



DEEPER FAITH

2014 DEEPER YOUTH CONFERENCE

Edited by Luke Dockery and Jake Greer

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PO Box 1022
Fayetteville, AR 72702

www.deeperyouthconference.com

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a lot of research has been done to assess the strength of the faith of American teenagers, and repeatedly, the results have been alarming. Studies have shown that about half of Christian teenagers leave the church after they graduate from high school. Furthermore, Christian teens struggle to put into words what the Christian faith is all about, and what's worse, many of them don't even know what it *is* about, and have replaced the teachings of Scripture and the demands of discipleship with a watered-down Christianity which makes them feel good. Jesus is viewed as someone who will come to their aid when they are in trouble, but who doesn't make any demands of their lives.

Although these realities are sobering, they shouldn't cause us to wring our hands in despair, but rather to do something to address the problem. It is in the context of this problem, and our desire to fight against it, that we developed the idea for the Deeper Youth Conference.

Our aim was not to create "just another youth conference", but rather to provide a slate of quality classes to help teens address tough issues, deepen their faith, and learn what Christianity is really about

while they are still teens. In other words, the Deeper Youth Conference was specifically designed to combat the problems regarding young people and their faith mentioned above.

In all, roughly 200 students, parents, and youth leaders gathered in Fayetteville, Arkansas on March 14-15 for the inaugural conference. We were pleased with the quality of the lessons which were presented, and were overwhelmed by the feedback we received from both students and adults.

This eBook is a record of that weekend, and contains the lectures and classes which were presented. It is our hope that this resource will be a blessing to you, and will aid you in the lifelong process of developing a Deeper Faith.

Luke Dockery and Jake Greer
Co-Directors Deeper Youth Conference
May 2014



NICK RUPLE is an imperfect but redeemed disciple of Jesus Christ, the husband of Alisha for almost ten years, and father of Livy (4) and Max (2). He has a passion to connect the ancient Scriptures with modern audiences in a way that reveals the eternal relevance of the Word of God. He has been serving as a minister for the Mount Comfort Church of Christ in Fayetteville, AR since 2007.

DEEP TROUBLE

NICK RUPLE

Introduction

When the apostle Paul was writing to the Christians in Rome, there was this moment when he couldn't help but to break out into a song of praise to God, just like you and I do sometimes. But *this* is what *he* sings:

*Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments; how unexplainable are his ways!*

"For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

(Romans 11.33-36)

So you see, it doesn't matter how deep we go in our studies. We're never going to get to the bottom of God. His ways are always going to be beyond our ways and His thoughts beyond our thoughts.

And yet, He's not a God who's hard to reach. He's not way off somewhere. Instead, He's a God who comes near to us, and reveals Himself in so many ways: through His creation, through His Word,

through His Son, and through His Spirit living in the church, working in our own lives.

So the Lord Himself invites us to ponder the deep things of God, and to put down our roots in Him. So prayerfully, that's where we're headed: deeper and deeper into the life of God. And I want you to notice that these lessons are intended to follow the contours of the gospel; the whole story about how God pursues and redeems His people through his own Son, Jesus Christ.

First, we're going to focus on the Deep Trouble that we find ourselves in now that sin has entered the world, and has entered *our* lives.

Jesus told a parable about this. It's a story that describes how every person goes astray and gets themselves into trouble; and sometimes they don't even realize it. But God is always searching for His children, and finding ways to bring us back to Him. So let's listen to what Jesus says about the Deep Trouble we're in, and how our Father wants to bring us back home.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. But the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So He told them this parable:

"...There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in immoral living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to

feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; but no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

(Luke 15.1-3; 11-32)

Younger Son

I was in *deep* trouble. You see, I had taken everything in the world that was valuable to me and just threw it all away. But I didn't just throw away my own possessions; I *took* and I *wasted* everything that was coming to me from my own father.

But I was just so *sick* of following all his rules. You know, sometimes it seemed like he just didn't understand me, like he didn't even know me, like he didn't care. And I just knew that I'd be better off without him.

So one day I finally got up the nerve, and I went to him and said, "Look, Dad, just give me my inheritance now, and I'll get out of your hair. I'll get out of your house. I'll get out of your life. You're worth more to me dead than you are alive. So why don't you just drop dead, *Dad*, and give me my money, and you'll never see me again."

And even though I had hurt him to the core, even though I told him I wished he was dead, and even though he knew that I was just going to go and blow it all, my father gave me everything that I asked for. He gave me everything that was going to be mine whenever he died.

I thought, "I don't need my father; I just need his money." And so I grabbed that money out of his hand, and I went and got all my things together, and I just left. I didn't even say goodbye. I just wanted to get out of there, and to get as far away from that house as I could. I didn't want anything to do with *him* anymore.

So I took off to this distant country and, just as my father knew I would, I blew the entire inheritance. I'm sure you can guess where the money went. You know, a young man, all on his own, far away from home, and with all this money that his father had earned. Now, I've got to tell you, those were some wild times and, honestly, I was spinning out of control, but I just didn't care. I just wanted to call the shots and to have a good time, and to do whatever I could to forget my father.

Of course, the day came (and pretty soon) when all the money was gone. I had eaten the richest foods, worn the nicest clothes. I had drunk the sweetest wine, and bought the finest women. I indulged every desire until I had absolutely nothing left. And then, there was a terrible famine that swept across that entire country, so that most people barely had enough for themselves, much less anything to spare for a wretch like me. My companions had all left me, the wine had worn off, and my stomach was empty.

So I wandered around that country, trying to find a way just to stay alive. Sometimes I begged, sometimes I stole, and I was always looking for work, until I finally found a job doing the last thing on earth a young Jewish man should be caught doing: taking care of pigs.

Of course, every day, I'd have to go feed them. And it was some nasty stuff, all the leftover scraps from my master's table. So whatever they scraped off their plates, I would go dump out in front of the pigs. And they'd just lick it up! Now, at first it

turned my stomach; it just made me nauseous. So I was already miserable, but it just got worse. And eventually, I was starving so much I actually started to *envy* those pigs. It got so bad that I was ready to get down on my knees and eat my fill of that disgusting slop.

I was so hungry, so lost. I was so desperate that I finally let myself remember the one thing that I'd been trying so hard to forget. I remembered home, and I remembered my father.

I just thought, "How many hired servants does my father have? He feeds *them* every day and they have plenty left over. And here *I* am with these filthy pigs, dying of hunger. So unless I'm going to die out here, there's only one thing left for me to do. I've got to go home...to my dad."

But then I stopped, and thought, "But he'll never take *me* back. It can *never* be like it was. I took his money and spit in his face. And now I don't have anything left out of all that he gave me. I can never be his son again; I'm not worthy. I'll have to *beg* him just to let me become his slave."

So I started back home on that long road of shame, with my head hung low, my stomach growling, and my whole body aching. And finally, I came to my father's house. It was just off in the distance, and then from way up there at the house, I heard a shout; it sounded like my name.

So I looked up, and from far away I could see that somebody was coming toward me just as fast as he could. And I watched that figure getting closer and closer until I realized: That's *Dad*. It was my father, *running* from the house. And he didn't care about his dignity. He didn't care that he was the patriarch of the family.

No, he had his robes gathered up in his fists, and was sprinting like a little kid, kicking up dust behind him, almost jumping with every stride. And when he finally got to me, he almost knocked me over. He threw his arms around me and gave me the kiss of greeting, the kiss of welcome.

I had been thinking of exactly what I was going to say to him in this moment, but I sure hadn't been expecting this! So I had to compose myself, and I tried to say it just like I'd rehearsed: "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...*"

But he stopped me. He gently put his hand up to my mouth to halt my speech. And I could see he had tears in his eyes and a great big smile across his face. And he whispered, "Hush...Son."

Then he called to his servants, "Quickly, bring out a robe, our best robe and put it on his shoulders. Bring a ring and put it on his finger. Bring sandals and put them on his feet. And go, kill the fattest calf we have and prepare a feast for my son. For this son of mine was lost and now he has been found. I thought he was dead, but here he

is, *alive* again. My son has come home!" And then he threw a party for me...like I'd never seen before.



The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt (1606-1669)

Elder Son

I was in deep trouble?! *That* boy is nothing *but* trouble! Ever since he was born, all he's ever done is take advantage of our father. He was given everything he could possibly want and he never gave *anything* in return, that spoiled little brat!

I was the *good* son. I'm the one who always did *everything* our father wanted. And that other son of his had the audacity to ask for his inheritance early. And Dad actually *gave* it to him!

And I knew exactly what was going to happen. Just like I said, he went out and wasted it all on booze and girls. Is it any surprise that he ended up almost starving to death out there? It serves him right!

He *should* have died out there, and to the *devil* with him! That would have made it easier on us. The whole family would have been better off. But no! That sorry excuse for a son came limping back home, with his tail tucked between his legs. How *dare* he come back here after all he's done!

But that's not even the worst part. The *worst* part is: *Dad* took him *back*! Can you believe that?! And it's not like he just let him come back and be one of the servants—no, Dad gave him our best robe, and he killed and cooked our best calf, and he threw him the biggest party I've ever seen!

And like always, *I* was out in the field working my tail off, like I'm *supposed* to, doing what a *good* son would do. And I finally finished the work and was headed back home. And I was looking forward to a quiet meal and an early bedtime.

But when I was still a ways off, I could hear music and dancing. I heard laughing and cheering and I heard them shouting *his* name!!

So I grabbed one of the servants and I yelled at him, "What's going on in my house?" And he said, "Your brother has come home! And your father's so glad to have him back safe, he killed the fatted calf for a feast."

Well, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. You've got to be kidding me! *I'm* not going to go to some stupid party for that stupid son of his! So I sat down outside, folded my arms, and I was just steaming.

And here comes my father. He left his precious boy's party to come out here to me, and to beg *me* to come inside.

But I had had *enough*. So I said, "Listen *Dad*, all these years, my whole life, I've been working like a *slave* for you. And I've *never* disobeyed even *one* of your commands. And yet you've never even given me a goat so that I could go celebrate with *my* friends. And you've killed the fatted *calf* for him! Are you telling me that the



way to get a party around here is to steal half the estate and go spend it on prostitutes? I can't believe you're just going to forgive him like that! Where's the justice in that? *I'm* the good son; *he's* never been anything but trouble."

Father

I have two sons...and they were *both* in deep trouble.

The sin of my younger son was obvious. His sin is **rebellion**. He didn't respect me. He didn't love me. He didn't want to live under my authority.

And so he decided in his heart that I was as good as dead to him. He didn't want *me* in his life. He just wanted what he thought I could give him.

And there are some things that a young person can only learn by experience. It was his life, and this was his choice. So I gave him exactly what he asked for. And he went off, and he did as he pleased for as long as he could, until he hit bottom.

Finally, he realized how foolish he had been, and what a mess he had made of his life. But even through all that, I never stopped loving him. *I* didn't want him to go through everything that he put himself through. I didn't *want* him to throw away his inheritance and almost starve to death. I didn't *want* him to hurt like that. He was my son! And I never stopped wanting him to come home and to be with me. So I looked for him day after day after day...

Until one day, he finally came back! And I saw him from a distance and my heart jumped into my throat and I started to cry. I gathered up my robe and took off running as fast as I could until I got to him, and I grabbed him and squeezed him as hard as I could. And I had such a smile across my face, and tears in my eyes.

He started to say something about wanting to just be a slave, but he was my son! And so I treated him like it—with the best of our robes, the best of our cattle, and the biggest party you've ever seen.

Yes, he rebelled. And it hurt me. And he suffered for it. But he was my son, and I was glad to have him home again.

I was happy, and the whole household was happy. And everyone there was celebrating. But it just wasn't complete, because I knew that my older son hadn't come back yet from the fields. He didn't know that his brother had come home. And I wanted *him* to be there too, so that he could celebrate *with* us. And so, just like before, I waited and waited and watched for my son to come home.

And then I realized that he was just outside the house, but was refusing to come in to the party. So I looked out and I saw him, too, at a distance, and I immediately went out to him, just like before. But he didn't want to see me. He didn't want to talk; he just wanted to shout: "I can't believe that you've taken back that son of yours, after all he's done to *us*."

And I could see, in that moment, that *this* son was in just as much trouble as his brother had been. He didn't respect me. He didn't love me. He didn't *want* to live under my authority. So for years, he had felt like he was enslaved to me, like it was a burden to be my son. And he couldn't understand how in the world I could forgive his brother. And my heart went out to him.

You see, my younger son's sin was rebellion, and it was obvious. But my older son's sin was **pride**, and pride is much more subtle, but just as dangerous.

It's easy to see the sins of others, to see a speck in their eye. But the prideful person is blind to their own sin, to the plank that's stuck in their own eye.

I have two sons. And they were both in deep trouble. Neither of them realized my love for them; my generous, patient, eternal love. They both acted like slaves, but I saw them as sons.

All that is mine is yours, so whenever one of you comes home, we've got to celebrate and rejoice! Because the one who was lost has been found, and the one who was dead has been brought back to life.

And that's why I, the Father, had my true Son tell this story in the first place. Because I have many children. And I love them, and I want them *all* to be with Me.

Some of My children are **rebellious**. They spit in My face. They don't want Me; they just want what I can give them. They want to live under their *own* authority. They want to call the shots. And they end up wasting so many of the blessings that I have

for them. They waste so much of their own lives. I want them to come home, and to enjoy all the riches that are truly theirs because they are Mine.

And some of my children are **proud**. They're proud of their own righteousness, their own good deeds, and their own slavish devotion. Year after year they slave away for their own pride and call it service to Me. And I want them to come home and to be *with* Me, and to experience the joy and the celebration that is theirs because they are Mine.

All of my children get themselves into deep trouble, including you. Trouble that you can't get yourself out of. And that's why I sent My true Son, Jesus Christ. *He* loved Me completely and was pleased to live under My authority. He enjoyed all the riches and the glory that were Mine, and yet, He gave it all up for His brothers and sisters. He went to the cross, and He took on all your troubles: all your rebellion, all your pride, all your sin. And He died to take those troubles away from *you*, My *child*. And He rose again to give you the life that I always wanted for you.

So let me ask you...are *you* in trouble? Will you come home? Will you come inside and join us? Because I'm throwing an amazing party, one like you've *never* seen before...



NICK RUPLE is an imperfect but redeemed disciple of Jesus Christ, the husband of Alisha for almost ten years, and father of Livy (4) and Max (2). He has a passion to connect the ancient Scriptures with modern audiences in a way that reveals the eternal relevance of the Word of God. He has been serving as a minister for the Mount Comfort Church of Christ in Fayetteville, AR since 2007.

DEEP PASSION

NICK RUPLE

Introduction

Last time, we saw the Deep Trouble that we've gotten ourselves into because of our rebellion and pride against God. Next we're going to see what *God* decided to *do* about it.

A lot of times we talk about how passionate we can be for God. But today, we'll see that it's God who is passionate for us. And He *showed* that Deep Passion for all His children in a very surprising way: by giving His only Son for us.

Three times in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts to His disciples that He is going to Jerusalem to die. All three times they totally misunderstand what He's talking about. And all three times Jesus brings them together and teaches them what true discipleship is all about and what Deep Passion really looks like.

So, let's listen in as Jesus teaches His disciples on those three occasions:

Jesus went on with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

And they answered Him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And He sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about Him.

Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning and looking at His disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wants to become My follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

(Mark 8.27-35)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for He was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill Him, and three days after being killed, He will rise again." But they did not understand what He was saying and were afraid to ask Him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house He asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

(Mark 9.30-35)

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to Him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death; then they will hand Him over to the Gentiles; they will mock Him, and spit upon Him, and flog Him, and kill Him; and after three days He will rise again."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Him and said to Him, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want Me to do for you?" And they said to Him, "Grant us to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at My right hand or at My left is not Mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

(Mark 10.32-45)



I thought that I had all the passion I needed. I thought I was so zealous for the cause that I was ready to suffer, even ready to die. But it turns out I had no idea what deep passion really meant.

Everyone thought that I was the passionate one. The first time that I saw this man—Jesus—all He said to me was, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” And that was all it took! I immediately dropped my nets and I left everything behind to do just what He said.

Some people may have thought that I was crazy to do that, but I knew I was just being passionate. And let me tell you, after that I saw so many amazing things. And they just confirmed that I had really made the right choice.

I saw *all* these amazing things as I followed Jesus around the countryside. He made a paralyzed man to walk again. He restored another man’s withered hand. He healed fevers, cleansed lepers. He cured *all kinds* of diseases. And He cast out many demons and unclean spirits. Now *they* seemed to know exactly who He was, but we’d never seen anything like this before.

So when we saw Him calm the storm we asked each other, “Who is this man? Even the wind and sea obey Him.” We wondered how He could possibly do such miraculous signs, and we wondered just what kind of man we had gotten ourselves involved with.

Many times we had asked, *"Who is this man?"* But then, one day, *He* asked us. As we were walking among the villages in the north, Jesus turned and asked us disciples, *"Who do people say that I am?"* And we answered, "Some think You're John the Baptist, come back from the dead. Others say You must be Elijah, because Malachi prophesied that He would return. And there's another group who say that You're one of the prophets themselves."

But then, more to the point, He asked us, *"But who do **you** say I am?"* And He looked right at me. Like I said, *everyone* thought that I was the passionate one, that I was the spokesperson for all the others. So I told Him what we were all thinking: *"You...are the Messiah."*

He was the One anointed by God, the One that our people had been waiting for. I was sure of it. He would be the One to lead Israel back to power. He was going to drive out the Roman oppressors, and make our people strong again. He was the Son of David who would reign again on the throne of Israel.

And I *thought* Jesus was going to congratulate me for finally figuring out who He really was, for declaring Him to be the Christ. But instead, He *ordered* us not to repeat it; to tell absolutely no one.

And then, He began to teach us things we never could have guessed. Things like I had never heard before. He told us that the Son of Man wasn't going to be enthroned by the leaders of Israel. No, instead He would be rejected by the elders,

the chief priests, and the scribes. That He would undergo fantastic suffering, and that He was going to be killed, but after three days He would rise again.

And He said all this like it was understood, like we should have already known. But I couldn't *stand* to hear Him talking like that.

See, we had left everything behind to follow Jesus. And even though some people thought we were crazy, we had seen His divine power: His power over disease, His power over nature, His power over the spirits.

Surely He had political power *too*! Surely He could gather an army, and march against Rome. And He *would* be victorious—He would ascend to power, and we could be right there with Him. I mean, that's *why* we were *following* Him! And yet now *He* was saying He was going to be rejected and killed?!

Well, I just couldn't have Him talking like that. He had just gotten this movement up and going. I wasn't going to let Him blow it now with all this talk of defeat and death. So, out of respect, I took Him aside, but I *did* give him a piece of my mind.

I started to rebuke Jesus for what He was saying, for His pessimistic attitude. And maybe I was a little too harsh, but at least I did it in private. But He got everyone's attention and then He rebuked me publicly, in front of all of the other disciples. He looked me right in the eyes and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you've got your mind set, not on the things God cares about, but on the things people care about."

I was stunned. I was speechless. I mean, it was my passion, my zeal for the cause that had me up in arms against Jesus in the first place. I just wanted Him to see how devoted I was. Even if He didn't believe in Himself, I wanted Him to see that I believed He was the Messiah who had come to fight for us and to deliver us. I didn't want Him to die. I didn't even want Him to *talk* about it.

But now, I felt like I had misunderstood something. He said that I was thinking on earthly things and not on heavenly things. He even called me Satan! But then, He really drove his point home. He called the whole crowd, together with us disciples and he began to teach all of us again. Something we had never heard before. Something we couldn't have imagined.

"If anyone wants to become **My** follower, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow Me. For those who want to save their life will lose it. But those who lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of the good news about me will save it."

Now, that was the first time we'd heard Him talk like that, but it sure wasn't the last.



Not long after that, we went on from there, further south, a little closer to Jerusalem. And we were passing through Galilee, but He didn't want anyone to know it because, again, He was telling us disciples what was going to happen to Him: "The

Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands. And they will kill Him and three days after being killed, He will rise again.”

Now I’ve got to be honest: we still didn’t understand what He was talking about. We didn’t understand *why* He was saying these things. But, we were all too afraid to ask Him.

Finally, we came to Capernaum, and to the house where we were staying. And once we were inside, He turned and asked us another question: “What were you arguing about on the way?” because He had overheard us fighting with each other. And even though He surely knew what we’d said, we kept our silence, because we were afraid to answer Him. We were ashamed, because we had been arguing about which one of us was the greatest.

So He sat down there, and called us together. And He told us, “Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all.” Now this sounded like a strange teaching to us, and we weren’t sure what to make of it. But we had been convinced that this Man was sent from God, that He was the Messiah we’d been waiting for, and so we kept following Him, further and further south.

And as we were on the road, with Jesus walking in front of us, we began to be afraid, because we could see where we had finally come to, and just where He was headed. And so Jesus took the twelve of us aside again, and He told us a third time exactly what was about to happen to him once we got there.

He said, "Look, we're going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death. Then they will hand Him over to the Gentiles. They will mock Him, and spit upon Him, and flog Him, and kill Him. But after three days, He will rise again."

Well, this still sounded crazy to us, but at least He was talking about rising up again, and ascending in power.

So two of the disciples, named James and John, caught onto this, and they got an idea. Now James and John were brothers who had been fishing partners with me and my brother Andrew. And they'd been with us since the very beginning; they were called by Jesus on the same day that I was. And now they knew that, along with me, they were Jesus' closest disciples.

So they went to Him and said, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." A pretty bold request, even for them. But he said, "What is it you want Me to do for you?" And they said, "We've heard You talking about rising up in power, and we just want to make sure that we get a share in it. So, when You come into Your glory, let one of us sit at Your right hand, and the other at Your left. Give us the two highest positions of power."

But Jesus replied, "You don't even know what you're asking...Can you drink from My cup? Can you be baptized with My baptism?" Now *they* were the ones who didn't understand what *He* was asking. So James and John said, "*We can.*" And He

became very solemn and said, "You *will* drink the cup that I'm going to drink and you will be baptized with My baptism. But I cannot grant you to sit on My right and left. Those positions are not Mine to give."

And when the other ten of us disciples heard what James and John had had the audacity to ask Him, we were furious. *We* all wanted those positions of power! What right did they have to go and ask for them behind our backs?

So it was very clear to Jesus that we *still* didn't understand what He meant when He told us the Son of Man must die and rise again. So He called us yet again, and spoke to us: "You know that among the nations, their rulers take advantage of their authority. They dominate those under them and exalt themselves as lords over them. So their great ones become tyrants. But it shouldn't be that way among you. It can't be like that for those who would follow after me. Instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all. For I, the Son of Man, have come not to be served but to serve, not to make slaves but to become like a slave. I have come not to take life, but to give My own life as a ransom for many."

And the next day, we followed Him into Jerusalem...



And soon, the day came when everything He predicted came to pass. And on the night before it happened, He told us that one of us would betray Him, and that all

of us would desert Him. But *I* was the passionate one! And so I boasted, “Even if everyone else deserts You, *I* will not!” Then Jesus told me to my face, “This very night, before the rooster crows in the morning, you will deny Me three times.” And I came back at him with as much passion as I could muster: “Even if I have to die with You, I will *not* deny You!” And all the other disciples said the same thing.

And then we all went with Him to the garden so he could pray. And the night was heavy with anticipation. But our eyes were heavy with sleep, and we couldn't keep ourselves awake with Him. So I...nodded...off...

But I was jolted awake by the footsteps of men. And I jerked my head up to see torches and swords and faces. And the face that led them all was that of Judas, bringing a mob to arrest Jesus. And after he gave Him the kiss of greeting, they laid their hands on Him.

And I was not going to just sit by and let them do that. So I jumped up, drew my sword, and started swinging at the men who held Him, and I sliced off one of their ears. I was proving my passion—I was ready to fight for Him; I was ready to *kill* for Him. And I was just about to attack again, but Jesus held up His hand and stopped me.

We all froze, as Jesus calmly stooped down, picked up the ear I had cut off, and healed the man. Then He turned to me once again, and told me to put away my sword. “Am I not to drink the cup that my Father has given Me?” And in that moment I



Jesus Being Arrested

knew: He wasn't going to fight; He was going to die! *I* tried to *stand up* for His life, but He...meant to lay it down.

So they led Him away to his trial, to false accusations, to beatings, to mockery, and ultimately, to His cross. But I wasn't willing to stand beside Him; I *followed*, but at a safe distance. And my heart was racing, because I knew they *were* going to kill Him, just like He had said.

As I came into the courtyard of the high priest, people started to recognize *me* as one of his followers. One after another they said, "*You were with Him,*" but each time I said I wasn't. And I became so frustrated and scared that I started to curse. And

finally I shouted, "*I don't even know that man!*" And before my own voice died in the night air, I heard the distant sound of a crowing rooster. Its voice mingled with mine, and in that moment, I knew my passion had been a sham. I was no disciple of his. I was a fraud. And I ran out of the courtyard and collapsed in tears.

Just as Jesus had said, they rejected Him, and they crucified Him. And he was all alone, because my passion had failed.

I *thought* that I had all the passion I needed. I thought that I was so zealous for the cause that I was ready to suffer, even ready to die. But it turns out, I had no idea what deep passion really means.

I thought that passion was found in my own personal devotion, my own strength, my *fortitude*. But that kind of passion always fails, for the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak. Nobody can stand up on their own power. Try to preserve your own life, and you'll just end up losing it.

That's what Jesus understood. That's what He was trying to teach us. True passion means suffering for the sake of God on behalf of others. True discipleship means taking up a cross and following the One we recognize as the Messiah.

It's a path of self-denial, of dependence, and laying down. It's a path that leads to a cross. That's the path He walked. And He taught us that the way to life is through death. The way to *get* through suffering is to *go* through suffering. And it's only in laying down your life that you can truly find it.

Passion, Deep Passion, is godly suffering for others. *That* is the passion of Jesus Christ. And that's why I'm here today. To remind you of what He taught us. To teach you what it took me so long to learn:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves [not with swords], but with his same attitude (for whoever joins him in suffering in the flesh is finished with sin). Then, you will not live the rest of your earthly lives for evil human desires but rather for the will of God...

My dear friends, don't be surprised at the painful trials you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be glad and shout for joy when His glory is revealed.

If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, because [that shows that] the spirit of glory, the Spirit of God himself, is resting on you. So if you suffer, it should not be as a murderer, or a thief, or any other kind of criminal...However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God because you wear that name...

Therefore, you who suffer according to God's will...commit yourselves to your faithful Creator and continue to do good.

(1 Peter 4.1-2, 12-16, 19)

Then, and only then will you have true, deep passion. And only Jesus Christ can show us just how far that kind of passion is willing to go.



NICK RUPLE is an imperfect but redeemed disciple of Jesus Christ, the husband of Alisha for almost ten years, and father of Livy (4) and Max (2). He has a passion to connect the ancient Scriptures with modern audiences in a way that reveals the eternal relevance of the Word of God. He has been serving as a minister for the Mount Comfort Church of Christ in Fayetteville, AR since 2007.

DEEP PROMISE

NICK RUPLE

Introduction

We've already seen the Deep Trouble that our sin has gotten us into. And we've seen God's Deep Passion for us: that He would send his Son, and that Jesus would die to redeem us from our troubles.

But, of course, everybody dies. Death is the great enemy of every one of us. And the Romans crucified a lot of people, not just Jesus. There were even two other men crucified with Him on the same day.

So what is it that makes the death of Jesus Christ so unique?

It's that it didn't *work*! He died, but He didn't stay dead. Our great enemy could not defeat our even greater Savior!

Jesus rose again on the third day, just as He predicted. And then He appeared to some who had followed Him up to a point, but then had deserted Him. And in His appearing, they realized the final piece to the puzzle: the Deep Promise that is ours because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

And from that time on, those followers are transformed forever.

And they make a Deep Promise back to God, this time to follow him wherever it may lead them.

So let's listen to what happens when Jesus appears to two men who had given up hope:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing Him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed Him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

But we had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find His body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see Him."

Then He said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into His glory?" Then

beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them the things about Himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, He walked ahead as if He were going on. But they urged Him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them. When He was at the table with them, He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the road, while He was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and He has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

While they were talking about this, Jesus Himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at My hands and My feet; see that it is I Myself. Touch Me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate in their presence.

Then He said to them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about Me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand

the scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

(Luke 24.13-48)



The sun was rising, but I wasn't ready to rise with it. My eyes were still closed, and I just lay there, trying to find a reason to get out of bed. If the last few weeks were like a dream, the last few days had been a nightmare.

Great crowds of people, like us, had flocked in from all over the region, and Cleopas and I were right there with them. We had left our hometown of Emmaus, in Judea, and headed north.

We had all left our homes for the same reason: we heard that there was this Healer wandering around Galilee, and He spoke with the authority of one of the prophets of old. He even claimed to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because he has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..."

And that's exactly what He had been doing: preaching the good news that the kingdom of God had come near, healing all kinds of diseases from blindness to

leprosy to paralysis, and He was releasing people from unclean spirits and from the sins that had held them captive.

And we knew exactly what this meant. This was Messiah material. This could be the One we've been waiting on for centuries. And we were *ready* to be set free from oppression, just like He promised—the oppression of the Romans who were occupying these lands that God had promised to Israel.

And we were ready to join up and to fight with Him. We were ready to leave behind everything we knew and to go find this Messiah, the one they called Jesus of Nazareth.

And we did find Him, traveling all over Galilee in the north with his twelve chosen disciples. We actually got to witness His amazing signs ourselves, and to hear His powerful teaching to the crowds. But, of course, there were some things that He said only to the twelve.

And one day, Jesus decided it was time to go south, and He set his face toward Jerusalem. We weren't exactly sure why, but apparently He *had* told his closest disciples. What we knew was that the Passover was coming and that Jerusalem was the heart of our land. And there was not a more perfect time or place for the Messiah to begin the redemption of Israel.

Over the next several days He traveled southward, stopping in all the villages along the way, continuing to teach and to heal. And He chose seventy of us to lead

the way for him, to scout out the towns that lay ahead. And Cleopas and I were both thrilled to be one of them, to be going before Jesus and proclaiming that the kingdom of God was coming soon.

We were there when, at last, Jesus came into Jerusalem riding like royalty on the back of a colt. And we spread our own cloaks on the ground in front of Him. And we shouted out the psalm with the multitude: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." And we couldn't have been any more elated, or more hopeful.

But, like I said, if *those* weeks were like a dream come true, the next few days were an absolute nightmare, because once Jesus was in Jerusalem, He made a lot of enemies. He drove the merchants out of the temple, rebuked the Pharisees, shamed the Sadducees, and condemned the scribes and the chief priests. And it wasn't long before they all wanted Him silenced, so they looked for a way to put Him to death.

And one of those twelve disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Jesus into their hands. They found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, and took Him to the Roman governor Pilate and convinced *him* to have Jesus executed. He was mocked, and tortured, and crucified on the day before the Sabbath. We had left everything to follow Jesus, hoping that He was the one who would redeem Israel, but now He was dead, and our hope died with Him.

As he lay in His tomb on that Sabbath day, I lay in bed...depressed, dejected, and in utter disbelief.

And by the third day, nothing much had changed. We were still in Jerusalem, all gathered in a house: the remaining Eleven and all the rest of us, including Cleopas and me.

The sun had already risen, but I wasn't ready to rise with it. My eyes were still closed, and I just lay there, trying to find a reason to get out of bed. That reason came when I heard this commotion in the front room.

And I staggered in there to find some of our women, led by Mary Magdalene, babbling on to the Eleven like they had seen a ghost. They were out of breath, their eyes were opened wide, and they were trying to get out this story that honestly didn't make a lot of sense.

They had gone out to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, but when they got there, the stone had been moved and the body was missing. As if that wasn't crazy enough, they started saying that they had met these two men there who were dressed in bright white. And they told these women that Jesus was alive. Now the story was getting pretty wild, and we found it pretty hard to believe. Surely, there was a more logical explanation than that.



*Disciples on the road to Emmaus
by Barry Moser*

But Peter had to see for himself. So I saw him run out the door, and he came back some time later. He confirmed that Jesus' body was gone, but he didn't know what to make of it.

As for me, after everything that had happened, *this* was just too much. Not only had they arrested Jesus and killed Him, but now some fanatic or some vandal had desecrated His tomb and stolen His body.

And I just couldn't take anymore. Cleopas and I had *no* reason to stay in Jerusalem. After all, our hometown was just a few miles to the west, and so we packed our things and said our goodbyes. And that afternoon we set out on the road to Emmaus.



Now, Cleopas and I hardly knew what to think, but we had seven miles to walk, so we filled the time by talking through everything that had happened, and what those women had said, just trying to make some sense of it all.

It was a long, dusty road. And we walked it in defeat, with our heads hung low and our feet scuffing the dirt with every step. So soon enough, this Stranger came up on us from behind. We hardly even looked up at Him, but He couldn't help overhearing our conversation, and He seemed very intrigued by what we were saying.

So He asked us, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" And we came to a stop and finally looked up at this guy. Neither of us had ever seen Him before. I just sighed. I was too burdened to try to recount the nightmare to this ignorant Stranger.

But Cleopas couldn't believe He didn't already know, because the Stranger was also coming from the city where everyone had been in an uproar. So he said, "You've got to be the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened the last few days!"

The Stranger said, "What things?" And Cleopas just couldn't contain his emotions anymore. We had given up so much, and were so invested in the cause. And all our hopes had been dashed when Jesus was crucified. It turns out he was a false Messiah after all. We felt like such *fools*! The shame and anger and desperation poured out of Cleopas as he shouted at the Stranger: "What things?! The things about Jesus of Nazareth! We just *knew* He had to be a prophet. He did such amazing things and He spoke with such power! But the chief priests condemned Him and handed Him over to those heathen Romans, and they crucified Him! And we fools had put *all* our hopes on *Him*. We thought surely *He* would be the One to redeem Israel. And if that wasn't enough! It's now the third day since all this happened, and this morning some of our women told us that His body was gone from the tomb. And then they went off the deep end, talking about seeing angels who said He was alive. I mean, they'd obviously gone crazy! So some others went down to the tomb to see for

themselves. And it was empty, just like the women had said, but *they* didn't see Him either."

Well, Cleopas had said enough, and the Stranger came back at him with surprising force: "You *are* a couple of fools! Not because you followed Him, but because you're so slow to believe what the prophets have said! Wasn't it all part of God's plan from the very beginning that the Messiah would have to suffer these things before He could enter his glory?"

And then He walked us through the Scriptures, starting at the very beginning, from the things Moses wrote: "I will raise up for them a Prophet...and I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak...all that I command Him,"¹ and going all the way through the prophets: "He was despised and rejected...a man of suffering... Surely He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases, yet we accounted Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions...and by His bruises we are healed..."²

The Stranger taught us from the Scriptures that what had happened to Jesus was exactly what was *supposed* to happen to God's Anointed One. And as He spoke, my heart began to race, and then I started to sweat all over. It's like I was overheating from the inside out. What if he was *right*?

¹Deuteronomy 18.18.

²Isaiah 53.

By the time he finished, we were approaching Emmaus, and the sun was starting to set. It seemed like the Stranger was planning to go on further, but we urged Him to come and stay with us. Because we were fascinated by all He said, His knowledge of the Scriptures, His familiarity with the Messiah, and His perception of our own hearts.

Finally, He agreed to come in and stay with us. But as we sat down to dinner, He did what no guest ever does. He did what only the host would do. He took the bread in His hands, blessed it, broke it, and went to give some to us.

And I looked at His outstretched hand, and as I took the bread from him, I glanced up at His face for just a moment. Then I turned and laid the bread on the table in front of me. And as I did, I thought "Wait a minute...I recognize *Him!*" But by the time I looked back up again, He was gone, vanished before our very eyes.

And I looked across the table at Cleopas, and he had the same astounded look on his face. And in that moment...we both knew.

He *is* alive! *That* was Jesus!

"I should have known!" I exclaimed. "I wasn't going to say anything because it sounded crazy, but it was like my heart was on fire when He met us on the road."

"Mine too!" Cleopas replied. "And it got even hotter when He started opening up the Word. That was *Him!* We've got to get out of here...we've got to go tell the others!"

And we jumped up from the table, ran out the door, and were back on the road. But this time our faces were held high and we sailed over the ground like we were barely touching it.



And we were back in Jerusalem in no time, busting down the door. We were so excited to tell the Eleven and all the others.

But *they* were already in high spirits. *They* were just as amazed and excited as we were. They said, "The women were right! He *is* alive! The Lord has appeared to Simon Peter!" And then we started to tell them how He had appeared to us too.

It turns out that the Son—the Son of God—had already risen. We just hadn't been ready to believe. Our eyes had been closed, and we didn't recognize who He really was. But when He broke the bread, our eyes were opened wide, and we believed.

And just when we thought it couldn't get any better, the Lord Himself appeared and stood among us. And even though we were thrilled to see that He wasn't dead, we were also completely terrified. Wouldn't you be? I mean, have you ever seen someone killed and buried and then seen them alive again? How would *you* feel?

We knew that He had been dead, but we didn't know what He was now. He certainly wasn't the same as before. Was he a ghost? A spirit? Or just a figment of our imaginations?

But He spoke to us gently: "Peace be with you. Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at My hands and My feet; see that it is I myself. Touch Me and see. For a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones as you see I have."

Then he extended His hands, and we could see the scars left by the nails. And we saw the same in His feet. This was still hard to believe, but now it was because we were so overjoyed! If Jesus could overcome death, why couldn't we?

And just to prove to us even further that He was not a spirit, but had been raised physically, bodily, He asked if we had anything He could eat. And when we gave Him a piece of broiled fish, He took a bite, chewed and swallowed it, just like any of us would.

Then He began to teach us again, saying, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." And we could all feel our hearts warming within us again, as He opened our minds to understand what God's message had been all along.

"This is what is written: the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. And now that I have accomplished this—Go! I'm sending you out in My name to announce the good news of My resurrection, beginning in Jerusalem, and then spreading out from there to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people, so that the world may know that they can turn from their wickedness, return to the Lord, be

forgiven of their sins, and that they too can experience victory over death. You are witnesses of these things.”

The nightmare was over, and our wildest dreams had come true. The Son had risen indeed. *Now* our eyes were opened.

And we were ready to live for Him, to die for Him, and to rise with Him.



Now, what does all of this mean for all of us? Because now that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, that changes everything.

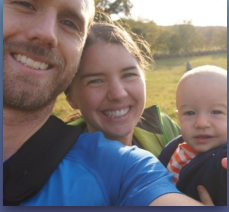
You and I knew that we were in **Deep Trouble**, because the payment for our sin was death. And we had no way of overcoming the sin in our lives. We had no hope of being able to defeat death on our own.

But in Jesus Christ, *God* has defeated both of those enemies for us! The **Deep Passion** of his Son’s *sacrifice* has erased all the sins that were on our record. And now we are continually washed by His blood.

And the *resurrection* of Jesus has given us such a **Deep Promise**: that death is *not* the final word. Through Jesus, we too can have victory, even over death. So we have an unshakable hope that when He comes again, we will be raised with *Him*. And if we’re found in Him, we’ll have glorious bodies just like His, and we’ll get to enjoy life that *never* ends!

Now *that's* good news.

It's the true story of how God pursues and redeems his children. And it's a story that inspires a Deep Promise from us: a lifelong commitment to turn away from our sins, and to follow God wherever He leads us.



JUSTIN BLAND lives in Searcy, AR with his wife, Heather, and 1 1/2 year old son, David. He has been teaching at Harding University for just over 3 1/2 years and received his Ph.D. in Kinesiology with an emphasis in Pediatric Exercise Physiology from Michigan State University.

THE SERVANT HEART

JUSTIN BLAND

Introduction

Before we begin I want to take a moment to set the stage: I do not know where you are spiritually or what you struggle with, but something that I have been struggling with for a long time is my inadequacy in worship. How is my worship even close to being adequate for the Almighty God of the universe?! The God who *breathed* stars into existence! The God who is before and beyond time!

There is a song that has expressed this thought so well for me. It is called "Gloria" by *Watermark*. The artist is struggling with his lack of ability to worship the Creator God. This is in stark contrast to his observations of nature—with everything nature has it praises the Almighty. He feels that the creation does such a better job of worshiping the Lord than he does. He says:

I wish I could crash like the waves

Or turn like the autumn leaves

In effort to praise You

I wish I could smell like the forest

*The fragrance lifting a mighty chorus
In effort to praise You, in effort to praise You*

*But I'm such a limited creature
And my words can only paint so many pictures
But somewhere I'm sure I read that I am
Treasured over all creation
So I know that I must try, I must try*

*I wish I could roll like the thunder
To leave the earth below in wonder
In effort to praise You
I wish I could fall like the summer rain
And every drop would sing Your name
In effort to praise You, in effort to praise You*

*But I'm such a limited creature
And my words can only paint so many pictures
But somewhere I'm sure I read that I am
Treasured over all creation
So I know that I must try, I must try*

*Gloria, glory in the highest
Forever I will hide myself in Thee
Gloria, glory in the highest
Forever I will hide myself in Thee*

*Every breath that I breathe
Every moment in my history
Is an effort to praise You
An effort to praise You*

We are the pinnacle of His Creation, and as such, our free choice to worship Him is adequate because of the awesome power of the blood of Jesus Christ. Buckle up, because we are going to talk only very briefly about a tiny aspect of the pinnacle of His creation—the cardiovascular system.

Purpose and Design

I believe there is a wide spectrum of understanding of the cardiovascular system. I will do my best to present information that is appropriate to all, but it is important to understand the difficulty of that task. We will only be briefly touching on some high points that I have come across in my studies, and thus we will be skipping over some background elements.

Also, when talking about structure and function of anything (especially the body) it is extremely important to note the words “purpose” and “design.” These are “our” words. Those of us that believe in a Creator God who is purposeful are the only ones that should be able to use these words when referring to nature (as in, “the purpose of this is...”). Interestingly, these words are used by most scholars concerning the structure and especially the function of the human body (and all other areas of biology). Listen carefully when someone uses these words, because the implications are *huge*. If there is no God then there is *no* purpose—and there is *no* design. You

cannot have it both ways. You cannot say “there is no God” and “the purpose of this structure/process is...”

So when I teach I emphasize the words *purpose* and *design* because the complexity of the created world is humbling. We *are* designed. We *do* have purpose. Our purpose is to Glorify God and spread His Kingdom.

Cardiovascular System Overview

Take a moment and find your pulse. If you have not taken your pulse before this is a great place to learn. I prefer to do this by finding my carotid artery—take your right index and middle fingers and place them on the left side of your “Adam’s apple” (or “Eve’s grape” if you are a lady!). There is a slight indentation between your Adam’s apple and the muscle of your neck (called the *sternocleidomastoid*, cool name, huh?) which is where you should be able to find your pulse. Time yourself for ten seconds and count the number of pulses in that period of time and then multiply by six to get your beats per minute (BPM). Count! Stop! Multiply! Write that number down; we’ll be referring to it later.

The cardiovascular (or CV) system is the combination of the heart (*cardio*) and the blood vessels (*vascular*) working in beautiful concert together to accomplish a host of tasks using blood as the means to accomplish these tasks. Blood, the “river of life,” is an incredible organ (and it *is* an organ) of the human body. Blood is typically

separated into two major parts: plasma and formed elements. The composition of blood looks something like this:

- 55% is plasma, which contains 90% water, 7% plasma proteins, and 3% other stuff (dissolved molecules such as CO₂, O₂, urea, lactic acid, etc).
- 45% is made up of “formed elements”, 99% of which is red blood cells (called *erythrocytes*) which are responsible for carrying oxygen (O₂) among other things, and a small and extremely important percentage of the formed elements are white blood cells (crucial for the immune response) and platelets (essential in the clotting process).

Unfortunately, we rarely think of blood as a positive thing because when we see it, it is usually a signal that something is wrong. But it has power. It *is* life. Each one of the elements of blood (even each *subelement* of blood) has been a topic of Ph.D. dissertations and lifetimes of research, so we will not have time to discuss these in much detail.

But I do want to highlight the Red Blood Cell (RBC), also known as the *erythrocyte*. The RBC is “born” or produced in your bones and is a cell without a nucleus, so it does not have the ability to replicate. It is able to live for about 100 days in your body so we are constantly needing to resupply them. In fact we produce approximately 2.4 million RBC each second! We are able to replace these lost RBC thanks to an incredible mechanism—your kidneys are actually responsible for increasing (or decreasing) the rate of RBC production by secreting a hormone called

Erythropoietin or EPO. When you are exercising heavily for weeks on end or ascend to high altitude your body senses the decreased oxygen pressure in the the blood, which stimulates your kidneys to release EPO to increase RBC production and thus increase the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood. A RBC has a special shape and design to it (see Figure 1). Where many other cells are roundish in shape, this one nearly looks like a doughnut, except for that it has an indentation instead of a hole. The

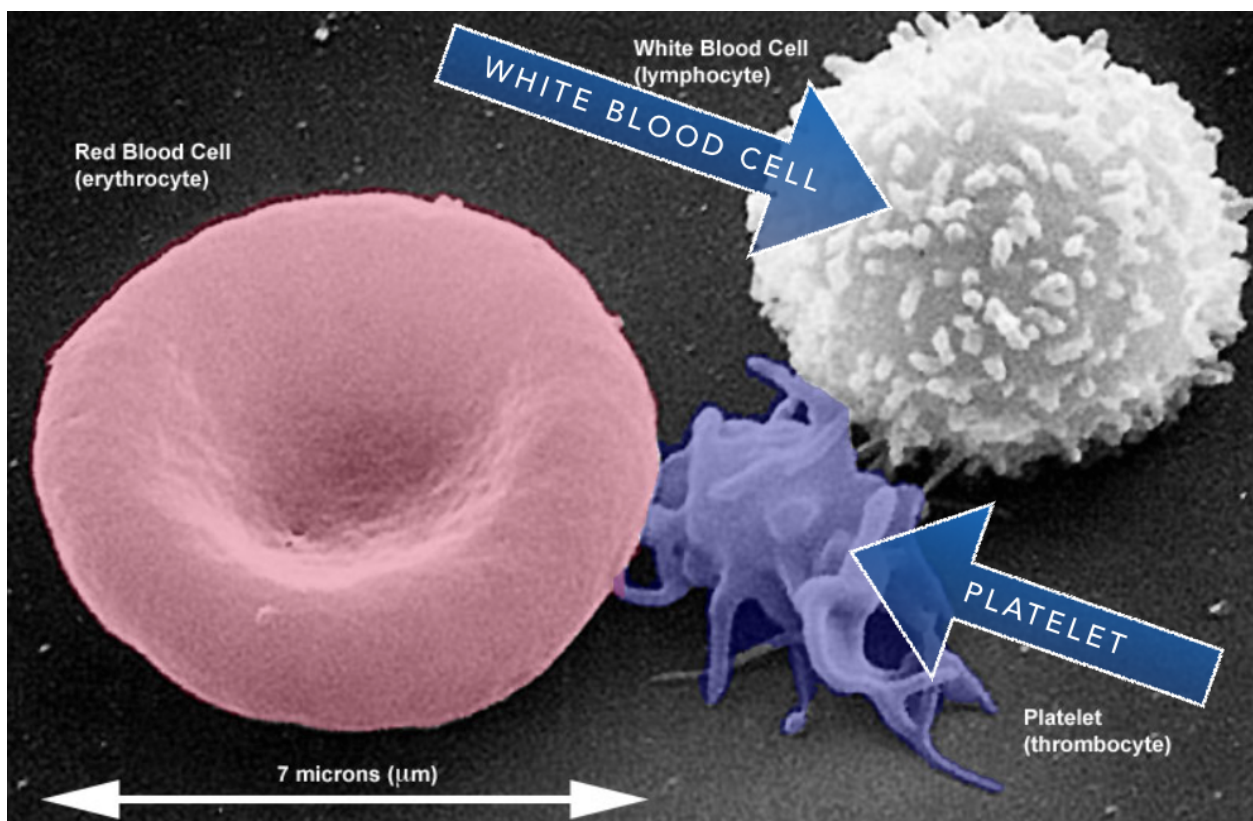


Figure 1

purpose of this indentation gives the RBC a huge surface area. By having a large surface area the RBC is able to take up and get rid of molecules (O_2 , CO_2 , etc) very quickly. Many capillaries (smallest of blood vessels) are so small that only one RBC can go through it at a time, and it is a tight fit (imagine that: a single cell is barely able to fit in

these capillaries). So the design of the RBC allows it to do something amazing: the RBC is able to deform in these capillaries in order to squeeze through. So now we have a RBC, with its high surface area, being squeezed through a tiny tube which further increases the RBC's ability to participate in gas exchange. This aspect of the CV system is so elegantly designed. And it is designed.

I want you to think of this system as a highway. The CV system is a network for transportation—pick-up and delivery. How do we take oxygen from the air and give it to a cell in the big toe?! Nutrients such as fat float in liquid, so how do we transport, store, and disseminate a molecule that will float in blood? The CV system must possess ingenious engineering solutions to these (and other) complicated problems in order to transport the vastly different molecules such as gasses, nutrients, hormones, and “waste” products (most of what we think of as waste products are not—they are an integral part of the crucially important communication system). These solutions are elegant. One example: hemoglobin, the oxygen carrying molecule in the RBC, has a base of iron and four locations (binding sites) of slightly differing affinity (attraction) to O_2 . As O_2 binds to the first location (which has the greatest affinity or strongest attraction) the entire molecule deforms slightly which “opens” or “reveals” the second location, resulting in the second location having a greater affinity for oxygen. This leads to another molecule of O_2 binding at the site, and the first location “holds” its O_2 molecule tighter. The pattern continues to the fourth location.

When reaching a place of low O₂ pressure (or content, such as a muscle or organ) the process is reversed. Thus, with the deformation of the hemoglobin molecule a single Red Blood Cell (RBC) is able to effectively transport approximately 1 billion oxygen molecules (there are 250 million hemoglobin molecules in each RBC). This is a beautiful design as it is simple, yet extremely effective and releasing oxygen at the appropriate time.

The highway system is a good analogy, but it is not like the static highways that we drive on, because the CV highway system is adaptive and responsive, possessing the mind-blowing ability to change its structure based on the ever changing needs of the environment. Vessels all over your body have been designed to change their diameter to encourage or restrict blood flow. These structural changes happen on the time scale of the millisecond (or possibly less) and they are occurring constantly with the purpose of maintaining hemodynamic integrity (appropriate blood pressure). How and why does this work? Those are excellent questions. We must think of the CV system as a closed, but highly flexible, system—an increase in pressure in one place will send blood to another place. By reducing the diameter of the blood vessels (or, *vasoconstriction*) the body can shunt blood away from certain locations and drive it to other locations (where the blood vessels have dilated, or, *vasodilation*). For example, when you begin exercise (or perceive a threat) blood vessels all over your body are told to vasoconstrict while at the same time muscles that are being activated send

local signals resulting in local vasodilation (yes, muscles themselves can tell the vessels what they need). The result is significant *reduction* in blood flow to low priority areas (such as the gut and inactive muscles) and significant *increase* in blood flow to high priority areas (active muscles). On a slightly smaller scale this is crucially important with changes in posture—if you were to stand up right now you’d better hope your blood vessels respond appropriately so you do not pass out. Speaking of which, now is a good time to take a break from your reading and stand up, and while you’re standing, take your pulse again. Remember, count the beats for ten seconds, then stop and multiply by six. How does that number compare to the first? All you did was stand; were there other variables that could have changed the results?

In addition to being a brilliant mode for transportation, the CV system is also essential for communication and defense. Unfortunately, we do not have time to discuss these in detail, but we will consider them very briefly:

- Communication: Hormones such as testosterone, estrogen, adrenaline, insulin, cortisol, etc., are simply messengers. Hormones do not actually “do” anything, but provide “long lasting” instruction to the cell as to what is needed. The CV system is the mode at which these crucial signals travel. It is a shame we do not have the time to talk about the immense complexity of cell signaling pathways and the hormones which provide instruction for each cell.
- Defense: Your immune system, with its utterly staggering complexity, is using the blood stream to patrol for, identify, tag, and destroy enemies.

Without your CV system, you would be defenseless against harmful viruses and bacteria.

Please understand that the cardiovascular system is not isolated but requires an intensely complicated system of feedback and feedforward responses. Feedback is a signal which conveys information concerning the current state of the body. Feedback signals carry information from organs and muscles. Feedforward response is...oh, wait, I forgot to tell you. Here in one minute I will be asking you to do as many pushups as possible while singing "You are my Sunshine". But before we do that, let's check your heart rate. Count! Stop! Multiply that number by 6 to get your BPM. How does that number compare to your first one and the second one? *That* is feedforward response. Without changing your position at all, you changed your heart rate significantly. By simply thinking about preparing to do an embarrassing and physically demanding activity, your CV system was making huge adjustments—your brain told your body to prepare for a demanding activity and your body responded before you even began to move. That is feedforward (and you can relax, because you don't actually have to sing while doing pushups). We will not be discussing much of the control of the CV system, which requires advanced degrees to truly begin to appreciate its beauty.

At the "center" of our intense network of blood vessels is the central pump: the heart. It is tempting to think of the heart as the commander of the human body

because it is indeed the central pump. It is the thing we can feel beating in our chest like a caged animal. It is the thing that must continue or we are done. It is the thing that all blood must be sent to and sent from. The logical conclusion is that the Heart is the Commander in Chief, the General. While there is some truth to this statement, it is far from the complete reality. The design of the heart is an analogy to our own lives. More on this later...

The Structure of the Heart

When we think of the heart we typically think of the non anatomically correct heart of valentine's day. This is understandable, but still frustrating to me because the actual heart is infinitely more beautiful. However, it is quite a bit more difficult to draw and I don't if know any anatomically correct heart emoticons exist!

Remember the heart is a pump and blood is a thick fluid, and we need to move that blood through approximately 50,000 miles of blood vessels. This means that the heart needs to move about 1.3 gallons each minute at rest, and 1.3 gallons/minute of thick fluid is a tall order. And remember, that's when you're at rest: we have to factor in the adaptation to exercise, and this is where the cardiovascular system comes into its own. At maximal exercise the demand for blood is staggering. Does you want to take a guess at how many gallons per minute we need to move? Two? Three? Four? Five? It is very possible, at maximal exercise, for your heart to be moving more than 6.6

gallons of blood every minute! Think about that for a second, do not let me downplay this—your heart has waiting in reserve the capacity to increase its ability to deliver blood by a factor of five! How does it do that?

What is so incredible to me is that the body's demand for oxygen at maximal exercise could be 20 times what it is at rest (or more) and the CV system is able to meet that need by increasing its output of blood by a factor of five. We have a very efficient system, and one that can change from a slow and steady rate of 50-60 BPM to 200 BPM in just a few moments. It is simply incredible.

The tissue that surrounds the heart is called the *pericardium*, and it is *brilliantly* designed. Take a moment and rub your hands together with me; what are we creating? Heat due to friction. Friction is the enemy of any moving components, especially if you are interested in those components lasting a long time. My heart is moving constantly and many times very rapidly, and personally, I would like for it to maintain structural integrity as long as possible. How is the body designed to combat friction? The pericardium. Without it we would be in a world of hurt constantly. The closest analogy I can think of is to imagine a blister on your heel after walking in new shoes... now imagine that blister is the size of your fist and it's inside your chest being rubbed 60-70 times a minute until you start running around and then it can get rubbed 200+ times a minute. Ouch. But, if everything is working normally, we are not even aware our heart is beating! The pericardium is a single tissue (or membrane)

folded back on itself in such a way as it creates two layers: one layer connects to the heart itself and the other layer (of the same pericardium) connects to the surrounding structures in the chest cavity (including the diaphragm). This can be illustrated by putting your fist in a balloon, your fist representing the heart and the balloon representing the pericardium (see Figure 2). As you place your fist in the balloon, the

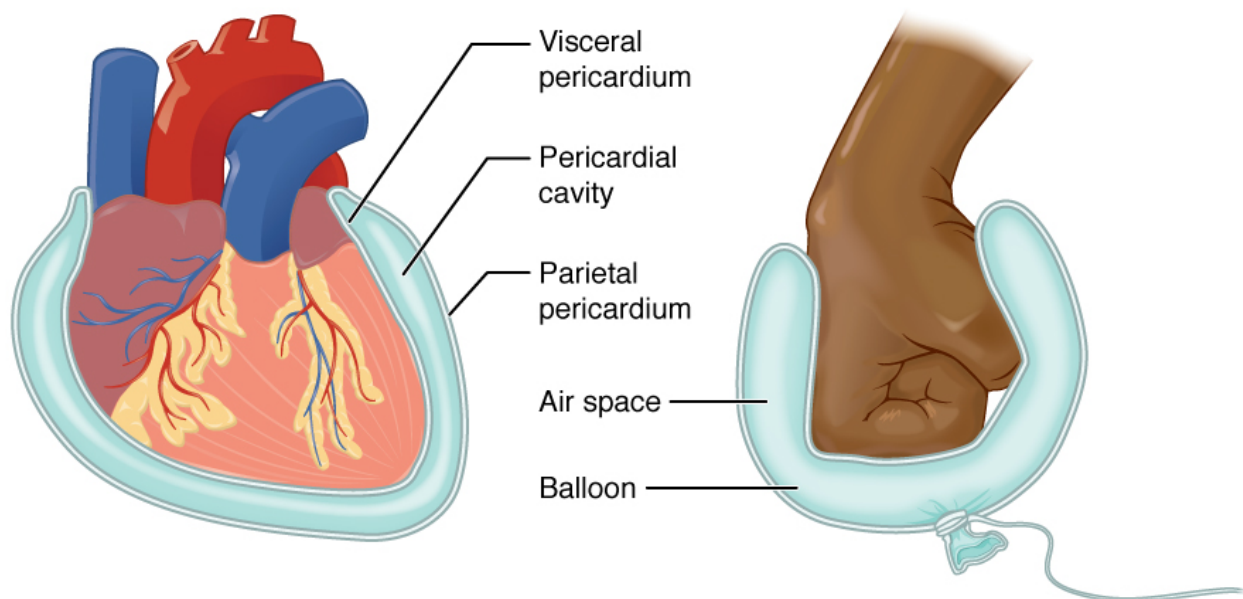


Figure 2

balloon conforms to your fist, but also forms an outer layer. There is now a space between your fist and the outside world. Your fist can do all the movement it wants and will not rub against any of the surrounding environment. But instead of air in the pericardium we have something much better which is called *serous fluid*. Serous fluid is a clear “oil-like” lubricant which looks like uncooked egg whites and is astonishingly effective at its job. In fact, serous fluid reduces friction to 20% of what an ice skater

experiences! The ice skater is creating 80% *more* friction than what the heart experiences! Accidental? Impossible. This is designed.

We actually have an interesting account of serous fluid in the Bible. John's account of the Crucifixion includes a soldier piercing Jesus' side and says, *"But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water"* (John 19:34). The "water" was most likely serous fluid. I love this testimony because Roman soldiers were good at what they did—this guy did not miss the heart with the thrust of his spear. His actions and testimony confirm, without doubt, that Jesus was dead on the cross (not just "asleep" or in a coma, as some people later believed).

The heart has four chambers. The top two are called atria and the bottom two are called ventricles. We'll start on the right side of the heart (remember we are looking at the heart on someone who is facing us, the right side of the heart is on our left). The right side of the heart is where all the systemic blood ("deoxygenated" blood from the body... but it still can be +75% oxygenated) enters (from the superior and inferior vena cavae). The right atrium is the top right chamber. Blood flows through the right atrium, through the tricuspid valve (a one way valve designed to prevent back flow) to the right ventricle (mostly driven by gravity, but some muscular contraction). Upon contraction of the ventricles blood is squeezed until the pressure inside the right ventricle overcomes the pressure in the pulmonary arteries at which

point the blood passes through the one-way pulmonary semilunar valve and travels to the lungs. Upon returning from the lungs the now oxygenated blood (about 98% oxygenated, even at intense levels of exercise) empties into the left atrium and passes throughout the mitral valve (again one-way) to the left ventricle. Again, upon contraction the pressure builds up in the left ventricle until the pressure on the inside overcomes the pressure on the outside of the valve and blood flows throughout the aortic semilunar valve to the ascending aorta, aortic arch and to the rest of the body.

One important side note I want to make is that while in the womb, the blood essentially flows from the right side of the heart straight through to the left via the *foramen ovale*. And blood coming from the lungs essentially skips the heart via a connection between the blood vessels called the *ductus arteriosus*. Remember the lungs are not used for breathing in the womb. In fact we do not breathe at all in the womb because our mothers breathe for us and pass on their oxygen to us.

So we must go from completely relying on our mother for oxygen to completely relying on ourselves for oxygen. Immediately (No pressure there!). Think about that for a second: the lungs, no simple tissue, had to be completely ready for that breath of air *before* birth! Upon the first breath both the foramen ovale and the ductus arteriosus close and "normal" circulation begins. On the *first breath!* The cardiovascular and respiratory systems undergo *massive* changes upon the first breath of air, which means both of these utterly vital, seemingly independent systems

were created to use two completely different systems of oxygen transfer and delivery with the ability to change within moments after birth. moments. If you are looking for evidence of a Creator God, look no further than the miracle of birth.

Okay, stand up! We will now march with knees high in place for 15 seconds. Afterward we will measure our heart rate (HR) again. March! Stop! Find your pulse. Count! Stop! How does that number compare to the previous numbers? You expected it, but do you appreciate it?

Function of the Heart: Electrocardiogram (ECG)

The heart is a muscle. One beautiful thing about muscles is that they are told to contract by electrical signal. Yes, you produce actual, measurable, electricity in your body and that is a method by which you send instruction to muscles. These are nerve signals. The study of nerve signals essentially changed my path in life from pulpit ministry to exercise physiology—that is how awesome nerve signals are! The heart has a unique setup concerning these signals, the study of which is called *electrocardiology* and that is where we get “ECG” from (some may know it by “EKG” but electrocardiogram doesn't have a “K” in it). The first and universally most interesting single fact about the heart is that it possesses the capability of automaticity. That is, it can beat on its own. Yes, if you were to have your heart ripped out it would continue to beat...crazy, right? This signal is initiated on its own from a

node in the upper right aspect of the heart, the *sinoatrial* (or SA) node. Muscular contraction rapidly follows the neurological signal.

After the signal is initiated in the SA node it travels across the atria (remember the top chambers of the heart) causing the atria to contract which sends blood to the right and left ventricles. The neurological signal then reaches a “station” at a point near the middle of the heart where the atria meet the ventricles. This station is called the *atrioventricular* (or AV) node (note both of the names: *atrium* and *ventricle*). The signal pauses here for a few moments which allows for the ventricles to fill completely before the AV node continues the signal down a thick branch of a nerve called the *Bundle of His* through the *ventricular septum*, the muscle which divides the right and left ventricles. The nerve fiber then divides and becomes the bundle of branches moving towards the point of the heart (called the *apex*). The fiber then divides multiple times into *Purkinje fibers* and wraps itself around the outside of the heart allowing the signal to reach the rest of the heart. In general, as nerve fibers get smaller the signal travels slower, but this is *not* the case in the heart. As the nerve fiber gets smaller the signal conduction more than doubles its rate in order to create the most effective muscular contraction possible. The ventricles need to contract in a squeezing manner to expend the most amount of blood each beat.

And here we find another gem: the heart has the responsibility of providing life to the rest of the body. Life. We are not just talking about beating for the sake of

beating, but the heart needs to be able to meet the demand of the body. If, for whatever reason, signals from the brain to the heart are interrupted or lost, the heart will continue beating (as we have already discussed) at approximately 100 BPM. But, what if the SA node fails (which starts the signal for the heart)?! We are up a creek right? Wrong, because the AV node has automaticity properties as well, and if it does not receive a signal from the SA node then the AV node will discharge at approximately 60 BPM. But, what if the AV node fails?! *Then* we are toast, right? Again, wrong. The Bundle of His through the Purkinje fibers also carry the ability to fire electrical impulses at a brutally slow, but life sustaining, rate of 20-40 BPM. Altogether, this means that the heart is viciously tenacious and simply does not give up easily. You see, the heart has the responsibility of providing life to the rest of the body. The body is *not* in service to the heart; rather the heart is designed to serve the body.

Remember: from beat to beat is one complete cardiac cycle. And this happens flawlessly, for most of us, on average 80 times a minute, 24 hours per day, 365 days per year for 70, 80, 90, in some cases even 100 years. Your heart will beat on average 115,200 times per day, 806,400 times per week, 41,932,800 times per year, and 3,354,624,000 times in an 80-year lifespan. Or, if you were Methuselah then probably in the neighborhood of 35,675,866,800 times (see Genesis 5.27)!

It's just incredible! And yet, do we even appreciate it?

The Servant Heart

Why is the heart doing all of this? We briefly mentioned the control of the heart: feedback/feedforward responses. But let me break that down a little more. There are really three systems that are interacting to send information to the heart so it will respond appropriately: the central command of the brain, the *arterial baroreflex* (which senses pressure of the arteries, specifically the aorta), and the activation of nerves in the skeletal muscle (which can be activated both chemically and mechanically).

The first, central command, we have already experienced with our pushup and singing experiment. The brain is powerful in sending information to your CV system to prepare for action. Research into feedforward responses from central command (the brain) is very difficult, so not much is known concerning this response, but we do know it is a crucial aspect to adapting to the ever-changing environment. As the brain anticipates a threat or a need for action, the heart and the entire CV system will respond to provide the muscles with what they need.

Secondly, the body is saturated with receptors that send information to the brain. We will not cover the nervous system here (we talk about the nervous system in another lecture), but one type of receptor, called the baroreceptor, is found right off the heart in the aortic arch and it is designed to sense stretch in the wall of the artery. As blood is pumped the elasticity of the artery allows it to expand with the influx of

blood. The expansion is measured by the baroreceptors and that information is sent back to the brain so that the brain can decide if adjustments need to be made to HR, SV, and diameter of the arteries in an attempt to maintain appropriate blood pressure. Because these signals are neurological the response is extremely quick—the baroreceptors allow blood pressure to be regulated on a beat by beat basis. For each beat of your heart, critical information is being sent to and analyzed by your brain so that it can relay the results to the heart enabling the heart to respond appropriately to the needs of the body.

Finally, the heart also indirectly receives signals from the muscles themselves. Muscles send two types of signals to the brain reporting on their current state. The first type of signal reports the chemical state of the muscles. If the muscles are working hard they will release certain chemicals (such as lactate, phosphate, etc.) produced by the metabolic process, which send a signal to the brain reporting the need for blood. Surprise, surprise, the heart immediately responds in service to the muscles by increasing the forcefulness of its contraction as well as the rate at which it contracts resulting in an increase in the amount of blood it delivers to the muscles in need (remember this is called cardiac output). Likewise arteries all over your body respond by constricting, which forces blood toward the muscles in need. The second type of response from the muscles is a mechanical response. Simply moving your limbs will cause signals to be sent to your heart reporting that movement is

happening and it would be a good idea to increase cardiac output to supply the moving muscles with the oxygen they need. This response is so sensitive that even if someone *else* were to move your limbs for you we would see an increase in HR in response! The heart is very aware of what the body needs and will do everything in its power to meet those needs.

As I said before, it is tempting to think of the heart as the General of the body. It seems to be the center of our being. We even say things like “follow your heart,” but do we even understand what that means?!

What people typically mean when they say that is: “do what you want to do.” But let’s get one thing straight right here—following your heart is the *opposite* of fulfilling your selfish desires! It’s fulfilling the needs of others. Truly following your heart means a life of service, because that is the *only* thing your heart does. Your heart serves the rest of your body and it does so at all cost—even at the cost of itself! It will serve the rest of the body even if its own parts are not working perfectly, even if it has been separated from the brain. It will still serve! Maybe the heart *is* the general of the body, because a true leader is one who serves. Jesus’ example illustrates that point perfectly. Remember John 13?

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he

poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples 'feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him"

(John 13.3-5)

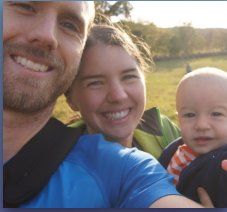
Jesus' understanding of who He is led Him to serve. He knew He was from God and that He would be returning to GOD...so He served. That's just what He did, by nature.

Also, the Book of Philippians contains an excellent passage which summarizes the role of Jesus on earth:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a **servant**,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross.*

(Philippians 2.6-8, NIV)

Jesus led by service; He led by love. Therefore, it cannot be a coincidence that the heart, the physical representation of love, is also the epitome of service.



JUSTIN BLAND lives in Searcy, AR with his wife, Heather, and 1 1/2 year old son, David. He has been teaching at Harding University for just over 3 1/2 years and received his Ph.D. in Kinesiology with an emphasis in Pediatric Exercise Physiology from Michigan State University.

THE GIFT OF PAIN

JUSTIN BLAND

Introduction

The nervous system is an intensely complicated system of communication. We can think of our nerves as wires in our body allowing electrical signals to travel very quickly. But it is so much more than that—the tendency is to think of nerves as static “wires” but they are constantly changing and adapting. We will only briefly be able to talk about the basics of the nervous system, but hopefully you will come away with a greater appreciation of this communication system. I also want you to take away from this talk a greater understanding of the nature of pain and maybe a deeper respect for it as well.

Nervous System Overview

Close your eyes and sit still and quiet for a few moments. What do you perceive? After you open your eyes, take a moment to list the different things your senses experience. We *perceive* the world

around us. In order to experience our environment we must have information of the world accurately measured and sent via signals to our brain (accuracy is so completely assumed in our hard wiring that we believe what we perceive as fact). Our brain is where these signals are analyzed and interpreted. I find it fascinating that the brain—isolated in darkness and surrounded by protective bone—is where we *exist*, but it is rendered useless without information from the *outside*. The information being relayed to our brain is only part of our existence... we need to be able to respond to the world around us; those that are unable to respond live a very difficult life.

The extensiveness and complexity of the brain is unfathomable. In order to even begin to understand we must look for comparisons in astronomy. The Milky Way Galaxy—our galaxy, or tiny corner of the universe—contains an estimated 200-400 billion stars. But we're getting ahead of ourselves: first of all, what is the largest number that you truly understand? 1000? 10,000? 100,000? 1,000,000? I really think if we were to be perfectly honest understanding the number 100,000 is stretching it for most of us. Let's think of this from a time standpoint: 100,000 seconds ago was yesterday. One million seconds ago was 11 days ago. One billion seconds ago was July 6, 1982. One hundred billion seconds ago was...any guesses? Close: Saturday, April 29, 1156 BC. That's 100 billion seconds ago, and keeping that number in mind, there are 200 to 400 billion stars in the Milky Way.

How does that compare to your brain? Well, the number of neurological connections in your brain could be more than 600 billion! Six hundred *billion* connections in your head. That makes absolutely no sense to me. I have heard estimates of up to one 1 trillion neurological connections. What is that number?! Google wouldn't even give me a date for 1 trillion seconds ago...it just said 31.69 millennia. I have even read estimates that were so large I thought they were typos! But the point is that you have many more times the number of connections in your brain as there are stars in the Milky Way. You have *galaxies* of neurological connections in your head. I wonder if God, who breathes stars into existence and knows each by name (Psalm 147.5), knows the names of each of the neurological connections in your brain? That sort of dwarfs the imagery of Him knowing the number of hairs on our head!

The crazy thing about the brain/nervous system is that it is unfathomably complex on multiple fronts. You have only scratched the surface about understanding how huge your brain is, but we also cannot understand how complex it is. Unfortunately, we will only briefly address some high points of its intricacy in the coming minutes; from an understanding point of view, wrapping your mind around the nervous system is like multiplying infinity by infinity. Two things that we don't understand in the same place. Isn't it fascinating that our own brain cannot understand our own brain?

Now that you have a different picture of what is going on in your head let's talk about these amazing structures. First, the big picture: The nervous system, broken down in the simplest way, is the system for bringing information to the brain and spinal cord and taking information from the brain and spinal cord. I say brain and spinal cord because sometimes signals do not reach your brain, such as reflexes. Those signals go to the spinal cord and then back to the appropriate organs (e.g. muscles).

These two pathways—information going into the brain and our response to that information—are the very basis of the nervous system. Information being relayed to the brain is called *afferent* signals, and signals sent from the brain to different areas of the body are called *efferent* signals. It is very easy to get those confused as they sound similar and only have one letter difference. But here is how I keep them straight. If a baseball is being thrown at my head I must first perceive the ball before I can respond. Afferent signals must first be sent to my brain for me to dodge the ball. "A" is the first letter of the alphabet and afferent signals are the first thing that must happen before I can respond. Afferent signals are signals traveling to the brain. The effect of me receiving afferent signals is that I dodge the ball (hopefully successfully). "E" is for effect and for efferent signals. After receiving afferent signals I make an efferent response. Efferent signals are signals going away from the brain. This is the

basis of everything you do. These measurable signals travel to and from the brain via nerves.

When we say the word “nerve” we are actually referring to a bundle of neurons. Each neuron is only responsible for one signal traveling in one direction and neurons are bundled together in a group called nerves. Notice there are multiple bundles in one nerve. These bundles have both afferent and efferent neurons, or signals traveling both to and from the brain. Specific nerves supply regions of the body, but one neuron is responsible for a very specific location: it could be a portion of a muscle or an organ. We typically say that a neuron “relays” a signal to the brain. We say the word “relay” on purpose, because there is no one neuron that carries a signal directly from the site of origin to the site of termination. There are always multiple neurons that will transmit a single signal.

But before we go too much farther into the physiology of the nervous system, we must understand the structure of the neuron. A neuron looks like a big cell body with branches (called dendrites) coming out every which way, then one long branch going in a different direction (called the axon). This is a fantastic design. As we talk about its purpose hopefully the design will become more and more beautiful to you. First, the dendrites (“tree branches”) carry information to the cell body (in a little while we’ll talk about how this information is carried, right now just accept that information is transmitted toward the cell body by the dendrites). Each dendrite is

connected to at least one other neuron and therefore each dendrite independently receive other signals (and even opposing signals). But a single neuron with all of its dendrites could be receiving signals from up to 10,000 other neurons and that neuron could be sending its signal directly to 10,000 other neurons. This is why we call this a neural network and it is how we have 600 billion to 1 trillion connections (or more) in the brain.

A single dendrite receives a signal from one or more other neurons and then an utterly mind blowing thing happens next - you see, many signals come into the cell body at the same time (or very similar time). The cell body then must “decide” if a signal should continue to be sent. That decision is made at the base of the cell body in a place called the axon hillock (see Figure 1). If the overall signal being received is

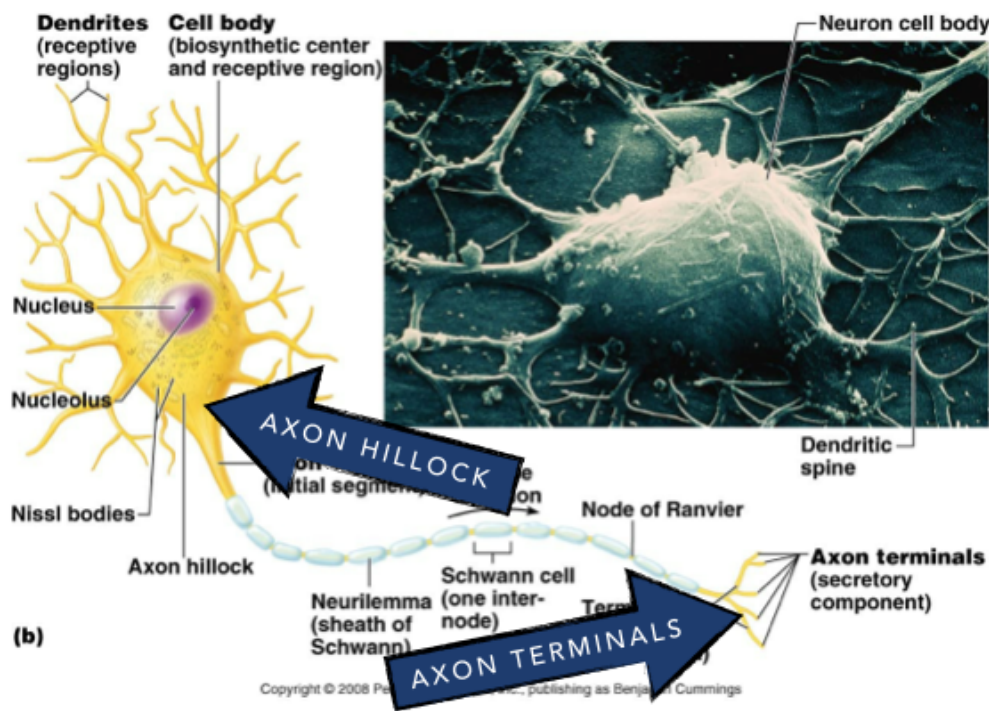


Figure 1

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strong enough (or reaches a threshold) the “decision” is made to send a signal down the axon to the end of the neuron called the axon terminal in order for the signal to reach the next neuron. But here is where the signal runs into a “problem”: there is a space between the axon terminal and the next dendrite called the synaptic cleft. At this point the electrical signal is converted to a chemical signal (called neurotransmitters) and “jumps” the gap in order to continue on its way. The next dendrite receives the chemical signal, converts it to an electrical signal and sends the signal to the cell body where another decision must be made. This process continues until the signal reaches the termination site (brain, muscle, organ).

Neurological signals can be exceptionally quick, reaching speeds of approximately 120 meters per second or around 268 miles per hour, but they also can be fairly slow (0.6MPH) depending on the design of the neuron. Several factors are significant in the speed of signal conduction, but two that you need to be aware of are axon thickness and myelination. The thicker the axon and the greater myelination the faster the signal will travel. Myelin is a white substance comprised of special cells that wrap themselves around the axon to provide insulation. Notice something interesting, there are gaps between the myelin sheaths. These gaps allow for the signal to essentially “jump” from gap to gap and therefore skip a larger portion of the axon, whereas a signal traveling down an unmyelinated axon will need to travel down the entire length of the axon.

You can imagine the difference between a myelinated and unmyelinated axon. Let's say I want to send a signal to turn off the light in a room filled with students all lined up in a row. The students will be the axon of one neuron and I am the axon hillock. On my signal, all stand up and sit down as quickly as possible in order from the first person to the last person. When the last person stands they turn off the light so we know that the signal reached the end. Here is the catch: a student cannot stand until the person next to him stands up all the way. So the moment one student reaches full standing height then the next student can stand up and sit down as fast as you can. Imagine this process occurring with a row of thirty students, and how long it would take. This would be a simulation of an unmyelinated axon.

Now, to simulate a myelinated axon, we will repeat the experiment, but this time, only every third person will stand because the signal will "jump" two people (so the first person stands, then the fourth, then the seventh, and so on). What would the difference be this time? Those that were standing up would not accomplish their task any faster, but the overall process would be much quicker because the signal was able to jump over sections of our axon.

We have been saying signal the whole lecture so far (neuron sends a signal), but what we mean (and what we just simulated) is actually called an *action potential* and our simulation is quite similar to the physiological process. Each person is just standing up and sitting down, but what is happening? The combination of all of us

sends the action potential to the end of the room providing instruction to turn off and on the light (which would be an efferent action potential). So when you hear “action potential” from here on out think “signal.” Let us briefly look at the major concepts of action potential.

Let’s zoom in on the axon. I believe we are about to investigate (way too briefly) machinery on the molecular level which is irreducibly complex. By irreducibly complex, I mean that this machinery is so complex that removal of any one part would make it utterly useless and therefore it would have to have come into existence all at the same time for it to be useful. This is one of the many places where I see the Creator God. I believe action potential and subsequent synaptic transmission of neurons to be beautifully designed by the Designer. And as David wrote in Psalm 139, we truly are “*fearfully and wonderfully made.*”

Through a seriously impressive mechanism, synchronized across three separate molecular machines (the sodium-potassium pump, sodium channel, and potassium channel), a



Figure 2

reservoir is created very similar to a reservoir behind a dam (see Figure 2). In a

hydroelectric dam we are able to use the power of the water to turn turbines which generate electricity. In the axon a similar mechanism is utilized. A machine (the sodium-potassium pump) pumps molecules out of the axon upstream to create enormous pressure, with a lot of molecules on the outside and not very many molecules on the inside. This pressure also includes electrical energy. When the axon is triggered channels open up and molecules flood into the axon right next to the axon hillock. This flooding triggers the next section of the axon which creates a domino effect down the length of the axon. This is the action potential, and once started, this domino effect cannot be stopped until it reaches the end of the axon. The axon now needs to reset itself by pumping molecules back outside the axon, essentially refilling the reservoir. During the time the axon is resetting itself an action potential (signal) cannot occur. This is known as the refractory period. Once the refractory period is over the axon is still not really ready to send another action potential, but it can *only if* the stimulus is strong enough. If the stimulus is not strong enough then the axon will continue to fill the reservoir until it reaches its resting state. Since an action potential is the same magnitude no matter the stimulus the brain must interpret the frequency of the action potential to understand the intensity of the stimulus. For example a light touch on the arm is not a powerful stimulus and the axon would reach its resting state before firing another action potential (which still occurs pretty rapidly), but an aggressive grab on your arm would be a very powerful stimulus

and action potentials would be triggered very soon after the refractory period. Since all action potentials are of the same magnitude the brain would interpret signals coming in at a greater frequency to be from a more powerful stimulus. This is how we can tell the difference between something that is soft and something that is painful: the frequency of the action potential. We have many different receptors, but they all send the same action potential. It is up to the brain to interpret the action potentials from different neurons and then to send appropriate action potentials as a response. So a neuron only tells the brain if there is a stimulus or not; an action potential will fire or it won't. It is on or off. Any computer geeks in here? What does that sound like? Yes, binary code! A one or a zero. And you thought man invented binary code. All of what we perceive can be broken down to an on switch or an off switch... trillions upon trillions upon trillions of them.

Pain

How do I know the difference between the touch of my son and the prick of a knife? There are specific receptors in the skin that are stimulated. Some respond to pressure, temperature, light touch, itch, and pain. In addition to these specific receptors is the *perception* (understanding) of what is being touched. For example, the worst milk I have ever drunk was actually orange juice. I love orange juice, and I like milk. One time I picked up a cup of milk, full and cold, and I knew it was milk, I

was preparing for milk...except that it was not milk. I picked up the wrong cup which had orange juice in it and as I drank the "milk", what I was tasting was the worst milk known to man and I immediately spit it out. I was thinking it was milk, but it was actually orange juice (which I would have really enjoyed if I knew it was orange juice). You see the perception of what is happening is a crucial part of the interpretation of the actual action potentials that are being sent to the brain. This includes how we experience pain.

But pain is different from the other sensations. What is pain? Why is there pain? What if there was a world without pain?

Pain indicates damage. Unlike any other sensation, pain has been designed to be unavoidable. It demands a response. Other senses I can ignore or be desensitized to, but pain will eventually win out. It will cause you to take action and protect yourself. Many times pain or the anticipation of pain will cause a response so fast that you will be performing avoiding actions prior to the signal even reaching your brain (these are reflexes and are an essential part to our survival). I can prepare myself for pain and even change my pain threshold, but pain will eventually cause me to take evasive action. As the brilliant Dr. Paul Brand once said:

Pain employs a tonal range of conversation. It whispers to us in the early stages of damage: subconsciously, we feel a slight discomfort and toss and turn in bed. It speaks to us as danger increases: a hand grows tender and sore after a long stint at raking leaves. And pain shouts at us when the danger

becomes sever: blisters, ulcers, and tissue damage break out, forcing us to change behavior.

Pain is not a bad thing. Pain protects us. And yet, we spend billions of dollars a year in the US trying to reduce and/or eliminate pain. More than any other society in the history of the world we have largely succeeded in separating ourselves from pain, and more than any other society in history we are terrified of pain. Pain has been an accepted part of life since after the Fall of Man: not pleasant, but accepted. In fact, from what I understand, *the problem of pain* has only been an issue in recent years.

Pain is beautifully designed. If you think hard enough of your favorite food you can nearly taste it—so much so that you may even begin to salivate just thinking about it. What about your favorite smells? You can almost smell them if you are in the right state of mind. But pain is different. It is so powerful and yet, even if you tried you cannot summon up the actual pain of your worst pain experiences. Yes, you can remember what the experience made you feel and the scene around you, but you cannot remember the actual pain. You can describe it, but you immediately forget the actual pain sensations. You may even be doubting me right now, but this phenomenon I have experienced, observed, and read about over and over again.

Pain and Unity

What if there was a world without pain? Wow, how amazing would that be? No pain!?! Guess what? There is. And it's here, right now. But it is not a perfect world at all. It's the world of a leprosy patient. The disease of leprosy damages the nerves and eliminates pain. The suffering of someone with leprosy is not *because of pain*, but because there is *no pain*.

Dr. Brand was an orthopedic surgeon, missionary, and author of some staggering incredible books who spent his life among individuals with leprosy, 50 years of which he was in India. A particular case that stuck out in his mind was with an individual named Sadan who was rejected by his family because of leprosy and came to Dr. Brand dejected and mangled from the disease. After 4 years of intense therapy, surgeries, and more therapy Sadan felt he wanted to go back to his family for a "trial weekend." After a wonderful day



Dr. Paul Brand (1914-2003)

of festivities at his family's home he fell asleep in his old room and he awoke the next morning only to discover part of his finger was missing—a rat had chewed on his hand in the middle of the night and he didn't notice it. He was devastated. Years of work gone. "What will Dr. Brand say?" he thought. Sadan decided to keep his promise to his family and stay the rest of the weekend rather than go back to the leprosy colony.

The next night he would stay up all night so as not to get eaten again, but he fell asleep reading and his other hand rested against a kerosine lantern badly burning his hand beyond repair. Again he was unaware of the damage. He had no pain. He traveled back to Dr. Brand weeping, totally devastated. Sadan then said something which stuck with Dr. Brand ever since: "Without pain I have no freedom. How can I be free without pain?"

Pain links the body together—without pain there is no sense that your hand is *your* hand. It is a hand and it is connected to you, but it isn't part of you. There is a disconnection that happens when a person does not experience pain. The suffering that Sadan experienced was due to the disconnection of himself to his body. His first thought upon realizing the devastating injury to his hand was "What will Dr. Brand think?"; he wasn't concerned about the actual damage to his hand at all! His hand was an appendage, but nothing more. He was much more concerned with the feelings of someone else than his own safety. Without pain there is no urgency to protect the body. Another great statement by Dr. Brand, "A body only possesses unity to the degree that it possesses pain." Parts of you that are "indispensable are defined by pain."

How do we respond to pain? In I Corinthians 12 Paul has a beautiful analogy comparing the human body to the Body of Christ. He says, "*If one member suffers every member suffers with it...*" (1 Corinthians 12.26). The first time I remember hearing this passage I was about seven years old and I did not know what it meant, so

I asked my dad. His response was: "what do you do if you hit your thumb with a hammer?" Then he proceeded to jump up and down, holding his thumb and yelling in pretend agony. Every part suffers with it. That's how it is with our physical bodies and it's how it should be in the Body of Christ. That is, **if we experience pain, if we experience unity.**

Here is another beautiful thing that God gives us. We already talked about the speed of the action potential being regulated by the thickness of the axon and the extent of myelination. Something to notice: when you experience pain, what do you do? Do you not grab the part of your body that is hurting and squeeze? The sense of pressure is received by receptors called baroreceptors. The axons associated with baroreceptors are thick where as pain receptors (nociceptors) have relatively thin axons. One more thing to know: we think the brain only interprets one signal at a time. This is called the gate control theory. Thus, by squeezing your thumb you have stimulated the baroreceptors with the thicker axons - those signals will reach the brain before the nociceptive signals (pain signals) essentially overriding the pain stimulus. Next time you hurt yourself do this experiment: try to *not* rub or squeeze the painful area and then notice the difference in the sensation when you do. This does not eliminate the pain, but decreases the intensity. Seriously, you should try it.

How do we respond to pain? How do we as the Body of Christ respond to pain (i.e. suffering)? Do we try to ignore it? Do we try to avoid it? Do we throw money at it

to try and dull the pain?...or do we embrace pain? Do we accept it and use it to our advantage? Do we hug someone when they are experiencing pain? After all, you don't talk to your thumb after you hit it, you squeeze it (although, it probably isn't a good idea when hugging someone to then explain the gate control theory and that the pain is less intense when being squeezed due to the stimulation of the baroreceptors with their thicker, myelinated axons producing faster nerve signal transduction when compared to the nociceptors. Just keep your mouth shut and hug them.)! You see, we can only experience unity to the degree we experience pain. A church or family that does not experience pain does not experience unity. Do you even know who is in pain in your church? In your family? If you do not then you cannot be unified. We cannot be an effective Body without addressing those parts which are in pain!

Pain is a gift to us. Without it we are not unified. Without it we do not instinctively protect or serve the body (or the Body). Pain is beautiful in that it demands our attention and our immediate action, but then passes quickly into oblivion. But we must understand pain with the appropriate mindset: pain is not to be ignored, but attended. Dr. Brand wrote about many things that intensify pain: fear, anger, guilt, loneliness, helplessness. These emotional factors enhance pain and enhance suffering. How then should we prepare for and help alleviate pain?

Dr. Brand tells a story of his medical residency during WWII in Britain. The hospital he was working at had to send the majority of their nurses to aid in the war effort leaving the hospital so shorthanded that the patients who could walk were recruited to do work (distributing food and water, taking temperatures and blood pressure readings, cleaning out bedpans, etc). Patients (even some in wheel chairs) volunteered instantly and an amazing thing happened: they were so busy serving others they forgot about their own suffering! Demand for pain medication dropped by 50%, those that needed sleeping pills were asleep before Dr. Brand could make his rounds to give them sleeping medication, and patients were healing faster than before. How do we alleviate pain? I believe service must be a big part of the healing process when it comes to pain and suffering.

Pain and Joy

Another gift of pain is joy. When have you experienced the most joy, the greatest sense of happiness or exhilaration? Was it not in the wake of great pain? My wife spent 71 hours in labor with our son. Seventy-one hours! She started labor on a Wednesday night and David was born, into my arms, on a Sunday morning. Later that morning when we were going to get some sleep—the first real sleep for her in a long time and the first time she even laid down in a long time—she climbed into bed and said with a laugh “oh my, this feels soooo good!” My response: “I do not want to know

how good that feels.” Why? To know how good she felt would require me to go through the suffering she went through. Um, no thank you. Her joy, her pleasure, was only provided by the pain that preceded it.

You know how miserably hot it gets in the summers in the south. How hot it gets is just wrong! One time in particular, my buddies and I were playing Ultimate frisbee on the front lawn of the University we were attending. It was crazy, crazy hot that day. At the end of our game someone had the utterly brilliant idea of jumping in the fountain... the race was on. I got there first and experienced the *most* refreshing feeling that I have ever experienced in my entire life. It felt so good, I could not contain the laughter that just bubbled from inside of me. I honestly thought: “This might be a tiny slice of actual Heaven.” But jumping into that freezing water without the previous pain would be less than desirable. I’m sure you have similar stories that you could share.

I believe God created pain; the process is so intricately, beautifully, and masterfully designed. It is truly brilliant. Maybe, just maybe, God created pain with a smile. Maybe God, in His infinite wisdom, knew that pain would afford opportunities of indescribable joy:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

(Romans 5.3-5)

Do you also remember what Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"

(Matthew 16.24-25)

Dr. Brand applies this passage by saying, "only in service can you find true happiness."

I know not all pain is good—some pain is due to perversion from the evil one, and I understand that. Pain from an evil source is not what God intended, and He does not take joy in this pain at all. Some of the worst suffering on this earth is evil in source, and makes us all long for the Day that God will heal all wounds. But God is also a God of impossibilities, and He is able to take all pain and even evil and turn it into good: an impossible feat that He regularly accomplishes. And that is truly beautiful.

The pain that God created is beautiful. We need to listen to it and accept it. Because only through pain may we understand true joy.



KEVIN BURR serves as the student body President at Harding School of Theology and will graduate with his Master's of Divinity in May, 2014. He plans to pursue a doctoral degree in New Testament studies to teach college Bible and Greek. Kevin lives in Memphis, TN with his wife Linnea.

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE WE HAVE TODAY

KEVIN BURR

The Story of the Bible

The Bible is a fascinating collection of poetry and songs, history and personal letters, law and biography, prophecy and much more. These works were written by different authors throughout centuries and were gradually compiled into one anthology which we call "the Bible." I want to share with you how the whole thing got put together, as least as much as we know. Many people do not know that the compilation of all the different books in the Bible took a long time, and there was also some disagreement between godly men and women about which books best represented God's character. But before we begin that discussion, many people do not even know what is in the Bible at all. Let me give you a brief summary of the Bible below. From the summary, we will be able to see how the need arose for the different books of the Bible to be written.

If you grew up going to church and reading the Bible most of

your life you are probably familiar with some of its stories: how God created the world; how Noah built the ark and survived the flood; how Abraham and Sarah were promised the birth of Isaac; how Moses brought the plagues against Egypt; and many more. Sadly, though, too many people and too many Christians, do not have a good sense of everything in the Bible; they only know a few of the exciting stories from the Old and New Testaments. But if exciting stories are all you read the Bible for, you miss out on the important messages that God has been communicating to people ever since creation: (1) God wants to live with people, but (2) because God is holy, His people must also be holy. One helpful way to understand holiness is the idea of separation and being separated for a specific purpose. We talk about the “Holy Bible” because it is different from other books. Or think about this analogy from sports: many athletes have a special pair of shoes or shorts that they don’t wear just anywhere; they wear them during game time or practice because these things are designed for a specific purpose. Or how about an analogy from art: artists do not (usually) use their special pencils, pens, or brushes to take notes in class or do other things—these are expensive instruments and are designed for shading and coloring, or for different textures. In a much more significant way, God has chosen us for a special purpose—to live like Christ and show others how to live that way too. Another way to say this is that we are supposed to be holy. To return to the themes of holiness we mentioned earlier, God’s holiness and His instructions for His people’s holiness

can be seen in story after story—which finally brings us to our brief summary of the Bible’s content.

Beginning with Genesis³ God created man and woman, placed them in the garden, and walked in that very same garden where they were (*Genesis 3.8*). Adam and Eve lived peacefully there with God until they listened to the serpent and disobeyed God. Even though they rejected God, He still cared for them by giving them clothing. As Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve’s sons, grew up, Cain became terribly angry with his brother and eventually killed him. God sent him away but protected him from the vengeance of others by placing a special mark on him (*Genesis 4.15*). After this, humans became increasingly evil, to the point that God said he wished He had not created people. But Noah and his family still lived holy lives, and so God spared them alone when He sent the flood. From Noah eventually came Abraham, whom God called to be the physical father and ancestor of the Israelites—God’s chosen people. Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, and Isaac then had a son named Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons. These sons were the fathers of the men and women who became the Hebrews. The Hebrews were God’s special people, but after living in Egypt for a time due to a famine in the land of Canaan, the Pharaohs took

³The first book of the Bible in English is called “Genesis.” This title comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (which was originally written mostly in Hebrew and some small portions in Aramaic), called the Septuagint. The word “genesis” simply means “beginning,” and looks like this in Greek: ΓΕΝΕΣΙΣ (uppercase), or γένεσις (lowercase). Many books in the Hebrew Old Testament use the first word or words as their title, and so the Hebrew title of Genesis is בְּרֵאשִׁית pronounced “buh-ray-sheet,” (and read from right to left, unlike English and Greek), the first word of the Hebrew text which means “In the beginning.”

advantage of them by using them as slave labor and they terrorized them by killing their infants when their numbers threatened the Egyptians. Four hundred years passed and God sent Moses to deliver the people out of slavery so they could once again be His holy people, a light to the whole world. God gave Moses certain laws to give to the people, to show them that God wanted to live with them in the special land He had promised to Abraham. They wandered in the desert for 40 years while God fed them and gave them water, teaching them how to live holy lives and be a holy community so He could live with them. These histories and laws were the basis for the first covenant which Moses gave so the people would have them and live by them (these also form the basis of the first five books of the Bible). Only some remained faithful to the laws Moses gave them, and so God raised up Joshua to lead these Israelites into the Promised Land.

After the Israelites entered Canaan (the land promised to Abraham), they sometimes followed God's laws but often they did not. Because they broke their promise to be God's people, God punished them. The book of Joshua shows Israel's successes in their conquest of the land, but Judges shows their failures. After a period of punishment they would cry out for mercy, God would raise up a judge like Gideon, Othniel, Deborah, or Samson, and they would defeat the Israelites' enemies. The people would then repent, get rid of idols and statues of other gods and goddesses whom the Canaanites worshipped, and serve God for a time. The author of the book

of Judges tells us about this cycle, which was written to instruct the Israelites and warn them about the dangers of falling away from God. But then they would fall back into idol worship and the cycle would repeat all over again. After several years of the judges, the Israelites begged God for a king. Saul was the first, and he served God for a while but was ultimately rejected because he disobeyed God's word. David and Solomon were the next two kings, and although they are remembered for their good deeds, they were far from perfect. After Solomon, the kingdom was split between the two tribes in the south (Judah) and the ten tribes in the north (Israel). Once again, the cycle continued where the people would do evil, God would punish them, they would repent for a time, God delivered them from the consequences of their actions, then the people return to evil ways. This cycle repeated so many times that God finally tore the Israelites away from their land by the Assyrians (from modern-day Syria) in 721 BC and the Judahites from their land by the Babylonians (from modern-day Iraq) in 586 BC. During this entire time God sent prophets to warn the people to turn back to Him, to live holy lives so God could live with them. Even the temple that Solomon built for God in Jerusalem, which symbolized God's presence with His people, was destroyed. The stories of the good and evil kings were written in 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, and later again in 1-2 Chronicles. The prophets or their followers recorded their prophecies and messages to the people. During the times of the kings and the exile, the people wrote about their experiences in the forms of Psalms and Proverbs, which were

intended to praise God for His goodness; or to call out to Him when He seemed far away (especially during the exile); or to share with future generations the wisdom of following Him.

Eventually after the exile, God allowed some of the people to come back to the land of Judah. The temple and city walls were rebuilt, but the people were demoralized. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther show how the people struggled to maintain their devotion to God, and the author of Chronicles reviewed the history of Israel's kings so the people would again remember to serve God only. God continued to send prophets to them until Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament period. Different rulers controlled Israel during the following centuries: Persians (from modern-day Iran); Alexander the Great; then two different generals (named Ptolemy and Seleucus) and their successors who took over when Alexander died (from modern-day Greece). The people of God won independence for a brief period of time from the second general's successors and lived under the rule of the Maccabees, a family from the village of Modiin about 19 miles west of Jerusalem, until the Romans took over in 63 BC.

God did not send a prophet to the people from time of Malachi until John the Baptist appeared as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!'" Finally, after four hundred years God sent another person to deliver His people. This time God sent His unique Son Jesus to save His

people by bringing them into the kingdom of God—that is, to be a holy people for God who are filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus chose twelve men (instead of twelve whole tribes), called disciples,⁴ to teach and show how to live righteously. For three years he taught them how to love and to live for God and one another. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, He gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles so that by the Spirit they would be empowered to lead others to God. Jesus also established the new covenant. Just like under the old covenant (established through Moses) God wanted His people to be holy, but unlike the old covenant, under the new covenant God gives His very own Holy Spirit which empowers men and women to live transformed lives and become ever more like Christ, who showed humanity the perfect example of holy living.

In order to spread this good news throughout the world, God sent out the disciples, now called apostles,⁵ to teach and preach this message about the kingdom of God and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As the apostles went around preaching and teaching the good news, they would bring together a group of people who believed in God and wanted to become Christians. The apostles gathered together groups like this from Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Syria, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey),

⁴A disciple is like a student, but the teacher shows a disciple how to live, how to think, etc. The English word “discipline” (not negatively, but discipline in the sense that someone is trained to behave in a positive way and does so even when they are tempted not to) comes from the same word “disciple.” Also, the Greek for disciple, *mathētēs* (in Greek: μαθήτης), is related to the Greek word “to learn.”

⁵An apostle is “someone who is sent” for a purpose. Our English word “apostle” comes from the Greek term *apostolos* (in Greek: ἀπόστολος).

Greece, Rome, and many other places. These groups were the first churches⁶ and many of the members still had to sort through difficult issues even after they became Christians. Paul, Peter, John, and others wrote to some of these churches in particular or to Christians in general about their questions, or if their behavior needed some correction, or what they had been taught, or to encourage them in a period of persecution (especially in the book of Revelation).

The Creation of the Old Testament

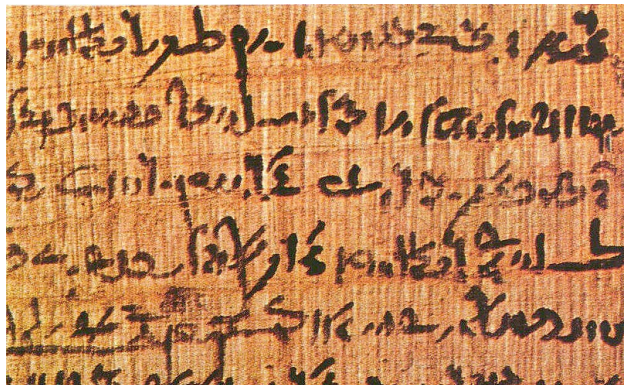
In the summary above we have mentioned several times when someone wrote down a message which God gave them to share with the people about the importance of being holy, about remembering His goodness in song or proverb, what His prophets taught them, or how God's purposes are fulfilled in Jesus, etc. All of these messages were written for a specific purpose: these are *occasional* documents. The Pentateuch⁷ was written to instruct the Israelites about God and His ways. The

⁶The term that Paul and other writers of the New Testament used for "church" is the Greek word *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία). This word means something like our English words "assembly" or "gathering." There was often just one or maybe a couple of church groups per city in the first few centuries AD. Most early churches met in the house of one of the wealthier members because that was the only space large enough for them to meet, but some were able to rent out public places for their Sunday morning services.

⁷The term "Pentateuch" (pronounced pen-ta-tūk, with a long "u" sound) is a short-hand way for talking about the first five books of the Bible. The prefix "pent" means five: a pentagon has five sides. These books are also sometimes called the Torah (תורה), which is a Hebrew word meaning "law," or "instruction." Both Pentateuch and Torah are sometimes used interchangeably.

deuteronomistic history⁸ and the prophets were all written to show the people the importance of following God and the consequences of neglecting their promise to love Him. Other works like the Psalms and Proverbs show the beauty of the songs and wisdom of God's people when they love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The gospels were written to instruct Christians in different areas of the world about what they had seen and heard about Jesus and encourage their faith. Paul's, Peter's, and John's letters to churches or individuals are intended to settle disputes, correct wrong understandings about their teaching, and to encourage the believers. Again, all of the literature in the Bible was written for certain purposes.

The process of writing these texts was complex. In the ancient world the best medium for writing was made from the papyrus reeds that grew near the Nile River. These reeds would be cut very thin and long-ways, squeezed together,



Ancient papyrus scroll

Image source: wikipedia.org

and laid out in the sun to dry. This process could be repeated several times in order to

⁸The term “deuteronomistic history” includes the books from Joshua through 2 Kings (except Ruth, which does not come after Judges in the Hebrew Old Testament). These six books have been given this title because the authors wrote these books with one of the major themes of Deuteronomy in mind. In Deuteronomy, Moses explains very plainly to the Israelites that if they trust God and obey Him they will be blessed, but if they go back on their promise to love God and serve Him only then they will be cursed. The books of Joshua through 2 Kings shows this to be true time after time: when the Israelites worship God alone and live holy lives by obeying Him they defeat their enemies and the surrounding nations realize that the God of the Israelites is the one true God. But when the Israelites disobey, evil kings and nations are able to rise up against them and they terrorize the Israelites (who were a fairly small group at that time).

make a long papyrus scroll, but scrolls could only be so big before they were difficult to store and roll up. Papyrus scrolls can wear out after much use, and unless they are stored in a dry climate they fall apart. To write, you could take ash and some other liquids to make ink, and use a sharpened reed stylus to write with. Sometimes oral tradition was passed down and then years later written. The Bible tells us that sometimes the words of one person were not written by him but much later, see for example: *“These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied” (Proverbs 25.1)* (about 250 years later). Once the first copy of a book was written, called the autograph,⁹ it would then be copied by others who either needed copies themselves (for the temple or a synagogue; most families could not afford their own copies because they were so expensive) or because the original was worn out. Sometimes copyists would adjust word order for the sake of clarity or because they remembered the way a similar sounding text was worded and accidentally wrote the version they remembered where it had not been originally. This should not worry us, however, because although these kinds of occurrences happened often, they do not affect the overall teaching of the Bible. With these things in mind we turn first to the Old Testament.

The books of the Old Testament are divided into three sections (followed by their Hebrew names in parentheses): Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and Writings

⁹When talking about the books of the Bible or any other ancient text that has been copied for hundreds and thousands of years, the term “autograph” is used to talk about the very first copy that the author actually wrote himself (or dictated to a secretary, as was common back then).

(Ketuvim).¹⁰ The order of the books of the Torah was fixed from an early stage because these books detail chronological history. The order of the Prophets and Writings was not as stringent since many of these books overlap time period (or for many of the psalms and proverbs it is impossible to know when they were first written). The Prophets and Writings were also often written on scrolls and kept in the same box, so the order was less important as was keeping them all together. Jesus may even refer to this threefold division when he tells the disciples *“that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled”* (Luke 24.44).

All the books in the Old Testament were recognized as authoritative to one degree or another around the time of Jesus in the first century AD. Indeed, Jesus and the apostles quote from several: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, 1-2 Samuel, 1 Kings, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Some books like Esther and Song of Songs puzzled many Jews because these books do not even mention God. Still, there were other books that some Jews enjoyed but were not considered authoritative on the same level as the law or prophets. These books were included in many copies of the Greek translations of the Old Testament since most of them were written in Greek originally (not Hebrew or Aramaic). Together they are

¹⁰A common name for the Hebrew Old Testament is Tanakh, which is an acronym of the Hebrew designations for the three different sections.

called the “deuterocanonical books,” or “apocrypha.”¹¹ Overall, the books that currently form the Old Testament were long recognized as authoritative for Judaism before the canon was “closed.”

However, how all of the books in the Old Testament were gathered together is not very clear. Some traditions hold that Moses wrote all the Pentateuch, but there is obviously some editing by a servant of Moses because Deuteronomy 34 talks about Moses’s death. We do not know precisely when the messages of the prophets were recorded and compiled together—some prophets ministered for only a few years, while some lived and preached for several. Some of the Psalms were written by or for David, but others were much later. To give a book-by-book discussion on how the Old Testament works were written is too much to discuss here.

Overall, the basic criteria for determining the canonicity¹² of a certain book were **authority** and **antiquity**. Books either had to be ascribed to Moses or David or Solomon, or one of the prophets from before the “continuous succession of prophets was finally broken in the time of King Artaxerxes (465-23 BC) according to

¹¹The term *deuterocanonical* is a compound word from “deutero-” and “canonical.” Deutero- means second, like in Deuteronomy (which literally means a second giving of the Law); canonical refers to the standard collection of books in the OT. Together these terms mean that although these books were important to some, they do not have the same authority and so they have a secondary place next to the canonical books. The term “apocrypha” means “hidden.”

¹²A book that has “canonicity” is one that deserves to be in the canon. In our discussion about the New Testament canon below we will see that the books in there have “apostolicity,” which is a close connection to one or more of the Apostles.

Josephus."¹³ Most Jews believed that no more authoritative works were written once the line of prophets had been broken. It does not seem as if any official group of rabbis legislated which books were "in" and which were "out," as if they were voting for their favorites. The process happened much more naturally, so that tradition about the sacred character of a book weighed in favor of its being understood as authoritative, and most of the books that were considered authoritative were agreed upon by the 2nd century BC, even though some final discussions did not occur until the 2nd century AD. There was an important meeting in the Judean town of Jamnia in the late 1st century AD that discussed the books of the Old Testament, but our best understanding of this meeting was that these discussions really focused on Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon—and not even to say whether or not these were "in" or "out" of the canon, but just to discuss the fact that these were already considered authoritative despite some peculiarities. This shows us that there was a spectrum of what was authoritative. Since there was no single factor that determined if something was authoritative or not, Jews had to weigh the relative strengths and merits on a book-by-book basis. As we have seen, the Torah (five books of Moses) were strongly considered authoritative because they contain the traditions passed on by Moses. Even though there was more discussion about the authority of Song of Solomon, it still fell within the spectrum of what was considered authoritative.

¹³Quoted by Julio Trebolle in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, p. 556. Josephus was an important Jewish historian who lived in the later half of the first century AD.

The Creation of the New Testament

Although it is not perfectly clear how all the Old Testament books were written, compiled, and collected, we have some greater confidence with how the process occurred for the books in the New Testament. Similar to the criteria for canonicity for the Old Testament books, there are three main criteria for canonicity in the New Testament: (1) apostolicity, (2) ecclesiastical¹⁴ usage, and (3) orthodoxy. Apostolicity means the document comes either from an apostle or a close associate. For example, two of the gospels were written by apostles (Matthew, John), but Mark and Luke were not apostles. However, some of the earliest Christians have passed on reliable traditions which say that Mark was a close friend of Peter and Luke was a travel companion with Paul on some of his missionary journeys. The second category, ecclesiastical usage, means that the letter or gospel account was widely used by many Christians and/or congregations. Third, orthodoxy is how well one work agrees especially with what was known to be taught by Jesus and the apostles, and also what was taught in the largest churches where the apostles spent much time (like in Rome or Ephesus).

Imagine this example from history. The apostle Paul was a missionary and one of the first global Christians. He traveled through what is now modern-day Israel,

¹⁴The term “ecclesiastical” comes from the Greek work *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), which means “church” or “assembly.”

Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and he hoped to go as far as Spain. Sometimes he was able to spend a long time with a new church he helped to start (see Acts 14). Other times, due to pressure from some Jews who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah or from pagans who did not worship God at all, Paul was forced to leave a city quickly and could not stay for long (see Acts 16). Because Paul had worked in so many different places it was impossible for him to visit them all for as long as he would have liked. Through friends in each church (Priscila and Aquila in Rome, see Romans 16.3) or from friends whom Paul sent to certain churches (Epaphroditus to Philippi, see Philippians 2.25), Paul was able to hear some news about what was happening in each church. He needed to visit more cities and preach the gospel to people whom had never heard it before, but he also needed to check in on the congregations he helped establish during his earlier journeys. As he heard how the churches were doing, he had to share with them his advice or offer some corrections to their understanding of salvation, grace, baptism, or the place of Jews and Gentiles in the church. Sometimes Paul was in prison, wrongfully accused of creating riots. When he was not in prison his best option was to continue traveling to establish new churches and write letters back to churches he had already planted whenever he had something very important to share with them. All of the letters Paul and the other apostles wrote are called *occasional* letters, because they were written for a certain

reason—to the original audience first. We are able to glean some information from these letters, but we really have something like one side of a phone conversation.

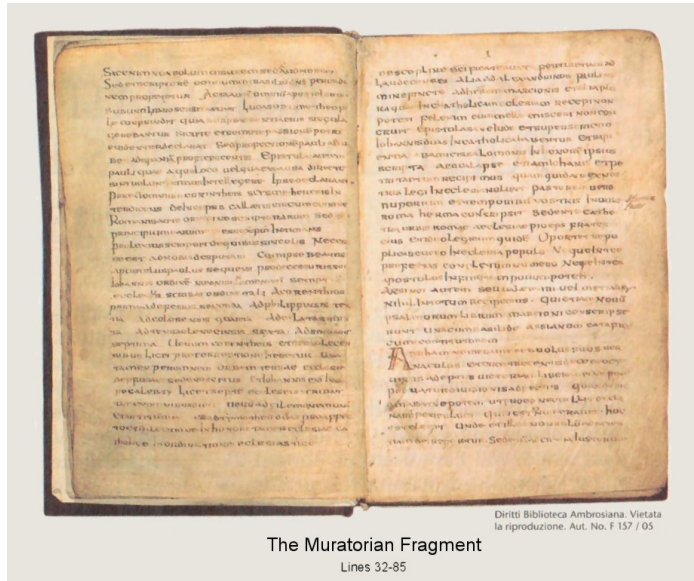
Just like Paul, when Peter, or James, or John had an urgent message to share with a church group or an individual whom they could not visit in person, they either personally wrote a letter or they dictated the letter through a friend or secretary. Literacy rates in the early first century AD were not nearly as high as they are in the twenty-first century. Most people could write only at a basic level if at all, and many could only barely read. Very few could read and write well. Someone who wanted to send a letter but who did not write very well or someone who was physically incapable (like Paul in chains in prison) could have hired one of these professional writers called an *amanuensis*. These writers were very highly trained and would often write word-for-word what was dictated to them. Others were friends of the apostles who were better able to put into words the apostles' thoughts, like Silvanus who helped Peter write the letter we call 1 Peter (see 1 Peter 5.12). Even in Scripture we see that there was more than one way for a letter to be written in the first century.

A man named Marcion was one of the earliest who tried to form his own canon of documents from the New Testament. Marcion was a Gnostic (pronounced "nos-tick"). Many Gnostics believed that God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament were two different beings. They also believed that you had to have special knowledge to be saved. This knowledge was found in the documents they wrote for

themselves but claimed were from Jesus and the other Apostles. The most popular of these documents is called *Gospel of Thomas* (attributed to the disciple Thomas), which has some of Jesus's sayings in the gospels and also makes up new ones attributed to Jesus. Marcion did not write this work; he is known for heavily editing many of Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke to his own liking. He systematically removed any positive mention of the Old Testament or Jews, and anything that connected Jesus to Israel he cut out. He then tried to pass off these versions as legitimate. His collection of these edited texts came out around AD 140. But as his views became known many church leaders responded by condemning him. The issue is significant—Marcion did not hold the views taught by Jesus and his earliest followers and so his canon simply does not work because he completely misunderstands Paul and Jesus' role as the Messiah of Israel. Marcion's Jesus has nothing to do with Israel and Judaism, which plainly contradicts the teaching in the New Testament. If Jesus has nothing to do with Israel and the Old Testament then He would be totally unqualified to be savior. In reality, Marcion undermined his own efforts.

A few years after Marcion's canon, there came a work that is referred to today as the "Muratorian fragment." It is called a fragment because it is missing part of its beginning and ending. This may explain why it does not have all twenty seven books of our New Testament. This collection is dated to around AD 170 (although some place it later). While it may seem that thirty years was a long time to respond to

Marcion, keep in mind that this may not be the only time when someone argued against Marcion. The Muratorian fragment is just the earliest response we know of—there could have been others that we just do not know about yet, and there may even be an earlier copy of the fragment we have not found yet either. But since the fragment mentions two letters that were forged in Paul’s name to spread Marcion’s teaching, the fragment must come after Marcion. The texts in the New Testament that the fragment mentions are: Luke; John; Acts; Romans; 1-2 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1-2 Thessalonians; 1-2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon; Jude; two letters from John; Revelation. The fragment does not mention Matthew or Mark because the beginning is missing; the first part we have describes Luke as the third gospel, which means Matthew and Mark were probably the first and second gospels mentioned. The fragment also refers to other books that are worth reading, but most these are distinguished from the books comprising the New Testament. Since the fragment omits Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, and one of the letters of John, does this mean these letters are suspect and sub-par? Not at all. Again, our evidence is only fragmentary, so



The Muratorian Fragment, ca.170 AD
Image source: bible-researcher.com

we do not know what the author of this piece thought about these letters. Also, Hebrews, James, and 1-2 Peter were probably written to groups predominantly of Jewish Christians, while Paul's letters were written to congregations that had a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Hebrews, James, and 1-2 Peter may simply not have circulated around the area where the author of the Muratorian fragment lived. Finally, if the letter from John that is missing is 3 John, that letter is directed not to a congregation but to an individual and so it may not have circulated as widely as the others. Regardless, its omission from the Muratorian fragment should not cast doubt on its inspiration.

Although the fragment is from the mid second century AD, it was not until the early fourth century that many of these discussions came to a close. Canonization did not involve men and women voting on their favorite books. Remember, one of criteria for canonicity was "ecclesiastical use" which means it took time for the letters and gospel accounts to spread to various churches throughout the known world. The process was also long because many were spending their time and efforts not with the books of the New Testament but combating heretical teaching about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The discussions about the New Testament canon were largely settled primarily for theological reasons. Some have tried to make these issues about political power and influence, but that ignores the fact that the main issue was the truth about Jesus.

Scriptures We Can Trust

So, what does all this tell about how we got the Bible that we have today? First, the recognition of certain books was a process, not an event. It took time for some books, or the messages in those books, to circulate among a large number of people. Afterwards, the people still had to discern whether the message was from God or someone else. There was no magic formula for this—the people had to trust God that He would give them the teaching they needed. In both the Old and New Testaments, some books were more quickly recognized as having authority than others. In the Old Testament, Jews and Christians knew the books of the Pentateuch were authoritative because they contain the traditions passed down from Moses. But the books of Esther and Song of Songs do not even mention God’s name once. The book of Revelation is so different from the other kinds of writing in the New Testament that some felt it was not an accurate representation of the loving Christ found in the gospels. Like I mentioned earlier, there is a spectrum of what was considered authoritative, and even though some books were more certain than others, all the ones now in the Bible were all understood to be authoritative. There will always be men and women who argue that certain books should be in the canon and others should be kicked out. But most people who make these arguments either want to see some other teaching in the Bible or they disagree with something in one of the books in the Bible, or they simply do not believe in anything in the Bible and so they believe that every teaching by

every person who called himself a Christian should be heard. On the other hand, the church has had the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the weight of tradition to recognize what was and was *not* authoritative teaching. It would be nice for us if there had been a magic formula to figure all this out, but there simply is none. Moses trusted God when He spoke to him, the prophets trusted that God communicated to Israel through Moses, Jesus knew God spoke through the Old Testament, and the disciples and first Christians trusted that God spoke about Jesus in the Old Testament and gospels and other works that eventually formed the New Testament. Ultimately, Christians can trust that God has given us the Scriptures we need to know Him and to know how best to love Him and serve Him. The Holy Spirit, God's own Spirit whom He gives to every believer at their baptism, has always guided the church into God's truth—truth which is plainly found in Scripture and perfectly found in Jesus Christ, who was full with the same Spirit that fills us.



KEVIN BURR serves as the student body President at Harding School of Theology and will graduate with his Master's of Divinity in May, 2014. He plans to pursue a doctoral degree in New Testament studies to teach college Bible and Greek. Kevin lives in Memphis, TN with his wife Linnea.

PLACING THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT

KEVIN BURR

Introduction

The New Testament is the written record of the beginning of Christianity from the birth of Jesus, his death, burial, and resurrection, and the missionary efforts of the first generation of Christians. In truth, the scope of the New Testament is not limited just to this time—it covers all eternity. The Gospel of John begins by saying this about Jesus, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God”* (John 1.1). The book of Revelation ends describing the new heaven and earth, and how those who have believed in Christ will live with Him forever. Even though the New Testament refers to the span of eternity, its focus is on the first few decades of Jesus’ life and teaching, and the work His apostles did after He gave them the Holy Spirit when He ascended into heaven. These stories about Jesus’ miracles and teaching are familiar to us. Jesus’ healing of the paralytic in Mark 2 shows His

power over disease, and His forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 shows His compassion. We also know and love famous passages in the letters of Paul and John, like, *“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant...”* (1 Corinthians 13.4-5a); or, *“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God”* (1 John 3.1). The New Testament is full of these kinds of stories which show how God was and is actively working in the world then and today, bringing people closer to Him. These stories tell about how God transformed the lives of men and women from ordinary sinners into extraordinary servants.

While the New Testament tells us these things, it is also important to know how the stories in the New Testament fit into their historical context. Were these just stories that only Jesus’ followers had heard, or did others who were not Christians know anything about Jesus and His teaching? Thankfully, there are several mentions of Christians outside the New Testament in the first and second centuries AD, which means these resources are very close to the time when the events in the New Testament took place. Some resources merely mention Christianity in one way or another, while others are very harsh toward Christians. The New Testament does not stand alone in some of its claims about Jesus and what the first Christians practiced and preached about Him. Certain works corroborate¹⁵ the evidence in the New Testament, while other works only mention how early Christians were treated on the

¹⁵The word “corroborate” is a great word that is often used in legal situations. To “corroborate” means “to confirm or give support to” something. A hypothetical example would be “the bystander’s statement corroborated the witnesses’ testimony.”

basis of their beliefs. We will examine some of these accounts to see what they say about Christianity, which will help us place the New Testament text in its historical context.

Josephus and Jesus

Two important pieces of evidence we have for Jesus outside of the New Testament come from the Jewish historian named Josephus.¹⁶ He was born in AD 37, which was close to the time of Jesus' resurrection. Near the end of the first century, when Josephus was an older man, he wrote most of his four works of history. He was a veteran of the Jewish-Roman war, which was fought between AD 66-74 (and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70). Josephus fought for the Jews, but near the end of the war he surrendered (instead of committing suicide like many of his countrymen) and began to work for the Romans. Most scholars and students of New Testament history today consider Josephus to be a fairly reliable historian. The early Christians remember Josephus's words about James the brother of Jesus. In his *Antiquities of the Jews* book 20 chapter 9, 1, Josephus says "so he assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, whose name was James ..." In this text, Josephus clearly knows that James had a brother named Jesus, who was also called "Christ." This does not mean

¹⁶Pronounced "Joe-see-fus."

that Josephus believed Jesus was the Christ, but simply that he was aware that Jesus had been given that title by his followers.

There is another mention of Jesus in Josephus's *Antiquities* book 18 chapter 3, 3, but this one deserves a little more careful study than the first. Here is how the text reads:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused many men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

Dr. Edwin Yamauchi, an expert in the backgrounds of the New Testament and a faithful Christian, points out that there are probably some "interpolations"¹⁷ in this text. This means that an early Christian found this copy of Josephus's work and probably added some phrases about Jesus that Josephus did not write (because he was Jewish and did not believe Jesus was Israel's Messiah, which is the same thing as "Christ"). The above paragraph shows that Josephus knew Jesus was called the Christ

¹⁷An "interpolation" is an insertion into a text that was not originally there.

but he did not believe Jesus was the Christ. The statement “if indeed one ought to call him a man” and “He was the Christ” are probably interpolations. Finally, since Josephus did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, he would not have likely reported on the resurrection either, so “on the third day he appeared to them restored to life, etc.” is probably another insertion. Other than these three statements (which are underlined), the rest of this selection is probably original to Josephus. He may or may not have believed that Jesus performed miracles, but that did not stop him from reporting that others believed Jesus did miraculous things. Yamauchi makes this helpful comment, “Josephus corroborates important information about Jesus: that he was the martyred leader of the church in Jerusalem and that he was a wise teacher who had established a wide and lasting following, despite the fact that he had been crucified under Pilate at the instigation of some of the Jewish leaders.”¹⁸

Negative Perspectives on Christianity

These two texts from Josephus merely mention what Christians believed about Jesus. The next few texts we discuss below show a different take on Christians. We as twenty-first century Christians should look at the message and practices of the first century Christians to try to emulate what they preached and how they followed the teaching of Christ and the Apostles. But, sadly, not everyone agreed with their

¹⁸Edwin Yamauchi, quoted by Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 81.

message. Some were even hostile to the Gospel and to those preaching it. In fact, Jesus warns His disciples in the Gospel of John:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.

(John 15.18-20)

Elsewhere, John tells his readers “Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you” (1 John 3.13). To another group of Christians, Peter says:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

(1 Peter 4.12-14)

Jesus and the Apostles all tell us that even though we love God we should not be surprised when the world disagrees with us, argues with us, even hates and persecutes us. What is worse, the earliest Christians experienced much of this sort of thing. The New Testament tells us some about what non-Christians believed about

Christians, but in order to get a broader understanding of how the Lord's people were perceived and treated by others, we have to place the New Testament texts in their context. This means we must look at how other accounts describe Christians, their actions, their thoughts, and what others believed about them and how they treated them.

The following excerpts are from various pagan authors. What we must keep in mind is that these people did not care to have a good understanding of Jesus's life and teaching. They felt Christianity was weird for several reasons. Athenagoras (*Plea* 3), who lived in the second half of the second century, says three main charges are leveled against Christians: "Three things are alleged against us: atheism, Thyestean feasts, Oedipodean intercourse." Atheism may seem surprising, but Christians (and Jews) denied the existence of gods like Zeus, Athena, and all the others. They affirmed the existence of the one God. For this reason many pagans believed Christians were atheists because they did not accept the pantheon of pagan deities. Some also believed Christians engaged in "Thyestean feasts" which involved cannibalism—the eating of human flesh. When Jesus talks about the Lord's Supper as his body and blood, he was obviously speaking metaphorically; the Bible does not teach that the bread and cup are the literal body and blood of Jesus. But when pagans heard Christians talk about this sort of thing, they were confused and took them to mean that they literally eat His body and drink his blood. Finally, many

pagans believed Christians were having “Oedipodean intercourse” which is incest—having sexual relations with family members. This is also surprising to us today, but when Christians talk about “loving their brothers and sisters” many pagans understood “love” to have sexual connotations, and in their misunderstanding they were disgusted that Christians talked about “loving” people who were their family members. We can see that there is a small grain of truth in the basis of these claims: Christians do not believe in pagan gods; we do talk about the Lord’s Supper as Jesus’ body and blood; and we love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. But these accusations are gross misunderstandings and misrepresentations of what Christians truly believe and practice.

Another accusation of cannibalism and incest comes from Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 9), who clearly misunderstood how someone was initiated into Christianity. He describes the Lord’s Supper first, then a “love feast” (see 1 Corinthians 11) which was kind of like today’s potluck lunches we have at church sometimes. Minucius Felix says,

An infant covered over with meal [breadding], that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily—O horror!—they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs.... On a solemn day they assemble at the feast, with all their children, sisters, mothers, people of every sex and every age. There, after much feasting, when the fellowship has grown warm, and the fervor

*of incestuous lust has grown hot with drunkenness...[the lights are put out]...
the connections of abominable lust involve them in the uncertainty of fate.*

Let me summarize this account since the language may be a little tricky. Minucius Felix says that someone who wants to become a Christian comes to a meeting of other Christians. A loaf of bread is placed before him and he is supposed to hit it (this is weird and we are not told why). What he does not know is that there is an infant placed in the loaf (how he does not know this is difficult to explain), and so he accidentally kills it. Everyone partakes of the loaf, eating part of the child too. Then, on Sunday, after everyone has gotten drunk they blow out all the lights and everyone finds someone to have sex with. Clearly, this is a series of nasty rumors that some people believed about Christians based on a severe misunderstanding of Christian belief and practice.

In addition to these accounts of what some people thought about early Christians, there are others which are less hostile (though still critical) and detail some early Christian belief and practice. In the passages below I have **bolded** the most relevant sections:

*But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order [from emperor Nero]. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, **called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the***

name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty: then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had opened his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

–Tacitus, Annals 15.44.2-8¹⁹

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether

¹⁹Tacitus was a Roman historian, writing in AD 115.

the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: **I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.** There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. **Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ—none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do—these I thought should be discharged.** Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. **They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.**

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that **they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this**

*was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing **two female slaves who were called deaconesses**. But I discovered nothing else but **depraved, excessive superstition**.*

*I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. **For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.** But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.*

—Pliny to the Emperor Trajan²⁰

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. **They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really**

²⁰Pliny the Younger was the governor of Pontus/Bithynia from AD 111-113, writing to Emperor Trajan. Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97 (from <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/texts/pliny.html>)

proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

–Trajan to Pliny²¹

In addition to these comments, there is a picture in a guardroom found in Rome that depicts a man named Alexamenos worshipping a man on a cross with the head of a donkey. Tacitus (*Histories* 5.3-4), Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.80), Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 9.3), and a Christian historian named Tertullian (*To the Nations* 1.14; *Apology* 16.2) all tell us that Jews were sometimes accused of worshipping a donkey, and it seems as if this mockery had been transferred to Jesus. The picture of Alexamenos and the donkey-headed man being crucified has these words scratched in the stone underneath: “Alexamenos worships [his] God” (in Greek: ΑΛΞΑΜΕΝΟC ΚΕΒΕΤΕ ΘΕΟΝ). Modern-day historian and devoted Christian Everett Ferguson says this about it: “As repulsive as the picture is to Christians now, it conveys strongly how contemptible the idea of a crucified Lord was to pagan thinking.”²² The carving and a tracing are below:

²¹Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97 (from <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/texts/pliny.html>)

²²Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2003 (3rd edition), p. 596. Pp. 583-620 contain an excellent summary of important issues related to Christianity in the ancient world, as well as a great discussion about what was truly unique about Christianity compared to other religions—Jesus Christ.



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Alexorig.jpg>



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:AlexGraffito.svg>

A few things about the materials above deserve comment. First, in the mind of a Roman, there was an important difference between “religion” and “superstition.” Religions were officially recognized by the imperial government and were protected from persecution. Religions were also respected for their age (at that time what was older was often more respected than what was newer). Judaism had the official status of “religion” in the Roman empire. Christianity, on the other hand, was officially considered a “superstition,” which is why Tacitus and Pliny both refer to it in that way. Superstitions were not protected like religions, and sometimes their followers were persecuted (like what Nero did to Christians), and they were generally looked down upon because it was believed that superstitions of all kinds dishonored the gods.

Despite this distinction between religion and superstition, we can learn some other things from these accounts. Tacitus says that the Christians received their name from Christ, who was from Judea, crucified under Pontius Pilate. He even notes that

Christianity had spread from Judea to Rome. This corroborates with what is said in the New Testament about Jesus' crucifixion and the spread of the church from Judea all the way to Rome. Pliny, in his letter to emperor Trajan, notes that people who refuse to recant their belief in Christ cannot be made to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods, nor are they willing to curse Christ. This matches with what Paul and the other apostles tell their churches about standing firm and not giving up their faith to return to paganism. Also, Pliny mentions what Christians have told him about their worship services: they would meet on a certain day (Sunday) to sing songs worshipping Christ, to encourage one another to live righteously, and then to return in order to eat together. Pliny notes that many different kinds of people had become Christians old and young, men and women alike. He also says that so many had believed that there was no longer anyone offering sacrifices to idols which meant there was no meat in the market place to sell (see 1 Corinthians 8 where Paul mentions meat sacrificed to idols). These resources from people who disbelieved Christianity still recognize that some important teachings of the New Testament are based in historical fact.

A Variety of Responses to Christianity

From Josephus's simple reporting of what Christians believed about Jesus to Minucius Felix's horrifying version of church gatherings, it is plain to see that there was a variety of responses to Christ and His teaching even among non-Christians.

Despite all the differences and wild tales, it is safe to say that some non-Christians in the first and second centuries AD had an understanding (even if not a very good one) of what Christians believed and practiced. There are other important texts that mention Christians which mock them for helping the poor and imprisoned (for example, see the author Lucian, *On the Death of Peregrinus* 11-14, 16)—even though they were making fun of Christians it is interesting to see that the Christians in some of these stories are doing the kinds of honorable and loving things that Jesus commanded. These texts mentioned above are helpful for Christians today because they come from people who are unsympathetic to Christian faith but still corroborate what the New Testament says about Jesus and the earliest Christians. However, we must keep in mind that our faith is not based on these texts—our faith is in Jesus the Son who perfectly reveals God the Father.



LUKE DOCKERY has been in youth ministry for over ten years, and has been at the Farmington Church of Christ since 2006, where he currently serves as Associate Minister. He loves teenagers, and is devoted to helping them come to mature faith in Jesus. He and his wife Caroline have been married since 2006, and they have one daughter, Kinsley, who is two.

WHEN FAITH GETS TOUGH

LUKE DOCKERY

Introduction

I have a difficult but important topic to discuss. The purpose of our gathering and studying this weekend is for the purpose of developing a deeper faith, but as a person of faith, what do you do when bad things happen in life? What do you do when things don't out the way you plan, and your life is marred by heartache?

Let's begin by looking at some Scripture:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

(Romans 5.3-5)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(James 1.2-4)

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted....

(2 Timothy 3.12)

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5.10-12)

What do all of those Scriptures have in common? They all speak of suffering not as a **possibility to be considered**, but a **certainty to be prepared for**.

So when the Bible promises us that the Christian life won't be easy and that suffering will be a part of it, why do we think that if we try to devote ourselves to God that we won't have any problems? Sure, we might *claim* that we don't really feel this way, but deep down, aren't we a little surprised when hard times come? Since we've given our lives to God, if we're honest, don't we feel like we *deserve* something better from Him?

My Story

I am a youth minister, and have been for several years. My dad is a preacher and has been for my entire life, which means that I grew up as a preacher's kid. I

certainly was not perfect as a teenager, but I was a pretty good kid. I made good grades; I tried to avoid doing bad things. I went to church all the time, and I was the kind of kid that youth ministers love: I answered questions in class, I went to youth activities, and I tried to be a good example to younger kids.

After I graduated from high school I went off to a Christian college, and while there I grew in my faith in a lot of ways. I became more serious about a lot of things. I didn't really plan on going into ministry, but ultimately I felt like God was leading me on that path, and here I am, several years later, a full-time youth minister. As a minister, I spend my life studying God's Word, trying to teach it to teenagers, and trying to help them develop a faith that will last a lifetime (and messing up in all of those areas). With the career path that I've chosen, I'll never be rich; I'll never be famous. But I think I'm doing what God wants me to do.

And so, it came as a surprise to me (although it shouldn't have) when my life got really tough.

I met my wife, Caroline, in college, and we got married in 2006. My wife is awesome. She is my best friend. We have fun playing together, and working together, and dreaming together, and even arguing with one another.

And as married people generally do, we decided that we wanted to have kids (she actually decided that *before* I did, but she eventually convinced me) and in early 2011, we learned that we were expecting. And that was great and we were really

excited, but that excitement quickly turned to sorrow when Caroline had a miscarriage and we lost the baby early in the pregnancy on January 9, 2011.

What an awful, dark, black time that was for us! We felt helpless and powerless—there was nothing we could do. And what's worse, a lot of people didn't know anything about it because we hadn't even told many people that we were pregnant yet (it's always harder to go through difficult times on your own).

With time, things got better. It still hurts—I can still remember that horrible feeling—but it became more of a dull ache than a sharp pain.

Within a few months, we learned that we were pregnant again. And we were excited again, but oh so nervous. We prayed and tried not to worry, but we couldn't help but be concerned that the same thing might happen again and that the pregnancy might end in miscarriage.

But praise God! It didn't, and our sweet daughter Kinsley was born in December 2011. She was big and healthy and we spent the next few months trying to figure out how to be parents to a newborn. It was exhausting and wonderful.

But then, after a few months, my wife started getting concerned. You see, babies as they develop start to do certain things at certain ages (roll over from their front to their back, hold their heads up, push up, babble, crawl, etc.). Those are called milestones, and although it's not an exact science, we have a pretty good idea of how old babies should be when they achieve certain milestones.

The problem was that Kinsley was way behind on her milestones. She couldn't hold her head up like other babies did. When she was on the ground she wouldn't really try to push up or move around or look around; she would just lay there.

Over a period of several weeks we took her to get a bunch of different kinds of tests done: a physical therapy evaluation to see how far behind she was, and an EEG and an MRI to see if there was anything physically wrong with her brain.

After what seemed like a long time, we finally got the results on November 20, 2012. And it wasn't good news. Kinsley had significant problems in her brain which indicated that she had a very rare kind of disease for which there was no cure, and no treatment other than therapy. It was a disease that would severely affect her life and limit what she would be able to do.

Again the darkness of suffering settled in over our lives.

It took some genetic testing and a lot more waiting before we got an actual diagnosis: Kinsley has a rare form of congenital muscular dystrophy called *Muscle Eye Brain Disease* (MEB). This is a genetic disorder—Kinsley got it because the genes she got from Caroline and the genes she got from me combined to form a mutation which causes her brain (and as a result her muscles and her eyes) to not work the way they are supposed to.

Children with MEB usually have a hard time learning to crawl or walk, most of them are non-verbal (they are unable to speak), and they are more vulnerable to a lot of health problems which can lead to a shortened lifespan.

Boy, talk about tough news! It all seemed like a cruel trick! After our miscarriage, we had been so concerned all during Kinsley's pregnancy because we were afraid that it might happen again. When it didn't and Kinsley was born without problems, we thought we were out of the woods and that everything would be fine, and then her diagnosis hit us like a ton of bricks.

It didn't seem fair. After all, thousands upon thousands of healthy babies are born everyday, many of them to people who aren't Christians at all. Some of them are born to teenagers who aren't even married and don't even want to have a child in the first place!

And here I am, a minister, someone who is trying his best to live a life in God's service, and it's *my* baby who is cursed with this terrible disease.

C'mon, God. Don't I deserve better than that?

An Older Story

I have another story I want to tell you. It's a much older story; it happened about 2,600 years ago. And if you've grown up going to church, you're probably

pretty familiar with the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego already. You'll find it in your Bibles in the Book of Daniel, chapter 3.

To start with, you need to know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were young Hebrew nobles who lived in the city of Jerusalem (probably teenagers when we are first introduced to them). These young men were faithful servants of God, but unfortunately, they lived in a time when most of the people around them were *not* faithful, and as a result, God allowed Jerusalem, *His city*, to be attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians. When that happened, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and a lot of other Hebrews were taken off into captivity in Babylon.

This would have been a really difficult time for these young men. They would have had a lot of questions going on in their minds, because when Babylon conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, it struck at the very heart of the identity of the Hebrew people.

You see, as a Hebrew, your identity was tied up in the fact that God had made a covenant with Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation. In accordance with that covenant, throughout history God had shown protection for His people time and time again. He had rescued them from Egypt and helped them to conquer the land of Canaan and defeat nations more powerful than they were; over and over again, God came and saved His people.

With God on their side, the Israelites felt confident that they would never be conquered, and this feeling was reinforced by the presence of the Temple, God's house, being in Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem were especially confident that their city would never be overthrown, because God would never allow His Temple to be violated.

Now, certainly God had warned the Israelites that if they were unfaithful to Him they would be punished. And in the centuries leading up to the downfall of Jerusalem, the people *were* unfaithful—they didn't obey God's commandments and they worshipped other gods. But despite these warnings, the people couldn't really bring themselves to believe that these bad things could happen to *them* (kind of like how we struggle to believe that we will suffer and go through hard times as Christians, even though the Bible tells us just the opposite!).

Regardless of their unbelief, that's exactly what happened: the armies of Nebuchadnezzar came and conquered the city, and the best and the brightest of the Hebrew elite were dragged off to Babylon. And God stood by silently.

This is the situation that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego find themselves in when they are taken into captivity to Babylon, and you can imagine some of the questions that must have been going through the minds of the Israelites at the time: why did God allow this to happen? Was He not powerful enough to stop it? Does He

not care about us anymore? These are important questions, and they're not so different from the questions that run through our minds today when things get tough.

In Daniel 3, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon decides to have a giant statue of gold built—90 feet high. Furthermore, he makes a decree that whenever music is played, all the people are supposed to stop whatever they're doing and fall down and worship this golden statue, and anyone who fails to do so will immediately be cast into the furnace of fire and burned alive.

But there's a problem: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego worship the true and living God, and they're not about to fall down and worship some statue! Some of the Babylonians go to Nebuchadnezzar and tell him that the three young men are refusing to worship the statue. This enrages Nebuchadnezzar and he calls to have them brought before him and he threatens them:

Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"

(Daniel 3.14-15)

And I absolutely love the way the three friends respond to the king:

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

(Daniel 3.16-18)

Did you hear what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego just said? A lot of times in this story I think we just pass over this without noticing it—we think that the three friends make an easy decision to refuse to worship the statue because they *know* that God is going to protect them.

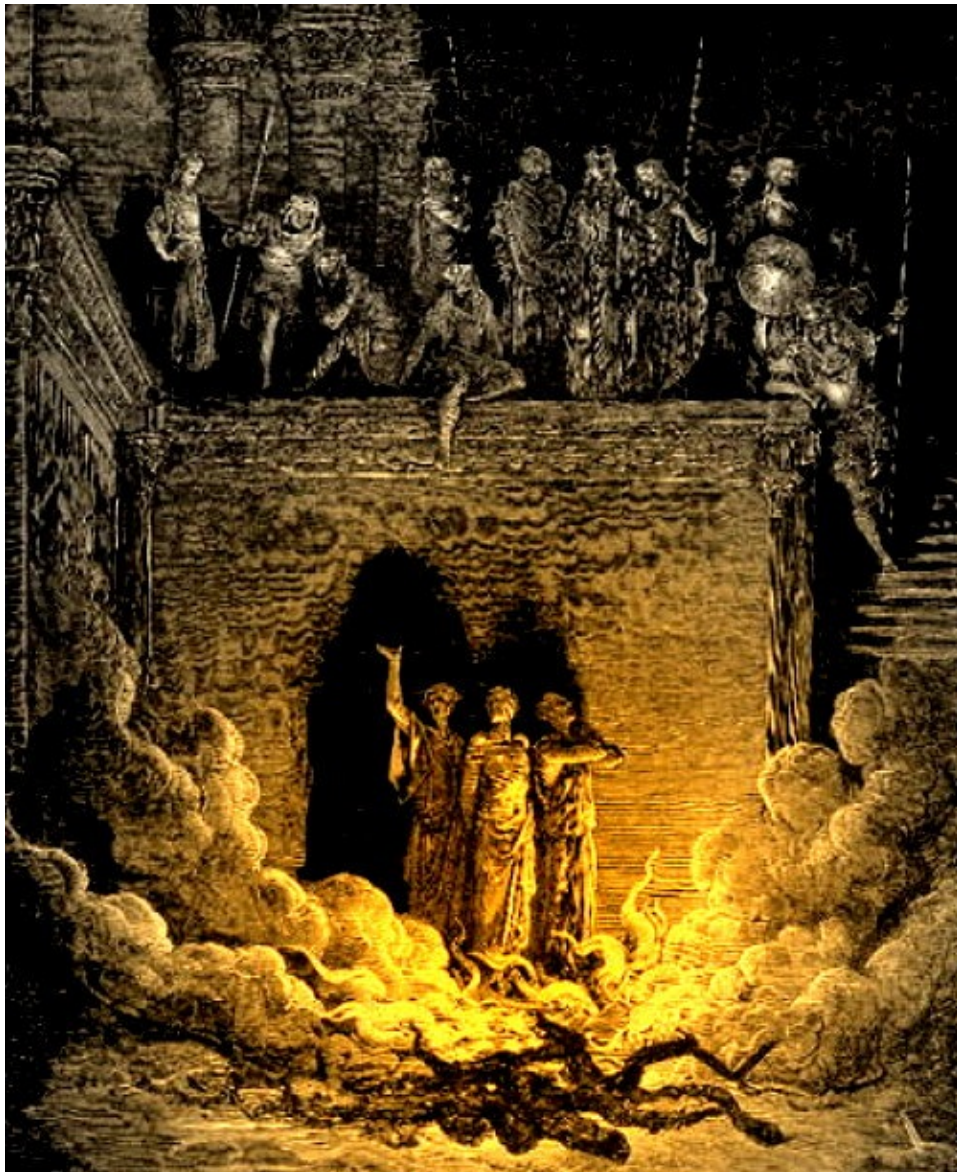
But that's not what these verse say. Listen again: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of the blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. **But even if does not**, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are *confident* that God *can* save them, and they're *hopeful* that He *will* save them, but they don't *know* that He will. And this is what makes their faith so impressive—they're determined to be faithful to God even though they don't know exactly what's going to happen to them!

Remember, life in captivity in Babylon was an uncertain time for God's people. God hadn't protected them from Babylon; He had allowed them to be captured. And

now, in these uncertain circumstances, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego find their lives threatened, and basically, they don't care: "King Nebuchadnezzar, we serve God and Him alone, no matter what. No matter how bad things get. We're not gonna bow down and worship your statue no matter what you do to us."

Of course, we should mention briefly the rest of the story: as it turns out, God does protect Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and even though the furnace burns



The Fiery Furnace by Albrecht Durer (1471-1528)

seven times hotter than normal, they're not burned up and as a result of the whole incident, Nebuchadnezzar glorifies God and changes the law.

But just because the story has a happy ending, I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't *know* that everything would be okay. They still had to choose to be faithful to God despite uncertainty, despite the suffering.

Tough Faith

As a youth minister, I have a lot of teenagers who look up to me, but I actually look up to three teenagers, because the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego blows me away. They were slaves in a foreign land and their very lives were threatened, but **when times got tough, so did their faith.**

I think God wants us to develop a tough faith. A faith that, regardless of whatever obstacles or circumstances we face, is determined to trust in Him no matter what happens.

Look, I don't know what your life is going to look like. I don't know if you'll ever have to literally risk your life in order to follow God. I don't know if you'll ever deal with the heartbreak of miscarriage or the daily struggle of having a child with a horrible disease.

I'm pretty confident though that at some point, things are going to get really, really tough for you. And I don't say that because they've gotten tough for *me*, but because the Bible promises that it will happen!

So the question is: when times get tough for you, will your faith be tough enough to handle it?

We talked about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: their faith was tough enough. As it turned out, their story had a happy ending, but their faith was so tough that they were prepared for an *unhappy* ending.

Kinsley is now almost two and a half, and I wish I could tell you that there has been a happy ending and that everything is okay. And don't get me wrong—Kinsley is awesome! She is a sweet, happy little girl. She is a huge blessing in our lives and she makes me so happy: I delight in her.

She has learned how to crawl and can even stand on her own sometimes. She understands some of the things we say to her. We're confident that one day she'll learn to walk and communicate with sign language and maybe even talk. But she still has MEB, and she will continue to have it for the rest of her life unless there is a huge medical breakthrough or unless God miraculously heals her.

I pray for both of those things everyday, but *even if they don't happen*, I will put my trust in God. He doesn't ask me to understand why my sweet girl struggles with MEB; He just asks me to trust Him even though I don't know how everything will turn out.

And He promises that even if everything is not okay *here*, even if everything doesn't work out the way I want it to *here*, it will be okay Someday. Because Someday, Jesus will return, God will call His people home, and:

He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore....

(Revelation 21.4)



RACHEL GOULD – As a student of English, Rachel has long been fascinated by words, particularly in analogies used in daily life and in the Bible. She spends much of her time working with young women in the church, encouraging them to grow daily in their love of the Lord. She currently serves as an admissions counselor at Freed-Hardeman University.

WE ARE THE BODY

RACHEL GOULD

Churches and Steeples

Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all of the people. Close the doors, and hear them pray. Open the doors, and they all walk away.

Did you grow up saying that rhyme and making the hand gestures that go along with it? I can't remember where I first learned that rhyme. Probably in one of the Sunday School classes for babies. I bet you can walk down the children's hallway on almost any given Sunday, peer into a two-year-old classroom, and find the teacher there helping the toddlers move their stubby fingers into steeples. Steeples are the hardest part after all.

"Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all of the people." It's a fun little rhyme, isn't it? The only problem is that it isn't quite right; it doesn't capture the entire picture. Because we grew up with this simple little rhyme and making the matching gestures, we bought into an idea that this rhyme captures what

defines the Church. We have come to believe that “church” only means collectively gathering with other Christians to pray, to sing a few songs, to hear a sermon, and then to leave “church” behind until 5:00 PM Sunday evening when we will repeat each of those actions again. Somewhere along the way, we bought into this idea that Church means a place and a time that we worship that does connect to a steeple, just not to our daily lives. Sometimes, I am not sure that the early Church would recognize us today if they could come forward into the 21st century.

Think back to the very beginning, to the day we call the beginning of the Church. Acts 2 captures that moment, and it is a chapter you probably know well. At the end of the chapter though, after the tongues of fire, Peter’s great sermon, and 3,000 baptisms, are a few lines describing the early Church:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

(Acts 2.42-47)

In just six verses, Luke, the author of Acts, shows us a group of people working towards the benefit of each other. They were gathering together daily, sometimes at the temple and sometimes in each other's homes. They were taking communion together, but they were also sharing meals together at other times. And did you catch verse 45? "And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." These people were so involved in each other's lives that they knew when someone had a need or a burden of some kind, and they did not leave that friend to suffer alone. Instead, they took care of the problem, even if it meant selling something that they owned in order to help.

Try making up hand gestures for that image.

I can remember the first time that this passage really came to life for me. I was in Papua New Guinea for the summer. If you do not know where that country is, Papua New Guinea is part of an island located just above Australia. I had gone there to spend the entire summer working with a team of missionaries. My job was to learn from that team about their daily lives and to begin practicing evangelism myself. I was fortunate because the primary language in the city I was working in was English, so I was able to plug in very quickly. Most of the people I met that summer had been Christians for a year or two at most. Although I had been a Christian for much longer, the way that they lived and worshipped changed my view of the Church forever.

All summer I watched as these people loved, encouraged, cared for, and challenged each other. There was Siggy, a young woman of 20 whose parents threw her out of their home when she became a Christian; so another woman in the Church, Caroline, invited Siggy to live with her so that Siggy would not remain homeless. There was Susan whose husband was a drunk and did not work, so the other members in the church raised money every month to help her pay for her children to attend school since public school in Papua New Guinea is not free. There was Leslie who was the only person in the Church who owned a truck, so he would drive everyone back and forth to their homes on Sunday and Wednesday nights so that they could still meet with the body since it was too dangerous for the women to travel by foot at night. And there was Wesley, one of only three men in the congregation, who asked the women to pray for more men so that they could be stronger. So every week, most of the women came together to pray for God to open opportunities for them to share the Gospel with their husbands, their brothers, or their friends. Furthermore, they also prayed for the men who were members of the body to be strong in their faith.

Daily, these Christians engaged with each other. Daily, they walked to each other's homes to encourage each other. When Sundays and Wednesdays did roll around, I found that as we sat in the thatched hut singing, our praise had an extra richness to it because of the time we had spent living with each other *outside* of

worship. There in worship we were able to lift our voices together more truly as one body because during the week we had spent time caring for each other individually. We knew each other's burdens, joys, and pains.

I had never seen the Church behave in such a way before, and I learned what the Church was that summer. The Church is not a building or an action or even a special group of friends. The Church is a body. The Church is a people. *We are the Church.*

We each have many allegiances in our lives, whether they be to our physical families, schools, sports teams, or elsewhere. But the most important allegiance you or I will ever have here on earth is to the family of God's people. These are your people. And wherever the Church is, they are there—you are there—to help make each other stronger.

In Romans 12, Paul calls us to examine how we can help to make each other strong. From its opening call for us to live lives of sacrifice to its close, Romans 12 is full of very specific language to tell us what it looks like for us to be part of the Church:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one

body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

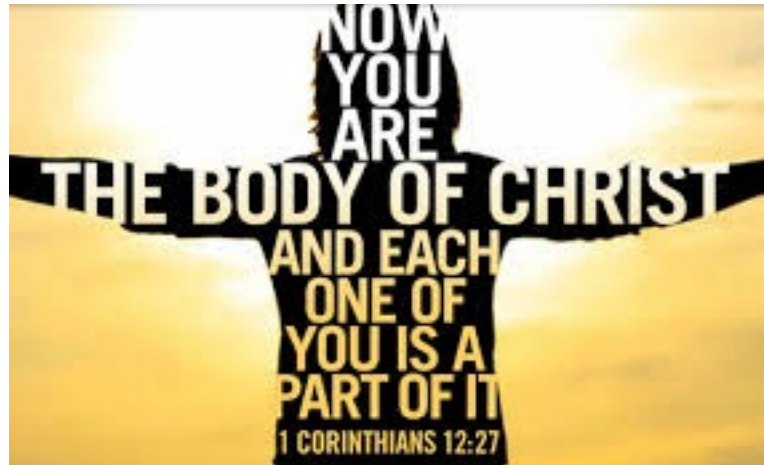
Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Romans 12.1-21)

Verse 5 sums up the entire passage: "so we, though many, are one in body in Christ, and individually members of one another." The last part of that phrase

fascinates me: “members of one another.” It implies a dependency on each other, and at the same time implies a responsibility to each other. I have something to offer you that you need, so I have a responsibility towards you. But you also have strengths to offer me that I need, so I am also dependent on you. Like Paul is pointing out to the Church in Rome, we need each other. Paul points out that each of us have a way which we can be serving within the body. None of us are sufficient alone. We have become members of each other.



Women and the Church

I think sometimes that it is easy for us as women to forget the responsibility we have to the Church. When we are so focused on worship and the areas where we have been called to submit, we can easily overlook the many ways we can be leading and serving. We can easily feel as though we have no role to play, but nothing could be further from the truth! The Bible is filled with stories and small glimpses of women who played tremendous roles in the work of God’s people, and their lives and faith are inspiration for us today. In fact, you do not have to look any further than the book

of Acts to where the Church was growing and spreading to find women who are helping to lead the way for its spread.

One of the first women we find described in depth in Acts is a woman named Tabitha, better known by her Greek name Dorcas. Read through her story in Acts 9:

Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.

(Acts 9.36-43)

Luke describes very little about this woman's physical persona. We do not know how old she is or whether or not she was married. Rather than giving this woman worth through her status, Luke describes her worth through who she is to the Church in Joppa. Dorcas is described as a disciple, a title I think any of us would be glad to bear. Verse 36 describes that she was full of good works and acts of charity or

kindness, which we later discover included making clothing and caring for the widows in her community. To be a true widow during this time meant that a woman's husband had died, and she was left without any financial support. Unable to work, such women were often marginalized. Yet Dorcas had reached out to them and cared for them so that as the scene opens, these women are gathered in her home wailing over her loss. Dorcas's death affects more than just the widows though, as it is clear that Dorcas had greatly impacted the lives of other disciples as well. The other disciples are so saddened by her death that they cannot imagine their congregation functioning without her. Dorcas is so important to the Church in Joppa that the disciples send for Peter to come and help them. Think about that for a moment: do our congregations and youth groups need us this way?

It is easy for us to focus on the miracle and lose sight of the silent woman in this passage. Dorcas does not say a single word in the story, but perhaps she doesn't need to. Dorcas does not need to because those whose lives she has touched are able to tell us all we need to know about the impact she was having on the Church and in her community. She had the means and skills to care of those around her, and rather than leaving it to someone else, she took advantage of the opportunity by living her life in connection with the Church and her community.

A few chapters later in Acts 12, we catch a small glimpse of another woman whose faithful service is impacting the Church in a big way:

Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

(Acts 12.6-17)

In this description of Peter's release from prison, we focus quickly on the angel and the miracle and frequently gloss right over the mention of Mary. In fact, she is only mentioned in verse 12: *"When [Peter] realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying."* Such a brief reference might not seem significant, but we can actually learn a lot about Mary from this description.

Mary is likely a widow since the text refers to the house as her own, and she has opened her house to the gathering of the Church. Days before Peter's release, the apostle James was killed by Herod, and Acts 12:3 tells us that Herod arrested Peter as well when he saw that James' execution pleased the Jews. For the Church, this was a frightening time. For Mary to open her home to the gathering of the Church took not only hospitality to make her guests welcome, but also courage. Yet Peter knows her house will be open and that he will find members of the body there. In verse 12, as soon as Peter realizes he is not dreaming and that he really has been released from prison, he heads straight for Mary's house. Mary must host the gathering of the Church in her home frequently—perhaps even daily—for Peter to know that her house is where he needs to go.

But Mary does not only provide a safe place to gather for the Christians. She is also the mother of John Mark, the same John Mark who accompanies Paul and Barnabas on missionary journeys and who eventually writes the Gospel of Mark. Much

like Timothy's mother and grandmother, Mary likely influenced the faith of her son, who in turn wrote one of the gospels that tells the story of Christ to you.

Perhaps no woman in Acts is as famous as Priscilla though. Acts 18 gives us our introduction to Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, and we learn more about her from her interaction with Apollos:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

(Acts 18.24-28)

Much like Mary a few chapters back, little is mentioned about Priscilla here. The text is focused primarily on Apollos, but Priscilla plays a large part in his ministry. Upon hearing Apollos preaching, Priscilla and Aquila realize that he does not have the full story. Rather than embarrassing him publicly or condemning him, they show gentleness by pulling him aside privately to teach him better the truth. Apollos is described as "competent in the Scriptures" in verse 24, yet Priscilla is able to help lead

him more fully into the truth. Priscilla must have been well studied in the Scriptures to have been able to reason with Apollos. She could have easily thought she didn't know enough to teach him, or she could have been afraid that she couldn't say things as well as he did. But she was not hindered by such fears. Her faith and learning were instrumental in setting him in the way of God more accurately.

These women are just three of the many who daily used their lives, skills, and means to serve the Church. I wonder how many of us have skills that we have never used to serve or how many opportunities we have let pass us by. Do you pray for opportunities to serve? Do you look for ways you can serve in your youth groups and in your home congregations?

I think the answer is that we want to serve. We like to think of ourselves as Isaiahs, right? In Isaiah 6—during Isaiah's vision of heaven—God asks in verse 8, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah answers the call with the cry, "Here am I! Send me." We like that image. We like the idea of God asking who will serve and us popping out of our chairs and crying, "Me! I'll go! I'll do it!" But in reality, we are a bit more like Moses, aren't we? Moses had a slightly different response when God approached him in the form of the burning bush. In Exodus 4, God has already spoken to Moses and reassured all of his fears through signs, yet Moses still does not want to go. Then, God says, "*Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and*

teach you what you shall speak.’ But [Moses] said, ‘O, my Lord, please send someone else’” (Exodus 4.12).

Maybe you feel that way right now too. Maybe you can think of an opportunity where you can serve, and you look at it and think, “Oh God please send someone else.” You look back at Dorcas, Mary, and Priscilla and think, “Sure, but they were **Bible** women. Of course they could serve.” Perhaps you think you have nothing to offer or are too young to be of importance. If you think that, you are wrong.

Turn back to Romans 12 and look again at verses 3-8. Paul tells us here that we have different ways in which we can serve, and no one way is better than another. You are unique, and as such, you have something unique to offer to the Church that no one else has. You have a way of encouraging the body in a way no one else can, and if you are not reaching out and serving, then your youth group, your congregation, the Church as a whole has lost an important element that could make it stronger. Sometimes that service seems easy, and we may eagerly volunteer. At other times, that service is difficult and leaves us wanting to hang back like Moses. But as Christians we choose to tackle the messy, the difficult, and the inconvenient because Christ set that example first when He came into the world to serve us. And as the Body of Christ, we show the world what God looks like, smells like, and is like. That is what it means to be the Church.

Stumbling into Service

We have to be intentional in our service though. Sometimes serving the Church requires a lot from us. Think back to Priscilla for a minute. She did not just happen to meet Apollos and randomly have all the knowledge she needed to teach him instantaneously. She probably had spent many, many hours studying long before she ever met Apollos, but when the opportunity came, she took advantage of it. Dorcas likewise had to take the time and spend the money to make clothes for the widows; she had no Walmart where she could just stop to pick something up. Mary undoubtedly did not open up her home to host the Church without preparations in addition to making a courageous decision every day that was potentially dangerous. Just as Christ did not accidentally stumble and decide while He was down on the floor to wash the disciples' feet, neither should we think we will just stumble into service. God has called us to serve in the Church and in our communities. He has asked us to help make the body strong. Look down at Romans 12 again, but this time, look further down at verse 9-13. Paul calls us to love each other. He calls us to be patient with each other, to be eager in our pursuit of God, to be providing for each other, to be praying. These are all actions that we have to choose to make time to do.

Start with what you like to do. Look at what you are good at, and go and use that to serve the Church. Think you can't do that? Just look at the ways these girls who

are just like you—some still in their youth groups and some in college—have found that they can serve in the Church:

One of my favorite things to do is to bake and to cook. I could do that pretty much all day every day. So I decided that I could use that to serve the Church. I had some friends, one family had a death in the family and the other had a mom who had just had surgery, so I just made them some food one night. They were super grateful. Until then I had always thought that taking food to people was just something moms did, but then I thought no, I am going to do that because I really like cooking. So I did, and those families were really grateful. It's just a tiny way that I can enjoy doing something that is part of who I am and yet serve someone within the Church.

—Heather

One way that I've been a leader in my youth group is that I got some people together, and we painted one of the walls in our youth room into a chalkboard wall. We took chalk and wrote prayer requests that we had from the Church or just personal prayer requests on it. Then whenever we went in there, we could look at the wall and remember each other and pray for each other. We could also copy down the requests from the wall to take home with us and pray for each other in our personal prayers.

—Rachel

My freshman year in high school some of the girls started a group called GEMS, which stands for Girls Enlisting in the Master's Service. It was a way that we were able to do service projects for not only our Church family but also our community. We did different things. We had a tea party with the widows, and it

was a great chance to get to know them and do something for them that they would remember and really enjoy. We worked in childcare centers, orphanages, and a soup kitchen. Those were things we could do to help our community and congregation and to spread Christ's name. But we also had the opportunity to come together to have girls' devotionals, which was a great chance for us to learn how to lead. We were also able to go on and teach the younger girls how to lead as well through these times. Once every month or so we would have the younger girls come and join us so that we could teach them how to lead singing or lead prayers or read Scripture. It was also a time for us to come together to talk about things on our hearts and our minds that we might not have been comfortable doing otherwise. GEMS is still going strong and making a difference in the area and in that congregation.

–Kayln

Sometimes leading in the Church is about the love you show to people. I really love spending time with older people in the Church, either by going to visit them or by intentionally taking time to speak to them when I see them to show them that I value them and want to learn from them. Our older people often fall by the wayside, but they love getting to talk with young people. I cleaned for an older lady once, and it didn't take me long to realize that I wasn't serving her by cleaning her house, I was serving her by visiting her every week to talk and to listen to all of her stories.

–Kelsy

One way that I found that I can serve in the Church is by teaching the younger children. Sometimes it's hard to teach them, but when their parents come and tell you how much they have learned and how they will be singing

the songs that they have learned at home, it's awesome to know that you are making a difference.

–Grace

I helped lead in my youth by planning a prom alternative for my youth group. Some of us didn't feel comfortable going to prom, and all of us went to different schools, so a couple of friends and I got together and decided to organize something else. Our first year, we went to the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, which is a really beautiful old theatre, and we went and saw a musical, had a really nice dinner, and took really cool pictures. After that we went back to a lake house and had devo. I just remember how much closer I got to my friends that night, and since then we have done one every single year. It's a tradition that has helped everyone get closer through a big, fun event instead of us all splitting up and going to different schools.

–Bailey

One way that I have been able to serve is through clothing drives. You can use that in a mission field or just helping out the poor in your community. A lot of congregations have people who are not as blessed as we are, and they may not feel comfortable asking for help. If you can get local thrift stores to donate clothing to the cause, then you can build up a store house open for people in your community or in your congregation or even to be used by a mission team that is going out. It's just a cool opportunity to serve others who have needs.

–Bekah

I help serve my youth group by being an encouragement and reaching out to other kids that may not be as involved in the youth group. A lot of times, people

feel left out, and no one really notices because they aren't in their immediate friend group. So it's really important to make sure you talk to them, sit by them, and try to get to know them. Another thing to do is to send them texts of encouragement in the morning. I just like to reach out to the girls, let them know I am thinking about them, and send a verse their way. It's just important to make sure everyone feels loved and involved, and that's a big way you can serve that isn't necessarily noticed as much.

–Rhyan

One of the ways that I've found that I can help in the Church is to give people rides. I know that some of you may not have a license yet, but there's an older lady at my congregation who doesn't drive at night. So I will go to her house and pick her up and give her ride on Sunday and Wednesdays because I know that that is something that she can't do.

–Morgan

You are a member of the body. Whether it is through putting a stop to gossip or bullying in your youth group, texting other kids in your youth group to let them know that you missed seeing them when they are not at a devotional or class, organizing a clothing drive for the area's homeless, baking cookies for the elderly, or studying with a friend who has faith questions, the ways you can be serving are limitless. If you are not sure where you can serve, talk to your youth minister or your parents and ask for suggestions. You are members of one another, and the Church needs your abilities to help make it strong. *You* are the Church. So go and serve.



ROBB HADLEY has been teaching Scripture and the Christian life to young people for 30 years as a youth minister and summer camp director. He has been a minister for the Center Street Church of Christ in Fayetteville since 1991, and currently serves as Associate Minister. He and his wife Karen have one son, Ben (16).

WEAPONS TRAINING: HOW TO USE THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

ROBB HADLEY

God's Word as a Sword

Until the 17th Century, no fighting force in the West equalled the level of training of the Roman Army. Think for a moment about what that means. For about 1700 years, none of the armies of the world rose to the level the Romans had reached beginning in the First Century BC.

The Greeks, who had ruled the world before the Romans, looked for physical specimens as soldiers and stressed general physical conditioning. By the time the Roman Army reigned supreme on the battlefield, technology and tactics had developed which required discipline, skill, and intelligence. The Roman soldier literally "lived or died by his skill with the sword."²³ Also, historians tells us that"

²³Richard S. Gabriel, Karen S. Metz, *A Short History of War*, 1992, p. 77.

swordplay was not friendly to amateurs.” This “most lethal sort of hand-to-hand combat meant incessant practice.”²⁴

Twice in the New Testament we read close comparisons between the Word of God and the Roman battle sword. One of these is found in Ephesians 6:

Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

(Ephesians 6.13-17)

In this session, we are most concerned with that last piece of spiritual weaponry: “The sword of the Spirit.”

Now, let’s take a look at a second New Testament comparison and swords. It is found in Hebrews: 4:

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

(Hebrews 4.12-13)

²⁴Robert L. O’Connell: *Soul of the Sword*, 2002, p.84.

We see here that the Bible claims it is alive, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It cuts on people bringing them to a decision point: Whether or not to serve the God to which everyone will one day give an account of his or her life and actions. But, again, we have this imagery of a sword, comparing it with the Word of God.

Whose Sword?

So, do you have your sword with you? Sorry, that was a trick question. You see, it isn't your sword at all! Nowhere in the Bible is the Word of God referred to as *my* sword or *your* sword. So, whose sword is it? If you will again consider Ephesians 6.17, you will find the answer. It is "the sword of the Spirit." This sword belongs to the Holy Spirit of God.

So, what difference does it make whether I consider the Word of God to be my sword or the Spirit's sword so long as I read it, study it, and use it? In some ways, it makes no difference at all. In others, it makes all the difference in the world!

If I see the Bible as *my* sword, I may get reckless with it. Surely you have cringed when watching a politician or a bigot or an immoral person or even a TV

preacher use God's Word to manipulate people. We must never use the Word of God in that way. The power contained in it and unleashed by it should cause us to handle it with reverence and awe. With things physical, we are careful with small razor blades. We are more careful, still, with sharp swords. As we



Image Source: kahlich.wordpress.com

approach others with the Word of God, we must do so wisely, helping them apply it to their lives and their situations.

Further, If I see the Bible as *my* sword, I may begin to think too highly of myself. Successes in spreading the Word of God may cause me to give credit where credit is not due. Paul said of his own successful preaching in Corinth, "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth*" (1 Corinthians 3.6). He understood that it was not he who was bringing in the converts. He understood that, through the Word of God he presented, the Holy Spirit was at work changing people's minds and lives.

If I see the Bible as *my* sword, I may get discouraged. Failure can be as discouraging as success is invigorating. Despite the power of the Word of God, it will not work on hearts where it is not welcome. Jesus used another comparison to describe the Word of God. In His explanation of the parable of the soils, He said, "*The*

seed is the Word of God" (Luke 8.11); that seed was only fruitful in one of the four soils mentioned. Jesus also said, "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7.14). Just because I haven't been making converts right and left does not mean I am doing it wrong. Again, it is God who gives the increase. We are faithful in following the Great Commission so long as we do what it says: Go and preach!

And here is the most dangerous: If I see the Bible as *my sword*, I may forget to let it cut on me. In that passage where the Spirit's sword is described as *"living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4.12)*, the writer was talking about people in a covenant relationship with God who, as he put it, had fallen into disobedience. So, it is important that we know how to use the Spirit's sword, and that we know how to let it do its work on us.

Interpretation and Context

Since the Word of God is so important in making disciples, we ought to notice something here about interpretation. Any document needs to be interpreted. If we want to know what the United States was intended to be, we turn to the Constitution and interpret it. If we desire to find out what William Shakespeare was trying to

accomplish, we must read his works and interpret them. Even conversations between close friends require this kind of interpretation.

Everyday language can serve as an example. We use the term shootout to mean several different things, such as a high-scoring ballgame, the way to end a soccer match that ends in a tie, a conflict between armed men, or even a close election. Even though that word may come up in different ways featuring different meanings, we are usually able to quickly decode the message. It isn't always a quick and easy process. In the U.S., we have courts to determine what laws and the Constitution mean.

That's the way it is with the Bible, too. Most of the time we are rolling right along picking up meaning as we go. Occasionally, however, it is necessary for us to look for help. Sometimes we have to study carefully and diligently in order to get the message God wants us to get. In order for us to use the Sword of the Spirit accurately, we must do some studying in order to learn what God meant. That's what we want to talk about next.

When we talk about context when interpreting the Bible, what we mean is to look before and after the passage to help determine the meaning of the text we are studying.

We start out with a text, whatever that text may be. So if we are studying a particular verse or passage, we look first at that verse within its paragraph. What is the

theme of the paragraph and what is its structure? And what do these tell us about the verse we are studying? Then we must look at the paragraph within the chapter of which it is a part. Then we need look at the chapter within the setting of the book and the book's theme. Then we can carry the question about context to place it within the context of writings by the same author (Example: Paul's Letters, Luke and Acts, John's gospel account, his letters and Revelation). Next we can look at our passage in light of what the entire same testament has to say about it. Finally we can look at our passage in the context of the whole Bible. If you have something difficult to interpret, it can be illuminated by something easy to interpret. If your interpretation of the more difficult passage is at odds with your interpretation from the easy passage, your interpretation of the difficult passage should be reexamined.

To help us practice using the principle of context, let's look at some passages from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

(1 Corinthians 13.1-2)

Note Paul's mention of speaking in tongues, prophecy and faith. Now, let's take a look at the previous chapter of 1 Corinthians:

"For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues."

(1 Corinthians 12.8-10)

Consider again, that Paul discusses faith, prophecy, and tongues. Next, consider 1 Corinthians 12.31, which is between the two passages we have just considered: *"But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way."* Here, Paul wants the Christians in Corinth to know that the most important thing for them was not using miraculous gifts. He wants to show them a "more excellent way." He shows them that spiritual gifts without love are of little value, but that love, even without spiritual gifts, is profitable. That makes love more important than spiritual gifts.

The point here is that we must link chapter 13 with chapter 12 to properly understand it. Since chapter 12 is mostly about spiritual gifts, we must look at chapter 13 as Paul wrote it: a message about love in the middle of his discussion of spiritual gifts to show that love is the more excellent way. Making connections like that is using context to aid our interpretation—getting the full message God wants us to get.

Here is another example of context. Consider these words of Paul: *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household"* (Acts 16.31). Here, Paul told the jailer at Philippi what to do to be saved. And what does Paul say? *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..."* Should we conclude from this verse that all one must do to be saved is to *"believe on the Lord Jesus?"*

Before we accept that interpretation, we should look at the context. We learn that the jailer was a man who did not believe in Jesus. Then there was an earthquake in which all the prisoners could have escaped, but did not. Paul and Silas had been singing hymns while in the jail. Perhaps the jailer was familiar with the events which led up to their imprisonment, including what the demon-possessed slave girl had been saying about the two: *"These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation"* (Acts 16.17).

When the jailer asked Paul and Silas, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* (Acts 16.30), Paul started at the beginning by answering that the man needed to *"believe in the Lord Jesus."*

Looking at the context, however, we can quickly conclude that this is not all the jailer was told. We find out, *"And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house"* (Acts 16.32). We are given no more particulars about what these people were taught, but we can draw some logical conclusions from the context.

The jailer showed *repentance*—a change of heart and mind—by washing wounds that the system in which he played a role had inflicted on them. Additionally, there must have been a command concerning baptism in the message given by Paul and Silas, because the jailer and his household were immediately baptized (*Acts 16.33*).

To interpret Acts 16.31 as the sum total of everything one must do to be saved is to violently rip it from its context and deliberately ignore historical events God saw fit to include in His Word.

Practice this! When you read the Word of God or prepare for Bible class, consider the context of what you are reading. You don't have to be a preacher or teacher for consideration of context to enhance your study. It is a principle that can help you right now, and you are capable!

Paul told his "son in the faith," Timothy, "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the Word of truth*" (*2 Timothy 2.15*).

We should strive to do the same!



BOBBY KUONEN

currently serves at the minister at River Valley Church in Clarksville, AR. He lives in Russellville with his wife Cindy, an elementary school teacher. They have two children, Benjy and Abby, who reside in Jonesboro. To keep the empty nest syndrome away, they have three dogs that are the life of the party! Bobby enjoys reading, cooking and of course—calling those Hogs!

WALKING IN THE SPIRIT

BOBBY KUONEN

Why We Are Here

In Acts 2 Jesus has risen to the Father, Peter preaches the first Gospel sermon, and the people are convicted that they had crucified their Messiah and ask Peter what they can do about it:

“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.’”

(Acts 2.38-39)

Yogi Berra, Hall of Fame catcher for the New York Yankees, was a talker behind the plate. He used to talk to the opposing batters in order to distract them. Hank Aaron tells the story about his rookie season in the 1958 World Series with Yogi behind the plate. Yogi kept telling Aaron “You’re holding the bat wrong, you’re supposed to hold the bat so you can read the label on the bat.” On the next pitch, Aaron hit a screaming shot over the left field wall for a home run. As Aaron

crossed home plate, he said to a dejected Berra, "I didn't come up here to read."

Hank Aaron knew exactly why he was at the plate.

I've been thinking about that line as I was preparing this lesson. Because the fact is, if you want to get around the bases of life, then you have to know and remember why you are at this "plate" called life.

You and I live in a culture where there are so many competing voices telling us *why we are here*. The one voice we need to listen to is the voice of the One in whose Image we are made. What does it mean that we are made in the image of God? It has everything to do with getting around the bases in life.

The Image of God

Let's start with a couple of excerpts from the first two chapters of Genesis:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in Our image and likeness.' So God created human beings in His image. In the image of God He created them. He created them male and female....Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

(Genesis 1.1; 26-27; 2.7)

So let's begin with a quick lesson in Hebrew. The picture below represents the name of God in Hebrew, which was the original language of the Old Testament.

Hebrew is read from right to left. These four Hebrew letters are consonants; there are no vowels. In English, these letters are transliterated as YHWH.



You may ask “How do you pronounce it?” and the point is, “You don’t!” Later we came along and added the vowels “a” and “e” so that it is pronounced “Yahweh”, but in the Old Testament, the name of the Lord God is unpronounceable, and it was meant to be that way because it is so sacred.

Ancient Jewish Rabbis noticed that when you took these letters and arranged them vertically (instead of horizontally) they took the shape of a human. The top letter represents the head, the second letter represents the chest and arms, the third letter represents the core (or torso), and the fourth letter represents the waist and the legs. The ancient Rabbis would look at the

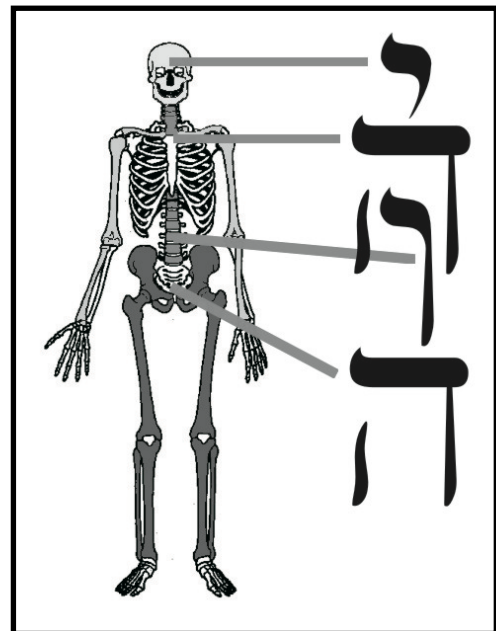


Image source: biblewheel.com

name of the Lord laid out vertically and see the shape of a human and it would be a living reminder that humans *bare the stamp of God's Image*. We are made in His Image.

When we say that we are "made in the Image of God," we're not saying that we're *identical* to God; we're saying we're *similar* to God in some ways. You'll find this kind of language in other parts of the Bible:

"When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth."

(Genesis 5.3)

Seth was not *identical* to Adam but he was *like* him as a son is like his father. Being made in God's image doesn't mean you're identical to God, but similar to Him. God is our Father, and Jesus instructed us to call Him our Father when we pray.

Made for a Relationship

Jesus came to remind us and restore us into the Image in which we were created. What it means for us to be created in our Father's Image is that **we were made for a relationship with God**. I want to show you four things out of the creation story in Genesis that will help us to see this.

First, **God created us out of want, not out of need**. Everything God created was out of desire, *not* out of necessity. God didn't create anything because He needed it.

The whole story doesn't begin with the beginning of God, but with the story of the heavens and earth. God is *already present* when the story begins in Genesis.

God is the only self-sufficient reality in the universe. What I mean by that is that His existence is not tied to or dependent upon anything else in the universe. Everything else's existence is dependent upon someone or something else. Your existence is depended upon the existence of oxygen, but the existence of oxygen is dependent upon the existence of hydrogen. See what I mean? Everything is dependent upon something or someone else...except for God! God created human beings simply because He wanted us. The closest thing we can relate this to is why so many people want children to have children: you don't have children out of necessity. Nobody has children because they *need* to for their survival. So why do they do it? For the same reason that God created human beings! God is love and love wants to be shared; love wants to be given and multiplied. As nice as it is to be *needed*, it's even greater to be *wanted*.

If you are just *needed*, then there is the chance that you will feel used. But God created you simply because you are *wanted* for a relationship. The fact is that the parent sacrifices far more than the child for a relationship. The story of Scripture of what God goes through to have a relationship with us and the price that He pays in order to do so makes it clear that God wants that relationship. It is safe to say that no one has ever sacrificed more for a relationship than God did for us. You exist because

you are wanted and the fact that you are here because you are wanted should tell you that you are designed to have a relationship with Him. God created you out of *want*, not *need*.

Secondly, **God created you for a conversation.** God created human beings almost exclusively for communication. Yes, He told the animals to multiply and fill the earth, but with human beings He expects conversation in a way that He doesn't expect from anything else. We are creatures who were created for relationship, and conversation is a fundamental part of that relationship.

Third, the creation story tells us that **because we are created in God's Image, we are more like Him than anything else in all creation.** We have relationships with things that are like us. Let me explain. When God created Adam, He said that it is not good for man to be alone, so what did He do next?

"Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found."

(Genesis 2.19-20)

It seems that these animals were possibilities for companionship for Adam: "But for Adam no suitable helper was found." So what does God do then?

“So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, He took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib He had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.’”

(Genesis 2.21-23)

Adam had an eureka moment (hubba hubba) and he saw someone like him. We have relationships with things that are like us, and the woman was more like Adam than anything else that was paraded in front of him.

I think God not only prepared Eve for Adam; I think he also prepared Adam for Eve by having all the animals parade in front of him first. Eve was more like him than anything else, and you are more like God than anything else. That means you were created for a relationship with God.

Finally, the creation story tells us that **we were built for a relationship**. Adam is God-breathed: *“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...”* (Genesis 2.7a). The Hebrew word for “breath” is *ruach*, which is also the same word for “Spirit.” Human beings have the “breath of God” in them, which means that all human beings have a part of God in them. I’m not talking about oxygen—all plants and animals breathe the same oxygen—I’m speaking now in a spiritual sense.

Ecclesiastes 3.11 says, *“He has also set eternity in the human heart,”* and within every human being there is an appetite for the eternal because we were created in the Image of the Eternal One. You have the breath of eternity inside you.

But we get into trouble when we don’t recognize that appetite for what it is and we try to satisfy it in countless unsuccessful ways. All of us have a God-shaped hole inside of us which only He can fill. A lot of us are like toddlers playing on the floor trying to fit a square block into a round hole, not understanding what the shape of our soul was designed for. Many try different things to fill that hole: for some it may be achievements and accomplishments, for others it may financial status, and for others it’s moving from one romantic relationship to another. But all of us have this God-shaped hole inside us that we try to satisfy with something other than an intimate relationship with God.

Once Jesus met a woman at a well who had been through five husbands. She was miserable; she was hurting. She had given up on marriage—in fact, she was just living with a sixth man. Jesus was visiting with her at the well and said to her:

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

(John 4.13-14)

He was talking to a woman who had been looking all her life for a man to do that which only God could do for her.

How many different things have you looked at to do the job which only God can do? It reminds me of the Rolling Stones song, "I can't get no Satisfaction": nothing can fill that hole like the One for whom that hole was made. Because you and I have the Breath of Eternity inside us, it is only with God that we can have 100% Satisfaction Guaranteed. We have an appetite for the Eternal One because we are created in the Image of the Eternal One. And nothing less will do!

When God created Adam and Eve He didn't create them in heaven; He created them on the earth and He put them on the earth. He put them in a garden named Eden. The word "Eden" means "delight in God's will", and it's always been God's will for man to delight in one another and in Him on earth. Some people say "God put us on earth and our mission is to go to heaven!" No! God put you on earth to live in an intimate relationship with Him on earth!

There was no temple in the garden for Adam and Eve to draw near to God and then leave that relationship; the whole garden was the temple! The whole garden was about living in an intimate relationship with God. Within that garden they worked and were productive; they ate and drank; they lived all of life before God. A relationship with God encompasses all parts of our life, it's all done before God. That's why Paul says, "*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God*" (1 Corinthians 10.31).

That means we don't isolate ourselves from the world; instead we are to show the world what it means to have a relationship with the Eternal One. What does that mean? It means you have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and you begin to exhibit the traits of God Himself, the One in Whose Image we were created: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law"* (Galatians 5.22-23).

Working on your relationship with God involves walking by the Spirit of God, and it includes every aspect of your life. When you work on being a good student, you're working on your relationship with God. When you feed the poor, you're working on your relationship with God. When you raise your kids up in the Lord, you're working on your relationship with God. When you work at your job during the week and give an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, you're working on your relationship with God. Everything on earth has a place in God's plan, but none of those things were meant to take the place of God in your heart.

Money can be a delight, but only if you keep it in the place where God meant for it to be. Money is an excellent *servant*, but it's a terrible *master*. But when God is at the center of your life and you are walking by the Spirit that is inside you, then you can properly react to everything in your life.

And you don't have to worry about the afterlife:

"Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on

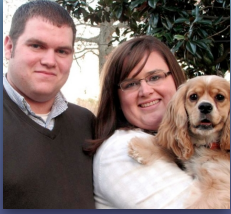
what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."

(Romans 8.5-11)

Thriving

Here are some initials, FTT, which means "Failure to Thrive". These initials are noted on a baby's chart when the baby is not growing as it should. *Failure to Thrive* could sum up life on earth without God at the center, and one of the reasons Jesus came was to make it possible for us to thrive: *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10.10).

The Only way that you grow to maturity—the only way to thrive—is when you're connected and living and walking in the Image in which you are made. You were made to know God. God desires to pick up the pieces of your life and restore them into the Image in which they were meant to be in the first place.



JARED PACK is currently finishing up his M.A. in History at the University of Arkansas and will begin doctoral work in the fall. Jared did his undergraduate work at Freed-Hardeman University and holds degrees in both Bible and History. Jared and his wife, Karen, live in Farmington, Arkansas where they are actively involved with the Farmington Church of Christ.

SNAPSHOTS OF JESUS

JARED PACK

Knowing Jesus vs. Knowing *About* Jesus

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and I believe them. Pictures and snapshots can tell us a lot about a person or an event. We can look at multiple pictures and see many sides and angles of the same thing. Sometimes, we miss things because we are only looking at one side of something. Only when we look at different snapshots or sides of the issue do we truly come to know something about someone.

Now think of your best friend in the world—the person you know better than anyone else. How well do you know your best friend? Is there anything you don't know about them? Do you know them better than other people do? If I asked you to describe them, could you? If I wanted to know about that person could you tell me about them? When You Think of Jesus, what do you think of? How well would you say that you know Jesus? Can you tell me as much about Him as you can about your best friend?

These are important questions. As we think about building a deeper relationship with Christ, it begins with knowing Him. But not just knowing *about* Him. For instance, you might know *about* a lot of people, but you don't necessarily *know* them. Many of you know some things *about* me, but do you *know* me? Is that how you would describe your relationship with Jesus? Today I want us to look at Jesus through the eyes of those who *did* know Him. By looking at snapshots of Jesus for those who knew him personally, I hope that we will come to know Him the same way they did. A deeper relationship requires that we move past knowing *about* Jesus and get to where we *know* Him personally, in much the same way that those individuals of the first century knew Jesus. When we start looking at snapshots of Jesus, and seeing Him in different lights and from different perspectives, we come to see Him in a much more complete and deeper way.

Isaiah

The first snapshot of Jesus we get is from the prophet Isaiah. He was a prophet from roughly 740-680 BC, some 700 years before Christ. Yet, Isaiah had more insight into this great man Jesus, the Son of God, than any other Old Testament figure. For this reason, there is so much we see in Isaiah's snapshots of Jesus. Isaiah knew Jesus in a very profound way. He knew Jesus before He was Jesus the man. He knew the baby Jesus. In Isaiah 7.14, Isaiah first introduces us to Christ. In this passage, he

foretold of a sign from God. He said that this "sign," will come in the form of a Child born of a virgin. Furthermore, he went one step further to say that the Child will be called Immanuel, which translated, literally means "God with us." As you can see, Isaiah knew the baby Jesus in a way that even people today oftentimes don't. He also saw Him as the crucified Jesus. In Isaiah 53, we read of the suffering servant who was led as a lamb to the slaughter, who was silent before His accusers, whose stripes save us, and whose wounds heal us. More than anything though, the Jesus Isaiah knew saved the lost! When Phillip met the Ethiopian Eunuch on the road, he began preaching to him from Isaiah 53, and the Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized into Christ. Isaiah's snapshots of Jesus have a lot to teach us.

Mary

The next snapshot we see is of Mary. Mary had a relationship with Jesus unlike anyone else in the entire world. Jesus was her son, and she was His mother. The relationship between a mother and son is a unique relationship different from any other relationship known to man, and the relationship between Mary and Jesus was no exception. Mary knew Jesus as One who puts God first in all things. When He was 12 years old, they took Him with them to Jerusalem for Passover. You know the story: they began to head home only to realize that Jesus was not with them. When they finally found Him, He was sitting in the temple both teaching and learning from the

priests. When His parents questioned Him, He told them, "You know I must be about my Father's business." But the text tells us that she "treasured up all these things in her heart." She knew that it was important for her to treasure, or remember and think about the things that He did. She already knew that He was the Son of God, and so she realized that while she might not necessarily be able to understand it all, the things that Jesus did were all to prepare Him for a life as the Son of the Most High. This continued as He got older, and she came to see Him as One who understood that the spiritual was greater than the physical. When told that His mothers and brothers were there to see Him in Mark 6, He replied that those who do the will of the Father are His mother and His brothers and His sisters. But despite all this, she knew Jesus would never neglect the physical. While hanging on the cross, Jesus, the oldest son, looked at His mother and at His best friend, John, and said "Woman, behold your son." In His dying moments He cared for His mother. That's the Jesus we see from Mary's snapshots.

John

Speaking of John, he's the next person whose snapshots of Jesus we can look at. John had a special relationship with Jesus. In John 21.20 and 21.24, we read about John being "the disciple whom Jesus loved." This relationship of love is exhibited throughout the entirety of John's writing, in both the Gospel of John and his three

epistles. The Jesus that John knew loved others above Himself (*John 15.12-13*). John made it very clear the extent of love that Jesus had for others. He came to the earth and died for us. That is in fact the greatest love the world can know. Jesus put His wants aside and made our needs His priority. He loved us so much that He did not let His own desires dictate His actions, but rather He sacrificed all for us. It's also important to notice that Jesus loved in deed. He didn't just say that He loved us; He *acted* upon it. He showed it. But John's Jesus also loved those who others didn't, like the woman caught in adultery and the woman at well. Yet, Jesus didn't confine that love to His own life. He taught his followers to love as well (*John 13.34*). For John, Jesus was all about love!

Nicodemus

One of the men we are introduced to in John's Gospel is Nicodemus. Nicodemus' relationship with Jesus recognized Jesus as the master Teacher. This should be little surprise, though, since Nicodemus himself was a teacher, a Jewish ruler. Coming to Jesus by night, Nicodemus identified Jesus as a teacher sent from God. He knew this because of the miracles that he had seen Jesus perform. Yet, Nicodemus realized that what makes a teacher special is what they teach. Jesus taught Nicodemus about the importance of baptism (*John 3.3-8*), stressing that we must be born again to inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus also taught more about the



Jesus teaches Nicodemus by night

Son of God in John 3.13-21. It is in this context where we learn about the love of God that allowed Him to send Jesus to save the world from its sin. The master teacher taught Nicodemus, and He wants to teach us as well!

The Woman at the Well

Continuing to move through the list of individuals we meet throughout the Gospel of John, we come to the woman at the well in John 4. She was a very unique individual. She was a woman plagued with sin and living in sin. She was a woman that would have been despised by most men like Jesus. She was a Samaritan. Yet knowing all of this about the woman, Jesus accepted her. She knew Jesus as the Messiah that accepts all people (*John 4.7-9, 27*). She also knew Him as the Messiah able to fulfill desires and quench thirst. With the living water that He provided, the yearning for

righteousness and completeness could be fulfilled. More importantly, though, she knew Him as the Messiah because He was the One that had been prophesied about (*John 4.16-26*). She had heard about the One who was coming, and when she finally met Him, she went and told everyone in the village. This is a lesson for all of us: when we come to know Jesus as the Messiah, we should tell others about Him so that they can also come to know Him.

The Blind Man

The last relationship we want to look at from John is that between the Blind Man in John 9 and Jesus. This man had been blind from birth, and many, including Jesus' own apostles, felt that someone must have sinned for the man to be born blind. Jesus knew differently, though; He knew this was an opportunity to show the power of God. So with some spit and dirt, He healed the man of his blindness, and the formerly blind man came to know Jesus as the Great Physician. While the man who had been given his sight was filled with joy, many in the area had other reactions to the Great Physician. In John 9.8-34, we see that the Pharisees became angry about what Jesus had done, and the man's parents were afraid to give Jesus the credit for healing their son. Despite all of this, the man born blind realized that Jesus was someone sent from God. When Jesus informed the man that he was the Christ, the



Jesus heals a man born blind

man believed and worshipped Him. In that moment, he came to know Jesus as the one who heals spiritually (*John 9:35-41*). In our own lives, Jesus wants to heal us spiritually and take away our sins. May we respond with joy and excitement rather than fear to speak of the things He has done in our lives!

Simon Peter

Flipping through different snapshots of Jesus, we come to the snapshot provided by the Apostle Peter. Peter had a unique relationship with Jesus. He made many sacrifices to follow Jesus, leaving his entire career behind. Peter also got to experience some pretty cool moments with Jesus that others didn't—the transfiguration, raising Jairus' daughter, and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Even more so, Peter was also the first apostle to see the Risen Lord. All of these actions helped Peter come to know Jesus more fully. When asked by Jesus who he thought Jesus was, Peter confidently announced that he was the Christ, the Son of God (*Matthew 16.13-17*). Because Peter knew that Jesus was the Son of God, Peter put his faith in Him and he got out of the boat to walk on water (*Matthew 14.25-33*). Yet for all of Peter's strength and confidence in the Son of God, Peter stumbled along the way. While walking on water, he got distracted and began to sink; when Jesus was arrested, Peter vehemently denied him three times. But Peter didn't let his failings get the best of him. When he saw the resurrected Jesus, Peter again became confident of everything he had known. Jesus was the Son of God, and Peter loved Him because of it (*John 21.15-17*). What we see about Jesus from Peter's perception is that he was the Son of God, and while we may have weak moments, we should live our lives for Him.

Zacchaeus

Another unique snapshot of Jesus is provided by Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is one of the most interesting characters in all of the New Testament. We learned about him from an early age in Vacation Bible School songs. Zacchaeus is also the only person we read about in the Bible that was characterized by his short stature. We read about plenty of men of great stature, or just men of stature, implying greatness, but no men of short stature. Furthermore, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. In the New Testament

world, tax collectors played a significant role in the daily affairs of the people. In fact, Zacchaeus was the furthest person from anyone that people would have expected Jesus to reach out to. But Zacchaeus knew there was something about Jesus, and he was eager to know the Savior. That's why he climbed up in a tree after all (*Luke 19.2-6*). Luckily for Zacchaeus, Jesus saw him in that tree called him down from the tree. Jesus went home with Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus informed Him that he was going to change his life (*Luke 19.8*). No longer was he going to live an unrighteous life; he was going to right his wrongs and treat people fairly. But why did Zacchaeus change? Because he knew that Jesus was the Savior of the lost (*Luke 19.7,9-10*), and that included him. We need to learn from Zacchaeus, and give up whatever sin is in our lives so that we too can know Jesus as our Savior!

Two Disciples on the Emmaus Road

Few individuals in the Bible had a more eye-opening relationship with Jesus than the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. Two guys were walking down the road, talking about everything that had happened in Jerusalem over the last few days, when some Stranger walks up and asks them about their conversation. They couldn't believe that someone had been around Jerusalem and didn't know about Jesus and what had happened to Him. So they began telling the Stranger about this man named Jesus that had been crucified for being the Son of God. But this Jesus

didn't just die; his tomb had been found empty, and some said that He had risen, but surely not. After hearing this, the Stranger began explaining to them all of the prophecies about Jesus. When the day came to a close, they all stopped and enjoyed a meal together. As the Stranger prayed, the eyes of the two disciples were opened and they realized that this Stranger had been the risen Savior himself! They truly understood everything that had happened to them that day and what Jesus had taught them. They had come to know the Christ, the Risen Savior of mankind.

Paul

In our final snapshot of Jesus, we come to the one and only Apostle Paul. Paul is unique in that he knew Jesus in two very different ways. Paul was not always the revered, evangelist and Christian example that we are familiar with. At first, Paul saw him as a liar. Paul was a devout Jew, the most zealous of anyone his age. In Acts 8, we see Saul of Tarsus (as he was then known) presiding over the stoning of Stephen, who was put to death for preaching Jesus as the Christ. Shortly after that, Saul took off to Damascus with the purpose of arresting any and all Christians. He was going to bring them back to Jerusalem, throw them in jail, and maybe even kill them. Along the way, though, Saul encountered Jesus in a real way. Saul was blinded by a light and Jesus confronted him and told him to go find a man named Ananias in Damascus, who would tell him what to do. When Saul met Ananias, he was told to be baptized and

wash away his sins, which he did immediately. From that point forward, Saul—soon to become Paul—never saw Jesus the same way. No longer was Jesus a liar, but the Lord of all creation. May we truly come to know Jesus as the Lord of all and the Lord of our lives!

As we think about these various snapshots of Jesus, we come to see Jesus in a lot of ways. He was prophesied about; He was one who showed love; He was one who healed the sick and saved the lost; He was the risen Lord and Son of God. All of these portraits of who Jesus was allow us to know Him more intimately. While we may not have had the opportunity to know Jesus personally like those of the New Testament, we can use the snapshots of Jesus from the Bible to know Him the same way they knew Him. So let me ask you, how do you know Jesus? Is He your Savior? Your Messiah? Your Teacher and Lord? Do you truly *know* Jesus or do you just know *about* Him? It's time to get serious about our relationships with Jesus. May we all come to a deeper and more personal relationship with a Jesus who wants to meet us where we are and call us His own!



MIKE RAINE has been preaching for 38 years, and has been the Preaching Minister of the Farmington Church of Christ since January of 2013. He is passionate about saving souls and is a tireless worker in God's Kingdom. He and his wife, Donna, have three grown children: Rachel, Joshua, and Caleb, and one granddaughter, Macy.

DEEPER THAN THE OCEAN

MIKE RAINE

Shallow Water (and People)

Have you ever heard the expression, “shallow as a wet-weather spring”? A “wet-weather spring” is a creek, ford, or spring that only runs during a wet season. Take away the water, and it dries up. So really, not very deep at all.

Who have you been around who was shallow, immature, and lacks depth? Are people really as shallow as reflected by Hollywood shows such as:

The Real Housewives of Hollywood

The Real Housewives of Atlanta

The Real Housewives of Miami

Basketball Wives

Keeping up with the Kardashians

What Not To Wear

Honey Boo Boo

If you put all these actors and actresses together and gave them a brain, they could start a Rock Garden! These “adults” (and I use that word loosely) have the maturity and mindset of adolescence, and that would be insulting to an adolescent. Are people really this shallow, superficial, and false?

Twisting Scripture

Do you dream in black and white, or in color? Recall the last dream you had. If you were awakened and taken to a court of law, would you get up on the stand and swear on the Bible that it was a real life experience?

How many of you like putting jigsaw puzzles together? Typically, where do you start and why? Have you ever tried to force a piece into a spot where it almost fits? What happens to that puzzle piece? It gets ragged edges.

The Apostle Peter says something interesting in 2 Peter:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

(2 Peter 3.15-16)

Did you hear what he said? Some people “twist” the Scriptures. When we try to fit particular Bible verses where they do not belong, we are being dishonest to

that Scripture and we make it look ragged, just like the jigsaw puzzle piece we mentioned above.

Why would we twist a Bible verse and try to make it mean something that it doesn't? It's like trying to put on a pair of jeans with a 30-inch waist when you actually wear a 38: there's just a whole lot that doesn't fit in right! Just because you can get into them doesn't mean you should wear them!

We twist and misuse scriptures for two reasons: either we are **ignorant** (unlearned) to its true meaning, or we are **dishonest** and try to make it say what it wasn't meant to say. We can also do this because we are young in the faith. Many times you are not after what it says, but what it means (When the Bible says Peter jumped into the water "naked" was he completely naked, or naked according to their standards in the first century?).

Let's take our brains off the shelf, dust them off, and start digging deeper in the well where the pure water can be found. The water is clear because not too many people venture here!

This idea of digging deeper is a very biblical one:

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.

(1 Peter 2.2)

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid

food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

(Hebrews 5.12-14)

So let's do some digging together.

First, why were all the animals paraded before Adam?

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field.

But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 2.18-25)

So why were all of the animals brought before Adam? Was it just so he could name them, or was it also so he could find a helper fit for him?

Read the following biblical passages. Use your brains and **think** about the questions associated with each:

- **Matthew 27.51-53:** What physical evidences are occurring in conjunction with the death of Jesus? What day did those who came out of the tombs appear in the holy city of Jerusalem?
- **Luke 18.18-27:** What lesson do we learn here? Does Jesus say it is *difficult* for a rich (covetous) man to enter the kingdom of God, or does He say that it is *impossible*?
- **John 9** (especially verse 31): Does this passage really teach us that God does not hear sinners? Or does it emphasize the special relationship that Jesus had with the Father?
- **John 10.1-2, 7:** What lessons do we learn? Is Christ the door, or is he the Good Shepherd who enters by the door? Are we talking about the same door, or the idea of access to God?
- **1 Corinthians 6.1-3:** What are we told not to do here? Are we forbidden from all lawsuits?
- **Hebrews 10.23-25:** Is the main emphasis here on not neglecting the assembly, or on making sure that our assemblies are places of encouragement where we stir up one another to love and good works?

Deeper Waters

I lived in Florida for 14 years before moving to Arkansas in 2013. I lived about 20 miles from Crystal River, freshwater springs of Homosassa, and the ocean. I enjoyed deep sea fishing and fishing the flats. I enjoyed scuba diving and being

challenged by my daughter to dive with her in both wrecks and caves. I swam with manatees and played with them, stroked them, and let them pull me while diving at Three Sisters Spring and Manatee Spring.



Three Sisters Spring, Florida

But those places are not where I *learned* to scuba dive; I *learned* to scuba dive in the safety of my in-ground swimming pool. And once I got certified, I enjoyed instructing several other men and women of the congregation where I preached to dive as well.

There was one observation I made while boating and fishing. As I looked towards the shore, I saw families and their children wading and playing in the shallows of Fort Island Beach in Ocello. I could then turn my gaze and look out

towards the horizon and see large ocean liners in the depths of the ocean. You see, in the shallows there is safety, where those that are young can play and enjoy the water. But the same water makes up the depths where the larger ships sail.

God's word works in the same way. Those who are young in the faith can wade in the shallow waters of Scripture and enjoy what God has for them. But those same waters get deep, and it is in that deep water that the scholars can be challenged in and sail.

And here's the important lesson: **as much as we enjoy the safety of the shallow waters, there comes a time when we must venture out into the waters that are a little deeper.** Never be satisfied with just wading. As you venture out into the deeper water, teach others to swim with you. Never be afraid of swimming out 100 yards and then swimming back 50 yards to help someone who is venturing out to the deeper water with you.

Part of developing a deeper faith is learning to make decisions based on things you cannot see. You might imagine your life (including your eternal life) as a long piece of yarn that stretches out the door. A single dot on that line represents what you can see right now. Do you make your decisions based only on the dot you can see, or on the rest of the yarn which you cannot see? Your vision and decisions will determine your destiny.



DEVIN SWINDLE is Assistant Professor of Bible & Preaching and Director of the Kerusso Experience at Harding University, as well as the Pulpit Minister for the Highway Church of Christ in Judsonia, Arkansas. He has been married to Rachel for fifteen years, and they have four sons: Isaac, Elijah, Samuel, and Josiah. Devin has a passion for preaching and teaching God's Word, and for training young people to do the same.

WHAT DREAMS ARE YOU CHASING?

DEVIN SWINDLE

Introduction²⁵

His Hebrew name is *Qoheleth*; his Greek name, *Ecclesiastes*. The word means "one who assembles," but what does he assemble? Perhaps it refers to congregants, which is why some translations refer to him as "the Preacher."

But it is more likely that he assembles observations and insights, sayings and words about wisdom, and students with whom to share them. This is why the NIV calls him "the Teacher" (*Ecclesiastes 1.1*).

He describes himself as "a son of David, King in Jerusalem" (1.1). He tells of his unsurpassed wisdom (1.16), his unparalleled works (2.5-7), his unequalled wealth (2.7-8), and his unenviable collection of women (2.8). Traditionally this Teacher has been identified as Solomon, because who had greater wisdom, works, wealth and women than Solomon?

²⁵For a great video introduction to the ideas of Ecclesiastes 2, see <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=6P7LLNNX>

But the Teacher of this class is almost certainly not Solomon:

- The Teacher speaks of his rule in the past tense. Solomon was king until the day he died (1.12).
- The Teacher mentions all those who ruled in Jerusalem before him. Only two kings preceded Solomon to the throne (1.16).
- The Teacher abandons the image of kingship only a few pages into his notes, at which point he takes a particularly critical tone toward the king (4.13-16; 5.8-9; 8.2-4; 10.4-7; 10.16).

Whoever the Teacher is, he adopts a kingly, perhaps even Solomonic persona in order to teach his students the lesson they must learn.

His lesson is hard to hear. It begins and ends the same way, in 1.2 and 12.8:

Hevel hevelaim!

says the Teacher.

Utterly *hevel!*

Everything is *hevel.*"

The Hebrew word *hevel* appears some seventy times in the Old Testament, thirty-seven times in the Teacher's notes alone. The NIV translates the word consistently as "meaningless." But there's much more to the word than that.

In the Teacher's classroom the word carries two main ideas. First, it refers to that which is without substance, and that which is not lasting. But you can also understand the meaning of *hevel* if you imagine blowing your hot air in the cold, dark

night. It is a breath, a vapor, a puff of smoke; it cannot be grasped, and it does not last. *Hevel* (Abel) was the name of the second son born to Adam and Eve, and his life, as short-lived as a vapor, perfectly conveys the meaning of the word.



Yes, his lesson is hard to hear, but his instruction is not without purpose. “What could possibly be gained,” you ask, “with the understanding that life is short and seriously lacking in substance?”

What is gained, my friends, is a proper perspective about life. When one understands life, one knows how to live it. This is the great contribution of this Teacher. He understands life. He knows all that can be known. He’s seen all that can be seen. He’s experienced all that can be experienced. And he passes on the wisdom he’s gained on to his students in the form of a very important lesson: **Everything is Meaningless.** In this lesson, the Teacher documents an experiment that he conducts in an attempt to discover the true meaning of life. He studies three areas in which human beings strive to find satisfaction: work, education, and pleasure.

Work

The Teacher begins his experiment with an examination of work: *“What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun” (1.3)?* In other words, is there anything in the profit column at the end of a life spent at work? This idea continues:

Generations come and generations go,

but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets,

and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south

and turns to the north;

round and round it goes,

ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea,

yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,

there they return again.

All things are wearisome,

more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,

nor the ear its fill of hearing.

What has been will be again,

what has been done will be done again;

there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one can say,

"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.
There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow.

(Ecclesiastes 1.4-11)

In these verses the Teacher describes the wearisome routine of work: He goes to work; he comes home from work. He goes to work; he comes home from work. He goes to work; he comes home from work. There is no end to his work. It's like on the movie *Groundhog Day*.²⁶

The sun keeps rising and setting, and rising and setting, and rising and setting. The wind keeps blowing round and round and round in circles. The rivers keep flowing into the seas, but the seas are never filled.

The work is never finished.

The work is never remembered.

And the work is never lasting.

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after

²⁶If you haven't seen *Groundhog Day*, you check out the trailer online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSVeDx9fk60>).

me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

(Ecclesiastes 2.17-23)

Work is meaningless.

Education

Next, the Teacher turns his attention to education: *"I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (1.13)*. Is there anything in the profit column at the end of a life devoted to education? He continues:

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What is twisted cannot be straightened;

what is lacking cannot be counted.

I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of

wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

*For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.*

(Ecclesiastes 1.14-18)

In these verses the Teacher introduces us to a phrase that is particular to his classroom: *"a chasing after the wind."* The phrase is a graphic illustration of futility and meaninglessness (have you ever tried to chase the wind?). Education is futile, because you can never be fully educated.

Some problems will never be solved.

Some pieces of the puzzle will always be missing.

And the fact of the matter is, *"The wiser you are, the more worries you have; the more you know, the more it hurts"* (1.18, TEV).

"What a heavy burden God has laid on men!" (1.13). Or, in other words, "What a lousy job!"

Education is meaningless.

Pleasure

Third, the Teacher studies pleasure. We listened to this passage in the video from 2.1-11, and his thoughts can be summarized as follows: *"I denied myself nothing*

my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2.10). Is there anything in the profit column at the end of a life lived in pursuit of pleasure?

Surely meaning can be found in pleasure: in wine, works, wealth, and women? The Teacher is like Prince Charles, Donald Trump, Bill Gates, and Hugh Hefner all rolled into one. *Who wouldn't be satisfied with this?*

*Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.*

(Ecclesiastes 2.11)

Who knew? **Pleasure is meaningless.**

Conclusion

You see the Teacher's point: *everything* is meaningless. Living for work, education, and pleasure ends up in incredible disappointment. What else is there to life? The Teacher looks again into education and work, thinking perhaps he has missed something somewhere. But no, it is all meaningless (2.17-20).

This lesson is hard for many of us to hear. It is hard because many of us—right here, right now—are giving our lives to these meaningless pursuits; chasing dreams that we will never catch.

We are pouring everything we are and everything we have into our careers, our schoolwork and college plans, and our extra-curricular activities.

And what do we have to show for it? I'll tell you we have:

- We have workaholics who sell their children to highest bidder, and then try to explain to the children how it's all about them.
- We have academic snobs who are so wise they've actually become fools (*cf. Romans 1.22*).
- And we have a world full of addicts who have convinced themselves that all they need to arrive at happiness is another house, another car, another spouse, or another drink.

Yes, the lesson is hard to hear, but it is not without purpose. We must learn from the teacher a **proper perspective** about life. We must come to **understand life**, so that we may understand how to live it. We must learn to **differentiate between the meaningless and the meaningful**.

Notice the Teacher's conclusion to this lesson: how exactly are we to spend our vapor-like and empty lives?

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

(Ecclesiastes 2.24-26)

My fellow students, life itself is the meaning. Sprinkled throughout this book, in the midst of every one of the Teacher's lectures about the brevity and banality of life, he turns to show his students what is most important. Seven passages present his statement of faith. They are known as the "joy passages," and they instruct us in the way to find meaning in life.

Here, where work, education, and pleasure fail us, the joy of living does not. The Teacher says that there is nothing better or more meaningful than to gather around a table with family and friends and to *receive* blessing, not *pursue* it. The best things, the meaningful things in life, come as gifts from a generous God, not from our baseless pursuits.

Our best efforts will often fail, but God will not. James writes, *"Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows"* (James 1.16-17).

Are you wasting your life in the pursuit of vain pleasures, or are you living life to the fullest, recognizing and receiving the true joys that only God can give? Stop chasing empty dreams. Stop building castles out of sand. *Casting Crowns* always says it much better than I can in their song, "American Dream":²⁷

All work no play may have made Jack a dull boy

²⁷See the video online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DumlllHSrsQ>.

But all work no God has left Jack with a lost soul

But he's moving on full steam

He's chasing the American dream

And he's gonna give his family finer things

"Not this time son I've no time to waste

Maybe tomorrow we'll have time to play"

And then he slips into his new BMW

And drives farther and farther and farther away

Cause he works all day and tries to sleep at night

He says things will get better;

Better in time

[Chorus]

So he works and he builds with his own two hands

And he pours all he has in a castle made with sand

But the wind and the rain are comin' crashing in

Time will tell just how long his kingdom stands

His kingdom stands