

All of this is why it is fitting and wise that we **“hope in Him.”** For it is not as if all these rich blessings are bestowed indiscriminately upon humanity. It may be called a sign that this belongs to **“the soul who seeks Him.”** And how does one seek after Christ? It is a conscious setting of one’s mind and heart on the Person of Christ presented in the Scriptures. It is in believing that He died, and died for *you*—this is commonly referred to as *faith*. And it involves a willingness to follow Him in lifelong obedience as our wise and loving Master, which is commonly referred to as *practice*.

For those who are in this grace, after the darkness there will be light indeed.

Questions for Study and Mediation

1. Compare and contrast the two Latin phrases *Post Tenebras Spero Lucem* and *Post Tenebras Lux*. What do they mean and why did one replace the other?
2. How do we misunderstand and misuse the word 'hope'?
3. What role does good works place in the life of a Christian? What role does it not play?
4. What was the condition of Jerusalem when Lamentations was written? Why was Jerusalem in that condition?
5. Where do we see Christ in Lamentations?

Part XXVI - Ezekiel

A Heart of Flesh, A Holy Temple, A Healing River

John 5:39; Ezekiel 36:24-27

November 10, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them* (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

Introduction

Watching the news can be so disturbing that we may opt out of following current events. Drug cartels shooting entire families; political unrest reaching levels of *smear* where one side cannot help but accuse the other of Stalinism, Nazism or some other form of fascism. Christians throughout the world being persecuted, tortured and killed for merely name the name of Christ. And not to speak of the so-called natural disasters of disease, earthquakes, hurricanes and famines.

Of course, reading history books will bring no brighter message. One hardly walks away from reading of the Holocaust, the Conquests of Genghis Khan (where he killed approximately 10 percent of the world's population), the Black Death (14th century) where 70 percent of Europe's population was wiped out, the Armenian Genocide, the Soviet and Chinese Communist Crimes of the 20th century responsible for over 100 million deaths, and more.

Of course, this is all so macabre. Generally speaking, at least here in the west at the micro level, life is good. At least it is good until it isn't. Until we get sick or a loved one gets sick. It is good

until we lose our jobs or someone we love does something foolish and horrible. And both the micro and the macro difficulties pale in light of that which is eternal. Eternal life and eternal death will make the pleasures, pains and passions of this life appear insignificant by comparison.

In terms of pain, the Apostle Paul wrote:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

Conversely, Jesus gives the other side of the eternal equation:

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

In light of all of this, we sure can use a bit of good news! We need healing. And from whence does this healing come? And if this healing is presented as the answer to the plight of man (since this plight is generally the consequence of the sinful human heart), how confident can we be that we, or anyone else, would receive or embrace it?

The book of Ezekiel chronicles a time in Israel's history where their rebellion had so controlled them that they, as a nation, were being judged by being taken into captivity. The world was a dark, dark place. Israel had become like the unimaginably evil nations by which they were surrounded. They shed the blood of those who were not guilty, sacrificed their own children, treated their parents with contempt, extorted the sojourner, engaged in lewd and incestuous actions, accepted bribes, and much more.

And all of this flowed from their idolatry. As much as the natural man repudiates religion, all people are religious at heart. Our guiding principles, urges, motivations, impulses are our gods. And when that god is not God, the fruit is licentiousness, a disregard for that which is good, right and true.

A popular suggestion among today's neo-atheists is that one needn't believe in God in order to do good. They, perhaps with some credibility, will highlight the scandals within Christianity, both now

and in history. But I would argue that what marks Christianity as distinct and necessary is not the superior ethical behavior of Christians (even though it should be, and many times has been, established), but that apart from acknowledging an eternal, self-existent, transcendent, omni-benevolent being (i.e. God) who has revealed Himself to creation, we can't even know right from wrong. Are we not engaged in this very discussion with our friends, neighbors, co-workers and classmates on a daily basis? The difficulty isn't merely doing right. *It is knowing what is right.*

What we read of in the book of Ezekiel, written some six-hundred years before the birth of Christ, is God's answer to the human dilemma. In a reverse order, the book will climax with a beautiful picture of living waters as the healer of the nations. It will specify from whence those waters flow. And we learn how God ensures that we will respond and not be forever trapped in our own blindness: *A Heart of Flesh, A Holy Temple, A Healing River.*

Survey of Ezekiel

As we survey Ezekiel, note the backdrop for this Good News. The backdrop for the Good News is the bad news. Ezekiel himself is one of those taken captive into Babylon where he prophesies against the lying prophets who are claiming that things are just fine, **“saying ‘peace’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 13:10, 16)**, like someone who knows they're sick and should see a doctor listening instead to their untrained and uneducated friends telling them they'll be just fine.

It was the commission of Ezekiel to inform them that things were not fine. It is a great act of love to care for another person's soul. It is also our responsibility before God to, as it were, sound **“the trumpet”** of warning. So deep is this call that to fail, at some level, places their blood on our hands (Ezekiel 33:6).

In the first three chapters of Ezekiel, the prophet sees visions of judgment while being ordained for his task. How ominous and certain the coming judgment! Ezekiel sees winged creatures with four faces and four wings. The faces were of a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. It is said these convey strength, service, intelligence and spirituality. The wings had hands, symbolizing the full capacity for service.

Their wings touched each other, leaving no gap for escape, and they **“turned not” (Ezekiel 1:12)**, demonstrating their undeviating prosecution of their task. We also see wheels within wheels, which turn not. And they are full of eyes. In all of this we are given a picture of the wheels of providence and God’s omniscience (all-knowing). Yet in all of this foreboding judgment, he also sees **“the appearance of a man” (Ezekiel 1:26)**. It is God who appears “in the likeness of enthroned humanity”²⁹ accompanied by **“the appearance of a rainbow,”** indicating His Divine faithfulness. We take comfort in the promise given through Noah that God’s judgment (at least in the negative sense) would not be universal.

Even within Israel there would be those God would mark for safety and redemption. And what picture would be given to signify this?

...and the Lord said to him, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it” (Ezekiel 9:4).

In our current day, there appears to be a great deal of interest in the Mark of the Beast. Not so much in the Mark of God. Suffice it to say, the primary message is not that of a tattoo. The forehead and the hand signify the way one thinks and the subsequent work. One can liken this to faith and practice. We believe (forehead) and we follow (hand).

For the next twenty chapters (4-24) we read of God’s judgment upon His own covenant people. This is followed by fifteen more chapters (25-39) where God addresses the destinies of the surrounding gentile nations. We’ve gone into this in the sermons on previous books, so I won’t labor the issue here except to observe a few significant items.

If the “chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever,” it would appear that the chief end of God is to glorify Himself in order that we might enjoy Him forever. Over seventy

²⁹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 569). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

times in these chapters we read the words, **“They shall know that I am Jehovah.”** Truly, if God were not God, such a motive would be the ravings of a madman.

But there is no higher attainment for humanity than to know God. In his wonderful must-read work, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer opens the book with a staggering quote from a Charles Spurgeon sermon which had been delivered in 1855 (when Spurgeon was just 20 years old!). The entire quote would be well worth reading, but here I will just give the conclusion:

Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that subject that I invite you this morning.³⁰

We complete our survey of Ezekiel with chapters 40-48 and the building of the final temple. The building of this temple becomes a matter of much debate, which we haven’t time to enter into here. A couple of notable things as we seek out where Christ is to be found in Ezekiel.

Christ in Ezekiel

As you may know, the rebuilding of the temple is a matter of great popularity and sensationalism in the modern eschatological (end-time) culture. Suffice it to say (and this may be shocking to hear) that the New Testament mentions the rebuilding of the temple only once.

³⁰ Packer, J.I. (1973). *Knowing God* (electronic ed.). Downers Grove: InterVarsity.

Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).

It is also worth observing that the outer dimensions of the temple (Ezekiel 42:15-20) in Ezekiel equal a square mile which covers a space as large as the whole city (requiring it to traverse bodies of water). It also requires that one explain the source of the water which becomes an impassable river. Add to this, if this temple is yet future and a structure of worship (in which the glorified Christ sits), the animal sacrifices will be reinstated. One must now grapple with the Christology (study of Christ) of a system of worship where lambs are sacrificed in front of the Lamb of God.

All this to say, Jesus was, no doubt, aware of the temple found in Ezekiel when He spoke of the temple of His body. He was, no doubt, aware of the river of flowing waters of that temple when He told the Samaritan woman that **“whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never be thirsty again” (John 4:14).**

On the last day, that great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37, 38).

It is very like a kingdom parable, with the water flowing from the temple begins at the ankles, then to the knees, then a river that could not be crossed (Ezekiel 47: 3-5).

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter (Zechariah 14:8).

So that river of life, that Healing River, is Christ. He is the healer of the nations. But as the risen Savior, what is the means by

which He brings His healing? If we appeal to the image given in Ezekiel, the river flows from the temple. The temple is the body of Christ. But how does the ascended body of Christ continue this healing?

Numerous times throughout the New Testament the church is referred to as the **“body of Christ”** (Romans 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:27; Eph. 4:12; 5:23; Col. 1:24; Heb. 13:3). But the church is only the body of Christ, the temple (2 Peter 2:4), to the extent that it presents Christ and Him crucified, resurrected and ascended, i.e. the gospel. As Paul wrote:

**For I determined not to know anything among
you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1
Corinthians 2:2).**

And we, as Christians, function appropriately in that temple when we, as a royal priesthood, present ourselves as living sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5; Romans 12:1). It is when the church is marked by the true message, followed by loving, sacrificial obedience, that she operates as that Holy Temple, presenting the living waters of Christ.

Yet there is one last operation of grace of which we read in Ezekiel, lest we find ourselves drowning in the waters rather than redeemed by the waters; lest the message conveyed smell of the aroma of death rather than the aroma of life (2 Corinthians 2:16). Because we would naturally resist such a healing medicine, God graciously and effectually brings us to those waters:

**For I will take you from among the nations,
gather you out of all countries, and bring you into
your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on
you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from
all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give
you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I
will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and
give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within
you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you
will keep My judgments and do *them* (Ezekiel
36:24-27).**

So much can be said of the cleansing waters. On the day of judgment, to be declared clean will be glorious indeed! And the true fruit of those who have sincerely called upon the name of Christ will demonstrate the presence of the Spirit of God in their lives by seeking to walk in God's statutes and keep His judgment.

But, that we may know that our redemption is all of grace, we are told that even our embracing of this restoration and reconciliation is by the power and love of God over the will of man. In our natural estate, we are dead to this life-giving message until our hearts of stone are replaced with hearts of flesh, so that from beginning to end the healing of the nations is the accomplishment of the living Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss the highs and lows of this life. How do they compare what awaits us in eternity?
2. What was the condition of Israel during the time Ezekiel was written?
3. During his commissioning, what was Ezekiel initially taught via visions? What encouragement was among these visions?
4. In the Bible, what does the “mark” put on the foreheads mean?
5. What phrase is mentioned over seventy times in Ezekiel? Why is this a good thing?
6. Why is the temple at the end of Ezekiel a controversial topic? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various ways of looking at that temple?
7. What flows from the temple and what does it signify?
8. How do we understand the temple in light of the New Testament/Covenant?
9. How does God effectually redeem us?

Part XXVII - Daniel

A Glorious Quest

John 5:39; Daniel 7:14

November 17, 2019

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom *the one* which shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:14).

Introduction

As a child, as youngsters are wont to do, I got into a bit of trouble. It was a large enough infraction to require our principal to call the fire department. I was ten years old on the playground when someone found one of those emergency road flares. It (somehow) found its way into my hands and I was dared to light it. I took the bait. Moments later I was sitting in the office waiting for the authorities.

Two Redondo Beach firemen walked in, had a brief conversation with the principal, then made their way in my direction. They asked a few questions about how I obtained the flare, then asked me one more question. It was well over fifty years ago, but their response to my answer changed my life to this very day.

Their final question was, “Why did you light it?” to which I responded, “I was dared to.” Then one of them responded, “Son, in this life there are followers and leaders. You need to decide which you will be.” I didn’t decide at that young age that I wanted to be a leader, either as a husband, dad, coach, elder, etc. Those kinds of things weren’t on my mind. But what I did decide (not necessarily always with success) was that I would not allow myself to be overly bullied or influenced by my surroundings, whether those surroundings were moral, academic, social, etc.

It is not likely that those firemen are even still alive. And I'm guessing that my response to them was not one of immediate gratitude. They likely felt their advice had fallen on deaf ears. But it had not. And we all have the opportunity, or responsibility, to bring a bit of wisdom into the ears of those with whom we come into contact, young or old.

I open with this story, as we pursue the book of Daniel, because Daniel is one of the few people in all of Scripture of whom only good is written. Noah, Moses, David, Peter and so many others have their dark story recorded. But not so with Daniel. Daniel is wise, good, faithful and uncompromising, living almost his entire life in captivity. It was not as if the daily news was reporting advances in godliness in Babylon and Persia! And yet this did not deter Daniel.

Since Daniel's story spans so many years, we have the advantage of examining the influences in Daniel's young life and how it poured its virtue out decade after decade. Daniel opens by telling us that Daniel was taken into captivity in **"third year of the reign of Jehoiakim" (Daniel 1:1)**. This means that during most of Daniel's youth, his king was the righteous Josiah. Daniel would have been a teen when Josiah died.

It was also during this time that Jeremiah commenced his powerful public witness. If you recall, Jeremiah was woefully referred to as the "Weeping Prophet" due to the lack of response to his (usually) negative prophetic warnings and utterances. How encouraging it would have been for Jeremiah to know that Daniel, as an old man (perhaps sixty years later), was still pondering the words of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2). Would it not be wonderful to be some Daniel's Jeremiah?

Survey of Daniel

So, what did this influence look like? What comes to the fore when we read the twelve chapters of Daniel? So much of Daniel involves visions of what God will do. Daniel's present faithfulness is buttressed by a certain hope contained in the promise of God (both historically and eternally). Daniel knew that he was a cog in God's plan of redemption, and in this respect, his life was full of meaning, joy, courage and (perhaps above all) contentment. In his pain and

captivity, Daniel knew (as should we) that God had not deserted him, nor would His mission ultimately fail.

As mentioned, Daniel opens with an account of Babylon besieging Jerusalem and taking Daniel (and other young men) captive. From the beginning these specific young men were selected due to their wisdom and intellect that they might be easily trained in the language and literature of the Chaldeans.

Daniel and his three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego) excelled and were far superior to the existing magicians and astrologers in whom the king normally relied. One thing we read from the very beginning of Daniel's captivity is his unwillingness to compromise when it came to Israel's dietary restrictions. Not a great deal is made of this, but small compromises lead to large ones. And an early statement of one's convictions helps strengthen us in later temptations. Even my pagan friends know my convictions and will call me on it if they see me falter.

Daniel's early ascension to notoriety involves his ability to make known and interpret a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar's. Nebuchadnezzar may have been the most powerful person on earth at the time and the lack of ability of his normal wise men to help him with his dream results in him beginning to kill them. Daniel enters the picture, and both recounts the dream and interprets it.

The dream was of a great image with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, a belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, feet partly of iron and partly of clay. A stone was cut without hands strikes the image on its feet and breaks it in pieces and the rest of the image is crushed as well and becomes like chaff in the wind. Then the stone becomes a great mountain and fills the whole earth.

The interpretation of the dream amounts to this: the image represents four kingdoms. Moving from the head downwards is Babylon, then Media-Persia, then Greece, and finally Rome. This is universally agreed upon. It is also universally agreed upon that the stone is Christ who will set up a kingdom that will **“never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44)**. But this is where the universal agreement ends.

Similar to what we will see in the seventy weeks of chapter nine, the more popular and more modern view is that there is a gap (or parenthesis) between Greece and Rome which is the entire church age (from the time of Christ until the Second Coming). And that the stone

actually falls upon a reconstituted Rome rather than the Rome that existed during the time of Christ.

I haven't time to fully address this right now, but this appears to be a solid example of allowing your preconceived theological convictions to drive the way you read your Bible. I do realize that there are times when a passage must be understood in a sort of counter-intuitive way when it appears to clash with the clear testimony of the majority of Scripture. But I will ask you, what is the most natural, literal reading of the text?

I will put this as simply as I can: Babylon will fall, the Media-Persians will fall, Greece (the reign of Alexander the Great) will fall, Rome will come to power, and Christ will be born. His kingdom will begin and the Roman Empire (along with the preceding kingdoms) will be no more. We will touch on this a little more toward the end. We will also pursue why this is important.

Nebuchadnezzar is quite excited about Daniel and his friends. They get promoted and Nebuchadnezzar makes the astonishing statement that their **“God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings” (Daniel 2:46, 47)**. Yet Nebuchadnezzar is an example of the corruption of power. He reveals himself to be moody, capricious and driven by pride.

He has a gigantic image of gold made (ninety feet high and nine feet wide) and demands that everyone worship his god even though he had just called Daniel's God the God of gods! Similar to Daniel, his friends aren't willing to compromise. Not only will they lose their promotions (which would probably be enough to sway most) but their very lives are threatened and they are thrown into a fiery furnace.

Here we read one of the great responses in answer to misguided, usurped authority.

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that *is the case*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver *us* from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).

God grant us the wisdom and boldness to have such resolve!

Nebuchadnezzar is not impressed. He has the furnace heated up to seven times its normal heat (so hot that even the guards bringing them to it are killed by the intense heat). As you no doubt know, the three are not even touched by the heat (even in their smell). Nebuchadnezzar also notices a fourth man in the furnace. There is speculation as to whether that fourth man is the preincarnate Christ or an angel. Suffice it to say, God, in some sense, was present in this miracle.

All of this is followed by Nebuchadnezzar's second dream and a significant impact/lesson in his life. God would reduce him to the level of a beast in order for him to learn that...

**...the Most High rules in the kingdom of men,
and gives it to whomever He chooses (Daniel 4:25b).**

This is followed by one of the most powerful passages in all of Scripture when it comes to the sovereignty of God.

All the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, "What have You done" (Daniel 4:35)?

Oh, that we and today's leaders would seek such deference to the sovereignty of God!

It is also poignant to note here that Daniel advises the king on a proper course of action. I mention this because many will seek to note that even though Daniel had such a high station in Babylon, he never tried to better the politics or the culture. Such is clearly not that case.

Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by *being* righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to *the* poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity (Daniel 4:27).

What a blessing Daniel's influence on the king would be to the Babylonians. But soon we read of a new leader of Babylon (Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar) who did not benefit from the lesson his father had learned, nor did he even know Daniel. So unlike Daniel himself, who had benefited from Josiah and Jeremiah.

Belshazzar was throwing a massive party and using the sacred vessels which had been taken from the temple in a mundane and irreverent manner. They also were (no doubt in a drunken fashion) praising false gods. It is during this feast that a very famous term is coined-*The Writing is on the Wall*. For the 'finger of God' as it were makes an entrance and writes something in the plaster. But no one is able to read it. He offers riches and status to anyone who can. Finally, the queen mentions Daniel.

What a scene this is! "Are you that Daniel?" the king utters. "I've heard of you." As if Daniel is one to be flattered. Then the king offers Daniel riches and status. Daniel answers:

Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation (Daniel 5:17).

Daniel has not come to this event sheepishly, with his hat in his hand; Daniel is respectful when he addresses the king. He then tells the king the story of the king's father (which he had known but conveniently ignored; Daniel 4:22) and informs Belshazzar that he had not "**humbled his heart**" before the Lord of heaven (Daniel 5:23). The writing on the wall was: "**You've been weighed in the balances, and found wanting**" (Daniel 5:27). That very night Belshazzar was slain and Darius the Mede received the kingdom.

It was Darius who was basically tricked into making a decree that no one could bow before any god but him. They did this because they did not like how high Darius had placed Daniel and could find no fault in him to accuse him. They also knew Daniel prayed regularly and publicly. Darius did not want to execute Daniel, but he had to uphold the law he made. Daniel was to be executed by being thrown in the lion's den. God supernaturally shut the mouths of the lion, which pleased Darius who ordered that Daniel's accusers receive that which they were seeking to inflict upon Daniel: to be eaten by lions.

In chapter seven we are first introduced to a term which would become the most common term by which Jesus would refer to Himself: the Son of Man. We will finish this morning with that in a moment, since there is little doubt Jesus had this in mind in terms of how the Scriptures testify of Him. But first, we'll finish our brief survey by noting that chapters eight, ten and eleven address events that will happen between the time this is written and the birth of Christ.

Warring of the kings, the treachery of Antiochus Epiphanes and Daniel's wonderful prayer for the people where, as churches in their imitation confess their sins and appeal to God, not...

...because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies (Daniel 9:18b).

Christ in Daniel

So much of Daniel teaches us of Christ. But no portions teach more than chapters seven, nine and twelve. It is a matter of some controversy, but again I would ask you to read the text most naturally. I say this because in one seminary class, I asked both instructors and students how they could possibly come to the conclusion they had reached. And again, their answer was based more on their theological environment than the plain reading of the passage.

In saying this, I am not bringing you something novel. Though he is not canon, the position I present would be consistent with John Calvin, who was the foremost theologian among the Reformers. I say this because I view novel theology with great suspicion, and so should you. But let us be thoughtful readers. Some say the following passage is the Second Coming, some say it is the Ascension. All agree that the Ancient of Days is God the Father and that the Son of Man is Jesus. Again, what is the most natural reading tell you?

I was watching in the night visions, and behold, *one* like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him (Daniel 7:13).

In all candor, it appears so obvious that this speaks of the Ascension that it hardly seems that an argument must be made. Jesus is not coming to earth here; He is coming to the Father. Why is this important? Because the very next verse speaks of the kingdom that Jesus repeatedly taught was established with His first advent (Matthew 16:27, 28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27; 11:20). It is a kingdom of which we are also a part.

Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom *the one* which shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:14).

It is this kingdom and this authority that Jesus appeals to in the Great Commission when He says that **“all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18)**. This produces the confidence that the gospel, the love of God, will prevail and His bride will be preserved.

Two brief comments by Calvin will help grasp the value. First, that it is the Ascension:

This passage, then, without the slightest doubt, ought to be received of Christ’s ascension, after he had ceased being a mortal man. He says, *He was represented before God*, namely, because he sits at his right hand.³¹

Second, it’s value in the face of attack and persecution:

The Prophet pointed out the perpetual existence of the Church in this world, because Christ will defend it, although daily subject to numberless causes of destruction.³²

³¹ Calvin, J., & Myers, T. (2010). *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel* (Vol. 2, p. 44). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

³² Calvin, J., & Myers, T. (2010). *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel* (Vol. 2, p. 46). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

What immense value and encouragement to Daniel and our brothers and sisters in history and throughout the world today who feel the weight of resistance and the bugle of taps rather than the trumpet of Reveille. Let us not miss as well that we are called to **“serve Him”** in His work of redemption, rather than pining away for a secret rapture, waiting for Jesus to complete some incomplete task. His work is finished. He will come again in judgment. We on the other hand have work to do.

Chapter nine also contains agreement and controversy. There is too much in there to address now. Suffice it to say that the “Seventy Weeks” in Daniel points us to the timing of the work of redemption in its completion. Christ will conquer sin and **“make reconciliation for iniquity...bring in everlasting righteousness” (Daniel 9:24)**. After the sixty-nine weeks, many will assert that there will be thousands of years (of which the Old Testament doesn’t speak) before the seventieth week. But the seventieth week will contain the destruction of **“the sanctuary” (Daniel 9:26)**, which Jesus taught would happen within a generation of His ascension (Matthew 24:2; 34).

Finally, in chapter twelve, we read of the final resurrection. Similar to the words of Christ in John 5:28, 29:

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame *and* everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:2, 3).

The wise, good, faithful and uncompromising life of Daniel was generated by early powerful influences and a keen grasp of the promise and power of God to redeem His people in history and deliver them safely into eternity. May such a spirit be in us, as well!

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Can you think of moments or conversations in your young life that had a significant impact? Explain.
2. What is an early example of Daniel's uncompromising spirit? In what ways can we imitate that? Why is it significant?
3. What are the various views of the stone without hands crushing the image? How do you read this?
4. Discuss the resolve of Daniel's friends with it comes to the gigantic image made of gold.
5. What did Nebuchadnezzar need to learn?
6. Did Daniel seek to better the culture of Babylon? Explain.
7. What was Belshazzar's problem?
8. 'Son of Man' was Jesus' most common designation for Himself. How is it used in Daniel?
9. When did/will Jesus start His kingdom? Why does this matter?

Part XXVIII - Hosea

Just Like the Love of the Lord

John 5:39; Hosea 13:14

January 12, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction (Hosea 13:14)!

Introduction

One of the routine recitations in our church service is the Great Commandment found in Matthew 22:36-40. Jesus is asked “which is the great commandment in the law.” Jesus answers that it is to “love the Lord.” But Jesus adds a second part to His answer. We are also to love our neighbors as ourselves. According to Jesus, this sums up the law. So, we see a relationship between law and love.

One should not think they are truly loving God if they are in violation of the first four commandments. That is to say, if we have other gods before Him; or seek to carve Him (via images) into something other than He is; if we use His name in a vain or empty way; or if we forget the Sabbath and ignore His call to have a unique day where our hearts focus upon Him.

Similarly, one should not think they are loving their neighbor if they are dishonoring to their parents (or other legitimate authority figures); seeking to murder or hasten your neighbor’s death; behave in an unfaithful manner to a spouse; steal from your neighbor, lie to or about your neighbor, or have an unhealthy desire for that which belongs to others.

A person might feel great passion or affection toward God or another person (a neighbor), but when we are in the act of violating these commandments (and by extension, related commandments) we cannot at that moment claim genuine love. At that moment, we are hating God and forsaking true love of our neighbors.

There are clear and objective boundary markers. And we should realize that there are consequences for these transgressions in this life. Everybody tends to look at David (who had clearly transgressed these boundaries) as if he had gotten away with infidelity and murder. But at times I wonder if there were moments when David, in light of the tragic circumstances/consequences of his sin (which included death and darkness among his own children), would have preferred that God would have taken him home rather than suffer the judgment that he had received.

But I would like for us to take a bit of a different turn here. To be sure, the law of God is tailor-made for the human condition and will bring about the best when it comes to all human relationships. At the same time, we should be careful to avoid viewing the law of God as a mere set of rules which are to be kept in order for me to create the best home, church or government.

If there is anything unique to Hosea, it is how personal, intimate and even passionately offensive our transgressions are to God Himself. I will offer here a brief disclaimer. Without a doubt, there are segments of the Christian community that are overtly emotionally based. Feelings, passions, impulses, urges (to be frank, carnality) become a guiding principle of faith and practice.

There are strict prohibitions regarding the danger of this type of pursuit of the faith. It has been convincingly argued that the beginning of the end for Israel (the northern kingdom, of which we read in Hosea) began when Jeroboam organized a worship service **“which he had devised in his own heart” (1 Kings 12:33; see also Numbers 15:39).**

Convenience, novelty, imagination and innovation may be fine (and even enjoyable) in certain categories of life. But we should be as careful in our worship as a surgeon would be in a heart transplant. I wouldn't want my doctor to act upon a feeling that a certain vessel in my chest cavity is not necessary to my welfare. In short, we should be guided by the truth of God's word over and, if necessary, against our feelings.

Having offered my disclaimer, I must say that many of us make no connection between breaking God's laws and breaking God's heart. We tend to think, “He's God, He can take it.” It certainly may grieve us to hurt a loved one. It can be a strong motivational factor for obedience and faithfulness for me to avoid

hurting my wife, children or friends. But in the preface of Hosea (the first three chapters) God will not have Hosea pursue his ministry dispassionately. If I can put it this way: Hosea will be given a small taste of what it feels like to be God—specifically, pain of loving an unfaithful spouse.

There is certainly a context where we are to understand that God is without passion.³³ At the same time, God presents Himself to us as a loving, compassionate Groom, who experiences the pain of faithlessness. We realize that the Lord uses anthropomorphisms (attributing human characteristics to Himself, even though He is not human). But I fear we become too clever when we use such accommodations as an excuse to say to ourselves: He is not really feeling anything. God has never presented Himself that way. From the very beginning, we read:

**And the Lord was sorry that He had made man
on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart
(Genesis 6:6).**

Survey of Hosea

To set the context, Hosea is the last prophet in Israel (the ten tribes of the northern kingdom) before they fell to Assyria in about 722 BC. It is Israel's zero-hour; Hosea has been referred to as the "deathbed prophet." Israel had descended from being a great and prosperous nation to a level of such irreversible corruption and moral decay that judgment was inevitable.

The outward evils which confronted Hosea included swearing and falsehood (4:1, 2); murder and bloodshed (4:2; 5:2; 6:8); robber-gangs, murder-gangs of priests (6:9; 7:1); wide spread adultery (4:2, 11; 7:4); perversion, false-dealing, and oppression (10:4; 12:7); idolatry (4:12, 13; 8:5; 10:1, 5); drunkenness (4:11; 7:5), utter heedlessness of God (4:4, 10, 8:14); adultery and calf worship as part of a religious rite (4:14); and more.

It can be horrifyingly astonishing how rapidly a people can descend. The elderly I worked with for many years were barely able to get their arms around how acceptable it was for Clark Gable to be allowed to cuss in a movie or for unmarried couples to live together.

³³ WCF, 2, 1.

But within a generation those infractions became minor compared to flood of folly and moral bankruptcy that has won the day.

Let us realize the connection between the outward evil and inward ungodliness or apostasy (turning away from the true God). The outward evil is like the sore that surfaces on the skin after the blood has long nurtured an infection. When the enemies of our souls (world, flesh and devil) take captive our understanding of God and the proper worship of God (as with Jeroboam and the golden calves), it is only a matter of time before cultural (and even religious) luminaries take the spotlight to promote all those transgressions that met Hosea.

How would Hosea meet this challenge? How would God prepare Him? In the same way Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, Hosea would be given intense heartbreak before donning the prophetic mantle. The story of Hosea's wife (first three chapters) is a prologue. The prophet began to see (as a result of his own heartbreak) the deepest and most awful significance of Israel's sin: The pain of a broken family.

He was called to marry Gomer, a prostitute, who would then be unfaithful and would eventually sell herself for money and drift into slavery from which he would buy her back (Hosea 3:2). It is here that we read an admonition from God that seems to go beyond what anyone would ever learn in seminary as they prepare for the ministry:

Then the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the LORD for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans" (Hosea 3:1).

God would not allow a mere casual acquaintance. This ministry would be beside Hosea when he awakened and walked through his home. There is a difference between talking to people and sitting with people.

As Hosea would pursue his ministry, one of the recurring themes or challenges he would encounter is summed up in chapter four:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6a).

Similar statements are made in Hosea 4:1; 6:3, 6. It is a sad chapter in any nation's life when ignorance of the truth and the true God prevails. It is compared to a famine.

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord God, “That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

It is a joy for an instructor to know that his pupils are conversant with the word of God. The ministry in China may be immature as they work out their understanding of biblical theology, but when I stood up at the front of the room to teach them I could scarcely begin a verse that every single person in the room couldn't finish.

A couple of statements are made in this category which are quite disconcerting but appropriate for our current spiritual climate. In the midst of their judgment, they cry out, “My God, we know You” (Hosea 8:2), when they did not know God at all. Similar to the warning of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount:

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’ (Matthew 7:21-23)!

The other statement which mirrors our current culture (I might add here that I mention this so we will not be shocked or discouraged when this occurs), is also found in chapter eight:

I have written for him the great things of My law, *but* they were considered a strange thing (Hosea 8:12).

Even Orwell (apparently it was Orwell) seemed to understand this concept, when he said:

The further a society drifts from truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.

Let us be neither discouraged nor surprised if a dying world prefers death.³⁴ Let us also be careful to avoid a retaliatory spirit. In his pain, Hosea was willing to buy his wife back. There is a gentleness we are to display in our love and ministerial pursuits.

I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped *and* fed them (Hosea 11:4).

Sadly, though God had taken the yoke from the neck of Israel, they chose to bull their necks and found themselves under the king of Assyria, an enslaved people.

Christ in Hosea

Yet, sprinkled throughout Hosea we see the promise of a greater deliverance, a deliverance through Christ. God will not abandon His people but promises to change their hearts in the “latter days.”

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They shall fear the Lord and His goodness in the latter days (Hosea 3:5).

³⁴ Calvin commented on this verse: *I have written*, he says, *the great things* of my law. “How much soever they may despise my law, I have yet set forth in it a wisdom which ought to be admired by the whole world; I have in it brought to light the secrets of heavenly wisdom. Since then it is so, what excuse can there be for the Israelites for despising my law?” He says, that *they counted it as something foreign*, when yet they had been brought up under its teaching, and the Lord had called them to himself from their very infancy.

Of course, King David is long dead, so to whom is the text referring? The purpose of David was always to teach us about and point us to Christ. We learn from Peter that at the resurrection, Jesus took the throne of David (Acts 2:30). But it would be a heavenly and eternal throne from which He would rule and reign over all things.

How clearly, and in how many ways, we see Christ in the words of Hosea, penned centuries before the Savior's birth.

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction (Hosea 13:14)!

There is a price to be paid for redemption, that God may be both just and merciful. It is, at times, called a ransom.

...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

As I have shared many times, it was in an effort to comfort a dear friend on the throes of his death, that he, with the force of the tide, comforted me. I had merely checked in with him to see how he was. His response was as brief as it was sweet:

The price has been paid.

In His resurrection, Jesus conquered death. It is at the climax of the Apostle Paul's argument for the resurrection that we read words similar to the prophet's words:

Death is swallowed up in victory. "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54b, 55)?

We read a story like Hosea from afar and are almost fascinated by the folly of trusting in earthly kings and carnal wisdom and rituals over a wise, loving, redeeming and heavenly Father. But we can so easily fall into a similar category when we turn our backs on the

Living God. Let us not follow their example (Hebrews 3:12), but ever trust in a God of such goodness and love.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Describe the relationship between law and love.
2. What role should feelings play in our faith and practice as Christians?
3. Have you wrestled with the idea of breaking God's heart? What does that mean? What are your thoughts on breaking God's heart?
4. What was going on in Israel during the ministry of Hosea?
5. Discuss the connection between outward evil and inward ungodliness. How do they interact?
6. How did God prepare Hosea for his ministry?
7. How are God's people destroyed? Explain your answer.
8. Where do we see Christ in Hosea? What difference has that made to you personally?

Part XXIX - Joel

A Restoration

John 5:39; Joel 2:25

January 19, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you (Joel 2:25).

Introduction

One of the glorious and accurate appeals to the Christian faith is the wonder and beauty of restoration. Job's great account of suffering and perseverance is concluded with the Lord restoring his fortunes, twice as much as he had before (Job 42:10). The parable of the Prodigal Son culminates with a warm and excited reception by the Father accompanied by the best robe, a ring of value, shoes on his feet and a fattened calf (Luke 15:22, 23). He was restored, not merely as a **"hired servant,"** which he would have been satisfied with, but the full privileges of a son.

Sin is a thief (John 10:10). It presents its **"fleeting pleasures"** (**Hebrews 11:25**) and then will leave you penniless, sometimes both body and soul, but at very least in soul. Whether it is our sin individually (as with the Prodigal) or sin in general (as with Job), *the fall of man* has left us with a keen and truthful sense that somebody has pilfered our house. And like a home invasion, there is a sense of loss and violation.

The world seeks to skate above the very thin ice of the sin-plagued world. It dons numerous jackets and expensive skates. It can feel, at least in some sense, how shallow the ice is and how imminent the fall. Pain, sorrow and death are inevitable. No matter how skilled we are in enjoying the moment (a skill worth having; we should seek to enjoy our lives), there is something looming that requires

restoration and the warm jackets of human ingenuity and expensive skates of secular therapy simply cannot fix it.

In this series we are examining how the Scriptures all testify of Jesus. Peter seized that thought when he preached that the prophets of old taught that Jesus would restore **“all things” (Acts 3:21)**. The magnitude of such a restoration extends to all of this groaning creation (Romans 8:22). But the central focus of this restoration is the individual souls of men and women. The Apostle Paul, knowing this, would write,

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

If there is any attribute or virtue which should typify the Christian faith, it is one of reconciliation and restoration. This may include restitution, as with Zacchaeus who restored **“fourfold”** all he had stolen (Luke 19:8), or a general willingness to make things right in broken and difficult relationships.

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Corinthians 13:11).

It can easily be argued that the harshest indictments from the mouth of Christ were aimed against those who were unwilling to forgive and restore. Who does not take a deep breath and entertain second thoughts when praying, as Jesus taught us to pray, that we are to forgive **“as we also have forgiven” (Matthew 6:11)**? This is the only portion of the prayer which Jesus follows up with a brief commentary:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 7:14).

Or consider Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Servant, how due to his lack of willingness to forgive another he would be thrown into jail until he paid (what amounted to be) his unpayable debt (Matthew 18:21-35). *Truly, restoration is at the heart of the Christian faith.*

How many of us have wandered into church hoping, even pining away, for restoration! It may be relationships, health, jobs, reputations, unrealized goals and ambitions, elusive joy or love. Sin has defaced all these things and we want them made right; we want them restored. It is in the book of Joel that God paints a graphic and fully orbed picture of restoration with these words:

So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you (Joel 2:25).

Volumes have been written to describe the utter devastation of swarming locusts. They've been compared to a slow-moving, unstoppable devouring fire. They consume everything in their path. They have no leader but never break rank. From a distance they look like a cloud. They never stop. When a wall or a house gets in their way they blindly rush over or through. If there is water, they don't go around but through and drown, providing a bridge for their companions. When they die their dead bodies produce a stench and often a plague.

The picture painted in Joel is that, due to their rebellion, God would send an army of chewing, swarming, crawling, consuming locusts into Israel. All the farmers can do is to feel shame that the sin of the nation had brought this, and all the vinedressers can do is wail. The joy had withered away, and this message should be conveyed to the children and all the following generations.

May this message not be lost on us. For it is to a people who have come to realize that they were down to the bones of their existence that the message was given; all that they ruined, all that they consumed, the wreckage and debris in which they now sat, would one day be fully restored. And the restoration would be far superior to any existence they had yet known.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you (1 Peter 5:10).

Survey of Joel

This brief book³⁵ opens with the announcement of this invasion of locusts. Joel is likely ministering in Judah, and the nation is in a state of rebellion both morally and religiously. The Lord issues a very dramatic call to repentance with sackcloth and lamentations and the consecration of a fast (Joel 1:13, 14). Five times in this short book we read the phrase, **“The day of the Lord.”** This phrase should not be understood in such a way as to designate one event in human history, but a day of special, great and magnificent visitation by God.

As we move into chapter two, we see that in addition to the swarm of locusts there is a future military threat. Again, the Lord accentuates the devastation.

Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them (Joel 2:3).

In the midst of this the Lord ever offers an appeal to repent and be restored.

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster (Joel 2:12, 13).

³⁵ Written sometime between 900 BC and 600 BC (exact date unknown). The author is Joel, about whom little is known.

In this sin-laden world, the Lord ever offers a path back. Yet His people would not hear. Captivity would be in their future. It is in the midst of their rebellion and devastation that the Lord offers these words of comfort, the words of restoration, that He would **“restore to you the years that the swarming locusts has eaten” (Joel 2:25)**. What would be that mechanism by which this would happen? Let us read of the wonderful promise which follows this pledge of restoration:

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame (Joel 2:26, 27).

As we have learned, there are often more immediate fulfillments of these promises, but the deeper redemptive message comes with the ultimate fulfillment. And here it is not a difficult task to grasp the means by which the presence of God in the midst of His people will take place. For the very next passage is the passage to which Peter will appeal hundreds of years in the future, at the beginning of the New Covenant church.

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Joel 2:28-32).

Christ in Joel

We ask: *Where is Christ in Joel?* It is in Joel that we read one of the premiere prophecies that Christ will be known at all! Jesus had recently been crucified, resurrected and ascended (Acts 1:9). He had ordered the apostles to remain in Jerusalem until they received the **“promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4)**. Jesus had promised that He would send His Spirit to remind them of all the things He had taught them when He was with them (John 14:26; 15:27).

The Day of Pentecost came and it was a singularly miraculous event with the sound of rushing mighty winds, divided tongues as fire and the ability to speak languages they had never learned (Acts 2:1-5). The mockers accused everyone of being drunk (Acts 2:13). But Peter appealed to Joel and the pouring out of God’s Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17). It would no longer be one nation but all peoples.

The message that Jesus had given to the apostles would now be supernaturally recalled and universally proclaimed. The confusion of the languages of Babel which rescued humanity from a false path to the heavens will be reversed and restored, where everyone would hear in their own language the true message of redemption in Christ.

Time does not allow a full treatment of this passage; suffice it to say, the signs, blood, fire smoke, sun turning dark and moon into blood **“before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord” (Acts 2:19, 20)** Jesus taught about on the Mount of Olives in His lesson concerned the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24). They were living in the generation when this would all take place.

Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place (Matthew 24:34).

The promise of the Messiah had been fulfilled and Joel prophesied how it would be successfully disseminated. The Old Covenant would cataclysmically come to an end and the New Covenant would begin to spread.

It is difficult for the modern person (even a Christian person) to realize what a huge event this was. BC would become AD. Many are looking for Christ to come again and do more. He indeed will come again in judgment, but there is no more work to be done. The

entirety of this passage from Joel falls under Peter's finger when he uses the near demonstrative: **"...this is what is spoke by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16).**

We must leave this topic for now, but as I mentioned Peter quoted the entire passage, culminating with the words:

**That whoever calls on the name of the LORD
Shall be saved (Acts 2:21).**

It is the ultimate act of restoration and the source of all restoration. It belongs to those who, by the grace of God, call upon His name.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How is restoration a beautiful attribute of the Christian faith?
2. In what respects is sin a thief? What does it steal? How is what is stolen restored?
3. How important is restoration, reconciliation, forgiveness in the teaching of Christ?
4. What do locusts do? Can you think of some applications in your own life?
5. What does the phrase “day of the Lord” mean?
6. How do we access the path back to restoration? How does Joel point us to Christ?

Part XXX - Amos

Nor a Son of a Prophet

John 5:39; Amos 7:12, 13

February 2, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Then Amaziah said to Amos: “Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread, and there prophesy. But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is the royal residence” (Amos 7:12, 13).

Introduction

I can’t say I’ve ever been a fan of Ricky Gervais. I’ve always found him to be a bit of an aggressive, condescending, neo-atheist who doesn’t always accurately represent his opponent’s side. Having said that, I must say that his opening monologue at the recent Golden Globe Awards may be the best speech ever at a Hollywood award ceremony. I say “may be” because I don’t generally watch award shows and a great portion of what he said was bleeped out in the feed that I did watch.

Nonetheless, I am not alone in my assessment. Other than the people who were actually in the room (and maybe some of their fans) the monologue received stellar reviews. I have no intention of repeating his jokes, many of which were foul and censored by the time it hit popular outlets. But it was not merely that his jokes were funny (no doubt that was part of it) or that they were, in large part, true, especially his chastisement about the Hollywood elite knowing nothing about the “real world.” It went beyond that.

What I think was impressive to many people was his willingness to say these things to a room full of the most powerful people in his industry, some of whom are the most powerful people/companies in the world (e.g. Apple,³⁶ Amazon, Disney). Perhaps this is why his monologue was laden with indications that

³⁶ Apple CEO Tim Cook was in the audience.

this would be his last time hosting. He could say all these offensive things without fear of not being invited back. Add to that his mogul status. His income has reached into the hundreds of millions (he produced the American version of *The Office*), which also gives him a great deal of liberty.

How rich or strong does one have to be in order to have no fear of repercussions? It is one thing to be respectful and sensitive to your audience (whether your audience is huge or is only one person), it is another thing to grovel or fear how they may respond to what you have to say. We all may think we're above this, but we fool ourselves. If we realize that what we're about to say may have a negative impact upon us economically, socially or in terms of our reputation, we may find ourselves stifled.

I mention these things because Amos was not a prophet, nor **“a son of a prophet” (Amos 7:14)**. He was a farmer and shepherd. But when the Lord called him to prophesy, he obeyed unapologetically. He might be compared to a streetwise kid from Brooklyn called to deliver a message to the Queen of England. It was a time of political stability and prosperity in Israel and Judah. But it was also a time of idolatry, extravagance and corruption.

There was no interest in what Amos had to say. In fact, there were concerted efforts to shut him up. Amaziah, **“the priest of Bethel” (Amos 7:10)**, accused Amos of conspiring against the king.

Then Amaziah said to Amos: “Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread, and there prophesy. But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is the royal residence” (Amos 7:12, 13).

In other words, ‘Get out of here.’ Now, I don’t think it is necessarily a good idea to immediately rush to harsh tones in a conversation. You’ll catch more flies with honey than vinegar, or to put it in Biblical terms, **“the goodness of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4)**. Yet there are times to up the ante in our dialogues. Amos was not about to allow himself to be intimidated into silence. He was ready to be removed from Israel’s social calendar when he referred to the upper-class ladies as **“cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1)** and Israel’s worship songs as **“noise” (Amos 5:23)**.

Let us pray for the boldness of Amos! One of the recurring themes in the New Testament is that God's word went forth with boldness (Acts 4:13, 31; 9:27; 13:46; 14:3; 19:8; 26:26; Eph. 6:19). As he languished in prison, it was the prayer request of Paul,

...that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak (Ephesians 6:19).

Ricky Gervais may be a mogul and worth a hundred million dollars; these are chest-expanding items on a resume. Amos had no such items on his resume. He did not have chariots and horses. He wasn't part of the prophet's guild. And you may not either. But when the King of kings and Lord of lords indicates that it is time to speak the truth, we are to have boldness in the knowledge that He is our Father, He owns the cattle on a thousand hills, He is the maker of the heavens and the earth, and He has promised to be with us.

Survey of Amos

Amos was a prophet in the mid-seventh century BC. The book opens with his prophecies of judgment on the surrounding nations. He did not receive pushback from his congregation when they heard that the hammer was going to come down on their enemies. Things became more difficult for Amos when he turned his attention to God's impending judgment on Judah and Israel, the covenant people of God.

It is much easier to take comfort in the faults of others. But it is never an excuse for our own bad behavior. If you fancy that you are the more mature person, then you should have the more mature behavior. Our primary and strictest judgments and evaluations should ever be focused upon ourselves. It may very well be that judgment begins **"at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17)**. But let us make every effort to ensure that our suffering is as a Christian (1 Peter 4:16). Make sure our first judgment is of ourselves.

For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:31).

Throughout these proclamations of judgments, we see a ‘three-four’ literary model: **“For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment” (Amos 1:3).** This is an often-used Hebraic device indicating what we might call *the last straw*. It was an evil that was both dishonoring to God and inhumane to people.

They did not merely struggle to obey the law of God, as with even the most devout believer; rather, they **“despised the law of the Lord” (Amos 2:4)**. They had engaged in sinful man-stealing slavery, grotesque sexual immorality, drunkenness and more. All accompanied by a command to aid in the way of darkness, that God’s word be extracted from the dialogue:

But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink, and commanded the prophets saying, ‘Do not prophesy’ (Amos 2:12)!

It is truly a sad day when God accommodates our fleshly desires. It is in Amos that we read that God will send a famine on the land.

Not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord (Amos 8:11b).

The truth can be very inconvenient and uncomfortable to those who wish to travel a path of waywardness. And the inevitable victims of this waywardness, when it reaches a national level, are the poor. Those in power will promise them comfort and provision, if they bow the knee, not to God but to them.

They hate the one who rebukes in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly. Therefore, because you tread down the poor and take grain taxes from him (Amos 5:10b, 11a).

In all of this, the people of God would not accept correction. They would receive a series of minor judgments (Amos 4:6-10) before a major judgment would come. God does not grow weary either in His judgments of the wicked or the correction of His own children. He will ever patiently and unwaveringly direct us back to Himself.

There is an old movie that is high on the list of people's favorite movies entitled Cool Hand Luke with Paul Newman, made in the 1960's. The movie is laden with Christian allegory. Luke is on a chain gang for the crime of ripping the heads off of parking meters, so he is much more innocent than his fellow prisoners. He is so unwavering in his convictions that the other inmates find inspiration in him. They begin to live and have hope vicariously through him. They are emboldened by his courage in refusing to bow to unsavory authority figures running the prison.

Yet there is a religious narrative in the movie where Luke is struggling with his own faith. In one of his many escape attempts (this one with the Peter figured in the movie, played by George Kennedy), he finds himself in a church and he begins to pray. It is a touching scene, though not necessarily theologically sound. He is asking God to make sense of his own difficult life. He finally acknowledges that he is a "hard case." The church is silent. He waits for an answer from God. But none comes. And then the Peter figure arrives at the door of the church surrounded by police. Luke laughs and responds: "This is your answer? Well, I guess you're a hard case to."

We may grow weary of doing good. But the same can't be said of God. The great, yet often uncomfortable, promise:

**...that He who has begun a good work in you
will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ
(Philippians 1:6b).**

It must be noted that in all of this, the people of God had not ceased to be religious. How we see that world and the church in Amos. The world loves to point out the faults in the church-the great evils done historically and to this day. I don't argue. One needn't go beyond the text of sacred Scripture to read of evil in the church. We

read that God hated **“their feast days”** and **“the noise of their songs”** (Amos 5:21, 23).

Of course, the contempt the surrounding nations had for an apostate Israel did in no way exempt them from their own judgments. At the same time, a corrupt church gives the world a cause to blaspheme (2 Samuel 12:14). And the salt, light and vehicle of redemption the church is called to be to the world is trampled under foot (Matthew 5:13, 14). All this to say that *being religious* is not always a good thing. We must ever pray and work that our own church not become a stench in the nose of God.

As with the other prophetic books, we learn that Israel and Judah would not repent. They would find themselves in captivity. It is here that we read, time after time, that there is a greater redemptive message than the mere national deliverance of a singular nation. There is another city, **“whose builder and maker is God”** (Hebrews 11:10b). It is toward the end that we begin to see that the central focus of Amos is Christ.

Christ in Amos

As Amos completes his prophetic task there is this yet unmistakable reference to the sun going **“down at noon”** and the darkening of the **“earth in broad daylight”** (Amos 8:9). Though this language is often used as a sign of calamity or divine judgment (Jeremiah 15:9; Ezekiel 32:7-10), all three of the synoptic gospels record this happening at the crucifixion of Christ (Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44). I wouldn't consider it overreaching to conclude that this was a sign of God's divine judgment falling upon Jesus.

Similar to what we have read elsewhere, God **“will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob”** (Amos 9:8). God had made a promise that through Abraham all the families of the earth would **“be blessed”** (Acts 3:25). And God would keep that promise in Christ. We see the promise of Christ in Amos with the words:

On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old (Amos 9:11).

In the book of Acts, we see this fulfilled in Christ:

After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old (Acts 15:16, 17).

John uses similar language early in his gospel:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

“**Dwelt**” *eskenosen* is used only twice: in this passage and in Revelation. It carries the idea of pitching one’s tent. Some might say that Jesus “tabernacled” among us as Immanuel, God with us. Amos conveys a beautiful and uplifting picture of the restoration found in Christ with gardens and vineyards: **“mountains dripping with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13)**. The glorious promise of God bringing back the captives of His people (Amos 9:14) is found in what the wine ever points our hearts to. Let us have that in our minds and meditate upon it as we come to the Lord’s Table this morning.

Questions for Study and Mediation

1. Can you think of circumstances which might tempt you to remain silent when you truly believe God would have you speak? Explain.
2. Are there times when we are called to be more aggressive or assertive in our dialogue? Give an example of a circumstance when that is right or wrong.
3. What are some dangers in taking comfort in the fault of others? Where should our first judgments be and why?
4. What is the difference between struggling to obey the law and despising the law?
5. How can it be a bad thing for God to accommodate our fleshly desires?
6. Explain what the truth does to those who desire to lead a wayward life.
7. How can it be uncomfortable for God to complete His work in us?
8. Where do we find Christ in Amos? How should we respond to this?

Part XXXI - Obadiah

A Protective Father

John 5:39

February 9, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Introduction

I was recently asked to do the memorial service of an old friend. He was a local fellow and fairly young, so the service was very well attended. It became apparent to me, as people stood up and shared their thoughts, that my old friend had been in some sort of twelve-step program. I had been previously unaware of this. But when some of his friends stood and a huge portion of the congregation recited their prayers and poems by heart, I realized that the room was full of people in recovery.

Prayerfully, I considered how this might affect the message I was assigned to give. My friend's wife had strongly encouraged me to give the gospel, which I was more than happy to accommodate. So, I opened my devotion by saying something that I don't normally say in a memorial/gospel presentation. It was something along the lines of, "Clearly, there are many people in this room who understand what it means to come to the end of yourself."

Admitting powerlessness over an addiction is a non-negotiable for someone in that battle. But many people in recovery become very single-minded in their quest for sobriety. This is understandable if you are involved in a behavior that may rapidly ruin or end your life. At the same time, the steps generally conclude with an acknowledgment of a spiritual awakening³⁷ which puts the principles of this practice into "all our affairs."

³⁷ I have no desire here to be overly critical of programs designed to help people through intensely difficult issues. That being said, the notion of a "God, as we understood Him" or a higher power of our own devices can result in a sort of 'out of the pan, into the fire' spiritual scenario.

My point in this memorial service was that there is an enemy which goes significantly deeper than specific addictions that we can't seem to get a handle on. Sin and death and everything that attends those inevitable realities (pain, sorrow, discontent, discouragement, despair, disease, disobedience, darkness, frustration et al) bring the entirety of humanity to the end of itself. It is the acknowledgment of our wholesale inability that brings the human heart to the beginning of the redemptive place, as uttered by the Apostle Paul:

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:24, 25)!

Survey of Obadiah

I open with this as we bring our meditations to the book of Obadiah because Obadiah's single chapter revolves around the judgment of a single nation, Edom. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob. In the Scriptures we do see brothers used to instruct us on the natural and intimate antagonism between spiritual forces. Cain slew Abel, and Ishmael and Isaac were the ill-advised plan of Abraham and Sarah which has been the source of international conflict even to this very day.

Esau is a supreme example of dis-appreciation for that which is spiritual and redemptive. Who has not scratched their head at the seemingly absurd exchange he made of his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup (Genesis 25:34)? It would seem that the only reasonable answer for such a swap would be utter disregard for the birthright. Like Uzzah and the ark, Esau lacked the requisite, thoughtful respect, culminating with a hasty and foolish choice that would affect his progeny for generations. Are we wise and thoughtful enough to gauge how our own decisions may manifest themselves in the years to come?

Unlike that progeny of Jacob, the Edomites would not make it through history. Obadiah 1:10 would prophesy that they would be **“cut off forever,”** which has happened. Why did this happen? What was the undoing of the Edomites? It certainly wasn't because they were a weak, vulnerable and disadvantaged people. In Obadiah 1:3 we read that they dwelt in the **“clefts of the rock.”** They lived in

Mount Seir (Genesis 36:8, 9), which was viewed as virtually impregnable due to the rock dwellings and difficult access. It was also a place of fertile valleys and fruitful soil. It may have been wise of them to utter the proverbial prayer:

Two things I request of You (Deprive me not before I die): Remove falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches—Feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, “Who is the Lord?” Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God (Proverbs 30:7-9).

It does require special maturity and grace to navigate the waters of poverty and/or riches. The Edomites had the riches and that became their undoing. We see it more often in the young and strong, but the destructive attributes of Edom are found in young and old alike. And it often requires our heavenly Father’s paternal afflictions to cure us. Or, as in the case of Edom, if we spurn His Fatherly call, the afflictions are but a pure judgment. In a mere two verses we see a very thorough curriculum vitae of Edom’s cancerous personal properties:

“The pride of your heart has deceived you, *you* who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; *you* who say in your heart, ‘Who will bring me down to the ground?’ Though you ascend *as* high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,” says the Lord (Obadiah 1:3, 4).

We are met with the blinding deception of pride; and undue confidence in their own strength: the supposed impenetrable fortress of their rock dwelling. Who could possibly bring them down??? Like the infamous quote regarding the Titanic that “even God could not sink it.”

The Edomites had engaged in their own structuring of the Tower of Babel, thinking they could ascend as “**high as the eagle**” and set their “**nest among the stars.**” But when God decides it is

time for a ship to sink or a nation to come to an end, His hand is not too short to bring it to pass.

He removes kings and raises up kings (Daniel 2:21).

But why would God bring such destruction upon Edom? Surely, their wickedness made them ripe for judgment. But there was something uniquely evil about Edom. It was their hatred and vindictive spirit toward God's covenant people.

For violence against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever (Obadiah 1:10).

The Psalmist makes this clear:

Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom the day of Jerusalem, who said, "Raze it, raze it, to its very foundation" (Psalm 137:7).

Ezekiel 25:12-14 gives a more detailed account of how Edom acted "**revengefully against the house of Judah**" and how, as a consequence, they would be made "**desolate.**"

The point here is that God has made a promise to preserve His covenant people. This promise extends back to the Abrahamic Covenant:

I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

God kept this promise through all of the Old Covenant with Israel and this promise is extended to the New Covenant in the blood of Christ. We see it in the words of Jesus to Peter:

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Kings and kingdoms come and go. Nations rise and nations fall. But the Kingdom of God through the church of Christ will move victoriously through history. Calvin stated it nicely:

Against all the power of Satan the firmness of the Church will prove to be invincible, because the truth of God, on which the faith of the Church rests, will ever remain unshaken. And to this statement corresponds that saying of John, *This is the victory which overcometh the world, your faith*, (1 John 5:4.)³⁸

But Calvin makes another observation which I believe we should take to heart:

Yet this passage also instructs us, that so long as the Church shall continue to be a pilgrim on the earth, she will never enjoy rest, but will be exposed to many attacks; for, when it is declared that Satan will not conquer, this implies that he will be her constant enemy.³⁹

Let us not lose sight of the spiritual war in which we are all engaged. Now, one last word regarding the transgression of the Edomites. Obadiah has been called the Prophet of Poetic Justice because his prophecy of judgment contains the principle that they will be condemned in the same way they condemned others.

For the day of the Lord upon all the nations is near; as you have done, it shall be done to you; your reprisal shall return upon your own head (Obadiah 1:15).

³⁸ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 2, pp. 291–292). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

³⁹ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 2, pp. 291–292). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Treachery, robbery, sword and destruction is the world in which they chose to live, and it will be the means by which they will be overrun. Jesus briefly called upon this principle when He told Peter that **“all who take the sword will perish by the sword (Matthew 26:52b)**. By these words Jesus wasn't suggesting that there is never a use for a sword (Exodus 22:2; Romans 13:4). But He is saying that if we think that the means by which we will successfully govern ourselves throughout our lives is by human force or even ingenuity, we will have a sad end.

This principle extends into our view of the faith. As we have learned elsewhere, if we have a view of the faith which excludes forgiveness (e.g. **“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”**) then we have a religion devoid of forgiveness; and that lack of forgiveness will be turned toward us. In the same sermon, Jesus taught that we will **“be judged”** by the same judgment that we judge others (Matthew 7:1, 2). That shouldn't be a scary statement to those who live in a religious world which consists of forgiveness, grace and mercy. For the unforgiving person, though, those words should be a terror.

Christ in Obadiah

There are no obvious types or foreshadows of Christ in Obadiah. Similar to most of what we read in God's dealings with Israel, the entirety of the nation typifies and instructs regarding God's promises. It is important to understand (against a very popular error) that the Old Covenant was *not a covenant of works but of grace*. Israel (meaning both the nations of Israel and Judah) was God's Old Covenant Church by the promise of the blood of Christ. It was for this reason that Jesus could teach that the Scriptures, in their entirety, were about Him.

All this to say, citizenship in the Kingdom of God in the New Covenant by the blood of Christ grants us His favor and Fatherly preservation and protection. Let us enjoy the tenderness found in the Old Testament words toward His covenant people. Like a parent, waking up their beloved small child and taking them for a walk around the block:

O Lord, You have searched me and known *me*. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For *there is* not a word on my tongue, *but* behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. *Such* knowledge *is* too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot *attain* it (Psalm 139:1-6).

These Fatherly affections belong to all who call upon the Name of Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is it necessary to admit that we are powerless?
2. In what respect has humanity come to the end of itself when it comes to our greatest enemies?
3. Who were the Edomites and how were they affected by their ancestry?
4. Explain the wisdom of the request found in Proverbs 30:7-9.
5. Describe some of Edom's cancerous personal properties.
6. What were the two main reasons that God brought destruction upon Edom?
7. In what respect should we either judge or not judge others?
8. What does Obadiah teach us concerning Christ and the New Covenant?

Part XXXII - Jonah

A Greater than Jonah

John 5:39; Matthew 12:41

February 23, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12:41).

Introduction

As an undergraduate student, I found myself enrolled in a number of science classes. I quite enjoyed studying physiology, kinesiology, biology, zoology, etc. In these classes I was often surrounded by pre-med students since many of these classes were required for entrance into medical school. Then, for a reason I cannot recall, I took a nutrition class. What I learned in this nutrition class (aside from nutrition itself) was a not-so-subtle clash between the field of medicine and the field of nutrition.

It was common to hear those pursuing a career in nutrition criticize the medical field. The criticism aimed at western medicine was how their focus was restricted to *healing* rather than *preventing* disease. Of course, the physicians had their own critique of the nutritional and holistic approach to healing, as if it were some sort of voodoo. Doctors viewed their disdain for drugs and surgery as naïve and life-threatening.

This bizarre, but understandable, enmity between these fields has seemingly lessened (but, by no means is completely gone) over the years. We have learned that there are certain behaviors that contribute to heart attacks and cancer, and a wise person seeks to avoid engaging in things that will inevitably lead them to an unhealthy life or early death. At the same time, conventional

medicine, with its pharmaceuticals, surgeries and often uncomfortable treatments of disease can be lifesaving.

Let us compare that now to the moral/spiritual battle in which we find ourselves engaged with similar components. Like the nutritionist, the Christian seeks to approach his/her own life and culture with an effort to avoid the disease of sin. God has given us guidelines in His word toward this end. There are certain behaviors and environments that are spiritually and morally unhealthy and so should not be part of public consumption.

It is not difficult to make a biblical argument that cultures/nations that allow and promote grotesque and public immorality and falsehood will yield a people overrun in their own hearts with the damaging effects of sin. It is impractical to think that the endorsement and exploitation of violence, pornography, disrespect for elders and authority figures, abortion, euthanasia, self-centeredness, the myriad of sexual sins and so on, will not be detrimental to the souls of any given society and by extension to the society as a whole.

There is something to be said for fighting a cultural fight to protect the eyes, ears and hearts of a nation. This should not be interpreted as a tacit endorsement of Mormonism, but I felt much safer, in terms of billboards, driving with my children (and myself) through Salt Lake City than through Las Vegas.

At the same time, no cultural battle will ever sufficiently dispense of sin. Sin is a universal disease and churches are to resemble the medical field, Christ Himself being the cure. He is aptly called the Master Physician whose shed blood and broken body is the panacea for the universal human condition of sin and death. Jesus came for those who, by the grace of God, came to know they were plagued with the sickness of sin. When being criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replied:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance (Mark 2:17).

Why do I mention all of this in my introduction to the book of Jonah? Because in our battle to produce a more righteous world, a nation whose God is the Lord (Psalm 33:12), we need to beware of a

natural enmity growing in our hearts against those who are not quite as enthusiastic about heralding the law and gospel of the living God. Those, who by the very nature of the case, are the spiritual enemies of that which is good, right and true. Those who promote that which has tarnished our own hearts and households! It can be very personal. Jonah is an example of someone who harbored an unhealthy disdain for those who were the natural enemies of God's covenant people. Let that thought simmer in your minds as we survey Jonah.

Survey of Jonah

Jonah is a bit different than the other prophetic books in that the prophet Jonah himself is the central character. It opens with Jonah's defiance of God's call in his ministry. Jonah is called to **"cry out against"** Nineveh, but Jonah instead goes to Joppa, pays a fare and gets in a boat going in the exact opposite direction. Joppa is just west of Jerusalem; Tarshish (where Jonah wants to go) would likely be southern Spain, and Nineveh northern Iraq.

Why would Jonah do this? Why would he go **"from the presence of the Lord"** (Jonah 1:3), which in all probability meant a divesting himself of his prophetic office? We're not left to guess; Jonah himself explains why he didn't want to go. He offers the very odd explanation after seeing the repentance of Nineveh and God relenting from His judgment. Normally an evangelist rejoices in the success of his preaching. But not Jonah:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for *it is better for me to die than to live*" (Jonah 4:1-3)!

How do we explain this? Two things come to mind: First, we must try to grasp just how evil the people of Nineveh actually were.

We read that their **“wickedness (had) come”** before the Lord (Jonah 1:2). But just how wicked were they?

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. They have been called the Nazis of the Old Testament. In my studies of Jonah, I had the opportunity to read what archeologists and historians have come to learn about how the Assyrians/Ninevites treated their neighboring and conquered nations. At this point, I will limit my comments to say that they went out of their way to instill a deep fear, by way of cruel, creative and unusual torture, into any person or nation that would dare to defy or challenge them.

All this to say, Jonah’s reluctance to rejoice in their repentance may have been caused by what the Ninevites had done to some of his own beloved countrymen. Many years ago I was leading a Bible study where a young woman had a little sister who had been abused by her preschool instructor. I recall at one point making the statement that we don’t want anyone to go to hell. She immediately mentioned the name of the accused abuser and said, without hesitation, that she wanted him to go to hell. It was a tense moment.

Another possibility for Jonah’s reluctance was that Assyria was the prophesied future conqueror of Israel. Perhaps Jonah thought that if God destroyed Nineveh, it would prove beneficial to Israel. All this to say that Jonah may have had at least somewhat justifiable/understandable reasons for preferring that Nineveh be removed from the equation. After all, God had removed other nations.

But God had other plans for Nineveh. He would send them an evangelist, albeit a reluctant one. Jonah had devised his plan to get in a boat to sail to Tarshish but God would direct his steps and send a great storm. The boat on which Jonah slept was being ripped apart and its crew was making every religious and rational effort they could think of to keep it afloat. They threw out all the cargo and each one, though pagans, cried out to their respective god, each man except Jonah.

Now all the attention turns toward Jonah. Why had he not cried out to his God? There must have been something unusual about this storm/event because they seemed to understand that this storm was caused by some transgression on the part of the crew. So, they cast lots to figure this out and it fell on Jonah. Then the interview begins.

They want to know who caused this trouble. What was Jonah's occupation? Where was he from? What is his country? Who are his people? Then Jonah, perhaps unwittingly, becomes an evangelist again. *I am not sure who you guys are praying to but...*

...I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land (Jonah 1:9b).

Whether you're an evangelist, missionary, pastor or church member, God may choose to use you, not merely once you get to your destination, but on your way as well.

Of course, the mariners on this ship want to know how to resolve the present issue. Jonah gives the easy answer, **"throw me into the sea" (Jonah 1:12)**. However we read Jonah and interpret his reluctance to go to Nineveh, it doesn't seem to be due to cowardice. At what exact point the crew is converted is difficult to say. They quite immediately enter into a time of prayer to the true God at the prospect of throwing an innocent man into the sea. This prayer followed what may have been their first lesson they learned as Christians, which is *'You Cannot Save Yourself.'* They paddled like crazy to get to the shore but could not.

It got down to this: they had to trust the word of God from the lips of Jonah that they would be saved through the shedding of **"innocent blood" (Jonah 1:14)**. They obeyed and threw Jonah into the sea at which time the **"sea ceased from its raging" (Jonah 1:15)**.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows (Jonah 1:16).

I like to think that when we meet those mariners in heaven, they'll inform us that the central point of the book of Jonah was what happened on Jonah's journey over what happened in Nineveh.

We then move to what makes Jonah so fun for Sunday School but also what causes critics of God's word to scoff. God **"prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah" (Jonah 1:17)**. A few brief comments on this:

Was it a whale or a fish? The Hebrew word (*dag*) simply means a class of animal that lives in a body of water. Hebrew taxonomy certainly allows for a swimming mammal. At the same time, it's not as if the word of God must subordinate itself to cultural taxonomic distinctions (as valuable as they may be). But if God puts creatures into three categories (creatures filling the waters, flying above the earth and walking on the earth) we should recognize that to be sufficient.

Is it possible for a man to survive three days in a fish? There is ample evidence that there are sea creatures big enough to hold an entire man and there are examples of people surviving in a sea creature for more than an entire day. All this is well and good. But when it gets right down to it, I find very little difficulty in believing that God Almighty, who spoke all things into being by the word of His mouth, could sustain a man in a fish for three days. It is just these kinds of supernatural things that God used through history to bring unique and special attention to His plan of redemption (Exodus 4:1-9).

Now we move to Jonah's prayer from within the fish's belly. Here is where doing a single sermon on an entire book is almost heartbreaking, for his prayer is rich and deep. But I will only mention this: there is not one petition in Jonah's prayer. His prayer contains thanksgiving, contrition and a rededication of his convictions; He will sacrifice and pay what he had vowed (Jonah 2:9).

Some break the book of Jonah into four sections: Disobedience, preservation, proclamation, and correction. It is in the belly of the great fish that God preserves His servant. How uncomfortable yet valuable. At the conclusion of his prayer the Lord speaks to the fish and Jonah gets vomited onto dry land.

At long last, Jonah has arrived at his mission field. Nineveh is a large city, a **"three-day journey in extent"** (Jonah 3:3) with what some calculate to be a million inhabitants⁴⁰ and they are to hear that they have forty days before they **"shall be overthrown"** (Jonah 3:4). We then read these wonderful words,

So the people of Nineveh believed God (Jonah 3:5).

⁴⁰ If those who 'cannot discern their right hand from their left' (120,000) are considered to be children.

How this all unfolded is difficult to say. Clearly Jonah did not have access to the internet, radio or television. It has been speculated that the story of what happened on the ship had reached the Ninevites, so there was great attention given to this new foreign visitor. Whatever be the case, there was national revival which involved the king himself.

The king of Nineveh displayed repentance and remorse. Then he called for a national fast and for the entire nation to turn from their evil ways that they might escape the judgment of God. It is difficult to fathom how, to this day, there are Christians who would resist the whole idea of a national repentance and calling upon the name of the Lord. Here we read of a vile, gentile nation in the Old Testament repenting in such a way that...

**God relented from the disaster that He had said
He would bring upon them, and He did not do it
(Jonah 3:10).**

O, that all nations, to this day, might follow the example of Nineveh!

As we read earlier, Jonah was not at all excited about these events. His greatest fear came to pass. God was merciful. It grieved Jonah to the point where he preferred death over life (Jonah 4:3). Sometimes God's ministers require the greatest lessons. Chapter four is all about God's correction of Jonah's twisted thinking. This was a lesson in which God would use various props.

Jonah goes out to the east side of the city to see what might happen. It's been speculated that Jonah was hoping that God would come to His senses and destroy Nineveh, nonetheless. But God, at least as far as this book is concerned, is finished with Nineveh. Jonah makes a shelter to watch the city and God accommodates Jonah by creating a plant to give Jonah shade.

But then God prepares a worm to damage the plant, so Jonah loses his shade. Add to that, God prepares a vehement east wind and has the sun beat down on Jonah's head (Jonah 4:5-8). So, Jonah goes from grateful to angry and wanting to die again (Jonah 4:8). God asks Jonah if it is right for him to be angry about the plant. Jonah says 'yes...even to death.'

And here comes the final lesson of the book. Jonah felt pity for the plant which he didn't labor to produce or make grow, and that had arrived and left in one night. And yet he had no regard for the pity of God over a land of hundreds of thousands of people. It may be argued that Jonah's understandable contempt for the Ninevites displaced an appreciation for a God who chooses to be merciful to sinners.

The story ends there. We don't know what Jonah ended up doing or thinking. But as for me, it teaches me that God may very well wish to extend his pity, love and mercy for someone who I may view (with perhaps justifiable reasons) as an unseemly character or community. But when we are told to preach to every creature, that doesn't mean only the creatures we find appealing.

Christ in Jonah

Where do we find Jesus in Jonah? In the twelfth chapter of Matthew and the eleventh chapter of Luke Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees, who are seeking for a sign, that the only sign they will see is the **“sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matthew 12:39)**. Jesus then compares Jonah's time in the great fish with His time in the **“heart of the earth”** which should be understood as the time between His death and resurrection.

Jonah did not die in the fish (though some have argued that he did), but it served as a type of death (Jonah 2:2 speaks of Sheol) from which he arose and proclaimed life to the Ninevites. But, as Jesus taught, **“a greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:41)**. And the very deliverance enjoyed by the Ninevites was due to the **greater than Jonah**. Jesus then makes the very disconcerting statement that the **“men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with the generation”** because they responded, as it were, to the types and shadows, whereas we enjoy the Good News in its utter fullness.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How do you feel about your surrounding culture? How does this affect your ministerial attitude toward it/them?
2. In what ways should we seek to transform our society? How should churches be similar to the medical field?
3. Why do you suppose Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh?
4. What was the first lesson the mariners learned as believers?
5. Discuss Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish. What was absent from his prayer and why do you think it is missing?
6. What did the repentance of Nineveh look like? What can modern nations learn from this?
7. The final chapter of Jonah contains a lesson God gives Jonah. What is that lesson? How does it apply to you?
8. In what respect does Jesus compare Himself to Jonah?

Part XXXIII - Micah

Mercy Triumphs

John 5:39; Micah 6:8

March 1, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)?

Introduction

When we get to Revelation, we will spend a good deal of time examining the beastly nature of government overreach in our lives. It's been said of Micah that he traces the perversion and adversity of the people to the misrule of those over them. It would be naïve to think there was ever a time when the leaders of our, or any, nation were so righteous that they deserved our unwavering devotion. But at least there was some general agreement regarding what constituted goodness/righteousness.

What we are witnessing now in the public debates of our would-be leaders is a celebration of the most debased and ungodly behaviors imaginable. And it would appear that in the span of a mere generation many young people have been bewitched into ignoring that which was so obviously wrong so recently. Add to this that many of those who aggressively promote ungodliness not only want to manage our morality but also desire to manage the intimacies of our lives.

What unites so many politicians in our budding beast of a government is how they think it is their job to direct our finances, fix our jobs, determine our wages, oversee our healthcare, educate our children, govern our very thinking regarding our neighbors, feed the poor, care for the elderly and provide for the orphan on my behalf (thus relieving me of such obligations and soothing my guilt for personal inactivity), display the type of art they consider beneficial to my soul, and a million other things.

On top of this, many are pressing for a socialistic/communistic form of government in pursuit of their beastly and misdirected source of altruisms. Many of our youth have been wooed into thinking that giving all of these responsibilities and economic endeavors to a centralized government is a good idea. Much of this is accompanied by the vilification of big and private business. There is a (not entirely unreasonable) push to recognize the value of anti-trust laws and monopolies. There is (again, not unreasonable) instilling of fear of market dominance and the concentration of power in big companies.

No doubt, some level of governance is of value when it comes to private business (Deut. 25:13-15). But what level of market dominance can possibly match a federal government running all goods and services? It is the epitome of a monopoly. But it is not a mere monopoly. It is a monopoly with a standing military that has the ability to fine you and imprison you if you fail to comply.

What we read in Micah, in terms of the oppression and misrule of the leaders of Israel, is found in recent history under the names of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Castro, Che Guevara, Pol Pot and others. These are proven failures in terms of the blessedness of the people over whom they governed. Yet in a mere generation or two, they have once again become options.

Survey of Micah

Micah, similar to other prophetic books, opens with a warning of imminent judgment. Through the powerful Assyrian armies, God will bring His judgments upon Israel. Mountains will melt, valleys will split, there will be mourning for Israel and Judah. It is a time when lies prevail. People had become so darkened in their understanding that they didn't know the truth when they heard it. It is in this massive fog of lies that God asks what amounts to be an obvious yet rhetorical question:

Do not My words do good to him who walks uprightly (Micah 2:7b)?

It is remarkable how many lies are spoken in the public discourse, yet we (as a people) don't seem to care. It has come to be expected. But a nation will only last so long if they choose to expel

the truth as a necessity for their existence. In the midst of the mourning for Israel and Judah, we read that **“her wounds are incurable” (Micah 1:9)**. Judgment was an inevitability.

But it is not as if they are yet ready to acknowledge their own apostasy and ungodliness. There remains a religious lip-service in the midst of their nefariousness.

Her heads judge for a bribe, her priests teach for pay, and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord, and say, “Is not the Lord among us” (Micah 3:11)?

We live in a day when those who would lead us, both spiritually and politically, trumpet religious fidelity while a mere moment later endorse that which is base and abhorrent when one takes the time to examine God’s holy word. If there was ever a time to reinvigorate *Sola Scriptura* (that the infallible and inerrant word from God is found in the Scriptures alone) it is now!

Christ in Micah

It is little wonder that the prophet rapidly moves to a time and a hope that goes beyond their particular nation and their current leaders. In chapter four we are called to consider **“the latter days.”** This should not be thought of as the end of history, but rather as the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant. It might be of help to see the way it is used by the author of Hebrews:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds (Hebrews 1:1, 2).

However one might understand **“last days”** *eschatou ton heremon touton*, the author’s use of the near demonstrative, **“these”** indicates that he believed he was living in them. Let’s recognize that God will continue to plead with Israel to repent in chapters six and seven. But that call to repentance is done in the light of God’s larger,

eternal promise that comes from a Ruler born in Bethlehem; and here we see Christ in Micah (Micah 5:2).

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *though* you are little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth *are* from of old, from everlasting (Micah 5:2).

In a series like Route Sixty-Six (where we are searching out what the Old Testament says of Jesus) one is hard-pressed to find a more obvious reference to Jesus in the Old Testament than the one now before us. When a troubled Herod inquired of his chief priests and scribes the location where the Christ was to be born...

They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:5, 6).

We read in Micah the glorious expectation of what this true Ruler will accomplish by His gospel and Spirit. Their current government/nation will fail. But God’s promise is from everlasting to everlasting. Let us read just a few verses, realizing that even though there is no mention of the Second Coming in this entire book, some choose to assign all of this to that which takes place after Jesus comes again. Let me say, that is simply not a natural reading of the text. What will happen as a result of that baby born in Bethlehem? Let us read a bit.

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days *that* the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and

we shall walk in His paths.” For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make *them* afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all people walk each in the name of his god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever (Micah 4:1-5).

It is easy to see where some would scoff at this happening prior to the Second Coming. The idea that a nation would not lift a sword against another nation (but rather beat it into a plowshare) sounds so fanciful. Yet Jesus needn't do any more work to accomplish this. *The cross is sufficient to accomplish peace on earth.* What we read here is the fruit of the Great Commission.

Of course, those are very macrocosmic, big-picture promises. But what of you and me individually? The Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson suffered a great deal of criticism by suggesting that people who want to change the world should begin by cleaning their own rooms. And though there may be some big-ticket items in terms of a better world, it is through Micah that we are offered what has been called the true essence of religion.

He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)?

These are virtues repeated by Jesus in His indictment against the scribes and Pharisees:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice

and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others (Matthew 23:23).

Justice, mercy and faithfulness (which is synonymous to walking humbly with God) is the essence of religion. One might even say that justice and mercy are the means by which one walks humbly with God. Yet I am not sure if we appreciate just how at odds these two virtues can be and how the full and meaningful application of these two attributes can only be found in Christ. If it can be put in the form of a question: ‘Do you desire justice or mercy?’ Or to put it another way, ‘Are we called to offer justice or mercy?’ Because justice would be getting what we deserve, and mercy would be not getting what we deserve (in a negative sense).

In a very simple sense, it would appear that what we read in Micah and see repeated by Jesus is that we should be fair-minded people who are ready to offer mercy, grace and forgiveness. James uses the same words to describe a sort of battle between the two:

For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13).

James is not teaching in this passage that our mercy toward others is the grounds of our acquittal. But when we begin to grasp that which is just and taste the sweet joy of deliverance from that justice through the mercy of God found in Christ, it will produce mercy toward our fellow man.

It is of the highest degree of import that Christians meditate upon the message that the full judgment of God fell upon that child born in Bethlehem, of whom Micah writes, that we might enjoy the triumph of mercy.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What type of effects do the leaders of a culture/nation have on the people? How have you seen this work out?
2. How do God's words function in those who walk uprightly? What does it mean to walk uprightly?
3. Discuss how leaders will continue to give lip-service to their convictions about God. How does one determine if it is more than a mere show?
4. What is meant by "latter days" and why is that important?
5. Investigate ways we see Christ in Micah.
6. Justice and mercy are valuable Christian virtues. How do we see them interact with each other?

Part XXXIV - Nahum

Keep Our Feast, Perform Our Vows

John 5:39; Nahum 1:15

March 8, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! O Judah, keep your appointed feasts, perform your vows. For the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off (Nahum 1:15).

Introduction

Nahum can be thought of as a sort of *Jonah-Part Two*. About one hundred fifty years after the Ninevites repented because of the preaching of Jonah, they had returned to their old ways, their old ways being the vicious, cruel, innovative torturers and destroyers of any nation or people they viewed as necessary to their prosperity. This included Israel.

Their reinigorated darkness carried an advanced culpability because they had so recently been a nation that had **“believed God...from the greatest to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5)**. It can be said that the Biblical principle that **“to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48)** found an application in Nineveh. Nineveh would soon cease to exist.

It may not seem terribly remarkable to hear of the fall of an obscure ancient civilization. Most of us are only acquainted with Nineveh because of the popularity of the story of Jonah. But this speaks more to the severity of God’s judgment than the obscurity of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, whose power was virtually unmatched in the entire ancient world. It may be a fair analogy to imagine that there had never been a Roman Empire or a Greek domination under Alexander the Great.

Nineveh was large and powerful. It was said to be three days’ journey in circumference, with walls one hundred feet high, and wide

enough to accommodate three chariots side-by-side. There were one thousand five hundred towers to ensure its security. There was perhaps never a city that had such justifiable confidence in its ability to survive. Yet just a few years after Nahum's warning, it would fall to Babylon. And within a couple of hundred years even the site of where it had been was uncertain.

Nahum's three brief chapters are all consumed with the destruction of Nineveh. Chapter one speaks of its certainty; chapter two of its siege and capture; and chapter three of its wickedness which provoked retribution. Briefly stated, Nineveh's destruction is *declared-described-deserved*.

One might ask, *what value is there in a book whose intent is to describe divine retribution?* Nahum (after whom, it is likely, that the village of Capernaum is named) means "consolation" and "vengeance." These two words don't seem to fit together. How is it that vengeance can be consoling? How would it be a source of comfort for God's people to know that a nation would be judged?

We will seek to answer these questions before we're through, but first I'll begin with a brief survey of this short book.

Survey of Nahum

The book of Nahum seems to begin in full sprint. God is furious with Nineveh. He will dig their grave because they are vile. Let's be careful to avoid thinking of God's anger against the wicked as if He were a fickle Greek deity on Mount Olympus who has had too much wine and reacts in unstable passion. No, along with their effrontery against God, there is their natural and inevitable cruelty and oppression of the poor and weak.

Our lack of ability to appreciate the righteous indignation of God against cruel and vicious tyrants is a sign that we have either forgotten or have never been acquainted with what man will do to man if left to his own devices. It is at the end of chapter one that we read one of the few familiar passages, used by the Apostle Paul in Romans in relation to the preaching of the Gospel:

Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! O Judah, keep your appointed feasts, perform your vows. For

the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off (Nahum 1:15).

Paul will use these words not to speak of deliverance from Nineveh but deliverance from sin and death through saving faith in Christ. But notice the principle. *Keep your feasts, perform your vows.* Do not allow what appears to be an unquenchable foe deter you from faithful living.

We can be so easily discouraged when things don't seem to be panning out. Israel had no answer for the Assyrians. We must be vigilant to avoid being overly controlled by our temporal, observable successes or failures. There is something deeper going on.

Shortly after the resurrection of Christ, the Apostle John described the world as lying under the sway of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). There were probably about two to four hundred million people in the world at that time and likely less than 20,000 of them were Christians. And those who were Christians were under continual torment and persecution. There was very social advantage in being a Christian. It was, in truth, just the opposite. What being a believer offered in terms of society, Paul wrote, made us **“of all men the most pitiable” (1 Corinthians 15:19).**

It was during the apex of cruel hatred toward believers that John wrote what would have appeared, in terms of outward observation, nearly unbelievable:

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him *be* glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Revelation 1:4-6).

There is a King over all kings. It is the promise of ultimate victory over evil, sin and death that should move us to persevere. There is something much deeper taking place which must govern the

souls of men. Addressing the temptation to give in to fatigue, Paul writes:

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:9, 10).

Let us ever keep our feasts and perform our vows, knowing that deliverance comes from the hand of God.

In chapters two and three the destruction of Nineveh is further described and shown to be deserved. Let us ask again, how is it that vengeance can be consoling? How would it be a source of comfort for God's people to know that a nation would be judged?

What we read in Nahum is a bit different from what we read in Jonah. The comfort of God's people is not merely a sense of vindictiveness against evil people. It is more a sense of justice against evil itself. Nahum contains one of the places in Scripture where we read that God will not acquit the wicked (Nahum 1:3). It seems as if God has created us with this intuitive inclination that evil will not prevail. And the comfort offered in Nahum is seen in how God works throughout history to ensure just that.

Years ago, I would play volleyball on the beach with friends who had been in the Vietnam war. From time to time, military helicopters would fly just offshore and my buddies would stop and look, and I could feel them thinking. To them, helicopters offered the sound of either deliverance or destruction. For the Israelite to read/hear the words of Nahum was the sound of deliverance.

One thing we learn, especially when we compare Nahum to Jonah, is that God will forgive sin repented of and battled with, but He will not condone sin persisted in. We also observe that wrath restrained can be wrath reserved.

Christ in Nahum

In what respects do we see Christ in Nahum? As already noted, Paul quotes Nahum almost verbatim regarding the preaching of the Gospel:

And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news” (Romans 10:15)!

To be sure, the heart of the comparison vis-à-vis the deliverance of Israel and the deliverance of our souls is the conquering of sin, Satan and death—the application by faith of the righteousness and blood of Christ to our sin-laden souls.

But that Gospel does look like something in the material world. Jesus didn't die on a cross in heaven to redeem and sanctify heaven. Heaven does not groan the way creation groans. There is an expectation that those in the New Covenant had when they first observed the Christ-child. And similar to the two accounts of Nineveh (the one that showed their repentance and the one that did not) the Gospel was shown to contain a rising and a falling.

In the second chapter of Luke we read of a man named Simeon who was **“just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25)**. In certain respects, Nineveh could be thought of as a type of Rome, for Simeon and Anna were faithful in the midst of the slavery, persecution and oppression of the Roman Empire. And in a similar way that Israel would be consoled by the prophecy of Nahum, Simeon was promised that **“he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ” (Luke 2:26)**.

Simeon would speak words which had to be disquieting to Mary, that her own soul would be pierced, and the thoughts of many hearts revealed as a result of her Child. Truly, Christ being born into this world would create conflict. This is seen in Simeon's words:

Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (Luke 2:34).

The Gospel can be the **“fragrance from life to life”** or the **“fragrance from death to death” (2 Corinthians 2:16)**. And perhaps the words of Simeon were not all that confusing to Mary, for her dynamic and oft quoted response (after Gabriel revealed God's plan for her) to her miraculous conception (the Magnificat) includes the anticipation of what the work of redemption through her Child would include:

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, and exalted *the* lowly. He has filled *the* hungry with good things, and *the* rich He has sent away empty (Luke 1:51-53).

As with Nineveh, God will ever bring His justice into history. It may be hundreds or thousands of years, but evil kings and kingdoms will kiss the Son (that is, bow before Him who is good, right and true) or they will (as they always have) perish.

But this word spoken toward us this morning is not the sound of helicopters, but it is the sound of the Gospel in the sound, taste and smell of the loaf and the cup. This is our “**appointed feast.**” Let us enjoy it and continually perform our vows.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Explain how Nahum can be thought of as a *Jonah-Part Two*.
2. How and why did the principle “to whom much is given, from him much will be required” apply to Nineveh?
3. Do you find the righteous indignation of God a difficult concept? Why or why not? Why do you suppose that is your reaction?
4. How can God’s divine retribution be a source of comfort?
5. What do we learn of Christ when we read Nahum? Discuss the historical expectations associated with Jesus.
6. Do Christians have appointed feasts or vows? Explain.

Part XXXV - Habakkuk

The Just Shall Live by Faith

John 5:39; Habakkuk 3:17-19

April 19, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s *feet*, and He will make me walk on my high hills (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Introduction

In our studies of the Old Testament we have seen that famines, plagues, grotesque immorality and political oppression are the rule rather than the exception in the redemptive record. In this respect our current challenge with this virus⁴¹ and subsequent quarantine appear to fit right in if one is interested in a biblical application of how one addresses and endures conflict.

I have no expertise as a politician or in foreign policy, medicine or disease control, so I will not weigh in when it comes to those categories. As a pastor, however, I am quite concerned with the theological implications of how Christians view an event like this. More than one person has lamented to me that one of the most depressing aspects of events like this is hearing how members of the clergy explain them.

Some say, “God didn’t want this to happen, but He will turn it into something good;” others have gone so far as to say, “God simply couldn’t stop it from happening.” How can humanity make sense of this calamity? How are people, who believe in the God of the Bible, to view things like pandemics, oppression, famine or any tragedy-

⁴¹ SARS-CoV-2; that is, the COVID-19 virus.

whether corporate or individual? It is during times like these that prayers are being offered beyond the norm, yet God appears very silent. This brings us to the opening verses of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk is a very unique Old Testament book in that it is not a record of Habakkuk addressing his countrymen or even foreigners. It is a dialogue between himself and God alone. As a prophet, he is not so much delivering a message but solving a problem. Initially, it's the problem of God's inactivity. That is followed by the problem of the method of God's activity. And this is all followed by a prayer and a heralding of his joy in the God of his salvation.

We are examining the book of Habakkuk to help us make sense of How God works in history. That is Habakkuk's quest. But above this and in concert with this aim, it is my prayer that we would join with what has been called Habakkuk's "Hymn of Faith."

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's *feet*, and He will make me walk on my high hills (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

This is not merely an academic or theological pursuit. What Habakkuk discovers is how, even if the normal and even necessary comforts and enjoyments of life are removed from the equation, he will rejoice. His strength is not in what he owns or even in his own might. The Lord God is his strength. His feet are made like deer's feet, firm though in high hills (Psalm 18:33). It's this image of a mountain animal walking on high and shaky ground with extreme balance and confidence. This is where Habakkuk arrives. Let's see if we can get there.

Survey of Habakkuk

The first problem Habakkuk has is one that I think resonates with most of us; it is God's apparent inactivity. The nation is evil and

getting worse and God doesn't seem to be doing anything. The prophet almost sounds whiney, **“O Lord, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear” (Habakkuk 1:2)?** This is not unique to Habakkuk. We see this same sentiment continually in the Psalms (Psalm 13:1, 2; 74:9, 10; 94:3).

Supernatural divine intervention and special revelation were rare even when the canon was open (that is, before the Bible was complete). There were only a couple of generations and specific locations where we find God's verbal interaction accompanied by supernatural events. The great benefit of this is the singular nature of special revelation. If God had a thousand different messages from a thousand different sources there would be overwhelming confusion. There is unity found in the word of God coming from a very singular source. Add to this that these generations (mainly during the lifetimes of Moses and Jesus), were among the most stiff-necked of all time. If you desire to grow in your faith, don't be looking for signs. God's Spirit sanctifies us through His word and in His providential undertakings in our lives. It is generally a long process accompanied by effort and discomfort.

Habakkuk continues:

For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

The cry of Habakkuk is similar to the cry in the pulpits of America. *How long will God allow the evil in our land to continue?* The law seems powerless to do anything about it and the wicked seem to be winning. *When will God ever do anything about it?*

God will reply to Habakkuk with the words:

Look among the nations and watch—Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you (Habakkuk 1:5).

The force of these words seems to indicate that the answer will be both astonishing and perplexing, so much so that I have found that many Bible-believing Christians have a difficult struggle with where

this book goes. But keep in mind that the prayer and hymn of chapter three is dependent upon chapters one and two.

The shocking answer provided to Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:6-11) is that God is raising up the Chaldeans (Babylon) to execute His judgments on apostate Israel! God describes the Chaldeans in the most vicious terms possible. It sounds as if God is impressed with the ferocious nature of the Chaldeans. But as John Calvin states,

It was not indeed a subject of praise to the Chaldeans, that they were bitter and impetuous: but the Lord could turn these vices to a good purpose, inasmuch as he elicits light from darkness. When, therefore, we read that the Chaldeans were bitter, and also hasty, God thus intimates that he can employ the vices of men in executing his judgments, and yet contract hence no spot nor blemish; for we cannot possibly pollute him with our filth, as he scatters it far away by the brightness of his justice and equity.⁴²

It is certainly no easy doctrine, hence the prophets second (and no doubt our own) question. This question is prefaced by Habakkuk reminding God who He is. Or perhaps he's just questioning his own understanding of who God is.

**Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God,
my Holy One (Habakkuk 1:12a)?**

Habakkuk's confusion is understandable. Usually, evil armies are led by evil leaders. He is marveling at God's choice as a disciplinarian of His people:

**O Lord, You have appointed them for
judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for
correction (Habakkuk 1:12).**

⁴² John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 28.

Habakkuk reveals his own humanity in rendering the same questions as the modern Christian (Habakkuk 1:13-17). In short, Habakkuk wonders how a righteous God can have anything to do with such evil people as the Chaldeans. ‘We may be bad, but they’re worse!’ It is through this difficulty that God is elevating Habakkuk’s understanding of who He is. Remember, this crescendo leads to prayer and praise!

But before Habakkuk gets there, he learns the hard lesson that it is God who **“make(s) peace and create(s) calamity” (Isaiah 45:7)**. It is God who declares **“the end from the beginning”** and **“will do all (His) good pleasure” (Isaiah 46:10)**. It is God who...

...does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done” (Daniel 4:35)?

Habakkuk had to learn that he must not view, even the terror that the Chaldeans would no doubt bring to his people, as something beyond the scope of God’s decrees. When it gets right down to it, God is never really silent or uninvolved. He is the God of every moment and every event. Calvin states,

Except then we be fully persuaded, that God by his secret providence regulates all these confusions, Satan will a hundred times a day, yea every moment, shake that confidence which ought to repose in God.⁴³

Habakkuk’s first prayer concerned God’s lack of judgment of his own people. Habakkuk’s first prayer concerned itself with zeal for God’s glory. Now he questions the means by which God answers his prayer. It is as if he says, “Certainly Lord we desire you be glorified and judge evil in our land, but this is a bit much.” Nonetheless, in chapter two we read that Habakkuk is committed to

⁴³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 42

listening. He will **“watch to see what He will say to me” (Habakkuk 2:1).**

God will give an answer. Then He makes a distinction in those who will hear it. The proud has a soul that is **“not upright in him.”** That is the first half of Habakkuk 2:4. The second half of 2:4 is a phrase used in the New Testament no less than three times, conveying a most critical message, **“But the just shall live by his faith.”** We will finish with a focus on this phrase in a moment, but now God turns His words toward the destiny of the Chaldeans (Habakkuk 2:5-20).

Habakkuk wondered how the pure eyes of God could look upon, let alone use, the Chaldeans for His purpose. God answers that the Chaldeans will be judged. The cup of His right hand will be turned against them. All of men’s efforts and rebellion against God will be to no avail, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

God has now answered both of Habakkuk’s questions. God will judge His people by raising up people more evil than Israel to sack them, and then judge the more evil people for what they did. God will draw a straight line with a crooked stick, and then break the stick. At first glance it appears paradoxical—some might even say contradictory. How can God not be held responsible for using the Chaldeans as His puppets? But there is a monumental difference between men and puppets. Puppets don’t desire to do evil—men do. A true contradiction cannot be found. There is no violation of the laws of logic, nor can any logical fallacy, whether formal or informal, be found.

Is it incomprehensible how He ordains the free choices, even evil choices, of sinful men? Perhaps. It is, at least, incomprehensible to me. I would say that the Trinity is just as incomprehensible, as is the true humanity and deity of Christ, as is verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture (did God write Romans, or did Paul write Romans?). But it does not violate truth, and any attempt to bring these things down small enough to fit into the mind of the creature generally results in heresy and unsoundness of soul.

How are Christians to view something like a pandemic? Is it the hand of God? Are His fingerprints on this? To say ‘no’ is to defy the God of Scripture and cast ourselves into a pool of irrational thoughts. But did God do this as a rash, impulsive and vicious

dictator? *No!* I cannot tell you specifically what purposes God has for the tragic events He ordains. But I know the purposes are divine. I trust that from eternity I will see more clearly the purpose for every stitch in His tapestry of history. The human mind ascends just so high. To offer less is to defy the God of Scripture. To offer more would be presumptuous.

Habakkuk is, as it were, introduced to a God who is much bigger than He had previously thought. The very heart of the king **“is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will” (Proverbs 21:1).**

It is the increased knowledge and appreciation of the incomprehensible power and goodness of God that brings an eruption of praise and thanksgiving from the heart of Habakkuk-the confidence to walk in high places with the feet of a deer, undaunted by the shaky ground of life’s difficulties.

Christ in Habakkuk

Where is Christ in Habakkuk? The phrase from Habakkuk 2:4, **“the just shall live by his faith,”** is central in the New Testament’s call to depart from trusting in self and to trust in Christ alone for peace with God (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Habakkuk knew a joy that the Chaldeans and even unfaithful Israelites did not.

What does it mean that the just shall live by faith? Simply explained, **“just”** *dikaio syne* as the Apostle Paul used it speaks of righteousness. Paul uses the same root word in Romans 5:1 – **“Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** The word shows forth an acquittal, a pardoning or a removal of guilt. **“Faith”** *pisteos* simply means to believe, to trust, to put your confidence in. And **“live”** means to be alive. In the context, we’re talking about being spiritually alive.

Although every Christian is called to, and should, conduct their lives faithfully, it would be a critical error here to understand this rich phrase to mean that we shall gain life if we conduct our lives faithfully. It would turn Paul’s meaning on its head to read this as if Paul is saying that a person is justified and given spiritual life by faithful living. Again, I think we should seek, and a true believer will

seek, to live faithfully. But we do not achieve peace with God through our own faithfulness.

Calvin labors the point that “faith is not to be taken here for man’s integrity.” True saving faith “sets man before God emptied of all (even) good things, so that he seeks what he needs from (God’s) gratuitous goodness (alone).”

We find Jesus in Habakkuk in these words that describe Jesus as the sole fountain of our hope.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What was Habakkuk's original prayer? How can it relate to the prayers of the church today?
2. How did God respond to Habakkuk's prayer?
3. What was confusing to Habakkuk about how God would judge Israel?
4. What was God's response to Habakkuk's dilemma?
5. Was it illogical for God to use the Chaldeans to judge Israel and then judge the Chaldeans? Explain.
6. What was it that Habakkuk discovered that granted him such joy?

Part XXXVI - Zephaniah

The Lord in the Midst of Thee

John 5:39; Zephaniah 3:16b-17

April 26, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. The Lord your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet *you* with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:16b-17).

Introduction

I find myself regularly involved in three struggles. The first is the inevitable, and often addressed, conflict between the Christian and the world. Jesus taught, in no uncertain terms, that the world hated Him and that it will therefore hate those who follow Him (John 5:18, 19).

We shouldn't be seeking out that hatred. This should not be an excuse for unseemly behavior on the part of Christians. It doesn't mean that you are to constantly be at odds with your non-Christian neighbors all the time on every conceivable issue. Elders, for example, should have a good reputation among those outside the church (1 Timothy 3:7).

It does mean that the heart of what you believe will be at odds with the world in general. And the more worldly the world becomes, the more hostility you can expect.

My second struggle is with the church (or so-called) and the current religious luminaries. When presented with the top-ten largest churches in America or the most influential Christian leaders in the west, I find the list enormously discouraging. Most of those on the mentioned lists are barely within the pale of orthodoxy. I don't mean to sound harsh, but I do think I am being charitable in my estimation.

Again, this should not be surprising. If one reads their Bible, they will readily find that the covenant people of God (Israel in the

Old Covenant and the church in the New Covenant) were rife with darkness, immorality and theological error. For thirty-five books we've been reading of the wickedness and judgments of Israel. When Jesus was born into the Old Covenant, He **“came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).**

The error didn't altogether end in the New Covenant church. Virtually every epistle in the New Testament was written in order to correct theological error and immorality. In the encyclical of Revelation, which went to at least seven New Covenant churches, Jesus continually threatens to expel them unless they get back on course.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent (Revelation 2:5).

Prior to revealing my third struggle, I will first say I have noticed something both odd and frustrating concerning these first two struggles (something which is addressed in Zephaniah). It is the difficulty of being caught in the crossfire of a godless culture and an apostate church. Many of the criticisms my unbelieving friends level against today's church (often times in their efforts to dress me down) are criticisms with which I heartily agree.

Modern day prophets seeking to pray/scream the coronavirus off the Manhattan Beach Pier have made the church what the Scriptures call an **“astonishment”** (or horror) and an object of ridicule (Deuteronomy 28:37). Similar to Nathan's criticism of David, there are many in today's church that have given **“great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (2 Samuel 12:14).** These can be difficult waters to navigate.

Now, my third struggle is internal. It is not with the world (although it certainly includes the world). It is not against the waning spiritual climate of the western church (though it includes that as well). It is within my own mind and heart. What the Bible often refers to as the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the

flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Galatians 5:17).

Not that everything we “**want to do**” is necessarily sinful. But when there is a conflict between the Spirit-given word of God and my flesh, I should defer always to the Spirit. It is not uncommon for Christians to do just the opposite. We often evaluate a peace we feel in our flesh as the guidance of the Spirit. A joy in the flesh or a comfort in my feelings may accompany the work of the Spirit, but it is very dangerous to view the two as synonymous.

This inward conflict, again, should not come as a surprise. Hebrews testifies to the inwardly cutting, sanctifying and piercing work of the Spirit of God through His word. It is a...

...discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account (Hebrews 4:12b, 13).

So, we wrestle with the world, with the influences and interactions with an apostate church, and with our own hearts/flesh. And there is an enemy of our souls who wishes to see us moving rapidly (but slowly is fine) in the wrong direction, or what John calls walking “**in darkness**” (1 John 1:6).

I mention these things in our study of Zephaniah because we tend to forget that these apparently minor adjustments or compromises shoot us and our posterity into thoroughly different destinations than the destination God has promised to those who are His. And as our hearts are slow-baked in a kiln to hardness, we, like the Israelites, are...

...settled in complacency, aho say in their heart, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil’ (Zephaniah 1:12b).

We forget that there is a judgment. We interpret God's patience as God's indulgence. We should never forget that we live in the midst of a battle. Zephaniah offers a wake-up call.

Survey of Zephaniah

Through Zephaniah the Israelites would be reminded, in the severest of terms, that their spiritual direction did have a destination. And it wasn't a good one. Probably no one would call Zephaniah a feel-good book. Reading through it, a pastor is tempted to merely read Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* and leave it at that (something I do plan on at some point).

The book opens with the words,

“I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land,” says the Lord (Zephaniah 1:2).

As a teacher and as a Christian this kind of verbiage brings us to pause. And God holds us in this discomfort for three chapters. As if God would have us meditate upon the bad news prior to any good news. We generally don't like that. I was listening to the news yesterday and they gave the sports report (not much to report during the quarantine). But the reporter caught my attention when he said, “Let me start by saying he is okay, he is okay, he is okay.” He then proceeded to report how the beloved Dodger announcer, Vin Scully had been hospitalized for a health issue.

We like to be told, right up front, that everything is going to be okay. The problem in Zephaniah is that it might not be okay, at least not for everybody. Nonetheless, the book which begins with **“I will utterly consume...”** ends with:

Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. The Lord your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:16b-17).

The lessons in between these two very distinct outcomes need our attentive hearts, that we might be assured that the wonderful climax belongs to us.

Zephaniah begins his book with a fairly long introduction. He's the great-great-grandson of the godly king, Hezekiah. He is prophesying during the reign of another godly king, Josiah. There is safe speculation that, as a descendant of a godly king and during the reign of a godly king, he had the king's ear and was not shy to address the sin in the land.

Truly, the word of God is by the Spirit of God. But it would appear that God utilized the history and personalities of the writers. For example, it is highly likely that James was written by the half-brother of Jesus. Some would say that this explains the strength of his tone in addressing the budding easy-believe-ism of his day. Zephaniah may have had a similar disposition.

Briefly stated, the book can be broken into three parts: The judgment that would befall apostate Judah in chapters one and the beginning of two; the judgment of the surrounding nations from the beginning of chapter two to the middle of chapter three; then, the healing and blessing written of from the middle of chapter three to the end of the book.

The Old Covenant church was becoming darker and darker in this era prior to the incarnation. It should be of no surprise to us as our study of the Old Testament winds down, that the final word in the final chapter is the word “**curse**” (**Malachi 4:6**). They are rapidly reaching the point of no hope, that place in the hearts of men where God turns them over to their own reprobate minds (Romans 1:28). To be sure, there is a call to repentance, and some will repent—those who will enjoy the peace of the final portion of the final chapter.

But as the covenant people of God, their days are numbered. Paul gives warning to the churches, lest they find themselves cut off in a similar manner (Romans 11:21). Whether we are born in the world or born in the church, we come into this world as sinners in need of a Savior.

**Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward
(Job 5:7)**

Truly, we are **“conceived in iniquity” (Psalm 51:5), “estranged from the womb as soon as we’re born, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3).** We are to ever believe, ever improve upon and live out our baptism. And all of this is to be done by the heart, not merely for outward observation or benefit. Good earthly kings could only do so much. The ungodly infections remained in Israel because the **“people had not directed their hearts to the God of their fathers” (2 Chronicles 20:33).**

Zephaniah then turns his prophecies to the desperately wicked surrounding nations and their impending judgment—a judgment due in large part because of their hostility toward Israel. What we learn in Zephaniah is that the world’s hostility against even an apostate church will find the world in the crosshairs of God’s judgment. The, albeit somewhat justified, arrows released against bad religion does not somehow vindicate the attacker. I am not Roman Catholic, and I think many of the criticisms against Rome have legitimacy. But when the world attacks Rome (as a sort of paragon of religion in general—since many in the world wouldn’t know the difference between a Roman Catholic and a Presbyterian), the errors of Rome do not entirely exonerate the persecutor.

Many of us find ourselves in an odd spot when we’re clumped in with heretics and idolaters donning robes, collars and buildings with crosses, baptismal fonts and open Bibles. Do I join the world in their critique of an apostate church and face the risk of being a divisive brother? Do I remain silent in the midst of massive apostasy in the name of peace among the brethren? These are not always easy questions to answer, depending on the level of the transgression.

Christ in Zephaniah

It is the third section of Zephaniah that we are led to Christ. There are numerous gates presented in Zephaniah, those of an apostate church and those of a hostile world. They will all find themselves and their self-deification and oppressive abuse of their enemies and fellow countrymen under God’s judgment. The third section of Zephaniah presents a faithful remnant and the narrow gate, which leads to life. And that gate is Christ (Matthew 7:14).

In almost romantic terms, we are told that God will rejoice over us with gladness. He will quiet us, our troubled souls, with His

love and He will rejoice over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). But these promises of eternal peace and tranquility of heart did not come by the forceful overthrow of nations or even by mere citizenship in the nation which had been designated the apple of God's eye (Deuteronomy 32:10).

The words of peace and comfort are directed toward those who have faith and who walk by that faith. In the Old Covenant it would be faith in the Messiah promised and for us it is faith in that promise kept-faith in Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. With whom or what do you find yourself in struggles? How do you engage?
2. What are some misunderstandings when it comes to be hated by the world?
3. How do you respond when the world criticizes religions or religious leaders who are less than orthodox?
4. Discuss your internal struggles. What does it look like? How does it happen?
5. Should we view God's patience as God's indulgence? Explain.
6. How does Zephaniah begin his book? Where does he end up?
7. What are the three parts of Zephaniah?
8. How can you be assured that the wonderful promises found in the end of chapter three belong to you?

Part XXXVII - Haggai

Don't Quit Building the Temple

John 5:39; Haggai 2:21, 22a

May 3, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: 'I will shake heaven and earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots and those who ride in them' (Haggai 2:21, 22a).

Introduction

There is a great deal of discussion these days as to what constitutes something that is *essential* to the welfare of a society. One politician recently posited that in a four-phase program, opening churches would be in phase three. For perspective, phase two includes opening schools, childcare facilities, summer programs, retail stores, parks, trails and toy-makers. Churches are in phase three alongside hair salons, sporting events centers and movie theatres.

This has produced no small amount of chafing on the part of many Christians. In a purely pragmatic sense, placing church so low on the totem-pole of societal essentials appears short-sighted. Churches (at least if done well) provide fellowship, warmth, encouragement, direction and a very deep sense of purpose. Politically, leaders would do well to also recognize that it is in church where people are admonished to respect political authority. Heaven and hell aside (taking a deep breath in writing that because these things are uniquely addressed in church), church is highly essential for the well-being of society.

Of course, now we must discuss what church actually is. Defining the word *church* is like defining the word *mother*. A mother has children, but that is certainly an insufficient definition. A mother is a woman. A mother is a nurturer. A mother may generate income. A mother is (generally speaking) a wife. A mother is a teacher. I

daresay books can be written defining the word. Similar with the word *church*.

Due to the livestreaming of church services, we are seeing a great deal of very limited definitions of church. One popular meme indicates that God doesn't want you to go to church, He wants you to *be* His church. We can give that half an amen. Does God not want you to be His church *and* go to church? Are we not called to not forsake **“the assembling of ourselves” (Hebrews 10:25)?**

The word *church* can mean a great many things. If I said, “Let's meet at church” you would know the location of where I meant for us to meet. At the same time, meeting *at* church is different than *going to* church. When we talk about going to church, we generally are talking about an event with a liturgy (e.g. call to worship, singing, a sermon, the sacraments). So, we, as the followers of Christ, are *the church*, going to a building we call *the church* to do an event call *church*. But that is not the end of it.

The Bible also speaks of what is generally called an *invisible church* (Hebrews 12:23). This includes the participation of angels and those who have left this life. These are true believers, past, present and future. The true members of this invisible church are known by God alone.

We also speak of a *universal visible church* (universal in that it is not confined to one nation, as under the law). This visible church consists of all who profess the true religion and includes their children. This visible church is made up of *particular churches*. This is what we see laden throughout the New Testament with the epistles addressed to **“the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2)** or **“to the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2)** or **“to the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thessalonians 1:1)**, etc.

The difficulty of defining church continues when Jesus, in the midst of teaching on church discipline, offers the phrase, **“tell it to the church” (Matthew 18:17)**. How does this take place? Does some random member show up with a bullhorn in the church parking lot? A deeper study of church discipline seems to indicate that this is done by designated leaders in the church. So, the church can also be referring to the elders.

But one phrase in the Westminster Confession grabs our attention. This phrase does not resonate with the modern Christian who might view the church as a good idea, but not critical. The

confession asserts that outside of the visible church (again, made up of particular churches) **“there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF. 25. 2).**

We live in an era with an abundance of books, broadcasts, social media and informal religious gatherings that can make the church seem expendable. You will notice it is with great thoughtfulness that they use the word “ordinary” in recognizing the power of God to use other means. At the same time, let us not allow the exception to become the rule.

If the church is neglected and crumbles, all of the books, broadcasts, social media, informal religious gatherings and parachurch efforts will follow suit. Jesus is building His church and it is through His church that the Great Commission will be fulfilled. I open with this because the central theme in Haggai revolves around the negligence of God’s people when it came to the building of God’s temple, which in the Old Covenant was square one when it came to the heart of God’s church.

Survey of Haggai

A brief survey of Haggai requires us to understand that the people of God had been in captivity but a first wave of them were released to return home and given the green light to rebuild the temple. Haggai records the story of how those who had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, those who began to rebuild the temple but soon gave up.

In our study of Ezra we noted why they gave up. One reason was due to the deception of the detractors of Israel offering to work with them-wolves among the sheep, as it were. The church must be very careful when the arms of the world reach out to help.

Another reason they gave up was due to the detractors speaking discouraging words. The church will not always be accompanied by cheerleaders. There must be a primary (and sometimes singular) trust in God’s promise that your labor in Christ is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Finally, the adversaries hired counselors to frustrate and accuse the workers. In time, they succeeded in halting the building of the temple! Ezra notably records the restoration of worship before the temple is built. Similar to the sacraments, the temple was significant,

but it was not magic. It was only valuable (similar to baptism and the Lord's Supper—really any religious undertaking) to the extent that it taught of the person and work of Jesus.

But none of this should lead us to undervalue the critical nature of building the temple. True faith would lead to the building of the temple in the Old Covenant similar to how true faith leads to the building of Christ's church in the New Covenant.

One other impediment to the building of the temple surfaces early in Haggai. It was a misreading and misapplying of prophecy.

Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built"' (Haggai 1:2).

Not to get into the details here, but it had been prophesied that there would be a seventy-year period of desolation due to their rebellion. Their lack of understanding of that prophecy caused them to declare that **"the time has not come"** for the temple to be built. It's been said that the prophecy of future deliverance, which was designed to be tonic, had become a narcotic.

At the risk of stepping on some eschatological toes, we see (IMO) a similar paralysis taking place with a misreading and misapplying of prophecy today. It is a more modern and popular conviction of the western church that God has determined that Christianity (at least in a certain sense) be an utter failure.

The failure of Christianity is perhaps a shocking concept, but it is the title of a chart on page 77 ½ of Clarence Larkin's very popular book on dispensationalism. The book was written in 1918 and continues to be published. In it, Larkin writes,

It is evident that there are more than a 100 times as many persons born into the world each year, as there are persons 'New Born', and that thus far Christianity, as a world converting power, is a failure, all of which proves that, if after 1900 years of gospel preaching the world is not converted, it is not God's purpose to convert the world by the preaching of the gospel in this age, but simply to gather out an 'elect body'—the church.

The ‘Millennial Age’ will be the ‘Dispensation of the Spirit,’ then righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the deep.”⁴⁴

I do not wish to sound uncharitable. But if you were to ask me to find a popular example of today’s church uttering “The time has not come” to the point of paralysis, this would be it. We must always be on the lookout for misreading and misapplying what we believe the Scriptures teach.

But to convince almost five generations of Christians that it is God’s plan for the Christian faith to fail has benumbed us. We are tottering on being inert as we pine away for a secret rapture, handing our sword and trowel in at the door in our commitment to insignificance (Nehemiah 4:15-17).

Perhaps all of this contributes to why a watching world would view the church as nonessential. God, conversely, viewed the advancement of His church through the rebuilding of the temple as a necessary prerequisite to everything that makes a nation thrive. Food, drink, clothing, wages, productivity in general were contingent upon God’s house being delivered from the ruins in which it found itself. It has been said that the rebuilding of the temple symbolized God’s restored presence among His people.

Moving into chapter two, we read that the rebuilt temple fell short of the glory of Solomon’s temple. As critical as a temple can be, the beauty of it can become a distraction. This was a central teaching of Jesus in His Olivet Discourse where His disciples became so impressed by the temple of His day. That temple had become a religious attractive nuisance and would soon be removed.

The people of Haggai’s day were not to fix their hopes on the opulence of the temple, but the temple should bring their hearts to God’s promise of deliverance and the presence of His Spirit.

‘Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is *this* not in your eyes as nothing? Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ says the

⁴⁴ Clarence Larkin *The Greatest Book on dispensational Truth in the World* (Rev. Clarence Larkin Est. 2802 N. Park Ave., Philadelphia 32, Pa. U. S. A., 1918), p. 77 1/2

Lord; ‘and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,’ says the Lord, ‘and work; for I *am* with you,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘*According to* the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear’ (Haggai 2:3-5)!

Today’s Christians needs to hear similar words. As Paul wrote to Timothy, his young protégé in the faith:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

Christ in Haggai

How clearly do we see Christ in Haggai? The book concludes with powerful words directed toward Zerubbabel:

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: ‘I will shake heaven and earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots and those who ride in them; the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother’ (Haggai 2:21, 22).

Zerubbabel is then told by God that he will be like a signet ring, which was a sign of authority. The language of this shaking and this authority is used by the New Testament writers to point to Christ. The author of Hebrews writes,

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be

shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:26-29).

When we feel shaken, let us be reminded that it is God's way of bringing our hearts unto that which cannot be shaken. I will conclude with a quote, for I found that I could not say it more beautifully or powerfully than Calvin when it came to Christ being preached in Haggai:

When the Jews found themselves exposed to the wrongs of all men, when so small a number returned, and there was no kingdom and no power, they thought themselves to have been as it were deceived. Hence the Prophet affirms here, that there would be a wonderful work of God, which would shake the heaven and the earth. It is therefore necessary that this should be applied to Christ; for it was, as it were, a new creation of the world, when Christ gathered together the things scattered, as the Apostle says, in the heaven and in the earth. (Col. 1:20.) When he reconciled men to God and to angels, when he conquered the devil and restored life to the dead, when he shone forth with his own righteousness, then indeed God shook the heaven and the earth; and he still shakes them at this day, when the gospel is preached; for he forms anew the children of Adam after his own image.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (Vol. 4, pp. 385–386). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is the church essential? Explain and justify your answer.
2. What are the various ways we understand the word *church*?
3. Explain why you agree or disagree with the teaching that there is “no ordinary possibility of salvation” outside the church.
4. What is the historical context of Haggai?
5. What were those returning to Jerusalem called to do and why weren’t they doing it?
6. How can the misreading and misapplying of prophecy be a stumbling block to the church? How have you seen this happen in modern Christianity?
7. How did the older people respond to the new temple? What lesson is taught?
8. Where and how do we see Christ in Haggai?

Part XXXVIII - Zechariah

Clothed in Christ

John 5:39; Zechariah 14:8, 9

May 10, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And in that day it shall be— *That* living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur. And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be “The Lord *is* one,” and His name one (Zechariah 14:8, 9).

Introduction

We live in a season where we feel as if our ability to worship God has been hobbled. The warmth of fellowship, the communion of the Lord’s Supper, our **“speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19)**, as wonderful as our leaders in music are, all feels compromised. We are working ardently to rectify that. There are so many things to consider.

There is the physical well-being of the congregation to consider; the laws and guidelines of the civil authorities; the conflicting information from medical experts; the various levels of comfort, fear, responsibility of members. All of these things and more are brought under the prayerful consideration of the elders. As we read the Scriptures, what do we prioritize in order to obtain the most obedient and faithful decision? It is no easy task.

But one thing almost universally agreed upon is that, at least for a time, in-person church services aren’t going to happen. That doesn’t mean every church that has made that decision was correct. It is hypothetically possible that every church in America, or the world for that matter, that closed its doors was engaging in (a sort of non-willful, ignorant) disobedience to God.

At the same time, the providence of God is not at the mercy of human agency. We do the best we can to make the best decisions we can. And we ought to repent when our decisions are found to be wrong. But the reality of our current situation is that almost all churches are closed to in-person worship.

Why do I mention this as we embark upon our study of where we find Christ in Zechariah?

The heart of Old Covenant worship revolved around the temple, which had been destroyed. God's people had returned to the land, commissioned to rebuild the temple but were negligent (even though they had convinced themselves they had a good reason to avoid its construction). In our last meeting we studied how Haggai addressed their negligence and encouraged them to complete the task. But Zechariah was concerned about whether the people would be ready to worship God once the temple was rebuilt.

Though in a temporal or secondary sense, the captivity and lack of a temple were all due to the rebellion and disobedience of the people. But in a primary and providential sense, each person had to wake up every morning and understand that God had ordained that very day.

And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when *as yet there were none of them* (Psalm 139:16b).

Were the people still worshipping God in the absence of a constructed temple? When things in our lives are not quite going the way we think they should unfold, how will we do? Whether it's in our church, our family, our nation, or our work we often think, 'this is not the way I had imagined it going.' And it feels as if God is neglecting us. As if He's a human who forgot to return our call.

In the book of Zechariah, we are assured that this is not the case.

Survey of Zechariah

I apologize in advance for how rapidly I will survey this book, a book which has been designated "one of the most remarkable

prophecies ever penned.” Though shorter than Ezekiel, Isaiah or the Revelation, Zechariah is deep, rich, challenging and comforting.

The comfort which God extends through Zechariah is the reminder that in a world full of hostility, darkness and power in the hands of evil leaders, the faithful are still **“the apple of His eye” (Zechariah 2:8)**. When we see evil and faithlessness succeeding, we may be tempted to rethink our position. If they have all the power and all the loot, we mistakenly think to ourselves that perhaps they are doing it correctly.

In the first half of the book (really, chapters 1-8) we see a series of visions indicating that evil will not prevail. These visions (which include four horsemen, four horns, four carpenters, golden candlesticks, a huge scroll) will all testify to God’s judgment of the wicked and protection of the just. We all seem to intuitively have this conviction (as unjustified as it may seem) that good will win out. What God conveys through Zechariah is that that is truly the case. To jump on board with the wicked is to serve a defeated master.

But how does one take rank with the righteous? The Israelites, no doubt, knew they deserved the judgment they were enduring. They would be on very shaky ground if they viewed their own goodness, virtue, humility, wisdom, faithful obedience, etc. as the foundation of their own righteousness. One is hard-pressed to find a minor prophet (or almost any Old Testament book) that points to Christ as directly and as often as Zechariah.

Christ in Zechariah

In Zechariah we read of:

*The thirty pieces of silver (11:13)

*The siege of Jerusalem (12:2), of which Jesus prophesied in the Olivet Discourse

*How they will look upon Him whom they pierced (12:10)

*How a fountain shall be opened...for sin and uncleanness (13:1)

*They will smite the shepherd, scattering the sheep (13:7)

*How His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives
(14:4)

*How the King comes on a donkey (9:9)

We read of these and many more prophecies pointing to Christ. We also read of the effects of the gospel upon the world.

He shall speak peace to the nations; His dominion *shall be* ‘from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth’ (Zechariah 9:10b).

Most of us are familiar with Jesus referring to Himself, His ministry, His Spirit in terms of “**living waters**” (John 4:14; 7:37-39). The end of Zechariah proclaims the beauty and extent of the peace that comes through Christ—through the Great Commission.

And in that day it shall be— *That living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur. And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be “The Lord is one,” and His name one (Zechariah 14:8, 9).*

A word of caution here. There are many with whom I respectfully disagree who assert that these blessings follow, rather than precede, the Second Coming of Christ. One resource of mine (whose opinion I respect in many categories) teaches that “**Zechariah, like the other OT prophets, is not enlightened as to the present long interval of the church age.**”

I would submit that they weren’t enlightened to it *because it is not found in God’s plan of redemption*. We must recognize that it is the word and Spirit of God working through a redeemed people that these promises find their fulfillment. But if you’re anything like me, you feel ill-equipped for the task.

This brings us to my final thought regarding Zechariah. It is the portion of the prophecy that I think of the most and has brought me the greatest sense of tranquility. And I believe, in terms of God’s people feeling overwhelmed by their enemies and unqualified in their

own souls, brought the greatest sense of truly belonging to their Father in heaven—that they were indeed accounted as the apple of His eye.

Now, the scene is both horrifying and comforting. Joshua the high priest is standing before the Angel of the Lord (Zechariah 3). That would be frightening enough! To stand before the tribunal of God with His piercing eye knowing every sinful deed, every foul thought! If that were not enough to convince anyone that they were not worthy to be considered a saint but rather an enemy of God, the intensity of the event becomes thick with guilt with the presence of Satan.

Satan is not omniscient (meaning, he is not all-knowing). But one needn't be all-knowing to know enough to accuse. And this is the skill in which he excels. The names used to describe him, *satanas* and *diabolos*, mean “adversary” and “accuser”. And due to the flesh and sinful nature of man, he has plenty of ammunition. Every last one of us is guilty as charged. To deny our own sin is the height of self-deception.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8).

God knows all. Satan knows enough. And if we're smart, we, like Joshua, will keep our mouths shut in utter dependence upon another. This is one of the glorious and powerful purposes of the law of God that every mouth may be stopped. That we all might recognize our guilt and know that **“by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Romans 3:19, 20).**

So the room stands in agreement as to the guilt of this priest—this high priest. What hope have the people when the priest (a priest represents the people to God, as opposed to the prophet who represents God to the people) stands guilty? How are we a **“a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5)** when we stand guilty?

Imagine the serenity and quietude of heart Joshua must have known when the next words were uttered.

And the Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem

rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire” (Zechariah 3:2)?

A recurring theme throughout Scripture when it comes to the victory over sin, death, darkness and the devil is that the **“battle is the Lord’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15; 1 Samuel 17:47)**. And it is in Christ that we become **“more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37)**.

Worthy of note, Joshua did not say (nor, I would guess, even thought) ‘you did not choose us, we chose you.’ How eminently comforting for Joshua to know that his inclusion among the favored people of God is grounded in the election of God, **“The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem”!**

Though perhaps unpopular in a day of self-confidence, self-assurance and self-image, Calvin’s thoughts on this passage are worthy of repeating here:

Let us then learn to rely on the gratuitous adoption of God, if we would boldly exult against Satan and all his assaults. It hence follows, that those men who at this day obscure, and seek, as far as they can, to extinguish the doctrine of election, are enemies to the human race; for they strive their utmost to subvert every assurance of salvation.⁴⁶

I hazard to guess that in that room, we would take more comfort in the election and victory found in the words of God than any decision we, in our best moments, would calculate to make.

We are not a glowing and beautiful ember that ascends from the fire by virtue of our own wings. No, we are a **“brand plucked from the fire”**. That is a piece of burning wood, headed for the ash heap. And by the love, mercy and grace of God, we are plucked-rescued *mussal*.

Let the faithful know that their contest is with Satan, over and above the irritations and attacks of an irreligious culture. For it is in the recognition of that fact that we will not rely upon carnal devices or a retaliatory spirit for our victory, but ever lean upon Christ and His

⁴⁶ Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (Vol. 5, pp. 84–85). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

provisions for warfare (truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit and prayer-Ephesians 6:14-18).

Having dismissed the devil, the attention is fully turned toward Joshua. There he stands in filthy garments, which are emblematic of sin and iniquity (Zechariah 3:4). Let us take in the beautiful imagery of Joshua, who has nothing to offer to this event other than his guilt, being stripped down of his sin and re-clothed in the robes of righteousness.

His guilt is taken away, but he doesn't remain naked. He will be dressed now **“with rich robes” (Zechariah 3:4)**. The Scriptures speak of three imputations *logizomai* (to reckon, calculate or charge to one's account). The sin of Adam is imputed to all; the sin of the believer is imputed to Christ; and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer. Such a beautiful and ample expression of the gospel, in such a few words:

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Now that the people of God are armed with the knowledge of the power of God as their hope, they are ready to finish the temple and worship within it. This righteousness found in Christ is not designed to be an excuse to continue in sin but is rather a declaration of our freedom from sin.

Toward the end of chapter three we are taught more fully about Christ. God declares that He is bringing forth His Servant, **“the BRANCH” (Zechariah 3:8)**. This is a common and appropriate expression used in anticipation of Christ.

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:1, 2).

A tender shoot from an almost extinct line of David. He will be born in humility and obscurity, from a root, as it were from under the ground. But He and His kingdom will grow. And it will grow because of something He has accomplished.

And I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day (Zechariah 3:9b).

We read similar words in Daniel in anticipation of the kingdom of Christ:

Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness (Daniel 9:24a).

And it is this which the church is to preach.

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Hebrews 10:14).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How has the inability of in-person worship affected your faith?
2. What was Zechariah's concern for the people of God as the temple was being rebuilt?
3. How do you respond to the providence of God when things don't seem to be going well? Do you have a way you think about these things?
4. How does evil tempt a person to join in?
5. Will evil eventually win or lose? Explain your answer.
6. What are some examples found in Zechariah that point to the ministry of Christ?
7. How does the vision of Joshua, the High Priest comfort and strengthen a Christian?

Part XXXIX - Malachi

Behold, He is Coming...But

John 5:39; Malachi 3:1

June 7, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts (Malachi 3:1).

Introduction

Speaking to a fellow minister recently, we were seeking to examine the proper response to the almost unprecedented turmoil in which we currently find ourselves. As we discussed the proper courses of action, we realized that pretty much every Christian recognizes the cure to the ills of society rests squarely on the grace of the Gospel. Such a statement is generally met with a brief ‘amen, amen’ followed by a ‘but what are we actually going to do?’

As we were accelerating past the Gospel into the weightier matters at hand, our short-sightedness gently slapped us on the back of our heads. In my normal fashion, I found a sports analogy. It’s almost as if the Gospel is an ‘also ran.’ An ‘also ran’ are people in a race who didn’t win, but they’re mentioned by the sportswriter as a bit of a courtesy. My friend compared it to the free square in bingo: ‘Yes, the Gospel is a given, but we must focus now on the other squares.’

It is beyond dispute that there is more to the Christian faith than resting in the Gospel (though this is a crucial element). In the book of Malachi, we learn of the dangers of an *unwarranted assurance* in the promises of God. The confession teaches of **“false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation” (WCF, 18, 1)**. But Christians, and especially

pastors, must be cautious of allowing their message to pass by the Gospel with a mere head-nod. This is particularly critical during critical times when we want to stop the bleeding. But the blood (pardon the graphic) coming through the skin is a result of something internal. And the internal problem is addressed by the Gospel.

We are in part thirty-nine in our series, Route Sixty-Six, which is inspired by Jesus' words in John 5:39,

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

These words of Jesus are followed by a rebuke,

But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life (John 5:40).

Trying to transform the world apart from Christ is like trying to get a dead man into shape. The necessary implication of the above verse is that they (meaning all unregenerate people) do not currently have life.

This morning we finish our survey of the Old Testament. What is God's parting word for us before the four-hundred years of silence followed by the birth of Christ? What is the final message for us to ponder?

So much drama in these Old Testament accounts! Far more difficult circumstances than any current event can be compared to. The plagues, famines, judgments, hatred, betrayal, slavery, vicious sacrifice of babies and other innocents can make the Old Testament almost unreadable in mixed company.

But the very first promise (in terms of redemption) and the very last promise unambiguously point to Jesus. At the very beginning, at the fall of man, there is the promised Seed who will defeat the enemy of God's people.

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel (Genesis 3:15).

Thousands of years come and go, yet the promise remains. Here, at the end of the Old Testament canon, we read of the astonishing immutability of God's covenant promise!

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts (Malachi 3:1).

This passage speaks of John the Baptist and Jesus. This event will not happen for hundreds of years. But the message from cover to cover, from beginning to end, is that the Alpha and the Omega is Jesus Christ, and He is crucified for the redemption of this fallen world. It is not an ‘also ran’. It is not the blank space in Bingo. It is our only hope.

Survey of Malachi

Malachi begins with God expressing His great love. **“I have loved you,” says the Lord (Malachi 1:2a)** is the opening message. This is followed by one of their many questions, **“Yet you say, ‘In what way have you loved us’” (Malachi 1:2b)?** Seven times we see this type of dialogue.

In what way have we despised your name...In what way have we defiled you...In what way have we wearied Him [the Lord]...In what way shall we return...In what way have we robbed you...What have we spoken against you (Malachi 1:6; 7; 2:17; 3:7, 8; 13)?

These words are reminiscent of Jesus' words about the last day:

“Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a

stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:44-46).

This is a chilling theme in Malachi: though God may love all people without distinction, that does not mean He loves all without exception.

The nation of Israel during the time of Malachi (around 400 BC) lived under the false impression that their mere inclusion among the covenant people of God meant that all the glorious promises were for them, in spite of their cold, faithless hearts.

If you will not hear, and if you will not take *it* to heart, to give glory to My name,” says the Lord of hosts, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, because you do not take *it* to heart” (Malachi 2:2).

There is a good deal of talk today about systemic issues. At whatever level those types of things exist, it fundamentally begins with the heart of the individual. The priests were corrupt, and the offerings defiled (1:6-2:9). Their religion had descended into a shallow and careless formalism (offering blind, stolen and lame animals), gifts even the lower magistrates (governors) wouldn’t accept.

The infidelity of the individual became the infidelity of the body. And the dire consequences of these cold hearts and lack of genuine faith was treachery. We hear these words from the voice of the prophet,

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers (Malachi 2:10)?

There will be no brotherhood of man apart from a Fatherhood of God. But if there is a true Fatherhood found in the blood of Christ, the brotherhood cannot be stopped. A cold heart toward God will inevitably produce a cold and oppressive heart to one another. But we are reminded of a God who intervenes to rescue us from our naturally morbid and diseased condition.

Christ in Malachi

There is no difficulty in finding Jesus in Malachi. We read it earlier:

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts (Malachi 3:1).

But there is a following verse which must grab our attention. Many of the Israelites found a false comfort in verse one. But verse two tells a different story:

But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like launderers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver (Malachi 3:1, 2a).

When Jesus came He initiated the biggest split in church history. **“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34a).**

The messenger, John the Baptist, preached of this very division. He taught that **“the axe is laid to the root of the trees” (Matthew 3:10).** Jesus would come with a **“winnowing fork in His hand” (Matthew 3:12).** When we arrive at the end of God’s revealed

word, the oft quoted words are, **“Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20b).**

Many a believer pines away for the rapture (or, more accurately, the resurrection). **“But who can endure the day of His coming?”** Are you quite certain it will be Good News for you on that day?

**Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is
darkness, and not light (Amos 5:18).**

The Apostle Paul speaks of how God **“diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place” (2 Corinthians 2:14).** The true fragrance of Christ to some is the **“aroma of life leading to life” but to the others it is the “aroma of death leading to death” (2 Corinthians 2:16).**

The divisions of today’s turmoil will pale in comparison to that division. The division begins wherever Christ is preached and it will continue to do so until there is the great division where the sheep will be separated from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). It is here that the hypocrites will face the music of their false presumptions. It is here that we read of the **“When Lord, When Lord?”**

Malachi is a book which confronts false assumptions of peace with God when there is no peace at all. **“Behold He is coming...but”.** In His great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts this presumptuousness. **“Did we not prophesy, cast out demons, do many wonders” (Matthew 7:21-23)?** To which they receive the sobering response, **“Depart from Me, I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23).**

The greatest fear of any pastor is that his church contains these people, those who will hear Jesus speak these words. After Malachi, there will be four hundred years of silence before we are greeted by John the Baptist and our Savior. But the Old Testament leaves us, as it were, with a warning:

**And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the
children, and the hearts of the children to their
fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse
(Malachi 4:6).**

The hope of humanity is found in having our hearts subdued by Christ, which inevitably unifies the hearts of sinful people. The inevitable outcome of the alternative is that God will come and strike the earth with a curse.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss how the difficulties of a particular era can tempt Christians/pastors to forget the importance of the Gospel?
2. What is the promise that we read of from Genesis to Malachi?
3. What do we learn in the opening of Malachi? How is this responded to? There is a recurring dialogue throughout Malachi. What does this tell you about the people?
4. False presumptions can be very dangerous. What false presumptions do we read of in Malachi?
5. How does a system of darkness begin? How is it cured?
6. Malachi teaches of the coming of Christ. Is this always good news for everyone? Why or why not?

Part XL - Matthew

A Promise Kept

John 5:39; Matthew 1:22, 23

June 14, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us” (Matthew 1:22, 23).

Introduction

Ezekiel opens with a description of angelic beings having four faces: of a man, of a lion, of an ox, and of an eagle (Ezekiel 1:10). There are various explanations for why God presents us with these creatures. We see men, wild beasts, domestic beasts and flying beasts. Each face reveals a slightly different facet of the same creature.

As we enter into the New Testament, we are met with four gospels. Each one will highlight different, yet harmonious, features in their accounts. But the centerpiece of their narratives could not be more clear: the person and work of Jesus Christ. By *person and work* we mean who He is and what He did.

We have been pursuing the theme put forth in the fifth chapter of John, where Jesus taught that the Scriptures are about Him. This was a striking comment to be made by any human—to suggest that books written fifteen hundred years before your birth were specifically about you!

For thirty-nine books we’ve hunted out where Jesus is to be found in these Old Testament books. For the most part, the task was not terribly difficult. We found Him in promises, types, foreshadows and prophecies. It is safe to say, Christians are more acquainted with the New Testament than the Old Testament, so the Old Testament

feels almost like a prequel. When it spoke of a sacrificial lamb or a king coming as a donkey's colt, we saw it plainly.

On other occasions it was not so easy to see the Christian message. Now, as we enter the New Testament, the quest is as plain as day. The entire Old Testament promised and anticipated a Savior, a Messiah, one who would succeed where Adam had failed. And now, the Healer of the nations has arrived. He is the one who will restore and renew and wipe away all tears (Revelation 21:4).

He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isaiah 25:8, 9).

The first four books of the New Testament contain the story of God keeping His promise and what that looks like. The next book (Acts) is the story of the expansion of that promise. Then, what we will largely see through the remaining books are corrections to the errors people have about what God has done through His Son.

The gospels might be compared to a battlefield where that which was necessary happened for the victory of lost souls; the remaining books are God's way of correcting our thinking in terms of what has actually happened.

A Survey of Matthew

It is widely believed that the intended audience for Matthew (similar to the Old Testament books) were Jews. Matthew either directly quotes, or makes allusions to, the Old Testament more often than Mark and Luke put together (Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because they are more similar to one another than John).

For thirty-nine books we've been reading about a promise God has made. In Matthew we see that promise kept. I recall as a new believer in Christ being told to read the New Testament. It opened

with the genealogies (what we called the ‘begats’). I remember thinking, *This is going to be a tough read*. But now, having spent so much time in the Old Testament, there is a new appreciation for how Matthew begins his gospel.

It is likely that every Jew knew that the promised seed would come through Abraham. So that is where Matthew begins. He traces the seed from Abraham to Jesus. God has kept His promise, Hallelujah!!! We will often see in Matthew the words, “that it might be fulfilled.” What is immediately astonishing is the response to God’s faithfulness. Foreigners (the wise men) are anxious to find and worship Him. But Herod the king **“was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3)**.

The church, the covenant people of God, had grown corrupt and there was found no place in the inn or in their system for the truth of God promises. Recall our study of Malachi. **“Behold, He is coming...But who can endure the day of His coming” (Malachi 3:1, 2)?** The light does not blend easily with the darkness.

For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial (2 Corinthians 6:14b, 15a)?

Herod, upon hearing of Christ’s birth, orders the hideous and unthinkable murdering of all the male children in the district. This was the welcome the world gave to Truth and Life.

We then see (again in a fulfillment of Malachi 3) John the Baptist. One of the very first things John does is dispel the notion that any person should take comfort in their physical or ethnic lineage. Nor should a person take comfort in their mere external association with the church. That is not to say there should be no external association whatsoever. At the beginning of Matthew we also read of John baptizing Jesus. This, among other things, was the outward sign Jesus would be associated with His church, His bride.

Moving ahead, we then read of the devil tempting Jesus and Jesus succeeding where Adam had failed. We also see Jesus reaching out beyond Israel. His fame spread as He healed so many. Then in chapters five through seven there is, some would say, the greatest sermon ever given. Jesus instructs on the attributes of those in His

true kingdom in the beatitudes. He doesn't destroy the law but fulfills it and actually strengthens the force of it, reaching to the heart and mind. It is here that we learn the Lord's Prayer and what it means to build your house upon the rock.

After the Sermon on the Mount there is a record of His many healings and miracles. He heals lepers, paralytics, casts out demons, calms the sea and brings the dead back to life. The spiritual landscape grieves Him as He looks with compassion at the masses—compassion on those who He loves, heals, instructs, yet these same will eventually betray, deny and stand against Him. It is truly a high call to seek to walk in His steps.

He then sends the apostles to canvas all of Israel. He confers on them the power to heal and raise the dead. Yet He also warns them that they will not be well received. It is here where we learn that Jesus did not come to **“bring peace but a sword” (Matthew 10:34)**. But He also comforts them with the knowledge that a sparrow does fall **“to the ground apart from your Father's will” (Matthew 10:29)**.

It is also here that Jesus rebukes the cities that would normally be associated with God's covenant promises. The people lived under great political (under Rome) and spiritual (under the Pharisees and Scribes) oppression. For those who by grace come to recognize their weakness under the formidable opponents of an evil state and a corrupt religion, He offers this kind and tender invitation:

Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28, 29).

But it is not as if His detractors are going to take this in stride. We read that they will begin to plot to destroy Him. And I don't think I reach too far by saying that this same spirit lies in the sons of disobedience, who seek to destroy right thoughts about who Jesus is and what He has done. Yet rest assured that Jesus will bind the strong man (Matthew 12:29 - similar to what we will see in Revelation 20) and take back that which is rightfully His.

In chapter thirteen He will begin telling many parables. Parables are designed both to reveal and conceal. His ministry will continue as He feeds the five thousand and the four thousand.

He then teaches about how He will build His church and how all the powers of darkness will fail to prevail against it. He also explains how He must go to Jerusalem and be crucified, a message not well received by His followers (Matthew 16:22, 23). We read of the Transfiguration, healing more who are sick and possessed, and continued confrontations with the clergy.

It is here that we see Jesus departing from Galilee and, as it would be anticipated in the Old Testament, He set His face like flint toward Jerusalem (Isaiah 50:7; Luke 9:51). It is here that we read of His encounter with the rich young ruler instructing us of the impossible nature of entering the eternal life through our best efforts (Matthew 19:16-26).

Jesus, now in Judea, will continue His instruction. It is a terribly hostile environment, but He does not shrink back. He seems to very much go on the offense. He enters Jerusalem (the Triumphal Entry) as a king, albeit humbly, sitting on a colt. He clears the temple which had become a den of thieves (Matthew 21). He continues to teach in parables which contain a scathing rebuke to the Pharisees who came to realize that they were the culprits in His parables (Matthew 21:45).

There is a great deal of talk among men (both in Scripture and in history) about whether we will receive or reject Jesus. There is generally not a great deal of talk about whether He will receive or reject us. But this is what we see in His encounter with and destruction of the fig tree which bore no fruit (Matthew 21:18-20).

And if things were unclear regarding Jesus' disposition toward the clergy, we have the scathing chapter twenty-three. He, with unvarnished tones, denounces their hypocrisy. They were whitewashed tombs of dead men's bones. They travel land and sea to win one convert who they make twice as much a son of hell as themselves.

We then read another great sermon generally called the Olivet Discourse. In this sermon He will prophesy of the destruction of the temple and the cataclysmic ending of the Old Covenant. In this sermon He will also teach of the final judgment.

In chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven, the passion (suffering) of Christ will reach its apex. It is difficult to express the depth of the conflict: pure light and deep darkness. We begin to feel the explosive nature of two highly incompatible elements. Every earthly institution—the church (Pharisees), the state (Pilate) and the family (His closest friends)—will either out-and-out betray and cry out for His death, or, at best, deny their association with Him and scatter like sheep. Alone, He will face the wrath of God. Alone, He will secure life for those who belong to Him.

It is difficult to express the power of that which is conveyed in the final, brief chapter of this opening book of the New Testament. The tomb is empty, death is defeated, and eternal life is purchased and secured for those who trust in Jesus' Name. I cannot help but think of a dear brother who had been aware of his own terminal illness. I reached out to him, seeking to comfort him. But it was actually he who comforted me with the words, "The price has been paid."

This gospel ends with Jesus teaching us that He has received all authority in heaven and on the earth. This is the framework, the substance, which surrounds the Great Commission to bring that message to all the world. But it is not a mission that we are merely sent on. He promises to be with us. So, as we seek to walk and work in obedience and faithfulness, we are not merely working *for* Him, we are working *with* Him.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose there are four gospels? What is meant by the phrase, “The person and work of Jesus”?
2. In what respect is the Old Testament like a prequel
3. To whom was Matthew primarily written? Why?
4. Discuss how Jesus was received into this world. Why was it so?
5. What did John the Baptist immediately dispel?
6. Why was Jesus tempted in the wilderness?
7. How did Jesus comfort the apostles when He sent them out?
8. What was Jesus’ great invitation in the midst of an evil state and a corrupt church?
9. Why did Jesus leave Galilee and turn toward Jerusalem?
10. How does this gospel end? What is the comfort and what is the call?

Part XLI - Mark

But to Serve

John 5:39; Mark 10:45

July 5, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Introduction

Sometimes it helps to hear something from someone else in a different way, with a different emphasis. I was a bit older than most people when I got married. I was already a pastor and had been one for many years. I had done scores, if not hundreds, of weddings. But my bride was not entirely confident that I had a handle on the event. She needed corroboration. And she needed to hear it with a little different slant.

I coached at the open and collegiate level for many years. I left coaching and had a family. When my kids were old enough, I coached them. They were good students with great attitudes. Every now and then I would bring in a former player who had made it big in the game. This open level player would give advice on technique and fitness (sometimes things I had taught them). My own children would walk away with a new enlightenment. This open athlete might say a very similar thing to what I had said but in a little different way.

This also would happen when we're on vacation, visiting another church. We would listen to a sermon. The pastor didn't say anything that I disagreed with. In fact, he would say things that I've said. But he said it with a different tone or accompanied by a different text or illustration. Somehow my children would often walk away with a keener grasp. So much so that they might wonder why I had never told them what they heard in that sermon. I felt I had.

The point is, hearing similar things from someone else in a different way, with a different emphasis, will often broaden our grasp

of a particular field. And there is no field or topic that is as critical for our spiritual well-being as the life of Christ as conveyed in the four gospels. They contain the same story (the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ) from four different authors. They tell the story from four distinctive yet harmonious ways, with different points of emphasis.

In our Route Sixty-Six series, we're examining how (based upon John 5:39) Christ is the central focus of all Scripture. This was His statement in reference to the Old Testament. How much more is this the case in reference to the New Testament!

Survey of Mark

In our last study, we learned that Matthew primarily concerned himself with a Jewish audience and their anticipation of God providing a promised Deliverer, a Messiah, the Savior. At the dawn of man, immediately after the fall, God made a promise. Matthew emphasized that God had kept that promise. Hence Matthew began with the genealogy, tracing the ancestry of Christ back to Abraham.

Mark has no such genealogy. There seems to be indications that Mark was focusing on an audience that was a mixture of Jew and Gentile. It has been convincingly argued that Mark himself (based upon his name and surname-John Mark) may have had a Jewish mother and a Roman father. All that to say, a genealogy would not have been as high of a premium to his first intended readers. In Mark we seem to be moving into a more diverse audience.

So, what was the unique perspective of Mark in telling of the life of Jesus? Not only do we see no genealogy, we see no record of His birth at all. The Gospel According to Mark opens with the ministry of John the Baptist. Mark reaches in one chapter what Matthew takes eight chapters to reach. By way of contrast, let us notice that though Matthew mentions the kingdom over fifty times, Mark mentions it only about a dozen times.

So, what is the unique perspective of Mark? It's been said that Mark is like a camera man giving shot and shot. The word *euthios* (meaning 'straightaway' or 'immediately') is everywhere. Twelve of the sixteen chapters begin with the word "and" *kai*, giving us the feel

that it is to be read in one sitting. But let us not make the mistake in thinking that Mark is a sort of Cliffs Notes version of the gospel.

Even though this book is only about half the length of Matthew, it can actually be viewed as much longer than Matthew. What I mean by this is that there are things that Mark seems to intentionally leave out (like the genealogy and birth, as already stated). Even the teaching ministry of Jesus is deemphasized. A startling observation is that if we removed the genealogy and nativity, along with the very abbreviated emphasis of the parables and sermons, Mark seems to have much more to say than Matthew.

So, what is the unique perspective of Mark? What Mark seems to bring to the forefront of his gospel is not so much what Jesus taught (though it certainly includes teaching) or even who Jesus is (although it most assuredly includes that as well). It is what Jesus *did* that Mark highlights. Mark focuses his camera on Christ the servant. A theme verse for Mark might be found in the tenth chapter, after James and John were lobbying for positions of power and leadership in glory. The culmination of Jesus' response is found in the words:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

A highlighted feature in Mark's Gospel is Jesus at work. It becomes almost exhausting to read. Mark presents, in rapid succession, Jesus casting out demons. And not just a demon here or there, but a legion of demons (Mark 5:9). Yet He is not too busy to engage in the intimate occasion of healing Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:30, 31). Big and small, Jesus is at work. Although Jesus is Lord, the word "Lord" is almost never used in Mark (though we see it up to eighty times in the other three gospels).

No, in Mark we see both massive and warm and familiar acts of service. Jesus calms the storm, expels demons, cures the incurable, feeds the five thousand and the four thousand, walks on water and raises the dead. But Mark, more than the other gospel writers, records small, touching details, with an emphasis on the personal touch (the hand) of Jesus.

When He healed Peter's mother-in-law, Mark records that He took her by the hand. At Bethsaida, He took the blind man by the

hand. In giving hearing and speech to the deaf and dumb man, He put His fingers into his ears. In raising Jairus's daughter, Mark records that Jesus **"took the child by the hand"** (Mark 5:41). Mark gives details: who was related to whom, who lived together, what time things happened, where people stood.

While His followers argued about who would be greatest, Jesus brings their eyes to a child. If you want to be first, Jesus taught, you **"shall be last of all and servant of all"** (Mark 9:35). Matthew records that Jesus put the child **"in the midst of them"** (Matthew 18:2). But Mark adds a touch here.

Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. *And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me"* (Mark 9:36 – italics mine).

Yes, Mark emphasizes Christ the servant. He served massively and intimately. Let us not lose sight of this highest of Christian virtues. If we desire to be identified as a believer, a follower of Christ, we must follow His overall refrain of servanthood. The Apostle Paul wrote of it so powerfully and beautifully:

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and

became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:1-11).

Can we say that this mind, which was in Christ Jesus, is also in us? Is it at least a sincere pursuit?

An Interrupted Ministry

One other thing Mark does is interject a stark contrast in the midst of his account. Things seem to be going so well. Jesus is hard at work, and the only thing His disciples seem to be worrying about is who's going to be the top dog in glory. Jesus was popular!

And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" (Mark 7:37).

And then comes chapter eight. When His popularity apexes and it becomes apparent that He can take the crown and scepter in Jerusalem, the real story surfaces. Jesus will push His servanthood to a level that made even His closest followers cringe.

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not

**mindful of the things of God, but the things of men”
(Mark 8:31-33).**

It’s been said that all the gospels are accounts of the passion (the sufferings of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death) with long introductions. Mark is no exception. Over and above what Jesus taught and in concert with who Jesus is, is what Jesus did. Did He provide an example to follow? Most certainly! In terms of servanthood, He taught:

**For I have given you an example, that you
should do as I have done to you (John 13:15).**

But there was an act of servanthood that Jesus did that we cannot imitate. And that is to die for the sins of others. It was here that His attractiveness waned. It was said, regarding the high status of Jesus recorded in the first eight chapters of Mark:

How unsubstantial was the popular clamour.

Mark will now record the tragic enigma of Christ’s rejection. One of the only affirming comments made in the last half of the gospel came from the lips of a Roman centurion. When the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom and Jesus breathed His last, the centurion who stood opposite Him, said...

**...Truly this Man was the Son of God (Mark
15:39b)!**

The integrity of faith was now put to the test. Those who were excited that following Jesus might elevate their social, political, economic or even psychological status had to rethink their convictions. True servanthood involves the emptying of self. Though we cannot imitate Jesus in terms of His substitutionary atonement, we are called to **“take up our cross.”** Or, as Jesus put it:

**And calling the crowd to him with his disciples,
he said to them, “If anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself and take up his cross and**

follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34, 35).

It is a sort of self-mortification. A dying to self and a living to God, and to others, forms the Christian's call. And we die to self and die to others because He died for us that we might live, truly live. Jesus Himself describes that greatest act of servitude in the greatest act of love.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends (John 15:13).

This is what Jesus has done for us. This is our blessed hope. It is the call of the church to bring this hope to a lost and dying world. And Jesus promises to be with us in the fulfillment of this Great Commission. The work and service of Christ did not end at the ascension. This very gospel informs us of Christ's continued work in the ministry of the apostles.

And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs (Mark 16:20).

Let us be comforted in our mission that we are not merely working for Jesus; we are working with Jesus.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What advantages are there from hearing the same story from different people in different ways?
2. In what ways is the Gospel of Mark different than the Gospel according to Matthew?
3. What seems to be Mark's unique perspective in the ministry of Jesus?
4. What can we learn and imitate when it comes to what Mark highlights about Jesus in this gospel?
5. How did the ministry of Jesus get interrupted? How did His followers respond? Have you ever experienced anything like this in your own life?
6. What aspect of Jesus' servanthood is it impossible for us to imitate?
7. What was Jesus' greatest act of love and how did you benefit by it?
8. What can we be confident of as we continue to work to fulfill the Great Commission?

Part XLII - Luke

Behold the Man

John 5:39; Luke 2:52

July 12, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52).

Introduction

I was not raised in a Christian home. So, like many of us, my early influences regarding religion came from television and movies. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, unlike today, religious figures were often portrayed in a somewhat positive light. Movies like *The Robe* or *Ben Hur* made an effort at giving an affirming, and at least somewhat accurate, understanding of the Christian faith (again, unlike today where it has become in vogue to wield Christ as a political tool, seeking to turn Him into something that He is not—a woman or gay or sinful, etc.).

One image that stuck in my head was when Charlton Heston played Moses in *The Ten Commandments*. To be sure, when Moses descended Sinai with The Law, his face shone in such a way that they were afraid to come near him (Exodus 34:29, 30). But I recall in the movie, after that event, how they portrayed Moses so other-worldly that he was almost in a trance for the remainder of the film. He had no fear, was undistracted from his quest, and even walked with a brisker stride. I figured that must be what true religion bestows in the life of the faithful.

Honestly, I am still waiting for it to kick in.

Of course, if Moses, a mere man, can walk this life with such a profound sense of otherworldliness and unwavering spiritual courage, how much more Jesus, the God-Man! What an advantage, one would think, Jesus would have over other mere mortals—the Godhead and the manhood, inseparably joined together in one person,

very God, and very man, yet one Christ! But we must be careful to avoid allowing early heresies to creep into our thinking when it comes to the nature of Christ.

Do we see God and man joined together into one person? Yes. But the early church worked out hundreds of years ago (at Chalcedon) something reflected in the words pertaining to Christ that He is **“one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion” (WCF, 8:2)**. Simply put, the two natures are not mixed together, as if Jesus could reach into His back pocket and pull out His God card when He needed extra strength, endurance, and even wisdom (as we are taught, there were things Jesus didn’t know; cf. Matthew 24:36). What we will learn in Luke is that...

...Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52).

How does God (who is **“alone wise”** Romans 16:27) increase in wisdom? In the same way it was Jesus, *the man*, who increased in stature (became bigger and taller); it was Jesus, *the man*, who became wiser.

The Emphasis of Luke

As previously mentioned, the four gospels give four harmonious, full, yet unique perspectives of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ (Luke and Mark mention the ascension as well). We should not overstate nor understate their distinctions. Let us not overstate it, knowing that if you read any gospel, you will read of that which was necessary regarding the complete accomplishment of redemption. But let us not understate it, as if the gospels are mere repetitions of each other. They each certainly emphasize different things.

In Matthew, the emphasis was on Jesus the promised King/Deliverer/Messiah. Matthew begins with a genealogy from Abraham to Jesus. This would speak loudly to the Jewish reader. Mark emphasized Jesus as the servant, with very little reference to Jesus’ ancestry. Mark focused on the serving hands of a true leader: that He did not come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). Luke appears to paint the picture of Jesus, *the man*.

The philosopher and theologian Joseph Ernest Renan said of this gospel that it was “the most beautiful book ever written.” Where we saw in Mark a photographer, moving quickly from scene to scene, we see in Luke a painter of pen-pictures. Perhaps we think of Norman Rockwell, so famous for painting images of simple, real life: a family picnic, a child at the doctor, a couple in a diner.

Luke will paint pictures of real human life. He opens his gospel by saying as much. He is setting **“in order a narrative”** of things that were actually done and seen. He wants his readers (beginning with Theophilus, to whom the gospel is written—likely a Roman Christian) to benefit from his **“perfect understanding of things from the very first...that you may know the certainty of those things” (Luke 1:1-4).**

Luke’s pen-pictures reflect real things happening in the real, physical world with real physical humans, including Christ Himself. We mentioned last time how we will not see verses from Mark on people’s lawns during Christmas. This is not the case with Luke. Luke will spend a great deal of time painting the picture of Christ’s birth, and more. Like Rockwell, Luke brings us into the families.

He begins with Zacharias and Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist. He writes in detail of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth when they are both with child, and Mary’s beautifully poetic and theologically rich response in the Magnificat. Where Matthew writes of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the response of Herod and the presence of wise men and a star indicating His location, Luke introduces shepherds and a full inn, and how Jesus was patiently waited for by Simeon and Anna.

It is only Luke who tells us of Jesus as a twelve-year-old and how (similar to Home Alone) He interacted with the teachers in the temple when was left behind by his parents for an entire day’s journey.

Unlike Matthew, it isn’t until the third chapter that we see the genealogy. Now, two other quick observations about the genealogy. It doesn’t merely go back to Abraham (which would emphasize promise and faith). It goes back to Adam, the first man! Also, it is the genealogy, not of Joseph (the legal father of Jesus), but of Mary, the physical mother of Jesus in a real human birth.

Genuine human interaction is included in all the gospels, but it is accentuated in Luke. The story of the Good Samaritan (where a

neighbor is defined as anyone who helps) is only in Luke; the Prodigal Son (touching the most intimate relationship of parent and child) is found only in Luke; the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (highlighting a personal recognition of our need for mercy before a holy God) is found only in Luke.

In Matthew, most of the parables begin with **“The kingdom of heaven is like”** or some such language. In Luke, the parables begin with words to the effect, **“A certain person...”** His brush is concerned with people and his brush paints pictures of Jesus the man. It has been said that Jesus performed miracles, thus proving that He was God. I think that statement needs a bit of a correction. Others did miracles, and that didn’t prove they were God. Jesus’ ability (and His disciples’ ability) to perform miracles did not prove He was God; rather, it proved that when He (and they) said He was God, it was true.

But we must understand that in His earthly ministry, Jesus was dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit. It was at His baptism that the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. It was the same Holy Spirit who led the man, Jesus, into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil and succeed where Adam, the first man, failed. The success of the ministry of redemption found in Christ was the work *of a man*, a man who got tired, hungry and needed to be strengthened by an angel (Luke 22:43).

And what Luke underscores more than the other gospel writers is that it was *the man* Jesus who needed prayer. Luke tells us that Jesus **“often drew into the wilderness and prayed” (Luke 5:16)**. It is Luke who records that Jesus **“continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12)**, prior to selecting the twelve apostles. Prior to the Transfiguration, Luke tells us that Peter, John and James **“went up on the mountain to pray” (Luke 9:28)**. Luke records many of the same accounts of events we read of in other gospels but will add that prayer was included where the others may not.

Along with the humanity of Christ, we also will see in Luke notions of the humanity of the mission of redemption. Luke is no gnostic gospel, merely focusing on the immaterial. This may be most obviously noticed in the Beatitudes. Where Matthew records **“Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3)”** Luke merely writes **“Blessed are you poor” (Luke 6:20)**. Where Matthew records **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”**

(Matthew 5:6) Luke records “Blessed are you who hunger now” (Luke 6:21).

In very human terms, Luke prominently features in his gospel the genuinely disenfranchised—the poor, the needy, women, widows, Samaritans, gentiles, prodigals and others who might have otherwise thought there was no place for them when it came to the salvation of souls. Even the word “**salvation**,” which is not found in Matthew or Mark, is mentioned five times in Luke. The word “**grace**,” also not found in Matthew or Mark, is prominent in Luke. Though other gospel writers record Jesus being anointed by women for His burial (Matthew 26; Mark 14; John 12, 13), it is only Luke who mentions...

...a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that *Jesus* sat at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind *Him* weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped *them* with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed *them* with the fragrant oil (Luke 7:37, 38).

Of all the accounts of such an anointing, it is only Luke who records the final disposition of the occasion:

Then He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Then He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Luke 7:48-50).

Luke, perhaps more than the other gospel writers, touches the human experience. Let us pray that even now we might begin to grasp the full effect of what it means to be pardoned by Christ; to know in the midst of guilt, uncertainty and chaos, that our names are written on His hands, that we belong to Him; and though He remembers our sins no more, He never forgets us—like a young romantic, we are never off His mind (Isaiah 49:16).

Behold the Man

Though it is in John's gospel that we are met with the phrase "**Behold the Man**" (John 19:5), I think it appropriate to mention here what must have been obvious to all the observers of the cross, that it was a man who was crucified.

Luke (it's been said), unlike the other writers, goes into more detail in his pen-art, sketching the humility of a murderous coalition of a dark clergy, the venom of a betrayers kiss, the panic-struck break-up of the apostles, the denial and blasphemy of Peter, the fiendish hypocrisy of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court), the sarcastic mockery of Herod and the political expediency and cowardice of Pilate.

But let us seek to grasp that it was a man who went to and through the cross on our behalf, to assume upon Himself the sins of the world. It was *the man* Jesus who...

...redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13).

May God grant our minds, our souls, elevation as we ponder the unfathomable, that a man took upon Himself the sins of the world. It's been said that...

...Luke sets forth Jesus in all the simple purity, lovely and naturalness, profound beauty, and moral sublimity of His sinless manhood.

He was so *humble* nothing could humiliate Him. He was so *loving* nothing could dissuade Him. He was so *honest* nothing could deceive Him. Even on the cross, Luke records something not found in the other gospels. The criminal next to him makes a final petition:

Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42, 43).

It was a man who was betrayed, denied, deserted, falsely accused and deceptively tried. He was nailed to a cross, anticipating the wrath of God, yet He ministered to His last breath. This is our Savior. This is the Savior of the world.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Describe your early influences in religion. Does your faith feel like you think it should feel? Explain.
2. What are some common errors when it comes to Jesus being God? How do we understand Jesus being truly God and truly man?
3. Review the focus of Matthew and Mark in their gospels. What picture does Luke appear to be painting and what is he emphasizing in his gospel?
4. Give some examples of events that are unique to Luke's account of the life of Christ.
5. What kind of needs did Jesus have and why is that important for us to grasp?
6. How are the beatitudes different in Matthew versus Luke?
7. Does an increased understanding of the cross being endured by a man change or alter your perceptions of Christ? How?

Part XLIII - John

And God Was the Word

John 5:39; John 20:30

July 26, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

...but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:30).

Introduction

Following our worship service, we have a time for questions and answers. I have found great value in this for a number of reasons. It helps clarify things that were not well-defined in the sermon. It is critical to understand what's being done and taught in church (1 Corinthians 14:15, 16). It helps me, as the pastor, to grasp what people do know or what they desire to know or what they don't know. Teachers should be aware of those to whom they seek to minister (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). It also gives the congregant an opportunity to **"test all things"** (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and to be **"noble-minded...search[ing] the Scriptures"** (Acts 17:11) to determine accuracy.

On occasion, through question and answer, I will find that I misspoke in a sermon or, at very least, gave a wrong impression. In our last sermon on the Gospel According to Luke, I presented the idea that Luke emphasized the humanity of Christ. During question and answer it was brought to my attention that it almost appeared that I was communicating that the deity (Godhood) of Christ was relatively unimportant in our redemption. Such a declaration (i.e. that the deity of Christ is remotely unimportant) by me, or any pastor, would be a gross error.

Yet here we see yet another example of the value of four gospels. For John opens his gospel with an incontrovertible declaration of the Divine nature of Jesus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God (John 1:1, 2).

Perhaps clumsier to read, but more powerful in the Greek, **“and God was the Word”** *kai theos en hos logos*. A few verses down, just in case we might be confused about who the Word is, John writes:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

It is quite difficult (one might say, gloriously incomprehensible, for who would want to serve a God that is finite enough for us to draw a circle around?) for us, as creatures to get our arms entirely around the Creator when it comes to how God and Man can exist in one Person. John is not presenting a contradiction. But he is presenting the unfathomable, the unsearchable.

We have spoken of how it is a mistake to make too much or too little of the distinctions in the four gospels. They all contain the heart of the life and redeeming victory of Jesus. But they are not mere repetitions of each other. Recall that Matthew (in his impressionistic style) highlighted Christ as the *Promised Messiah*. Mark’s rapid account placed a special spotlight on Christ’s *work*. Luke’s pen-art gave us the Norman-Rockwell-like portrait of Christ’s *humanity*. Even with these distinctions, the first three gospels are quite similar. Hence, they are often called *synoptics* (able to be seen together). John’s gospel is quite dissimilar to the first three.

John’s recurrent theme is distinct from the first three. In Matthew, Mark and Luke we learn about *who* Jesus is (the Promised One, the Obedient One, even the Human One). But John opens unapologetically with *what* Jesus is. To be sure, He is the answered promise, obedient and human. But John offers with full-force an attribute which will separate Jesus from any and all religious figures (or any figure at all, for that matter) in human history. *Jesus is the Living God*. It is a *truth* necessary for redemption. It is a *claim* that will cost Jesus His life.

Survey of John

After recording His deity, John brings us to a wedding where Jesus turns water to wine, then John moves on to the cleansing of the temple. We then find ourselves listening in to one of the more powerful, and oft quoted, conversations in all of Scripture between Jesus and Nicodemus (a ruler of the Jews). In this conversation we learn about our utter dependency on God to rebirth us. It is here that Jesus will compare Himself to the “**serpent in the wilderness**” (**John 3:14**) that Moses lifted to be gazed upon for healing. It is in this conversation where that most quoted verse is deposited:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

The leaders of Israel needed to learn that redemption extended beyond the borders of Israel and to the entire world. We see an immediate example in the next chapter where Jesus has another conversation, this time with a person who was quite the opposite of Nicodemus: A Samaritan woman with a checkered past. Jesus would not bow to the culture. There were three cultural reasons He should not have spoken to her: She was a *Samaritan*, she was a *woman*, and she had a *questionable reputation*. We may not think much of this. But she and His disciples all marveled at this interaction (John 4:9, 27).

John records various of Jesus’ miracles, eight to be precise. All of them truly happened and all of them carried a message. He turned water to wine (sad to glad), healed the nobleman’s son (disease to health), cured the paralytic in Bethesda (paralysis to energy), fed 5000 (hunger to fullness), walked on water (agitation to tranquility), gave sight to the blind (darkness to light), raised Lazarus (death to life), miraculous draught of fishes (failure to success).

In all of this, His detractors, rather than being moved to faithfulness, sought to accuse Him of violating their traditions (usually revolving around Sabbath-keeping). He also calls out the kangaroo court seeking to stone a woman caught in adultery. This is followed by one of the most heated conversations recorded in all of

Scripture. The Pharisees will accuse Jesus of (as some read it) being born out of wedlock, being a Samaritan and having a demon (John 8:41, 48). Jesus in response tells them their father is the devil (John 8:44). But even here it is Jesus' claim of deity that puts stones in their hands (John 8:58, 59).

In chapter thirteen we see this **“new commandment” (John 13:34)**:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34).

Yet loving one another is hardly new. The Old Testament was replete with such admonitions. Loving God and loving one another were those things on which the Law and the Prophets hung (Matthew 22:40). It is said that it is new in feature or depth. Christ's love would extend to giving His life as a ransom. This model of love is deeper than previously taught or understood. We must be careful. There are those who will quote this verse as if we are to ignore all the commandments and replace them with (and I hope I don't sound uncharitable) our own vague notion of what it means to love.

In chapter fourteen we read of Christ comforting His disciples in light of His departure. There are many dwellings for those who trust in Him. He goes to prepare a place. He also spends a good deal of time recording Jesus' teaching of the coming **“Helper”**, the Holy Spirit. In His ascension, we are not left alone.

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

John records Jesus' teaching about the vine and the branches in chapter fifteen. In chapter sixteen He gives them the difficult prophecy of their own weeping and lamenting for the difficult times ahead. It culminates with these words:

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have

tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

In chapter seventeen we are given the opportunity to listen in on Christ's High Priestly Prayer. I will not attempt to do justice to this glorious chapter in so short a time. I will merely offer this historical notation:

John Knox, on his death-bed in 1572, asked his wife to read to him John 17, "where," he said, "I cast my first anchor."

In the remainder of this gospel account we read of arrest of Christ, the various trials of Christ, His crucifixion, burial, resurrection. Truly, this gospel contains the clear account of how we are redeemed.

Jesus, the I AM

Before we close, let us turn to the unique emphasis of John. The self-designation "**I Am**" *ego eimi* is used 23 times in John. Any remotely learned student (of which Jesus had many) could not miss the implication. When Moses asked God what His name was, **God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14).**

It was when Jesus said to the Pharisees, **Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM (John 8:58)**, that they took up stones to throw at Him.

But there were seven tremendous times that Jesus used the I AM designation: I AM the Bread of Life (John 6:48); I Am the Light of the world (John 8:12); I Am the Door (John 10:9); I Am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11); I Am the resurrection and life (John 11:25); I Am the way, truth and life (John 14:6); I AM the true vine (John 15:1). It is little wonder, in a world where people demand to be the final arbiters of truth, that a claim of ultimate Godhood would be infuriating.

Add to this how He deconstructed their temple worship, which had become idolatrous and virtually replaced all of its meaning with His own life. They had an altar, but He was the Lamb (John 1:36).

They had a laver for ceremonial cleansing, but He would be the one who would make them clean (John 13:8). They had showbread, but He was the “bread of life” (John 6:48). They had a candle-stand, but He was the “light of the world” (John 8:12). They had an altar of incense, but it was His sacrifice and His High Priestly Prayer which provided a fragrant aroma to God (John 17). They had an Ark which demonstrated covenant access, but it was His sacrifice that would grant them access (John 14:3). They had a mercy seat, but mercy would be found in Christ and in no other.

Conclusion

Perhaps something more emphatic than all that we’ve examined so far can be seen in John’s own spotlight. He himself tells us the reason he wrote his gospel:

...but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

The word “**believe**” in its various forms is found ninety-eight times in this gospel. *Believe and live* or *life* (or related implications) are continually found together (John 3:14-16; 5:24; 6:40; 11:25, 26). But one is hard-pressed to find a passage which more clearly and powerfully illustrates how one finds themselves children of God, a passage which also indicates where life is *not* found:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12, 13).

True rebirth is found by the blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit opening our eyes, bringing us to receive Him by faith.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him

should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is it valuable to ask questions and seek to have them answered when it comes to church?
2. What incontrovertible truth does John open with in his gospel?
3. Review that which is emphasized in the first three gospels. Why are they called 'synoptics'?
4. If the first three gospels addressed who Jesus is, what does the gospel of John address? Explain.
5. Give highlights of Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus and the woman at Jacob's well.
6. What lessons do we learn from Jesus' miracles?
7. What is new about the new commandment?
8. Why do you suppose people find such comfort from chapter 17?
9. What is significant about the designation I AM? How did Jesus teach in such a way as to compare Himself to the temple?
10. What was John's reason for writing this gospel? What does that mean to you personally?

Part XLIV - Acts

A Baptized Church

John 5:39; John 16:7

August 2, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you (John 16:7).

Introduction

Having moved my daughter to Dallas, we took an informal tour. We were in the company of a young man who had amassed a great deal of knowledge about the Kennedy assassination. I am old enough to remember where I was when Kennedy was shot. I have also watched movies and documentaries about it and read numerous articles. But I had never actually been to the specific location. We parked at the book depository and my young friend pointed out the window from where Oswald took the shot. We saw the markings in the street indicating exactly where Kennedy was on that fateful moment. We stood on the grassy knoll. I was fascinated.

At the same time, we were merely looking at a building, a street and little park. Yet I was enthralled.

I had a similar experience when I stood in the church where John Calvin preached. While in Europe we must have viewed a hundred churches and cathedrals. But when I entered Calvin's church, I recall just sitting and staring at the pulpit. I have read Calvin's opinion on probably every verse I have ever preached on for thirty years. I have become very acquainted with his life, ministry and theology. In one respect we were just in another beautiful church. Yet I found myself moved by the occasion because I knew the history.

We have just spent four weeks surveying and analyzing the special emphases found in the four Gospels. We will soon examine a series of letters (epistles) written to churches and individuals. A great

deal of what we read when we open the New Testament is someone else's mail on how they are to respond to some event or an attempt to encourage a certain behavior.

Acts (or *the Acts of the Apostles*, as it is often called) is a unique book in the New Testament. Though written to an individual (Theophilus-Acts 1:1), it is not so much instruction, guiding Theophilus in ministry (as with Paul's epistles to Timothy), as much as it is a historical account—a narrative—a part two of Luke's Gospel. Acts forms a bit of a bridge between the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Acts provides historical background for the remaining twenty-two books in the Bible.

What we see as we open this transitional book is something that has been a source of confusion for the history of the New Covenant church. It opens with the ascension of Christ followed by a remarkable event during a Jewish feast day called Pentecost (Feast of Harvest or Feast of Weeks). In this event we read of a rushing wind and divided tongues, as of fire, sitting upon each person (Acts 2:1-4). We also read of the miraculous ability to speak a foreign language.

Whether or not these types of phenomena are a reasonable/biblical expectation for the church through history has been a source of much controversy. It may be asked this way: are the events recorded in Acts part of the *applied work* of redemption or the *accomplished work* of redemption?

The *accomplished work of redemption*, as the word suggests, is something accomplished and not something we would expect to continue. For example, there is general agreement that the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ fall under this category of accomplished. But what about the events of Pentecost? Are rushing winds and tongues as of fire a reasonable/biblical expectation extending perpetually through history? And if not, why not? If so, why does it so seldom (if ever) happen?

At our close, we will seek to answer that question. But first, a quick survey of Acts.

Survey of Acts

What we do see in Acts, at least in seminal form, relates to what Jesus taught in John 16:7. It will be to the advantage of the church for Jesus to “**go away**” physically, that He might forever be

with His church spiritually. His ministry is not constrained to His physical, geographically limitations. At this point, it has been fifty days since His resurrection. For forty of those days He presented Himself to them, then He would have them “**tarry**” for ten days, after which time He would baptize them with the Holy Spirit (again, a source of great confusion and controversy). There is general agreement that the theme of Acts is found in the eighth verse of chapter one:

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

This baptism (something that produced signs/miracles that were mocked-Acts 2:13) is accompanied by Peter’s great sermon where he indicates that these events were prophesied in the Old Testament, mainly by Joel. Joel’s prophecy highlights the cataclysmic events surrounding the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant (sun to darkness, moon to blood, etc.). Peter teaches that Christ has taken David’s throne (Acts 2:30). The Spirit was powerful in Peter’s sermon and the people were “**cut to the heart**” (Acts 2:37) and asked what they should do.

Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38, 39).

It is here that we see the church begin to grow as they **continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42).**

We continue to see the Spirit working mightily as Peter and John engage in healing and teaching. It is having such an effect that they are commanded to stop but realize they must defer to the higher authority.

But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge” (Acts 4:19; see 5:29).

The beginnings of the New Covenant church are a hotbed. The persecution is intense, and the prayers are made for boldness (Acts 4:29). Deceit within the church finds little tolerance from the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11) and turmoil within the church results in what is commonly argued to be the beginning of the diaconate (Acts 6:1-11).

One of the great early deacons is Stephen. He presents a powerful and beautiful sermon resulting in his being the first public New Covenant martyr. Addressing an apostate church, Stephen concluded his sermon with words that today’s church should take to heart. He addressed his listeners as those **who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it (Acts 7:53)**. Woe to the church that allows their Bibles to become a mere religious fashion accessory!

The early portions of Acts have Peter as the central figure. With the martyrdom of Stephen, we now see a new character introduced. Saul of Tarsus was there, consenting to the death of Stephen.

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison (Acts 8:3).

We read of both good and bad as Acts continues. Simon the sorcerer thought he could pay money for power. The Ethiopian eunuch comes to faith through the ministry of Philip (Acts 8). As we reach chapter 9 we are re-introduced to Saul, **“still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1)**.

Then Saul finds himself encountering Christ on the road to Damascus, after which encounter he becomes the primary human instrument in the hands of God throughout the book of Acts. In chapter ten, Peter is taught a great lesson regarding the international nature of the New Covenant church in a vision and an encounter with Cornelius.

Acts continues to record the advancement of the church along with persecutions, imprisonments and beatings of Peter and Paul, and Paul's three missionary journeys where we read of the beginning of so many churches. It is to these churches that we will see Paul write letters, which we will turn our attention to in due time.

We read of the Jerusalem Council where the leaders of the church gather together to establish unity in their approach to a church that is now international in nature (Acts 15). We read of the wonderful conversions of Lydia and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16).

We read of the ministry of Paul and Silas and how they disrupted the religious practice and commerce of the towns they entered. Paul addresses the sophists at Mars Hill in his preaching regarding **“The Unknown God” (Acts 17:23)**. As we continue to read Acts, we see the ministry continue to grow while at the same time being resisted. Paul will not hesitate to preach the **“full counsel” (Acts 20:27)**. He also warns the church that all the church's enemies will come not only from without but from within as well.

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:28, 29).

As Acts comes to a close, the focus is upon Paul's arrest and trial. He appears before governors and kings, and eventually appeals to Caesar (Acts 25:11). After incidents upon the ship in his journey to Rome, Paul spends his last couple of years (Acts records about thirty years of church history) under house arrest in Rome.

But let us conclude by answering our earlier question: To what extent should we view the miraculous events of Pentecost as a reasonable/biblical expectation continuing in the church, especially as it relates to the *baptism of the Holy Spirit*?

A Baptized Church

Though this subject is worthy of an entire class, it must at very least be recognized that some of the events recorded in Acts were

unique events that we should not view as extending past the era of the Apostles. Jesus, in His instruction regarding the sending of the Spirit (speaking to His apostles), said:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:25, 26).

The sending of the Spirit enabled His followers to infallibly remember and declare all that Jesus taught them with He was still with them in the flesh. Jesus has never been with us in the flesh; He has ascended. The Spirit doesn't bring to our remembrance things Jesus taught us while He was with us. The Spirit gave that infallible message through the Apostles, which has been recorded for us in Holy Scripture. What is recorded is the full and complete message necessary for redemption. This is why the Holy Spirit was not sent until Jesus was glorified (John 7:39), that the entirety of the accomplished work of redemption would be deposited in His church via the Old and New Testaments.

What we read of in Acts is the baptizing of the church. It begins in the upper room when Jesus breathes on the Apostles (John 20:22), then it comes in full force at Pentecost (Acts 2) and continues through Acts, even into chapter nineteen where they had not even heard yet that there was a Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit falls upon the church in phases throughout the ministry of the Apostles.

We are to understand ourselves as part of a baptized body.

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many (1 Corinthians 12:12-14).

Paul now begins his **“body”** illustration (the foot speaking to the hand, etc.), but not until he makes a critical point—that by one Spirit all the members of the church have been baptized into one body. To suggest that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a subsequent experience is to tear Paul’s unity argument asunder. There is no notion allowed in Paul’s argument that some had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and others hadn’t. The glue for Paul’s argument is the assertion that **“by one Spirit (they) were all baptized into one body.”**

It would be best to understand the baptism of the Holy Spirit as something poured out on the church as an organism—a body. This is what we see throughout Acts. And when we, by the grace of God, become part of that organism we are made to drink into that one Spirit. So, it is not me, on an island (or tarrying in prayer), waiting to be baptized by the Holy Spirit; when God grants me faith and I am brought into the church of Christ—the body of Christ— at that moment I become part of a baptized body.

This may be illustrated by thinking of people in a pool (the church) and others outside the pool (the unconverted). The pool is the baptized organism. The people outside the pool don’t make their own pools or seek to splash water on themselves. When, by the grace of God, they enter the pool they enter a baptized body enjoying all its graces.

So how does one know they are truly part of that baptized body? Or further, what marks out the church as a true baptized body? How do you know, if you jump in the pool, that you will land in water rather than on cement? For one, it holds the word of the triune God to be the true word of God. That is the initial work of Christ in sending His Spirit. And, like the remainder of Scripture, the true church will ever highlight the central figure of redemption. The focus of Acts, and of all true churches, is the person and work of Christ, the only **“name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11).**

And finally, the recurring message in Acts, the message of a Spirit Baptized body, is that **“God raised [Jesus] from the dead” (Acts 13:30).** One can barely get through a chapter of Acts without Luke recording that central message (**2:14, 24, 30; 3:15; 4:10; 10:40; 13:34, 37; 14:31**). This is the message which begins in Jerusalem,

reaches Judea and Samaria and then goes out to the “**end of the earth.**” As Peter preached:

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:42, 43).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How is Acts different from other books in the New Testament?
2. Describe the difference between the accomplished work of redemption and the applied work of redemption.
3. Why would it be advantageous for Jesus to “go away”?
4. What does Joel’s prophecy predict?
5. How did people respond to Peter’s sermon? What did Peter tell them to do? Have you done this?
6. When is it right to disobey human authority?
7. What was Paul/Saul like before meeting Christ?
8. How will the church be attacked?
9. Discuss and define the baptism of the Holy Spirit.
10. What is the central message of a baptized church?

Part XLV - Romans

The Covenant-Keeping Savior of the World

John 5:39; Romans 1:16, 17

August 9, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “*The just shall live by faith*” (Romans 1:16, 17).

Introduction

When empiricists speculate about the beginning of the universe, they will generally agree that there are things they don't know and, in fact, things they can't know, at least through the efforts involving the scientific method. This does not stop them from hypothesizing, however. And though I find myself quite skeptical of their hypothetical models, I also find them fascinating and amusing.

One of the more intriguing conjectures attached to the beginning of the universe lies in how big it was when it began (generally there is no effort to answer how it got there in the first place). The mind-blowing proposal is that the entire universe, and everything necessary for the universe to be all that it is at this moment, was condensed (or contained) in something about the size of a soccer ball. That which was the size of a soccer ball, it is proposed, exploded into the entire reality we currently experience!

Allow me to be quick to say *I am not buying this*. It, in my estimation, creates more questions than it answers. But I mention this as we begin our look at Paul's Epistle to the Romans because as long as Romans is, it is a very condensed book in the Bible. One is hard-pressed to find a theological topic that is not addressed in Romans.

In Romans, the Apostle Paul addresses: sin, law, judgment, human destiny, faith, works, grace, justification, sanctification,

election, the plan of salvation, general revelation and human inexcusability, work of Christ and the Spirit, hope, the nature and life of the church, the reason for trials, conflicts between church members, church philosophy, Christian citizenship and our relationship with the civil magistrate, personal godliness and morality, eschatology, and more. It's all in Romans!

It's been said that Romans is the Apostle Paul's *Magnum Opus* (his greatest work). Martin Luther called it "the masterpiece of the New Testament." Romans has probably been preached through more than any other book in the Bible. It also contains and elucidates a cosmically transforming message, which message even ignited the Protestant Reformation.

But we should not think that Romans is a haphazard collection of unrelated ideas, as if Paul were merely following a stream of consciousness or creating a systematic theology for seminary students. Throughout Romans, Paul is consistently answering a confusion which was causing turmoil within the church. Of course, while he is answering some primary questions, we are learning a great deal of what it means to be a Christian—what we are to believe and how we are to behave.

So, what is the over-arching confusion? I think the misunderstanding that Paul is continually answering can be found in chapter three, where Paul asks this question:

For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect (Romans 3:3)?

The theology running through the church at that time seemed to insinuate that God was, in some sense, not being faithful to His promise. Notable that Paul's response to his own question, in the following verse, is "**May it never be!**" The theological miscalculation of the church at Rome is also addressed in chapter nine:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed (Romans 9:6a).

Again, we see this notion in the bosom of the church nurturing the soul-disturbing concept that God has not been faithful to His own word. It should not surprise us that a church which embraces such a skewed view of God and His promises will not be a harmonious body.

One must take a deep breath before seeking to put forth a brief title intending to encapsulate an epistle in Scripture as deep and massive as Romans, but if I may take a crack at it, I would postulate the theme of Romans to be *The Covenant-Keeping Savior of the World*. I often use the word *promise* rather than *covenant*, but *covenant* is the richer, and more accurate, word. *Promise* is a bit too simple, and *contract* (another way of looking at it) is a bit too cold. (Think of a marriage covenant. A marriage contract would be a bit too business-like.) Not to go too far here, but O. Palmer Robertson helps when he defines a covenant as: “**A bond in blood sovereignly administered.**”

And, of course, the only blood that will satisfy this covenant is the blood of Christ.

Survey of Romans

Please excuse my rapid-fire attempt at a survey of Romans. It is a bit like racing through the Louvre on a high-powered motorcycle. In Paul’s effort at articulating how Jesus is the savior of the world, while at the same time not abandoning His promises to Israel, he opens by leveling the playing field.

God has revealed that *He is* to all mankind, and all mankind suppress that truth due to their own unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). He goes on to show that if man persists in that inexcusable denial then God turns them over to their own cravings. His primary example of these cravings or lusts revolves around the natural attractions in human relations (which should help us understand our current status). But the dis-acknowledgment of God also pushes them to what one might call *abject* evil.

Such a doctrine tends to yield a comfort in a reader who doesn’t number himself among the depraved. But if we cater to such a reading, we miss Paul’s point. Paul’s theological jackhammer brings all human concrete to dust in chapter three where his indictment is served to all humanity.

As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10, 11).

Paul is not unclear about his goal. There is no classification of human which escapes this unimpeachable charge. Every mouth is stopped.

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

Paul will then begin to emphasize our true and only hope.

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28).

His readers begin to understand (hopefully) that the problem is not in God’s faithfulness but rather in our faithfulness, or the lack thereof.

This is no new teaching. In chapter four Paul will appeal to the archetype man of their religion, a person to whom the covenant was directly given. Abraham himself was not justified (declared righteous) by his works or faithfulness, but by faith and faith alone. It was by faith that the righteousness of Christ was imputed (credited) to Abraham.

Paul begins to explain in chapter five that since we are **“justified by faith” (Romans 5:1)** we should understand our difficulties and trials, not as God failing to keep us, but as God refining us and bringing our focus to true hope found in Christ. Also, in chapter five, Paul looks to a time earlier than Abraham: to Adam. In Adam death spread to all men, but through Christ comes life. We begin to see more clearly in chapter five how God’s plan of redemption extended beyond the borders of Israel to include all (by *all*, meaning all categories of humanity, every nation, kindred and tongue, rather than every single last individual person).

Therefore, as through one man's offense *judgment* came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act *the free gift came* to all men, resulting in justification of life (Romans 5:18).

We must ask ourselves if we are in Adam or in Christ by faith. Such a gracious understanding of our redemption caused some people to suppose that it must not matter if we continue in sin.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound (Romans 6:1)?

This is followed by another of Paul's "**may it never be!**" reactions. We are to understand ourselves as baptized into Christ's death and therefore dead to sin. In summary:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts (Romans 6:12).

Martin Luther put it this way:

We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

In chapter seven, Paul teaches us that even though we are freed from the law as a covenant of salvation, it does not follow that we are free from the law as a guide in life. It should not be the practice of the faithful to dismiss the law of God, which Paul calls "**holy and just and good**" (Romans 7:12b). In chapter seven Paul will transparently reveal his own struggle, one with which every true Christian can identify:

For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice (Romans 7:19).

This struggle serves to ever bring him (and us) to rely and rest in Christ.

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:24, 25)!

Chapter eight will begin with these wonderful words:

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1).

There may not be a warmer and more reassuring chapter in all of Scripture than the eighth chapter of Romans. It is here that we learn how the Spirit bears witness with our spirit. It is this “**Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, Abba, Father**” (Romans 8:15).⁴⁷ In Romans chapter eight we are told that “**all things work together for good to those that love God, to those who are called according to His purpose**” (Romans 8:28). And it is in Romans eight that we learn that God predestined us in order that we might be assured of being conformed to the image of His Son and ultimate glory. It is in Romans eight that we learn that since God did not spare His own Son we can be assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

But these very universal designations of being chosen, loved and the recipients of God’s covenant promises were confusing to the Jewish Christians who viewed themselves as having a unique status. For three very controversial chapters Paul will explain that the problem is not in God’s covenant promises, it is in their errant understanding of to whom those promises are made. The true children of God are the children of promise, not necessarily (although it certainly may include) children of the flesh. And you know you are a child of promise if you abandon seeking to establish a righteousness of your own, and turn to trust in the righteousness of Christ.

For eleven chapters Paul has been teaching them that God, through His sending of His Son, is the covenant-keeping savior of the world. Then comes the “**therefore**”. In chapter twelve he begins

⁴⁷ “Abba” is the word framed by the lips of infants.

teaching what this should yield in our lives. Our bodies should be living sacrifices. We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are to exercise our God-given gifts for the edification of the body of Christ. We are to overcome evil with good.

In chapter thirteen Paul teaches what a proper relationship with the governing authorities should look like and what their roles and responsibilities are.

Getting specific, in terms of the turmoil within the church, Paul encourages the church to avoid “**disputes over doubtful things**” (**Romans 14:1**). It recently dawned on me that the reason there were disputes is because they failed to recognize what falls into the category of *doubtful things*. We must be careful to avoid thinking that things that seem beyond dispute to us fail to fall into the category of doubtful.

Paul continues teaching in chapters fifteen and sixteen that we should bear one another’s burdens. His letter ends with great warmth and an expressed desire to visit the church in Rome in person. And finally, almost an entire chapter is dedicated to intimate greetings, a call to avoid divisiveness, an exhortation to be wise in that which is good, and to be simple in that which is evil.

And lastly, his beautiful benediction, where we once again see that God, in sending His Son, is the covenant-keeping savior of the world.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen (Romans 16:25-27).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is Romans considered Paul's *Magnum Opus*?
2. What is the confusion that Paul seeks to answer in Romans?
3. What is a covenant?
4. How does Paul create a level playing field in the first few chapters of Romans? Why is this important?
5. What do we learn by Paul referencing Abraham? In referencing Adam?
6. In what ways does Paul address the notion that it is okay for Christians to continue walking in sin?
7. Discuss highlights of Romans 8. What, in particular, do you find reassuring or comforting?
8. What misconceptions does Paul clear up in chapters 9-11?
9. How is chapter 12 a transition?
10. Discuss some of the topics Paul teaches in chapters 13 and 14.
11. How is the epistle concluded?

Part XLVI - 1 Corinthians

Not for Every Man is the Voyage to Corinth

John 5:39; 1 Corinthians 11:17

August 16, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Now in giving these instructions I do not praise *you*, since you come together not for the better but for the worse (1 Corinthians 11:17).

Introduction

Underestimating the powerful influence of the cultures in which we have been raised can be a spiritually crippling error. I would be foolish to ignore, or think I have somehow escaped, being a child of the sixties in Southern California. The message in the music, the aggressive counter-culture dialect, the appeal of substance abuse, the heralding and lauding of spurning authority have all created stains deep within my psyche.

These stains will often color the means by which I read the Scriptures and the conclusions I might draw. It is for this reason that I value reading the opinions of theologians who are foreign to my era and geography. At first, I found these theologians (often Reformers) difficult to read. Not only was the language odd to me, but they were stuck within the confines of their own age as well. More than once I would seek their opinion on a passage only to find they had launched into a tactless anti-Roman Catholic tome and tirade. But that was their era. And there continues to be value in their perspective.

We would do well, all of us, to examine our influences. To pray fervently that God would reveal those things that, perhaps unwittingly, we have allowed to grab our hearts. It may be more difficult today because we don't seem to live in some monolithic era. Influences are vast and they change rapidly. In 1973 George Lucas made a popular, nostalgic movie entitled *American Graffiti* which was

set in 1962. How could eleven years produce nostalgia? Things are changing rapidly.

At times it is easier to see this influence in others than in ourselves. When listening (and we should work hard at that) to those older or younger than myself, I can become confused (and sometimes dismayed) at conclusions drawn and directions taken, either morally or theologically.

I am challenging us in this respect because there may not be a New Testament church that fell deeper under the dark influence of their culture than the one we will study this morning. Corinth had Roman government and Greek trade and was said to be as “vile and vicious as could be imagined.” Toward the end of the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul lists the worst of sin and degradation. It has been observed that he wrote Romans from the city of Corinth. As a Jedi once said, “You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.”

In Corinth was the Temple of Aphrodite which, according to some reports, housed a thousand prostitutes. The common adage toward this licentious city was: “Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.” We learn in the eighteenth chapter of Acts that Paul had started this church and it flourished. Paul likely spent about eighteen months (Acts 18:11) ministering there and it would have been reasonable for him to expect some level of maturity. But instead, they were a church rife with problems. I certainly live in no envy of the elders of that church.

A Survey of 1 Corinthians

Many scholars have broken 1 Corinthians into two parts. In chapters one through six Paul addresses issues that had been reported to him (1 Corinthians 5:1). In chapters seven through sixteen he answers questions that had been written to him (1 Corinthians 7:1). Note the order. Before he answered their questions, he addressed their faults. There were things they *wanted* to know, and he would get there. But there were things they *needed* to know. Their weakness and immaturity was not that of mere humble and uninformed Christian fledglings. They had become puffed up (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Instead of maturing, they had evolved into a church of factions and personality cults.

Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul never mentions that there was anything wrong with these teachers, just the disposition of the followers. These teachers (all good teachers) were to be *learned from* rather than *leaned on*. Even the statement “**I am of Christ**”, if said in a factious way, implied the inferiority of all other factions. It is not uncommon for someone to question an opinion with the words, “That may be your opinion, but I trust Jesus’ opinion”, as if their own interpretation of a certain biblical passage is canon.

They had become a church seeking signs and human sophistry. Paul sought to direct them back to the cross, back to Christ.

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Corinth was a church influenced by and in love with the world. Paul would not play that game. Though no doubt wiser than them all, Paul puts forth the Gospel army: the foolish, weak, base, despised and nonentities. Are you weak? Step in here behind the fools. By the world’s standards, these are laughable recruits. But it these religious ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ who will have the true wisdom from above, “**that no flesh should glory in His presence**” (1 Corinthians 1:29).

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have

crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:7-9).

They were confusing worldly wisdom with the **“wisdom of God.”** The wisdom of God accesses the riches of heaven found in Christ. The Corinthians were carnal in their sectarianism. It might be important to note that Paul is not creating categories of Christian—the spiritual and the carnal, as if we must make a leap or find a key. He is merely pointing out that when they behave a certain way, they are being carnal (1 Corinthians 3:4).

They were a church standing in judgment of the Apostle himself (1 Corinthians 4:3), similar to how many a church will stand in judgment of the Scriptures themselves. It is a sinister method of self-ascension that denigrates legitimate authority. As mentioned, I have found this disposition weaved into my own soul. And the fruit of this puffed quasi-leadership was to allow sexual sin (a sin worse than those outside the church) to go unchecked. They actually seemed proud of what they may have viewed as gracious and indulgent behavior.

And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you (1 Corinthians 5:2).

It is not without reason that Paul, along with Jesus (Matthew 18:15-20), taught on the importance of church discipline. It is the method by which the brethren are restored and the purity of the church maintained (1 Corinthians 5:6, 7).

The issues at Corinth go on. They were suing each other, viewing their liberty in Christ as license for sin. It is no act of Christian love to ignore the strong warning:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor

covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).

Here, Paul is not speaking of an isolated incident or a continuing struggle, but rather the embracing of a lifestyle. Being a Christian playboy or swinger is a contradiction.

Even as Paul begins to answer their questions (usually with the conjunction, “now”), his answers contain stout corrections. He gives instruction on marriage, on Christian liberty and conscience, on the proper supporting of Christian ministers (a support he denied taking, likely due to the immaturity of the church). As we learned in Romans, Paul was not one who viewed himself as having obtained righteousness, though he was still mature enough to point them to his example. Twice, he calls them to “**imitate**” him (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1). The Apostle provides a supreme example of self-sacrifice. He did not always take advantage of the rights and freedoms he had as a Christian. It was a sacrificial effort on his part to “**become all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some**” (1 Corinthians 9:22). We are in a race and we are to run in such a manner as to receive “**the prize**” (1 Corinthians 9:24).

In chapter ten Paul sites Old Testament examples of faithlessness. The Corinthians (and all church members) should not think that their mere inclusion in the outward manifestation of the kingdom ensures our peace with God. We are to persevere. And we are to take comfort in the knowledge that God will not allow us to be “**tempted beyond**” what we are able (1 Corinthians 10:13). Paul reminds them what we all need to be reminded of, that “**God is faithful**” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In chapter eleven he begins to address what is appropriate and not appropriate in their times of meeting. He’ll speak of the roles of men and women. He will again address their factions, which, interestingly enough, he viewed as a necessary discomfort, that the truth might be ferreted out.

For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved

may be recognized among you (1 Corinthians 11:18, 19).

But these words are preceded by an eye-popping chastisement.

Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse (1 Corinthians 11:17).

Such a horrible thing to say about a worship service! But the Lord's Supper, which should be an act of communion with God and each other, had descended into drunken thoughtlessness resulting in great judgments upon the church.

Then in chapters twelve through fourteen Paul seeks to place order in the pandemonium that had taken over their worship. Oddly, he reminds them that they had once been **"carried to these dumb idols" (1 Corinthians 12:2)**, as if to make some kind of comparison. Though there is most certainly instruction on gifts (how they are for mutual edification, how things need to be understood to be of value, etc.), it would appear that the overarching theme of these three somewhat controversial chapters is that all things should be governed by love (1 Corinthians 13) and **"done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).**

Paul will complete this epistle by addressing a collection for the saints, his personal ministerial plans, and some final exhortations.

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love (1 Corinthians 16:13, 14).

But prior to these final words, he dedicates his longest chapter to the matter of the resurrection—both Christ's and ours. This is the heart of the Christian faith. Will the victory of Christ change our lives and change the world? Most certainly! But the Christian faith as a lifestyle or even a world-transforming force pales in comparison to our eternal hope. Paul puts it thus:

For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile;

you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:16-19).

To deny the resurrection is to deny the Christian faith. In his explanation Paul will appeal to the course of nature and the apparent death of a seed.

Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies (1 Corinthians 15:36).

We despair not for the seed, for we know what it will produce. Such is the same for the resurrection of those who are in Christ. It is a full chapter of victory, but in summary, our bodies:

- Are sown in corruption but raised in incorruption.
- Are sown in dishonor but raised in glory.
- Are sown in weakness but raised in power.
- Are sown a natural body but raised a spiritual body.
- Are sown an earthly body but raised a heavenly body.
- Are sown flesh and blood but raised a changed body.
- Are sown mortal but raised immortal.

So grand is this victory that Paul will crescendo with the great mocking of death, followed by a call to stay the course.

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “*Death is swallowed up in victory.*”

“O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the

**Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the
Lord (1 Corinthians 15:54-58).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some ways you have noticed your culture has influenced your view of theology and morals?
2. What kind of city was Corinth?
3. In what way is 1 Corinthians broken into two parts?
4. What was an initial problem in the Corinthian church that Paul addresses in this letter?
5. Describe the “Gospel army.”
6. Discuss the notion of a carnal Christian.
7. Why is church discipline important?
8. Who are those who will not inherit the kingdom of God? Explain.
9. Review some of the difficulties Corinth experienced in its worship. How were they instructed?
10. How important is the resurrection? Why? Unpack the beauty of the resurrection.

Part XLVII - 2 Corinthians

A Quill Dipped in Tears

John 5:39; 2 Corinthians 12:15

August 30, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved (2 Corinthians 12:15).

Introduction

At the risk of being found out, I will offer some truths when it comes to my role as a minister. These truths may not be accurate for other ministers, but form an exposé of my personal experience. I was hesitant to enter into full-time ministry. I have had two positions (three if you include my short stint with Athletes in Action, a branch of Campus Crusade for Christ) in the past forty years. I did not seek either of them. A local church asked me to be their youth pastor and I said ‘no’. But, to quote a famous theologian, they made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. And it went fairly well.

Then, a little over thirty years ago, I was approached to take the post of pastor at this church. Again, I said ‘no’, and again, they catered to my clear weaknesses and hesitations. The one response I recalled in these negotiations was when I said (due to my great respect for the man I was to succeed): “Don’t expect much.”

This is not to say I had no heart for the ministry. At a young age I developed a passion for the Scriptures, for the truth! I liked (maybe even loved) the truth. But I wasn’t all that crazy about people. Now, I don’t want to overstate this. I liked people. I cared about people. At the same time, when compared to the truth of Christ and His word—people were (I am staring at my keyboard in hesitation)—people were expendable.

I guess there can be some noble way of spinning this.

Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:42, 43).

My job was (and it still is) to tell the truth according to the Scriptures. It wasn't all that difficult for me to put relationships on the line for the sake of the truth. After all, "**Faithful are the wounds of a friend**" (Proverbs 27:6). As time marched on this became emotionally more difficult. This is both the beauty and the pain of living in one community your entire life and being in one church.

You marry a couple, then, all of the sudden, you're doing the wedding of one of their children! You sit in the ashes through the death of a loved one or the demise of a relationship or some severe or joyous event! As a young man and young pastor, I had not been psychologically or spiritually woven in such a way as to immediately love or care. But spending time (a serious type of time) with people yields both love and care. As does age.

Now I feel with members of our church similar to the way I feel with my own children (fathers and brothers is a common name, designating presbyters). I want them to know and embrace the truth. I desire that they be wise, good, faithful and loving. I have a responsibility to confront and offer words that I fear may not be well received. There is the potentiality of alienation.

But the feeling that members of our church are expendable has flown the coop. And even new members or visitors with whom I have not the intense history, easily win a place in my heart as a newly-adopted member of the household. When one dedicates their life to the community of Christ, there is a great risk of getting emotionally involved.

I don't think I am speaking merely for myself. This same experience can be said of the elders (some of whom don't take as long as I for this emotional investment) and of the deacons as well. It can be said of the staff, the Sunday school teachers, the youth workers, the worship leaders. In truth, I think it can be said of anyone who determines to make a ministerial/fellowship investment in the lives of their brothers and sisters in Christ in their church. This is why it can be so difficult for people to move. If, at some level, it doesn't break

your heart to leave your church, you may have not made that investment.

Perhaps you will not think this introduction odd when I proffer that 2 Corinthians is an epistle of pathos. Yes, it contains valuable doctrine. But it was said to have been written by a “quill dipped in tears.” The Apostle Paul dances in this letter between being encouraged by this church’s repentance while simultaneously having the unenviable task of defending himself from a small but powerful minority who had taken aim at him morally, theologically and personally.

Survey of 2 Corinthians

As we survey this epistle, we note how the protagonist of this ministerial revolt does not wallow in pity. Instead, he places his focus upon the deepest source of comfort, while remaining ministerial on the utility of his battle.

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

Being loved and comforted by God should not form a cul-de-sac in our souls. God shines in so that we may shine out. A few chapters later Paul writes:

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Paul does rejoice in their repentance, although it would appear that their course of action was still laden with weakness and immaturity. In 1 Corinthians Paul had chastised them for their willingness to allow incestuous sin to go unchecked (1 Corinthians 5:1). And though there is legitimate question as to whether he is

speaking of the same issue, he now encourages the church to receive back the repentant sinner...**so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:7).**

Sometimes the biggest violators are the least forgiving. The lack of willingness to forgive is a very dangerous attribute for those who call themselves Christians (Matthew 6:15). Good and bad reactions from within and without would not deter Paul from heralding the knowledge of God in every place. He rejoiced in being **“the fragrance of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:15)**. He did this knowing the reactions to this fragrance would be dramatically different among listeners.

To the one [the perishing] *we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other [the saved] the aroma of life leading to life (2 Corinthians 2:16a).*

The responses will vary; the fragrance should never differ.

Let us beware; the antagonists to the ministry are often within the church with the Scriptures in their hands, those who read the Scriptures while dismissing, rejecting or deemphasizing Christ read as if blinded and obfuscated.

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

May God grant us the grace to behold the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face.

A recurring theme in this epistle, along with divine comfort, is God's strength manifested in human weakness. In part, Paul is answering the accusation that his difficulties must have meant faulty

theology on his part. But he teaches a lesson we must continually re-learn, that God often works counter-intuitively.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. *We are* hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Corinthians 4:7-11; see also 6:3-9).

It is no easy task to achieve contentment in this approach to life. The world so surrounds and consumes us. An old saying suggests that a person can be “so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.” Paul did not seem to embrace that adage. It would appear that even the joy of ministry blanched when compared to his eternal hope.

We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

And Paul's (truly, the Holy Spirit's) effort to ensure that this blessed hope and comfort be in the souls of those he sought to shepherd, he never strays from viewing Christ, and all others, with heavenly eyes. It may be argued that the conflicts in their church, the conflicts within all churches, and (dare I say) the racial conflicts which plague all the world, would find a cure if we excelled at appropriating this simple yet seemingly impossible passage.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him thus* no longer. Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away;

behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:16, 17).

He will go on to explain the very heart of the gospel that these beautiful promises might be ours. There may not be a single verse in all of Scripture which captures the gospel so powerfully and succinctly.

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

On the cross the Father accounted Christ accursed that we might be accounted righteous. There is no better news than this!

Yet the Corinthian church had been “**restricted by [their] own affections**” (2 Corinthians 6:12). The world had undue influence upon them, and they were warned against being “**unequally yoked**” and coming out from the sway and pull of the world (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Again, Paul is moving between joy and chastisement. He does not wish to overwhelm them with harsh correction, nor through negligence leave their sins unchecked. In his concern of how they might sorrow in his corrections, he defines and distinguishes two types of sorrow.

For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Both Peter and Judas had sorrow, but with dramatically different outcomes.

Paul will spend some time on the offerings they would give for the poorer Jerusalem churches. Not to spend a great deal of time here, it is worth noting a distinction Paul makes from his first epistle to Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 9:8, while addressing subsidizing those who preach the gospel, he appeals to the law.

Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the

Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain” (1 Corinthians 9:8, 9).

Those who served in the temple were the model in terms of how the preacher was to receive income—it was a tithe (literally, a *tenth*). But in 2 Corinthians (addressing an offering for the poorer churches) he seems to say just the opposite.

I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others (2 Corinthians 8:8).

In chapter ten Paul makes a noticeable detour in his emphasis. So much so, that some have thought (without due merit) that chapters ten through thirteen comprised a different epistle entirely.

It is in chapter ten that Paul points out how different the spiritual war is. Herein lies a flagship passage for those who hold to presuppositional apologetics.

For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5).

In this spiritual warfare, Paul seems less concerned with making arguments to defend his God than with casting down the self-exalting arguments of others.

In chapter eleven Paul engages in the unenviable task of defending himself against the charges of false apostles. To this day, red flags fly upon encountering anyone who presents themselves with the moniker of apostle.

In chapter twelve Paul continues his defense by appealing to having been caught up into the third heaven, into Paradise where he “**heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter**” (2 Corinthians 12:4b). So glorious was this that a “**thorn in the flesh was**” given to him to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12:7b). We learn here that even messengers of Satan come ultimately

from the hand of God for our good. It is here we learn that God's grace is sufficient.

Paul continues his defense by reminding them that he had displayed the supernatural signs of an apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12), something that never happens now that the canon of Scripture is closed.

Paul will conclude by stating something from which he seldom strays—the gospel.

For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you (2 Corinthians 13:4).

And it is with loving and pastoral concern that he exhorts his readers to “**examine**” themselves as to whether they are in the faith; indeed, this is a healthy practice for us all.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss what you believe to be the valuable attributes of those who seek to minister and why.
2. What are some risks you take when you seek to love and minister to others?
3. From where should we seek comfort in trying times? What should we do, having received that comfort?
4. What did the Apostle Paul mean by the *fragrance of Christ*? Discuss his use of that term.
5. How is God's strength manifested through human weakness?
6. What does it mean to regard no one according to the flesh?
7. How is the gospel captured in 2 Corinthians 5:21?
8. Contrast godly sorrow with worldly sorrow.
9. How does a person examine oneself to determine whether or not they are in the faith?

Part XLVIII - Galatians

Justified by Faith

John 5:39; Galatians 2:16

September 13, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Galatians 2:16).

Preface

Having studied a book or a passage, I generally put forth an introduction of personal application. A truth is singular, but applications can be many. For example, a singular truth may be that love is sacrificial, the applications of sacrificial love are numerous.

The goal of my introduction in a sermon generally revolves around describing how what I studied either comforted, challenged or otherwise sanctified my thinking or actions when it comes to the things of God. First and foremost, a sanctified heart will find the application is a heart more inclined to worship.

From there it should extend to the whole of our being. I do believe this should be the lifelong quest of the Christian. It should be the historic quest of all creation.

Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen (Psalm 72:19)!

Introduction

After studying Galatians, one thing that rose to the fore in my thinking was how the impetus for Paul's writing of this epistle was

Christ's church (and Paul himself) being disturbed by troublers. I was reminded of an essay in a Christian periodical I read years ago entitled *Our Debt to Heresy*. In short, the article chronicled how so many of our great creeds, confessions and catechisms were a result of heresies infiltrating the church.

Many of those heresies lost their momentum due to the work of the early church. In a sense, those early heresies worked like a vaccine. Enough of the disease is injected that the body might ward off future infections. The modern church is much more highly susceptible to infections having dismissed the work of these early saints and their creeds, confessions and catechisms. Heresies these days are not as easily spotted. Nonetheless, God has a way of transforming our own infractions into His most powerful remedies.

Perhaps the most beautiful and powerful expressions of God's love and forgiveness in Scripture came about due to deplorable human failure. Can anyone site a richer expression than Psalm 51 when it comes to blotting away our sins and restoring the joy of our salvation? Yet the sin which drove the creation of this glorious Psalm was dark and deep.

At a personal level, the events which were most sanctifying for me and, by extension, for our church, came as a result of those who brought the most pain and heartache. Thorns hurt. They are not generally concerned with our welfare. But God is. And it is He who controls the thorns. Speaking of that thorn in the flesh, that messenger of Satan, Calvin wrote:

I answer, that Satan, in accordance with his disposition and custom, had nothing else in view than to kill and to destroy, and that the goad, that Paul makes mention of, was dipt in deadly poison; but that it was a special kindness from the Lord, to render medicinal what was in its own nature deadly.

May God give us grace to appreciate His special kindness in all our difficulties. It was difficulties instigated by troublers that brought Paul to write this epistle with large letters in his own hand (Galatians 6:11), something that must have not come easy.

Survey of Galatians

The topic of this epistle is the life support of the church. It is not hyperbolic to say that the understanding of the Christian faith these Galatian churches were beginning to embrace would render the death of Christ a vanity.

I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21).

There was a real threat that they would lose the gospel, a threat Paul would not countenance for a moment. He wrote of the lies and the liars who brought them.

...to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you (Galatians 2:5).

And the lie was not that there was no gospel. Nor was the lie that Christ had no part of the gospel. What they were hearing and beginning to adopt was a “**different gospel**” (Galatians 1:6) which rendered it not a gospel at all. It was not, at least here, the world but the church that had been “**bewitched...fallen from grace...hindered...from obeying the truth**” (Galatians 3:1; 5:4, 7).

Paul’s indignation is almost uncomfortable to read. It is with self-mutilation in mind that he writes:

I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off (Galatians 5:12)!

Clearly the error is great! But before we engage this great error, let us examine the darkened fountains from which great errors spring. Paul will make a distinction here between who he is as a man and who he is as an apostle. It is with holy respect for God’s holy word that Paul will write,

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have

preached to you, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8).

Spiritual death erupts when the word of God is dismissed or supplanted. And these eruptions of both church and the individuals in the church come not (so much) from missiles from the sky but rumbling tectonic plates beneath the church's own soil.

“And *this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage)” (Galatians 2:4).

What is this great sin designed to rob the Christian of liberty and bring them into bondage? What is this unendurable error that carries anathema (a curse) to the teacher and, potentially, to his students? The heart of the message is found in one verse:

...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Galatians 2:16).

Martin Luther called *justification* the doctrine by which **the church either stands or falls**. Calvin declared it the **hinge of the Reformation**.

There is nothing you will learn in any church at any time which surpasses this message-this good news-this gospel. In short, a sinful person is justified (declared righteous) before the holy Triune God by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law (that is, anything we can do, say or think).

We must be aware that these accursed heresies are shrewd enough to avoid dismissing Christ altogether. To them, the atoning work of Christ played a significant, albeit insufficient, role. But the argument of Paul, an argument which resurfaced in the Reformation, was that it is Christ alone who saves.

By faith we rest upon Him alone for justification (being declared righteous), sanctification (being made holy), and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace. Paul’s dismantling of these bondage-making heretics amounts to this: Christ plus nothing equals everything; Christ plus something equals *nothing*. Or to use the words of Scripture, **“Christ will profit you nothing” (Galatians 5:2b).**

His greatest detractors were those who were convinced that their ethnicity/lineage to Abraham placed them in a superior religious stratum. This strikes me in a similar manner when I witness to a friend who tells me their uncle is a pastor. As if their religion is covered by virtue of blood or marriage. Paul will not have people feel secure because of a false hope in their descendancy.

Therefore know that *only* those who are of faith are sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7).

A common objection to this lawless gospel is that people can live like hell on the sweet cruise to heaven. But interestingly enough, this ‘superior’ works-oriented false gospel was causing flagrant ill behavior. They were biting and devouring one another (Galatians 5:15). There is nothing that will yield more loving, gracious and obedient children than the knowledge that they themselves are the recipients, the beneficiaries, of a loving, gracious and obedient Savior.

If I think I have something to offer God to earn or merit His love—if that is my method of thinking—it naturally follows that I will withhold my own love until it is merited by others. This is a worldly love. Jesus taught:

But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them (Luke 6:32).

To summarize, the first two chapters of Galatians tend to be *personal*. The apostle is presenting his authority and credentials.

Chapters three and four are highly *doctrinal*. Sinners are declared righteous before a holy God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, who they know by the Scriptures alone, to the glory of God alone.

Chapters five and six focus on the *practical*. This great freedom we have in Christ should not be a license for sin.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life (Galatians 6:7, 8).

Law and bondage are replaced by love and service. Through love we serve one another. True Spirit-given faith produces Spirit-given fruit. The fruit does not save us, but it does reveal what kind of tree we already are.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Are there distinctions between the truth found in Scripture and the applications of it? Explain.
2. What are you hoping your study of God's word will produce in you?
3. How does God transform human failure into redemptive fruit?
4. Give reasons why creeds, confessions and catechisms are of value.
5. Why was Paul so intense about the errors invading the churches of Galatia?
6. What is the initial error that begins to destroy a church?
7. What is the doctrine by which the church either stands or falls? Why is this so?
8. Why and how does a proper understanding of God's grace produce greater love in Christians?

Part XLIX - Ephesians

Every Spiritual Blessing

John 5:39; Ephesians 1:3

September 20, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

Introduction

I have often found that I am more excited about the message I am bringing forth than are those who are listening to me. There is good reason for this. Throughout each week, I am baptized in the wonderful instructions of dear saints (mostly departed) who have made every effort to help me appreciate what the Scriptures are teaching about God—His riches, His blessings and what duty He requires of me. It is the most wonderful component of a wonderful job!

After this delightful immersion, the pastor then stands before the congregation, as it were, with a fire hose trying to fill teacups. He/I (for I think this is true of many pastors) is so excited to share his discoveries! It's the way you might feel when you read a great book or watch a great movie or find a great restaurant. You can't wait to share it with your friends and loved ones. You watch them take that first bite and you're waiting for them to react!

If they don't have a sufficient reaction, you become vexed. Maybe you ordered the wrong item or there was a different chef. How can someone possibly not see the beauty or taste how delicious this meal is?! As a pastor, sometimes you fear you have ruined a great meal with a poor, or insufficient, presentation.

What we can be confident of, to push the metaphor, is that the ingredients of this meal, being the word of God, are sublime. And the reasons we aren't bursting forth in praise are not found in the

shortcomings of God's truth, but the limitations of our own spiritual, intellectual and ethical dimness.

In this short epistle to the saints in Ephesus, Paul breaks into prayer twice (large sections in Ephesians 1:15-23 and Ephesians 3:14-19). These prayers are not so much petitions for items or deliverance or health. They are, essentially, prayers that his readers would begin to comprehend what he was writing, to understand what already belongs to them. And after that second prayer it's almost as if Paul cannot contain himself and bursts into a benediction in the middle of his letter. Let's see if we can catch a little of his excitement. Lord help our hearts move in that direction!

A Survey of Ephesians

A Lack of One-ness

Why would Paul write his letter to the Ephesians? He didn't write out of thin air. He wasn't cordially killing time with a 'just thinking of you' note. It would appear there was a problem. The *symptom* of this problem was a lack of unity in the church. This lack of unity, or one-ness, is seen when Paul turns (halfway through the letter) to the very practical application of what he is hoping will be their reaction to what he has written.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all (Ephesians 4:1-5).*

A bit shameful, don't you think, that he must write to them from prison to motivate them to behave well. But his point should be obvious. There is one God, one baptism, one faith, one Lord, one Spirit, one body—*unity!* But true unity was lacking. Like when kids

take their friend's hand and make them slap themselves. The symptom here was a church that was slapping itself. What would Paul, through the Spirit, prescribe to heal this malady?

More often than not, merely telling someone to behave is insufficient if you desire true, lasting, heart-motivated transformation. So, for three chapters Paul will take them deep into the caverns and high into the heavens of why there should be unity.

The Heart of Unity

At some level most of us have experienced unity. To this day I still get together once a year with my college roommates who were also teammates. Players and coaches often feel this bond, this *esprit de corps* (the *spirit of the body* due to some kind of common experience). It is more often applied to the military, but it can be applied to family or a work project. The movie *Apollo 13* captured this among the engineers posed with a life-saving mission for the endangered astronauts.

It is while Paul is laying the foundation for a true bond, a unity, that he breaks into prayer and benediction. What unity do we have as brothers and sisters in Christ that far exceeds the unity, the bond, provided by noble albeit less profound ties that bind? He begins his explanation in the form of a praise; in fact, it is one of the longest sustained outflowings of praise we read in the New Testament.

It begins in Ephesians 1:3, with the words, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”** Then he begins to explain why. He has:

Blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

Who can calculate the magnitude of such a statement?

He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless.

Prior to us choosing Him, He chose us! And He didn't choose us because we were holy, but in order to make us holy.

He predestined us to adoption as sons.

More than once Paul will call upon the predestinating election of God as a source of unity and praise. The very doctrine that troubles the creature is that which brings glory to the Creator and is designed to come back around and bring unity to the body.

Paul will then, as it were, pause as if to explain the first cause of all things. Again, if this be applied to anyone or anything but God, it would (and has been) a travesty and a tragedy. What is the first cause? The answer to the great ‘why’ from the lips of human pottery?

...according to the good pleasure of His will.

These are words he will say again (1:9). Paul continues his fire hose at the teacups.

“According to the riches of His grace” we have “redemption...forgiveness” again, “according to His good pleasure.”

And what is the end game of God’s good pleasure?

...that in the dispensation⁴⁸ of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him (Ephesians 1:10).

And to quell the notion that our inclusion in this great plan of the ages, this eternal plan of peace and unity for all humanity (Jew, Gentile, every nation, kindred and tongue) to enjoy, is somehow contingent upon the superiority of one person over another, Paul labors his point with words which have been a source of both the sweetest peace and hottest consternation.

⁴⁸ On a radio talk show this verse was produced in defense of Dispensationalism, as if the word itself was an argument for the entirety of the doctrine. As an example, I explained to the listener that I believe we should be witnesses for Jehovah, but that doesn’t make me a Jehovah’s Witness.

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11).

I am grieved that we must stop. But this extended praise for that which we already *possess* is followed by an extended prayer that we might *perceive*. He will pray that the “**eyes of [our] understanding**” might be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18). He wants us to “**know**” what we already have.

And the power which accomplishes all of this is the same power that raised Christ from the dead. Jesus Christ is at the right Hand of God...

...far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come (Ephesians 1:21).

Beware wary of doctrines which teach that Jesus has not yet taken the throne! They work against the glory of God and the unity of Christ’s church.

And, as if to immediately shut down the natural human pride which may attend realizing what a glorious mission we have been called to, Paul reminds them of their previous, natural state. They/we were “**dead in trespasses and sins**” (Ephesians 2:1). They/we were “**children of wrath**” (Ephesians 2:3). It is with a pastoral heart that Paul does not leave them long in their history. The glorious conjunction comes rapidly, “**But God, who is rich in mercy**” is followed by yet more expressions yielding humility to the human heart and exaltation to the riches of God’s grace.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Paul will then spend time addressing the specific problem of his era. The promises were made to and through Israel. Yet now there were gentiles in the church.

Clearly, prior to Christ, the Jew/gentile distinction was significant (though there were many gentiles even in the Old Testament who were included among the covenant people of God). But God chose a single nation through whom He would preserve the message and deliver the Savior!

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen (Romans 9:4, 5).

The gentiles were not part of this. They were...

...aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

Yet Paul offers another conjunction, **“But now in Christ” (Ephesians 2:13)** that has all changed. The **“wall of separation”** between Jew and gentile has come down. Paul was urging his readers to no longer view each other as **“strangers and foreigners”** but as **“fellow citizens.”**

Paul is seeking to dispel the notion that any Christian, any person, has obtained a higher status by anything other than the good pleasure of God’s gracious, predestinating will. The source of true unity, the means by which God creates **“in Himself one new man from the two” (Ephesians 2:15)**, is through the preaching of peace to those near and those afar off.

It is very difficult to read these passages and draw the conclusion that members of that church would walk away from worship and be able to say to their fellow believer, “but there are still promises that belong to me that do not belong to you.”

Before moving into the practical application of his letter, Paul launches into a prayer that Christ may dwell in the hearts of his readers. He prays that they...

...being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17b-19).

This is what moves Paul to a benediction followed by lessons on what true unity consists of. Again, it is painful to shorten the lesson here, but briefly stated, these last three chapters consist of:

- **Gifts from God and the word of God toward unity and Christian maturity (Ephesians 4:7-14).**
- **A willingness to no longer walk as the world. To put on the new man (Ephesians 4:17-24).**
- **A pursuit of moral living. Lying, anger, stealing, corrupt words, sexual impurity, unfruitful works of darkness, drunkenness, etc. Which all give a place for the devil (Ephesians 4:25-5:14).**
- **Worship to the glory of God and one another's benefit (Ephesians 5:17-20).**
- **Honor God as husbands, wives, parents, children, masters and servants (Ephesians 5:21-6:9).**
- **Recognize this to be a spiritual war which requires spiritual armor (Ephesians 6:10-20).**

Conclusion

We are in a war—a spiritual war. But let us recognize that, in a very significant way, it is a war that has already been won. The

Goliath of sin and death was conquered by the One (Christ) anointed by God. Let us appreciate the order of this epistle. The practicality of chapters four, five and six become the most impractical pursuit imaginable apart from the Gospel of chapters one, two and three.

It would be like removing a person's legs and bidding them to run a race. Apart from the victory of Christ, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, there is no race to be run. The spiritually dead do not run a spiritual race. May the rich mercy of God find and give life to our hearts by grace through faith in Christ.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose you find some sermons or lessons more edifying or enriching than others?
2. How did the Apostle Paul respond to his own writings in Ephesians?
3. What was the problem the saints at Ephesus were contending with? How do you know this?
4. What was Paul's method in solving the problem in Ephesus?
5. What is the first cause or initial reason for the events in life? What would the alternatives be?
6. Why should we be reminded of our previous, natural condition?
7. Discuss the unity of the Jewish Christian and gentile Christian.
8. What are some practical applications of a unified church?
9. In what respect are we in a spiritual war? In what respects is the war already won?

Part L - Philippians

Righteousness from God by Faith

John 5:39; Philippians 4:11-13

September 27, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13).

Introduction

Numerous times I have communicated to you how difficult a calling it would have been to be the pastor at the church in Corinth. The challenges for the pastors, elders and deacons of that church would have made it far from enjoyable. Conversely, if I had to pick a church in the New Testament that appears to have been a joy to a minister, it would be Philippi.

This first church on European soil is basically receiving a thank-you note from the Apostle Paul. No doubt, as we shall see, there is valuable ministerial instruction contained in Philippians. But Paul is essentially thanking them for their support in the labors of ministry while he is in prison. One gets the impression that this church held up the apostle's arms and were a great source of encouragement and object of affection.

For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:8).

Although it should not be the heart of ministry and, most certainly, can be the root of much evil, as with Judas (John 12:6),

economics is a component of Christian service. The Philippians were generous, and Paul gratefully received their support, unlike the different-natured Corinthians whose support was something Paul did not require of them. It is a great honor from God to support a noble cause.

All this to say, the book of Philippians is the least dogmatic of all Paul's letters. There is very little in the way of harsh rebukes or severe warnings. Recurrent ideas involve joy, God's power in seeing us through our Christian journey, learning by each other's example and the general richness of the Christian life.

A Survey of Philippians

The letter opens with Paul greeting the saints in Philippi along with bishops (elders) and deacons. The modern west has embraced a very casual disposition about what constitutes a church. Arguments against organized churches will often point out how the church in the New Testament often met in homes rather than church buildings.

Of course, *where* a church meets is not the defining element of whether or not it is a church. But churches without elders and deacons are not meeting the New Covenant definition of how a church is to be structured. Churches should have elders and deacons.

Paul rapidly moves to encouraging his readers of their ultimate victory and the reason for it. Paul was...

...confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

The true Christian will persevere (and abound, as seen in 1:9) because he or she is preserved by the love and power of God.

Paul, who is at this time in prison for his faith, will convey early in this letter how apparent outward antagonism is no indicator of gospel failure but rather...

...have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12b).

It is generally ascribed to Tertullian that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” whilst arguing against the oppression of the Roman Empire. Perhaps more accurately translated, “We multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed.” Like so many other notions contained in the faith, we like the idea of it until it is our own blood. It seems as if there are fewer and fewer who are willing to pay the price, to become His living pulpits and our lives be incarnate sermons.

Paul realizes that not everyone preaching the gospel is doing so from pure motives. It would seem we have good reason to question the sincerity of those who, either financially or politically, have a lot to gain by putting on a good religious show. Paul will apparently leave that final judgment up to God.

What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice (Philippians 1:18).

It has been suggested that chapter one can be summed up in verse twenty-one:

For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain (Philippians 1:21).

So assured Paul was, so confident of his place of peace in heaven, that he viewed his time in this life as a sort of utility. *As long as I am of value here, God will keep me here. But I do not bemoan His taking me when He sees fit.* An initial response to this might be to feel slighted that this world (along with the people we love) is so easily displaced. But it is just the opposite.

You will never receive a greater love than a love from a saint whose heart, focus, peace and fountain is the grace of God in Christ. But how does one attain what Paul seemed to have? It is through that which forms the heart of chapter two—the mind of Christ.

Therefore if *there is* any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being of*

one accord, of one mind. *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:1-4).*

And the example Paul uses for our Christ-mindedness was His willingness, though God, to empty Himself. Not only did the eternal Son of God become flesh, He was obedient to the point of death. And not a noble death, but death on a cross—an ignominious, shameful death. This is the mind that Christians are called to have.

It is quite difficult and counter-intuitive to dismiss that ‘what’s-in-it-for-me’ attitude, even when we walk into the doors of the church. And since inherent selfishness is so weaved into the human psyche, there is a great temptation for those in the ministry (myself included) to cater to this. It is directly after this call to self-humbling that Paul offers a somewhat puzzling statement:

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure (Philippians 2:12a, 13).

We are not working *for* our salvation. We are working *out* our salvation. It’s almost as if Paul, knowing the great difficulty we will have in this pursuit, informs us of something very extraordinary accompanying the efforts of Christian faithfulness: *Be encouraged, knowing God is at work in you.*

In chapter one we learn that to live is Christ. In chapter two we are to have the mind of Christ. In chapter three we see a goal, a pressing on to know Christ more fully. We are to know the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. It is complete and utter identity in Christ. Paul’s approach to this is to remove the clutter which wars against it, to take out the trash, so to speak. And in Paul’s mind, the trash is his resume, the very things that would elevate him to the top tier of the religious community.

He fulfilled all the religious requirements. He was from the right family. He performed the faithful works. He was the poster-boy for religious perfection. But he had become a hoarder. He viewed these plaques and trophies as refuse. The religious and ethical medals around his neck were choking him. They were millstones rather than medals. Christian faithfulness becomes evident, not only in what we have, but in what we're willing jettison, which, for Paul were all things.

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:7, 8).

It can be very difficult to throw things out; especially things we think our entire sense of self and value revolve around. Pride and undue love of self are among the attributes of apostasy (2 Timothy 3:2). It is quite unlike the emptying of self we saw in the second chapter. But Paul's emptying of self was not a matter of leaving his soul with a vacancy. He did not evict a demon and leave his house swept, clean and empty, a perfect abode for seven other demons (Matthew 12:43-45).

Paul, as it were, made a trade. There are few verses in Scripture which encapsulate the heart of the gospel better than the one where Paul enunciates this trade. It is Paul's goal, as it should be for every believer, to...

...be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).

It's been said that he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, in order to gain what he cannot lose. And the Apostle Paul was no fool. His eyes had been opened to the feeble nature of his own righteousness and the sinless perfection of His Savior, which had been freely given to him through faith: **“the righteousness which is from**

God by faith.” There may be no more significant question to ask yourself than if this is the righteousness in which you will be found.

In one respect there is an ease and comfort to this doctrine. Truly, and with great accuracy, did Jesus teach:

Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Yet at the same time, we wonder how His followers interpreted these words when being burned in gardens and eaten by animals for entertainment. Make no mistake, peace with God (for which Christ carries the burden, the context of this teaching) is often accompanied by a lack of peace with the world.

It may be for this reason that we move from Christ as the believer’s *life* to having the *mind* of Christ to the *goal* of knowing Christ more fully to Christ as the believer’s *strength*.

Though he will crescendo with contentment and strength, Paul begins his final chapter with one of the more comforting and powerful passages on prayer we see in all of Scripture.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6, 7).

Anxiety should set the alarm in our hearts for prayer. We pray with thanksgiving since we know God will respond according to His own **“riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:29)**. And in this spiritual war, again, where Paul will move to strength in Christ, prayer leads to the peace of God, a sort of sentry, guarding our hearts and minds through Christ.

And, as if to aid us in this peace, we are counseled in terms of the directions of our very thoughts. Keep in mind that Paul is writing from prison:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8, 9).

Can we in all truth, if we were to canvas the inventory of our own minds, offer a record of noble, just, pure, lovely, virtuous items that have subdued us to the point of meditation?

An old story is told of a grandfather seeking to teach his grandson lessons in life. The old man was honest when he told the young man of a fight within his own mind and heart. He said it was like having two wolves inside of him. One is evil. He is full of anger, envy, jealousy, lewdness, greed, arrogance, resentment and pride. The other is good. He is full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The grandson asked, “Which one wins?” The old man answered, “The one you feed.”

At the same time, it would appear that true, godly strength is preceded by a contentment, recognizing God’s hand in all our challenges. Again, it is Paul in prison who wrote:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need (Philippians 4:11, 12).

From whence does such godly contentment spring? Paul provides the answer.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

Calvin offers wonderful words on this well-known verse. And we will finish with this.

As he had boasted of things that were very great, in order that this might not be attributed to pride or furnish others with occasion of foolish boasting, he adds, that it is by Christ that he is endowed with this fortitude. “*I can do all things,*” says *he*, “but it is in Christ, not by my own power, for it is Christ that supplies me with strength.” Hence we infer, that Christ will not be less strong and invincible in us also, if, conscious of our own weakness, we place reliance upon his power alone.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Philippians* (electronic ed., Php 4:13). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How is Philippians different than many of Paul's other epistles?
2. What makes a church a church? Specifically, how does Paul's greeting help us in the defining elements of a church?
3. How can you have confidence that you will persevere in the faith?
4. Keeping in mind that Paul was writing from prison, did he think that was hindering the advancement of the gospel? Explain.
5. The apostle wrote that "to live is Christ and to die is gain." Does that mean he didn't care about people or about this life at all? Why or why not?
6. Give an example of what it means to have the mind of Christ.
7. Does "work out your salvation" imply working to be saved? Why or why not?
8. How did Paul view his own righteousness? What was he willing to trade it for?
9. How does one find strength in Christ?

Part LI - Colossians

Christian Self-Actualization?

Luke 24:44, 45; Colossians 2:9, 10

October 11, 2020

Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures (Luke 24:44, 45).

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power (Colossians 2:9, 10).

Introduction

One night I was having dinner with an old friend and the conversation turned (as it inevitably would) to religion. My thoughtful and congenial friend was careful to avoid (what he perceived to be) a wounding of my faith. His perception was that since my religion seemed to be working for me, he didn't want to dismantle it. He would huff, but not puff, upon my religious house of cards.

As a younger man I would have preferred to dispense with the niceties and move immediately to the bare knuckles. Now, however, I've come to appreciate the well-meaning, albeit misguided, opinion that the Christian faith is somehow less than the rock that it is. It engenders civility. Yet courtesies from the world appear to be happening less often. O, for the strength of Caleb who, at eighty-five, was as strong for battle as he was at forty, the day the Lord spoke to Moses (Joshua 14:10, 11)!

Lifting his wine, my friend acknowledged, as many will, his belief in god. But deeply inhaling he asked his question: “I just don't understand all the focus on Jesus?”

I wish I'd had access to the words of the 16th century English cleric and Cambridge theologian, Williams Perkins, who wrote:

Christ is the substance or subject matter of the whole Bible. Christ stands alone in the work of redemption, without colleague or partner, without deputy or substitute, whether we respect the whole work of redemption, or the least part of it...There is no other name whereby we can be saved beside the name of Christ (Acts 4:12). Christ saves them perfectly that come unto him (Hebrews 7:25). In him we are complete (Colossians 2:10).⁵⁰

As we embark upon this brief epistle to the church which met in Colossae, we will learn (or, with them, relearn) of the necessity and sufficiency of Christ. We will see that the pursuit of spiritual, psychological and even material peace apart from Christ leaves the human explorer with his head in the clouds and his feet in the mud.

Survey of Colossians

It would be no stretch to say that a brief outline of Colossians is found directly after Paul's encouraging greeting.

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9, 10).

It is Paul's prayer that they "**be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.**" This forms the content of the first two chapters.

He then moves to the fruit of this wisdom and spiritual understanding, that they "**walk worthy of the Lord.**" Therein lies the content of the following two chapters. As has been said many times: before telling us how to live, we are told who we are. Or to put it another way: before God tells us what to do for Him (and each other) He tells us what He has done for us.

⁵⁰ Perkins, A Commentary on Galatians, 274 [Gal. 4:8-11].

Christians are not motivated by a fear of hell but rather by gratitude for having been redeemed. Such a mindset is highly critical for true, godly, spiritual peace. The Oxford Group had a slogan, which was said to sound breezy and practical, but was actually fallacious:

Never mind what you believe; the only thing that matters is how you live.

That slogan is far from the approach of Scripture.

Having given the outline, we now look for the theme. It is widely held that the theme of this epistle is found in chapter two.

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power (Colossians 2:9, 10).

Paul (and, as we have seen, all of Scripture) will press the necessity of and sufficiency in Christ. We are “**complete in Him.**” And the force of this astonishingly bold claim rests on Christ Himself—who He is and what He did/does; said another way, it is *His person and work*.

The Father delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love. It is the application of Christ’s blood, the forgiveness of sins, that provides for all the needs of our lost souls. *How can Jesus do this?* Paul will seek to elevate our understanding of Jesus with a brief, yet unmatched (unmatchable) description of who Jesus is and what He has done/does (Colossians 1:15-18).

- **Visible form of invisible God**
- **Prior-Heir of all creation**
- **The Creator**
- **Before the universe**
- **In Him all things cohere**
- **Head of the body, the church**
- **Firstborn from among the dead**

We are complete in Christ because Christ is the complete Savior. Yet somehow these Colossian Christians had their heads on a spiritual swivel. Instead of being built up in their faith in Christ, they sought to redefine their faith.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6, 7).

How can this happen? What make these saints susceptible to smooth-talking, influential, eloquent, yet specious and deceptive teachers? Paul, as any pastor might feel, was concerned that the members of this church (and others) were being cheated **“through philosophy and empty deceit” (Colossians 2:8).**

This philosophical, empty deception was a bizarre amalgamation of things: the focus and undue reverence for angelic beings/powers (Colossians 2:18); a contempt for the body and things physical—a form of Gnosticism (Colossians 2:20-23); and a false reintroduction to Old Covenant ceremonial practices (Colossians 2:14-17).

There was something enticing about these things. The victims of this deceit were promised a superior spiritual experience along with a greater righteousness and victory over the flesh. But Paul was saying ‘no’:

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:23).

How can we be wise when it comes to our own vulnerabilities? In what ways are Christians tempted to dismiss the sufficiency of Christ through ceremonies, ritualism, philosophies and the like; especially when these types of things package themselves as Christianity?

Church history is replete with this sort of mysticism: The use of icons, incense, holy water with various forms of penance, etc. We

can see *church*, rather than an institution heralding the person and work of Christ alone in its handling of the keys to the kingdom, seeking to itself become the door to heaven.

But much of this empty deceit is closer to us than we think. So-called Christian publishers putting forth books which promise fulfillment through popular prayers (consider the Prayer of Jabez) or dramatic representations of God in human form (The Shack). We also saw a recent popularization of the ascetic disciplines (fasting, solitude, quietude, meditation, etc.). These are not always bad, but similar to the undue reverence for angels (who are genuine creatures serving God), our focus can easily move from *the sufficiency of Christ* to the pursuit of what I call *Christian Self-Actualization*.

Self-Actualization became popular early in the twentieth century in the realm of psychology. It was considered the highest level of the development of the human psyche, where full potential is achieved through the fulfillment of bodily and ego needs. This full potential looks different in different people. For some, the top priority is self-esteem; for others it's love; for others it might be creative outlets.

It is just these kinds of vacancies in our psyches (even as Christians) that make us fodder for the cheaters. It is here that we must avoid making a critical categorical error. As a Christian I may have a strong desire (we might refer to it as a *need*, but that is generally an overstatement) for the love of another person or to be noticed and included or be productive. We also might find that those desires are not being entirely met.

Then someone comes along and says if you join their religion or their version of your own religion, all those felt needs will be met. You will experience Christian Self-Actualization (though they wouldn't likely use that term). This can become insidious. Like a spouse who feels unsatisfied at home surrounded by clever and attractive coworkers. There is a promise of happiness and fulfillment. You just need to leave, or cheat on, your spouse.

You have a desire for Christian Self-Actualization, so your head goes on a swivel. Instead of working on your marriage, walking in it, being rooted and built up and established in it, you just change your partner. You may not start off thinking this way, but Paul is concerned that these Christians are taking short strides toward a deep

drop. It is for this reason that he offers the unsettling conditional conjunction ‘if’ to their testimonies.

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard (Colossians 1:21-23a).

Fundamental human needs continue even into the maturity of our Christian faith. If you need a creative outlet, find a good one. If you desire inclusion among friends, make the effort. If you desire to be loved, be a loving person fellowshiping with the types of people you would like to be loved by in return.

And perhaps, in your desire to be rooted and built up in your faith, you should rethink your habits and the extent to which you avail yourself of the means of grace (prayer, Bible reading, worship, fellowship, etc.). But what you never want to do is abandon the only One who is necessary and sufficient to meet your greatest need—the salvation of your soul—Christ, the hope of glory. **“As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (Colossians 2:6a).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you noticed that people are willing to acknowledge belief in God but not in Christ? What do you make of that?
2. Discuss the outline presented for the Epistle to the Colossians from Colossians 1:9, 10. What are the major points addressed?
3. Why are our motives for the way we live important? What are your motives for decisions you make?
4. Why can we be confident that we are complete in Christ? What does it mean to be complete?
5. How were the saints in Colossae vulnerable and susceptible to deceptive teachers?
6. Can you think of examples in our current culture where the church is tempted to view Christ as insufficient?
7. What is Christian Self-Actualization and why can it be dangerous?
8. What must we be careful never to abandon?

Part LII - 1 Thessalonians

Excel Still More

Romans 1:1-3a; 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 2

November 8, 2020

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son (Romans 1:1-3a).

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of the Lord Jesus* (1 Thessalonians 4:1, 2 NASB).

Introduction

One obvious advantage of today's information superhighway is the ability for those who no longer live nearby to communicate regularly and rapidly. Many former members of our church, who have moved away, will weigh in on a regular basis on what is taking place in their former church. It is encouraging and heartwarming.

Previous leaders in our church will communicate and encourage me as I seek to continue to minister in their former local church family. At some credible level, this reveals a ministerial authenticity. They loved their church family and the idea of not, at some level, keeping up to date is not an option for them. They still desire to know and continue to desire to help.

This was the nature of the Apostle Paul's relationship with the church of the Thessalonians. Satan had somehow hindered Paul from enjoying face-to-face ministry with this church, so when he "**could no longer endure it**" (1 Thessalonians 3:5) he sent Timothy to establish these Christians and encourage them concerning their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

It was with a pastoral heart that Paul desired that in their walk with Christ they **“excel still more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1)**. Paul compares his own heart toward them as an affectionate nursing mother, and an instructional father (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8, 11). Finally, he offers guidance on how they might comfort one another at the loss of loved one (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11).

He is not merely seeking to comfort them. He wants them to learn how to fill that responsibility. We see, more than once, a phrase along the lines of, **“comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11, 14)**.

Survey of 1 Thessalonians

The epistle begins with words of encouragement. Mostly new believers would be uplifted by the words of Paul due to their faith and the good example they provided for others. Their hearts would be lifted to hear that they had become...

...examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out (1 Thessalonians 1:7, 8).

Never underestimate the need we have to encourage one another in this manner. Discern vulnerabilities in your spiritual siblings and be ready to animate with words of invigoration. You might say to yourself, ‘Ah, but that person is grumpy and anti-social.’ My friend, that may be the very person who needs to hear it most.

Early in this epistle Paul introduces the thorny topic of election. Why would he do such a thing? Why throw such a loaded grenade into the campfire of these spiritual neophytes? Election can be such a source of controversy. Was Paul hoping this would sharpen their debate skills? I think not.

Paul nestles this in the midst of words designed to uplift. The doctrine of election is to produce peace and assurance in the believer’s heart! See where he places it. Paul was remembering their...

...work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 4).

But if election is God choosing us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), how do we know we are included in that number? Paul answers that question in the next verse:

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

He will later state it more thoroughly:

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

If the word of God resonates true in your heart, it is an indication that God is your Father, His Spirit bearing witness with ours that we belong to Him (Romans 8:16). Conversely, those who claim Christ while rejecting His word remain on the weak and shifting sands (Matthew 7:24-27).

Why would such a doctrine as election provide such solace? Among other things it is because we recognize that our inclusion among those who can enjoy the peace of God and riches of heaven is not contingent upon something as fickle and fragile as mere human decision-making. Any decision I made to believe and follow Jesus found its origins in the antecedent decision of Almighty God in the hidden chambers of eternity.

Years ago, I competed in the Pan Pacific Conference Games in New Zealand. I wasn't part of the United States National Team. I was already in New Zealand and had an international competition permit. I would have liked to have competed for the U.S. but was not selected to be on the team. Nonetheless, I competed independently

and had a nice finish; even better than some of the U.S. team members.

Afterwards, some of the team suggested I get in the photo with the American team. They even provided a shirt that looked a bit like the team uniform. I was insecure about such an action. I wasn't actually on the team. There was a meeting where the team was selected, and I was not included. Even though my performance was adequate, I wasn't really part of it. So I opted out.

At a level that is infinitely higher, we can be assured of a place in the family of God, not because we have an adequate performance or finagle a uniform. It is much deeper, richer and substantial. God has chosen us to be His own. We know this is true of us because we believe. We have been given the gift of faith.

This weaves nicely into the second chapter. It is in this chapter that Paul likens himself to a nursing mother and instructive father. Since the faithful response to the true word of God is an indicator of being in God's favor, there may be no greater act of paternal/maternal love and affection than to make every effort to deliver that word. In chapter two, these young Christians are reminded of this very thing. It was not an easy task for the apostle. In the midst of great conflict Paul proved trustworthy to deliver not his own message but God's message.

But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness (1 Thessalonians 2:4, 5).

Many are the temptations to somehow better the word of God, to improve the gospel—as if such a thing can happen! History is rife with those who thought they could somehow ameliorate what God has determined to be words of life and redemption. Keep in mind that chapter one doesn't happen in this epistle apart from chapter two. Faithful Christians come about through the instrument of a faithful heralding of biblical truth.

But it is not a matter of putting together an effective, accurate message and then moving on. As mentioned earlier, Paul would hear

of this church and seek to have them established. In chapter three he mentions sending Timothy to this end.

Having recently taken a bit ill, I would watch those who fill the pulpit in our own church. I felt they did a fine job. I sought to worship and not critique, but it is unavoidable that I consider how those for whom I am accountable to God might be fed.

A story is told of the great British preacher Martyn Lloyd Jones being ill and unable to preach. He was well enough, though, to sit and listen to others preach in his stead. When asked his assessment of his substitutes, he responded.

I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and the glory of God, the love of Christ my Saviour, and the magnificence of the Gospel. If he does that I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him.

It is through faithful preaching that God brings in His children. It is also through faithful preaching and interaction within the congregation that we are established in the faith.

As we move into chapter four, we are introduced with a call to purity. Paul will exhort us to abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Sexual immorality is a very selfish act. It harms the other individual and can be a source of heartache for an entire community.

...that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter (1 Thessalonians 4:4-6).

Lest we forget in our rapidly changing society, human sexual passions are beautifully and exclusively designed to be enjoyed by husbands and wives. It should come as no surprise that both biblically and historically, the fall of cultures and the nations they form, are almost always accompanied by some form of sexual licentiousness.

Toward the end of chapter four we begin to learn of the final resurrection as a level of depth we don't often see in the epistles. It's almost as if these young believers needed to be catechized on their eternal hope. Simply put, on the day of judgment those who have died will rise first, then those who are alive will be **“caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).**

This hope of a final resurrection and entrance into eternal glory is the Christian's hope!

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14).

Death in Christ is entirely unlike the way the world faces death. Hence the word **“sleep.”** The seventeenth century Reformed pastor Richard Baxter once offered these words:

I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.

If our ministry does not address this inevitability, it is no ministry at all. At many a funeral within our small community I have been confronted with the reality that I face a gathering of souls who may very well still dead in their sins. You want them to know of a God in heaven who loves sinners and lovingly provides all that is necessary for eternal peace.

Paul spoke of the former lives of Christians in this manner. They were **“strangers from the covenants of promise, having no**

hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). But things became different. May these words ring true of all of us!

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13).

The design of these are our *comfort*. Chapter four ends with the words:

Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

We are to be comforted at the prospect of our own death and the death of the ones we love who are in Christ.

The final chapter of 1 Thessalonians concerns times and seasons and may be understood to address events soon to happen then proleptically toward the final judgment. (We haven't time to plumb these depths in one brief sermon.)

Suffice it to say, we are exhorted to recognize and highly esteem those who God has placed to watch over our souls. This includes elders and deacons. We are called to warn the unruly, comfort the fainthearted and display patience. We are to be loving, prayerful, wise and self-controlled.

The epistle concludes with a wonderful benediction. Let us conclude with this as well.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it* (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. To what extent should we concern ourselves with our brothers and sisters in Christ, once/if we have moved away?
2. In what ways did the Apostle Paul seek to encourage the church of the Thessalonians? Have you found yourself encouraged by others? How have you been encouraged, and how do you seek to encourage others?
3. How is the doctrine of election a source of assurance and solace?
4. Why is sexual purity so critical? In what ways can sexual immorality be destructive?
5. Paul teaches of Judgment Day in chapter four. Review this. Why is this important for Christians?

Part LIII - 2 Thessalonians

Be Not Shaken or Troubled

1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2

November 15, 2020

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come (2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2)

Introduction

It is widely conceded that eschatology (the study of end times) is a secondary issue among Christians. This is not due to its inherent lack of value; heaven forbid we say such a thing of any topic addressed in Scripture! It has more to do with the difficulty of arriving at a consensus. *What is to happen in God's history and what role are we to play in that history?*

The most popular view circulating in western evangelicalism postulates that it is God's will for history to end in cultural and religious apostasy and failure. In short, it's God's plan for things to get worse. In a book entitled *The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth in the World*, author Clarence Larkins offers a shocking title followed by disquieting words.

In large font, the words fire across the page, *The Failure of Christianity*. The author (whose book written over one hundred years ago is still in print) then writes:

It is evident that there are more than a 100 times as many persons born into the world each

year, as there are persons ‘New Born’, and that thus far Christianity, as a world converting power, is a failure, all of which proves that, if after 1900 years of gospel preaching the world is not converted, it is not God’s purpose to convert the world by the preaching of the gospel in this age, but simply to gather out an ‘elect body’—the church. The ‘Millennial Age’ will be the ‘Dispensation of the Spirit,’ then righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the deep.⁵¹

According to the current eschatological majority report, the fact that Jesus was born, lived a righteous life, died, rose again, was given all authority in heaven and earth, and put forth the Great Commission will have no power to impact the world for the better. The world is a sinking ship, and to seek to improve it is tantamount to arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Many a Christian has rested his/her head on this pillow of prophetic destruction: “Yes, things may be getting worse, but I have access to God’s secret plan that this is the way it ought to be. On my worst days it is appropriate for me to pine away for the rapture.”

A more moderate eschatological view is that evil will increase, as will righteousness. This polarization will occur throughout history without one side prevailing. The wheat and the tares will ever grow, and it is unrealistic and, presumably, unbiblical to expect or work toward the demise of evil and the ascent of that which is good. According to this view, “culture wars” are a waste of time and lack spiritual value.

A third, more optimistic view, is that the truth of Christ will, through much pain, work and tribulation, yield a world where...

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).

⁵¹ Clarence Larkin *The Greatest Book on dispensational Truth in the World* (Rev. Clarence Larkin Est. 2802 N. Park Ave., Philadelphia 32, Pa. U. S. A., 1918), p. 77 1/2

As Dr. Bahnsen was fond of saying when confronted with the parable of the wheat and tares, “Let us remember, it is a wheat field.” The preaching of the Gospel will be the instrument through which God saves souls and changes lives. As His kingdom grows, we should expect a changed world.

Amidst this eschatological confusion, people are loath to make a commitment. When we get to the book of the Revelation, I will offer a story as to why that might be. Suffice it to say for now, most people don’t view the subject as being important to their own spiritual well-being. They glance at it with a sort of hat-tipping acknowledgement. They lightheartedly wear the label, *Pan-millennialist*. After all, it will all pan out in the end.

Yet, eschatological error, like all Christian doctrines, yields consequences. If we are convinced that it is God’s will for the church and world to wax cold morally and theologically, we should not be surprised to see this happening. It becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we are convinced that it is God’s will for good and evil to advance equally and that the promises associated with the Messiah should all be consigned to the immaterial (rather than primarily immaterial but demonstrably affecting the material), then we should not be surprised to see the church/Christians become culturally insignificant, almost cloistered.

If we are convinced that the Scriptures promise a changed world, in every respect, as a result of the fulfillment of the Great Commission, we will pray and work toward the end (which, interestingly enough, almost Christian does in spite of their eschatology).

All of these views have their consequences. If a coach convinces his team that it is inevitable that they lose, he shouldn’t be surprised when they lose. If he believes a tie is the best-case scenario, expect a tie or a loss. But if a team realizes that the Captain of their salvation has determined to subdue the entire earth with His love, grace and wisdom, they will tend to embrace that glorious task as His call in their lives. And with their eyes on whole domain of human existence, they will seek to bring the light of Christ.

Survey of 2 Thessalonians

In surveying 2 Thessalonians we will make the discovery that eschatological error had captured this young church. It was significant enough for Paul to write this letter, likely within a few months of the first one. Prior to addressing that error, Paul, similar to his first letter, extends words of encouragement.

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure (2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4).

Almost like a proud parent, Paul boasts of their spiritual direction. He also acknowledges that their budding maturity is in the face of persecution and tribulation. Instead of this being a negative, Paul addresses this opposition as...**evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer (2 Thessalonians 1:5).** And after having been beaten for preaching Christ, the apostles had a similar experience.

So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:41, 42).

Little wonder that the early church prayed for wisdom, in terms of where to fight the good fight, but also boldness, that, having drawn battle lines, they would not shrink back.

It is toward the end of chapter one that Paul encourages the church that their antagonists will face the judgment of God both in history and eternity. A recurring promise in the Scriptures is that God will protect His church, providing it remain His church. The “**gates**

of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). This is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith with these words:

The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will (WCF, 25, 5).

Having encouraged them to fight the spiritual fight, Paul now turns to address misinformation they had been given. This information had caused them to be shaken in mind and deeply troubled. Somehow, they had arrived at the conclusion that **“the day of Christ had come” (2 Thessalonians 2:2).**

What is this day of Christ? The phrase **“the day of the Lord”** is common Scripture and can be referring to many different events where God intervenes in history in an extraordinary way. It is very common for commentators to offer the opinion that the Thessalonian Christians thought they had missed the rapture. Let it be noted, a natural reading of the Scriptures renders this interpretation highly unlikely.

We haven't time to dig as deeply as many of you would no doubt like. When we reach the Revelation, this will be addressed more thoroughly. I will offer a few observations that should help us.

First, all Paul would have to do to help them dismiss their fear that they had missed the rapture would be to acknowledge his own presence. That he had not been raptured should be the end of their troubled minds. And how would they have received a letter from him if he had been raptured?

Second, Paul wants them to know of things which must precede this day of the Lord. One of these will be a great apostasy. If the day of the Lord is the end of history, then the church should acknowledge and, at some level, embrace this great apostasy. Perhaps you can see where this adds to the package of eschatological defeatism. But, as we shall see, Paul's language doesn't allow (apart from great strain) this/these events to be thousands of years in the future.

Third, the infamous **“man of sin, the son of perdition” (2 Thessalonians 2:3)** must make an appearance. There is no end to the speculation as to who this man may end up being. But we do know this about him: it is his intention to exalt himself and sit as God in the **“temple of God” (2 Thessalonians 2:4)**. How would the original recipients of Paul’s letter understand this? At this point in history there was a standing temple. Within about twenty years it would be destroyed. So, whoever this person is/was there were about twenty years for this prophecy to be fulfilled.

Fourth, this man of sin was currently being restrained and Paul’s readers (based upon Paul’s instructions) knew what was restraining him.

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work (2 Thessalonians 2:5-7).

If this passage is addressing the end of history, how do Paul’s readers know what is currently restraining this man of lawlessness?

Fifth, as we just read, the **“mystery of lawlessness is already at work.”** The man of sin is somehow connected with this mystery of lawlessness which was already at work. Unless the man is currently two thousand years old and the mystery of lawlessness abides for that period of time as well, we have great difficulty making sense of this chapter.

Add to this, Paul is promising his readers that the man and his lawlessness will be destroyed (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10). How would this be significant or of comfort to Paul’s readers if Paul is addressing events two millennia (or more) in the future?

Suffice it to say for now that Paul is, as he does in all of his letters, addressing the current issues of those at that church. Similarly, we are to benefit from his words of encouragement when it comes to the enemies of that which is good and true.

Consistent with Paul’s first letter, he will place their comfort primarily and squarely upon the election of God. This is the front line of our comfort and the fountain from which all other graces and callings follow.

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given *us* everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work (2 Thessalonians 2:13-17).

The epistle concludes with some warnings. Although Paul does not state it directly, the general conclusion is that their obsessing over the day of the Lord along with their troubled hearts had a negative effect upon the church. It is worth noting that cults and reclusive sects of Christianity will often obsess over the coming of the Lord to the extent of quitting jobs, ceasing to educate their children and moving to geographical locations which better accommodate surviving Armageddon.

The Thessalonians had become idle and disorderly. They had ceased from work and increased as busy bodies. They are exhorted to be productive.

For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

This is not to say that there is no place for the feeding of the poor (Proverbs 14:31; Matthew 25:35). It is to say that the overall and general theme of a godly and thriving society is one of hard and faithful labor.

Recognizing the difficulty of faithfulness over an extended period of time, Paul addresses the Thessalonians as he has other churches with the call to persevere. He will also exhort his readers to

be willing to love others at a level that may appear uncomfortable yet is truly brotherly.

But *as for* you, brethren, do not grow weary *in* doing good. And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:13-15).

The one confronted may view you as an enemy, but never give in by treating them as an enemy.

Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful (Proverbs 27:6).

Once again, Paul concludes his letter with a benediction, as will we.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord *be* with you all. The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every epistle; so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen (2 Thessalonians 3:16-18).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose eschatology (the study of end times) is a secondary issue among Christians?
2. What are some of the views regarding how history is to unfold? Do some of these seem more or less tenable? Explain.
3. In what ways can eschatological errors have consequences?
4. What is the Apostle Paul's disposition toward the church in Thessalonica?
5. Is suffering something Christians should or should not expect? How should we think of suffering?
6. Will there always be a church on earth? How do you know this? What should this produce in us?
7. Discuss whether or not it makes sense that the Thessalonians thought they missed the rapture.
8. How does the doctrine of election elicit comfort in the Christian?
9. What are some of the final exhortations Paul directs toward the church?

Part LIV - 1 Timothy

Conduct in the House of God

Acts 3:18; 1 Timothy 3:15, 16

November 22, 2020

But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled (Acts 3:18).

I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory (1 Timothy 3:15, 16).

Introduction

It is a common occurrence for me to entertain discussions with people who find a lack of contentment with the church. People visiting, or seeking membership in, our church will often explain (generally in nice way) some reason they have left their former church. Others will express concern with matters within our own church family. Then there is a general disposition of distrust in the institutional church wafting in the ether of our culture.

What I have found in these discussions of ecclesiastical discontent or distrust is the frequent and repeated theme of frustration regarding how matters have been handled. Whether the problems are moral or theological, whether there has been financial scandal or minor power moves within a small congregation, people have difficulty suffering a lack of process in confronting whatever the issue might be.

Deciding to have purple carpets in the sanctuary or painting the church green may be of little consequence to most. But if you find these even somewhat minor decisions are made incompetently or without any oversight or accountability, a red flag might go up. If we have no process, for example, with how we're going to arrange the

chairs in church or what time we're going to begin the service, what about accountability when it comes to the budget or heresy or immorality among church leaders? Such a clumsy approach to the functioning of the church can, and should, raise eyebrows.

In our Route Sixty-Six series we take a brief detour for a few books. The books of Romans through 2 Thessalonians have been letters to churches regarding their doctrine and the general related issues. Now, for three books, the Apostle Paul turns his pen toward addressing individual pastors (Timothy and Titus). Perhaps Paul is anticipating his own absence (these letters written later in Paul's ministry) or he has become increasingly aware of the challenges facing local ministers.

That these letters are written to individual pastors should not tempt the layperson to be inattentive regarding their content. Letters were often read publicly (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27) for the benefit of all. It is not only on the shoulders of the pastor to know the details and nature of his call, but for the congregation to know and encourage that pursuit as well.

Many years ago, when we were a much smaller church, it seemed that I had to be involved in every duty required for us to function. From bulletins to budget, from Sunday School to helping organize the church picnic. In time I became routinely encouraged by members in our church who assumed responsibilities in order that I might more dedicate myself to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

How a church, pastors, deacons, members function is critical to the well-being of the body. Much of what we will read in these letters to Timothy and Titus are ignored altogether by today's church or bent beyond recognition.

Survey of 1 Timothy

Early and late in this epistle we are given what may be understood as the theme, an entrusted stewardship. Paul says it early of himself, then later, by way of charge, to Timothy. In chapter one Paul writes of...

**...the glorious gospel of the blessed God which
was committed to my trust (1 Timothy 1:11).**

In chapter six comes the charge:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust (1 Timothy 6:20).

As taught by Jesus in many of His parables where the King goes to a faraway country, God has entrusted His ministry to fallible humans who are required to behave faithfully in their care of something that doesn't actually belong to them. The light shining upon every decision is that this church/the church has one true King. He is to be ever served in every encounter.

One early impediment to fruitful ministry revolved around self-inflated, quasi teachers who were robbing Timothy of his time through “**endless genealogies**” and “**idle talk**” (1 Timothy 1:4, 6). This can be a tricky problem. At least fourteen times in 1 and 2 Timothy Paul will use the word “**doctrine**” or “**teaching**”. Clearly, it is a priority.

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine (1 Timothy 5:17).

But for some, theology can be a hobby or a cudgel used to dominate and intimidate. We must ever adhere to the counsel of the Spirit when it comes to the word of God.

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5).

It is not always easy to know when time, which might be better used elsewhere, is being wasted. Nonetheless, doctrinal discussions are not something from which Paul ever shied away. If we wish to speak of the law, it is good “**if one uses it lawfully**” (1 Timothy 1:8). In this context, lawfully is referring to the power the law of God has to retrain the wickedness of the ungodly.

Paul lists sins, and also sins that are crimes. The extent to which the law of God should be brought to bear upon secular cultures in order to retrain sin is a matter of some debate. It will, nonetheless,

be either the law of God or the law of man. Laws will either be derived from the Holy Word or from unholy hearts.

It is in this discourse that Paul offers the self-evaluation of being the chief of sinners. It was the recognition and contemplation of God's mercy toward him that Paul breaks forth in doxology.

**Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to
God who alone is wise, *be* honor and glory forever
and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17).**

The opening chapter ends with Paul charging Timothy to **“wage the good warfare” (1 Timothy 1:18)**. We are to be ever mindful that a spiritual battle rages! Moments of rest are vital, but a disposition of spiritual coasting will ultimately bring us to the bottom of the hill. With that charge to Timothy comes another much neglected aspect of a sound church, church discipline. Hymenaeus and Alexander were delivered to Satan (referring to the world or to being put out of the church) for their own spiritual well-being. This great act of love is ever interpreted by the world and the church as intolerant and viciously judgmental. A bigger lie can hardly be told.

In chapter two we are called to pray for all people. Paul highlights prayers for kings and people in authority, that those under their care might lead **“quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:2)**. Naturally attached to this admonition is something obvious to us but perhaps was not as obvious to the early church with its Jewish roots. It is God's desire to reach all people without distinction.

Many, and naturally so, struggle reconciling 1 Timothy 2:4 (God's desire that all people be saved) with predestination and the power of God in general. How is it that Almighty God has a desire that He is incapable of meeting!!!??? Suffice it to say for now that “all” in Scripture seldom means *every last single*. And in this context, it is quite apparent that Paul is talking about all classes or categories of people—every nation, kindred and tongue (Revelation 5:9; 7:9).

He continues his instruction with the spectacularly unpopular counsel that the authoritative teaching office in the church is to be assumed by men rather than women. The influence of the feminist movement along with a very loose and liberal method of Bible interpretation has all but redacted this passage (1 Timothy 2:12).

It would be overly ambitious to engage all the reasons offered for ignoring this. Briefly, some argue that women were uneducated at this time in history. But those are the exact words to describe Peter and John (Acts 4:13). Another argument is that Paul and Jesus were accommodating their culture (why Jesus picked twelve men to be apostles).

But one thing which should be readily apparent to any Bible student is that neither Jesus nor Paul (or any biblical writer) wrote to accommodate culture at the expense of truth. Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of John overwhelming proves that point. Add to this that in Paul's argument for his position he appeals all the way back to creation with Eve being deceived. Again, this can go much deeper, but we must move on for now.

We now move to the qualifications for elders and deacons. One is hard-pressed to find a topic more critical to the well-being of the church than this chapter. In the more than fifty times the word "elder" is used in the New Testament it is almost always in the plural; it is always in the plural when it comes to ruling in the church. Simply put, Christ has determined to exercise His kingly rule over His church by a plurality of elders.

If your church is not run by a plurality of elders, they should be working toward that. If your elders fail to meet the standards put forth by 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 it will be the beginning of troubles for your local congregation. The same can be said of the character and role of the diaconate. The chapter climaxes with a reminder of why Paul was writing the letter along with what all those in leadership must ever keep in their hearts.

I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory (1 Timothy 3:15, 16).

Moving into chapter four, Paul instructs Timothy that he is living in times where apostasy has been prophesied. Timothy should

not be overly discouraged to see false teachings and hypocrisy. Good pastors are to continue in biblical instruction though surrounded, within and without, by error.

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed (1 Timothy 4:6).

Paul completes the epistle with instructions on how to best minister and interact with the elderly, the young, the widows, the rich. As a pastor (and as a church) we should honor and encourage the elders. It is with big picture thinking that Paul seeks to help Timothy (and all of us) avoid being overwhelmed with whatever dreams or visions or goals he might have had which have not materialized.

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into *this* world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out (1 Timothy 6:6, 7).

Those in the church and in the ministry are not immune to the desire for riches or recognition and various snares that have caused some to have “**strayed from the faith**” (1 Timothy 6:10). In this environment, Paul again offers the battle cry.

But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:11, 12).

May we, as a church, ever be committed to obey that charge given to him and, by extension, to all faithful churches throughout history.

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust (1 Timothy 6:20a).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is the process by which the church functions so very critical?
2. First and 2 Timothy were both written to Timothy. Does that mean it has no relevance to others? Explain.
3. What is committed to the trust of the church? How should this color our behavior?
4. Theology is necessary but can become something unhealthy. Explain how this is true and give some examples.
5. What is the lawful use of the law?
6. How is church discipline difficult but also loving?
7. If God wants all to be saved, why aren't they?
8. Carefully discuss the roles of men and women in terms of leadership in the church.
9. Is eldership important to a healthy church? Why? Answer the same question in regards to the deacons.
10. What are Paul's closing words to Timothy?

Part LV - 2 Timothy

Perilous Times

John 5:39; 2 Timothy 1:7

December 6, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39)

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

Introduction

As people were sharing things they are thankful for during last week's Thanksgiving celebration, I came upon a quote from a young lady with whom I am a distant acquaintance. She advertised her thankfulness for (in her words) homosexuality, gender deviance, sodomy, men in dresses, women with tattoos, depressed leftists with bleached hair, and the destruction of America as we know it. She was also thankful for Karl Marx, Planned Parenthood and witchcraft.

I didn't find this terribly uplifting.

Honesty and full disclosure require I admit that the moral and spiritual climate of our culture has had a clear and rapid descent under the Baby Boomer watch. I don't wish to be overly self-deprecating since I have little doubt that though the symptoms of darkness have more recently become demonstrably apparent, the heart of this disease began long ago.

What are Christians and pastors to do in the midst of an ethos where virtually every form of art and media portrays them as simple-minded, undisciplined, hate-filled and hopelessly isolated from reality?

I have noticed two currents in which we tend to get caught. One, in our effort to be relevant, loving and redemptive, we find ourselves in a state of compromise. Jesus, we say to ourselves, was a friend of sinners; should we not imitate Him? And though it is true that Jesus was a friend of sinners, it must be noted that sinners never had any influence upon Jesus. It was just the opposite. Jesus would

speak and behave in such a way as to convert sinners or alienate sinners.

This current is more like an undertow. The Scriptures are not unclear that in our ministerial efforts, we should never allow ourselves to be corrupted.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

The second current is not a current at all. To get caught in a current, one must at least put their toe in the water. This response is one of isolation. In an effort to remain pure, we insulate ourselves in cultural bubble-wrap. We think interaction with our dying culture becomes somebody else's problem. It is difficult to find a disposition that is less Christian than this.

Ministerial licentiates are often asked what is new about the New Covenant. Among the list of potential answers to this question is the word *go*. In the Old Covenant people came to the Tabernacle, the Temple and the nation of Israel. In the New Covenant, the Temple goes to the people, to all nations. But the Temple (the body of Christ) must remain the Temple if it is to be the beacon of light, hope and redemption.

Second Timothy is the Apostle Paul's final letter. He is writing while he awaits execution. He will be poured out as a drink offering (2 Timothy 4:6). **"Come before winter" (2 Timothy 4:21)** is his plea to Timothy. John Calvin commented on this letter:

Paul had before his eyes the death which he was prepared to endure for the testimony of the gospel. All that we read here, therefore, concerning the kingdom of Christ, the hope of eternal life, the Christian warfare, confidence in confessing Christ, and the certainty of doctrine, ought to be viewed by us as written not with ink but with Paul's own blood.⁵²

⁵² Calvin, J. (1998). *2 Timothy* (electronic ed.). Albany, OR: Ages Software.
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Paul is writing to his young protégé in the faith, anticipating his own death and Timothy's challenges as a young minister. In many respects it would be more difficult for Timothy than Paul. Paul had started many churches. Though Paul had endured great suffering, he had seen true flourishing take place.

But as the Old Covenant was vanishing away (Hebrews 8:13) Timothy would be confronted with harsh and discouraging ministerial encounters. Many had abandoned Paul or the ministry. Some of these people are mentioned by name (2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17; 4:10). Timothy would also have to contend with an apostasy and a general sway toward ungodly behavior and convictions. Paul warns Timothy of upcoming **“perilous times” (2 Timothy 3:1).**

Many will understand Paul's meaning to be addressing the end of history due to his use of the term **“last days”** *eschatais hemerais*. And certainly, the counsel Paul gives Timothy should be understood and imitated by those reading this letter throughout the course of history when we encounter these types of spiritual regressions.

But we should not read 2 Timothy 3 as if it is some iron clad prophecy of matters getting worse as we approach the Second Coming. We must always read our Bibles with the original audience in mind. In this case the original audience was Timothy. In the midst of this chapter where Paul warns of people becoming **“lovers of themselves, money, boasters, blasphemers, unthankful, unholy and unloving”** Paul tells Timothy:

And from such people turn away (2 Timothy 3:5b)!

It is important to note this is written in the second person singular. What should be obvious is that Timothy would have no ability to turn away from people who would not be born for two thousand years!

Nonetheless, the church would, through the course of history, encounter similar challenges and should glean from the wisdom of the Holy Spirit through the word of God. How are Christians to respond when the tide of public opinion moves in an aggressively hostile direction? This is addressed by Paul and we should benefit from that instruction.

Survey of 2 Timothy

Early in the letter Paul reminds Timothy of his own spiritual upbringing and heritage; how he had been raised and what he had been taught by his mother and grandmother. Also, his preparation by Paul himself. He then charges Timothy with the words:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

In a world governed by darkness, ignorance and aggressiveness, Timothy is to remain loving, clear thinking and in control of himself.

The direction Paul takes in his counsel of Timothy is to address him personally then pastorally. Personally, Timothy is not to be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord nor of Paul who was in prison. There is a time to speak and a time to remain silent. But heaven forbid we ever sheepishly withdraw from a conversation due to our fear of being associated with Christ!

May the Apostle Paul be to us what the Old Testament saints were to these first century Christians: to hear from someone soon to pay the ultimate price for faithfulness to Christ.

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 2:1).

With these words of encouragement comes also a call to persevere. The world, our own flesh and the enemy of our souls all seek our allegiance. But we are to live our lives ever repenting and ever enjoying the pardon of God in Christ! Perseverance in the faith is necessary.

This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 1:11-13).

The call to persevere is not a works-righteousness. We learned in 1 Timothy 1:15 that Paul viewed himself as the “**chief of sinners.**” Not long after that he wrote in 2 Timothy some of the only affirming words regarding his own faith:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7).

We may be unprofitable servants when it comes to meriting our own salvation, but we are called to be servants, nonetheless. It may be a healthy question to ask when we engage in a certain action, word or thought, who we are at that moment seeking to serve.

Personally, the call is to stir up, be not ashamed, be strong and endure to the end. But what is Paul’s pastoral counsel? It is one thing to avoid being overtaken by the world and its ways, it is another thing to advance.

Paul utilizes the soldier, the athlete and the farmer in his instruction regarding pastoral advancement to make the point that the battle is long term. Paul had commissioned Timothy and Timothy was to commit the ministry to others who will be able to teach as well. The soldier is not overly entangled with “**the affairs of this life**” (2 Timothy 2:4). The athlete competes “**according to the rules**” (2 Timothy 2:5) and the farmer “**must be first to partake of the crops**” (2 Timothy 2:6).

Briefly stated, our minds and hearts should never stray from the first focus of our eternal life and call. That being the case, God has determined the rules or laws of ministry. Human innovation and imagination may be valuable and enjoyable in worldly endeavors, but God has conveyed the means by which His kingdom is to grow. Finally, the hardworking farmer realizes that there is much sweat and effort, even before a sprout is visible.

Directly following these illustrations Paul highlights that his current troubles flow from his own proclamation of the resurrection. And though his body is in chains, the word of God is not.

Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer,

even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained (2 Timothy 2:8, 9).

The pastoral and advancing ministry, Paul will equate with the word of God.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Any ministry that fails to put the word of God first when it comes to our knowing who God is, what He has done, and His call in our lives is one that will surely fail. The Westminster Confession 1, 1 aptly states,

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

In 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 the well-known passage informs us of the usefulness, power and sufficiency of a God-breathed word:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the

man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

It is the handling of this word and, in humility, bringing it to bear in the lives of sinners, that we have hope of God granting redemption and repentance.

And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and *that* they may come to their senses *and escape* the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to *do* his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Whether we think it convenient or not, we must ever be willing to bring forth a message of hope in Christ. Regardless of the pervasive, ear tickling messages by which we find ourselves surrounded, we must ever know and herald the gospel. There will be a day of judgment, and apart from Christ there is no standing when our accounts are called.

I charge *you* therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

The ministry would continue with Timothy and continues to this day through the faithful churches numbered in history. But I have

little doubt that Paul's rejoiced for Timothy and **"all who have loved His appearing"** because there awaits **"the crown of righteousness"** which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give out on that day.

John Calvin observes Paul's heart in reference to his soon departure from his current life:

...he mentions that his own death is at hand, but he does so in the manner of a conqueror hastening to a glorious triumph, which is a clear testimony of wonderful confidence.⁵³

May our gracious Lord instill such confidence in our own hearts as we prepare for and participate in the Lord's Supper.

⁵³ Calvin, J. (1998). 2 Timothy (electronic ed.). Albany, OR: Ages Software.
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Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are two “currents” in which Christians may be caught in the face of a degenerating culture? Can you think of others?
2. What is new about the New Covenant?
3. What was happening in Paul’s life as he wrote 2 Timothy? How do you think that would affect his writing?
4. Explain the challenges Timothy was about to face as a young minister.
5. Compare and contrast Paul’s direction to Timothy personally and pastorally.
6. How is the word of God not in chains? What does that mean?
7. Why would God commit His word to writing?

Part LVI - Titus

Practicing the Message

John 5:39; Titus 3:8

December 13, 2020

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39)

This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men (Titus 3:8).

Introduction

Years ago, a science fiction movie came out called *Stargate*. It was about this interstellar teleportation device found in pyramid in Egypt which led to another planet or dimension. Upon entering the pyramid, one would come into contact with the stargate which led to the other dimension. Now, keeping this analogy in mind, let us look at Scripture. Jesus said to **“enter by the narrow gate” (Matthew 7:13)** and by this we understand that gate to be Jesus Himself. But what is the ‘pyramid’ in which this gate is found? I suggest that this pyramid, in which the gate is found, can be likened to Christ’s church.

Our current series, based upon Jesus’ statement in John 5:39, has focused on how Jesus Christ is the central figure in all of Scripture and truly the central figure of all there is. The Old Testament consistently and reliably anticipated the work of redemption through the promised Messiah! The opening of the New Testament revealed Christ as the fulfillment of that promise. The New Covenant church would now begin and stretch its hands of love, truth and redemption to all nations.

It would not take long though for that New Covenant church to find itself with a target on its back. In the same way Herod would unsuccessfully seek to quell the birth of the Savior with his nefarious plot to kill any child who might possibly fall into that category (Matthew 2:16-18), the enemy (namely, Satan) would ever seek to

warp and pervert the body of Christ, the church. The infant Christ was a target in the scope of evil as was the infant New Covenant church.

The Gospels and the book of Acts communicated the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ along with the birth and establishment of the New Covenant church in His name. In Romans through 2 Thessalonians we learn of the spiritual, moral, doctrinal instructions and corrections given to those early churches. What we are learning in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus has more to do with how those churches are to function. The pyramid, appealing to my earlier illustration, is of little value if the gate within it can't be found.

These are pastoral epistles written to individuals, but they are for the benefit of all. Churches are only valuable to the extent that they herald Christ. They are the primary institution ordained by God for that very purpose. To neglect the doctrine of the church has severe consequences.

Here we have Paul writing to Titus, who was thought to be one of the most able and reliable ministers in the early church. The ministry was in Crete, a horribly immoral island off the southern coast of Greece heavily influenced by Greek mythology. Their mythology was not merely influential in their culture, it was making inroads into the fledgling church as well.

We see great similarities in this letter to 1 and 2 Timothy, but distinctions of emphasis as well. It's been said that the emphasis of 1 Timothy was to *protect* the message, the emphasis of 2 Timothy was to *proclaim* the message, and the emphasis of Titus was to *practice* the message. The key verses in Titus are found in chapter three:

This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men (Titus 3:8).

And let our *people* also learn to maintain good works, to *meet* urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful (Titus 3:14).

Lofty doctrine accompanied by low conduct is intolerable to New Testament Christianity. This is emphatic in Titus.

Survey of Titus

It is not as if Paul merely baldly urges better behavior. He opens his letter with one of the heftier greetings we read in any of his epistles.

Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, but has in due time manifested His word through preaching, which was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior (Titus 1:1-3).

Bondservant (a willing slave) is a common designation Paul uses for himself in regards to his service to Christ. His service would be the means by which God would bring His elect to Himself. He touches early on his reason for writing, that **“truth accords with godliness.”**

He then digs deep. Our hope is of eternal life which God (who cannot lie, unlike Zeus, who was quite comfortable lying) promised in eternity past. Christians are to know that their inclusion in the heavenly promise did not find its beginnings in our ability to make wise decisions but in the eternal decrees of God. Paul is quick to add that the means by which this all unfolds is through the preaching of the word.

Similar to 1 Timothy, Paul now lays down the qualifications for elders to whom God has given authority in the church and for which they will be accountable to God.

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:17).

One is hard-pressed to find a more critical duty for the church than to assure that those who have the office of elder are qualified for the task. While maintaining a spirit of love and respect, the congregation should be willing to investigate as deeply as reasonable. Titus 1:6-9 requires that these men be evaluated *domestically* (how does he handle his own household), *personally* (is he selfish, quick-tempered, intemperate, greedy, etc.), and *doctrinally* (does he know the Scriptures well enough to exhort and see and address error).

Paul then offers a conjunction with the qualifications leading us to consider the elder's task. Crete had no shortage of insubordinate loudmouths and deceivers, **“whose mouths must be stopped” (Titus 1:11)** and who needed to be **“rebuke[d]...sharply” (Titus 1:13)**. We should not view these words as an excuse to be unduly harsh to an erring brother or sister. The people Paul had in mind were not merely the immature or the honestly erring, but those **“who are defiled and unbelieving” (Titus 1:15b)**.

They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work (Titus 1:16).

Somehow the west has arrived at a very soft and feeble view of the faith. To be sure, this can be tricky terrain to maneuver. But if the elders allow poor behavior and false doctrine to go unchecked in the church, there will be severe, even eternal, consequences.

Such actions, as loving as they are (for what could be more loving than a willingness to confront sin and error?) are not, and should not be, a source of unhealthy power or unseemly enjoyment. These actions should be done, so to speak, with a broken heart.

Recently I received a correspondence where a person suggested that our elders must have been terribly excited about the opportunity to denounce a sinner. Let me tell you, I have never once taken some unhealthy joy at the prospect of confronting sin, nor have I seen this attitude in any of our current elders. And if such a disposition does exist, it would alone be enough to disqualify a person from holding such an office.

I might add that insufficient domestic, personal or theological qualifications does not constitute church discipline (though they

might possibly be disqualified from holding an elected church office, depending on the issue). All to say that a person who might be found (currently) falling short of these requirements enumerated by Paul should not view themselves as the object of accusation.

Paul moves from the elders to the qualities of a sound church in general. **“The older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience” (Titus 2:2).** This may be obvious, but Southern California is notorious for breeding perennial adolescence. Paul also encourages the older women to develop relationships with the younger women, especially as it relates to their husbands, children and households (Titus 2:4, 5).

When our children were younger my wife would often take advantage of her relationships with the older women in our church, especially as a home-schooling mom. Scheduling life was difficult, and she often felt overwhelmed. In time, she has become a resource for others. Sometimes these types of relationships happen spontaneously. Other times people in our church will seek to organize events to facilitate these types of things.

Paul also addresses the young men:

Likewise, exhort the young men to be sober-minded, in all things showing yourself *to be* a pattern of good works; in doctrine *showing* integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you (Titus 2:6-8).

Youthful joy, play and enthusiasm are fine things. But we should always seek to be inculcating in our youth a godly maturity.

A healthy church is made of souls who deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly. We are to ever remember Christ...**who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself *His* own special people, zealous for good works (Titus 2:14).**

As we move into the final chapter of this epistle, we see Paul focus his attention on one of the great themes of God’s love and grace. This would be the theme of *guilt*, *grace*, and *gratitude*. The godly patience Christians are called to is performed in the light of

remembering our own past (or for those raised in the church, where they would no doubt have ended up) and God's rescuing of our souls.

We were redeemed from all that was around us and within us...

...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7).

Guilt was the verdict, grace is the remedy, and gratitude should ever guide our hearts in our love for God and others. This is the prescription for a healthy church, a church which will practice what it preaches.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Jesus compares Himself to a gate. What is the institution by which this gate is presented to the world? What are some of the more critical elements of this institution?
2. In what ways can we compare the infant Jesus to the infant New Covenant church?
3. What kind of letters are 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus? How are they similar? How are they distinct?
4. Discuss the meatiness of Paul's greeting to Titus. Why do you suppose he goes into such depth?
5. Elders are mentioned a great deal in the New Testament. What are some qualifications and tasks for elders?
6. What are the attributes of a healthy church?
7. Explain the notion of guilt, grace, and gratitude. Why are these critical in the Christian's life?

Part LVII - Philemon

A Spontaneous Kindness

John 5:39; Philemon 14

January 17, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39)

...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord (Philemon 14).

Introduction

Showing me how to fix my minibike, my father's friend slapped my hand away as I sought to touch part of the mechanism. He preferred I kept my hands to myself. At about fourteen years of age, I didn't particularly like having my hand slapped. I recall thinking I wasn't in danger of breaking anything or hurting myself; he just didn't want me to touch it, and the slapping of my hand seemed like acceptable behavior to him.

I had shared that story with a friend who, years later, watched me in an interaction I had with a student. I hadn't slapped the student, nor was I particularly harsh (I can't recall what I was even trying to teach them). At the same time, I was fervidly restrictive in terms of allowing them interaction in the task. I didn't immediately understand why my student seemed put off. My friend took the opportunity to remind me of how I had felt having my hand slapped away.

Respecting caution in terms of ruining the project or injuring oneself, sometimes it helps to allow a student to touch whatever it is you might be working on. Even if it involves failure. It is often through this that the student begins to own the undertaking. A transfer begins to take place from coercion or manipulation to ownership and responsibility. The student/disciple is not merely engaging in the activity by compulsion. They are beginning to recognize the inherent value of doing the right thing in the right way.

And if we may bring it to a loftier level, they/we, upon examination of our ethics and motives, can thoughtfully begin to determine if our behavior is a reflection of true godliness and done out of love for God and others, to His glory. God may in effect slap our hands away.⁵⁴ Other times He may simply allow us to engage, even if there is a possibility of failure. These are common steps toward Christian maturity.

Survey of Philemon

This morning we dedicate our thoughts and prayers to this briefest of epistles from the aged and imprisoned Apostle Paul to Philemon and the church in his house. A drama had unfolded which led to the writing of this letter. Philemon, who by all accounts was a fine Christian man (verses 4-7), had been (most likely) robbed by his slave, Onesimus (whose name means *useful* or *profitable*). Onesimus also subsequently had fled from his owner.

In time, Onesimus came to meet the imprisoned Apostle Paul and became a Christian. Paul then writes this letter and has Onesimus (it would appear. See Colossians 4:9) deliver it to his former master against whom he had committed theft and desertion. In summary, the letter is Paul's request that Philemon receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a brother, useful to the ministry. This is the long and short of the letter. Nonetheless, it is rife with difficulties, especially to the so-called modern mind.

For example, why does Paul not use this opportunity to decry slavery altogether? It was not uncommon during the antebellum period of western slavery for masters and even pastors to use the book of Philemon as a justification for the slavery in play at the time.

Is the Apostle Paul simply ignoring one of the more heinous behaviors which prevailed in human history? It has been projected that slavery has been the most financially lucrative businesses since the genesis of business. Paul does not seem to take much of a shot at it here. If anything, Paul's willingness to make things right with Philemon by sending Onesimus back and paying for Onesimus' theft (Philemon 18, 19) almost appears to grant legitimacy to Philemon's ownership of another person. *Why?*

⁵⁴ Through His providence.

Secondly, what is often ignored in the commentaries on Philemon is what an uncomfortable journey this must have been for Onesimus. If we read this letter in the environment of current western sensitivities, we will fail to appreciate the courage and faithfulness of this new convert. Onesimus had the potential of the infliction of the death penalty for stealing and fleeing. One thinks of Uriah the Hittite who carried a letter from King David to Joab without realizing the design of the letter being the blueprints of his own murder (2 Samuel 11:14, 15).

Add to this Onesimus' lack of protest regarding his own slavery. Were Paul and Onesimus (not to mention the faithful Philemon) all complicit in the ignoring of this violation of human rights? Should there not have simply been unanimous agreement that slavery is wrong? Should not this have been contained in Paul's message? Should it not have been obvious to Philemon and liberating to Onesimus?

Herein lies one of the great errors in reading the Scriptures anachronistically (reading something while ignorant of the time, context or meaning of the words or events). This is a great error, not merely in reading the Bible, but when studying history in general. We are very quick to vilify individuals from other eras when hearing of their behavior or language. I am not terribly bothered by this, since our only true hero and example is Christ alone, against whom no accusation can stand.

At the same, we should be cognizant of what utter failures we will be when evaluated by the generations which will follow us. We grow to be quite cozy in our own system of ethics, but will our lethargy toward the needy, confusion regarding sexuality, willingness to euthanize old and young etc. mark us out as barbaric in the ages to come?

Let us return to the matter at hand: slavery. You may be shocked to find that the word *slave* is only found twice in all of Scripture in the King James Version. In the New King James Version, it is found 72 times. In the English Standard Version, it is found 118 times; and in the New American Standard Version it is found 187 times! The alternative translation being *servant*.

I highlight this since, for most us, the moment we read the word *slave*, our minds inescapably leap to our most common and recent understanding of the word, western antebellum (pre-Civil War)

slavery. This provides naysayers of Christianity ample, albeit ignorant, ammunition against the Scriptures. For the type of slavery we are most common with, which involves man-stealing is, according to Scripture, a capital crime.

And he who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death (Exodus 21:16).

Paul reiterates the heinous nature of man-stealing/slavery in his letter to Timothy as he emphasized the value of God's law. In the category of the “**ungodly**” and “**sinner**” Paul uses the example of “**enslavers**”⁵⁵ (1 Timothy 1:10). All this to say, we must be aware of the fallacy of equivocation⁵⁶ when seeking to make an argument or understand literature.

In order for us to appreciate this epistle, we must seek a bit more accuracy in terms of what kind of slave/servant *doulos* Onesimus actually was. There may have been any number of reasons a person might find themselves in this condition, but the most common came to be known as indentured servitude.⁵⁷ This could be a result of debt or theft. Regarding a thief, we read in Exodus,

He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft (Exodus 21:3).

The Old Testament provides a great deal of protection when it comes to a person in this condition, as well as a way out, since the indentured servant would pay their debt, likely learn a skill and then be released. It has been convincingly argued⁵⁸ that this is superior to the penal methodology of the current west where the thief does not pay off the debt to the victim but rather to the state. In this system, the victim both loses their merchandise and then also must pay for the

⁵⁵ KJV translates this “menstealers” *andrapodistais* “man-trappers”.

⁵⁶ When the conclusion of an argument depends on the fact that a word or phrase is used, either explicitly or implicitly, in two different senses in the argument. Hurley, Logic p 164.

⁵⁷ The selling of oneself for a certain amount of time for a loan, debt or theft.

⁵⁸ https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/pdf/tools_of_dominion.pdf

incarcerated perpetrator (through taxes). If the victim seeks restitution, they must sue in a separate civil trial where, even if they win, recompense is seldom made.

With these clarifications behind us, let us seek to appreciate the events of this epistle.

Beginning with Onesimus, he was willing, at great risk, to make things right. He did not view his coming to faith in Christ as an excuse to ignore the failings of his past. It might be said that when a person in prison comes to faith (as often happens whether in truth or pretense) they should all the more recognize the just nature of their incarceration.⁵⁹ The forgiveness which comes from God through Christ does not exonerate us or dismiss us from the consequences of our behavior in our relationships with other people.

Although we are not informed in this letter how Philemon did respond, Paul seems to be under the impression that he is **“Confident in [his] obedience” (Philemon 21)**.

What I would like to conclude with is Paul’s approach to the difficulty. Clearly, Paul is a common friend to both parties and desires the best for them, especially as it relates to ministry. Paul had to conciliate a man (Philemon) who had good reason to be offended. He was stolen from and abandoned. Yet Paul had great affection for Onesimus. Let us appreciate the language of Paul.

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment...I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart (Philemon 10, 12).

How could Paul commend the offender without denying or aggravating the fault? This brings me back to hand-slapping.

Paul does not shrink back from informing Philemon that his old age, his willingness to be imprisoned for Christ, and his own ministerial efforts in Philemon’s conversion (Philemon 19) would be sufficient for Paul to **“command” (Philemon 8)** obedience. There are other times when Paul does just that (1 Corinthians 5:13; 14:37). But here Paul goes down a different track.

⁵⁹ Operating within our current system.

...yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you (Philemon 9).

Paul continues,

...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord (Philemon 14).

Again, Paul did not always allow the maturity of the disciple to be the driving force in the task. There was an assumed maturity in Philemon that Paul was counting on. Herein lies the great and necessary precondition to the ills of humanity.

There is a great deal of talk today (although it is true in most self-governing cultures and societies) of systemic evil and ungodly laws. And whether it is racism, abortion, gender issues, etc., the Christian should always stand on the side of just and godly laws. But there are two errors of which we must be aware:

First, *godly laws follow godly citizens*. It is a foolish outlook to assume that the mere pursuit of godly laws will happen apart from changed hearts. And since the Gospel is the means by which hearts are changed (Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21) the church must ever prioritize the preaching of Christ crucified. Jesus gives the order in His Great Commission: We are to make disciples, then teach them to obey His commands (Matthew 28:18-20).

Second, *it is an error to think that the mere changing of laws will genuinely solve the problem*. Whether it's the willful blindness or narcissism which leads to concluding the acceptability to taking the lives of the innocent, old or young or the disposition which dehumanizes those whose ethnicity differs from our own, the mere changing of a law (however appropriate that might be) is a little help. It's just the slapping of the hand. Social evils are changed by transformed lives.

This is what Paul was counting on in his letter to Philemon. It's been said,

Christianity puts the slave into a brother and spiritual equal in Christ. It was this thinking which

eventually abolished slavery, emancipated women and claimed true social justice.

Also,

One only needs to know the helpless abjection of slaves under Roman law to realize the height which Paul scales when he asks the slave-owner to receive back the runaway thief-slave as a “brother beloved” (verse 16).

Prior to Paul expressing his confidence in the obedience of Philemon, he makes a statement that many believe must have ringed in Philemon’s ear as a testimony to the heart of his own redemption:

But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account (Philemon 18).

As a homeowner and slave-owner, Philemon was likely pretty well off. Very few who read this epistle conclude that Philemon would actually require the aged and imprisoned Paul to pay this debt, especially since Paul immediately reminds Philemon of his own indebtedness to Paul. But there is an even greater debt.

If we live ever mindful of this debt, it will produce the redemption of souls and the transformation of this fallen world. It was in the context of God’s gift of faith which opened Paul’s eyes to God’s gift of Christ that Paul wrote of his own debt.

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise (Romans 1:14).

Why would Paul view himself as debtor? Truly there is a debt we can never pay. Paul labors this point just a few chapters later.

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the

**ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness
(Romans 4:4, 5).**

But we should not read this as if the debt was not paid. The Scriptures will often refer to this payment as a “ransom” *lytron* (**Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6**).

The debt of our sin and its attending wrath has been charged to Christ and His righteousness and its attending riches of heaven have been credited to our account. The recognition of this ever flavored the heart of Paul. It was this blessed payment and the imputations (our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us) thereof that Paul was counting on for Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother of “**his own accord**” rather than by compulsion.

We live in a world where both perpetrator and victim are governed by a sense of entitlement rather than a sense of debt to God and debt to each other. It is through an act of God’s grace in Christ that souls are healed and subsequently comes the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2). Let our hearts be propelled in such a direction as we come to the Lord’s Table this morning.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you had your hand, in one way or another, slapped away from a task? How did it make you feel? Have you done this to others? Is it ever appropriate? When is it the poorer option? When is it preferable?
2. Review the course of events which led to the writing of Philemon. Why do you suppose so little is said of the evils of slavery in this letter?
3. Why would this have been a difficult letter for Onesimus to deliver (pages 3, 4)?
4. What does it mean to read literature anachronistically? What is the fallacy of equivocation and how can it be misleading? By what definition was Onesimus a slave?
5. Discuss how Paul approaches the difficulty between Philemon and Onesimus. To what does he appeal? Why does he not merely command Philemon to do the right thing?
6. What are some common errors when it comes to true social justice and cultural transformation? What must happen in order for these things to actually transpire?
7. What is Paul counting on when it comes to the maturity and obedience of Philemon? In what respect should we view ourselves as debtors?

Part LVIII - Hebrews

A Heavenly Country

John 5:39; Hebrews 11:14-16

January 24, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:14-16).

Introduction

I came to faith on the tail end of what came to be known as the *Jesus Movement*. It was a sort of religious stepbrother to the Hippie Movement of the sixties. The Jesus Movement didn't like the word, *religion*. We were fond of saying things like, "I'm not religious, I just love Jesus." The whole movement had the feel of a Christian protest against cold, lifeless orthodoxy.⁶⁰ People were happy to leave the institutionalized church for something more real and personal. Bibles were dog-eared from intense study. In many respects there was something healthy about this movement.

At the same time, there were side-effects. For we do see the institution of the church as we read the Scriptures. Many of my Jesus Movement friends, as they grew older, reintroduced themselves to very sound churches. It then became very interesting to watch them raise their own children in the faith and in the church. Would their own children catch the Jesus Movement fire, or would they be more akin to lifeless orthodoxy or something else altogether?

⁶⁰ I am not a fan of the term "lifeless orthodoxy" since true spiritual life comes through what is orthodox (*orthos* correct + *doxa* belief), though I understand what people mean when they use it.

I open with this in our study of Hebrews because it is difficult for us to appreciate the pull of religion that these Jewish Christians (the primary audience to whom this epistle was written) were feeling. In a sense, they got swept into a first century Jesus movement. Yet there was still the temple! Like a magnet, the temple and all the attending rituals were beckoning them back to a religion they had practiced all their lives. And not just all their lives; the lives of their parents, grandparents, great grandparents and on back for thousands of years!

And it wasn't a cult or a sect. It was the true religion, ordained by God. The practice of this religion was articulated in great detail both doctrinally and liturgically (what they believed and how they were to worship).

Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, “*See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain*” (Hebrews 8:5b).

Many of the recipients of this letter showed great faith and obedience early in their conversions (Hebrews 6:10; 10:32-34). Yet difficulties and persecutions can become laborious over time and they were tempted not only to become sluggish (Hebrews 6:12) but to retreat back to the comfort of their religious history.

The theme of Hebrews is to inform these Christians that the purpose of the long history of their religion was to placard the promise of Christ. The history of Israel was, to be sure, the history of God's covenant people. It was the true religion. But the true religion, from the dawn of time, was the promise of Christ. For thousands of years, through prophets, priests, kings, battles, judgments, signs, wonders, the covenant people of God were being taught what God would do through this promised Messiah.

Yet when the Messiah came, He was ignored and attacked. The church had so corrupted itself that it had no place for Christ. A good question for us to continue to ask ourselves (perhaps here, more than any other portion of the New Testament): *Do we see the appropriate application of the theme verse for this sermon series?*

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Survey of Hebrews

Hebrews is not a crescendo. It begins with an explosion of the superiority of Christ. An audience who had learned to revere angels, Moses, Joshua and Aaron are taught that Christ is over them all. It is through Christ that all things were made, and all things are continually upheld (Hebrews 1:2, 3). The Christ would not merely be one more religious character in the history of redemption. The design of those characters was to teach us of, and lead us to, Christ. It is Christ who would grant **“so great a salvation” (Hebrews 2:3a).**

This great salvation would come at a cost. The Captain of our salvation would be perfected **“through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10).** This does not mean Jesus was sinful then became sinless, but that He would become the complete and sufficient sacrifice for sins. He would **“fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).**

There is no religious person or being, inside or outside of the Christian faith, who could claim these credentials for themselves. Christ was perfect, sinless and complete. The author of this book is seeking to bring into fullness the reader’s estimation of the superiority and sufficiency of Christ. What blessed astonishment there must have been for them to read that through the death of Christ, Jesus...**might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14b).**

Since the initial readers of Hebrews were likely very conversant with the Old Testament, the author takes opportunity to help them play the correct role. We watch movies or read books and pretend to be the heroes. We would certainly be brave and faithful! In my fantasies I unhesitatingly enter the cave of the dragon to save the potential victim. Yet when I put the book down, I can barely make it a minute without full dedication to self!

As they read the Old Testament, who did they imagine themselves to be? Because they were apparently very close to being the very ones they would not desire to be. Hence the warning straight from Scripture:

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest’ (Hebrews 3:7-11).

There is in this epistle the warning that we avoid imitating “**an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God**” (Hebrews 3:12). The issue with those people is a problem that still exists, even in churches, to this very day: the word of God was “**not being mixed with faith in those who heard it**” (Hebrews 4:2b). If your religion is merely external, as accurate as those external things may be, it is of no saving value.

After the superiority of Christ, the author then moves to the superiority of the New Covenant. The neglect of the New Covenant and focus upon the Old Covenant might be compared to a wife whose husband spent years at war and all she had was a photo of him. For years she found comfort in the photo. But when he comes home, all she wants to do is look at the photograph!

The rituals and religion of the Old Covenant became an unhealthy source of comfort. It was so unhealthy, that when the Person came to whom all those rituals and religion pointed, He was rejected and abandoned. Hebrews is seeking to correct what amounts to be that soul-damning error. What necessarily follows the superiority of Christ is the superiority of the covenant. The superiority of (if we can use the term) *religion*!

The word “**better**” *kreittonos* is used 13 times in Hebrews. There is a “**better hope**” (Hebrews 7:19), “**better promises**” (Hebrews 8:6), “**better sacrifice**” in a better sanctuary with better results (Hebrews 9). In the Old Covenant there was a great deal of emphasis given to the deliverance from physical slavery in Egypt into the promised land. All the earth belongs to God and, as faithful stewards, Christians should promote His glorious rule in all the world. At the same time, we would also be missing the proverbial point if we

didn't plant our hearts firmly in a "better" country. A worldly country should never have been their main objective, nor should it be ours.

For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:14-16).

We also see a great deal of attention in Hebrews to the priestly role of Christ. A simple, albeit insufficient, distinction between a priest and prophet would be that a prophet approaches people on behalf of God and the priest approaches God on behalf of the people. In Hebrews we read how insufficient the role of human priests is in genuinely accomplishing anything.

The high priest would enter the temple on behalf of the people. He would, once a year, enter the Holy of Holies, which was a small room containing the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant in which there was manna, Aaron's rod and the tablets of the covenant. This room was designed to teach us about how God was to be approached. There was a veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. When Jesus was crucified, that veil was rent from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51)! It was a picture of the opening of heaven!

In Hebrews we learn we have one true High Priest. He doesn't enter into a temple made by human hands. It might be said, that it is the religious activity of one Person that truly matters.

But Christ came *as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11, 12).*

If it is the religious activity of Christ alone which obtains eternal redemption, how does it become ours? This is the final emphasis of Hebrews. The superior instrument is...*faith*.

Yet faith was not unique to the New Covenant. In chapter eleven the readers learn that if they wish to take rank with the true church, both old and new, it is by faith (Hebrews 12:22-24). It was faith at the dawn of history and throughout history, for without faith it is impossible to please God. The author reaches back to Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses' parents, Moses, Jericho, Rahab, and others. Their works were works of faith.

Yet in their works of faith, they found great difficulty from the world. We should expect no different. Unlike the world, though, we should understand our difficulties as coming from the loving, chastening hand of our heavenly Father (Hebrews 12:7). How beautiful and comforting the words:

Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

In light of the superior Savior, the superior covenant and the superior instrument, we are called to **“run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).**

The epistle concludes with what should be produced in our daily lives when we are governed by such heavenly realities. We are to exercise brotherly love and a willingness to entertaining strangers/angels. We are to remember prisoners, not from afar, but as if chained with them. We are to have godly attitudes toward marriage and avoid covetousness. Let us seek contentment and love and respect for leaders. We are to appreciate the immutability of Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, and be wary of strange doctrines.

The Old Covenant was soon to end (Hebrews 8:13). The temple would be destroyed the way a parent would remove a temptation or distraction from their child's environment. In the meantime, the author calls his readers to avoid a godless church. As Jesus suffered outside the gate, we are to go to Him outside the camp,

bearing His reproach, offering our sacrifice of praise. It is to those persevering faithful that the benediction is offered.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20, 21).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What do you know of the *Jesus Movement*? What were some of its strengths and weaknesses?
2. Are there things, places, people, etc. from your past that draw you back? Similar to this, how would the practices of the Old Covenant be like a magnet to the Hebrew Christian?
3. Was the Old Covenant a false religion? Explain.
4. How is Hebrews unlike a crescendo?
5. What is unique about the Captain of our salvation?
6. A record of dispositions to avoid are given to us in Hebrews 3 & 4. What are they and how do you find yourself contending with them?
7. Christ is the Superior One. What does His superiority lead to?
8. In what respect is Christ our High Priest?
9. What is the instrument through which the riches of the superior covenant become ours?

Part LIX - James

Saving Faith

John 5:39; James 2:14

February 14, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him (James 2:14)?

Introduction

One night I was leading a Bible study made up of young Protestant believers, Roman Catholics and others who were relatively undefined in terms of their religious convictions, and the subject came up of how one is saved. The basic question: *How do you get to heaven?* It was remarkable how quickly the room was divided.

The Protestants spoke up first. *We are saved by faith in Christ.* Those of the Roman Catholic persuasion bristled a bit at that answer. “So, it doesn’t matter how you live,” they complained, “all you need is faith?” Contained in their objection was the (not altogether unreasonable) contention that trusting in faith alone, while living a life of intentional and besetting rebellion, seemed wrong, even hypocritical.

It took all of about three minutes for our young Bible study to unintentionally unearth the issue at the heart of the Protestant Reformation: salvation by faith alone. Of course, when one reads James, we learn that this issue goes back significantly further than the 17th century. The way James addresses this issue very early in the New Covenant church (the book of James was one of the earliest written epistles) has been the source of no small controversy throughout all of history.

The confusion of how one finds peace with God goes back even further than James. It has been convincingly argued that the same muddled approach to salvation extends to the stitched-up fig leaves of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:7). Is James, as some have

taught, contradicting the Apostle Paul's continual and emphatic assertion that we are **“justified (declared righteous in the sight of God) by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28b)?** In other words, are we saved by faith alone?

By the Spirit and wisdom of God we will seek to answer that question before we adjourn.

Survey of James

Though the justification issue seems to grab the attention of those who read James, there is much more to this epistle than those thirteen verses in chapter two. James has been called the *Proverbs of the New Testament*. James is full of parallels and aphorisms. **“Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation” (James 1:9, 10).** **“For the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20).** The epistle contains short, easily recalled punches of wisdom and counsel.

James is not written to a particular church but to the twelve tribes scattered abroad. Some understand this to be a metaphor for Christians in general who are, at some level, pilgrims and sojourners this side of glory (1 Peter 2:11). At the same time, the early Christians were scattered in a very literal sense. While Saul (who later became the Apostle Paul) was wreaking havoc for the church, we read:

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (Acts 8:1b. See also 11:19).

It is to a scattered and laboring church that James opens with words of comfort and encouragement that many of us have seized upon during seasons of strife in our lives.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be

perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

I have found this to be one of those injunctions we enjoy in theory but are feeble in practice. We don't mind trials just so long as we get to decide what they will be and how long they will last. This is reminiscent of how we so enjoy that Jesus was a friend of sinners until a particular type of sinner seeks to become part of our church or our life. What a wonderful promise we read in James, that we may be **“perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”** Yet, in order for that to be achieved, we must let **“steadfastness have its full effect.”**

Perhaps realizing how difficult all of this will be, James calls us to ask God for wisdom, which He will generously and graciously provide (James 1:5). In our prayers and in our lives, we are to avoid doubt. This seems like an impossible request. Doubt is weaved into our new, even regenerate, fallen natures. Because of this, we often hear that doubt is an acceptable disposition.

Yet we must realize that doubt in God equals trust in something else (usually either the flesh or something intentionally unidentified). James calls this waffling Christian a **“double-minded man”** *dipsychos* (literally “two-souled”). It's been said that the double-minded person is one who buys a dozen doughnuts, puts them in the cupboard, then prays they won't eat them.

Seeking to get to the heart of our matters, James exhorts his readers not to put too much stock on their stations in life, rich or poor, for we all have the same end (James 1:9-11). Instead of being concerned with some earthly, fleeting identity, we are to remain steadfast under trial, looking forward to the eternal crown of life (James 1:12).

James also bids that we take responsibility for our own behavior. It is not God who tempts us, he explains,

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:14).

This deadly cycle begins with something as seemingly benign as desire. We are called to “**flee...youthful lusts**” (2 Timothy 2:22). Instead, we tend to entertain them.

Toward the end of chapter one, James begins to touch on the whole *how are we saved* question. He begins by defining pure and undefiled religion before God. We are called to not merely be hearers of the word but “**doers of the word**” (James 1:22). James does not avoid the word *religion* as is so common today. But he does define it.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

In chapter one we are told to avoid putting too much stock in our station in life; in chapter two we are told to avoid putting too much stock in the stations of other. Preferential treatment is to be avoided. I was part of a ministry years ago that sought to convert the more well-known and popular. It was not as if these popular people were more important, they would say, just more strategic. It seems that James’ counsel runs contrary to such thinking.

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him (James 2:5)?

In the almost thirty-one years I’ve been at this church, I have never, by design, known who donates or how much they donate, that I might not ‘tiptoe through the tithers.’ It is advice I would offer all young ministers.

In the midst of this counsel, James brings forth what may have been a head-scratching proposition which seems to put us all on the same playing field.

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (James 2:10).

This statement on its own seems to militate against the idea that we are saved by our works. So, and this seems to be a point of confusion for many, in one respect all sins are the same in terms of salvation. As the Westminster Confession teaches:

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent (WCF, 15, 4).

Yet in another respect, some sins are more or less reprehensible in the eyes of God. Proverbs 6:16-19 provides a list of things which God particularly hates. We will finish by addressing the issue of justification at the end of chapter two, for now we move on the untamable tongue.

Simply put, our lack of ability to control our tongues can be devastating. One is hard-pressed to find more emphatic, forceful and descriptive language in all of Scripture!

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell (James 3:6).

It is my own testimony that in my many years of ministry, the highest percentage of turmoil is a result of thoughtless words. It was quite common for us to confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed (WCF, 33, 1). Of course, speaking a word is a deed. But so common and egregious are sins of the tongue that it gets its own category. As Jesus taught,

For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45b).

Chapter three concludes with a distinction between heavenly and demonic wisdom. We all know worldly people with great worldly wisdom. They may offer great advice economically, artistically, even relationally, as far as it goes. But there is a wisdom

“from above” (James 3:17) that ever recognizes the direction to which all things are to lead, to the glory of God in Christ.

Chapters four and five contain numerous exhortations toward godliness. James addresses covetousness, wrong motives, undue friendship and influence with the world, along with an almost startling promise:

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you (James 4:7, 8).

Even a cursory understanding of the devil must cause us to pause at what a great victory Christ has won for us that the devil would flee! Seeking to help us keep perspective, James calls us to ever live our lives with the caption **“If the Lord wills” (James 4:15)**. There are numerous off-ramps we might have no intention of taking (including death itself) to which God will direct us.

A man’s heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

So much anxiety we have regarding what *might* happen!

In his final chapter James again addresses putting too much faith in earthly riches while ignoring, neglecting and defrauding others. We are again called to patience with a reference to a farmer waiting for the fruit of the earth. We all love the fast-motion filming of a growing plant! But, in reality, we must be willing to wait days, weeks, months or even longer.

The epistle concludes with a call for the church to call for the elders to pray and minister (James 5:14). We assign every member an elder in order to more faithfully fulfill this. Keep in mind, at least here, it is the responsibility of the *member* to make the call. James gives the value of confessing our sins to one another (James 5:16). It is here that we read that oft quoted verse on prayer.

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16b).

His final word has to do with us seeking to turn back those who wander from the truth. A responsibility we all have if we are truly seeking to love the brethren.

Let us conclude by tackling the justification issue. Just in case we are growing weary and think this is no big deal, listen to what two of the finest minds in human history, and certainly church history, had to say about this. John Calvin said, **Justification is the main hinge on which salvation turns.**

Martin Luther said it a little differently but with similar impact: **Justification is the article by which the church stands and falls.**

Clearly the issue of being acquitted before God (which is what justification generally addresses) is of premiere import. Is James contradicting Paul? Such a concession would cast doubt on the veracity and singular source of authority within Scripture; that being the Spirit of God Himself.

Add to this, James utilizes the same biblical/historical figure as Paul to make his argument. Romans 4 and James 2:21-24 both reference Abraham. But it is worth noting that Paul's reference to Abraham being justified from Genesis 15:6 happened decades prior to James' reference to Abraham being justified in his willingness to offer Isaac (James 2:21; Genesis 22:9). Was Abraham justified in chapter 15 or chapter 22 of Genesis? Keep in mind that justification (when referring to being acquitted by God) is a single action by which we have peace with God (Romans 5:1).

This should clue us all in to the fact that James seems to be using the word **“justified”** *dikaiosynen* differently than the way Paul was using it. The entire context of James' argument is not whether we are acquitted of our sins before God by faith. The context of James' argument revolves around what that faith looks like. James' point is summed up well in verse fourteen.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him (James 2:14)?

Faith that does not produce obedience is simply not saving faith. If you're sick and a doctor gives you medicine which allows you to walk, run, play and work, your ability to perform activities is

not what made you well. It merely gave evidence that the medicine was effective. James' use of the word *justified* is similar to the way Jesus uses the word in the gospel according to Luke:

**Yet wisdom is justified by all her children
(Luke 7:35).**

What Jesus is saying here is that wisdom is shown to be wisdom by what it produces. James is saying that true saving faith is shown to be genuine by what it produces. But there is a monumental difference between saying that true faith produces obedience versus saying that we are saved by that obedience. We are saved by the blood of Christ and the blood of Christ alone!!

Nonetheless, James' point should be well taken in an era of easy believe-ism where it is commonly asserted that we can be assured of our salvation due to an uttered prayer apart from repentance. This seems to be something James is warring against. Repentance, in a very reductionist definition, simply means a changing of the mind *metanoeo*. Yet the Apostle Paul declared that we should not merely repent (change our minds) but perform deeds in keeping with our repentance (Acts 26:20).

James seems to be teaching that when we change our minds, we change our minds about everything: who we are, what we have done, what sin is, who God is, how we are saved, how we should live. We are saved by faith alone. But saving faith is evidence that God has given us a new birth and we are to function accordingly. As Martin Luther famously said:

**We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that
saves is never alone.**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How do you get to heaven?
2. James has been called the *Proverbs of the New Testament*. Why do you suppose that is? Give examples.
3. To whom is James written? How does that relate to his early words of comfort and encouragement?
4. Do you count it all joy when you meet trials? Why or why not? What is it designed to produce?
5. What does it mean to be double-minded?
6. Discuss the deadly cycle of desire.
7. What does it mean to be a “doer of the word”?
8. If you fail in one point of the law, you become guilty of all. What are the implications of such a statement?
9. Is James contradicting Paul when it comes to justification? What is justification? Solve the apparent difficulty.

Part LX - 1 Peter

If God Cares So Much, Why Am I Going Through This?

John 5:39; 1 Peter 5:6, 7

February 21, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:6, 7).

Introduction

In my studies of 1 Peter, I happened upon an interesting point of conjecture. The author was speculating regarding the type of response we might receive if we sought to express sympathy to Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. If you recall, they were companions of Daniel who refused to worship the image constructed by Nebuchadnezzar under threat of being burned alive. They were supernaturally preserved from the burning and were joined by a fourth in the midst of the blaze, who many believe was the preincarnate Christ (Daniel 3).

Upon our expressions of sympathy, that they would have had to endure such a horrifying event, he supposed that they would politely correct us. They likely looked back at that as the grandest experience of their lives because it was there, in the seven-times-heated furnace, that they found Christ Himself, transforming the burning fiery furnace into a dew-kissed Garden of Eden.⁶¹

Peter would have, no doubt, been conversant with the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And as we pour over 1 Peter, we might conclude that a goal of Peter, in terms of the behavior of the recipients, would have been for his readers to have the resolve of these three Old Testament saints. How can we not be moved and inspired in this brief account found in the third chapter of Daniel! The king rages:

⁶¹ *Explore the Book*, 1 Peter, p.302. Baxter.

But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. “If it be *so*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. “But *even* if *He does* not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:15-18).

In his letter, Peter moves back and forth between our eternal inheritance, how it has become ours and how to live in a world that may not be all that excited to have a gospel testimony in their midst.

Survey of 1 Peter

As we survey 1 Peter, we notice that the greeting is unlike the greetings we generally see in Paul’s epistles. It is not written “to the church at...” but to **“the pilgrims of the Dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1)**. Peter is writing to scattered Christians (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19). He does not have the environment of a particular church in mind, but Christians in the everyday world living among fellow, and not always friendly, human beings.

They are under fire and will soon the fire will get hotter (1 Peter 4:12). It is so easy for us to lose our moorings in the midst of hostilities and temptations. Peter will seek to anchor us with the knowledge that Christians are **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Peter 1:2)**. A wonderfully comforting exhortation is found in the fifth chapter.

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:6, 7).

The God who spoke the heavens and the earth into being from the mere words of His mouth cares for you! One might, in a very human moment, ask, ‘If God cares so much, why am I going through this?’

Prior to answering that question, Peter reminds us of our eternal inheritance, purchased by the death and resurrection of Christ, which is...**incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:4).**

So, why am I going through these fiery trials? It is because our grasping of these glorious, heavenly gifts is by faith. And like a metal, crusted with rust, our faith must be tried. Perhaps we can use the comparison of a filthy windshield, so muddy and cloudy that we can only see the inside of the car. Trials are like a wiper that our vision may extend beyond the confines of sin-tainted creaturely limitations.

We are, in a sense, with the world in the car. Yet we are called to **“be holy”** because God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). For the world, this journey is a sort of party bus to hell and Peter is explaining how God clears our vision, that we might more plainly perceive this great salvation, prophesied from the beginning of time, this work of redemption, **“things which the angels desire to look into” (1 Peter 1:12b).**

God’s caring for us involves clearing the dross. It is so easy in a *world with devils filled, who threaten to undo us*, to fall into worldliness. But is with our eyes of faith on our heavenly reward that we can begin to lay...**aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:1b, 2).**

Buttressing us even further, Peter seeks to help us recognize our identity in Christ through the metaphor of a spiritual house, made of living stones, a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:4-10). But he is quick to point out that the chief cornerstone was rejected by the builders. But the Christian has been called out of the darkness into His marvelous light!

So now we find ourselves traversing this world in a counter-intuitive way. The world, our own flesh and the devil, who Peter compares to a **“roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8)**, would have us join them. If we are not willing, Peter presses the fact that the furnace will get hotter. And our natural

temptation will be to retaliate. And in our retaliation, we have played the dark game and have given the world some, albeit perverted, warrant to attack.

We need to be sure that if we suffer, we suffer for doing good.

But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God (1 Peter 2:20b).

It is precisely here that Peter calls us to follow in the steps of Christ.

...who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:23).

It is more than we can tackle here, but Peter will spend time specifically addressing how to interact in what appears to be a less than optimal environment (even though it is the sovereignly ordained environment).

We are to appropriately respond to governing authorities (1 Peter 2:13-17). We learn how believing wives are to win the souls of their disobedient husbands (1 Peter 3:1). Husbands are instructed how to dwell with their wives in an understanding and honoring manner (1 Peter 3:7). We are to be serious and watchful in our prayers and have a fervent love for one another (1 Peter 4:8). We are to be hospitable and use our gifts to minister to one another (1 Peter 4:9, 10). He gives instruction regarding the office of elders caring for the church (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Truly, Peter is seeking to inspire the scattered Christians to provide a God-honoring, redemptive testimony to the surrounding world, being untainted by it and supportive of one another. But what strikes the reader is the means by which Peter seeks to strengthen us. He is not merely cheering us on or coaching us through the trials of life. He is directing our thoughts toward lofty, holy, heavenly and sacred things, **“things which the angels desire to look into” (1 Peter 1:12b).**

There is a mosquito in the room, and he is arming us with a flame-thrower. Let us close by briefly noticing what Peter references in order to arm us for battle.

We are not merely part of a club or a team. Christians are the...**elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:2).**

We should live our lives, never losing focus on...**our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3b, 4).**

We have been redeemed, not with corruptible things...**but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:19).**

We might wonder if Peter, as he grew in his own faith and contemplated his own foretold martyrdom, gained fresh and deep appreciation for his Savior...**who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree—by whose stripes you were healed (1 Peter 2:24a, c).**

You might venture a guess that Peter contemplated his own failure and unjust nature when he wrote:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18).

All Christian behavior is performed, not in order to win God's favor, but in the light of a favor purchased by Christ. And our refinement in grasping and trusting in this is the aim of our trials. It is in light of this truth that Peter can offer another benediction.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5:10, 11).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Reflect upon how Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego might honestly respond to questions about their ordeal.
2. To whom is Peter writing? Why does it help to know this?
3. If God cares, why do His children go through fiery trials?
4. In what ways are we to imitate the suffering of Christ?
5. Where does Peter direct our thoughts in seeking to strengthen us?

Part LXI - 2 Peter

Peter's Final Lesson

John 5:39; 2 Peter 1:5-9

February 28, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins (2 Peter 1:5-9).

Introduction

A conversation is recorded toward the end of the Gospel of John between Jesus and Peter. As you know, prior to the crucifixion, three times Peter denied that he was a follower of Christ (Luke 22:54-62). The conversation we are looking at takes place after the resurrection (John 21:15-19); this latter exchange between Jesus and Peter also had a threefold repetition.

Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. Three times Peter answered in the affirmative. Three times Jesus responded by calling Peter to minister to His sheep. It was in this dialogue that Jesus revealed to Peter what kind of death he would endure to glorify God (John 21:19), something to which Peter refers in this epistle (2 Peter 1:14).

It is likely well over thirty years between that conversation and the writing of the second epistle of Peter. It is no stretch to conclude that the words of Jesus were deeply etched in Peter's heart. For more than three decades Peter, albeit with failures, sought to keep that calling given to him by his Savior. Now, as he faced his own death, he was confronted with a great concern. Interlopers!

As Peter is exiting the front door of his earthly dwelling to enter his eternal glory, he looks back and sees intruders arriving through the rear. Jesus had commissioned Peter to care, tend, feed and protect His household. These intruders are not attacking from without but from within. They are not throwing rocks through the windows, they are making friends with the children and being invited in. Invited in, not merely to learn and grow, but to teach and influence. They are winning the affections and allegiance of those who have called on Christ. And not to a good, truthful end.

Peter will not retire without giving a refresher. We also need to be reminded.

For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I *must* put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease (2 Peter 1:12-15).

This thought caused me to reflect upon Dr. Greg Bahnsen, who died at the age of forty-seven and yet left behind a tome of priceless theological instruction.⁶² A former member of our church, Dr. Mike Stingley (also a pastor), was good friends with Dr. Bahnsen. Dr. Stingley had indicated to me that Dr. Bahnsen's prolific output of material was, in part, motivated by the realization that he knew he was not well and may not live a long life.

What will this apostle, whose life and ministry contained moments of brilliant success and dismal failure, commend to us?

Survey of 1 Peter

Early on Peter assures us that God has provided what we need. No Christian is left spiritually destitute. God is an ample supplier

⁶² A recent project has made Dr. Bahnsen's materials available in digitized form without a paywall: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/solo/thebahnsenproject/>

who withholds no good thing “**from those who walk uprightly**” (Psalm 84:11b).

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue (2 Peter 1:2, 3).*

Yet you will notice that “**all things *pertain[ing] to life and godliness*” is contingent upon “**the knowledge of Him (Christ)**”. It is true knowledge of Christ that Peter sees being threatened. This is what Peter seeks to remedy. Peter is not addressing people who are denying Christ outright. He is addressing people who are denying the true Christ. How often we hear the world tell us what Jesus would or would not do! The morphing of Christ into a caricature of who He truly is carries a greater danger than to altogether deny Christ.**

Herein lies the strategy of the evil one. The atheist has always been a relatively insignificant antagonist. It’s the false apostle and heretical teachers within the church causing all the chaos.

For such *are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).*

It’s been said that Peter’s first epistle was *hope amid trial*, the emphasis in his second is *growth in, and through, true knowledge*. But he is quick to address how knowledge does, and should, affect behavior. There is a false and breezy aphorism which asserts, “Never mind what you believe; the thing that matters is how you live.” Such a disposition is pharisaical and patently unbiblical. The way one thinks and believes will inevitably dictate behavior. And the reason, or motivation, for our behavior is of paramount importance—to the glory of God.

We are called to be diligent, after which Peter offers a succession of attributes that should adorn, and extend, from true saving faith. *Virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness and brotherly kindness* are the marks of a flush and fruitful faith. These things are to be ours and are to abound.

Not all, but certain, sharks (mako and great white, e.g.) will die if they stop swimming forward. I am not at all suggesting that there aren't times we should rest (Mark 6:31). And as we get older, we may have to adjust our schedules to accommodate fatigue or illness. But coasting into the finish line of life is a spiritually unhealthy plan.

The first chapter closes with Peter referencing the value of God-breathed Scripture as the means by which the light of Christ comes (2 Peter 1:19-21). But he is quick in chapter two to bring a powerful denunciation regarding false apostles, teachers, heresies and blasphemies (2 Peter 2:1-3). A robe, a pulpit, a cross and even a Bible in hand, does not assure truth. But rest assured, these false teachers who seek to exploit you will face their judgment.

These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever (2 Peter 2:17).

In the meantime, the deceivers will seek as many victims as possible. You may wish to ask yourself if you know a lie when you hear one, especially from the pulpit! When I hear what is being heralded from the loudest pulpits in our land, and look at the tens of thousands in attendance, I fear we have lost discernment. Not that it is necessarily bad to have tens of thousands listen. Spurgeon and Whitefield had such crowds. But their message is a far cry from what rules the theological airwaves today!

And let us not expect these “**spots and blemishes**”, as Peter calls them, who join the Christian feasts (2 Peter 2:13) to be twiddling their moustaches as they walk on stage accompanied by a sinister soundtrack. One of the most subtle, nefarious and currently applicable verses found in this epistle is in chapter two:

While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption (2 Peter 2:19a).

The veneer, the surface of their message is one that offers freedom. For a time, you will walk away feeling liberated, even vindicated. “The sin is not your fault,” they will tell you. Even further, “It is not even sin. And those who are calling it sin are seeking to imprison you in their archaic religion of guilt!” That **“your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:22)** seldom finds its way into their lexicon. Their message is one of cool water over burning lava.

The commonly denied message is that there is indeed sin, but there is forgiveness, redemption, and grace **“in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:2)**. It was the concern of Peter, and it should be the concern of every elder and pastor, that their congregants know a falsehood when they hear one.

In 2 Peter 2:3, Peter speaks of **“deceptive words”**. The Greek is the word *plastos*, from which we get the English word *plastic*. To them, Scripture is a wax nose they can twist in whatever way they desire. It’s been said that the false teachers have the Christian’s vocabulary, but not the Christian’s dictionary.

I pray I don’t sound overly accusatory. Every church, every elder, every pastor should invite a healthy assessment, critique, of their message. This is one of the reasons at our church we write our entire sermons out and give the listener an opportunity to question and, if necessary, correct us every Lord’s Day (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). Whereas it is possible to be overly critical of others, it is also possible to be overly malleable through the influence of others. The comfort, peace and correction we all extract from those in the ministry should come from their helping us grasp the Scriptures. And, as we have sought to emphasize, the heart of the message of the Scriptures is Christ and what it testifies of Him.

The third chapter of the epistle contains the message of a sure judgment; another doctrine which the modern, liberated clergy either deemphasizes, ignores, or denies altogether. The answer to this **“great and terrible day of the Lord”** is not to pretend it is not going to happen, but to take refuge in the one who is capable of delivering us from it. Peter calls us to **“be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless” (2 Peter 3:14b)**.

To be sure, the conduct of our lives will give evidence regarding the sincerity of our faith, but the only way for us to be

found without spot and blameless is through our Redeemer, who, as Jude records, is...

...able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24, 25).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Reflect upon how Jesus' conversation with Peter must have impacted him.
2. What does Peter seem to be witnessing as he realizes his ministry and life are coming to an end? How does he respond to this?
3. Do you sometimes feel that God is not supplying what you need? What do you suppose is the actual issue?
4. Is there a difference between denying Christ altogether and denying the truth about Christ? Explain which is more dangerous and why.
5. Some assert that what we believe doesn't matter, just what we do. Some assert just the opposite. How are these both errors?
6. What is the danger in spiritual coasting?
7. Does a Bible in a teacher's hand assure that he/she will speak the truth? Explain.
8. A false sense of liberty can be morally and spiritually dangerous. Why?
9. Will there be a judgment? How does one stand through this?

Part LXII - 1 John

That You May Know That You Know

John 5:39; John 20:31

1 John 5:13

March 7, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

...but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

Introduction

From time to time issues resurface in the church which must be readdressed. One of the most recurrent, and critical, issues (since it has to do with salvation itself) revolves around the distinction between Jesus as savior and Jesus as lord. We often use the words *lord* and *savior* without giving a great deal of thought to how different they are. But they are indeed different. It is one thing for a lifeguard to save you. It is quite another thing for the lifeguard to be your master.

During one of my stints in seminary the debate surrounding this issue was raging. The camps were commonly referred to as *Lordship Salvation* versus *Easy Believism*. The concern revolving around Easy Believism was that if you could get someone, perhaps at a weak or vulnerable moment, to pray a specific prayer, you could immediately assure them that they had eternal life.

I recall witnessing with a friend in the ministry who was working hard to get a young man (who was clearly not interested) to pray a prayer to be saved. When I stated what appeared to be obvious (that this fellow just wanted us to go away), my friend said he did not

believe in Lordship Salvation. He thought if he could talk this guy into praying, he would be saved.

The concern orbiting Lordship Salvation was that it, perhaps unwittingly, intertwined our obedience as meriting salvation, a doctrine traditionally known as *legalism* (salvation by our keeping of the law).

Simply stated in juxtaposition: *Is a person saved by the mere uttering of a prayer? Conversely: Does a person's ethical or moral excellence somehow contribute to their salvation?*

Otherwise good theologians would get caught in these traps. More than once I've heard that all the rich young ruler had to do in order to be saved was sell all his possessions (Matthew 19:21). It seems to escape the notice of people that Jesus was putting an impossible task (Matthew 19:26) before this young man who had deluded himself into thinking he was a law-keeper (Matthew 19:20).

Other highly popular, and generally orthodox, teachers have given testimony as to how one summer they accepted Jesus as savior, then the next summer as lord. One must ask: during that year, who was this man's master? Jesus taught,

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other (Matthew 6:24a).

That Jesus would be at the same time someone you trust in as Savior but despise and hate as master is demonstrably unbiblical. Yet this problem didn't begin in the 1970s or 80s. John, the apostle, was confronted with this issue in the early church. It has been said,

The Gospel of John was written that men might have life, the epistle of 1st John that believers might know they had life.

This is seen when we compare two, similar sounding, verses:

...but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that

believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

It is one thing to have eternal life. It is another thing to *know* you have eternal life. This is not a mistake a person wants to make. The enemy of our souls would ever have the Christian doubt that they are in the loving hands of their Savior. He would also, more dangerously, want to assure those who are not truly saved that their souls are just fine. The means by which this is to be assessed is a major theme in 1 John.

Survey of 1 John

John opens by establishing the true and concrete nature of the Christian faith. He does this by establishing the historical and material nature of Christ. Concerning the “**word of life**” John testifies that they had “**heard...seen with [their] eyes...looked upon and have touched with [their] hands**” (1 John 1:1, 2).

Jesus was not a fictitious inspirational character, and the Christian faith is much more than a set of good ideas. The eternal Son of God entered history and was made manifest to humanity (1 John 1:2). This event, which theologians call the incarnation (the act of being made flesh) would, and still does, come under attack. *From whence does this attack come?* John explains,

...every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 John 4:2b, 3).

Seeking to dispel the truth of the incarnation is a dark deed from a dark place. In terms of our self-examination regarding the sincerity of our own faith, this seems to be of critical importance.

Denying that Jesus has come in the flesh comes from the spirit of antichrist. One other doctrine we learn from John is of the antichrist. It promotes the denial that Jesus is in fact the Christ, that is, the promised Messiah of which the Old Testament continually speaks.

As we examine the genuineness of our faith, we are to seek to be assured that the object of our faith is not misplaced or twisted beyond recognition. Everything we've learned in the Old Testament regarding the Messiah anticipated Jesus, the Christ. He then became flesh. He lived a life without sin (no darkness found in Him); died on a cross, becoming a curse (Galatians 3:13); then rose again in a grand display of victory over sin and death, granting His victory to all who call upon His name. *Is this the Jesus whom you trust with your eternal soul??*

We will also be given the means by which we access the necessary information. In case you haven't noticed, 'spirituality' is at an all-time high. The claim of being 'spiritual' is ready on the lips of anyone who finds themselves engaged with a message of redemption in Christ. This is nothing new. It was rampant during the time of John.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

Of course, if I am to test something, I need access to the answers. John, in an appeal to his own apostolic authority, just a few verses later points us to the source document:

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6).

John rapidly moves from a focus upon Christ to an evaluation of self. It is one thing for Jesus to save sinners. It is quite another to know if we are included in that number. This self-evaluation is presented in a series of conditional sentences. We have a sort of 'if-then' method of spiritual self-analysis.

It amounts to this: if we say we're Christians, yet live a life walking in darkness, we're lying. If we walk in the light, that is an indicator that we are covered by the blood of Christ. Walking in the light, it must be said, is not to be understood as sinless perfection, but of a lifelong following of Christ. We know walking in the light is not sinlessness because John adds, **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8)**. One feature that our eyes have been opened to the truth is the recognition of our own sin. This is restated in 1 John 1:10.

This series of conditional sentences climaxes with the well-known verse:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

It may do us well to take a few moments on this powerful, comforting verse. To **"confess"** means to agree *homologomen*, in this case with God, that we are sinners. We are not left to our own devices for this, as if sin-laden creatures have the final word on the definition of sin. For all the anti-law rhetoric which goes on in the church today, John appeals to the law as the means by which sin is defined.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

When we look at the perfect law of God, then look at ourselves, we arrive at the conclusion, which we confess. John then highlights the faithfulness of God. The very best humanity has to offer will still find itself riddled with sin and weakness. There are many people I love and trust. But when it gets down to our eternal souls, there is only One who will be faithful no matter what the obstacle.

We see **faithful** followed by **"just"** *dikaios* (also can be translated *righteous*). Why is this added? We often think God can forgive the way we forgive, which usually means we'll just forget about it and seek to move on (or something like that). But for God to

say something along the lines of “Let’s just pretend that didn’t happen” would be a violation of His character. God is just and the source of all that is just.

Imagine a court room where the judge, in a great act of “mercy” upon a convicted criminal, said “Today I have chosen not to make you pay for your crimes. You’ve been set free.” That court might be many things, but it would fail to be a hall of justice. Justice has not been served. The penalty for the crime has not been paid. But God maintains His just character in forgiving us because the price has been paid for us by another—Christ our Savior.

These wonderful words of pardon are followed by John giving one of the reasons why he is writing this letter:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin (1 John 2:1a).

In the same verse he very pastorally recognizes the battle of being human. He therefore finishes the thought:

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1b).

Herein lies the ongoing walk, battle, struggle of the Christian faith. If we are in Christ, we will ever seek to walk in the light, which is obedience governed by His word. This is an attribute which we can observe in our own lives and which is telltale.

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments (1 John 2:3).

It is critical though, for us to recognize that John, in this verse, is not telling *how* we have come to know Him, he is telling us how we *know* we have come to know him. It is one thing for me to know that I am rich. It is quite another thing for me to know how I became rich. Am I rich because I’ve earned it or am I rich because I inherited it?

Pouring over this short epistle, John never strays too far from this message. The message that we are saved by the love and grace of

God (1 John 3:1) which evidences itself in our love and service of God and one another.

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:6-10).

Is it possible that a simple prayer might be included in God's saving of a soul? Certainly. Should there be a call to repentance and acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord in the presentation of the gospel? Of course. Jesus did not hesitate to communicate to His would-be followers that they must be willing to “**count the cost**” of discipleship (Luke 14:25-33). For many, the cost of discipleship would be their own lives.

The confusion surrounding the Lordship Salvation/Easy Believism controversy is that whatever cost we, as disciples, might pay, it can never purchase redemption or pardon from God.⁶³ Those who simply pray a prayer that is not then followed by a life pursuing obedience should not be deluded into thinking that they are in the favor of God. Nor should those who seek obedience think that their obedience is the means by which that favor is found. The blood of the martyrs may be the seed of the church, but it is the blood of Christ alone that makes the church a house of redemption.

We, as the believers, will soon commune with God and each other in the Lord's Supper. But as the words of institution so clearly

⁶³ It is of value to distinguish causation and correlation.

indicate, it is Christ's body and Christ's blood alone that **“is poured out...for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Define and discuss Lordship Salvation versus Easy Believism.
2. What is one comparison made between the Gospel of John and the First Epistle of John?
3. How does John open this epistle? Why do you suppose he begins with this?
4. What are some things the spirit of antichrist is seeking to deny?
5. How does one go about testing the spirits?
6. John offers a series of conditional sentences in chapter one. What is he seeking to help us determine?
7. Discuss why “just” is included in 1 John 1:9.
8. What do you suppose is John’s main point in this epistle?

Part LXIII - 2 John

You're Not Invited

John 5:39; 2 John 5; 2 John 10, 11

March 14, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another (2 John 5).

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds (2 John 10, 11).

Introduction

The man leading the Bible study was one of the most theologically savvy, intellectually gifted, yet gentle and humble people I had ever known. He exceeded most of the seminary professors I had ever studied under. Here was a member of our church, leading a Bible study. But in one particular study, something happened that resulted in me getting a phone call from a visitor, a lawyer, who also happened to be an acquaintance of mine. He was very disgruntled at the way he was treated.

After a little investigating, I unearthed what transpired. My visitor/acquaintance did not attend the Bible study merely to learn or grow. He attended with the clear intention of influencing. And the doctrine which he was seeking to foist upon the study was one that we, as a church, would have held to be unbiblical and unorthodox, something that was not in the spiritual best interests of those in attendance.

When the Bible study leader perceived the direction the visitor was seeking to take, he addressed the doctrine, and the person seeking to promote the doctrine, in unvarnished tones; tones that many within the bosom of modern, western Christianity would view as inconsistent

with the sweet flavor and sensibilities of religion to which we have grown accustomed. This Bible study leader believed that he not only had a responsibility to address a predatory doctrine but also the predator who was seeking to bring it.

I couldn't help but think of this encounter as I read 2 John this week. Separated by a mere four verses is the call to **“love one another” (2 John 5b)** and the call to **“not receive”** someone into your house or **“greet him” (2 John 10b, 11a)**. How do we square this passage...**Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels (Hebrews 13:1, 2)**...with this one...**As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Titus 3:10, 11)**.

Most of us in this room might agree that a church that is overly *seeker centered* may find itself in dangerous territory. At the same time, being sensitive to a seeker (or more aptly, a visitor) is only reasonable. The visitor should have some idea of what's going on. The Apostle Paul is very clear that if an **“unbeliever or outsider” (1 Corinthians 14:24)** enters the church, they need to grasp the event. He goes so far as to say it should be **“easy to understand” (1 Corinthians 14:9)**. All this to say, we shouldn't center the service on a seeker, but we shouldn't ignore or be hostile to the seeker either. *Seeker hostile* churches aren't good.

Yet in this brief epistle we read these counter-intuitive words not to receive certain people or even greet them! That appears to be another category altogether; and a critical one at that. This goes well beyond the normal seeker type categories.

Survey of 2 John

Since we are examining such a brief epistle, I thought it would be profitable to inch into the answer of this unique issue through a verse by verse overview. Digging too deeply will not be possible given our time restraints, but we can certainly get the general ideas contained, stopping to highlight issues that may need emphasis in our current spiritual environment. Let us begin.

The Elder, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever (2 John 1, 2).

John, the likely author, refers to himself as “**The Elder.**” This is a bit of a different autograph. In the over sixty times the word ‘elder’ *presbyteros* is used in the New Testament, only about three times do we see it in the singular. And it is never in the singular when discussing ruling or authority. It is very possible that John is using the word here to describe his age rather than his office. The critical message for today’s church in this greeting is for us to recognize that the church is to be governed by a plurality of elders, not by a single person.

The “**elect lady**” may be an actual woman and her family or a reference to a church. 2 John 13 tends to favor the latter, but not explicitly.

The second thing we notice is the repetition of the word “**truth**” *alethia*. From time to time we see an argument in Christian circles between truth and love. We must recognize that both attributes are an extension of the character of God. God is love and God is truth (John 14:6; 1 John 4:8).

And, it must be stated, apart from the acknowledgement of a divine, absolute source, the two words are reduced the meaninglessness. Simply (and biblically) stated, truth without love makes us a clanging cymbal and love without truth is generally pure carnality or idolatry.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love (2 John 3).

These greetings become so common that we tend to, at our own expense, ignore them. It is within a very substantial and defined love and truth from the Lord Jesus Christ that we have “**grace, mercy, and peace.**” Tackling these august words in a couple of sentences feels overwhelming. Briefly stated, grace means we freely receive that which we have not earned (the riches of life, light, heaven

and favor with God). Mercy means we do not receive that which we do deserve (death, wrath, torment and eternal disfavor with God). And peace can mean two things: peace with God (purchased by the blood of Christ) and the peace of God (which comes as we meditate upon what has been done for us). It is a glorious greeting!

I rejoiced greatly that I have found *some* of your children walking in truth, as we received a commandment from the Father. And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it (2 John 4-6).

John, as should we, rejoiced when he saw the next generation walking in truth; especially in the increasingly hostile environment confronting the first century church. A point of emphasis here is that we should **“love one another.”** That may be obvious but should continually be stated and pursued. What is not obvious, at least in today’s religious environment, is that love is defined by **“walking according to His commandments.”**

Fallen creatures will ever seek to pervert the gifts of God which are most beautiful, love being at the very top of the list. Of course, love goes beyond the mere external obedience of commandments. But to ignore the commandments in our relationships with God, and one another, is an objective and explicit display of a lack of love. If I am lying to you, about you, or stealing from you or being unfaithful to you, I cannot at the same time say I am loving you.

The commandments might be said to be the framing or substance of love. 1 Corinthians 13 (the well-known love chapter) is the finished carpentry, interior design and texture of love. We should pursue both with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30).

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ *as* coming in

the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward (2 John 7, 8).

We have discussed in 1 John the continual effort of the spirit of antichrist to transform Christ into something other than who or what He is (1 John 2; 4). John firmly resists the notion that Jesus is merely an idea or an inspirational character. Jesus is the Christ, the eternal Son of God made flesh. He was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died on the cross and rose again to justify sinners.

John is fortifying the significance that a church which loses this message will have lost **“those things we worked for.”** He is not speaking here of the individual loss of regeneration (a teaching the Scriptures do not allow). He seems to be addressing here the light and saltiness of the church.

There is an argument that since less-than-pure churches (which all churches are) contain saved people, we should quit addressing our disagreements in the name of peace. This is a dangerous and unbiblical argument (1 Corinthians 11:19).

If Christians quit contending for the truth (Jude 3) in the churches, the only ones contending will be the **“false teachers” (2 Peter 2:1)**. These **“wells without water” (2 Peter 2:17)** have made great strides in major denominations during our generation.

Whether by **“full reward”** he is speaking of heavenly gifts or the reward of a fruitful ministry, it is difficult to say. Either would be worth the effort. John then presses the issue of deceivers and the danger they pose to the church. Little doubt, there were people who had believed the deceivers. John provides a way to evaluate:

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds (2 John 9-11).

Three times in three verses we see the word “**doctrine**” or “**teaching**” *didache*. Twice it is stated as the “**doctrine of Christ.**” The anti-propositional and anti-intellectual post-modern system of approaching life and truth is a creepy intruder in the church. The denial and attack upon objective reality, truth, morality, reason, language, etc. is a cultural phenomenon which has found its way into the way we interact with Scripture, the church, each other and God.

An analysis of this methodology, of course, pushes us to a bended knee before the altar of the postmodernist who will tell us, in no uncertain terms, what the new reality is, or should be. In the meantime, we are told that we should (as every Disney movie repetitively teaches) follow our hearts, rather than cold and lifeless doctrine, even the doctrine of Christ.

Let it be known that people who want things like truth, love, morality and even religion to remain cryptic are people who want you to engage in, and dedicate your allegiance to, that which is undefined and unexamined. This folly has led our culture into the mess that it currently is in. Heaven help us if the church follows suit! Truth loves a definition and will never be offended by a healthy critique (Acts 17:11). What we are all called to critique is whether or not what we’re hearing is the “**doctrine of Christ.**” The source for this, as we learned in 1 John, is the Scriptures (1 John 4:6).

Apart from the doctrine of Christ, John teaches, we have neither the Father nor the Son.

**No one who denies the Son has the Father.
Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also (1
John 2:23).**

There is a great deal of talk about whether or not the major world religions serve the same God, whether they have Christ or not. This appears to answer that question.

This brings us back to our Bible study leader and his uncompromising (some might call it harsh) treatment of his would-be pedagogical (teaching) guest. It appears so inhospitable to “**not receive him into your house nor greet him.**” John’s concern here seems to be that our favorable interaction with the promoter of false teaching would demonstrate a tacit approval of his doctrine, causing us to “**share in his evil deeds.**”

A few quick points need to be made as we conclude: First, I don't think John is addressing basic pleasantries. Although it may be a bit of a social challenge, it is possible to vehemently reject the person and their teaching, while at the same time extending an olive branch of peace.

Some might question the very personal affront toward the person rather than merely the false teaching they seek to bring. But if, for example, I show up in a hospital seeking to treat patients, the staff and patients need to know more than the fact that my medicinal recommendations are likely to put them in the morgue. They need to recognize me, that I am a medically dangerous person who is not to be trusted.

Second, the ability to efficiently obey what John is calling us to do requires that the church have a well-thought-out understanding of what the Scriptures teach. The worst heretics in history had Bibles in their hands. A church that will not convey in some confessional form what they believe the Bible teaches can be more dangerous than a church that has rejected the Bible altogether.

Finally, there is a recognition that a **“little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6)**. It is the continual duty of a sound, biblical church to recognize that **“a little folly”** gives a **“foul order”** to the **“perfumer’s ointment” (Ecclesiastes 10:1)**. A little poison in a cup of water can render the entire drink poisonous.

John concludes with a farewell that has, in the last year, taken on new significance for almost every churchgoer I know.

Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen (2 John 12, 13).

Even in a world (unlike the time of the writing of this epistle) where we have virtually unlimited access to books, music, entertainment and electronic social interaction within the boundaries of our own home, there is simply nothing like **“face to face”** (literally *mouth to mouth*). It is an impediment to the fullness of joy when our fellowship is restricted as it has been this past year. Let us continue to

pray and work toward having full access to the means of grace which God has provided for our welfare.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you ever had a challenging experience in church or a Bible study when it came to social interaction? Was it justified? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the ups and downs of seeker sensibilities in today's church.
3. What is the primary means by which Christ governs His church? Why is this critical?
4. Analyze the war between truth and love. Are they enemies? Are they mutually exclusive or interdependent? How so?
5. Define and discuss grace, mercy and peace.
6. How do we know if we are truly loving somebody?
7. What does the spirit of antichrist seek to do?
8. Should churches/Christians avoid disagreement no matter what? Why or why not?
9. Gives reasons why the "doctrine of Christ" is so important.
10. How do we, as hospitable Christians, explain John's admonition to not receive or greet certain people?

Part LXIV - 3 John

For His Name's Sake

John 5:39; 3 John 5-7

March 21, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. *If* you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles (3 John 5-7).

Introduction

Having been in the ministry for so many years in the same community, a request will occasionally come my way to help other local churches through thorny issues. Many a meeting I've sat in, trying to size up the problem. From time to time it is just a matter of having an outside set of eyes looking objectively at, perhaps, an obvious solution. But often times it becomes apparent that the difficult lies in the personalities of the leadership.

A variety of vulnerabilities surface, making churches less-than-enjoyable, and sometimes less-than-redemptive, in their function. These vulnerabilities might be leadership too concerned with pleasing everyone at the expense of biblical truth. Other times the leadership is very committed to biblical truth while almost ignoring a proverbial trail of broken bodies strewn across the pews. Another common blow to effective church ministry is when there is dissension in the leadership. The Scriptures, the congregation and Christ Himself fades into obscurity while the under shepherds sheer and slaughter each other.

In 3 John we read of these types of things hindering the ministry—ham shackling, as it were, the effectiveness of going forth for His name's sake. Similar to 2 John, we will approach this, and more, questions with a verse-by-verse study of this brief epistle.

Survey of 3 John

The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth: Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers (3 John 1, 2).

As we discussed in 2 John, “**The Elder**” may be John’s referring to his office in the church or to his age. Either way, let us not lose the lesson in the Scriptures that the church is to be governed by a plurality of elders. “**Gaius**” was a common name. We do not know if this is the same Gaius mentioned elsewhere (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14). When the Scriptures do not tell us something it can contain its own value. That Gaius is not an apostle, elder, deacon, etc. allows a more universal application in terms of these types of words of encouragement.

It has been suggested that Gaius’ health issues may have been related to his unrelenting service. As poor as his physical health might have been, his soul was in excellent health. John’s prayer is that Gaius’ physical health would match his soul’s health.

Gaius’ soul was prospering. I would hope it would go without saying that this prosperity *euodousthai* has nothing to do with financial riches. To be sure, the fruit of faithful, hard-working Christians may include financial benefits (and many other benefits). But it may, depending upon the climate of the culture, include persecution, oppression and imprisonment. A quick Google search reveals a predominance of “ministries” promoting the divine right of financial riches. These types of “**god is their belly**” ministries (Philippians 3:19) have long wandered from the path of truth.

For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth (3 John 3, 4).

This passage adds a bit to the argument that John’s signing of this letter as “**The Elder**” may be a reference to his age. It is a source of grief to watch how easily a younger generation can be swayed by lies and winsome quasi-intellectual fashions. To hear and see young

people know there is a truth and grasp and walk in it is a sublime pleasure. For John to convey that he has **“no greater joy”** is a very strong statement.

I always marvel when God, by His Spirit, chooses to include the names of (or, at least, references, as with Gaius) otherwise inconsequential people (e.g. the woman who poured expensive ointment on Jesus’ burial in **Matthew 26:13**) in the Holy Scriptures. Truly, a **“good name is better than precious ointment”** (**Ecclesiastes 7:1**).

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name’s sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth (3 John 5-8).

Clearly Gaius was a highly respected man. Both the brethren and strangers spoke well of him. Christians are called to be cautious in terms of being too wrapped up in, and in love with, the world (James 4:4). At the same time, we are called to have **“a good testimony among those who are outside”** (**1 Timothy 3:7**).

There are many angles to this. Whatever hatred the world might have for us, it should not be based upon anything legitimate. Let us also recognize that though we are to be faithful regardless of our current difficulty or station in life, it is important to be actively encouraging faithfulness in others when we see it. It is difficult to imagine that Gaius was not enormously encouraged by this letter.

Even in our worship we are to play a role in the edification of each other. Do not the Scriptures teach that being filled with the Spirit yields **“speaking to one another in psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs”** (**Ephesians 5:10**)? I recall one young man taking offense that I or one of our elders would say “good morning” to the congregation, as if it was a violation of the regulative form of worship. The entire event of worship and communion is with God and one another.

Gaius was a man who walked in the truth and was devoted to God. The fact of this was evinced by his charity, his love for the brethren, his hospitality both to those he knew and those who were strangers. The bottom line for Gaius was his willingness to do all things for **“His name’s sake,”** that is, the sake of Christ and the ministry proceeding from His Spirit.

The commission was that he would send these workers for Christ on **“their journey in a manner worthy of God.”** There are times and places where the advancement of the kingdom is done with meager contributions in terms of resources. If such be the case, so be it. We move forward and trust that God will produce what He is capable of producing

Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the Lord our God (Psalm 20:7).

But if you have a chariot and the youth group needs a ride to camp, there is nothing truly pious about not offering it because you figure that God will get them there somehow! There is a sad and pathetic irony in our current evangelical culture where Kenneth Copeland, with his aberrant teachings, boasts an income of over half a billion dollars while at the same time good pastors I know find it difficult to provide for their family. It’s the sad humor I once heard where the congregation prays regarding their pastors, “You keep him humble, Lord; we’ll keep him hungry.”

These saints who **“went forth for His Name’s sake,”** similar to how Paul at Corinth (**1 Corinthians 9:12**) took **“nothing from the Gentiles.”** Interestingly that Paul makes an argument from the law that the recipients of his ministry ought to support the ministry. At the same time, he did not use this right. How could Paul allow this church to neglect the law in this manner? He concluded that it would **“hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:12).**

This opens an interesting conversation; suffice it to say for now that those who are more mature in the faith will often carry the financial weight for those less mature. I know, for me, I do a great deal of ministry outside of our church. And it is not something for which I require a fee. I can do this because this church provides. My ability to spend the amount of time I do going forth for His name’s

sake is due, in part, to the support which comes from those mature in the faith.

John now changes gears:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting *them* out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God (3 John 9-11).

Another character is now interjected into the letter. Diotrephes is just the opposite of Gaius. Not only is this man ineffective and sinful in his ministerial efforts, he is making sure others cannot minister either. Pride is a killer. Diotrephes loved to have “**preeminence**” *philoproteuon*. He loved to put himself first.

It is such an ugly thing to see in the church: those groping for prestige who “**loved the praise of men more than the praise of God**” (John 12:43). If we’re seeking to imitate Christ in terms of His supreme example of what it means to lead, to be the Head of the church, it is perhaps best found in the simple statement:

...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

This man’s contemptible disposition is found in his rejection of apostolic authority. When John writes that he “**does not receive us,**” we can take with that the wholesale rejection of the word of God. Like liberal ministers today who either reject God’s word or twist it beyond recognition. It is difficult not to think of the immensely popular Rob Bell who, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, made the statement,

...the church will continue to be even more irrelevant when it quotes letters from 2,000 years ago as their best defense...

Diotrephes also engaged in malicious words against John, ever going on the attack (“Prating” means wicked nonsense). Be careful of those who are just too comfortable and incessant in their criticisms of others. It may just be a not-so-subtle way of deflecting the negative attention away from themselves. Diotrephes was also aggressively forbidding true ministry from taking place. Heaven forbid someone else receive the encouragement! Diotrephes must have been grinding his teeth at the nice words extended to Gaius, and now Demetrius.

Demetrius has a *good* testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true. I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name (3 John 12-14).

Demetrius is another person we know nothing about. But his good name will live on. Similar to his previous letter, John looks forward to speaking face to face. There is something irreplaceable about that. I recall after five years of undergraduate and ed classes sitting in an interview for a teaching position. The interviewer took about ten minutes to skim through five years of grinding academic labor. She then looked at me and said, “Tell me about yourself.” I got the feeling that the next eight minutes was going to matter more to her than my previous ten semesters.

In conclusion, let us not lose the main thrust of this epistle. The overarching theme, similar to all of Scripture, is to advance the name of Christ. Let all things be done for His name’s sake.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you ever noticed difficulties in the leadership and managing of the church? Why do these types of things happen?
2. How can it be helpful in our Bible study when we don't know that much about who a person is?
3. What was John's prayer for Gaius' health? What does it mean to prosper? What does it not mean?
4. What are the attributes of Gaius that are brought to our attention? How can we be to others what John was to Gaius?
5. Discuss what it means to do things "for His name's sake".
6. How do we help others in ministry "in a manner worthy of God"?
7. Diotrephes, unlike Gaius, was someone to avoid imitating. What are some red flags when it comes to the weaknesses and sins of Diotrephes?
8. What does true leadership look like?

Part LXV - Jude

Contending for the Faith

John 5:39; Jude 3

March 28, 2021

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Introduction

We live in an odd age where almost any critique of morality or cultural/political/economic policy is met with the accusation of being hateful, judgmental or bigoted. It is odd and ironic that the very voices seeking to dress down this supposed judgmentalism seem to be oblivious to the fact that they are currently engaging in the very thing they're denouncing. If, as you say, it is wrong to judge, then you should just let me be judgmental without judging me for it!

Of course, the entire enterprise is dependent upon people dismissing any deep or critical thought. I pray that is not us. By contemporary standards, Jude would be the target of daily chastisements. This short epistle is fierce in its reproofs and rebukes. It is as if he is sitting on the porch of a house in a land where outlaws rule the streets. His children are inside, so he sits with a shotgun in hand, lest the predators find their way into the abode of his loved ones.

Truly, the children are to be protected, but there is a prayer that even the outlaws, if moved by the truth and the Spirit of God, will have eyes to see that that house is the narthex leading to eternal peace. Similar to our past few messages, we will approach Jude verse by verse.

Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ: Mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you (Jude 1, 2).

Jude is likely a close personal relative of Christ (a half-brother or cousin), but chooses the designation of “**bondservant**” *doulos*, which would amount to a voluntary slave. It is of note that even though Jesus says, “**No longer do I call you servants (slaves-doulos)...but I have called you friends**” (John 15:15), that His faithful followers still refer to themselves as slaves. By inheritance and heavenly riches, Christians are sons and daughters, but by service and obedience we are to be willful, voluntary slaves to an omnibenevolent (all-good) Master who died that we might live.

“**Bondservant**” would be a natural, and joyful, self-designation for Jude who was the recipient of God’s effectual “**call**” *kletois*. There is an outward call, e.g. “**many are called, but few are chosen**” (Matthew 22:14), but there is irresistible inward and effectual call. These are the “**beloved**” in Christ and those who are “**preserved**” by, and in, Christ. Truly a good work that He began, He will complete (Philippians 1:6).

It is with a pastoral heart that Jude prays that we would have an exponential intimacy with the mercy, peace and love of God and toward God and one another. But Jude, similar to what we read in the other general epistles, perceived a threat: *Creeps*.

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 3, 4).

We have a tendency to coast. Jude is bidding us to fight. As a fellow Christian, he is calling us to put on or, more aptly, take off the

gloves. We use the word “**contend**” to describe a boxer, a contender. It is a very appropriate use. Not to dig too far into the Greek, but a quick look at the transliterated word is revealing.

Epagonizesthai

Notice the root, from which we get our English word, “agonize.” Truly, salvation is the free gift of God, paid for by the blood of Christ (so it is truly a high price). But the ongoing presentation, or proclamation, of that free gift is ever under siege. And the church must fight.

And, once again, the fighting is not with those throwing rocks through the windows of the church, but those who have subdued positions of leadership. In 2015, the Presbytery of the Palisades cast its vote in favor of an amendment to the PCUSA Constitution that would change the description of marriage from being between “a man and a woman” to being between “two people.” It became the 86th presbytery to cast an affirmative vote, providing the majority needed among 171 presbyteries to approve the change.

This resulted in cheers and tears. My only point here is that this patently unbiblical decision was not foisted upon the PCUSA from hostile outsiders. It was internal. This is the very danger of which Jude writes. These church leaders have crept into positions of authority and turned the grace of God into lewdness, thus denying Christ. Even the most worldly and ungodly thinker must see the dishonesty here. It is one thing to disagree with, and reject, the law and gospel of Christ found in Scripture; it is much more insidious to transform it. Of course, this is precisely what Satan does when he “**transforms**” (literally, *reshapes*) himself into an angel of light (**2 Corinthians 11:14**).

In order for the church to avoid thinking this will result in some genuine overthrow of the true faith, Jude conveys that all of these people were “**long ago marked out for this condemnation.**” The very battle in which the church, Christians, find themselves is designed for its own strength. Calvin taught,

...for if these were already long ago ordained, it follows that the Church is not tried or exercised but according to the infallible counsel of God. ⁶⁴

Jude then gives what might be considered a scalding hot history lesson.

But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire (Jude 5-7).

The three examples given are Egypt, angels, and Sodom and Gomorrah. One specific (Egypt), one celestial (angels), and one general (Sodom and Gomorrah). The point made with Egypt is that even though they most assuredly had a religious experience of sorts (being saved from slavery), they did not persevere and were destroyed.

The point with angels is the leaving of their proper domain or abode. They desired to be more than they were, to have more authority and power. The great beauty and light they enjoyed as the angelic host was not enough. The lust for power is a killer and it resulted in their being in **“chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day.”**

The final example of Sodom and Gomorrah emphasizes the connection between ungodliness and **“sexual immorality.”** **“Strange flesh”** here likely refers to homosexuality. I realize this is an unpopular position and I am not encouraging hatred or bigotry or any of the terms so popular today designed to chastise those who believe marriage should be between a man and a woman. But the

⁶⁴ Calvin, J. (1998). *Jude* (electronic ed., Jud 4). Albany, OR: Ages Software.
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power and emphasis behind seeking to redefine marriage is, in Scripture, commonly associated with aggressive antichristian thinking.

Years ago, I wrote op-ed pieces which promoted the biblical notion of marriage between a man and a woman. I would occasionally anticipate in these articles that it is not merely wrong for marriage to be anything else, but that any other type of ‘marriage’ union will have a profound and damaging effect upon our children. I was widely criticized for using children to make my point. It was a scare tactic. Yet many of you will be aware of a recent Pantene commercial where two homosexual moms exploit their young “transgender” child to sell hair products. I don’t mean to harp on this, but it is in the text, it is in our culture, and it must be addressed.

Again, attacks and criticisms are to be expected in every generation of the church militant. Almost five hundred years ago, Calvin opined,

So at this day the world is full of Epicurean despisers of God, who having cast off every fear, madly scoff at the whole doctrine of true religion, regarding it as fabulous. ^{65, 66}

Jude will now begin to move from historical examples to historical figures, that we might be wise as to the actions and strategies of those who fight against the hope of eternal life in Christ.

Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, “The Lord rebuke you!” But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in

⁶⁵ “Fabulous” here means having no basis in reality; mythical.

⁶⁶ Calvin, J. (1998). *Jude* (electronic ed., Jud 17). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah (Jude 8-11).

The event of Michael and the devil presents more than our current time allows. Suffice it to say that those who wish to be destructive often seek to abolish all order, accountability, authority and governance. These are people, according to Jude, who don't really know what they're talking about and whatever they do "**know naturally**" or according to their natures they handle like "**brute beasts**" in self corruption. After all, if humans are merely the most advanced animal, this would make sense.

He then mentions Cain who worshiped God, but not in faith as did Abel (**Hebrews 11:4**), and was overtaken by sin and wickedness. He mentions Balaam, a prophet of God who, though he could not prophesy against God's people, offered counsel for money on how to destroy them (**Numbers 31**). Finally, he mentions Korah who headed a rebellion against Moses and the work of God through his hands (**Numbers 16**). All of these are examples of people who would, ostensibly, have been among the people of God.

Jude now moves from actual examples to metaphors describing their folly.

These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving *only* themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 12, 13).

"**Spots**" *spilades* can actually be translated "**hidden reefs.**" One thinks of surf-spots with great waves but deadly rocks directly underneath. These false teachers are bidding you to thoughtlessly jump in. A farmer sees "**clouds**" and anticipates a watered crop. But there is no true, living "**water**" coming from them. Though they are dead "**trees,**" they do not cease to present themselves as "**raging waves**" who, before God, are foaming up their own shame. Finally, they are like "**wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness**

of darkness forever.” They are lost in an eternity of blackness and wrath. Modern sensibilities might assess Jude as hostile, angry, hateful and even bigoted. But in truth, his words are intensely and unapologetically loving and protective, much like a mamma-bear protecting her threatened children.

It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage (Jude 14-16).

The seemingly harsh words of Jude pale in comparison to the harsh reality of the judgment which will fall upon those who disregard the warning; in this case, a pre-flood warning. Four times in three verses we see a reference to **“ungodliness”** *asebes*. The word does not mean irreligious. Religion is at an all-time high. The devil is a very religious entity who never gives up. This word refers to one characterized by immoral and impious behavior. It might be best understood as designating one who lives in this world as if there is no true God.

They can be spotted by their incessant grumbling, their lack of contentment, their priority of following their own sinful desires (what they like is, by definition for them, the best thing), they raise their voices rather than strengthening their arguments and they will play the political/religious game to gain the advantage in their ungodly pursuits. As one sixteenth century minister conveyed:

These are murmurers. They who indulge their depraved lusts, are hard to please, and morose, so that they are never satisfied. Hence it is, that they

always murmur and complain, however kindly good men may treat them.⁶⁷

I pray none of us are numbered among those who so uncharitably critique those God has brought into our lives to help guide us through the storms. Jude counsels on the proper response.

But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit (Jude 17-19).

The prophet moves from ancient (Enoch) to more current (for them). Our response is not to be shocked or disillusioned to find ourselves in our current battle. We should know in advance that this is the battle. The standard biblical enemies of Christ and His church are the world, the flesh and the devil. We sit in the church and look out the windows, wondering where they are and what they're doing. Jude is saying that we need to be aware that they are in the pew next you, perhaps in the pulpit before you, and at some level within you, lying at the door of our own hearts. But we are to do more than just know this is going to happen.

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling *them* out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh (Jude 20-22).

Through prayer, meditation upon the love of God for us, a fervent pursuit of love for one another and our eyes ever focused upon the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life, we are to be built

⁶⁷ Calvin, J. (1998). *Jude* (electronic ed., Jud 16). Albany, OR: Ages Software. 582

up. And Jude gives here a brief expression of what Paul had taught in more detail regarding our need for one another (**1 Corinthians 12:12-31**). We need to be cognizant of each other's vulnerabilities and be willing to act. Some need a kind word, others a stern warning, and all of this done with allowing the defilement of our own souls.

Realizing how ill-equipped any of us are for such an eternally significant task (really, all tasks), Jude ends with one of the richest and most sublime doxologies in all of Scripture. We will end with that as well.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen (Jude 24, 25).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. To what extent are the common accusations of being hateful, judgmental or bigoted legitimate? Explain.
2. What is a bondservant? How are Christians to be this?
3. Christians are called and preserved by Christ. How does happen? What does look like?
4. Jude perceived a threat. What was it?
5. What does it mean to “contend” for the faith?
6. Is Jude addressing the threat to the church from within or without? Explain your answer. Can you give examples?
7. Discuss the historical examples and historical figures Jude uses to make his point. How do we recognize a threat to the church, the truth and to Christ Himself?
8. What does it mean to be “ungodly”?
9. How are the “beloved” to respond to these attacks and threats?

Part LXVI - Revelation

The Triumph of Christ

Revelation 1:19

April 18, 2021

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this (Revelation 1:19).

Introduction

Checking out of the grocery story, I couldn't help noticing the cover of *Newsweek* Magazine. On the cover was a copy of the painting *The Vision of Ezekiel* by Raphael. It is a painting which shows the ominous coming of angels and God's judgment. In letters bigger than the title of its own magazine was the word 'PROPHECY' with a sub-heading, "What the Bible says about the end of the world."

There may not be a section in any Christian bookstore that attracts more browsers than the shelves dedicated to eschatology (the study or science of last things). The best-selling non-fiction book in the entire decade of the seventies was *The Late Great Planet Earth*. This was a book bought by Christians and non-Christians alike which popularized the study of last things. The sixteen volume *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins between 1995 and 2007, sold in the neighborhood of eighty million copies, along with a number of movies.

Although the views proposed in these books will not be found in any confession or creed (or anywhere else) prior to 1800, the influence of these books, and others with the same theological flavor, was phenomenal. So much so that those views have become somewhat of an untested modern orthodoxy. To hold views inconsistent with the brand of eschatology found in *Late Great Planet Earth* and *Left Behind* will cause not a few eyebrows to be raised. For this reason, a study of the ancient confessions on this subject should be of value to Christians.

During arguably richer theological times, none of the great masters of the faith held to the views that now dominate today's airwaves and bookstores. This is not to suggest that there were no

disagreements among early, brilliant theologians. But it should get our attention that in all the disagreements, no one held the view that is most popular today. I don't want to misrepresent here. It can be argued that today's dominant view can be seen briefly in history in seminal form. But even those historic seminal views are quite unlike what you yourself have probably read or seen when it comes to end times.

It should be an assumption among Christians that the Church is a spiritually richer place when it holds more closely to Biblical Christianity. We should also note that today's dominant view is prevailing during a period of apostasy in western evangelicalism. Seeking to be charitable, I will argue, in part, that our current negative trajectory has become a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is no small thing to convince an entire generation (or more) of Christians that it is God's will for the world to decline morally, spiritually, economically, politically, and in almost every other way.

Be that as it may, we should not be sheepish about questioning what the majority of an arguably lukewarm generation in the church believes about the Christian faith. None of this makes any position right or wrong. But it should make us a little more comfortable when giving modern notions of Christian thinking a healthy critique—especially as we examine alternatives that have a richer theological history.

Let us first ask the question, *is eschatology important?*

Is Eschatology Important?

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near (Revelation 1:3).

Some might question if studying eschatology has any value at all. I have heard mixed reviews in terms of enthusiasm for a sermon series on Revelation. Many pastors I know have opted out of the issue altogether. They make jokes about being pan-millennialists. They say *it will all pan out in the end*. Or they suggest that it is simply an unknowable aspect of the Christian faith. Some wonder

what difference it makes. They assert that there doesn't seem to be any direct application in terms of personal behavior.

There are a number of reasons, however, why eschatology is important. The most obvious reason is because it is part of God's word. We certainly don't think the Holy Spirit added a branch of theology to the Bible that was unnecessary! Eschatology is part of God's word, so to propose that it is useless to the Christian is an insult to God. It is part of God's word and it deserves our study. It may be a difficult subject, but the entire Bible is difficult. That certainly is no excuse for never opening it.

Eschatology tells us what God's plan is in history. We are to work and pray toward that plan. As James Henley Thornwell (1812-62) stated,

If the Church could be aroused to a deeper sense of the glory that awaits her, she would enter with a warmer spirit into the struggles that are before her.⁶⁸

Finally, I would hope to approach this book in a very ministerial way. Like all of Scripture, the Revelation is designed to teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.

If you were to ask what, at its heart, do we learn from Revelation when it comes to what we are to believe concerning God and what how we are called to respond (duty), I think the words of Dr. Greg Bahnsen sum it up well. The basic message of the Revelation is "the *triumph* of Christ (of Christianity) over all opposition, or evil." This is what the Revelation teaches us regarding what God accomplishes in His Son. In light of this, our duty is to endure, conquer, overcome, persevere *nikonti* to the end.

It is remarkable that the word "**throne**" *thronos* is used sixty-three times in the New Testament, and forty-seven of those sixty-three are in the book of the Revelation. It is universally agreed that Revelation gives a message of Christ upon His throne. What there seems to be less agreement on is when that happens and what that looks like. *Is Jesus currently on His throne?* Some would say not

⁶⁸ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism, An Eschatology of Hope*, (P & R Publishing, 1999), p. 47.

entirely. And if Jesus is on His throne, *how will that affect the course of history*, if at all?

Survey of Revelation

It might be overly ambitious to seek to survey this entire book in one sermon, yet we will make an effort. I will seek to achieve this by staying out of the theological weeds and just offer an overview, which itself will be difficult enough. In our upcoming verse-by-verse series we will get deeper, but even then, these will ultimately still be sermons and not a seminary class. Nonetheless, it is my prayer that we will all have a richer understanding of God's word through our own examination of the text over merely embracing what appears to be the prevalent view.

After a greeting and very lofty description of Christ (Revelation 1:1-8), we learn that John (likely the Apostle John), as a political and religious exile, is writing from the rocky and barren island of Patmos. He is instructed to write a book and send it to seven churches which were along a Roman mail route in Asia Minor. John is given a vision of the glorified Christ with attributes which will be referred to as each church is addressed.

It is as if the church under the oppression of Jerusalem (Revelation 11:8) and Rome (Revelation 17:9) needs to look beyond those despotic and overbearing circumstances to see the deeper truth.

An outline of Revelation is then given to John.

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this (Revelation 1:19).

In terms of pure devoted literary space, this outline doesn't unfold evenly. The things which John had "**seen**" are in chapter one, such as things like the glorified Christ in the midst of the seven candle-stands (Revelation 1:12-16). The things "**that are**" refer to the current conditions of the seven churches (Revelation 2, 3). Finally, the things "**that are to take place after this**" are the next nineteen chapters. So, we see this is not equally spread out.

As stated, the previously seen things have to do with the power and authority of Christ and how that should underscore and

encourage our hearts in the midst of difficulty. In the seven letters to the seven churches, things become more specific.

Each church is addressed by Christ with a reference to some attribute we learned of in chapter one, for example:

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands’ (Revelation 2:1).

The Lord then reveals to these churches that He knows of the things taking place in His churches. He knows our works (Revelation 2:2); He knows our tribulation (Revelation 2:9); He knows where we dwell (Revelation 2:13); etc. Christ is intimately acquainted with what is happening in all of His churches, both good and bad.

With some exceptions, each church is given words of encouragement, words of critique, a call to persevere/conquer, a promise of blessing and/or a warning of sanction or threat if they continue in rebellion. The church is the means by which Christ overcomes the **“gates of hell” (Matthew 16:18)**. If the church waxes cold and is unwilling to persevere, repent and obey, they will be like a fruitless branch to be thrown away (John 15:1-11).

It is in chapter four, the things **“that are to take place after this,”** that theological paths begin to diverge.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (Revelation 4:1).

Some take this as referring to the rapture of the church. I respectfully disagree. It is John alone (second person, singular) who is called to **“come up here.”** And John alone, according to the next verse, is the singular one who goes. To what are we being introduced here? Herein lies the **“throne”** talk. Fourteen times in this chapter alone!

Most people, and certainly all Christians, have a sense that good will win out. Why do we think that? The very notion that good

will win out is mere cockeyed optimism if we have no solid notion of what constitutes good or why we think it will prevail. Do we have any basis for this disposition? Chapter four climaxes with an appeal to God as creator:

You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created (Revelation 4:11).

It is God who created all things. And it is God, as the One who controls history, who will assure that good will prevail. In chapter four, we are shown just that. He is most assuredly on His throne. David S. Clark teaches (and, I think, appropriately) of the purpose of the vision. It is designed to...

...lift their [our] hearts and thoughts above the deadly decrees of tyrants, and their [our] souls above the fear of prison, sword, and stake.⁶⁹

In chapter five we're introduced to a seven sealed scroll, which I take to mean the course of history (especially immediate history). Christ alone is worthy to open the scroll, for He has prevailed. Chapter four emphasized God as Creator; chapter five emphasizes Christ as redeemer. The means by which He has prevailed is by having been slain as the Lamb (Revelation 5:6).

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing (Revelation 5:12)!

In chapter six we see the seals begin to be opened. We are now getting a preview of how God will protect His church. The opening of the seals reveals things that have become immensely popular in western literature. The four horsemen of the apocalypse. The cries of the slain martyrs for God's vindication. There is then an appeal to both natural calamities and political siege.

⁶⁹ The Message From Patmos, David S. Clark, p. 46.

In chapter seven, to assure that these calamities would not fall upon the **“servants of God”** (Revelation 7:3), the avenging angels are told to wait until God’s people are sealed on their foreheads. Here we are given a picture of a great multitude that **“no one could number” (Revelation 7:9)**, clothed with white robes...made white with the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14).

Early in the prophecy of things **“that are to take place after this”** the saints are given this blessed assurance that they are sealed by God, belong to Him and will be preserved by Him. In a Christian culture where the faith is viewed more as a massive colloquium of self-help, purveyed by life-coaches, these assurances may mean little. But to a persecuted church, both then and now, these words carry much greater depth.

...for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Revelation 7:17).

In chapter eight, the prayers of the saints (for vindication) will be answered (Revelation 8:3, 4). We read of a half hour of silence. This is the calm before the storm, allowing God’s sealed saints to flee the wrath that will come upon Jerusalem (Matthew 24:16; Luke 21:20, 21). With the scroll fully opened, we now read of seven angels with seven trumpets (Revelation 8:2, 6). We haven’t time this morning to dig too deeply here, but the seven trumpets yield natural calamities and human woes.

These trumpets of judgment extend through the end of chapter eleven. In these accounts we read of John given another prophecy to deliver via a little book (Revelation 10:9-11). This is addressing something more international in nature, **“...about many peoples, nations, tongues and kings.”** The current judgment is upon Jerusalem. This is where the temple stood (Revelation 11:1) and where Christ was crucified (Revelation 11:8). The natural outworking of the Great Commission (Christ’s universal authority) is heralded at the sounding of the seventh angel.

Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms

of this world have become *the kingdoms* of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

In chapters thirteen through eighteen we will read of God’s judgment turning to Rome (Revelation 17:9). But not until we read of Satan eluded, defeated and cast down in chapter twelve.

In chapter thirteen we are introduced to the beast to whom the dragon gave power. We see another beast as well. Allegiance must be given to the beast in order to simply conduct one’s life. There is no buying or selling without taking his mark upon **“their right hand or on their foreheads” (Revelation 13:16)**. The number 666 is associated with this beast which, apparently, those who have understanding can calculate. I will say little about this here, other than to say that neither the seals or marks of God nor those of the beast are likely tattoos or subcutaneous computer chips. Quite simply, the forehead is how we think, and the hand is how we behave.

With Christ firmly on Mount Zion with His established saints, we read in chapters fourteen through eighteen of the deposing of Rome as an enemy of Christ’s kingdom. It is not as if Rome happily leaves. Many Christians will be tempted and threatened to yield. But **“blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13)**. This great persecutor of the church will find itself subject to **“seven angels and seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God” (Revelation 15:7)**.

In a visit to Rome I saw carved into an ancient building a map showing the size of the Rome at its height, at the time of Christ. It extended north into today’s Great Britain, west to Spain, east through Asia Minor to the Caspian Sea and south to Egypt. The carving also showed its decline and how, today, it is a mere dot on the map. Conversely, the Kingdom of God has continued to cover the earth. This is the prophecy found in Revelation.

With its initial persecutors deposed, chapter nineteen reveals all heaven breaking open, Christ called **“Faithful and True” (Revelation 19:11)**, seated on a white horse. His name is **“called the Word of God” (Revelation 19:13)** and the sharp sword of His mouth strikes the nations. The Great Commission now races forward through history.

We learn in chapter twenty that the success of this Great Commission is assured because Satan, that strong man (Matthew 12:29), has been bound **“that he should deceive the nations no longer” (Revelation 20:3)**. We then have a reference to the millennium (thousand years), which I take to reference the periods between the first and second advents of Christ.

When the thousand years expire, Satan will be released for a short time, as if to remind humanity of its continual need for Christ. This will be followed by the Great White Throne Judgment. It is universally agreed, regardless of eschatological convictions, that only those clothed in the robes made white in the blood of the Lamb will endure that judgment.

The book concludes in chapters twenty-one and twenty-two with a reference to a new heaven and a new earth. The struggling saints, in every age, can look to their eternal glory.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:4).

That is what we learn of God, what He will do. We have gone full cycle now in our Route Sixty-Six series. We have gone from Paradise Lost in Genesis to Paradise Restored in Revelation. In light of this, let us take our duty to heart.

He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son (Revelation 21:7).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is 'eschatology' and why do you suppose it has become so popular? What questions come to mind when you consider today's most prevalent views?
2. Why is eschatology important?
3. Discuss Dr. Bahnsen's view on the basic theme found in Revelation.
4. From where did John write the Revelation and to whom was it initially sent?
5. How is Revelation outlined?
6. Is Revelation 4:1 speaking of the rapture of the church? Why or why not?
7. How does Revelation achieve what David S. Clark suggested?
8. What does it mean for God to seal His people? How does this speak to the mark of the beast?
9. Who are the two persecutors of the church found in Revelation?
10. In light of what we learn regarding what God will do, how should we respond?

