



Corinthians

Weak

is strong

Studies in the book of 2 Corinthians

PART TWO: Weeks 7-13

Group Applications

Personal Study



four
oaks
church

Week 7

2 Corinthians 3:1-6 (ESV)

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? 2 You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. 3 And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but

on tablets of human hearts. 4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Context

- The situation in Corinth was complex for a number of reasons, but one of the most painful is that Paul is forced, via letter, to defend the authenticity of his message and his ministry. He does not want to do this but feels compelled:
 - » I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.
— 2 Corinthians 12:11 (ESV)
 - » The verb “to commend” (synistanein) does not mean “to boast,” “to extol,” or “to exalt.” “Commendation” needs to be understood in the context of friendship and recommendation in the ancient world. Paul does not use
- Some commentaries make the case that the word here for commend (συνίστημι) is closer to the idea of introduction than self-serving conceit. The idea would have been that Paul didn’t have anyone in Corinth to introduce him. With this view, Paul’s need for commendation was about relationships and connections more than puffing up one’s credentials.

self-commendation in a negative sense to mean self-applause... Self-commendation is therefore equivalent to self-introduction.¹

- That explanation might be partially true (Paul himself often used letters of recommendation, for example, Acts 18:27) but doesn't go far enough to get at the idea of "vouching" for Paul, and certainly doesn't accurately portray the full emotional turmoil Paul is experiencing in this letter. The reality is that Paul is being questioned, and writes in the midst of accusation and suspicion. One commenter noted: "Self-defense is almost impossible without self-commendation. St. Paul's opponents made the former necessary, and then blamed him for the latter."²
- Paul founded the church, then other apostles come with letters of reference and boasting, which becomes a sort of public measuring stick of worth. When Paul writes to the church, these letters (like a long, overdone list of book endorsements) had become a status symbol, and he has none. He

¹ David E. Garland, 2 Corinthians (vol. 29; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 155.

² Paul Barnett, The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 59.

founded the church, and yet now the church is saying, "Where are your endorsements? Mr. SuperMiracleMan has 13 endorsements in his college ruled moleskin. Show us your endorsements." The point is not that recommendations were bad, but that the love and affection Paul showed for a church he planted, shepherded and lived amongst, has not been reciprocated.

- The fruit of Paul's ministry is the gospel transformation he left behind. They are evidence of God's work in his life and the vindication of his apostleship. He has made this exact point in previous letters:
 - » If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. — 1 Corinthians 9:2 (ESV)
- The "letter" that Paul does have is the evidence of change in the people of Corinth, but even this he does not ultimately take credit for having accomplished. Sufficiency was from the Lord. This is the consistent message from Paul's life, to glory only in the sufficiency that comes from God.
- Covenant is a biblical word to describe an agreement between two or more parties outlining mutual rights and

responsibilities.³ Throughout scripture, God uses this word to describe his ongoing commitment to his people. Here are a few of the times we see covenants being made:

- » Noah (Genesis 6:18)
- » Abram (Genesis 17:1-8)
- » David (1 Chronicles 17:12-14)

- Covenant is similar to “last will and testament,” and is actually the word behind “testament” in our Old and New Testaments in the Bible. In addition to all of the specific covenants mentioned above, there is a massive biblical emphasis on the difference between law and grace, letter and Spirit. They are not antithetical to one another but are all ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

3 Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 240.

Personal Study

- Read Luke 14:7-11. What principle do we find here? How does that inform Paul’s anxiety about credentials and commendation in 2 Corinthians?

- 2 Corinthians 3 describes a “new covenant” of the Spirit. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. What are some of the promises of this new covenant? List them.

- Read Romans 8:9-11. What is the difference between life and death according to this passage?

- Most people tie confidence to competence. If you are competent, you will be confident. How does Paul upend this thinking?

- What does it mean that we are not sufficient to claim anything as coming from us? What kinds of things would we be tempted to believe come as a result of our sufficiency? Read Matthew 6:9-13 slowly and deliberately. Jesus teaches us to pray for things beyond our control but what does he also teach us to depend on God for?

- If you find yourself trusting in your own competence for your life, it is likely the result of erroneous thinking. You either believe you are more capable than you are OR you are not longing for the right kinds of things. You will not pray for what you think you can accomplish. You will not seek help for things deemed within your power. Make a list of things you long to see happen that cannot happen apart from God moving (transformation of heart in your kids, provision beyond your means, end to suffering for those in need around you, etc.). Press toward this list and you will discover the end of your self-sufficiency.

Group Application

- Have you ever needed a letter of recommendation? Share your story—what was the context, why was it needed, what was written, etc.

- How did the Corinthian church serve as a letter of recommendation for Paul?

- Often times we wait to minister to others because we don't feel ready or worthy. How can Paul saying his sufficiency is in Christ rather than in himself help us when we don't feel "ready" or competent to be ministers of the gospel?

- When Paul contrasts the letter and the Spirit, he isn't favoring "experience" over "the word." Instead, he is showing the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant. Talk about how the new covenant is superior to the old covenant and how this benefits us as believers and ministers of the gospel.

- How do you plan to apply the passage and sermon to your life this week? How can your group help you and pray for you?
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Short Reading

From the Pursuit of God by A. W. Tozer

Teach us, O God, that nothing is necessary to Thee. Were anything necessary to Thee that thing would be the measure of Thine imperfection: and how could we worship one who is imperfect? If nothing is necessary to Thee, then no one is necessary, and if no one, then not we. Thou dost seek us though Thou does not need us. We seek Thee because we need Thee, for in Thee we live and move and have our being. Amen

“The Father hath life in himself,” said our Lord, and it is characteristic of His teaching that He thus in a brief sentence sets forth truth so lofty as to transcend the highest reaches of human thought. God, He said, is self-sufficient; He is what He is in Himself, in the final meaning of those words.

Whatever God is, and all that God is, He is in Himself. All life is in and from God, whether it be the lowest form

of unconscious life or the highly self-conscious, intelligent life of a seraph. No creature has life in itself; all life is a gift from God.

The life of God, conversely, is not a gift from another. Were there another from whom God could receive the gift of life, or indeed any gift whatever, that other would be God in fact. An elementary but correct way to think of God is as the One who contains all, who gives all that is given, but who Himself can receive nothing that He has not first given.

To admit the existence of a need in God is to admit incompleteness in the divine Being. Need is a creature-word and cannot be spoken of the Creator. God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made, but He has no necessary relation to anything outside of Himself. His interest in His creatures arises from His sovereign good pleasure, not from any need those creatures can supply nor from any completeness they can bring to Him who is complete in Himself.

Again we must reverse the familiar flow of our thoughts and try to understand that which is unique, that which stands alone as being true in this situation and nowhere else. Our common habits of thought allow for the existence of need among created things. Nothing is complete in itself but requires something outside itself in order to exist. All breathing things need air; every organism needs food and water. Take air and water from the earth and all life would perish instantly. It may be stated as an axiom that to stay alive every created thing needs some other created thing and all things need God. To God alone nothing is necessary.

The river grows larger by its tributaries, but where is the tributary that can enlarge the One out of whom came everything and to whose infinite fullness all creation owes its being?

Unfathomable Sea: all life is out of Thee,
And Thy life is Thy blissful Unity.

Frederick W. Faber

The problem of why God created the universe still troubles thinking men; but if we cannot know why, we can at least know that He did not bring His worlds into being to meet some unfulfilled need in Himself, as a man might build a house to shelter him against the winter cold or plant a field

of corn to provide him with necessary food. The word necessary is wholly foreign to God.

Since He is the Being supreme over all, it follows that God cannot be elevated. Nothing is above Him, nothing beyond Him. Any motion in His direction is elevation for the creature; away from Him, descent. He holds His position out of Himself and by leave of none. As no one can promote Him, so no one can degrade Him. It is written that He upholds all things by the word of His power. How can He be raised or supported by the things He upholds?

Were all human beings suddenly to become blind, still the sun would shine by day and the stars by night, for these owe nothing to the millions who benefit from their light. So, were every man on earth to become atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what He is in Himself without regard to any other. To believe in Him adds nothing to His perfections; to doubt Him takes nothing away.

Almighty God, just because He is almighty, needs no support. The picture of a nervous, ingratiating God fawning over men to win their favor is not a pleasant one; yet if we look at the popular conception of God that is precisely what we see. Twentieth century Christianity has put God on charity. So lofty is our opinion of ourselves that we find it

quite easy, not to say enjoyable, to believe that we are necessary to God. But the truth is that God is not greater for our being, nor would He be less if we did not exist. That we do exist is altogether of God's free determination, not by our desert nor by divine necessity.

Probably the hardest thought of all for our natural egotism to entertain is that God does not need our help. We commonly represent Him as a busy, eager, somewhat frustrated Father hurrying about seeking help to carry out His benevolent plan to bring peace and salvation to the world, but, as said the Lady Julian, "I saw truly that God doeth all-thing, be it never so little." The God who worketh all things surely needs no help and no helpers.

Too many missionary appeals are based upon this fancied frustration of Almighty God. An effective speaker can easily excite pity in his listeners, not only for the heathen but for the God who has tried so hard and so long to save them and has failed for want of support. I fear that thousands of younger persons enter Christian service from no higher motive than to help deliver God from the embarrassing situation His love has gotten Him into and His limited abilities seem unable to get Him out of. Add to this a certain degree of commendable idealism and a fair amount of compassion for the

underprivileged and you have the true drive behind much Christian activity today.

Again, God needs no defenders. He is the eternal Undefended. To communicate with us in an idiom we can understand, God in the Scriptures makes full use of military terms; but surely it was never intended that we should think of the throne of the Majesty on high as being under siege, with Michael and his hosts or some other heavenly beings defending it from stormy overthrow. So to think is to misunderstand everything the Bible would tell us about God. Neither Judaism nor Christianity could approve such puerile notions. A God who must be defended is one who can help us only while someone is helping Him. We may count upon Him only if He wins in the cosmic seesaw battle between right and wrong. Such a God could not command the respect of intelligent men; He could only excite their pity.

To be right we must think worthily of God. It is morally imperative that we purge from our minds all ignoble concepts of the Deity and let Him be the God in our minds that He is in His universe. The Christian religion has to do with God and man, but its focal point is God, not man. Man's only claim to importance is that he was created in the divine image; in himself he is nothing. The psalmists and prophets of the Scriptures refer sad scorn to weak man whose breath

is in his nostrils, who grows up like the grass in the morning only to be cut down and wither before the setting of the sun. That God exists for himself and man for the glory of God is the emphatic teaching of the Bible. The high honor of God is first in heaven as it must yet be in earth.

From all this we may begin to understand why the Holy Scriptures have so much to say about the vital place of faith and why they brand unbelief as a deadly sin. Among all created beings, not one dare trust in itself. God alone trusts in himself; all other beings must trust in Him. Unbelief is actually perverted faith, for it puts its trust not in the living God but in dying men. The unbeliever denies the self-sufficiency of God and usurps attributes that are not his. This dual sin dishonors God and ultimately destroys the soul of the man.

In His love and pity God came to us as Christ. This has been the consistent position of the Church from the days of the apostles. It is fixed for Christian belief in the doctrine of the incarnation of the Eternal Son. In recent times, however, this has come to mean something different from, and less than, what it meant to the early church. The Man Jesus as He appeared in the flesh has been equated with the Godhead and all His human weaknesses and limitations attributed to the Deity. The truth is that

the Man who walked among us was a demonstration, not of unveiled deity but of perfect humanity. The awful majesty of the Godhead was mercifully sheathed in the soft envelope of Human nature to protect mankind. "Go down," God told Moses on the mountain, "charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish"; and later, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live."

Christians today appear to know Christ only after the flesh. They try to achieve communion with Him by divesting Him of His burning holiness and unapproachable majesty, the very attributes He veiled while on earth but assumed in fullness of glory upon His ascension to the Father's right hand. The Christ of popular Christianity has a weak smile and a halo. He has become Someone-up-There who likes people, at least some people, and these are grateful but not too impressed. If they need Him, He also needs them.

Let us not imagine that the truth of the divine self-sufficiency will paralyze Christian activity. Rather it will stimulate all holy endeavors. This truth, while a needed rebuke to human self-confidence, will when viewed in its Biblical perspective lift from our minds the exhausting load of mortality and encourage us to take the easy yoke of Christ and spend ourselves

in Spirit-inspired toil for the honor of God and the good of mankind. For the blessed news is that the God who needs no one has in sovereign condescension set Himself to work by and in and through His obedient children.

If all this appears self-contradictory—Amen, be it so. The various elements of truth stand in perpetual antithesis, sometimes requiring us to believe apparent opposites while we wait for the moment when we shall know as we are known. Then truth which now appears to be in conflict with itself will arise in shining unity and it will be seen that the conflict has not been in the truth but in our sin-damaged minds.

In the meanwhile our inner fulfillment lies in loving obedience to the commandments of Christ and the inspired admonitions of

His apostles. “It is God which worketh in you.” He needs no one, but when faith is present He works through anyone. Two statements are in this sentence and a healthy spiritual life requires that we accept both. For a full generation the first has been in almost total eclipse, and that to our deep spiritual injury.

Fountain of good, all blessing flows
From Thee; no want Thy fulness knows;
What but Thyself canst Thou desire?
Yet, self-sufficient as Thou art,
Thou dost desire my worthless heart.
This, only this, dost Thou require.

Johann Scheffler¹

¹ Tozer, A. W. (2013-11-28). A. W. Tozer books: The Pursuit of God and Other Classics (Kindle Locations 2326-2354). . Kindle Edition.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Week 8

2 Corinthians 3:7–11 (ESV)

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemna-

tion, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Context

- Paul picks up the letter/Spirit dichotomy from verse 6 to further describe the contrast of the old and new covenants. In this case, what was merely hinted at in “letter” is now fully explicit in reference to the law. He says it was “carved in letters on stone” and references the Israelites and Moses. The closest direct reference is here:
 - » Exodus 34:29–33 (ESV) — 29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone

because he had been talking with God. 30 Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. 32 Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. 33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

- This is, of course, a direct reference to the 10 Commandments, but is representative of the whole Old

Covenant. This covenant Paul calls the “ministry of death” and the “ministry of condemnation.” That former ministry was coming to an end but only in leading us directly to Jesus Christ.

- Paul is not only battling cries for self-attestation (the need to prove his ministry) but also needing to press back against the constant pull in Jewish customs and laws. New Testament writing is tinted by the transition, or difficulty in transition, between the legal, sacrificial, ritualistic system of the Jews and the freedom granted to us in Christ.
- Apparently these leaders who questioned him were also pointing to his supposed jettisoning of the law. To this Paul desires to show that the law of Spirit, the law of Christ is superior in every way. The old ministry had glory, that much is certain, but he calls them to see that the ministry of the Spirit has so much more glory. This is basically the entire theme of the book of Hebrews as well.

- The new ministry in Christ is a ministry of righteousness, meaning that the way to right standing with God no longer goes through the law or sacrificial system. Righteousness can only be found in Jesus.

» Romans 10:4 (ESV) — For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

- One of the most poignant reasons the new covenant has more glory is that it will abide forever. It cannot be overthrown or outdone. “The old covenant was temporary and is now abolished; the new is permanent and will continue without end.”¹
- The definition of glory (δόξα) is brightness, splendor or radiance. Glory is used 10 times in these few verses to describe the majesty and light of the gospel.

¹ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 67.

Personal Study

- Read Romans 7:7-12. How does Paul characterize the work of the law? What does it produce?

- No matter how perfectly you follow the rules, it will only deliver death. That is what Paul declares again and again. Read Romans 3:21-26, thinking about the righteousness of God. If we cannot be sufficiently righteous in our own actions, how has righteousness come?

- Read Matthew 5:16. Then read 1 Cor 10:31. Clearly, we are to live in a way that gives “glory.” What does that mean to you? How do you apply this?

Group Application

- Share a time that you saw or experienced something glorious and beautiful.

- What is glory? How would you define and explain it?

- Look at verses 7-11 and answer these questions: How was the giving & ministry of the law glorious? How is the giving & ministry of the Spirit and righteousness even more glorious?

- How can you grow in your seeing and experiencing the glory of the gospel?

Short Reading

The following excerpts from J.I. Packer help us to better understand the purpose of the law (ministry of death as Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians 3) and the use of glory in scripture.

GOD'S MORAL LAW HAS THREE PURPOSES

I would not have known what sin was except through the law.

ROMANS 7:7

Scripture shows that God intends his law to function in three ways, which Calvin crystallized in classic form for the church's benefit as the law's threefold use.

Its first function is to be a mirror reflecting to us both the perfect righteousness of God and our own sinfulness and shortcomings. Thus "the law bids us, as we try to fulfill its requirements, and become wearied in our weakness under it, to know how to ask the help of grace" (Augustine). The law is meant to give knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20; 4:15; 5:13; 7:7–11) and, by showing us our need of pardon and our danger of damnation, to lead us in repentance and faith to Christ (Gal. 3:19–24).

Its second function is to restrain evil. Though it cannot change the heart, the law can to some extent inhibit lawlessness by its threats of judgment, especially when backed by a civil code that administers present punishment for proven offenses (Deut. 13:6–11; 19:16–21; Rom. 13:3–4). Thus it secures some civil order and goes some way to protect the righteous from the unjust.

Its third function is to guide the regenerate into the good works that God has planned for them (Eph. 2:10). The law tells God's children what will please their heavenly Father. It could be called their family code. Christ was speaking of this third use of the law when he said that those who become his disciples must be taught to keep the law and to do all that he had commanded (Matt. 5:18–20, 28:20), and that it is obedience to his commands that will prove the reality of one's love for him (John 14:15). The Christian is free from the law as a supposed system of salvation (Rom. 6:14; 7:4, 6; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 2:15–19; 3:25) but is "under Christ's law" as a rule of life (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).

GLORY

Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

EZEKIEL 1:28

God's goal is his glory, but this needs careful explanation, for it is easily misunderstood. It points to a purpose not of divine egoism, as is sometimes imagined, but of divine love. Certainly, God wants to be praised for his praiseworthiness and exalted for his greatness and goodness; he wants to be appreciated for what he is. But the glory that is his goal is in fact a two-sided, two-stage relationship: it is, precisely, a conjunction of (a) revelatory acts on his part whereby he shows his glory to men and angels in free generosity, with (b) responsive adoration on their part whereby they give him glory out of gratitude for what they have seen and received. In this conjunction is realized the fellowship of love for which God's rational creatures were and are made, and for which fallen human beings have now been redeemed. The to-and-fro of seeing glory in God and giving glory to God is the true fulfillment of human nature at its heart, and it brings supreme joy to man just as it does to God (cf. Zeph. 3:14–17).

“Glory” in the Old Testament carries associations of weight, worth, wealth, splendor, and dignity, all of which are present when God is said to have revealed his glory. God was answering Moses' plea to be shown God's glory when he proclaimed to Moses his name (i.e., his nature, character, and power, Exod.

33:18–34:7). With that proclamation went an awe-inspiring physical manifestation, the Shekinah, a bright shining cloud that could look like fire, white-hot (Exod. 24:17). The Shekinah was itself called the glory of God; it appeared at significant moments in the Bible story as a sign of God's active presence (Exod. 33:22; 34:5; cf. 16:7, 10; 24:15–17; 40:34–35; Lev. 9:23–24; 1 Kings 8:10–11; Ezek. 1:28; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4; 11:22–23; Matt. 17:5; Luke 2:9; cf. Acts 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 1:7). New Testament writers proclaim that the glory of God's nature, character, power, and purpose is now open to view in the person and role of God's incarnate Son, Jesus Christ (John 1:14–18; 2 Cor. 4:3–6; Heb. 1:1–3).

God's glory, shown forth in the plan and work of grace whereby he saves sinners, is meant to call forth praise (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14), that is, the giving of glory to God by spoken words (cf. Rev. 4:9; 19:7). All life activities, too, must be pursued with the aim of giving God homage, honor, and pleasure, which is glory-giving on the practical level (1 Cor. 10:31).

God would not share with idols the praise for restoring his people, for idols, being unreal, contributed nothing to this work of grace (Isa. 42:8; 48:11); and God will not share the praise for salvation with its human subjects today, for we too contribute nothing more to it than our need of it. First to last, and at every stage in the

I J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993).

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Week 9

2 Corinthians 3:12-18 (ESV)

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever

Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Context

- Paul makes the astounding claim that we can be bolder than Moses. If you are in Christ and have the Spirit of Jesus, you are in a position of more light and knowledge than Moses, who needed to be veiled when talking to the people because he met with God.
- The direct reference here is from Exodus 34:29-35, when Moses returns from the mountain with the law of God.

» Exodus 34:29–35 (ESV) — 29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. 32 Afterward all the

people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai.

33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. 34 Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, 35 the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

- The failure of Israel to embrace Jesus is a painful topic for Paul and he borrows language from Exodus and Deuteronomy to make sense of their spiritual blindness. Despite all of the promises, prophecies, and fulfillment, the issue with unbelief is the heart. A veil lies over the heart. Moses had used this same language to describe the hard-heartedness of Israel.

- » Deuteronomy 29:2–4 (ESV) — 2 And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, 3 the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders.

4 But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

- Verse 18 gives us a sharp summary of the Christian life.
 - » Regeneration – with unveiled face. Our hearts are made new.
 - » Justification – beholding the glory of the Lord. Jesus crucified/raised and substituting for us.
 - » Sanctification – being transformed from one degree to another.
- We are reminded that anything good in us comes from the Lord. It is initiated, sourced and sustained by the ministry of the Spirit of God. This whole concept of regeneration is summarized well by JI Packer:
 - » The concept is of God renovating the heart, the core of a person's being, by implanting a new principle of desire, purpose, and action, a dispositional dynamic that finds expression in positive response to the gospel and its Christ. Jesus' phrase “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) harks back to Ezekiel 36:25–27, where God is pictured as symbolically cleansing persons from sin's pollution (by water) and bestowing a “new heart” by putting his Spirit within them. Because

this is so explicit, Jesus chides Nicodemus, “Israel’s teacher,” for not understanding how new birth happens (John 3:9–10). Jesus’ point throughout is that there is no

exercise of faith in himself as the supernatural Savior, no repentance, and no true discipleship apart from this new birth.

Personal Study

- Read Matthew 27:51. What context surrounds this verse? What kind of imagery is being used and how does it relate to our passage?

- Read Romans 9:1-5. How does Paul feel about the veil over Israel’s heart?

- In your own words, how would you describe what it means to “turn to the Lord” as quoted in 2 Corinthians 3:16?

Group Application

- Talk about the time the “veil” was removed and you turned to the Lord. What were the circumstances and how did God open up your heart to truly see Him for who He is?

- Why did Paul’s hope give him such boldness?

- According to verse 18, how do we grow to be more like Jesus? (Take special note of the words “beholding” and “the spirit.”) In other words, who do we behold and how does the spirit help us in that?

- How has the Spirit recently transformed you more into the image of Jesus? Looking forward, what is one area in your life in which you want to be more like Jesus?

Short Reading

From Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*¹

A. True Saving Faith Includes Knowledge, Approval, and Personal Trust

1. Knowledge Alone Is Not Enough.

Personal saving faith, in the way Scripture understands it, involves more than mere knowledge. Of course it is necessary that we have some knowledge of who Christ is and what he has done for “how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” (Rom. 10:14). But knowledge about the facts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for us is not enough, for people can know facts but rebel against them or dislike them. For example, Paul tells us that many people know God’s laws but dislike them: “Though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them” (Rom. 1:32). Even the demons know who God is and know the facts about Jesus’ life and saving works, for James says, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). But that knowledge certainly does not mean that the demons are saved.

¹ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* p. 104.

2. Knowledge and Approval Are Not Enough. Moreover, merely knowing the facts and approving of them or agreeing that they are true is not enough. Nicodemus knew that Jesus had come from God, for he said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Nicodemus had evaluated the facts of the situation, including Jesus’ teaching and his remarkable miracles, and had drawn a correct conclusion from those facts: Jesus was a teacher come from God. But this alone did not mean that Nicodemus had saving faith, for he still had to put his trust in Christ for salvation; he still had to “believe in him.” King Agrippa provides another example of knowledge and approval without saving faith. Paul realized that King Agrippa knew and apparently viewed with approval the Jewish Scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament). When Paul was on trial before Agrippa, he said, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe” (Acts 26:27). Yet Agrippa did not have saving faith, for he said to Paul, “In a short time you think to make me a Christian!” (Acts 26:28).

3. I Must Decide to Depend on Jesus to Save Me Personally. In addition to knowledge of the facts of the gospel and

approval of those facts, in order to be saved, I must decide to depend on Jesus to save me. In doing this I move from being an interested observer of the facts of salvation and the teachings of the Bible to being someone who enters into a new relationship with Jesus Christ as a living person. We may therefore define saving faith in the following way: Saving faith is trust in Jesus Christ as a living person for forgiveness of sins and for eternal life with God.

This definition emphasizes that saving faith is not just a belief in facts but personal trust in Jesus to save me. As we will explain in the following chapters, much more is involved in salvation than simply forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but someone who initially comes to Christ seldom realizes the extent of the blessings of salvation that will come. Moreover, we may rightly summarize the two major concerns of a person who trusts in Christ as “forgiveness of sins” and “eternal life with God.” Of course, eternal life with God involves such matters as a declaration of righteousness before God (part of justification, as explained in the next chapter), adoption, sanctification, and glorification, but these things may be understood in detail later. The main thing that concerns an unbeliever who comes to Christ is the fact that sin has separated him or her from the fellowship with God for which we were made. The unbeliever

comes to Christ seeking to have sin and guilt removed and to enter into a genuine relationship with God that will last forever.

The definition emphasizes personal trust in Christ, not just belief in facts about Christ. Because saving faith in Scripture involves this personal trust, the word “trust” is a better word to use in contemporary culture than the word “faith” or “belief.” The reason is that we can “believe” something to be true with no personal commitment or dependence involved in it. I can believe that Canberra is the capital of Australia, or that 7 times 6 is 42, but have no personal commitment or dependence on anyone when I simply believe those facts. The word faith on the other hand, is sometimes used today to refer to an almost irrational commitment to something in spite of strong evidence to the contrary, a sort of irrational decision to believe something that we are quite sure is not true! (If your favorite football team continues to lose games, someone might encourage you to “have faith” even though all the facts point the opposite direction.) In these two popular senses, the word “belief” and the word “faith” have a meaning contrary to the biblical sense.²

2 Of course, the words believe/belief and faith occur frequently in the Bible, and we should not completely give up using them in a proper biblical sense just because our culture sometimes gives them an incorrect sense. My point is simply that when explaining the gospel to an unbeliever, the word trust seems to be most

The word trust is closer to the biblical idea, since we are familiar with trusting persons in everyday life. The more we come to know a person, and the more we see in that person a pattern of life that warrants trust, the more we find ourselves able to place trust in that person to do what he or she promises, or to act in ways that we can rely on. This fuller sense of personal trust is indicated in several passages of Scripture in which initial saving faith is spoken of in very personal terms, often using analogies drawn from personal relationships. John says, “To all who received him who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). Much as we would receive a guest into our homes, John speaks of receiving Christ.

John 3:16 tells us that “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Here John uses a surprising phrase when he does not simply say, “whoever believes him” (that is, believes that what he says is true and able to be trusted), but rather, “whoever believes in him.” The Greek phrase πιστεύω εἰς αὐτόν could also be translated “believe into him” with the sense of trust or confidence that goes into and rests in Jesus as a person. Leon Morris can say, “Faith, for John, is an activity which takes men right out of themselves and makes them one with Christ.” He

understands the Greek phrase πιστεύω εἰς to be a significant indication that New Testament faith is not just intellectual assent but includes a “moral element of personal trust.”³ Such an expression was rare or perhaps nonexistent in the secular Greek found outside the New Testament, but it was well suited to express the personal trust in Christ that is involved in saving faith.

Jesus speaks of “coming to him” in several places. He says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out” (John 6:37). He also says, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). In a similar way, he says, “Come to me all 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” (Matt. 11:28–30). In these passages we have the idea of coming to Christ and asking for acceptance, for living water to drink, and for rest and instruction. All of

3 Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* p. 336, with reference to the longer discussion by C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 179–86, and a note that Dodd finds no parallel to the use of πιστεύω (G4409) followed by the preposition εἰς (G1650) to refer to trust in a person, in secular Greek. The expression rather is a literal translation of the expression “to believe in” from the Hebrew Old Testament.

likely to convey the biblical sense today.

these give an intensely personal picture of what is involved in saving faith. The author of Hebrews also asks us to think of Jesus as now alive in heaven, ready to receive us: “He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Jesus is pictured here (as many times in the New Testament) as one who is now alive in heaven, always able to help those who come to him.

Reformed theologian J.I. Packer quotes the following paragraphs from the British Puritan writer John Owen, describing the invitation of Christ to respond in personal faith:

This is somewhat of the word which he now speaks unto you: Why will ye die? why will ye perish? why will ye not have compassion on your own souls? Can your hearts endure, or can your hands be strong, in the day of wrath that is approaching? ... Look unto me, and be saved; come unto me, and I will ease you of all sins, sorrows, fears, burdens, and give rest to your souls. Come, I entreat you; lay aside all procrastinations, all delays; put me off no more; eternity lies at the door ... do not so hate me as that you will rather perish than accept of deliverance by me.

These and the like things doth the Lord Christ continually declare, proclaim, plead and urge upon the souls of sinners ... He doth it in the preaching of the word, as if he were present with you, stood amongst you, and spake personally to every one of you ... He hath appointed the ministers of the gospel to appear before you, and to deal with you in his stead, avowing as his own the invitations which are given you in his name. (2 Cor. 5:19–20)

With this understanding of true New Testament faith, we may now appreciate that when a person comes to trust in Christ, all three elements must be present. There must be some basic knowledge or understanding of the facts of the gospel. There must also be approval of, or agreement with, these facts. Such agreement includes a conviction that the facts spoken of the gospel are true, especially the fact that I am a sinner in need of salvation and that Christ alone has paid the penalty for my sin and offers salvation to me. It also includes an awareness that I need to trust in Christ for salvation and that he is the only way to God, and the only means provided for my salvation. This approval of the facts of the gospel will also involve a desire to be saved through Christ. But all this still does not add up to true saving faith. That comes only when I make a decision of my will to

depend on, or put my trust in, Christ as my Savior. This personal decision to place my trust in Christ is something done with my heart, the central faculty of my entire being that makes commitments for me as a whole person.

4. Faith Should Increase as Our Knowledge Increases. Contrary to the current secular understanding of “faith,” true New Testament faith is not something that is made stronger by ignorance or by believing against the evidence. Rather, saving faith is consistent with knowledge and true understanding of facts. Paul says, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17 NASB). When people have true information about Christ, they are better able to put their trust in him. Moreover, the more we know about him and about the character of God that is completely revealed in him, the more fully

we are able to put our trust in him. Thus faith is not weakened by knowledge but should increase with more true knowledge.

In the case of saving faith in Christ, our knowledge of him comes by believing a reliable testimony about him. Here, the reliable testimony that we believe is the words of Scripture. Since they are God’s very words, they are completely reliable, and we gain true knowledge of Christ through them. This is why “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17 NASB). In everyday life, we come to believe many things when we hear testimony from a person we consider to be reliable or trustworthy. This kind of decision is even more justified here, when the actual words of God provide that testimony and we believe it.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Week 10

2 Corinthians 4:1–2 (ESV)

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper

with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Context

- In Paul's world, the phrase "to lose heart" meant a cowardly surrender. It would be like a soldier casting his sword aside and giving up in the middle of a heated battle. Yet Paul does not credit a sense of duty or even a fear of God's disappointment as the reason for not losing heart. He says he does not lose heart because of God's mercy. Paul saw every second of his life as a privilege and gift of God's grace. It is this perspective that allows us as believers to know that our trials are always under the watchful eye of a compassionate God.
- The word Paul uses for "tamper" literally means to ensure or corrupt, and is used to describe the process of diluting wine with water. For someone to tamper with God's word is to dilute the message in some way, so that people do not hear the whole truth. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that he's not keeping any secrets — the gospel he preaches is the real deal. It might be that Paul's critics thought his message was too straightforward, that they accused him of unfaithfulness to the Old Testament.
- When Paul speaks of "cunning" he speaks of the same craftiness that Satan displayed when he deceived Eve in the garden (2 Cor 11:3). Satan's tactic was to convince Eve to doubt God's words to her. In the same way, Paul gives an indirect dig at false teachers that twist Scripture for their own ends.

- Faithfulness to Scripture goes far beyond just preaching the text as it is. It involves the entire man. Paul knew his character was essential to the credibility of his ministry, especially considering his past

as a persecutor of the church. He not only preached the truth, but lived it before the people because he had a keen awareness that his life played out before God himself.

Personal Study

- What are some disgraceful underhanded ways people can tamper with God's Word?

- Read Numbers 22:38. How can the church guard against tampering with God's Word?

- How would you describe Paul's philosophy of ministry? Look at Acts 20:17-27. What is consistent about his method and approach?

Group Application

- Share a time when you did not lose heart but instead persevered. How did you have the strength to do it?

- What caused Paul not to lose heart but instead to persevere in the ministry of the gospel? (note: you'll need to look back at chapter 3 for help.)

- Paul continues to highlight his character as much as his message (see 1:12-14). Why is this important, especially when one has been criticized as an impostor? How can this relate to us when we are sharing the gospel?

- How are you currently being tempted to “lose heart”? How can your group pray for you?

Short Reading

From Taking God At His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me by Kevin DeYoung¹

If you've ever wondered why different professing Christians come to such wildly different theological conclusions, at least a part of the answer—the biggest part, in fact—has to do with the question of authority. The three main branches of Christianity in the West—traditional Roman Catholic, liberal Protestant, and evangelical—do not agree on how to adjudicate competing truth claims. We don't answer the question "What is our ultimate authority?" in the same way. Every Christian acknowledges that in some sense our theology and ethics must "accord with Scripture." But when push comes to shove in theological wrangling, to whom or what do we appeal to make our closing arguments?

See if you can spot the differences in these three statements on Scripture and authority, representing different branches of contemporary Western Christianity.

¹ DeYoung, Kevin (2014-04-30). *Taking God At His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me* (p. 84). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

The first is from Peter Kreeft, a fine writer and winsome Roman Catholic:

The Church gives us her Tradition like a mother giving a child hand-me-down clothing that has already been worn by many older sisters and brothers. But unlike any earthly clothing, this clothing is indestructible because it is not made of wool or cotton but truth. It was invented by God, not man. Sacred Tradition (capital "T") must be distinguished from all human traditions (small "t"). Sacred Tradition is part of "the deposit of faith", which also includes Sacred Scripture. It is comprised of the Church's data, given to her by her Lord.²

The second statement is from Gary Dorrien, the foremost expert on American liberal theology and himself a liberal Protestant:

The essential idea of liberal theology is that all claims to truth, in theology as in other disciplines, must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal to external authority. Christian scripture may be recognized as spiritually authoritative within Christian experience, but its word does not settle or establish truth claims about matters of fact.³

² Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Church Beliefs Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 18.

³ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal*

And finally, here's a third statement, from the Westminster Confession of Faith, which on this point is representative of broader evangelicalism:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (WCF 1.10)

The differences in these statements are striking. For Kreeft, church tradition is a final authority, on par with Scripture. For Dorrien, Scripture must align with reason and experience. But for Westminster, the word of God stands outside and over and above the church and all human opinion. Whatever else we may disagree on as Catholics, liberals, and evangelicals, we should at least agree that it is our view of Scripture and authority that divides us.

All religion rests on authority. In fact, every academic discipline and every sphere of human inquiry rests on authority. Whether we realize it or not, we all give someone or something the last word—our parents, our culture, our community, our feelings,

Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 1.

the government, peer-reviewed journals, opinion polls, impressions, or a holy book. We all have someone or something that we turn to as the final arbiter of truth claims. For Christians, this authority is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Of course, we can misunderstand and misapply the word of God. But when interpreted correctly—paying attention to the original context, considering the literary genre, thinking through authorial intent—the Bible is never wrong in what it affirms and must never be marginalized as anything less than the last word on everything it teaches.

Two Books, One Final Authority

God reveals himself to us in two ways: through the universe we can see, and through the Scripture we can hear and read. General revelation is God's self-disclosure through the created world. Special revelation is God's self-disclosure through the spoken and written words of divinely inspired messengers. Both means of revelation are important, and both are taught in Scripture.

It has often been pointed out that because the revelation in both of these "Two Books" is from God, the two teach the same truth. "All truth is God's truth," as the saying goes. In the end there can be no conflict between what God reveals in Scripture and what he reveals in nature. If all the facts

could be known perfectly, we would find that the Bible and science do not contradict each other. Christians have nothing to fear from rigorous scientific investigation.

And yet, if the Bible is our final authority—as it surely was for the Bereans—then we must be hesitant to scrub the Bible when it seems to contradict the “assured results of science.” I sympathize with Christians who struggle to reconcile what they hear from scientists and what they see in the Bible about a particular issue. We should not be quick to dismiss these questions. It is possible to read the Bible wrongly. It is possible for the church to miss the mark for a long time. But every Christian should agree that if the Bible teaches one thing and scientific consensus teaches something else, we will not ditch the Bible. The Two Books are not separate, but they are unequal.

The Belgic Confession provides a standard definition of general and special revelation:

We know him [God] by two means:

First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since the universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God; his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in

Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse.

Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own. (Article 2)⁴

Notice the difference between general and special revelation. The former gives us a sense of God’s power and divine nature so that we are left without excuse. The latter reveals God “more openly” so that we might be saved. The doctrine of general and special revelation was never meant to make the Bible artificially conform to any other academic discipline. The heavens declare the glory of God, but the law of the Lord is perfect and the testimony of the Lord is sure (Ps. 19: 1, 7). Jesus can illustrate with the lilies of the field (Matt. 6: 28), but “it is written” can conquer the Devil (4: 1– 11).

I am not for a moment arguing for obscurantism when it comes to the hard questions concerning faith and science. Pastors who haven’t had a science class since the tenth grade are often too cavalier with the tough issues raised by geology,

4 Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1987).

biology, and genetics. But surely it is the mark of a Christian to believe everything the Bible teaches no matter who says it can't be so. Academic journals are not infallible, let alone high school textbooks or fifteen-second sound bites. As Christians we must always be willing to change our minds when we see that we have misread the Scriptures, but that is a far cry from setting aside the Scriptures because for the last five years—or fifty years or a hundred and fifty years—some scientists have informed us that we can't believe in the historicity of Adam or that the universe was created out of nothing by the word of God. General revelation can show us there is a God and convict those who don't worship him rightly. But special revelation speaks more clearly, more openly, and more authoritatively. If Scripture gets the last word, we should never change a jot or tittle of the Holy Book merely because the book of nature—for a time and according to some voices—seems to suggest we should.

Believing In Order to Understand

Many thoughtful Christians, who affirm the inerrancy and final authority of Scripture, and who study the Bible long enough and hard enough, eventually stumble upon problems in the biblical text that don't afford simple solutions. There are dates that are hard to reconcile and numbers that don't seem to fit. There

are apparent discrepancies that are not easily harmonized and questions without easy answers. These may seem strange admissions in a chapter on the authority of Scripture, but Christians should not be afraid to admit what we see. If Peter found some things in Paul's letters "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3: 16), we too are bound to be perplexed now and then.

But given everything we have already seen about a biblical doctrine of Scripture, we have no reason to be intimidated by difficulties and apparent discrepancies in the Bible. Many of them are easily explained. Most of the rest of them have good, plausible solutions. And for the few humdingers that are left, there are possible explanations, even if we aren't sure that we've found the right one yet. Our confidence in the Bible is not an irrational confidence. The findings of history, archaeology, and textual criticism give us many reasons to trust the Old and New Testaments. But more than all the apologetic evidence—and it can be found by anyone who cares to read the best books out there—we have the testimony of God himself. The Bible is God's book, a fact we are reminded of frequently in the book. Consequently, to trust completely in the Bible is to trust in the character and assurances of God more than we trust in our own ability to reason and explain.

Again, J. I. Packer puts it perfectly. This long paragraph is worth reading slowly:

God, then, does not profess to answer in Scripture all the questions that we, in our boundless curiosity, would like to ask about Scripture. He tells us merely as much as He sees we need to know as a basis for our life of faith. And He leaves unsolved some of the problems raised by what He tells us, in order to teach us a humble trust in His veracity. The question, therefore, that we must ask ourselves when faced with these puzzles is not, is it reasonable to imagine that this is so? but, is it reasonable to accept God's assurance that this is so? Is it reasonable to take God's word and believe that He has spoken the truth, even though I cannot fully comprehend what He has said? The question carries its own answer. We should not abandon faith in anything God has taught us merely because we cannot solve all the problems which it raises. Our own intellectual competence is

not the test and measure of divine truth. It is not for us to stop believing because we lack understanding, but to believe in order that we may understand.⁵

Did the Bereans ever have questions about the Scriptures that they couldn't answer? Perhaps. There is no way to know for sure. What we do know is that they were commended for the singular virtue of giving Scripture the last word. They tested everything against the Scriptures because they dared not accept what Scripture denied or miss what Scripture affirmed. They approached their Bibles with a reverence fitting for God alone. Which makes sense, because ultimately, we commit ourselves to the authority of the word of God because the God whose word it is informs us that we can and tells us that we must.

⁵ J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 109.

Notes

[illegible]

Week 11

2 Corinthians 4:3-6 (ESV)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For what we

proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Context

- The concept of blindness in the New Testament refers to Satan's deception over sinful mankind. Ephesians 2 speaks of the unconverted man as following the 'prince of the power of the air' which is Satan. Jesus repeatedly used the metaphor of blindness to sight in reference to what happens at the moment of conversion (John 9:39). A person with blurry vision needs glasses but a person without vision needs a new set of eyes. In the same way, sinners by nature are blind to the truth and need the grace of God to open their hearts.
- When Satan blinds men he does not go for their eyes but their mind. Why is that? Satan does not want men to see the light of the gospel. He does not want men to believe or understand what God has done at the cross and the reality of God's judgment. Satan has no problem with men living moral lives so long as they do not know who God is.
- Paul links our new life in Christ with the event of Creation in Genesis. Just as God spoke for light to shine out into darkness and create the world so God let light shine in the hearts of his people to know Christ. Paul echoes this sentiment later on in 2 Corinthians 5:17 when he says that Christians aren't just people with a second chance, but completely new creations.
- Paul nails it on the head — the gospel is not about us as believers but Jesus as Lord. Many people claim to preach

Jesus but really preach themselves with Christian lingo. Paul had no such mentality. He saw himself as a servant to all and a pointer to Christ. He took to heart John the Baptist's words "He must increase, but I must decrease."

- The word 'proclaim' denotes a public heralding of the gospel. Paul did not keep the message of Christ to himself

but put it out boldly and clearly. In fact, it was Paul's boldness and clarity that caused him so much grief. If Jesus is the most glorious being in the universe then Paul's responsibility is not to be his PR man but to simply make him known. Jesus Christ's glory is so radiant that for someone to miss it they would have to be blind.

Personal Study

- What is the significance of Christ being the image of God? How does that relate to humanity?

- How would you explain to someone what 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God' is?

- How should the concept of blindness inform our relationships with non-believers?

- Why is Satan referred to as the god of this world?

Group Application

- Share a story about blindness (funny or serious). Maybe you have a friend who is blind, or you blacked out or your eyes were dilated, etc. How did that make things difficult?

- The Bible often compares unbelief to blindness (e.g., John 12:36-41). Talk about the similarities and differences between physical and spiritual blindness.

- What is Paul's (and our) responsibility in ministering to unbelievers? What is God's responsibility?

- Who are people you know who are currently blind to the light of the gospel? As a group, discuss how you can minister to these individuals (maybe think of a creative way to reach out to them). Then, spend some time praying for these individuals and that God would “shine in their hearts.”
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Short Reading

From The Reason For God by Tim Keller¹

Counting the Cost

A Christian is, literally “Christ’s one,” someone who is not just vaguely influenced by Christian teaching, but who has switched his or her most fundamental allegiance to Jesus. Christians understand the all-or-nothing choice that is forced upon us by the magnitude of Jesus’s claims.

From the earliest days, the confession of Christians was *Christos Kurios*—“Jesus is Lord.” In the historical context, in which it was required to say *Kaiser Kurios*, “Caesar is Lord,” this confession meant that Jesus was the supreme power. He was not just a divine angelic being, but, as an early Christian hymn put it, he had “the name

above every name” (Philippians 2: 9). In him “All the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily” (Colossians 2: 9).

This is an enormous claim, but there is a certain logic to it. One of the most recent people to note this logic is Bono, the lead singer of U2, in a conversation with Michka Assayas:

Assayas: Christ has his rank among the world’s great thinkers. But Son of God, isn’t that far-fetched?

Bono: No, it’s not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: He was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn’t allow you that. He doesn’t let you off that hook. Christ says, No. I’m not saying I’m a teacher, don’t call me teacher. I’m not saying I’m a prophet. I’m saying: “I’m the Messiah.” I’m saying: “I am God

¹ Keller, Timothy (2008-02-14). *The Reason for God* (pp. 232-233). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

incarnate.” And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet we can take. You’re a bit eccentric. We’ve had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don’t mention the “M” word! Because, you know, we’re gonna have to crucify you. And he goes: No, no, I know you’re expecting me to come back with an army and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah. At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says: Oh, my God, he’s gonna keep saying this. So what you’re left with is either Christ was who He said He was—the Messiah—or a complete nutcase. I mean, we’re talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson.... I’m not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me that’s far-fetched...

Bono is describing how Jesus’s statements about himself force us all into an all-or-nothing choice. He asks how likely it is that a mentally deranged man on the order of Charles Manson or David Koresh could have produced the kind of impact on his followers and on the world that he has. However, if Jesus was not a lunatic, then our only alternative is to accept his claims and center our entire lives around him. The one thing we have no right to do is to respond to him mildly.

Flannery O’Connor makes the same point in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” The Misfit is a bandit who apprehends a family in a rural area in the South. The head of the family, the grandmother, tries to talk him out of killing her by chattering on about prayer and church and Jesus, but the Misfit responds:

Jesus... thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.

O’Connor once commented about this encounter saying that the Misfit indeed understood the all-or-nothing implications of Jesus. “The story is a duel of sorts between the grandmother and her superficial beliefs and the Misfit’s more profoundly felt involvement with Christ’s action, which set the world off balance for him.” O’Connor felt this pressure personally. There was no use just saying you believed in Jesus unless you let that change your life and affect your view of everything. “Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live,” she wrote in an essay, “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy.

This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that.”

Bono and O'Connor are extremely different personalities, and yet both of them have personally felt the radical implications of Jesus's claims. Christians are people who let the reality of Jesus change everything about who they are, how they see, and how they live.

Taking Inventory

Perhaps these challenges from Bono and O'Connor make you gulp. What if you are increasingly respectful of and interested in Christianity but you are not yet ready to make such a big commitment? You may sense that there are still barriers between you and Christian faith.

If that is your situation don't simply put things on hold, hoping that somehow your feelings will change and somehow the barriers will melt away. Take an inventory in order to discern the specific reasons for your reservations. Here is a possible set of questions to help you in this process.

- Content issues: Are there any parts of the Christian message—creation, sin, Jesus as God, Cross, resurrection—that you don't understand or agree with?
- Coherence issues: Are there still doubts and objections to the Christian faith that you cannot resolve?
- Cost issues: Do you perceive that a move into full Christian faith will cost you something dear? What fears do you have about commitment?

You can use an outline like this to analyze and identify your barriers to full commitment, but don't trust yourself to do this on your own. Almost anything—from a new language to a new skill—is best learned in a community of others who are at various stages in their own pilgrimage. Spend time in a Christian church, in its worship and in friendship with its members, to talk with Christians and to hear how they have handled these doubts themselves.

Most important of all, remember that becoming a Christian is not simply a matter of ticking off a list of things to believe and do. At the end of Matthew 11, Jesus calls us to “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.... Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” A man once said to a pastor that he would be happy to believe in Christianity if the cleric could only give him a watertight argument for its truth. The pastor replied,

“What if God hasn’t given us a watertight argument, but rather a watertight person?” Jesus is saying “I am that person. Come to me. Look at who I am. Look at my Cross. Look at my resurrection. No one could have made this up! Come to me, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Ultimately faith and certainty grows as we get to know more about Jesus, who he is, and what he did.

There’s one more barrier that many people feel at this point may not be as hard to deal with as you think. New York City is filled with people who were raised and baptized in various churches but who abandoned their faith in their teens and college and have not thought much about it for years. Then something brings them up short and they find themselves in spiritual search mode. They work through the basics of the Christian faith and it seems to them they had never really understood it before. Their question to me as a pastor is “I don’t really know if I am a Christian or not. Am I returning to my faith or finding it for the first time?” The answer is simple—I can’t tell, and it doesn’t matter. If you want to either connect to God or reconnect to God, you have to do the same two things. What are those two things?

Making the Move

The first thing you have to do is repent. That’s not a very elegant sounding word but there is no getting around it. The repentance that begins a new relationship with God is not primarily a matter of drawing up lists of specific sins you are sorry for and want to change. Don’t get me wrong: If you are gouging the poor or cheating on your spouse, and you want to put your faith in Christ, then by all means stop doing those things. A Christian should love the poor and be faithful to his or her marriage vows. But those behavioral changes alone will not make you a Christian. Lots of people in the world are socially and personally ethical but do not have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Repentance is not less than being sorry for individual sins, but it means much more.

The repentance that really changes your heart and your relationship with God begins when you recognize that your main sin, the sin under the rest of your sins, is your self-salvation project. As we saw in Chapters 9 and 10, in both our bad deeds and in our good deeds we are seeking to be our own Saviors and Lords. We have alternative trusts and “gods,” even though we do not call them that. We try to prove ourselves by our moral goodness or through achievement or family or career. Even diligent involvement in church and religion may need to be repented of once

we understand that it was all a way to put God and others in our debt.

Repentance, then, is confessing the things besides God himself that you have been relying on for your hope, significance, and security. That means we should repent not only for things we have done wrong (like cheating or lying), but also for the motivations beneath our good works.

The second thing you have to do is believe in Christ. Belief in Christ has a definite content to it. We must believe he was who he said he was, that we require salvation, that on the Cross he secured that salvation, that he rose from the dead. However, while life-changing Christian faith is not less than believing these things with your intellect, it is much more.

The faith that changes the life and connects to God is best conveyed by the word “trust.” Imagine you are on a high cliff and you lose your footing and begin to fall. Just beside you as you fall is a branch sticking out of the very edge of the cliff. It is your only hope and it is more than strong enough to support your weight. How can it save you? If your mind is filled with intellectual certainty that the branch can support you, but you don’t actually reach out and grab it, you are lost. If your mind is instead filled with doubts and uncertainty that the branch can hold you, but you reach out and grab it anyway, you

will be saved. Why? It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.

This means you don’t have to wait for all doubts and fears to go away to take hold of Christ. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that you have to banish all misgivings in order to meet God. That would turn your faith into one more way to be your own Savior. Working on the quality and purity of your commitment would become a way to merit salvation and put God in your debt. It is not the depth and purity of your heart but the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf that saves us.

Faith, then, begins as you recognize and reject your alternative trusts and gods and turn instead to the Father, asking for a relationship to him on the basis of what Jesus has done, not on the basis of your moral effort or achievements. Several young adults of my acquaintance made their move of faith this way. They prayed:

Father, I’ve always believed in you and Jesus Christ, but my heart’s most fundamental trust was elsewhere—in my own competence and decency. This has only gotten me into trouble. As far as I know my own heart, today I give it to you, I transfer my trust to you, and ask that you would receive and accept me not

for anything I have done but because of everything Christ has done for me.

This begins a lifelong process in which, through steady change in every area of life, the gospel story shapes us more and more.

Notes

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Week 12

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 (ESV)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be

manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you. 13 Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, 14 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 15 For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Context

- Clay jars are not very impressive. In Paul's day they were essentially cheap garbage cans that were easily disposable. Paul lived in a Roman culture at the height of its intellectual brilliance and military might, yet God chose weak and humble fishermen, prostitutes and tax collectors to accomplish his purposes. It is by using the weak and foolish in the world that God changes it.
- Paul does not just suffer one setback, but a succession of trials and sufferings that drive him to the brink of despair. His list seesaws between God's sustaining grace and the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. It is easy for us in times of intense struggle and pain to believe that God is really there, but Paul's words remind us that God allows us to be perplexed, persecuted and struck down because those moments of weakness are where he can fully manifest his power.
- We live our life by our expectations. It is a fundamental part of being human.

It's not bad to have expectations, but we get into trouble when our expectations do not align with what God says. Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians in part so that people can know a life spent serving Christ is not a vacation. The church always grows through persecution because suffering purifies the church and sets the minds and expectations of believers solely on what God has promised.

- Paul makes a shocking statement that his sufferings manifest the life of Jesus. As believers we want to be like Jesus in his compassion and his love, but often shy away from being like Jesus in suffering. Paul gives us a helpful reminder that we all must carry our cross

daily and suffer the insults, mocking and ridicule of a world that needs Jesus. What more loving action is there than to suffer for the sake of others?

- The hope of the future resurrection of the dead is what Paul clings to in times of affliction. Faith in Christ is not wishful thinking, but a deep knowing or understanding of the truth. Paul finds peace in present uncertainties by setting his hope on future certainties, and this allows him to suffer well.
- Everything Paul did was by the grace of God, and Paul found his joy and empowerment in that fact.

Personal Study

- Why does Paul cite Psalm 116 in verse 13?

- Read 2 Timothy 3. What does Paul warn Timothy about? How does Paul encourage Timothy?

- What is Paul trying to communicate when he says, "...death is at work in us, but life in you."?

- It is often said that God does not give a believer more than he or she can handle. How would you respond to that statement in light of Paul's comments?

Group Application

- Share about a time of hardship (in your life or someone you know) and how the difficulty helped Jesus shine more brightly in the person's life.

- Paul was willing to go through great difficulty (he even calls it "being given over to death") for the sake of the Corinthians. What gave Paul the strength to carry on?

- What hardship are you currently facing? How can Jesus shine more brightly in you through it?

- Talk about your willingness (or unwillingness) to sacrifice for others. How can you grow to be more like Paul in this way? What will give you the strength to carry on?

- Paul says that his ultimate purpose for ministering to the Corinthians is to bring more glory to God (verse 15). How does the glory of God impact the way you live?

Short Reading

From Death by Living: Life Is Meant to Be Spent by N.D. Wilson¹

My Marisol Helen is named for a great-grandmother who is, at this moment, only hours out of her own earthly chapter. My girl is two and eager to climb up onto me whenever I dare pop the lever on my recliner to better ponder the ceiling. She wriggles her way up onto my chest and then takes my unshaven face in her small, cherub-caricature hands.

“You tell me story,” she commands. Her siblings call her the boss of the world. I raise my eyebrows at her and smile, waiting to see if she adds at least the politeness of a question mark. She does.

“You tell me story?”

I nod, and the hands leave my face. This is how she settles in. She widens her eyes, pinwheels excited fingers in a quick spasm of thrill, and then thumps her tiny elbows onto my chest and props her meringue cheeks on her hands. Her whole body is tense as she waits, her ribs shivering on mine.

¹ Wilson, N. D. (2013-07-30). *Death by Living: Life Is Meant to Be Spent* (pp. 84-85). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

“A bird story,” she says. Other times it’s a kitty-cat story (never a happy one) or a pirate story. Dog stories are common as are sibling stories and cousin stories and papa stories and Jesus stories and Marisol-with-wings stories. I let her select the genre and she does it well.

In every story, the stage is set, some little Eden of backyard trampolining is established before trouble (evil owls, sky pirates, a dragon, wizards, wolves, sharks) comes to ruin everything and threaten destruction. In every story, salvation comes. But just once (I swear), I wove it differently.

The world was happy. Marisol was playing with her animals in the backyard and they were all having so much fun. And then Billy the Bear and George the Monkey and Moo-Moo the Statue of Liberty Cow all thought it would be so much fun to go inside and have a tea party, and Marisol thought so too. So they all went inside and went upstairs and had the best tea party ever. Everyone loved it.

“The end!” I grin and spread my arms.

Her young eyes narrow above her propped-up cheeks. She exhales slowly, gives me a quick courtesy smile, and then grows serious.

“You tell another one,” she says.

Dear Mr. Father,

Thank you so much for your submission of
From Trampoline to Tea Party, but I'm afraid
that it doesn't fit in our lists at this time.

Best of luck,
Marisol Wilson
Acting Editorial Director

I told her another one. She was almost
eaten, and she loved it.

Ask her about the dragon sometime. She'll
tell you what Jesus did to its head.

Dear Mr. Hipsterelli,

Thank you so much for your submission,
but I'm afraid we already have several
million pending volumes of peer-conscious
faux-introspective pride on a bed of sexual
guilt layered beneath a thick Crisco frosting
of everything-is-going-to-be-fine-if-my-
jeans-look-good-and-my-band-selection-is-
appropriate. But do please resubmit if you
should choose to live otherwise.

Best of luck,
Marisol Wilson
Acting Editorial Director

If life is a story, how shall we then live?

It isn't complicated (just hard).

Take up your life and follow Him. Face
trouble. Pursue it. Climb it. Smile at its
roar like a tree planted by cool water even
when your branches groan, when your
golden leaves are stripped and the frost
bites deep, even when your grip on this
earth is torn loose and you fall among
mourning saplings.

Shall we die for ourselves or die for others?

For most of us, the question is rarely posed
in our final mortal moment (although there
is glory when it is). Death is the finish line
of this preliminary race. Shall we cross the
finish line for ourselves or for others? The
choice isn't waiting for us down the track.
The choice is now.

Death is now. The choice is here.

Lay your life down. Your heartbeats cannot
be hoarded. Your reservoir of breaths is
draining away. You have hands, blister them
while you can. You have bones, make them
strain—they can carry nothing in the grave.
You have lungs, let them spill with laughter.
With an average life expectancy of 78.2
years in the US (subtracting eight hours
a day for sleep), I have around 250,000
conscious hours remaining to me in which
I could be smiling or scowling, rejoicing in
my life, in this race, in this story, or moaning

and complaining about my troubles. I can be giving my fingers, my back, my mind, my words, my breaths, to my wife and my children and my neighbors, or I can grasp after the vapor and the vanity for myself, dragging my feet, afraid to die and therefore afraid to live. And, like Adam, I will still die in the end.

Living is the same thing as dying. Living well is the same thing as dying for others.

Marisol Helen Wilson tucks me into my chair, fully reclined. She brings me a tiny blanket and fingers my eyes closed. She sets a Statue of Liberty Cow on my chest. I write stories; I can see the prophetic echo of what is to come. A time will come when her hands will not be so small, when she will do this again, but with more tears and a box, when I will have finished my race, when my strength will have been poured out, when I will have spent every beat of this heart and my lungs can no longer net me life from the wind, when this body will have been broken. I watch her working, chattering busily to herself as she does, imitating the love of her mother. I listen to my other children laughing at the table instead of doing their homework. When that time

comes, they and the Author of my life story will know the truth. I know what I want that truth to be; I have an Older Brother with a bruised heel who has shown it to me.

Mari places her hand on my head, as bossy as ever.

This is my body, I think, may it be broken for you. And for my beloved in the kitchen with her blond hair bound into a fountain on her head as she slides calzones onto a hot stone in the oven, and for those future men and women making each other laugh and throwing pencils in the dining room, and for their children, and their children, and for children I will never know. May I live hard. To the dregs. May my living be grace to those behind me.

“You sleep,” Mari says. “I tell you story.”

She makes a pious face and bobs as she conjures a narrative, pin-wheeling her hands.

“Once, there was a princess. She died. The end.”

I laugh. Mari races away. She’s right, after all. She only left out the middle.

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Week 13

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (ESV)

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.
17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of

glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Context

- Paul returns to the theme of perseverance by repeating the refrain from chapter 4 verse 1, 'we do not lose heart.' This persistence is not born out of present or pleasant circumstances but rather the confidence that God is at work in him and them. The idea behind 'lose heart' is to be discouraged or to lose enthusiasm in a task or path. Despite all of the pain and difficulty, Paul has set his mind and his heart on his calling and desires the church to do the same. It was a common refrain from Jesus to the disciples and is for Paul as well.
 - » 2 Thessalonians 3:13 (ESV) — 13 As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.
- Paul embraces his present by remembering his future. He is not concerned that his body is wasting away because we will be raised with Jesus (2 Cor 4:14) and he is not concerned with temporal affliction because he has a storehouse of glory waiting eternally.
- This light momentary affliction. Not usually how you would describe beatings and imprisonment. This is not denial or a kind of delusion for Paul. Common to teaching in this age (and ours) is to instruct via stark contrasts and hyperbole. You cannot love me unless you hate your mom Jesus might say. That is the essence of Paul's meaning here... it is comparison for instruction not a downplaying of real pain and suffering.

- Previously in chapter 4, Paul has used contrasts of light and dark to describe the life of Christian and borrowed imagery of veiled and unveiled faces

from Exodus. He continues to teach through contrast and deepens the sight illustration by indicating that we are to 'see' the unseen.

Personal Study

- Read John 14:1-7. What common refrain from Jesus is mirrored by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4? Where else do you see Jesus saying this?

- The 'weight of glory beyond all comparison' is a difficult thing to imagine. Thankfully, scripture gives us a few pictures to ponder. Read Isaiah 65:13-25. What strikes you as beautiful, valuable or interesting?

- What current circumstance or worry has you most tempted to lose heart? How can you remind yourself of the eternal future glory? What would it take for God to give you a new mindset or vision?

Group Application

- Share a time when God renewed your “inner nature” even as your “outer nature” (e.g., sickness, injury, etc.) was wasting away.

- Paul repeats the phrase “so we do not lose heart” twice in chapter 4 (verses 1 & 16). How can Paul say that he does not lose heart (see verses 16b-18)? How can this encourage you?

- What affliction(s) are you currently facing? How can having an eternal perspective change how you see them and endure through them?

- What aspect of the sermon was most impactful upon you today? How do you plan to apply the passage and sermon to your life this week? How can your group help you and pray for you?

Short Reading

From Heaven by Randy Alcorn¹

Heaven: Our Source of Optimism

Secular optimists are wishful thinkers. Discovering the present payoffs of optimism, they conduct seminars and write books on thinking positively. Sometimes they capitalize on optimism by becoming rich and famous. But then what happens? They eventually get old or sick, and when they die they go to Hell forever. Their optimism is an illusion, for it fails to take eternity into account.

The only proper foundation for optimism is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Any other foundation is sand, not rock. It will not bear the weight of our eternity.

However, if we build our lives on the redemptive work of Christ, we should all be optimists. Why? Because even our most painful experience in life is but a temporary setback. Our pain and suffering may or may not be relieved in this life, but they will certainly be relieved in the next. That is Christ's promise—no more death or pain; he will wipe away all our tears.

He took our sufferings on himself so that one day he might remove all suffering from us. That is the biblical foundation for our optimism. No Christian should be a pessimist. We should be realists—focused on the reality that we serve a sovereign and gracious God. Because of the reality of Christ's atoning sacrifice and his promises, biblical realism is optimism.

Knowing that our suffering will be relieved doesn't make it easy, but it does make it bearable. It allows joy in the midst of suffering. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you. . . . Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven" (Luke 6: 22-23). Paul said, "I rejoice in my sufferings" (Colossians 1: 24, NASB), and James said, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1: 2). The apostles didn't enjoy suffering, but they rejoiced in the midst of it, because they trusted God's sovereign plan and they looked forward to Christ's return, their bodily resurrection, and the redemption of all creation.

Christ said to his disciples, who would suffer much, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10: 20). Our optimism is not that of the "health and wealth" gospel, which claims that God will spare us of suffering here and now. Peter

¹ Alcorn, Randy (2011-12-08). Heaven (Alcorn, Randy) (Kindle Locations 8536-8549). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

said, “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4: 13). Christ’s future glory, in which we will participate, is the reason for our present rejoicing while suffering.

Anticipating Heaven doesn’t eliminate pain, but it lessens it and puts it in perspective. Meditating on Heaven is a great pain reliever. It reminds us that suffering and death are temporary conditions. Our existence will not end in suffering and death—they are but a gateway to our eternal life of unending joy. The biblical doctrine of Heaven is about the future, but it has tremendous benefits here and now. If we grasp it, it will shift our center of gravity and radically change our perspective on life. This is what the Bible calls “hope,” a word used six times in Romans 8: 20-25, the passage in which Paul says that all creation longs for our resurrection and the world’s coming redemption.

Don’t place your hope in favorable circumstances, which cannot and will not last. Place your hope in Christ and his promises. He will return, and we will be resurrected to life on the New Earth, where we will behold God’s face and joyfully serve him forever.

Reepicheep’s Quest²

In C. S. Lewis’s *Voyage of the “Dawn Treader,”* a ship sails east in search of lost countrymen and new adventures. But the heart of one passenger, Reepicheep the valiant mouse, is steadfastly set on a greater adventure. He has one destination in mind: Aslan’s country.

From his youth, Reepicheep was taught in a poem that one day he would journey to the far east and find what he’d always longed for:

Where sky and water meet,
Where the waves grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,
To find all you seek,
There is the utter East.

After reciting the poem to his shipmates, Reepicheep says, “I do not know what it means. But the spell of it has been on me all my life.”

Late in the journey, when they have sailed farther than anyone on record, Reepicheep is thrown into the sea. To his surprise, the water tastes sweet. His excitement is unrestrainable. He’s so close to Aslan’s country, he can literally taste it.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* (New York: Scholastic, 1952), 24.

Earlier in the voyage, Reepicheep had expressed his utter abandonment to the cause of seeking Aslan's country: "While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan's country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise . . ." ³

We can identify with Reepicheep's glorious quest, because the spell of Heaven has been on us all our lives, as well, even if we have sometimes confused it with lesser desires. At the end of *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* Reepicheep's traveling companions watch him disappear over the horizon. Does he make it to Aslan's country? In the final book of the Narnia series, we discover the answer, which confirms what we already knew in our hearts.

Through the Doorway

When five-year-old Emily Kimball was hospitalized and heard she was going to die, she started to cry. Even though she loved Jesus and wanted to be with him, she didn't want to leave her family behind.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (New York: Scholastic, 1952), 24.

Then her mother had an inspired idea. She asked Emily to step through a doorway into another room, and she closed the door behind her. One at a time, the entire family started coming through the door to join her. Her mother explained that this was how it would be. Emily would go ahead to Heaven and then the rest of the family would follow. Emily understood. She would be the first to go through death's door. Eventually, the rest of the family would follow, probably one by one, joining her on the other side.

The analogy would have been even more complete if the room that Emily entered had had someone representing Jesus to greet her—along with departed loved ones and Bible characters and angels. Also, it would've helped if the room she walked into was breathtakingly beautiful, and contained pictures of a New Earth, vast and unexplored, where Emily and her family and friends would one day go to live with Jesus forever.

Every person reading this book is dying. Perhaps you have reason to believe that death will come very soon. You may be troubled, feeling uncertain, or unready to leave. Make sure of your relationship with Jesus Christ. Be certain that you're trusting him alone to save you—not anyone or anything else, and certainly not any good works you've done. And then allow yourself

to get excited about what's on the other side of death's door.

I've often read at memorial services this depiction of a believer's death:

I'm standing on the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She's an object of beauty and strength and I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and the sky come down to mingle with each other. And then I hear someone at my side saying, "There, she's gone."

Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side. And just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her.

And just at the moment when someone at my side says, "There, she's gone," there are other eyes watching her coming, and there are other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes!"

And that is dying.⁴

The place of our arrival will be a beautiful, though temporary, place where we'll await

⁴ Variouslly attributed to Henry Scott Holland and Henry Van Dyke; source uncertain.

the culmination of history: the return of the risen Jesus, who will resurrect us. When his millennial reign is accomplished (whether that's a nonliteral present reign or a literal thousand-year future reign), we'll join him in ruling the New Earth, free of sin and the Curse.

Five months before he died, C. S. Lewis wrote to a woman who feared that her own death was imminent. Lewis said, "Can you not see death as a friend and deliverer? . . . What is there to be afraid of? . . . Your sins are confessed. . . . Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave with regret? There are better things ahead than any we leave behind. . . . Our Lord says to you, 'Peace, child, peace. Relax. Let go. I will catch you. Do you trust me so little?' . . . Of course, this may not be the end. Then make it a good rehearsal."

Lewis signed the letter, "Yours (and like you, a tired traveler, near the journey's end)."⁵

We see life differently when we realize that death isn't a wall but a turnstile, a small obstacle that marks a great beginning. Calvin Miller put it beautifully:

I once scorned ev'ry fearful thought of death,

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 117.

When it was but the end of pulse and
breath,
But now my eyes have seen that past the
pain
There is a world that's waiting to be
claimed.
Earthmaker, Holy, let me now depart,

For living's such a temporary art.
And dying is but getting dressed for God,
Our graves are merely doorways cut in
sod.⁶

6 Calvin Miller, *The Divine Symphony* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2000), 139.

Notes

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