

Introduction to Great Themes of the Bible

Every lesson, sermon, message or series we undertake at Signal Mountain Bible Church is based on the understanding that the Creator has revealed himself to his creation, he has communicated with mankind to tell us about himself. Which only stands to reason – why would God create us in the first place if he wasn't going to have a relationship with us?

To see if we can make it on our own? Please! He knows better. The God who can bring life out of nothing is not likely to be entertained by watching a hapless mankind flounder around. He created us to have a relationship with us, and a relationship requires communication.

We might argue on the relative intelligence of humanity, but there is no denying humanity is rational. We are thinking, conscious beings. And to have a relationship with us, God would have to communicate with us in a rational way, way that we can perceive, understand.

And that's exactly what he has done. He has told about himself through his creation, what theologians call general revelation. Romans 1:20, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made..." In other words, Paul says, nature alone is enough to know 1) there is a God, 2) he is powerful, and, 3) he is good.

But nature can't reveal the fullness of God, only a dim outline. We need something more explicit, and the most explicit revelation is in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..." John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

But he has revealed himself in another way as well, in his Word. In the pages of Scripture we learn who God is, what he is like, and what we must do to have a right relationship with him. 2 Tim 3:15 tells us it is Scripture that gives us the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ.

Which is why we study Scripture in the first place. ***We study Scripture not to know theology, but to know theos, God.*** If we pursue knowledge for its own sake, it will turn on us. 1 Cor. 8:1, "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Studying Scripture with no higher motive than having all the answers is self-defeating. Because although Scripture is propositional truth, its purpose is not merely to reveal propositions, its purpose is to reveal God.

For this series, we're going to focus on those great truths that run from one end of the Bible to the other, anchoring the whole. We'll focus on the big picture, try to capture the whole sweep of revelation in 10-12 studies over the next 4 or 5 months. Themes like grace, judgment, the promise & provision of a Savior, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, Mercy, Justice, Humility, the Church, and the Future.

My hope for this study is not that we will be able to impress one another with our Bible knowledge. You might dazzle me if you can quote Zechariah 3:10 without looking, but God is a tougher audience.

My hope for this study is that we will see our Lord more clearly. That we will take Bible knowledge past point of knowing *about* God, to a place of *knowing* God. In truth, that is purpose for every message, study, sermon preached here.

Lesson 1: The Greatness of God

This series on *Great Themes of the Bible* starts at the very beginning, with God himself. Which, I must tell you, is a daunting task. The Athanasian Creed, a variant on Apostles' Creed used in Episcopal services, has a stanza that goes, "The Father incomprehensible. The Son incomprehensible. The Holy Spirit incomprehensible." The dictionary gives two definitions of "incomprehensible." 1) "impossible to understand," and 2) "without limits." The Creed uses incomprehensible in the second sense, God is without limits, he can't be fenced in, he is infinite.

But we have to admit that the first definition applies as well. There are two things about taking God as our subject. First, to understand the barest fraction of who God is, let alone the fullness of his glory, is in this life an impossible task. Take the bare fact that God is one, yet Three. Who here understands the Trinity? Who can comprehend the incomprehensible?

Psalm 145:3 says God's greatness is unsearchable. John Wesley said, "Give me a worm that can understand a man, and I will give you a man who can understand God." The pastor who takes infinite God as his subject is like a circus clown called on to play Hamlet. He's way out of his depth.

But he is the first, greatest truth of Bible, and we must see him as he revealed himself to us. C. S. Lewis said, "We want...not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven: a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves" and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, "a good time was had by all."

But that's not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is immortal, invisible, holy, and just. We can't understand him fully, but we can understand what he has told us about himself. The problem is, there's so much to tell, time wouldn't allow us to do more than list his attributes one by one.

Instead, how about a one word summary? How about one word that describes God? What word would you pick? Holy? That's good, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory," says Is. 6:3.

What about love? 1 John 4:8, "God is love." Can't get any more succinct than that. The Bible offers several one word descriptions, but the one I think allows us to see God with the deepest, broadest perspective is this: ***God is great***. The primary truth, the first thing we must know if we are to understand this book, and therefore its author, is the greatness of God.

The second thing about taking God as our subject is that we can never talk about him behind his back, because he is present with us right now, hearing every word we say about him. We can't be theoretical about him, detached.

God's Greatness is the Reason we Worship

Bible often uses the word "majesty" to express the greatness of God. Sang it this morning...

- Ps 93:1, "The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty;"
- Ps 145:5, " On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate."
- 2 Pet 1:16, speaking of the Transfiguration, Peter says "we were eyewitnesses of His majesty."
- Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, describes God as the "Majesty on high," "Majesty in the heavens."

"Majesty," comes from the latin, *majestatis*, greatness. The Latin mass praises *Rex Tremendae Majestatis, Patrem Immensae Majestatis*, the King of Tremendous Majesty and Father of Immense Majesty. Magnificence, splendor, might. In a word, great.

God's greatness is why we are here this morning, it is the reason we worship, but more than that, God's greatness commands our worship:

- Psalm 48:1, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised."
- Psalm 95:3, 6, "For the LORD is a great God and a great King above all gods...Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker."

He is so far above us in worth, so magnificent, so perfect in all his attributes, that worship is more than a privilege, it is something we need to do. In fact, to withhold our worship from him does us infinite harm. God is great, and his greatness never changes.

God's greatness never changes

Scripture opens & closes with greatness of God. From the very opening chapters of Genesis, God brings order out of chaos, gives life by his word, creates man out of dust. There is no doubt who's in charge, is there? He curses the ground, subjects his rebellious creation to death & futility, floods the world in judgment, confounds human wisdom at Babel, & promises redemption thru one man. Genesis 18:14 sums it up this way: "is anything too difficult for the Lord?" Answer? No!

Scripture opens with God's greatness, and it closes with it as well:

- Rev. 4:11, "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."
- Rev 5:13, "And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, 'To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.'"

He created all that is, and he will reign thru eternity over all that is. God's greatness never changes, he always has been and always will be the supreme Lord of the universe.

God's ***life*** does not change, Jer. 10:10 says he is "the living God and the everlasting King." Psa 90:2, "Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God."

His ***truth*** does not change, Is. 40:6-8, "All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades... But the word of our God stands forever," Ps 119:89, "Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven"

His ***purposes*** do not change. 1 Sam 15:29, "the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind." Ps 33:11, "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation."

And his ***Son*** does not change. Heb 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Heb 7:25, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

So God's greatness never changes. What he was in eternity past, he is now, and will be. But just how great is he? To see, turn to Isaiah 40:12.

God's greatness is seen in comparison to us, Isaiah 40:12ff

How great is he? The second thing we learn is that God is ***all-everything***. ***All***-powerful, ***all***-knowing, ***all***-present. Isaiah presents those truths in a series of questions, comparing the created and the Creator in terms we can readily understand.

For example, compare God's ***work*** with our own, v12-14: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, And marked off the heavens by the span, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, And weighed the mountains in a balance And the hills in a pair of scales? Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding?"

What's the answer? *No one.*

Or compare God's power to the ***nations*** of the world. There is much consternation about Iraq these days, but it would only be a matter of weeks or months to completely destroy them. The United States is that powerful.

But all the power of Iraq, of the USA, of the combined force of all the nations of the world, isn't a flea-bite compared to God's power, v15-17: "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless."

Or consider his greatness compared to the ***earth***, v22, "It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in."

God is so vast, I'm surprised we rate as grasshoppers. The world is his footstool, and the frenetic activity of the billions who live here sway him just about as much as the grasshoppers in my yard sway me.

How about the great men of the world? The men who dictate the fate of millions: Nebuchadnezzar, Napoleon, Washington, Lincoln, Churchill, Hitler, Saddam, Bush. Are they the movers and shakers? No way, v23-24: "He it is who reduces rulers to nothing, Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. Scarcely have they been planted, Scarcely have they been sown, Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, But He merely blows on them, and they wither, And the storm carries them away like stubble."

The great men are only great in relation to the rest of us. Compared to God, they are like the fluffy bits of a dandelion gone to seed. One {poof}...gone. We look at Saddam and tremble, God looks at him and says: dandelion dust.

So God is greater in comparison to us in our work, nations, earth, and the great men of our world. Finally, he is greater than the universe itself, v25-26: "To whom then will you liken Me That I would be his equal?" says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high And see who has created these stars, The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, Not one of them is missing."

How big is your God? Because we are limited and weak, we tend to limit God in our minds, to see him too much like ourselves. We need to learn the vast, majestic greatness of God.

Maybe it will help if we realize the vastness of our universe. Our solar system is a pretty huge thing, extending from the sun at the center, about 93,000,000 miles from us, out to Pluto, 3.5 *billion* miles away. If we could travel at the speed of light (which we can't), but if we could, at 186,000 miles per second, then it would take us 1.28 seconds to reach the moon. Not bad.

Mars would be 4 ½ minutes away, Saturn just over an hour. To get all the way to end of our solar system, Pluto, 3.5 billion miles away, would take 5 ½ hours.

But, what if you wanted to go to the next star over, Proxima Centauri? That little trip, at the speed of light, is 4 ½ years. What if you just wanted to go to the center of own galaxy, the Milky Way? To get to the center of our own little galaxy, at the speed of light, would take 30,000 years! And that's just one galaxy, there are more than 100 billion galaxies in our universe. And the ones we can see, vast as they are, are just tiny specks of light from the earth.

With the launch of the Hubble telescope in 1989, astronomers now estimate the edge of the observable universe is 15 billion light years away. That is, at the speed of light, it would take us 15 billion years to get there! Minds boggle.

Let's put it in more easily understood terms. If I were to take an orange, I could easily hold it in my hand, even palm, hold it upside down, no problem.

But what about a basketball? Nope, I've got little bitty pastoral computer geek hands, I can't palm a basketball. But there are thousands who can, from high school to the NBA. Is that impressive? Check out Is. 40:12 again, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span," (a span is the distance from the tip of the little finger to the tip of the thumb, about 9 inches) "and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales?"

I can palm an orange, you can palm a basketball, but ***God can palm the universe***, 15 billion light years & more. He has complete control of every moon, planet, star, pulsar, quasar, black hole, & galaxy there is. How big is your God?

Common sense says the Creator must be greater than what he has created. If the creation appears great, glorious, beautiful and majestic, how much greater, more glorious, more awesome, must God be?

- Jeremiah 23:24, "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth, declares the Lord?"
- Psalm 8:1, "O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!"
- But his greatness, his majesty doesn't mean he is not near to us. He is a personal God.
- Psalm 8:3-4, "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him?"

The omnipotent God is anything but impersonal, anything but indifferent. He cares for us, provides for our needs, approves good, condemns evil. If Is. 40 contrasts God's greatness with our own, Psalm 139 pictures God's greatness in an intensely personal way, based on his limitless relationship to us.

God's greatness is seen in his relationship to us, Psalm 139

No limits to his knowledge of me, v1-6: "O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it."

We are good at outward appearances. We shield much of our true selves from one another. I knew a man when I worked at IBM in the early 80's. A good guy, funny, nice, real family man, one of those guys everybody liked, respected. He was promoted to some other job, and I lost touch with him. I picked up his trail a few years later, when I read in the LA Times that he'd been convicted of molesting his nieces.

We can hide our thoughts & heart from one another, but nothing can be hidden from God. He literally knows us inside out. There are no limits to his knowledge of me and ***no bounds to his presence with me.***

I used to love to read a book to my kids, "The Runaway Bunny." It starts like this: "Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away... "If you run away,' said his mother, 'I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.'" No matter form the little bunny takes, a fish in a stream, a crocus in a garden, or a rock on a mountain, his steadfast, loving, protective mother finds him.

But that's nothing compared to God's presence with us, v7-12: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in

Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night," Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You."

God is always watching us, we can't run away even if we wanted to. There's great comfort in that fact (unless you're trying to get away).

No end to his power, v13-18: "For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with You."

The same power that sculpted Everest formed you. The same power that spread out the galaxies watched over your growth, your development in your mother's womb.

God is all knowing, all present, all powerful, ***and intensely personal about it.*** He brings all that power to bear on you, for his glory, and your good.

Grabbed by the Greatness of God

Have you been grabbed by the greatness of God yet? Have you begun to get a glimpse of it? Infinite in all his attributes, perfectly holy, perfectly just, perfectly loving, perfectly merciful. There is no end to his wisdom, presence, power. The hymn writer put it this way:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible, Hid from our eyes; Most blessed, most glorious, The Ancient of Days; Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unbasting And silent as light; Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might. Thy justice, like mountains, High soaring above; Thy clouds, which are fountains Of goodness and love.

To all, life Thou givest, To both great and small; In all, life Thou livest, The true life of all; We blossom and flourish As leaves on the tree, And wither and perish But naught changeth Thee.

Great Father of glory, Pure Father of light; Thine angels adore Thee All veiling their sight. All praise we would render, O help us to see 'Tis only the splendor Of light hideth Thee.

Once we see the greatness of God, we begin to understand the smallness of man don't we? In fact, considering how puny man is next to God, it's amazing he bothers with us at all! But his greatness proves our need.

If this great God created us in the first place, doesn't it stand to reason that he expects to be God in our lives? How much sense does it make for a woefully incompetent, pint-sized creation to deny him that right? How much hurt do we do ourselves when we ignore, rebel against him?

A world with man at its center is by definition fatally flawed, pretending the finite, fallen, futile creature is in charge instead of the God who made him. Christians succumb to that kind of thinking too, giving God about 75 minutes, once a week, and even then our attention wanders!

If we truly understood God's greatness, the shock of it would electrify our walk and our worship. How aware of God's greatness are you? When you pray, sing, read, listen, how tuned in are you? **Unless we are grabbed by God's greatness, our faith will be feeble and our worship weak.**

Ps 77:13-15, "Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your strength among the peoples. You have by Your power redeemed Your people..."

The story line of the Bible in one sentence is that the great God reaches out to save his fallen creation. Where are you in relation to that great God? Have you submitted yourself to him? Is he Lord of your heart? If he is, does his greatness grab your heart, lead you to greater need, dependence, trust?

Lesson 2: The Evil of Man

If the greatness of God is the primary truth of Scripture, the corresponding truth is the frailty, weakness, and evil of man.

There is a faith healer who has his patients recite daily, "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better." According to the Cato Institute in a book published in 1996, that's true. The *State of Humanity: Good and Getting Better*, argues that in every measurable aspect, humanity is better off than ever, and there is strong reason to believe the progressive trends will continue indefinitely.

Robert Wright, author of *The Logic of Human Destiny*, says that society & culture are evolving, the human race is fulfilling its "destiny," moving inexorably to greater intricacy and morality. He concludes that it "may literally be within the power of the species to swing nature's moral scales...decisively in the direction of good."

What newspaper is he reading? Reminds me of the saying, "I'm not getting older, I'm getting better at denial." Here's what Scripture says: 2 Tim. 3:1-7, 13: "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth...But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

Whew! How about some lighter examples? A would be thief entered a German bank with a burlap bag over his head, bumping into customers as he felt his way to the teller. He pulled out a plastic knife and toy pistol in one hand, pulled the bag off head to demand money with the other. He'd forgotten to cut eye-holes in the bag.

Or, a Beaverton, Oregon science instructor wanted a day off, and tried to cancel her class by phoning in bomb threats to her own school. She was identified when school staff members recognized her voice.

Two men were seriously wounded as they practiced shooting beer cans off each other's head.

One man who attempted to siphon gas from a motor home on a Seattle street got more than he bargained for. Police arrived to find him curled up next to the motor home and a puddle of sewage. He admitted trying to steal gasoline, but plugged the hose into the sewage tank by mistake.

Maybe siphoners are especially challenged. A Toronto man siphoning gas out of a neighbor's car late at night wanted to see how much he had, and pulled out his lighter to check. You can guess what happened.

It only goes to show you should never attribute to malice that which can be explained by stupidity. Someone said the difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has its limits. Seminaries always pair anthropology, study of man, with hamartialogy, study of sin. I wonder why?

Essence of Scripture on man: the overwhelming message of Scripture is that man is bad to the bone. Open book anywhere, here's what you'll find:

- Is. 53:6, All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way;
- Jer. 17:9, The heart is more deceitful than all else & is desperately sick; who can understand it?
- Eph. 2:1-3, And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...[living] in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath.
- Col 1:21, you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds
- 1 Jn 1:10, If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

It wasn't like this in the beginning. Turn to Genesis and let's see what happened. When God created man, he made him out of dust, 2:7. You could argue that means he's low or earthy, but Gen. 1:26 makes clear that man was created in God's own image.

Image of God in man is what distinguishes him from the rest of creation. God's image in man are the aspects of man's nature that reflect God's character, his moral, rational, creative faculties. It is his mark on us that shows we belong to him, like the president's image on the loose change in your pocket.

In other words, we may be created out of dirt, but there's more to us than just matter. We are spiritually-oriented beings.

At each stage of creation, God declared what he had made "good." But look what he says after man's creation, when he's all finished, 1:31: *"very good."* Body and soul, man is God's most marvelous work, the ultimate act of his creation. He lived in a perfect environment, 2:8-9, with every tree pleasing to the sight & good for food. What is more, he lived in perfect harmony with God, 3:8a, even enjoying walks together in the garden in the cool of the day.

Man lived in harmony with his environment, with God, with his wife, and with himself. There was no need for psychologists or psychiatrists in Eden. Man had the ability to love & obey God and one another in a way we can't imagine.

But, he was also free to disobey. That's why, in 2:16-17, God lays down the one condition for their relationship. "Eat all you want from any tree but one." With all God's gracious provision, everything at his fingertips, open communion with God, full harmony with his soul-mate, man chose to disobey God on the only point of obedience in question.

And so, he fell from that pure relationship, with profound results, recorded in Genesis 3. The first sin is recorded in v6, and guilt makes its first appearance immediately after in v7, followed by fear, v8 & 10, strife & blame, v12. So much for full harmony between wife and husband.

But Adam, Eve, messed up more than *their* relationship. The entire universe was corrupted. 3:16, pain in childbirth & conflict between husband and wife. 3:17-19, the ground s cursed, labor & toil become a daily reality, finally death, and an unwelcome return to dust. Ultimately, 3:24, man is driven out of garden God created for him. Communion with God is shattered.

The effects of Adam's sin fell on him like a ton of bricks, body and soul. All because of an apple? No, because of his rebellion against God. That's what Scripture says sin is, out & out rebellion, a coup d'état to subdue God, to smother his rule over our lives.

Sin twists the image of God in us of all recognition. In the Grace Awakening, Chuck Swindoll quotes, *Sin is a blasting presence...every spiritual delicacy succumbs to its malignant touch...Sin impairs the sight, & works toward blindness. Sin benumbs the hearing & makes men deaf. Sin perverts the taste, causing men to confuse sweet w/ bitter, & bitter with sweet. Sin hardens the touch, & renders a man "past feeling." All these are Scriptural analogies, & their common significance is this: sin blocks & chokes the fine senses of the spirit; we are desensitized, rendered imperceptive. Sin hardens the spirit.*

There's something else Scripture says: Adam & Eve aren't alone. **All** have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Not some, not many, but all! Every single one of us are infected with the same disease, and have been since conception. Ps. 51:5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."

David's not saying he was illegitimate, he's saying he is sinful from the womb. What sins did he commit in there? None, of course. He's saying the pollution of sin, *singular*, began before we commit our first sins, *plural*.

How is that possible? Because, Adam's sin didn't just affect Adam. May have been one man's disobedience, but the results are universal. Turn to Rom. 5:12 to see the connection between Adam's sin and our own.

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned"

Some argue the only connection between Adam's sin and our own is that we repeat it, each of us willfully choosing to disobey God on our own. That doesn't do justice to Romans 5. 6 times, Paul says sin entered the world through one man, Adam, and the entire race was affected:

- v12, through one man sin entered into the world
- v15, by the transgression of the one the many died
- v16, the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation
- v17, by the transgression of the one, death reigned
- v18, through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men
- v19, through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners

IOW, Paul says, there is an essential, intrinsic, inborn connection between Adam and us. Adam wasn't just an ordinary, everyday guy. He was the only man ever created by the direct hand of God. As the first man, he is the head of the human race.

F. F. Bruce: *To Paul, Adam was more than a historical individual, he was also what his name means in Hebrew - 'humanity.' The whole of humanity existed first in Adam...It is not simply because Adam is the ancestor of mankind that all are said to have sinned in his sin (otherwise it might be argued that because Abraham believed God all his descendants were necessarily involved in his belief); it is because Adam **is** mankind."*

The best analogy I can give you is the President of the United States. We are all citizens of the USA, but only George Bush is its head. He is more than a mere citizen, he represents all citizens. When he obligates the country to a course of action, he is obligating you and me. What he does has a direct bearing on us.

In the same way, Adam was the head of the human race. What he did had a direct bearing on us, and when he sinned, his sin was *imputed* to us, charged to our account, so that we are legally guilty. When Adam sinned, I sinned; when Adam received spiritual death, I received spiritual death.

Two little words define the result in Romans 5:14, "death reigned," v17, "death reigned," v21, "sin reigned in death." Not just physical death, but spiritual death.

We know what spiritual death feels like. There are times when life is exciting, when it's great to be alive and all of life ahead looks fascinating and challenging. But these moments pass. And as we age, we can become more and more aware of growing sense of futility, emptiness, and insignificance.

As a friend of mine said after turning 50, he was beginning to see the dark at the end of the tunnel. And that tunnel **is** dark, because it ends in the grave, the certain, final, remorseless tomb. Is this depressing or what? But this is what is going on in the world all around us this morning.

No one embodied the go-for-all-the-gusto, joy of life, like Ernest Hemingway. Great novelist, world traveler, big-game hunter, bullfighter, a man for whom all life was an adventure. Here's what he said: "I live in a vacuum which is as empty & as lonely as a radio tube when batteries are dead & there is no current to plug it into."

And on a sunny Sunday morning in Idaho, he put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. This is the reign of death. It is the awareness of our spiritual emptiness, something we all share, without exception, as our inheritance from Adam.

We see it from the very beginning. We see Eve's temptation in Gen. 3, how she saw the forbidden fruit hanging there, how good it looked, that it would make her wise, and she couldn't resist it. We read that story and we know exactly how she felt because all of us have been there too.

We see Adam & Eve's guilt and fear, their decision to hide from God, and every one of us knows what that feels like. How many times have you done something that made you wish you could find a hole, crawl in, and pull it in after you?

We see Cain's jealousy, and his decision to murder Abel out of spite, and all of us know what it means to be burn with resentment over some slight, to want revenge.

We see a whole people banding together to build a tower at Babel, a tower to storm heaven from, challenging God for the supremacy. And that's us. That's our story.

We are children of Adam, driven by self, pride, desire, the image of God in us twisted into a perverse distortion. We said last week that we are good at outward appearances, but the truth is we are rotten, and left to ourselves we will end in futility and death and there's nothing we can do about it! Every fiber of our being, body and soul, is enslaved to sin, and we prove it every day.

But sin corrupts more than our morals, it corrupts our intelligence. One result of Adam's sin is that we became dumb, and contrary to what some say, we are getting dumber all the time. Turn to Romans 1:18-32.

In these verses, Paul brings 3 charges against mankind. First, he says that even though we knew the truth about God, we chose to **suppress the truth**, v21a, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks." We **ignore** him, cover up the truth that God is in charge so we can strut around like we are the big cheese.

We replace God's name with generic terms like fate, luck, karma. Or with an impersonal force like nature, or science. The only way we consistently acknowledge God is when we curse.

Paul says when man ignored God, v21b, 2 things happened. Man "became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." We are **futile in our thinking & dark in our hearts**. Futile means empty, useless. Thousands of years of knowledge, millions of books, all from futile brains, dark hearts, Our minds and hearts can't come to right conclusions about anything on our own.

Yet, Paul says in his 2nd charge, v22, we **pretend to be wise**. We tell all who'll listen, "yep, I knew that." We think we see all, know all. Guess who we're trying to imitate? God. The result, in one blunt word: we become fools!

The 3rd charge, v23, is that we **insult God**, exchanging "the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."

We picture the epitome of corruption as the incorruptible God, with images like men, birds, animals, and reptiles. Did you notice the descending order in v23? Man is at one end & a snake at the other.

What do schoolkids do when want to insult someone? Draw mean pictures on board, stick figures with ugly faces and weird hair, then write name under it. When street protestors want to show contempt for a leader, they hang him in effigy. Take a dummy, put a picture of the offending ruler on it, and string him up.

This is what man does with God. He makes the equivalent of a stick figure out of wood or gold and calls it Lord. He is saying, "This is who God is, something I can handle, bow to, or ignore, as I see fit." He may show some religious consideration for it, some superstitious fear, but God is not honored, he's insulted.

By the way, idols aren't always statues. Idolatry is anything that debases God by raising something in his place or reduces him to less than he is. We don't worship idols in 21st century America, do we?

What about movie stars, football heroes, and politicians? They are mere men & women, fallen & corrupt, yet idolized and worshipped. Or what about things like power, money, sex, comfort, beauty, youth, or adventure?

All of these exchange the glory of the incorruptible God in all his majesty and greatness for pale imitations. Because we ignore God, because we try to imitate God, we wind up insulting him, and God therefore allows the natural consequences of his sin to rain down on us, v24-32:

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Its kind of like reading the newspaper, isn't it? 3 times (v24, 26, 28), Paul says "God gave them over." This is the downside of free will. When man abandons God, God removes the restraints and lets him sink all the way down. Want to explore your depravity? God will let you, but there will be a price to pay, and it won't all be due in the next world.

Sin's natural course is a graveyard spiral, and that too is part of God's judgement. There's a progression in these verses. 1st, God gave us over to *sexual decadence*, v24-25, not only outward sexual sin, but worshipping sex. Is this us, or what? We live in sex-crazed culture, indulging itself in every conceivable sexual vice and some many of us have probably never heard of.

Sexual decadence leads to *degrading passions*, v26-27. The homosexual lobby is successfully taking over our culture. What used to be unthinkable is now just a plot line for TV sitcoms, & what is still unthinkable won't be for long. I used to think we had a ways to go to catch up with Sodom & Gomorrah, but I'm not sure anymore.

Finally, God gave us over to a *depraved mind*, v28-31. Not just doing evil, but redefining evil as good. Do you see the progression? The first appeal is to the physical. We want to see how evil tastes and feels, what it looks like. Just think of any memorable TV commercials. They focus on the look, taste, or feel of what they sell.

The second appeal is from the physical to the emotional. Some pleasure in sin, and we find we like it, at the beginning. But the third and most terrible stage, is when minds are damaged, depraved, and debased. Sin then is no longer a choice, you couldn't stop if you tried. Paul closes with this, v32: "although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them." Deviancy is not just tolerated, it is advocated, promoted, marketed every way possible.

We ignore him, imitate him, insult him, and end up decayed, degraded, and depraved. This is not theoretical jargon, it is right where we live. If Romans 5 tells why sin runs rampant, and Romans 1 tells what it does, I'm going to close with Romans 3, which tells us the true state of man.

Someone else has titled Romans 3:10 and following, ***I'm fallen and I can't get up.*** It is Paul's indictment of the human race, starting in v10b: *There is none righteous, not even one.* Really? Don't you know some nice people? Good, kind, gracious folks? They might be nice on the outside, but inside, all our motives are selfish, corrupt. So God says, "not even one."

There is none who understands, v11a. Really? But there are millions of people devoting whole lives to the pursuit of knowledge. All over the world, in schools, universities, temples & churches, people are searching for wisdom and enlightenment. But it is a futile search. God says, "no one understands."

There is none who seeks for God, v11b. Really? But we are so spiritual! More than any time in last 80 years, people are attuned to spiritual things. They may say they are looking for God, but God says, "no one searches for God." They are looking for *a god*, not *the God*.

All have turned aside, together they have become useless;v12. Could Paul be any clearer? *There is none who does good, there is not even one.*" As Christians, we might be tempted to think, man, these unbelievers are really lousy! Guess what? This is all humanity Paul is talking about, you and me. Want proof?

What if we had a camera that records thoughts? Wouldn't that be great? We could put it over the pulpit, then every Sunday morning, all you fine-looking, moral, clean-living people could be scanned and all your thoughts recorded. What you thought when you came in the door, when the person next to you sat down, when we sang that extra long verse of that extra long song. Then, we could hold a screening after the service. How many would show up?

We wouldn't like what we saw, would we? But that's what God sees when he looks at the human race. There is no one who does good, not even one, and it is because there is no fear of God in us, v13-18. We've numbed ourselves. We are too busy ignoring him and insulting him to fear him.

That lack of fear is ***reflected in our speech***, v13-14: "Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving," "the poison of asps is under their lips"; "whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness."

It starts in the throat, moves to the tongue, then the lips. Movement is from inside to outside, from the throat to the lips, until it fills the whole mouth. When we open our mouths, God sees an open grave with a rotten corpse and a putrid stink.

Our conversation is filled with toilet talk, constant sexual innuendo and double meanings. Pop music has gone from the Buddy Holly and the Beach Boys to Marilyn Manson and Eminem. The problem is deeper down than our throats, the problem is in the heart. What is in the heart comes out in the speech: vulgarity, hypocrisy, and deceit.

That lack of fear is also ***reflected in our actions***, v15-17: "Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known." Wherever man goes, ruin follows. There isn't a city in the world without slums, murder, robbery and rape. War has never been absent from the world, because, v18, "there is no fear of God before their eyes."

So, Paul concludes in v23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That brings us right back to 1:18, doesn't it? "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

It's a long way down from the image of God, isn't it? We are perverted, bent, so that instead of reflecting God as we were created to do, we ignore, imitate, & insult him, and reap the debasement. This is total depravity.

The whole world is accountable to God, and there is no easy way out. Death won't erase anything. Heb. 9:27 says, "it is appointed for men to die once ***and after this comes judgment.***"

This is pretty bad news, isn't it? Where's the upside, the good news? There is none, if we stay to the topic at hand. Man is fallen and he can't get up. We said last week that as we get a glimpse of God's greatness, we begin to understand how small man is. I will tell you this morning that once we get a glimpse of how evil man is, once we begin to understand the depth of our sin, we begin to understand how great God's grace is. A huge sin requires a huge-r grace to take care of it.

You don't have the capacity to pull yourself out of this bad news. Only God can pull you out himself, thru the death of his Son on the cross. The good news is, he was very willing to do that for you.

Lesson 3: The Promise of a Savior

Christmas can inspire some pretty scary stuff. Consider the hit movie of a couple of years ago, the "Nightmare Before Christmas," in which Halloween's goblins get bored waiting for next October and decide to take over Christmas. Actually, that's nothing new, Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" is after all a ghost story. Christmas stories with a scary them is a pretty long list.

How about a scary song? "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town."

Why is that scary? Because, "He's making a list, & checkin' it twice; gonna find out who's naughty and nice." Santa has his eye on you. All the time.

"He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!" He sees all and knows all, he is omniscient.

No problem, as long as your nice. Yes, you can earn Santa's favor. If your good, he'll give you stuff. "Little tin horns, & little toy drums, rooty-toot-toots & rummy tum-tums." Whatever those are. "Little toy dolls that cuddle & coo, elephants, boats & kiddy cars too. SC is coming to town."

So, "better watch out, better not cry, better not pout." Ho, ho, ho.

Not only is Santa omniscient, he is evidently omnipresent. How else could he visit every home with a good boy or girl? Consider this:

There are over 2 billion children in world, but since Santa doesn't appear to handle Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist kids, he only has to deal with about 15%, or 378,000,000. If you take the average of 3.5 children per household worldwide, that's 92,000,000 homes, assuming one good kid in each, an admittedly big assumption.

Santa has 31 hours of Christmas in which to work, thanks to the earth's rotation, and that works out to 823 visits per second. In other words, for each household, Santa has 1/800th of a second to park, hop out of his sleigh, grab the presents, jump down the chimney, dump the presents, eat the cookies, drink the milk, get back up the chimney, into the sleigh and move on to the next house. He must be pretty limber for a big guy.

That also means Santa's sleigh moves at 650 miles per second, 3,000 times speed of sound. Pretty fast for something that must be incredibly huge, because, assuming each child gets no more than 2 lbs. of presents, his sleigh has to carry 321,300 tons.

8 tiny reindeer? I think not. The average earth-bound reindeer can pull about 300 lbs. Even adding Rudolph doesn't help. Santa needs 214,200 reindeer to haul the load.

What about air resistance? Taking the weight of the sleigh and 200,000 reindeer, Santa's got a total payload of 353,000 tons. Now, an object weighing 353,000 tons, traveling 650 miles per second, would experience roughly the same air resistance as the space shuttle reentering earth's atmosphere. If the heat didn't vaporize them, they'd all be crushed by centrifugal force 17,000 times greater than earth's gravity. No wonder Rudolph's nose is so bright.

The truth is, as a cartoon character or figure of history who symbolizes the warmth, generosity, and joy of the season is just fine. But when Santa becomes the focus of Christmas, he is nothing more than a thief, who steals all that is good and right and holy about the great Day, and leaves nothing behind but cheap toys and tinsel. When Santa Claus becomes what Christmas is all about, he's nothing but a cheap imitation of the real deal.

The Divine Dilemma

Going to look at the real deal this morning. In our series on the great themes of the Bible we've seen the greatness of the infinite, holy, creator God, to whom the entire universe is the merest wisp, something that would fit in the palm of his hand. Perfect, right in all he thinks, says, and does, there is not only the presence of good in him, but the total absence of evil.

We also saw his most magnificent creation, mankind, male & female. Created good, bearing his image, they nevertheless chose to disobey, chose what they knew to be wrong, and are thus subjected to suffering, futility, and despair, what Paul in Romans calls the reign of death.

So that now, an infinite chasm separates God from his creation. What should God do? He'd told Adam if he ate of the tree, he'd die. Should he simply forgive, just say, "Aw, shucks, I'll give you one more chance"? Not if he is the great God Scripture shows him to be. If God doesn't mean what he says, if he goes back on his word that man should die, he is flawed like his creation. ***A just God can't go back on his word.***

But if he doesn't go back on his word, then man has to die. Isn't that equally unthinkable? God had declared his creation "very good." He was pleased with it, it was the work of his almighty power and divine creativity. He was glad to have done it. Would God be satisfied to let the pinnacle of his creation, one who bears his image, sink into corruption? Don't think so.

Certainly, the God who is described as love itself would not treat the ruin of his most magnificent creation with indifference. Which means that something would have to be done. A just God can't go back on his word, and ***a loving God won't abandon his creation to ruin.*** There would have to be some way to pay for sin.

If you were God, how would you go about doing that? Require Adam to repent? Isn't that what we teach our kids? "When you do wrong, say, 'I'm sorry.'" Problem is, repentance only takes care of the original crime, and man had a bigger problem than one apple, single act of disobedience.

Now he's got a sin nature, a fleshy inclination to keep on sinning, and incur more corruption, more death. Repentance does nothing to address the consequences of the fall. Besides, it's not like saying "I'm sorry" makes everything better. A lamp broken because a kid was horsing around isn't fixed because he said "I'm sorry." Man is broken and he needs to be fixed.

This is the divine dilemma: God could either

- do nothing, allowing man to go his own way, with the result that death reigns and his entire creation perishes, purposeless. Or,
- he could require man to make it right. Problem is, man can't do that. You can't straighten out in others what's warped in yourself. Sinful man can't pay the price for other men's sins.

Only solution to the divine dilemma is for the ***just & loving God to bridge the chasm himself***. So, when God promised a savior in Genesis 3:15, he wasn't talking about a man. He wasn't talking about an angel, angels can't redeem men. He wasn't talking about animals, animal blood only covers

sin, doesn't take it away. The only one who could pay price for man's sin, take his death, was God himself.

But how could the immortal, eternal God...die? He would have to enter our world in a different way than walking in the garden, he would have to take on our mortality, stooping to our level. Not just put in an appearance, not just appear like the angels in the Old Testament, deity dressed in man-clothes, but taking our body as his own, fully God, but fully man.

Promise Made

So when God promised a savior, he was talking about himself. How long between fall, Genesis 3:6-7, and the promise of a savior, 3:15? Not long. Actually, God had it all planned out. He isn't shooting from the hip, knew Adam & Eve would fall, and that he would act on their behalf, and he knew it before they fell, before they drew first breath, before Genesis 1:1, before the foundation of the world.

Which is why the promise, given immediately after the fall in v15, is thousands of years away from fulfillment. We might expect God would fix it right then and there, when there were only 2 people infected with sin. But just as he had purposed to redeem before the foundation of the world, he had in his wisdom purposed a specific time to do it.

Galatians 4:4, Paul writes "when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman..." Again, in 1 Tim 2:6, he calls Jesus "the testimony given at the proper time."

I don't think Adam & Eve understood there would be a delay, because they immediately started trying to make savior. Look at Genesis 4:1.

When Cain is born, Eve celebrates, "I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD." Cain means, "gotten one," think "gift." Many commentators think Eve believes Cain, the "gotten one" from the Lord, was to be the promised savior. If so, she's about to be sadly disappointed.

Cain's name reflects a level of optimism and hope. The next kid was named Abel, 'breath,' 'vapor,' maybe "vanity." Eve's optimism seems to have waned. Maybe she had come to understand that the consequences of sin wouldn't be easy to deal with. Life was no longer a walk in the garden, but a struggle.

Yet, man seems to think he can provide the savior. We see it again in Genesis 5:29, when Lamech's son is born: "he called his name Noah, saying, 'This one will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the LORD has cursed.'" Noah, whose name means "rest," certainly was used by God, but not in the way Lamech expected.

What they didn't understand about the promised savior was, he wouldn't be just any man. When you study Old Testament prophecy about the coming savior, 3 truths predominate: first, the ***promised savior will be king.***

- Gen. 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, & to him shall be the obedience of the peoples"

- Is. 9:6a, For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders.
- Is. 11:1, 10, a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit... in that day The nations will resort to the root of Jesse...
- Jer. 23:5, "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice & righteousness..."
- Zech. 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The promised savior will be king. That's why, in Matthew 2:2, the wise men, looking for Jesus, stopped in Jerusalem and asked, "Where is He who is born King of the Jews?"

2nd point, the promised savior won't be just any king, but a divine one. **The promised savior will be God himself.**

- Ps. 2:7, "He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'"
- Is. 7:14, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. [God with us]"
- Is. 9:6b, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
- Mic 5:2, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."

The best of our Christmas carols reflect these truths...

- Joy to the World, "the Lord is come, let earth receive her king."
- Angels from the Realms of Glory, "God with man is now residing, worship Christ the newborn king."
- Hark the Herald Angels Sing, "glory to the newborn king, veiled in flesh the godhead see, hail the incarnate deity."
- The First Noel, "born is the king of Israel."
- Once in Royal David's City, "He came down to earth from heaven who is God, Lord of all."

One more, We Three Kings, puts it all together, "glorious now behold him arise, king and God and sacrifice." He is King, and he is God, and he is Sacrifice, the one who would take away our sin. That is the 3rd point: the **promised savior will be our sacrifice.**

- Is. 1:18, "Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool."
- Is. 53:4-6, "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him."

- Jer. 50:20, 'In those days and at that time,' declares the LORD, 'search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant.'
- Zech. 13:1, "In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.

Promise Kept

Promise made, hundreds and hundreds of times throughout the Old Testament, and promise kept. When the fullness of time had come, God stepped fully, bodily into our humanity, but in an unexpected way. He wasn't the kind of king we were expecting. Look at Philippians 2:6-8.

"He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself..." He came from heaven to earth. How big a step down is that? Infinite! From heaven, where he was honored and praised as God from eternity past, to our squalid, dirty, sin-sick earth. But that's not all, v7.

"Taking the form of a bond-servant *and* being made in the likeness of men." Didn't just show up, didn't just put in an appearance, he became fully, truly, human. He gave up his limitless power, confined himself in the body of a helpless baby, who had to rely on Mary for food, warmth, everything! And that wasn't all, v8.

"Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." He stooped all the way down, to earth, to take on our humanity, to die the most ignoble death you could imagine.

If we were going to bring God to earth as a king, we'd have done it differently. We would have had him born in a palace, to a wealthy, influential family. We would have had him educated in the best universities, would have made sure he met all the right people, heads of state. Would have made sure he had plenty of airtime, made the rounds of all the Sunday morning talk shows.

We'd have done it differently. We never would have let him be born in a barn-yard stable. We never would have let him be born to an impoverished working man, a 2-turtledove family who couldn't even afford the lamb to celebrate his birth. We never would have let him waste his life in a carpenter's shop in a nothing town in a hick backwater of a 3rd rate nation. We certainly never would have let him hang out with a shabby bunch of ex-fishermen. He would have had only the very best people as his disciples.

We'd have done it differently. The religious leaders would have flocked to him, would have fought just to have a word with him, to be noticed and blessed by him. Anyone who laid so much as a finger on him would have been jailed, maybe executed. Most of all, we would have made sure he was universally loved and honored and respected.

We'd have done it differently, and we would have wound up with someone who looks a lot like Santa Claus. God did it so the divine king became not just human, but came all the way down, lowering himself to poverty, subjection under Roman rule, humiliation, ultimately death, thereby providing our redemption.

The Central Figure of History. The old '60's TV special, "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" has as its premise that Christmas has to be cancelled because a global snow storm is more than Santa can handle. That's where Rudolph comes in. To the world, Christmas without Santa might as well be cancelled.

But the truth is, it is Christmas without Jesus that is nonsense. Taking J out of Christmas is like taking numbers out of math, doctors out of medicine, sun out of daylight. It isn't Christmas, just Xmas. Christmas centers on the central figure of human history, the unique, marvelous person of Jesus Christ.

- Col. 1:15-20, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.
- Heb. 1:1-4, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they."

Buddha never claimed to be God. Moses never claimed to be Yahweh. Mohammed never claimed to be Allah. But Jesus claimed to be the true and living God.

Buddha said, "I am a teacher in search of the truth." Jesus said, "I am the Truth."

Confucius said, "I never claimed to be holy." Jesus said, "Who convicts me of sin?"

Mohammed said, "Unless God throws his cloak of mercy over me, I have no hope." Jesus said, "Unless you believe in me, you will die in your sins."

He is the central figure of all human history. *Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, He shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, He spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise, than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times. (Philip Schaff, quoted in Josh McDowell, New Evidence that Demands a Verdict, 321.)*

You would expect that kind of lasting influence from God visiting earth, but there is more: because he is the divine king who takes away our sin, Jesus satisfies the deepest spiritual hunger in humanity.

What's your problem? Loneliness, fear, despair? In him is fellowship, courage, comfort. Because he is the divine king who takes away our sin, Jesus overcomes humanity's greatest enemy, death.

You might also expect he would rule over creation as all humanity's sovereign king. He will, but not just yet. Jesus said, "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) He said, "The Kingdom is in you...or in your midst." (Luke 17:21)

In other words, his kingdom is not a political entity, it is a spiritual one. He is king now in the hearts of those who believe in him, who love him, who accept his gracious forgiveness for their sins. Some day soon he will be King over all the earth and the whole universe will submit to Him:

Philippians 2:9-11, "For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Lesson 4: The Grace of God

We've seen the greatness of the infinite, holy, creator God. Perfect, right in all he does, all he thinks. We've also seen his most magnificent creation, man, male & female. Created good, in God's own image, yet when given a choice between good and evil, man chose evil, to the ruin of all creation.

Subjected to suffering and futility, evil has so contaminated man that the best of the best of us, whoever that may be, can't measure up to God's standard, "Be holy as I am holy." Even our righteous deeds, our good works, Isaiah 64:6 says, are like filthy rags. God is separated from his creation by an infinite chasm. And we saw that God bridged that chasm himself in infinite sacrifice in the promise and provision of a Savior, his Son, Jesus Christ.

The message of the Bible is that it is who God is and what God does that is the critical issue, not who we are and what we do. Man's sin is big, God's grace is bigger. This morning, we will look at the underlying principle for all God's dealings with man, grace.

Not just a New Testament Concept

There is a mistaken idea that the OT is all about Law, the NT is all about grace, but it just isn't true. There is no dividing line between Old and New on grace because **grace is an intrinsic part of God's nature.**

It is how he describes himself to Moses, Ex. 34:6, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."

In Numbers 6:24-26, Moses was told to invoke God's name in blessing this way: "The LORD bless you, and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace." Grace is an essential part of who God is.

The word "grace," Hebrew *chen*, Greek *charis*, occurs many times in the OT, often translated "favor." When "grace" is used of God, it refers to his undeserved kindness to needy men and women.

Key word: undeserved. He doesn't have to show kindness to us, he chooses to. We don't have the resources to meet God's standard, but God in his grace meets our need. In the OT as well as the New, grace is the fundamental principle of God's relationship with man.

- *Gen. 6:8, "Noah found favor, grace, in the eyes of the Lord."*
- *Psalms 84:11, "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly."*

Now, you may be saying, "What about the Law? What about the sacrifices? The whole legal system of obedience and punishment?" The OT is clear: even though God gave the Law, the law was never the thing. What God wanted was their hearts:

- *1 Sam. 15:22, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the...LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams."*
- *Psalms 51:16-17, "You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."*
- *Prov. 21:3, "To do righteousness and justice Is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice."*
- *Hosea 6:6, "I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."*

Let me show you a more concrete example. Turn to Ez. 16. This is one of Ezekiel's more graphic stories, showing God's love for Jerusalem, which is pictured as a baby girl who is unwanted, unloved, and abandoned, literally thrown out by her parents immediately after her birth. Ez. 16:4-6:

As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths. No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born. When I passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!'

God sees this powerless and pitiful baby girl, thrown outdoors to die without even being washed from her birth, and he rescues her. But he doesn't stop there. He takes this wild, unwanted, unclean girl and makes her his bride, v9-14:

Then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril, [that's a good thing] earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil; so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD.

God showers his love on her, and she is transformed. But notice v14, where does her great beauty come from? It's a reflection of God's splendor, not her own. What advantages did she bring him? What had she done to earn his favor? Absolutely nothing.

This is a perfect picture of God's grace. We are fallen in evil, covered in our own blood, powerless, rejected, thoroughly unlovely. Yet, he chooses to love us, rescue us, and transform us. Truly, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Psalm 103:10-12

The Place for Grace

If grace appears to be more front and center in the NT, it is only because the promise of the OT is fulfilled in the New. It is as if the wraps were taken off God's plan, and grace stands unveiled in all its glory. John 1:17, grace and truth made concrete in person of Jesus Christ. Paul, in Acts 20:24, summarizes the entire Christian message as "the gospel of the grace of God."

The good news is all about the unsought, unbought, saving activity of God. You have probably heard this over and over, we are "saved by grace." Lets be crystal clear about what this means.

It is grace that provides our justification. There's a churchy word for you. What does it mean? *Justification* is a legal word, describing the judicial act of God by which he pardons all the sins of those who believe in Christ, and counts them as righteous, that is to say, without sin.

An old saying, a bit oversimplified, goes "justification is God saying it is just-as-if I'd never sinned." In justification, God declares that all the claims of the law against you are satisfied. He doesn't relax or set aside the law, he says it is fulfilled in the strictest sense. But not by anything that you did.

Weeks ago, we looked at Romans 5 and saw how the whole human race was infected by Adam's sin. Turn there, to see the corresponding truth, that thru one man's perfect obedience, God justifies those who trust in Christ, v1-2:

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God."

We are justified by faith, but Paul says in v6-10 that our justification is based on God's action alone:

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath thru Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

His action, not ours. Finally, v15-21, Paul goes on to contrast the results of Adam's disobedience with Christ's obedience:

The free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace & of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Justification is not merely forgiveness of sins. It is also God placing on you a righteousness that perfectly and forever satisfies the law, the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And that means that when God looks at you, he doesn't see the vile, wretched sinner that you are. No offense. He sees his holy, beloved, well-pleasing Son, "just as if" you'd never sinned.

Something else is really clear: grace isn't something you earn. **Grace is a gift.**

Look at v15 -16, again, 4 times Paul calls grace a gift, but notice, twice he calls it "the free gift." What gift isn't free? No such thing – every gift is a free gift, otherwise it is no gift at all. Not a mistake of grammar, Paul thru the Holy Spirit is underscoring the nature of God's grace. It is a gift, but more than that it is a free gift, doubly given. Not a thing we can do to earn it, God gives it.

- *Rom. 3:23-24, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus"*
- *Eph. 2:8-9, "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

We can't earn God's grace. If we could, it wouldn't be grace, it would be wages. Packer, "Grace is free because it originates in God. It begins and ends with him. He doesn't wait for some sign from us, doesn't need our okay. **He** loves, **he** acts, **he** saves, because of who **he** is, not who we are.

What Changes when we Understand God's Grace and its Implications?

I think we understand grace better when we are talking about salvation than about daily living. All too often we revert to performance as our measuring stick for who we are in Christ, for the joy in him and the security of our salvation.

If we understand grace, we will understand it isn't about performance. You know what I mean by performance, don't you? Our actions, our behavior, our obedience.

See if this describes you: How do you feel about yourself when you skip quiet time, don't pray, pass on witnessing opportunity, fall into "big" sin, when you just don't feel spiritual? Now, how do you

feel when you have a great quiet time, share Christ with a friend, turn your back on temptation, and you have a plain sense of God's presence in your life?

On those good days, we think God is with us, and we feel accepted. On the bad days, he isn't, and we aren't. Or maybe we think it is what we don't do that makes God accept us. "I don't smoke, & I don't chew, & I don't go with girls that do." Is that the height of holiness? God will be pleased with us if we don't smoke, drink, go to movies, or listen to hard rock? Sounds a bit like the Pharisees.

Many live in absolute frustration because they rely on their ability to obey God, and they can't do it. Do you feel like you are constantly living out of a sense of debt? Do you fear that God will turn his back on you because of your sin? Do you worry that you don't measure up? Guess what? You don't.

But understanding grace means you understand it isn't about your performance, your sin, your failures that determines our acceptance before God. Performance puts the basis for our acceptance on *our* shoulders, and that minimizes both God's holiness and man's evil.

But when you understand God's grace, when you grasp its implications, you understand that it isn't about you at all, what you do or don't do. It is all about what he has done and is doing. And that means that if we understand grace, we'll ***understand there is no place for fear and guilt.***

Great old hymn I dearly love, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, with badly mistaken lyric, "O to grace how great a *debtor* daily I'm constrained to be." I have a tough time reconciling grace with debt.

Yes, God wants our obedience:

- *Colossians 1:10, "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."*
- *1 Tim. 6:17-18, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share."*
- *James 2: 18, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

But he doesn't define his relationship with us on the basis of our obedience. He defines it on the basis of his grace. Titus 2:11-12, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age."

In other words, and it's critical that you get this, everything that you do, your day-to-day life, your work, your relationship to those around you, your relationship and obedience to the Lord, is to pour out of the overflow of God's grace.

Yes, we are to walk in a manner worthy of him, we are to serve, to share the gospel, to do good works. But we don't work in order to earn God's blessing, we work as a response to God's blessing. And get this, even those works are empowered by his grace:

- *1 Cor. 15:10, "by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."*
- *Col. 1:28-29, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me."*
- *Eph 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."*

We must understand it is not our strength that empowers our labor, it is his. God's grace provides the fuel for our work, enabling our growth in obedience to him.

He is not frowning down on you, counting up your sins, big and little, shaking his head and wondering why he ever bothered with you in the first place. Paul says in Col. 2:14 that God cancelled out the debt, we are no longer debtors. He has placed the righteousness of Jesus Christ on you, and when he looks at you, he sees his Son.

You don't have to earn God's love and blessing. You already have all of it you could ever possess. Living out of a sense of debt reduces our relationship to God to the level of barter and trade.

It's like a friend inviting you over for dinner, a really great meal, all your favorites. The food is great, the fellowship is wonderful, and at the end of the evening, on your way out the door, you take out your wallet and in all seriousness, ask him how much you owe him for the evening.

We are trying to pay God back for his goodness by **our** sincerity, **our** religious performance. That's not grace, that's legalism. If we really understood that grace is a gift that originates in God and does not depend on our worthiness, it would transform our lives.

Finally, if we understand grace, we will understand the triumphant life. Turn to 2 Cor 2:14. Paul pictures our life in Christ in a wonderful way: "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place"

A "triumph" was a Roman military parade, where the victorious general is given a triumphal procession to celebrate his victory. The general leads the procession, followed by his army singing his praises, then slaves carrying incense in his honor, and finally, the defeated general and his warriors bring up the rear to be jeered and ridiculed.

When we talk about triumph, here 's what we sometimes forget. In Paul's picture, this is Jesus' parade, not ours. He is the general who has won the war. Where are we? We're the incense carrying slaves, spreading thru the world the aroma of Christ. It isn't our triumph, it's his, but we get to participate in it, by God's grace.

We are totally inadequate to avoid evil or do good, but God leads us in constant triumph, whether we realize it or not. We are not adequate, but we don't have to be. In God's grace, our adequacy is from God, unconditionally (2 Co. 3:5).

Three Warnings about Grace

Finally, have to acknowledge that grace is a risky topic. I have 3 warnings about grace for you. ***Don't sell it short***. Teaching grace often exposes the teacher to the charge of encouraging sin, of discouraging a commitment to a holy lifestyle. In fact, I have never taught on grace without someone coming to me with a serious concern that I was opening the door to immorality.

Paul dealt with this as well. After preaching grace in Romans 5, he starts c6 anticipating that very argument, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may increase? May it never be!" David Martin Lloyd-Jones, great British preacher of previous generation said this:

"The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the NT gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean...that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace." quoted in Swindoll, Grace Awakening, p. 39.

But we have to emphasize grace. But if we sell grace short, soften it, we wind up emphasizing performance, works, legalism.

Don't cheapen it. Every bit as dangerous as selling grace short is the other extreme, abusing it, using it to justify our sin. If we are Christians, could we never obey God and still be acceptable before him? Yes, but that's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." The difference between cheap grace and true grace is simple: cheap grace justifies the sin, true grace justifies the sinner. Cheap grace says sin it up and don't worry about it. True grace results in desire to obey out of love and gratitude.

Don't sell it short, don't cheapen it, and finally, ***don't miss it***. Sad to say, the story we read from Ez. 16 didn't end there. In the end, Jerusalem, that little abandoned baby that God rescued and loved, didn't want her rescuer and turned away from him to become a prostitute. She spurned God's grace.

He loves, pursues, & sacrificed infinitely for his creation, but he doesn't twist arms. You can miss his grace entirely by refusing it, by denying him. James 4:6, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

And you can miss it even as a Christian. In 2 Cor. 6:1, Paul says we can receive the grace of God in vain. How? By living by a performance-based standard that turns your relationship to Christ into a hellhole of fear and frustration.

AW Tozer said that when we realize the holiness of God, we realize that there is nothing we can do to earn his love, to please him by our actions. Rather, "we must hide our unholiness in the wounds of Christ as Moses hid himself in the cleft of the rock while the glory of God passed by. We must take refuge from God in God. Above all we must believe that God sees us perfect in his Son while He disciplines and chastens and purges us that we may be partakers of His holiness."

That is grace, God's provision for our need.

Lesson 5: What God Requires

In the last study we looked at the grace of God, his undeserved kindness to needy men and women. We said that grace is not merely a NT concept, but runs all thru Scripture, Old and New.

We said that we are saved by God's grace, that we are justified by it. That is, when we trust in Christ, God in his grace and by his action alone places the righteousness of Jesus Christ on us, and declares that we are innocent of sin.

We said that grace is the gift of God. It originates in him, not us, which means that we can't earn it, and shouldn't try. Trying to earn God's grace reduces our relationship with him to a system of performance, guilt, and ultimate frustration.

And we said that if we understood grace, we'd understand that our religious performance doesn't save us. If we understood grace, we'd understand that there is no place for fear or guilt in our relationship with the Lord, and we'd understand that all Christians participate in Christ's triumphant life.

We are not under the thumb of a holy dictator, we are under the protection of a loving Father. Everything we do is to pour out of the overflow of God's grace operating in our lives.

Many of you expressed appreciation for the encouragement. Looking at God's incredible grace is heartening. It's a comfort to be reminded that we can't earn God's love, and don't have to – he offers it freely.

But I also heard quite clearly that there were some good, practical questions unaddressed by last week's message, in fact, prompted by last week's message, so it makes sense to take our time in God's word this morning and address those questions.

Most of your questions came out of the fact that grace and discipline present a bit of a paradox. If we are saved by grace, if it isn't about our performance and we can't repay God, where does our obedience come in? But if God requires obedience, where does grace fit?

Beware the Big Lie

That is, what about all the verses that talk about duty, obedience, and debt? As we talk about the great themes of Scripture, we can't forget that a significant portion of it is devoted to God's Law, which is a reflection of his holiness, and meant to be obeyed.

We have to ***beware the big lie*** that you can be right with God without following God. Jesus said, Jn 14:15, "if you love me, you'll keep my commandments." Followers of Jesus follow. As someone has said, they aren't the "10 Suggestions"! ***God requires obedience.***

- **Leviticus 11:45**, "you shall be holy, for I am holy."

- **Deuteronomy 10:12**, “what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”
- **Matthew 6:12, 15**, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”
- **Colossians 1:10**, “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work.”
- **1 John 2:3-5**, “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him.”

There is such a thing as faith that does not save, what I might call *shallow faith*, but it isn't really faith at all, its just belief. Maybe you've been in church all your life, you've heard and believe that Jesus loves you and died for you, think “I believe it, but it doesn't have much of an impact on me one way or the other.”

Faith that saves, faith that has an eternal impact on you, is more than belief. Let me show you an example of shallow faith. Turn to John 2:23. Early in Jesus' ministry, many believed in him because of his miracles:

“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.”

John says they saw what he did and believed in him. But what did they believe? That he was a man of power, authority? Sure. That he was Messiah? Maybe, but whose Messiah? Were they trusting in the suffering servant who came to die, or the political savior who would kick out the Romans and restore Israel's glory?

When Jesus doesn't live up to their expectations, some of these same people are in the crowd outside Pilate's court shouting, “Crucify him!” They believed, but it didn't make much of an impact on them one way or the other.

That's why John says, v24, Jesus was having none of it. They may have given him some kind of intellectual nod, sign of support, but he knows their hearts, knows it is just surface level, shallow faith.

Like the parable of the sower and the seed that falls on thin, rocky soil. Belief may spring up in a burst of apparent life, but if it has no root, it has no life, and it withers away.

Shallow faith doesn't have any substance to it, and certainly doesn't have any life-changing power. Men and women of shallow faith are described in Titus 1:16, “They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.”

But there is another kind of faith, I'll call it living faith, and living faith is different. Living faith goes beyond mere belief to commitment. It goes beyond intellectual assent to devotion. It goes beyond looking good on the outside to repentance, turning away from the old life, turning to the new.

How can we tell living faith from shallow? When do we know we've got living faith? When we see a changed life. I'll say again what I said last week. We are saved by the undeserved kindness of God. We don't have the resources to save ourselves. Our best works are like filthy rags. **No one is saved by works, but no one is saved without producing works.** Living faith works.

Living Faith: James

That is the message of James. Turn to James 2:14: "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"

James asks a pretty straightforward question. Can a faith that never, ever produces what he calls "works" be a saving faith? What answer does he expect? No way. Actually, he doesn't even think such unproductive faith exists. Look carefully at v14 again.

He doesn't say "What use is it, my brethren, if someone has faith but has no works?" Instead, he is asking a hypothetical question: "What if someone says he has faith, what if someone claims to have faith, but has no works?"

James says such "faith" isn't faith at all, just a profession of faith without anything tangible to show for it. Understand, James isn't talking about working to earn salvation. He is talking about the **quality** of saving faith, and he is saying that saving faith is living and active.

What kind of works is he talking about? Just look at what James has been talking about. For example, 1:12, endurance, patiently enduring trials demonstrates living faith. Or 1:21-22, putting away filthiness, wickedness, obeying Scripture demonstrates living faith. 1:27, showing love and compassion for the needy. Or 2:1-11, not showing favoritism, all these things demonstrate living faith.

What good is a profession of faith if you don't have any of those kinds of works in your life? Where's the evidence? He gives an example in v15-16, a very practical application related to a very real problem for the early church.

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

The first century church lived in a world without safety nets. There was no welfare system, no unemployment insurance, no social security for your "golden years." When you had no food, you went hungry, unless a kind soul helped you out. Not just a problem for the early church, is it?

Picture yourself downtown, waiting to cross Market to get to your car. It's near dark, it's freezing cold, the wind is blowing, and you are anxious to get home. A young mother with a child come up to you, shivering, without proper clothes, obviously hungry, and ask you for help. What do you do?

Say you hear of a family in this church or any other, a family of your acquaintance, not strangers, who are in deep financial trouble. So deep, they can't afford food, housing, and heat. They have to choose between them. What do you do?

Here is James' question. What good does your faith do someone in dire need if all you do is tell them, "Dress warm. Eat right."? The answer of course, that your faith would do them absolutely no good, it would have no effect. It would be dead to them.

In the same way, v17, faith that does not result in works is not living faith; it is dead, ineffectual, useless. Living faith works. If you claim to have a living faith, you will have works to prove it, v18-20: "But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?"

The only way you can prove your faith, which is internal and invisible, is by your concrete and tangible action. Merely stating a belief in Christ isn't enough. After all, Satan and his demons believe too.

As evidence for the unbreakable connection between faith and works, James offers a prime example in v21-24, Abraham. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."

James says, v21, that Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac. Here's where we all start to get uncomfortable. **Who's right: James or Paul?** Didn't we say last week that we are justified by grace? Doesn't Paul say "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" in Eph. 2:8-9? What about Romans 4:2-5?:

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness."

James says Abraham was justified by works. Paul says Abraham wasn't justified by works, but by faith. Isn't this a major contradiction? Is James advocating a gospel of salvation by works

while Paul preaches a theology of salvation by grace through faith? Is Paul standing in one corner, shouting “Grace alone!” while James fumes in the other, shouts back “Faith without works is dead!”

No, a little careful reading makes clear there is no contradiction between the two. In fact, James and Paul are looking at two completely different events in Abraham’s life.

Paul is focused on an event from Gen.15:5-6: “And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

This is the beginning of Abraham’s intimate relationship with God. He was declared righteous when he was still called Abram, X years before Isaac was ever born. What did he do that God declared him righteous? Some good work? No, v6, he simply believed what God told him, and God credited his faith as righteousness. He justified him.

James, on the other hand, is looking at a completely different event in Abraham’s life, Gen. 22:1-2: “Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

Ghastly! God is going to have Abraham offer Isaac as a human sacrifice? No, God is testing Abraham’s love. Childless for decades until finally Isaac was born, did his only son mean more to Abraham than God himself?

Abraham responded in faith, and would have offered Isaac, believing, Hebrews 11 says, that God would raise him from the dead. Instead, God stops him, provides a ram for the sacrifice, and tells him in 22:12 , “now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

In other words, when James says in 2:24 that Abraham was justified by works, he is not describing the event in which Abraham was declared righteous – literally became a saved man. He is describing the event in which Abraham gave proof positive of his faith by his willingness to obey God even to the point of sacrificing his own son.

Abraham’s action was the fulfillment of God’s earlier declaration of righteousness to him. Faith and works cooperated together in Abraham. The faith motivated the work, while James says, v22, the work perfected, that is completed, the faith. But note which came first. Abraham was first declared righteous, then proved it.

Paul and James don’t disagree, they aren’t facing off, fighting one another from opposite corners. They are standing back to back, fighting different enemies. Paul is writing against justification by works, while James is writing against shallow faith. They are battling different enemies, and so emphasize different points.

Living faith obeys, but obedience itself isn't what saves. Obedience is what proves the presence of salvation, which is by grace, thru faith.

But back to the practical question. We are saved by grace, but God requires obedience. How do we do it? I can tell you one thing: we can't rely on our own strength. **Living faith does not equal self-discipline.**

To place the emphasis on self-discipline would put the cart before the horse. We don't grow in our ability to obey by drumming up the resources within ourselves, churning out time in the word, in prayer, gritting our teeth and bearing down, thinking our maturity is measured like a time clock in a manufacturing plant.

There is great value in Bible study, prayer, witnessing, even when you don't feel like it. But the mechanical action of these things is not the source of our strength and maturity. Jesus Christ thru the Holy Spirit is. We need to be disciplined, but if discipline alone is what God is looking for, he'd have given us all hair shirts.

We need the discipline that recognizes and relies upon God's grace, that draws its power from God's grace. We need to be like Paul, who said "by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." (1 Cor. 15:10). We must be disciplined, but we must work according to His power, which mightily works within us. (Col. 1:29)

It may seem paradoxical, but grace & discipline are not opposed to one another, they rely upon one another. We cannot obey without the grace of God, and God gives his grace to us for the express purpose of pleasing him. **There is a trick to it though. And I'm going to tell you what it is.**

The Secret's in the Vine – Abiding in Christ

Turn to John 15. Jesus is talking to his disciples in the upper room on the night before his crucifixion. Tells them that those who have genuine faith **abide in him**, and that abiding in him will have a certain result, v1-6:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

What's the trick? It is **abiding in Christ**. Just like you can tell a healthy rose by its bloom, so you can tell if someone has life in Christ by their fruit. By what they do. In fact, Jesus goes so far as

to say that without abiding in him, v5, we produce nothing. In other words, fruit is the natural, inevitable part of being connected to the vine.

If we were to ask Jesus, “is it possible to be saved & not bear fruit?” what would he answer? He’d say, “What kind of question is that? Of course not!” To say you can be saved & never bear fruit is like saying you can love him, yet never, ever, obey him. Ridiculous! It makes J’s words meaningless.

Abide, meno, same root as “dwelling place,” “home.” We are to be “at home” in Jesus. Home is where you are most comfortable, most yourself. In other words, Jesus says there is an intimate, comfortable, natural connection between himself and his followers.

Love of Jesus & obedience to Jesus are joined at the hip. Obedience is proof of your love, and your love is your motivation for obedience. Can’t get away from it. So, if you love Jesus, you’ll never, ever disobey him? One slip and you’re history?

No, because then there would be no need for pruning, v2. There also wouldn’t be anyone left to prune. He is talking about the established, consistent pattern of your life. The fruit of obedience comes from lives that are being transformed, not lives that are like Mary Poppins, practically perfect in every way.

It is abiding in Christ that produces the fruit of works in obedience. No obedience, have to question the connection to the vine. Has God’s grace transformed you, or are you merely attending church? If you are in Christ, you abide in him, it will have its natural result in your walk.

The test of life in Christ, of abiding in J, is fruit. Bearing fruit proves there is a connection to the vine. Conversely, never bearing any fruit proves there is no connection. Those who bear no fruit, v6, don’t abide and so are headed to destruction, judgment.

Abiding in Christ is what guards against making works the standard. Look at v4 again. What does J command, “Obey me?” No, “Abide in me.” Abiding in Christ, being in him, is the standard by which all is measured. In a word, our connection to the vine thru God’s grace. Obedience isn’t the standard, it is the sign, the proof of our connection to the vine.

If you are a Christian, you already abide in the positional sense. You are in Christ, and nothing you can do will take you out of that relationship. But what does abiding in Christ mean to us practically?

Answering this question may help you figure it out: how aware of that relationship are you? How much do you feel your need to draw your life and strength from him? How much do you trust him? Better yet, how much do you need to trust him?

I would submit that the deeper the relationship, the more conscious you are of it, the deeper your root in Christ’s vine. Like the living faith that goes beyond shallow, a believer who has sunk his roots deep in Christ’s vine, who consciously draws his nourishment from him, is going to grasp

the practical connection between grace and discipline, and is going to have a deeper awareness of God's power in his daily walk.

And that's the trick. We must be disciplined, walking in obedience. We must take every step necessary to obey God, but we must do it all in utter dependence, total awareness that we are at home only in him. Sin is not limited to physical actions or hateful emotions. Self-sufficiency, an attitude of independence, is sin.

Here's a good example of discipline that is dependent on God's strength and provision: Jonathan Edwards. Between his 19th and 20th birthdays, Edwards wrote 70 Resolutions that he pledged would govern his character and conduct. But he didn't just write them and stick them in a drawer, he read them over weekly as a kind of barometer, not of his worth before God, but of his obedience to him.

Here is what Edwards said about these resolutions: "Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him, by his grace, to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake."

Abiding, depending, is also how we guard against making works the standard. It goes back to the motivation, a la John 14:15, love first, obedience as a natural result. The love is the thing.

What about when we fail, when we stumble in sin? *Abiding in Christ is what comforts us when we fall*. Remember, he is the God of grace. All your sin is forgiven in Christ already. 1 Jn 1:9, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us and cleanse us of all our unrighteousness. God requires obedience, but his grace enables it.

Lesson 6: Three Indispensable Things, Part 1: Justice

Start by talking about something we don't usually talk about here at SMBC, religion. Karl Marx said religion was the opiate of the masses. Thomas Edison said all religion is bunk. That great philosopher and former Governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, said religion is a sham, a crutch for the weak-minded.

Would it surprise you to know that I agree? Not in the way they mean, but in the way most people define religion, it is something to be avoided.

There are two kinds of religion, the kind God hates, and the kind God likes. .

Kind of Religion God Hates. The kind of religion God hates is what most people mean when they think of "religion:"

- Works, religion that imagines we are capable of earning our way to heaven.
- Ceremony, religion that emphasizes incense, ritual, mystery.
- Tradition, religion that places value on our heritage, ancestry, ala the Pharisees, "we are Abraham's children."

- Finally, and more prevalent than most, the religion of a clear conscience, or what I call “You Light Up My Life” religion. It can’t be wrong when it feels so right.

That kind of religion may impress us, but it doesn’t impress God. In the kind of religion God hates, people reach for God thru their own means, ultimately placing themselves in control. All are examples of spiritual self-deception, based on the notion that man can reach God on his own. Simply not true.

However, there is a ***kind of religion God likes***. 700 years before J, between 735-700BC, God called a peasant farmer named Micah to speak to Israel. Micah, whose name literally means “Who is like the Lord?,” was a contemporary of Isaiah, lived during a time we could perhaps identify with.

Outwardly, things were good. The economy was in great shape, plenty of work, food. But with great prosperity came great corruption. Personally and socially, Israel was becoming a moral cesspool.

Worship was steadily being degraded. Many Jews worshipped Baal instead of Yahweh, and what’s worse, many who worshipped Yahweh hedged their bets by integrating elements of Baal-worship into their sacrifices.

That’s the society Micah speaks to. Micah speaks of both judgment & deliverance. In chapters 1-2, he speaks of God’s judgment on Israel.

In chapters 3-5, he indicts Judah’s godless rulers, but promises a ruler who will come to restore Israel.

Finally, in chapters 6-7, he brings an indictment against the people, asking in 6:3, what did I do to you that you should treat me with disdain and contempt?

In 6:6-7, Micah takes the voice of the people, who ask God, in light of God’s charges against them, how they should respond. Should they offer 1000’s on 1000’s of sacrifices? How about the ultimate sacrifice, their firstborn?

No, God answers, simply this: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

The answer to a life that is corrupt, that is unmerciful, that is prideful, is not more sacrifice, not more religious devotion. It is simply to turn around and do what is right. This is a call to repentance. Micah says, the way to fulfill God’s law is to do justice. It is to love mercy. It is to walk humbly before your God. Micah isn’t the only one.

Amos 5:21-24, *“I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your*

songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Jer.22:1-3: Thus says the LORD, “Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and there speak this word and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, who sits on David's throne, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD, Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

James 1:26-27, If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

In the kind of religion God likes, love for God results in ***tangible expressions*** of love for those in need, doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly before your God.

These are the 3 indispensable qualities of a life that pleases God. 3 things we can't live without if we want to live in right relation to God: justice, mercy, humility. We're going to take a couple of weeks to look at these from a Biblical point of view. We'll start where God starts, justice.

Justice Defined. God's command thru Micah is to “do justice,” or “justly” in the NIV, NKJ. Hebrew, *mishpat*. Sometimes translated “justice,” sometimes “judgment,” *mishpat* is often translated as the thing by which we measure justice and judgments, right and wrong. Such as regulation (Ex. 15:25), ordinance (Lev. 5:10), or standard (Lev. 24:22).

Think “justice” and you may think first of the law, of courts and lawyers and legal matters. During my IBM days I was assigned for a couple of years to work with folks from the Harvard School of Law, and they had some funny notions of justice. Basically, justice was whatever you could convince a court it was.

But that isn't biblical justice. There is more to justice than courts and lawyers. *Mishpat* is virtually synonymous with *tsedaqah*, “righteousness,” but with this distinction: *mishpat* usually refers to doing what is right in relation to others. It is giving to every one what is their due, what is fair and right.

If you want to see ***justice illustrated***, no better place than God himself, because justice is a reflection of God's character. “There is no God else beside Me; a just God and a Savior” (Is.45:21, KJV).

A.W. Tozer: *It is sometimes said, ‘Justice requires God to do this,’ referring to some act we know He will perform. This is an error of thinking as well as of speaking, for it postulates a principle of justice outside of God which compels Him to act in a certain way. Of course there is no such principle. If there were it would be superior to God, for only a superior power can compel obedience.*

The truth is that there is not and can never be anything outside of the nature of God which can move Him in the least degree. All God's reasons come from within His uncreated being. Justice, when used of God, is a name we give to the way God is, nothing more; and when God acts justly He is not doing so to conform to an independent criterion, but simply acting like Himself in a given situation..." A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pp. 93-94.

We would have no notion of what justice is without God showing us, and he shows us in a number of different ways. He shows his justice by judging evil.

- Ps 1:5, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
- Psalm 9:7-8, the LORD abides forever; He has established His throne for judgment, And He will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity.

He shows his justice by protecting the poor and the afflicted.

- Psalm 140:12, I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, And justice for the poor
- Jer. 22:3, "Thus says the LORD, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of *his* oppressor. Also do not mistreat *or* do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

He shows his justice when he shows mercy and compassion.

- Isaiah 30:18, the LORD longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. The LORD is a God of justice; How blessed are those who long for Him

He shows his justice in saving sinners.

- Ps 76:9 says, God arose to judgment, to save all the humble of the earth.
- Isaiah 33:22 For the LORD is our judge, The LORD is our lawgiver, The LORD is our king; He will save us.

I read a lot, and in my research for this topic, found something surprising: justice has been hijacked. Evangelical, Bible-believing Christians don't talk about justice. Bible encyclopedias skip from juniper trees to justification, no mention of justice. The vast majority of writing on justice comes from a liberal perspective. Activists of all stripes have turned "justice" to their private definitions of right, wrong.

- Last year, Michael Jackson and Al Sharpton held a press conference to protest Mr. Jackson's declining popularity as evidence of racism in the record industry. Mr. Sharpton concluded his remarks with the activist punch line, "No justice, no peace."
- Environmental activists seek to protect the earth against humanity, led by what used to be the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, now renamed "Earthjustice," with the slogan, no kidding, "Because the earth needs a good lawyer."

- This is from PETA, People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, “The animal rights movement is a movement for justice...Most people understand that bias on the basis of race or gender is wrong. The neglected link, for many, is species bias.” As an example of species bias, they offer this, referring to the plight of circus animals: “If elephants’ cries for justice can’t be heard in Washington, maybe the elephant should no longer be used to symbolize democracy.”

There is more to doing justice than advocating or agitating for a cause, than holding press conferences and organizing protests.

But there is more to doing justice than simply NOT doing wrong. There is more to doing justice than staying out of jail. Doing justice means actively doing what is right.

Romans 13:8-10: *"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."*

Have we loved our neighbor as ourselves? Are we treating the people around us with the justice, the righteousness, due them? Are we honest and fair with people? With a business? With the government?

Remember how God shows justice? By judging evil, protecting the poor and afflicted, showing mercy and compassion, saving sinners.

Psalm 82:1-4: *God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges (shpet, a variation of mishpat) in the midst of the rulers. How long will you judge unjustly & show partiality to the wicked? Vindicate the weak & fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.*

We do justice when we imitate God in these matters. When we stand against evil, speaking out against moral, social wrong. When we protect the poor & afflicted, weak & needy. When we show mercy, compassion to those who have offended, hurt us. When we share the gospel with the world.

Our society has a challenge with poverty. Working to relieve it is doing justice. We have a challenge defending the innocent, as abortion takes 1000's every year. Working to protect them is doing justice. We have a challenge providing for the elderly who have no one to help them. We have a challenge, globally, with famine and disease, with sharing the gospel. Working to help is doing justice.

What good thing are you doing? Opportunities abound: AAA, Bethany, Welfare Council, missions, just getting out and helping someone in need...

Further Thought. Many of us, when we hear “justice,” think “capital punishment.” What about that? What should be the Christian’s view? Some claim that when Jesus, in John 8, refused to stone the woman taken in adultery, the Law’s penalty, he set aside the death penalty for all.

That is the religious anti-death penalty argument in a nutshell. That by setting aside the woman’s sentence, Jesus abolished the death penalty for all. State violence is therefore incompatible with Christian witness, and it is destructive to the Gospel for Christians to advocate the death penalty.

But Jesus said nothing about setting aside the OT’s punishment, he just exercised his divine right to pardon one woman, as God pardoned David for his adultery without ending capital punishment. “Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17).

Two themes in anti-capital literature, 1) not a deterrent, 2) justice is a cultural, abstract concept, not an absolute. Both reflect a profound misunderstanding of justice. Capital punishment is an absolute deterrent for the individual who faces it. And that is the deterrent that counts. Whether or not it deters capital crime to society as a whole is secondary.

And to say that justice is an abstract, not an absolute, is to deny the God of justice. Justice exists only because of God, as we read earlier. Shouldn’t God’s justice be reflected in our laws? He means for justice to protect the innocent. When we refuse to carry it out, the innocent suffer.

Sad irony that strongest opponents of death penalty for murderers, rapists, are often strongest advocates of abortion. Neither God’s nature or God’s love is reflected in this. As Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-4, governments have the moral authority and obligation to carry out justice (“bear the sword,” v4 - didn’t use it to spank people). .

When There Is No Justice. What about the wrongly accused? The poorly defended? What about incompetence, corruption, and injustice in our legal system? Good questions, let’s carry it further.

What about the unexpected tragedies of life that make us all wonder about justice? The babies who die, the good who suffer, the evil who prosper? We affirm that God is good, just, yet we see events take place that seem to fly in the face of that truth.

How can a just God allow such injustices to exist? Some resolve these tensions by redefining God to accommodate their experience, deny God’s existence, saying there is no such thing as good or evil.

Or, some say God exists and he is good, but he isn’t all powerful, doesn’t know the future. Psalm 73:11, “They say, “How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?” but injustice on earth doesn’t mean there is no justice in heaven.

God is not a vending machine, who responds automatically and predictably every time we drop a coin in the slot. We kid ourselves if we think we can predict his every action. In any case, if we deny God’s goodness or His justice we deny His nature as He has revealed Himself.

Instead of redefining God to align with our experience, we need to redefine our experience to accommodate God. To do that takes a cross centered theology.

A cross-centered theology recognizes that suffering exists because we live in a fallen world, and that while God has taken steps to make that right, this can still be a hard place to live.

A cross-centered theology does not treat evil lightly, explaining away tragedy and injustice as ultimately good things. A cross-centered theology does not make peace with sin and death. J certainly didn't, John 11 and Lazarus. If we make peace with death here, what is the point of there being no more of it in eternity? If there will be no more tears there, then there must be tears here.

A cross-centered theology focuses on the firm hope of a day when there will be no mourning, tears, or pain. A cross-centered theology will not claim to know more than we really know.

And maybe this is the main thing we can say after all the clichés have been stripped away. Maybe all we can really say is that we know that God exists, and that He is good, just, and sovereign. We know he loved us enough to suffer injustice for us. We know He oversees all things by His providence and that His purposes are always for our best. But we can't pretend to know those purposes, and we should not offer explanations where God remains silent.

A cross-centered theology recognizes that the just God may always be found precisely where He was on Good Friday: identifying with us in our suffering, acting to resolve that suffering in ways we can't even imagine, and yet sovereign in the heavens, accomplishing his eternal purposes.

Ritual alone does not please God. What rituals do we do? How can we put Micah into our context? We may not offer sacrifice anymore, but we do sit in church Sunday mornings. We don't present burnt offerings, but we do give money. We sing praise, we bring our requests, listen to his word.

These things are important. More than important, they are essential to obeying God and to our spiritual growth, Heb. 10:25. Lack of fellowship, worship, accountability, can result in spiritual stagnation. I am convinced from Scripture we must be faithful about these things.

But...God only accepts our religious offerings when they are accompanied by things more essential. If you are not doing what the Lord requires of you, if you are not doing justice, then all the church services you attend, all the sermons you hear, all the prayers you offer, may benefit you nothing!

May we be a people known for doing justice!

Lesson 7: Three Indispensable Things, Part 2: Mercy

Consider Matthew 18:21-35: *Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"*

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

Or Luke 10:25-37:

And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"

And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.'

Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Both parables share a common theme, though they come at it from opposite ends. Mercy.

Several weeks ago, in our series on the great themes of Scripture, we looked at Micah 6:8, Micah's call to repentance for the nation of Israel. Israel had gone bad from the top to bottom, from the rulers who he pictures lying awake at night, figuring out ways to defraud the people to the people themselves, who reject and disdain God. From the lowest slums to the king's palace, rotten.

So Micah calls them to repent, not by religious works or ceremony, but by a sincere love for God that results in a life characterized by three indispensable things: "He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?"

These are the 3 indispensable qualities of a life that pleases God. 3 things we can't live without if we want to live in right relation to God. Saw justice last time. This week we'll look at what it means to love mercy, which I think is a preferable translation to the NAS' "kindness."

The Easy Part: Understanding Mercy

Father of Mercies. Mercy flows thru Scripture like a river that runs from the Garden of Eden thru the Garden of Gethsemane to the New Jerusalem. The Bible is the story of God's mercy from the beginning of creation to the end of days, because mercy is an essential quality of God.

In the Old Testament, Lev 16 describes the Ark of the Covenant behind the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, especially the lid that covered the ark. Remember what it's called? The Mercy Seat.

God says, v2, High Priest is not to enter the holy of holies, "before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat." It was the place of God's presence on earth. Only on the yearly Day of Atonement could he come before the mercy seat.

v14-15 describes how on that one day the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, taking the blood of a bull and then a goat and sprinkling it on the mercy seat. It was not only the place of God's presence, it was the place where sin's price was paid. Where God's mercy was made visible.

In the New Testament, the Mercy Seat has been transformed. Jesus' once for all sacrifice has replaced the mercy seat with a merciful and faithful High Priest who sits at what the author of Hebrews calls the Throne of Grace, Heb 4:16.

God is all about mercy. He is "the Father of mercies" in 2 Cor.1:3, "rich in mercy" in Eph.2:4, and "full of compassion and merciful" in James 5:11.

- Micah 7:18, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy."

- Psalm 86:15, “But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.”
- Psalm 145:8-9, “The LORD is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The LORD is good to all, And His mercies are over all His works.”

Mercy is the umbrella under which he works, his general attitude toward man.

Mercy’s Vocabulary. The word NAS translates “kindness” in Micah 6:8 is *chesed*, and is one of 2 major word groups that form the vocabulary of mercy in the Scriptures.

The other group include the Hebrew *racham* & Greek *splanchnon*, lit., bowels. Usually translated compassion, feeling of pity deep down inside you. KJV often talks about “bowels of compassion,” that’s *racham/splanchnon*.

Chesed and its Greek equivalent, *eleos*, are among the most important words in Scripture. NAS often translates it “kindness,” as in Micah, or “loving-kindness,” as in Psalm 136. KJV, NIV use mercy. Usually find NAS is superior, but here have to go with KJV’s mercy.

The reason I prefer it is this. There are 3 basic meanings of *chesed*, “strength,” “steadfastness,” and “love.” Each of these meanings interacts with the others, so that any translation of *chesed* that doesn’t take each into account is incomplete.

“Love” by itself leaves out the covenant understanding of steadfastness. “Steadfastness” alone suggests only the fulfillment of an obligation. “Strength” by itself sounds like mere force. It takes all 3 meanings to accurately translate *chesed*. *Chesed* implies both care and commitment.

When *chesed* is used of man in relation to man, I don’t think kindness gets it done. Too easily confused with nice, warm-hearted. Doesn’t convey enough meaning.

Mercy is a rich, multi-faceted word that centers on the ideas of compassion, pity, kindness, and grace. It is **kindness in action**, that reacts when it sees need and forgives when wronged. Here’s my definition: **mercy is undeserved compassion that acts to relieve suffering and forgive wrong.**

Key words: 1) Undeserved. If it was deserved, it wouldn’t be mercy. 2) Acts. Mercy is more than emotion. Mercy always translates emotion to action. Pity that doesn’t act is just wasted emotion.

Consider how often people cried out to Jesus to show them mercy, and how he responded.

- Blind men at least 2 occasions, Mt 9:27, 20:30-31. “Have mercy on us, Son of David”
- The Canaanite mother for her demon-possessed daughter, Mt 15:22, “Have mercy on me”
- The father for his epileptic son, Mt 17:15, “have mercy on my son”
- The 10 lepers, Luke 17:13, “have mercy on us”

They aren’t asking for emotion, for empathy. They didn’t want Jesus to merely feel bad for them, they wanted action, and they got it!

How does mercy relate to grace? Mercy is clearly related to grace, but isn't exactly the same thing. I've said in the past that the difference between grace and mercy is that grace is being given what you don't deserve, and mercy is ***not*** being given what you deserve. True to a point, but probably doesn't go far enough.

The central point of grace is an undeserved gift, whatever that may be. In mercy, the central point is the forgiveness of a debt or the relief of misery. RC Trench, "Grace is God's free gift extended to men as they are guilty, mercy is God's love extended to men as they are miserable."

The Hard Part: Being Merciful

Because our God is merciful, he requires us to be merciful, too.

- Mercy is the weightier part of the Law, Mt 23:23.
- Mercy is the mark of the kingdom, Mt. 5:7, Lk 6:36.
- Mercy is a spiritual gift, Romans 12:8
- Lack of mercy is characteristic of our depraved world, Romans 1:31, and is condemned, James 2:13.

In other words, you can't separate your relationship with God from your relationship with others around you. The easy part of mercy is when you get it, right? But being merciful is a bit tougher. Yet, mercy responds to need. Mercy acts to relieve suffering. Luke 10:25-37.

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to a lawyer's question. A lawyer in NT is one who was trained in interpreting the Law and the innumerable oral and written additions that Rabbis had made to it over the centuries, asked him the kind of question that we usually associate with sincere desire to know the truth, "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Luke tells us he doesn't really care, v25, he's just trying to score points against Jesus. Not a surprise to Jesus, he turns the question back on him, v26. "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" Now the surprising part is, the lawyer gets it right, v27. He quotes from Dt and Lev, "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

He may make a living out of the nit-picky details of ceremony and ritual, but he sees the big picture. He knows what the point of the Law is: love of God and love of neighbor. Even Jesus is impressed, acknowledges that he knows his stuff, v28.

He knows his Bible, but his problem is, it's all in his head, not in his heart, v29. "Wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" See, that's the lawyer's real question. The first was a setup. He doesn't care about the truth he just recited, he's looking for the loophole, the escape clause that will make loving his neighbor something easy to do, something he can manage. He probably has his own definition of a neighbor, a very narrow definition.

So, Jesus tells the story we call the Good Samaritan, which does anything but narrow the definition. The key to the story is not the hapless victim, robbed on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. His role is just to lie there & bleed. The key to the story is how the people around him react to him.

The robbers saw the man as a victim to exploit. The Priest and the Levite both saw him as a nuisance to avoid, an interruption to their busy schedules and a threat to their ceremonial cleanness. The Innkeeper saw him as a customer, part of his job. Lawyer questioning Jesus saw a theoretical problem to explore, only the Samaritan saw a man in need, a neighbor to help.

Seeing the man, v33, the Samaritan's compassion, *splagchnizomai*, kicks in. He obviously had someplace he had to get to, but deep down in him, he couldn't pass by this wounded, bleeding man without giving him help. So he stops, treats his wounds with oil and wine, and bandages him up.

Where did he get the bandages from? Probably his own clothing. How about the oil and wine? His food. Whose donkey does he wind up on? So he's now walking, and takes him to the nearest inn, where he spends the night taking care of him.

The next day, he has to go, but he still isn't finished. v35, gives some money to the innkeeper to take care of him until he's able to leave, and promises to pay any additional costs. In that day, innkeepers were notorious for fraud, and he's laying himself wide open. Yet there is no hesitation here.

Jesus finishes the story with a pointed question to the smug lawyer, "Who was the neighbor?" and a firm bit of direction to stop thinking theoretically and start acting mercifully, "go and do the same."

Jesus' point is not that showing mercy saves, but that the saved show mercy. The parable starts with the premise that mercy is a mark of the kingdom, something that will characterize the redeemed. It illustrates what mercy costs, and who we are to show mercy to: anyone who needs help.

Of course, what makes the story all the more powerful is that the hero is a Samaritan. You know about the Samaritans, right? They were a mixed-race people in a world of race hatred, half-Jewish, half-Gentile. Beyond that, they weren't even orthodox. The Samaritans rejected the Old Testament except for Genesis thru Deuteronomy. Virtually denied 90% of Scripture.

To get the proper impact, don't imagine someone culturally unacceptable in the Samaritan's place, like a biker dude with hair down to here, multiple piercings tattoos, and dirty leather. It would be much closer to Jesus' point to replace him with a Mormon, or a Jehovah's Witness. And instead of the priest and Levite, plug me and Gary in there. Or you.

Simply being in the family of God doesn't guarantee you'll act like it. The Samaritan may have stood outside the faith, but he loved mercy, and one who loves mercy, who shows mercy, will very likely respond to mercy when it is shown to him.

As hard as it may be to interrupt a busy schedule and to be out of pocket to help someone else, it may be harder still for many of us to show mercy when we've been offended. Mercy and compassion are lovely ideas, until you've got something to be merciful about, then justice and anger sound pretty good. But ***mercy forgives wrong***, Matthew 18:21ff.

Jesus, in v15ff, is talking about sinning brothers. Peter, v21, asks how often we should forgive those who wrong us, may think 7 times is pretty good. J, v22, not quite, 70 times 7. Not literal, but forgive forever, with no end in sight. He illustrates unending forgiveness with this parable.

Two key things to know. First, the first slave owes the king an immense amount of money. 10K talents, v24. A talent was the largest denomination of currency they had, and it was a big one. 1 talent equaled just over 33 years wages. One! 10K talents, in our present economy, is about 10B dollars.

In other words, this is an unpayable debt. That he didn't have the means to repay in v25 is an understatement. He could never pay this back, which makes his promise in v26, empty.

Second, remember, this is a slave to a king. The king has absolute rights over the man and his family. Yet how does the king respond, v27? With compassion, *splagchnizomai*. From the gut, the heart. And moved by that compassion, he released the slave instead of selling him, and he forgave the debt. Not pocket change, even for a king, and he lets him walk.

What a huge gift! Think of the burden that is off this guy's shoulders. He must have been walking on air, heart filled with joy at his master's goodness to him, going out into the world with good will and peace and happiness.

Until he sees...that guy that owes him 100 bucks, v28. Denarius was 1 day's wage. How much did the slave owe the king? Not 10K denarii, but 10K talents. 1 talent = 12K denarii, so 10K = 120,000,000 denarii. IOW, this guy owes the slave 1 millionth of what the slave owed the king. So how does the forgiven slave respond?

Grabs him by the neck, demands repayment. Look at v29. The 2nd slave begs for patience from the 1st, using almost exactly the same words, only now the debt is small and its between equals, 2 slaves.

You know what happens, v30. The one who was quick to receive mercy will not give it, and when the king finds out, he withdraws his mercy, throws him in jail until he can pay it back. In other words, he will never leave.

Here's Jesus' point, v35. That slave's fate will be our own if we do not show mercy *from the heart*. Not outwardly, not for show, but from the depth of our being, from our true character. In other words, if we don't give mercy, we won't get mercy.

There are ***three lessons*** to these two parables. First, who is our neighbor? To whom do we show mercy? Anyone who needs mercy. Second, Mercy costs. Time, money, inconvenience, maybe

personal feelings of justice. But mercy costs. Third, Lack of mercy costs even more. James 2:13, “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.”

Does that bring home the importance of loving mercy? Do you see yourself in either of these parables? Do you lean towards the one who shows mercy, or do you struggle with forgiveness, bitterness, lack of compassion?

Les Misérables is the story of two men. Jean Valjean, a former convict who has broken parole and spends years evading Inspector Javert, who is unyielding in his pursuit, determined to return him to prison. After years of guarded living, Valjean glimpses freedom when a commoner's revolt captures Javert as a spy and plan to kill him. Valjean is asked to do it, but instead, lets him go.

But his mercy has no effect whatsoever on Javert. He continues to hunt Valjean, more determined than ever to put him back in jail. Ultimately, he corners Valjean at the banks of the Seine River. Javert pulls out his gun and orders Valjean to the edge of the river.

But Javert is tortured by the fact that Valjean freed him from the rebels. He asks, "Why didn't you kill me?" Valjean responds, "I don't have the right to kill you." "But you hate me," Javert reasons. "I don't hate you," Valjean continues, "I don't feel anything."

Javert concludes. "I'm going to spare you from a life in prison, Jean Valjean. It's a pity the rules don't allow me to be merciful." He pushes the barrel of the gun under his chin, Valjean waits for his death. Yet Javert seems unable to pull the trigger. He is clearly struggling with something.

Finally, Javert says, "I've tried to live my life without breaking a single rule," and without warning, he drops his gun, undoes the handcuffs, and shoves Valjean away in frustration. He handcuffs himself and plunges backwards into the river. Valjean stares in disbelief as Javert sinks into the waters, as the realization slowly dawns on him that at last, he is truly free.

Javert knew only the law. Mercy and grace was absolutely foreign to him, and if it was intolerable that his enemy, Valjean, should have had mercy on him, it was worse still that Javert, in the end, had mercy on Valjean. Unable to live where mercy triumphs over the law, he exacts his own punishment.

Loving Mercy

How do we love mercy? What can we do to cultivate compassion? What would God have you do to align yourself with his merciful character?

We Need a Good Memory. We need to remember that we, all of us, have received mercy. John Donne, “We are God's tenants here, and yet He, our landlord, pays us rents--not yearly, nor quarterly, but hourly; every minute He renews His mercy.” .

- We were all under a death sentence, Romans 3:23, 6:23

- We were all children of wrath, Eph 2:1-3. “dead in trespasses and sins...lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind...by nature...children of wrath.
- We all owed an unpayable debt, Eph. 2:4-5, “But God, who is rich in mercy...even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.” Titus 3:5, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy”

Along with that good memory, we need a good mirror. Paul, in 1 Cor. 6, goes thru a catalog of vice: fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, etc, and he concludes it this way: “such were some of you.” We need to take a good, hard look in the mirror. Two key attitudes will result: 1) compassion. You could easily be that one with critical needs that only mercy can meet. 2) tolerance. We need to give our fellow sinners space to be wrong and time to change. Ecc.7:21-22, “Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you--for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.”

He’s not condoning cursing, he is saying, you aren’t without sin, right? We don’t encourage sin when we are merciful to those who hurt us, we just reflect God’s character by doing what he did for us, showing mercy. Takes us back to Peter’s question, doesn’t it? How often shall I forgive?

The mercy you give will be the mercy you get. James 2:13, “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.” Mt. 7:2, "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.”

I don’t know about you, but I personally could use a large dose of mercy. Which means I better be ready to dispense large doses of mercy.

Lesson 8: Three Indispensable Things, Part 3: Humility

Thus far in our series on the great themes of Scripture we’ve seen God’s greatness, man’s evil, the Old Testament promise & New Testament provision of a Savior, and God’s grace. Then we turned to Micah 6:8, which encapsulates 3 great themes, justice, mercy, and humility. This study will focus on the last of these, humility.

Humility is an elusive quality. The instant you think you’ve got it, you’ve just lost it. Yet humility is essential, one of those indispensable qualities of a man or woman of God.

Not everyone is into humility. Aristotle did not view humility as a virtue but a vice, an overemphasis on shame. In its place he taught something he called “high-minded self-sufficiency,” where the individual is the center of his own world and every man and woman puts their own interests first. It’s a measure of Aristotle’s naiveté that he thought total self-absorption would ultimately mean a better, more civil and benevolent society.

Another philosopher with no use for humility was Nietzsche, German philosopher who coined the phrase “God is dead” and whose writings inspired Hitler’s Nazi “master race.” Nietzsche said that humility was a perverted morality, where weak people elevate their inferiority to the height

of excellence. I'm sure that when N entered eternity, he was a bit surprised and disappointed to find he wasn't the center of it.

One high minded, the other low, but both are pagan, man-centered. Both are 180 degrees off mark.

What Humility Is and Is Not

Don't confuse humility with...

1. Lack of confidence. Some don't feel adequate to do anything. See themselves as a big, fat zero. That isn't humility.
2. Discounting God-given abilities. But humility is not thinking I'm bad at something when I'm actually good at it.
3. Assuming you are always wrong or never worthy or able to lead. Where would church be w/o men, women who desire to be used by God? How could Paul say, 1 Tim. 3:1, that if any man aspires to be an elder, it is a good thing?

I like what William Temple, 17th century English statesman, had to say about humility. "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other."

Contrast humility w/opposite, pride. Pride is an unhealthy interest in self. Pride thinks of itself all the time. Pride is an inaccurate, inflated view of self, Jer. 49:16, speaking to Edom, God says their arrogance has deceived them. Pride makes us think we are more than we are.

Humility, on the other hand, is an accurate view of self that comes from recognizing that everything you have and are comes from God. Read Rom. 12:3. Spurgeon, humility makes right estimation of one's self

Hebrew, several words translated humble, all focused around idea of lowliness, including poor, meek, even afflicted. When you get to the Greek, it really becomes a fascinating word study.

Word most commonly translated humility is compound, *tapeinophrosune*, ta-pay-no-phro-soo'-nay. Comes from *tapeinos*, "lowly, abased" and *phroneo*, "think," or "judge." Literally "lowly thinking." Humble estimation of ourselves, especially in relation to others, not in value or capability, but in ***priority***.

And here is what is so fascinating, that concept of humility was basically created in the NT scriptures. It did not exist in popular Greek culture. To pagan thinkers, *tapeinophrosune*, was a negative. They translated it as petty, cowardly, or spineless.

Took Holy Spirit, Scriptures, and the church, to turn negative to positive, move from spinelessness to Christ-likeness, foundation for mutual care and service. .

Here's a definition: humility isn't thinking less ***of*** ourselves; it's thinking less ***about*** ourselves. Obsessing over your weaknesses makes you as self-absorbed as the person who obsesses about his strengths.

Jesus was humble, but he didn't pretend he wasn't the Son of God. He never claimed that his mission wasn't important; he just placed his rights & privileges below our needs. That's humility.

Why is Humility Important?

Humility is the basis of our relationship with God. Augustine said the secret to holiness can be summed up in 3 words: "Humility, humility, humility."

- 2 Ch 7:14, "if my people who are called by my name humble themselves & pray & seek my face & turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin & heal their land

Humility is the pre-requisite for God's hearing, forgiving, healing

- Pro 15:33, "The fear of the Lord is instruction for wisdom, & before honor comes humility."

The Lord honors those who are humble. What about the proud?

- Pro 16:5, "everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; assuredly, he will not be unpunished."

God honors the humble, the proud are an abomination. Humility is basis of relationship with God because it is the logical consequence of understanding your own sinfulness. You can't be pumped up about yourself when you are face down before holy God.

When Isaiah sees God, enthroned in the Temple, Is. 6:5, what was his response? "Woe is me, for I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips, and live among a people of unclean lips" That's a humble response. Remember God's response? An angel took a coal, touched his lips, cleansed him from sin.

If you understand your sinfulness, you can't help but be humble:

- James 4:6-10: *But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.*

- 1 Pt 5:5-6: *You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,*

Humble yourself before God, and he will exalt you. Exalt yourself, and he'll take you down. Humility is the basis of our relationship with God.

Humility is foundation for unity between God's people. Here are three brief passages I'd like to look at back to back to back:

- Eph. 4:1-3: *Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

Humility is at the heart of the worthy walk. What is the goal? Unity.

- Phil. 2:1-4: *Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*

Paul is talking about unity in v1-2, same mind, love, spirit, and purpose. How do we get there? Humility, v3-4.

- Col 3:12-14: *So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.*

Again, the common theme is humility, the common goal, unity. Why is the unity of believers so critical? *Because when we are one we show Christ to the world.*

In John 17, Jesus' final prayer for his disciples, Jesus prays beginning in v20 for all believers throughout all time. Listen to his prayer in v21, 23: "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me...that they may be perfected in unity, **so that the world may know** that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

See how critical humility is? It is the foundation for unity between believers, which is the proof to the world that Jesus is who he said he was. When our fellowship is characterized by love that puts one another's interests ahead of our own, the world sees Christ. When our fellowship is characterized by splits, divisions, etc., all the world sees is us. And just between you and me, that is not enough.

We can talk about how we need to be committed to discipleship, to teaching, to ministry, have great programs, but it is our lack of humility that destroys our unity and keeps the church from being effective. Splits, cliques, divisions divide the church, not only body from body, but leadership from people, person from person.

Can you imagine the impact on the world if

the church was truly committed to growing in humility? Humility is the basis of our relationship with God, it is the foundation for unity between God's people, and the third reason humility is so important, it's what God is like. God's love is what motivated him to act to save his creation. God's humility is what made him take on flesh to do it.

Humility is the essential quality of the Christ-like life. Jesus is the supreme model of humility. Mt 11:29, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Imitating Christ is a command, not an option, so we must be humble. .

And here's what it means to imitate Christ, here's what humility does:

☛ Phil. 2:5-8: *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

To be imitators of Christ, we have to be humble people, which means putting other's interests ahead of our own.

Hard to Be Humble?

Do you know the Mac Davis tune, "Hard to be Humble?" Here's the chorus:

*Oh Lord it's hard to be humble When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror Cuz I get better lookin each day*

*To know me is to love me I must be a heck of a man
Oh Lord it's hard to be humble But I'm doin' the best that I can*

Sound like someone you know? Funny thing is we always think it describes someone else, not us.

What's Your Humility Quotient?

If there was a meter with pride on one end of the scale and humility on the other, where would your needle point? Here are three tests:

1. How willing are you to **listen** to others?

Psalm 10:4, “The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”

Proverbs 13:10 Through insolence comes nothing but strife, But wisdom is with those who receive counsel.

James 1:19-21 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

Self-sufficiency kills humility. Do you have all the answers? No interest in hearing others? That’s pride.

2. How willing are you to serve others?

Mark 10:42-45, Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. “But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Philippians 2:3-5 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...

Humility shows itself in service. If you are putting other’s interests above your own, you can’t help but serve.

3. How do you react when you are mistreated or ignored?

Ephesians 4:2, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love...”

Titus 3:1-2, “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.”

“Every consideration,” vail forbearance. Do you forbear, or do you hit back?

Most of us fight a constant battle against pride, self-centeredness, self-righteousness, self-glory – all delusion. How we listen, serve, react to wrong, good indicators of our humility quotient.

Cultivating Humility. How do we cultivate humility? Improve our humility quotient? Again, here are three ways to work on humility.

1. Don’t take yourself, or your success, too seriously. See yourself truly, not high, but not nothing either, because of God’s work in you.

Deuteronomy 8:10-14, "When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God..."

Romans 12:3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

2. Do **humbling** things. Remember Jesus, on the night before the cross in the Upper Room, washing the disciple's dirty feet? That's humility! Seek to serve, not the prestige that comes from leading. Mt 23:8, "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers." The church should not be a collection of hierarchies that compete for honor.
3. Let go of **slights** and **insults**. Can't control much in life, but we can control how we treat others. Serve, honor, and forgive them when they hurt you.

Romans 12:16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. 17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

1 Peter 2:20-23, For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;

The Apostle Paul is a great example of growing in humility. He gave three self-descriptions, dated from around 59, 63, and 64 AD respectively:

- ☛ I am the least of the apostles. - 1 Corinthians 15:9
- ☛ I am the very least of all the saints. - Ephesians 3:8
- ☛ I am the foremost of sinners. - 1 Timothy 1:15

It's almost as if the older he gets, the less he thinks about himself. Is he growing smaller, or growing larger? He accomplished much, but his glory was in the cross (Gal. 6:14), not his success.

Do you want to grow in grace? Then cultivate humility. Phillip Brooks said, "The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is."

In other words, humility isn't afraid of showing the world the true picture of self, warts and all. Consider the fact that Scripture shows the "heroes" of the faith at their very worst. All the disciples are shown to be dense, selfish, and uncaring in all four Gospels. Peter looks worst in Mark, the Gospel he provided the detail for. Paul merely continues the trend.

There are two battlegrounds for the believer who seeks to be humble. Battleground 1 is the church, battleground 1A is the home. Everything I've said here goes in spades for the home.

Humility is essential to marriage. Without it, two strong egos do nothing but butt heads. Couples who are struggling with one another haven't fallen out of love, they've fallen out of repentance. Humility requires a moment by moment repentance.

Without humility, we can be difficult, disagreeable, demanding people. Anger, bitterness, resentment, and eventually hate, are born in pride, putting yourself above others.

Husbands, wives, fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, brothers, sisters, without humility, any relationship can collapse into a contest of wills.

My prayer for us all is that 1) God would free us from the need to think about ourselves, and 2) having freed us from self-absorption, would free us to serve one another in true humility.

Lesson 9: God's Spirit in You

The great failing of the church today is our confusion about the Holy Spirit. It's as if we don't see him clearly. If I take my glasses off and look around the room I can have a rough idea where things are, but that's about all. Everything's a blur.

I think the church today sees a blurred image when looking at the Spirit, at two extremes. Sometimes I'll be flipping the dial and come across what I can only describe as a crazed frenzy, purporting to be a Holy Spirit revival.

On the other hand, there's another extreme that I can illustrate in a great little encounter in Acts 19. Paul's in Ephesus, & meets some of John the Baptist's old disciples. At this point John has been dead at least 20 years, so these guys are way of date. Paul can tell something's not quite right with their testimony, so he asks, v2, "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" Look at their answer: "We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

Sometimes I wonder if we aren't just a little like them. We are so far from frenzied about the Spirit, we don't think much about him at all. We don't understand who he is, what he does for us, or how he does it. Seems like the church is caught between two unhealthy extremes, frenzied or frozen.

As we continue thru the great themes of Scripture, we'll talk about the great truth that God's Holy Spirit, promised before the Cross, has been poured out on the believer, and is our resource for spiritual life and the conduit for God's power.

Who is the Holy Spirit?

First thing to make less blurred, his identity. Who is the Holy Spirit? Consider this.

He is called God: 1 Cor. 6:11, Paul says we are "justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." In Romans 8:9, he is called the "Spirit of God." This is interesting, turn to Acts 28:25-27. Paul says "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke..." quoting Is.6:8-13. You know who's speaking in Is. 6? Yahweh on his throne. The Spirit is called God.

He has God's attributes: He is eternal. Hebrews 9:14 calls him the "eternal Spirit." He is omnipresent, Psalm 139:7-10, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

He is omniscient, 1 Cor. 2:10-11, "for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God."

He is eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, and he is omnipotent, Gabriel told Mary, Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, & the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." 12 times, Scripture says the Holy Spirit gives power.

He does what only God can do: He was present at Creation, Gen.1:2, "The earth was formless and void...and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters."

He gives life. Job 33:4, Elihu says, "The Spirit of God has made me, & the breath of the Almighty gives me life. In Romans 8:11, Paul says it was the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

He is called God, has God's attributes, does what only God can do. Any doubt as to his identity? No? Good. Not an impersonal force, not the personification of God's character, like his love or his power. The Holy Spirit is God. But wait a second.

The Spirit is God, Jesus is God. And Yahweh, the Father, is God. What did we read earlier, Dt. 6:4? "Hear O Israel, the Lord is Three?" No, the Lord is One. When we recognize that God is one, yet three, we are talking about the fact that God is triune, one in three, the Trinity.

The Third Person of the Trinity

You won't find the word "Trinity" in Scripture. While the truths that form our understanding of it are in Scripture, no single verse ties it all up into one neat little package. It took a couple hundred years wrestling with Scripture for the church to figure out God's triune nature. And that's a very interesting story.

With the completion of the New Testament and the passing of the first generation of believers, around the end of the 1st century, the church found itself in a struggle for its life. Not, as you might expect, against the persecution of the Roman Empire, but against false teachers within the church.

As the old leaders passed, heretical teachers and their followers multiplied. One group, the Arians, said that God created Jesus and the Spirit to deal with man for him. The Gnostics said God was too removed from humanity to ever come near it, let alone save it. They said Christ and the Spirit were not created by God, but were created by others who were created by him.

Then there were the Modalists. They said that Father, Son, and Spirit were just different names for the same God. Like I am son to my mother, father to my kids, husband to my wife, so Father, Son, and Spirit are just titles for the one God.

One thing all these heresies had in common, they each deny the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Scripture clearly teaches the deity of both, but the assault of false teaching gave Christians fits as they struggled over truths that hadn't been questioned a generation earlier.

It took the church's best minds decades to begin to understand how Father, Son, and Spirit can each be God, yet still say that God is One. Finally, at the Council of Nicea, 325 AD, the whole church put its formal stamp of approval on the doctrine of the Trinity, from the Latin term for 3.

Best definition, BB Warfield: "There is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence." One in substance, yet Three Persons.

False teachers are still with us. The same heresies spread under the names of Gnosticism, Arianism, & Modalism are still active. We just call them by different names. Mormonism, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Unitarianism.

Implicit in the Old Testament. But the Christian doctrine of the Trinity did not "begin" at the Council of Nicea. It is present in the Old Testament. Implicit, but its there.

It's hinted at in Genesis 1:26 & 3:22, where God refers to himself as "we" and "us." Some say that's the "royal we," where a king refers to himself in the plural. The problem is, that was a 16th century English custom, not a Hebrew one. Jewish kings didn't refer to themselves as "we."

It is hinted at when Isaiah 61:1 pictures God as Spirit, and when Psalm 2 shows God as Father to an eternal Son, v7, 12. It is hinted at in Isaiah 6:3 with its threefold declaration of God's holiness.

And so, while the Trinity is not explicit in the Old Testament, it is certainly visible. But it is left to the New Testament to take the hints and inklings of the Old and make them concrete.

Explicit in the New Testament. The New Testament pictures God's triune nature in the common truths to which the whole church adhered, like Paul's benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ & the love of God & the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Look at Matthew 28:19, the Great Commission. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..."

Notice two things: First, is "name" singular or plural? Not three names, but one. Second, see how each person is distinctively identified by the inclusion of "the," "the *name* of *the* Father and *the* Son and *the* Holy Spirit..." One name, three persons.

The trinity is also seen in the intertwined work and relationship of Father, Son, & Spirit. Look at Romans 8:9, "you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." Paul equates the Spirit of God to the Spirit of Christ. Says the same in 2 Cor.3:17, the Lord is the Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, all 3 persons are active in giving spiritual gifts: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all."

Look at Gal. 4:4-6. "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Similar truths in Titus 3:4-6. 1 Peter 1:1-2.

God the Father initiates action on our behalf, fulfills that action through his Son, and energizes the results of that action through his Spirit.

So Scripture says that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all and each God, and yet God is One. Got that? Good, because that's all I'm going to say about the Trinity. Not that there isn't more. We could study the Trinity for years. The problem is, we wouldn't come any closer to understanding it.

The Trinity is a truth beyond our tiny minds. Some say that if you can't understand it, it can't be true. But that makes man's mind the standard for determining truth. If Scripture says it, we can trust it. Comprehending it is another matter. John Wesley said, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and I'll show you a man that can comprehend God."

Isaiah 55:8-9, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts"

As simple as the Bible is in its message of man's sin and salvation in Christ, it is also incredible subtle and profound. A child can receive Christ, but the greatest mind can barely scratch the surface of what happened at the Cross. Ken Boa says "the Bible forces any reader to crash into the ceiling of his own comprehension, beyond which he cannot go until he sees the Lord face-to-face."

God has communicated to men truly but not exhaustively. Moses, Dt 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God." Paul wrote, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

It is the height of arrogance to say that because we don't understand something in Scripture it can't be true. We must trust God's Word and submit our minds to its truth. That's why it's called "faith,"

not "proof." We can test Scripture, we can make sure these things are truly taught, but we must lay hold of its truth by faith and wait on total understanding.

So, the Holy Spirit is God, the 3rd Person of the Trinity. But what does he mean to us? What is our relationship to him? Here are a couple of truths to consider.

First, the Holy Spirit is God's resource to us for our spiritual life. God calls his people to be like Him. In Eph. 4:13, Paul says the goal for the believer is to grow to maturity, "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."

2 Cor. 2:15-16 says the church is the fragrance of Christ to the world. In other words, we represent Christ, we display him, and we demonstrate his sacrificial love and care.

How many here feel like you've got a handle on measuring up to the fullness of Christ? How many here accurately represent Christ to the world? I thought as much. You aren't alone.

That's the great paradox. Called to be like him, but can't do it. Romans 7 is depressingly familiar, v20-21, 23-24, "But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good...but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"

We know what is good but can't do it because we still have this thing called "the flesh" which is sold to sin and death. So what are we to do? Has God left us with no resource for living a godly life?

Let's read ahead and see, 7:25-8:2: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Through Jesus there is no condemnation, having been set free from control of the flesh. How are we set free? By the Spirit of life, v2: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead makes us alive as he indwells us, v10-11: "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

After the despair of Romans 7, Paul tells us in Romans 8 that because of the Holy Spirit, we couldn't have it any better. He completes the work of making you like Jesus!

Which is what you'd expect given what Jesus said about him. Turn to 14:16-17. Jesus spent his last evening before the cross preparing his men, and one of the most important things he told them was that he would send them the Holy Spirit, who is another like Jesus, read.

John the Baptist baptized with water, but he said Jesus, would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Jn 1:33). In other words, where John's baptism was an outward symbol, Jesus' would bring real, inward change. Where John used plain old river water, Jesus would baptize with Living Water. Here it is..

He's called the Helper, paracletos. para, "called," kaleo, "alongside." One called alongside to help. In secular Greek a paracletos is a legal advocate who speaks in your defense, provides counsel before a court. The Holy Spirit represents us before God, he is our counselor and advocate.

Can also be translated "Comforter" in the old English sense, "one who strengthens." He comes alongside us to strengthen and encourage us.

Notice Jesus calls him *another* Helper? If the Holy Spirit isn't the first Helper, who is? Jesus. The Spirit continues Jesus' work, **coming alongside the believer to strengthen, counsel, & help.**

Jesus says something else about the Spirit in v17 that is a monumental, watershed distinction between Old Testament believers and New, he "abides with you," present tense, "and will be in you," future tense. In other words, a change is coming. The relationship of God the Spirit to believers is about to change from a temporary, external presence, to one **who indwells believers.**

Before the Cross the Spirit didn't live in God's people, he *rested on* them temporarily. In Num 11:25, God placed the Spirit "**upon** the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again."

It is often said of the Judges and the prophets that "the Spirit of God came **upon** him." There is no instance of the Spirit dwelling in an Old Testament believer. He came and went, as God desired.

But the Old Testament also made clear that something more was on the way, that there would come a day when God would pour out his Spirit on his people in a new way. Listen:

Isaiah 44:3. For I will pour out water on the thirsty land And streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring And My blessing on your descendants;

Ezekiel 36:26-27. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Joel 2:28-29. It will come about after this That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

Jesus is telling his disciples, that day is just around the corner. Instead of resting on the believer, he will live within us. And that's what happened at Pentecost, Acts 2. **The Holy Spirit is not merely an external presence, but an indwelling Person, present in all believers.**

If you've been told you have to receive the Holy Spirit separately from receiving Christ, you've been misinformed. Romans 8:9 says "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." He has taken residence within every single believer, bar none.

Jn 7:38-39, "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive..."

So the Holy Spirit is another Comforter like Jesus, and he indwells believers. We'll get to the importance of indwelling in just a second. First, another truth, turn to John 16.

Jesus continues to prepare the disciples, and tells them, v13-14 "when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you."

The Spirit doesn't call attention to himself, instead, he **glorifies Jesus**. The Spirit's focus is on Christ, whom he glorifies by *disclosing* him. *Anagello*, announcing, revealing, making him known. Not merely what Jesus said, but who he is and all that he has done and is doing.

J.I. Packer calls this the Spirit's "floodlight" ministry. You know what floodlights do to a building, they light it up, heighten its beauty. I remember seeing the White House in DC for the first time. It was a crisp, clear October evening, and it was floodlit all around, & the combination of the light on the white marble against a black sky – was extraordinary.

The other thing about floodlights – if they're well done, you'll never see the source of the light, just the object being lit. That's what the Spirit does for Jesus. He throws the light on him, showing his beauty. ***Spirit-led ministry will always be centered on Christ, not the Spirit.*** "The Spirit's message is never, 'Look at me; come to me; get to know me', but always, 'Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life.'"

We live in the fulfillment of Jer.31:33-34, "I will put My law within them & on their heart I will write it; & I will be their God, & they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor & each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them for I will forgive their iniquity, & their sin I will remember no more."

The Source of Spiritual...

He is our resource for life. What is more, the Holy Spirit is the conduit of God's wisdom & power. Just consider all that he does for us:

He is the source of spiritual insight. He is the Spirit of Truth who breathed out God's Word, 2 Pt 1:21, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." He leads & prompts us, giving us guidance as God's children. Romans 8:14, "all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God."

He is the source of spiritual Desire. He gives us the desire to please God, Gal. 5:16-17, "walk by the Spirit, & you will not carry out the desire of the flesh, for the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, & the Spirit against the flesh..."

He is the source of spiritual Power. The indwelling Spirit frees us from sin's control & transforms us, 2 Cor. 3:18, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

He enables & equips us, giving us spiritual fruit, Gal. 5:22-25, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control." He gives us power to accomplish his purposes, Acts 1:8; "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

He is the source of Fellowship with God. He is the one who works salvation. We are "born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3:5), saved "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit." (2 Thess. 2:13). He seal us & assures us of our salvation. 2 Cor. 1:22, God "put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." Rom. 8:16, "The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God."

He intercedes for us in prayer. The Spirit who knows us and the Father perfectly, prays perfectly on our behalf Rom. 8:26, "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"

He is the source of our Fellowship with Other Believers. The Spirit creates fellowship and unity among Christians as they fellowship with him. Eph. 2-18-22; "for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

And here's where the indwelling part comes in. The Spirit isn't a temporary presence that may up and leave, he's in you to stay, a divine helper who takes permanent residence within you to guide, strengthen, and encourage you.

He is a permanent, indispensable part of your life. What would the Christian life be like without the Holy Spirit? No Spirit, no spiritual insight, desire, power, or fellowship. In other words, without the Spirit, we'd live in Romans 7, all the time.

This is the ministry of the Spirit. That's why I am so disturbed when I see the frenzy that points to self and Spirit, without the deeper reality of the Spirit's ministry to us. The frenzy robs us of the Spirit's power just as surely as ignoring the Spirit does.

What difference does the Holy Spirit make in your life? I suspect some of you are saying, I have the Spirit and my life is still like Romans 7! How do I get that desire & power? How can the Spirit make my life what he wants it to be? Easy. Just give up your life. There are 4 commands that tell us our responsibility in relation to the Spirit.

Eph.5:18, be filled with the Spirit. What does that mean? Control is the primary emphasis here. Think of a ship, its sail filled by the wind. The ship moves under the control of the wind's power. The believer who is filled by the Spirit is controlled by the Spirit, and the only way to allow the Spirit to control us is to give up control ourselves.

Gal. 5:16, walk by the Spirit. Bonnie's dad has come to a place in his life where he needs a cane to get around. He walks by that cane, he depends upon it. In the same way, we are to walk by the Spirit. We are to depend on the Spirit, to need him.

Eph. 4:30, don't grieve the Spirit. How might we grieve the Spirit? Eph. 4 is focused on the unity of the body. I believe we grieve the Spirit when we act in a way that harms the unity of the church, that is, we ignore or hurt one another. When the brothers and sisters in whom the Spirit dwells are hurt, the Spirit is hurt also.

1 Thess. 5:19, don't quench the Spirit. How could we quench the Spirit? When we ignore him. When we do not listen to what the Spirit is telling us, by not spending time in God's Word or by not putting ourselves under the Word's authority.

If you let the Spirit to fill & control you, if you depend upon him, if you don't grieve him by ignoring or hurting your brothers & sisters in Christ, if you don't quench him by ignoring his truth & his leading, he'll be free to work in you as he pleases, & you'll have all the power you could imagine.

The Holy Spirit and the Non-Christian:

What about the Spirit in the non-believer's life. Does he play a role there? The Spirit produces spiritual conviction, John 16:8. "And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

"Convict," *elegcho*, more than convincing someone of truth or convicting them of wrong. It always means to show someone their sin & call them to repentance. The same word is translated in Luke 3:19, *reprimand*, Eph.5:11, 13, *expose*, 1 Tim 5:20, *rebuke*, 2 Timothy 4:2, *reprove*, Titus 1:9, *refute*.

The Holy Spirit convicts the world concerning its sin. He exposes & rebukes unbelief so that the men & women who constitute the world will recognize their need for their Savior.

He convicts the world concerning its righteousness. You know what the world's righteousness is? Works. The idea that you can either earn your way to heaven or create heaven on earth by your good works. Isaiah says all your righteousness is like filthy rags, and the Spirit rebukes it.

He convicts the world concerning its judgment, v11. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of following the wrong leader, Satan, who stands judged by the Cross, and calls us to repentance.

The Holy Spirit, who is helper, advocate & counselor to the believer, is prosecutor & judge to the world, exposing, rebuking, & reproofing its sin, its pretensions of righteousness, and its flawed judgment.

Is the Holy Spirit calling you, even now? Listen to his voice, can put down your sin, false pretensions of righteousness, flawed judgment about the Son, come to Christ, let Spirit transform you.

Lesson 10: Worship: Giving God His Due

I have a copy of a poster, titled: "Come Together and Worship!" Featuring Michael W. Smith, Third Day, with very special guest, Max Lucado! The text says this is the "worship event of the year." And at the very top, "Presented by Chevrolet."

Does corporate sponsorship mix with worship? If so, maybe we can pay off our new building a little quicker, by selling naming rights to corporate sponsors? How about "Zondervan Auditorium at SMBC?" "517 Subs Kitchen at SMBC?" Maybe Gary & I could do product endorsements, decals on shirts & coats, like golfers, NASCAR.

I said last week we don't always seem to see the Holy Spirit clearly. I think our notions of worship have taken a hit as well. For many, worship equals a concert. "Worship" is now a major category in Christian music. I enjoy and listen to a lot of it. But something is wrong when the worship leader or even the act of worship gets top billing over the object of worship.

Worship is something we need to think seriously about. Do you know how many times worship is commanded in the Scriptures? Neither do I, because there are too many to count. Worship is obviously important to God, so we better know what we're talking about.

Why are we here? To worship. We call this our "worship service." Some say worship is a feeling of love & devotion toward God. Others, that worship is all the preliminary stuff before the sermon. This morning, as we continue in our series on Great Themes of Scripture, we will talk about the importance of worship. First, let's define worship.

What is Worship?

In Scripture there are two groups of words translated "worship." First group, Hebrew "*abad*," Greek "*latreuo*," means "to serve." In the OT, it refers to the work of the priests in the Temple. As they offered sacrifices to Yahweh they were giving service to him, a formal rite of worship before God.

That's why Peter says we are called to be priests, 1 Peter 2. When we talk about the priesthood of the believer, we often mean that we don't need a mediator to stand between us and God. Jesus has given us free access. This emphasis is right, but it isn't complete. Peter doesn't have a mediator in mind. He tells us, v5, what we should be doing as priests, Offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

Like the OT priests offered sacrifices of animal flesh, grain, and drink, we too are to offer sacrifices, spiritual ones.

Second group, Hebrew "*shachah*," Gk, "*proskuneo*," translates to "bow" or "bend the knee." Means give homage, recognize worth. In worship, we give God his due. In fact, English word "worship" comes from idea of ascribing worth, which in Old English was "worth-ship," shortened to worship.

Peter has something else in mind the 2nd time he mentions the priesthood of believer, v9, As a "royal priesthood" we proclaim the excellencies of the God who saved us. his power, his greatness, his mighty acts.

So we have two basic principles. First, worship is active. To quote Robert Webber, worship is a verb, something we do. Church service is not worship itself, but we worship in it.

Second, worship is adoration. As worshipping Christians we ascribe honor and glory and blessing to God, we adore him. Basic definition, worship is *active adoration*.

Worship is not a church service. That is a setting in which worship may occur, but it isn't itself worship. Ron Allen, in his excellent book, "Rediscovering the Missing Jewel," says the essence of worship is "the celebration of God! When we worship God, we celebrate him: we extol him, we sound his praises, we boast in him."

As God's people, called to offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim his excellencies, it is critical that we know what Scripture says about worship, make sure we are doing it right. I'm going to give you three basic truths about worship.

God Seeks Worship

The first truth is this: God seeks worship. An awful lot is said about worship in the Bible, but in John 4:23 Jesus says something that is said nowhere else in Scripture.

Talking to the Samaritan woman, he tells her that the old patterns of worship established for the Tabernacle & Temple are soon to be done away with. *"an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers."*

We tend to emphasize the first half, worship in "spirit & truth." But consider the last half, that the Father *seeks worship*. We don't often think of God "seeking" anything. He's omniscient, he knows the end from the beginning. I don't know any other Scripture that talks of God seeking. But here. He seeks worship.

Think about this - the great God of the universe, almighty Creator who sustains all life & being by his power, who is utterly blessed & infinitely beyond the understanding of his creation, seeks our worship.

He seeks it because *he is worthy of it*. We began this series talking about God's greatness. Ps 93:1, "The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty;" Ps 145:5, On the glorious splendor of your majesty & on your wonderful works I will meditate

"Majesty," Latin *majestatis*, greatness. God's greatness the reason we worship: Psalm 48:1, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised." Psalm 95:3, 6, "For the LORD is a great God and a great King above all gods...Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker."

He is so far above us, so magnificent, so perfect in all his attributes, that worship is more than a privilege, it is something we must do. He seeks worship because he's worthy of it.

Second, seeks it because *he takes pleasure in it*. Haggai 1:8 gives us another truth you may not have thought much about. God takes pleasure in being worshiped. Just listen to it: Haggai 1:8 *"Go up*

to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the LORD."

God tells Judah to rebuild the Temple so God may take pleasure in it. Is God a fan of architecture? Does he like nice buildings? No, he will take pleasure in the process of building the Temple as an act of worship and in the acts of worship that will take place there. 4 dozen times in Scripture, offerings are called a "pleasing aroma" to God. He likes it when we worship him.

There should be a little exclamation point going off in your head. Why would this great, almighty God want my puny offering of worship?! Its a mystery to me, yet, when we worship him we contribute in some mysterious way to his pleasure, his blessedness.

It is right he should seek worship, take pleasure in it, for he's utterly worthy of it. And all that comes to this point, which is perhaps the most important of this entire message. If you hear nothing else this morning, hear this: worship is for him, not us.

Worship is for him, not us

How many times have you thought at end the of a church service, "What a great service! That really ministered to me" or "Hmm. No big deal, didn't like the music, sermon bored me."

Both extremes betray a misunderstanding of our role in worship. Worship isn't about us, it's about him. ***Worship is the primary duty***, single most critical obligation, of God's people.

You may be saying, "Wait a minute, worship is our primary duty? What about obedience? What about justice, mercy, and humility? Turn to Romans 12:1. Paul says offering our bodies as living sacrifices is worship. That means living our lives so that all we do brings him praise. All Christian life is worship.

When I say worship is the primary duty of God's people, I'm not saying it is more important than other commands, love one another, build one another up, go, make disciples. I mean our obedience to those commands is worship in its broadest sense. But active adoration is worship in narrower sense, active celebration of God.

Look at Luke 10:38-42. Martha is doing good things, working hard to make sure Jesus' needs are met. Yet Jesus said that Mary, sitting at His feet, had chosen the good part. What Mary was doing had eternal significance. Martha's activity, beyond that afternoon, had none. Jesus says worship is the one essential activity that must take precedence over all the rest.

We see another truth about worship in Acts 13:1-2. What were the prophets and teachers doing in Antioch? The NIV's "worshiping the Lord" isn't a good translation. *liturgeo*, like *latreuo*, another word for service. Get "liturgy" from it. KJV, NASB have it right, ministering to the Lord.

Doesn't that sound like they got things reversed? We are to minister to God?! Exactly. OT says so, over and over, that the duty of the priests was to minister to God:

- 1 Ch 15:2, God chose Levites to "minister to Him forever."

- 1 Ch 23:13 Aaron & sons set apart to minister to the Lord.
- 2 Ch 29:11 "the LORD has chosen you to stand before Him, to minister to Him"
- Ez 45:4 priests are the ministers of the sanctuary, who "minister to the LORD"

God is the audience, not us. ***In worship we minister to God.***

We offer praise, express happiness, thanks, sadness. We listen, give gifts, even eat & drink in worship. Common things, do them routinely. But in worship, these common things are offered to God, and they are sanctified, transformed into something holy, because of who it is we worship. Our worship must be centered on God. Saw earlier that Peter says we are "to declare his excellencies." He is the focal point of our worship.

Scripture puts no limits or constraints on our worship. Doesn't say anything about where, when, or how many have to be present. You can and should worship alone or with others, in your home, in the church, or outdoors.

Worship by the Book

But whether we are talking about individual worship in quiet time or corporate worship with others, one thing we must do: make sure we are worshipping biblically. Let me show you what happens when man treats what God has to say about worship lightly. Turn to Lev 10:1-2.

God had told Nadab & Abihu specific things about how they were to minister to him. Didn't listen. Think the next priests to offer sacrifice were a bit more careful? We should be careful to make sure our worship aligns with what God has told us he wants of our worship. Here are 6 principles of Biblical Worship:

Flows from your whole life. Maybe we don't offer fire any longer, but does this sound familiar? Is 1:10-14.

Worship from insincere and disobedient hearts does not please God. In fact he hates it. It wears him out! God takes no pleasure or blessing in insincere worship. Remember Micah 6:6-8?

We can come to God in worship 6 days a week & twice on Sunday, but it doesn't please him unless we are doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly. Our songs & prayer rings hollow in his ears. Our worship must flow from our whole lives, as living sacrifices.

Recognizes God as One-in-Three. Must praise him as he has revealed himself, the Triune God, Father, Son, Spirit. I said last week that the Trinity is not just interesting fact about God, it is something that is vitally important.

To worship him as the Triune God doesn't mean having equal hymns for the Father, Son & Spirit. It means to worship God with an awareness of the distinctive work of each person of the Trinity. We worship by the Spirit (Phil 3:3), who points to the Son, who in turn reveals & glorifies the Father.

It is entirely appropriate to worship the Father & the Spirit, but I believe Trinitarian worship rightly exalts the Son. Not over Father & Spirit, but as the Incarnation, the "radiance of his glory & exact representation of his nature" (Heb. 1:3), the one whom the Father himself will exalt to "the highest place" (Phil. 2:6-11), and before whom every knee will bow.

Our worship should be clearly directed to God as Father, Son and Spirit. To worship God as anything else is to worship another god altogether.

Remembers God's Mighty Acts. In worship we focus not only on who he is, but on what he has done.

Not by preaching a salvation message over & over, but all he has done, from Creation thru Fall, Flood, Covenant, Exodus, Exile, Return, Incarnation, Resurrection, to filling, indwelling of HS, soon his return.

We worship God when we remember his acts on our behalf. The Psalms say to "Make known his deeds," "Speak of all his wonders," "Remember his wonderful deeds." We should rehearse before God & the congregation his work on our behalf, underscoring twin themes of our sin, his forgiveness.

Submits to God's Authority. Biblical worship submits to his authority. How? When we listen to his word as it is read, taught, preached, and sung.

We hear God through his word, and come to know him better by it. God wants us to be doers of the word, not hearers only (James 1:22-25). To do his word we must know what it says.

When we hear, read God's word, we are encountering God himself. Not the paper & ink, but the Living Word that reveals & reflects who he is, breathed out by him for our training, reproof, correction, and teaching. It is significant that Paul's last command in his last letter, 2 Tim 4:2, is "preach the word." Biblical worship hears, and submits.

Sensitive to his Presence. Let me ask you this question: do you sense God's presence when you sing? I've been told that it isn't worship if you don't have a palpable experience of God's presence. But that is not true.

Ex. 20:24, "Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you." The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, so he is always with us. But is that something we always know experientially?

We should be aware of God's presence every time we worship, in hearts & minds. Sometimes we may have a heightened sense of his presence among us. What if you don't "feel worshipful." If nothing special happens, you don't sense his presence, does that mean it isn't worship?

This is important, because we can mistake emotion for worship. I can tell you, the times I've really sensed God's presence, had an extraordinary worship experience, felt exactly the same as when I heard the Los Angeles Philharmonic give the most incredible performance of Shostakovich's 5th Symphony I'd ever heard. Was it worship? No, it was emotion.

Emotions can play a role in worship, but it's easy to confuse an emotional response to a favorite song with something deeper. God speaks to the whole person, intellect and emotion. The two go hand in hand, emotion informs intellect, which stimulates the emotions.

We need to be sensitive to the fact of his presence at all times, come to offer him our worship, but leave the emotional response up to the Holy Spirit.

Is Edifying to Believers. While our worship is first of all to be a blessing to God, it should have the secondary effect of blessing *us* as we are built up. 1 Cor. 14:23-33 underscores this best.

There are 3 points here: 1) v23-25 says worship should be convicting to non-believers. When those who do not believe see us at worship, they should understand that "God is really among us." Not by entertaining them, but by presenting the truth in such a way that men & women are brought face to face with their need for a Savior.

Our worship should edify, build up, the congregation, v26. We should be maturing as a result of our worship. Everything we do, from songs, to announcements, to sermon, should edify.

Worship is not a spectator sport, v27-33, worship is the job of the congregation. It isn't my job, Paul's Gary's, or Jon's. We don't sit back & watch others worship, it is our privilege & responsibility.

The point is that worship is not entertainment, it requires give and take, revelation and response. We take in God's word, his work, his presence. We respond with praise, with our concerns, with our hearts.

The question we should always be asking ourselves is not "What did I get out of that service?" but "How did I do on my job of offering worship?"

Biblical worship flows from your whole life, recognizes God as One-in-Three, remembers God's mighty acts, submits to his authority, is sensitive to his presence, and edifying to believes.

How is Your Worship?

Do you sing for joy? Do you sing? Have to tell you, if you don't sing, you are withholding praise from God. He doesn't care what your voice sounds like. Singing is commanded, Ps. 95:1-7.

You can't praise God silently. Praise must be expressed out loud. "Sing for joy, shout joyfully (2x), worship, bow down."

Do you treat God's praise lightly? What if we switched the sermon to the beginning of the service, put songs and prayer at the end, only we didn't tell you. How would you feel walking in 15 minutes late? Would you feel comfortable talking to others while we preach, as so often happens as we sing?

You might say, "It's hard to get here on time, so we skip worship & come for the sermon." Are you giving God his due? Are you ministering to God or yourself? Do you understand your role in worship?

Worship is not a matter of lifting hands or keeping them down. Saying "Amen" & "Hallelujah" or being quiet. Shouting, stamping, clapping, or sitting still.

We must come with an attitude of reverence toward God, joy over his goodness. If we overemphasize reverence, wind up with cold, dead ritual. Overemphasize joy, run risk of being shallow. We need both.

Must come with attitude of expectation, approaching God's throne with boldness, with an eye to participation, by listening, singing, praying, lifting your voice, submitting to his Word.

There is no technique for ensuring we have a deep experience of God every time we worship, except to worship by the book. We must be faithful to Scripture, make sure our own hearts are right before God.

Ps 24:3-4, "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood And has not sworn deceitfully."

Matthew 5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall what? see God. If we are faithful to Scripture and our hearts are right, our worship will be authentic, will minister to & please God.

How is our worship as a community of believers? Is God pleased by it? How are you doing at your task? Have you been ministering to God? Has God been pleased with your worship this morning?

If so, then we can thank him for his grace and his goodness. If not...ask him to show you where you need to change.

Lesson 11: The Coming Kingdom, Part 1

As we bring this series to a close, we will focus on Scripture's promise of a coming kingdom. The Bible is the story of redemption, of the loving Creator who reaches down to restore his fallen creation. The Climax of the story is not merely the salvation accomplished at the Cross, but the consummation of that salvation in eternity in heaven.

I need to say something right at the outset. When you talk about end times, right away people choose up sides. We declare ourselves to be pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib, pre-mil, post-mil, or a-mil, with all kinds of variations in between.

I think there is at best minimal value in such designations. I came to Christ at the tender age of 18, in my first month at college. Within weeks, I was given "The Late, Great Planet Earth" by Hal Lindsey, a detailed rendering of the end times: the Rapture of the Church, the Anti-Christ and the Great Tribulation, the ultimate return of Jesus, his 1000-year Kingdom on earth, then the final judgments, and eternity beyond.

And I was hooked. I loved it, felt God had personally told me just what to expect, and forewarned was forearmed. I was on the lookout for the Antichrist, I eagerly followed news of the Common Market, expecting them to add a 10th country and so mark themselves as the Beast of Revelation 13.

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I even purchased one of those "Last Will and Testament" documents for the glove compartment of my car that started out "In case of Rapture..."

That was 30 years ago, and today, I still pretty much identify with much of what I learned from Lindsey. Only now, the more I read and reflect on Scripture, the less I'm sure of all of his conclusions. Have to say the same for the "Left Behind" series. I've read most of the books, and think they say more than we can know.

Scripture is clear, J is coming back. What's less clear are the details surrounding his return. This week and next, we're going to see what Scripture says about the coming Kingdom of God. I'm not going to say much about the theological cubbyholes we use to categorize our positions. For now, suffice it to say that my purpose is to understand what God tells us about the future, and why.

The first thing we know is that God has promised his people that there is more to life than what we see around us. There is more to life than the here and now, than our day to day circumstances. In fact, there is a chain of covenant promises thru the Old Testament, all pointing to something yet to come:

God promised Adam & Eve there would be enmity between man and the serpent, and that woman's seed will eventually crush Satan. He promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, a land, and that the nations of the world blessed thru him. He promised Israel, his chosen people, that they would be a testimony to the world. If they obeyed him, he would bless them. If they disobeyed, he would judge them. And finally, he promised David an everlasting kingdom and an everlasting Son to sit on his throne, Messiah.

All these promises of God are really different aspects of a single promise – redemption. God promised his creation he would reverse the Fall, lift the curse Adam and Eve brought down upon us.

All God's promises are aimed at one target, eternity. That's why the New Testament over and over again refers to "the promise," singular. Heb 4:1 speaks of "the promise" of entering His rest. In Romans 4:13-16, Paul 3 times refers to "the promise," singular. In 2 Tim 1:1, Paul calls himself an apostle "according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus." 1 John 2:25, "This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life."

All God's promises are part of the larger promise of eternal life. In the Old Testament, that is often seen in terms of a restored kingdom and a new covenant, what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God.

God Reigns

God Reigns Over the Heavens and Earth. Central to that kingdom is the simple fact that God reigns over all his creation as its King.

Psalm 103:19 "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all."

1 Chronicles 29:11 "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O LORD, and You exalt Yourself as head over all."

Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the LORD'S, & all it contains, The world, & those who dwell in it." God is ruler over the whole earth. As Creator, he has jurisdiction over the nations of the world, Psalm 22:28, "He rules over the nations."

He is the eternal king, ruling from everlasting to everlasting, (Ex. 15:18, Ps. 41:13). He reigns in power and glory, truth and righteousness. He is the just judge of the entire world, worthy of praise from his people, and fear from those who reject him.

God Reigns Over Israel. Though God rules the whole world, he has a special relationship with Israel, the people he created & chose to be his special possession.

He calls himself the "King of Israel," Is. 43:15. He manifested his presence in Tabernacle & Temple. 2 Kings 19:15 says God is "enthroned above the cherubim" of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies. He is described as ruling from Mt. Zion, Jerusalem: Psalm 48:2, Mt. Zion "city of the great King."

Earthly Kingdom Interrupted. God reigns in heaven, but in a limited sense, his rule of this world has been interrupted. God has allowed Satan a limited amount of authority over the earth. Jesus calls him "the ruler of this world," John 12:31. Paul calls him "the god of this world," 2 Cor. 4:4. That's why Jesus teaches the disciples to pray for the time his will would be done on earth in the same way its done in heaven.

Even among his chosen people, his earthly rule has been interrupted. At the end of Samuel's life, 1 Samuel 8:5-7, Israel said, "you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations... The LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.

God was their king, but they rejected him. God's righteous rule over Israel and Israel's obedience to that rule was to have been a testimony to the world. And if Israel had obeyed their king, it would have been. But God told Israel at Sinai that his blessing was contingent upon obedience. If Israel obeyed, he would bless them mightily. But if they disobeyed, he would discipline them, and if they persisted, even drive them from the promised land. (Lv. 26:15-33, Dt. 4:23-27)

And that's exactly what happened. Despite all God's blessings, his deliverance from their enemies, his provision for their sin, Israel continually disobeyed, followed other gods. Finally, after 100's of years, God took them out. Israel, the 10 tribes in the north, was taken captive by Assyria in 721 BC. Judah and Benjamin, the southern tribes around Jerusalem, were taken by Babylon, 588 BC.

Kingdom Promised. Captivity had been promised by God, and prophesied by the prophets. Prophets also looked forward to a time when God would redeem his people (Ps 130:8), save them from their enemies (Zeph 3:14-17), and restore them to the land (Micah 2:12). Then God would reign on earth, from Jerusalem, over all the nations of the world:

Isaiah 24:23, Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, For the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, And His glory will be before His elders.

Micah 2:12 "I will surely assemble all of you, Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel. I will put them together like sheep in the fold; Like a flock in the midst of its pasture They will be noisy with men.

Micah 4:7, "the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion From now on and forever."

And so the promise of God's eternal rule would be fulfilled, with God reigning on earth, from Jerusalem. Well, Israel, or at least Judah and Benjamin, were restored to the land after 70 years. But it was kind of a motley crew, certainly no hint of glory in the promised land. God reigned in heaven, not in Israel. Persia was king there, then the Greeks, then the Romans.

Bible students were scratching their heads everywhere – "God has restored us to the land, but it sure doesn't look like the promised kingdom." They began to realize there was a central part of the promised kingdom that had not yet been fulfilled, coming of Messiah, awaited since Genesis 3.

As they studied Scripture about Messiah, they could see he would be an anointed king from the house of David, who would reign eternally.

Isaiah 9:6, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

Jeremiah 23:5-6, "I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely"

Ezekiel 34:23-24, "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them... and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them"

Anticipation built after the Old Testament, especially the 400 years of prophetic silence after Malachi, and with it, the expectation of the full restoration of God's kingdom on earth.

Let's say you were a Bible teacher, time of J's birth. Here's what you would have expected. You'd have expected Messiah to come soon, kick Rome out of the promised land, restore Israel to her former glory, and reign on David's throne. When he came, he would usher in God's kingdom on earth. He would be a sign for all the nations, ruling from glory (Is 11:10). All war would be ended as world beat swords, spears into plowshares, pruning hooks (Is. 2:4). Even animal kingdom at peace, lion lie down w/lamb (Is. 11:6-9).

When Messiah came, God would make a new covenant with Israel, internal, not external, so that all know God intimately (Jer. 31:31-34). Things of this world would be forgotten (Is. 65:17), and God would create a new heaven and new earth, and all mankind would worship before him (Is. 66:23).

Old Testament believers thought all this would occur in seamless chronology. They didn't see any gap between restoration to land, Messiah's coming, and God's kingdom. Which goes to show how we can think we understand exactly how something is going to play out, and be completely, totally wrong.

They missed some important clues about Messiah, passages like Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, foretold suffering servant who would save people from their sins. They missed the fact that Messiah would come not once, but twice, and they missed the distinction between earthly kingdom and eternal state.

It's like seeing a mountain range in the distance. It looks like a single, solid wall, but as you get closer, you begin to distinguish peak from peak, and realize it isn't one mountain range, but two, one close, the other far away.

In the same way, the Old Testament doesn't distinguish between the twin mountain ranges of Christ's 1st coming and his 2nd, of God's earthly kingdom and the eternal state. We understand it in hindsight, but they couldn't see it clearly.

Well, anticipation for promised Kingdom built to fever pitch, and then...

Kingdom Come

Time Fulfilled. The Messiah came, teaching about the Kingdom, what it was like, and he said this about its timing: Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand..."

Time is fulfilled? But we don't see God ruling from Jerusalem, peace, new heavens, new earth, do we? It's a fair question, if Jesus says "time is fulfilled, kingdom at hand," then why, 2,000 years later, are we still waiting for it? There are two aspects to the answer: 1) the fulfillment of God's kingdom promises and 2) the consummation of those promises.

God's promises were all fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God invaded the world in his own person. In Luke 4:17-21, Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah that talks about the restoration of the Kingdom, sits down and tells the people, "today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming. And Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

In a real sense, the kingdom came with Jesus. We say it was inaugurated with his advent, that he fulfilled all God's promises. 2 Cor. 1:20: "for as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us."

Yet Still Future. Yet Jesus himself said there were still some future aspects of God's Kingdom promises. Believers then thought it was all going to happen at once, but we have the luxury of hindsight.

There are some things we know that they didn't know then.

1. 2 advents, not one. Messiah would return!

Acts 1:11, Angels to disciples, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

Acts 3:19-21, "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.

Hebrews 9:28, "so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him."

2. Jesus anticipated a gap in time between his sacrifice for sin and the coming of the kingdom. We call that gap the Church Age:

Matthew 16:18-19 "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Matthew 24:14 "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and ***then*** the end will come.

Great commission, Matthew 28:18-20, "w/you always, even to end of the age."

3. Jesus will return, but the time of his return is unknown. No one knows when:

Mt 24:27, 36 "For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be...But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Lk 12:40 "Be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

1 Th 5:2 "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night."

4. We don't know when he's coming, but we do know this: time of his coming is near.

Philippians 4:5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

Hebrews 10:37, "for yet in a very little while, he who is coming will come, and will not delay."

James 5:8, "be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near."

You might say, "How could his return be near if we're still waiting for it 2000 years later?"

Time is a construct of God's making. It is for his creation, not for him. Time doesn't limit him, doesn't constrain his work. Time is something he steps in and out at will, like a man crossing a stream. So to God, 2,000 years is nothing, because time is meaningless to his eternity.

Think of "near" as imminent, something that could happen at any time. This is the single best argument for the cubby hole we call the "pre-Tribulation Rapture." There is no other prophecy awaiting fulfillment, Jesus could return at any time.

And so we say that all God's promises were fulfilled in Christ, but we are still awaiting the consummation of some aspects of them.

5. Most notably, God's righteous reign on earth as king and judge:

Matthew 16:27 "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.

Matthew 25:31-32 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;

Jesus returning as Judge and King is the only thing we await. He fulfilled all God's promises, and so we await his return and the consummation of those promises in the kingdom.

Living in the Last Days

We often cite 1 Jn 3:2-3, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

What does it mean to have this hope fixed on him? Let me answer that by having you look at Jesus last sermon in the gospel of Mark, the farewell discourse. We'll just look at the last bit, Mark 13:32-37.

Jesus says no one knows the day or hour, v32. Not man, not angels, not even the Son who is returning! So why do we try to figure it out?

Instead, he says "take heed," v33, be alert, like a servant keeping watch for the owner's return, because you don't know when he's returning - that's the point, v34-35. In fact, a good, one-word summary of the farewell discourse is simply, *watch*.

To fix your hope on Jesus' return doesn't mean to be consumed by details that Jesus himself says are unknowable. "But shouldn't we discern the times? Scan the newspapers, dissect CNN, uncover the identity of the Antichrist, the abomination of desolation?"

No. First of all, time has already been discerned for us. We don't have to wonder if we are in the last days, because Scripture makes that clear. The last days started 2000 years ago.

Hebrews 1:1-2, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these *last days* has spoken to us in His Son..." Acts 2:16, "Last days;" 1 Peter 1:19-20; "last times;" 1 John 2:18-19, "last hour."

The watchman at the door keeps a lookout, but the servants have tasks to be about as well. The master doesn't want to return to a house in disrepair because everybody's on the roof scanning the horizon for his approach, right? So how does a servant keep watch? Here are 4 starters:

Be eager. Don't put your hope in getting the details right. Instead, hope in his return, look for it eagerly. Anticipate and desire the time when sin, suffering comes to end, God glorified, kingdom restored.

- 1 Cor 1:7 "awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." Also Heb 9:28
- Titus 2:13, "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus"
- 1 John 2:28, "Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming."

Expect persecution. Realize that obeying God will cost you, but keep right on doing it. 2 Tim 3:10-14.

Paul says to follow his model, to continue in the things Timothy has learned. And don't panic! Ps 34:19, "Many are afflictions of righteous, But LORD delivers him out of them all."

Get the right perspective. America is not the world, just part of it. What happens here is only part of the larger stream of God's work in the world, not the sum total.

Get the right perspective on Scripture. God gave us the Bible to know how to live, to equip us for every good work, not to tell us what will happen next. "Of that hour, no one knows..." If it's important, God makes it clear. What's fuzzy now will be clear then.

1 Peter 1:10-12 – the prophets didn't understand all they spoke and wrote. They studied, tried to figure it out. Only at appointed time was all made clear.

Get the right perspective on time. God waits because he wants all to come to repentance, 2 Pt 3:8-9, "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise...but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Serve the Lord well. Good times – bad times – end times: our response should always be the same:

1 Peter 5:8-10, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you."

As we wait, we need to remember what someone else has said: we are on the welcoming committee, not the program committee. We aren't responsible for the time of his coming, only to be ready for it.

Lesson 12: The Coming Kingdom, Part 2

Running thru Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is the great theme that God loves his creation and desires to have a relationship with man.

God's love is expressed in his covenant promises: To Adam & Eve, that woman's seed would crush Satan. To Abraham, that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars, that they would have a land, and that all the nations of the world would be blessed thru him. To David, that he would have an everlasting kingdom and an anointed King, Messiah, to sit on that throne.

All these promises point to something yet to come, and are really parts of a single promise: redemption in eternity, the time God will reverse the Fall, lift the Curse. Last week, we saw that God reigns over all creation as King, but he has allowed his reign on earth to be interrupted. God has allowed Satan a limited amount of authority. He is called "the ruler of this world," John 12:31, and "the god of this world," 2 Cor. 4:4.

Israel rejected God as their king and worshipped other gods, so God turned them out of promised land. He promised when they returned to him, he'd restore them to their earthly kingdom, reign again on earth, from Jerusalem, over all the nations of the world.

The short-term fulfillment with eternal consequences of that promise came when Jesus came. He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand..." Mk 1:15. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom, Lk 17:20-21, "kingdom of God is in your midst," referring to himself.

Yet, God's promises still await ultimate consummation, fulfillment. We just don't know when. Mk 13:32, "of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone...you do not know when the appointed time will come.

We said last week that we need to fix our hope on his return, not the time and details of his return. I believe Scripture indicates a pre-Trib Rapture and pre-Millennial return of Christ before a literal 1,000 year earthly reign. But Scripture is not conclusive on these matters, and there are biblical arguments for some, not all, other views. The point is we must not get consumed by details that Jesus himself said we could not know.

What does Scripture say is still future? What can we expect? Four points: 1) Jesus Returns, 2) Jesus Reigns on earth in the Millennial Kingdom, 3) Final Revolt, 4) Eternity.

Jesus Returns

Rapture of the Church. 1 Th 4:16-18, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord."

The Lord descends with a shout, the dead in Christ rise, then what happens? We are all caught up together in clouds, meet Jesus in air, and are with him forever.

But aren't the dead in Christ already with him? Are they in some kind of limbo until he returns? No, Scripture teaches that at death, Christians go directly to be with the Lord: Phil 1:21, "to live is Christ, to die is...gain." 2 Cor 5:6-8, "Absent from the body, present with the Lord."

But even though Christians who have died are with Jesus, they do not yet have their "resurrection bodies," the immortal, imperishable bodies of 1 Cor 15. Their spirits are in heaven, their bodies in the grave. 1 Th 4 says its at the Rapture, when "the dead in Christ rise first," that we get our new bodies.

This event, what we call the Rapture, seems to be something different from the ultimate return of Jesus at the 2nd Coming:

Rev. 19:11-16: I saw heaven opened, & behold, a white horse, & He who sat on it is called Faithful & True, & in righteousness He judges & wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, & on His head are many diadems; & He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, & His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white & clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, & He will rule them with a rod of iron; & He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe & on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

At the Rapture Jesus meets us in the air. Here, he comes to earth. At the Rapture, he takes the saints to heaven. Here, he brings saints with him, v14, and they follow him to earth. And what does he do?

He wages war, v11, his eyes flame fire, his robe is soaked in blood, and he strikes nations with his sword, rules them, and treads the press of God's wrath. He's coming to judge world, but there is no judgment at the Rapture. The Rapture is a time of blessing for the Church, this is a time of cursing for the nations. Finally, there are no signs that precede the Rapture in 1 Th 4, this coming is preceded by darkened sun, moon, falling stars, smoke, lightning.

That's why we say the Rapture, the catching away of the church, is different from the 2nd Coming. At the Rapture, Jesus catches away His own before the Tribulation, the 7-year period of God's wrath, so much death, destruction that Jesus said unless the days were shortened, Mk 13:20, no life would be left at all.

At the end of the Tribulation, Jesus returns to judge the nations, destroy Antichrist and his false prophet, and wrap up the current age, v17-21. 2nd Coming heralds beginning of Millennial Kingdom.

Jesus Reigns – Millennial Kingdom, Rev. 20:1-6

If Tribulation is hell on earth, the Millennium is Heaven on Earth, Rev 20:1-6. Millennium is Latin for "thousand." 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth that will be characterized by the binding of Satan and the rule of the saints.

Significant # of solid believers say the millennial kingdom is symbolic, not literal. They are called "Amillennialists," no millennium. They interpret these verses to say this is the kingdom. Right now, Jesus reigns on earth.

They say, "doesn't really mean 1,000, symbolizes eternity." "Doesn't really mean earthly Kingdom, but kingdom in hearts of men who are on earth." Who told them that?

I believe you must interpret Scripture literally, unless the passage demands figurative interpretation, and nothing here demands symbolism, so this is literal. First thing we see about Millennium is who isn't there:

Satan bound, 20:1-3. This is a triumphant moment in God's plan. Victory over the enemy, the Lion of Judah overcomes the roaring lion. Note, Satan is not all powerful. Has power because God allows him to. A single angel grabs him, binds him with a chain, throws him into the abyss, and shuts him in. Demons too?

If this is the kingdom, here and now, Satan must be bound, right? Does he look bound to you? Scripture says he goes about as a roaring lion; he is the god of this world who has blinded the minds of those who do not believe, he is the prince of the power of the air.

He's not bound, he's loose, and continues to oppose God and his people in every way. But he will be bound. What will that be like? Obviously, it will profoundly change this world.

No more satanic schemes, workings, temptations. The way we think, the way we live, our justice, education, and entertainment systems are all corrupted, used by Satan. But not during the Millennium. Satan is imprisoned, Jesus sets agenda for the world.

Does that mean there is no sin in the Millennium? No, don't need Satan to sin, just your own flesh. But Satan stimulates the flesh, and when his influence is gone, we won't be tempted in the same way. He is thrown into the abyss, shut up & sealed, influence on this world is ended, at least temporarily.

Saints rule, v4-6. Thrones set up – who sits on them? We do – all the saints of God. Old Testament saints, Daniel 7:18, 22, 27, "the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come... Ancient of Days came, judgment passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom... Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One."

And New Testament saints, 1 Cor 6:2-3, "do you not know the saints will judge the world? ...do you not know that we will judge angels?" 2 Tim 2:12, "If we endure we will also reign w/Him"

And Tribulation saints, v4. Those who came to Christ after the Rapture, died during Tribulation. So in the Millennium, all the saints of all time reign with Christ. For how long? 1,000 years. Here's another problem with seeing this as symbolic of the Church Age. Non-literal interpretation says "1,000" symbolizes eternity, not literally 1,000 years.

Now its true that 1,000 is used symbolically 3 times in Scripture. Ps 50:10, "cattle on 1,000 hills." Ps 90:4, 2 Peter, "1,000 years in your sight like yesterday" Ps 105:8, "remembers covenant to 1,000 generations."

Clearly used to signify long time, not literal. God owns cattle on all the hills, not just 1,000. But how many times is "1,000 years" repeated, 20:1-7? Six times, v2-7. Sounds pretty specific to me. A number intended to be purely symbolic would not be repeated 6 times.

We need to be careful about being dogmatic here. Symbolism plays a role in some of these descriptions, after all, Jesus doesn't really have a sword coming out of his mouth. But God has shown himself to be exact in predictive prophecy. Jesus fulfilled 100's of OT prophecies. I believe this must be read literally as a 1,000 year reign on earth.

And it says during this 1,000 years, the saints are going to rule the earth. World leaders, presidents, prime ministers, local leaders, governors, mayors, & judges. The people responsible for education, judicial system, legislation, entertainment, everything that happens on the earth overseen by saints, under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ himself to carry out his will everywhere.

Can you imagine what that will be like? Righteousness, peace, & justice will rule the earth, unlike anything we experience today. Truth in advertising, righteousness in education, justice in the courtroom, honesty in the media, books and even television filled with truth and goodness?

For 1,000 years we will carry out the rule of Christ in the world Satan once ruled. Things will be good – no, great! Not only will there be no satanic influence, but Christ's influence will be pervasive.

It will be a time of refreshing, restitution, and restoration. I believe it is during the Millennium that God's promises to restore Israel's kingdom will be kept.

Joel 2:24-26, "The threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with the new wine and oil. Then I will make up to you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the creeping locust, the stripping locust and the gnawing locust, my great army which I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat and be satisfied And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; Then My people will never be put to shame."

Amos 9:13-14, "Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, When the plowman will overtake the reaper And the treader of grapes him who sows seed; When the mountains will drip sweet wine And all the hills will be dissolved. Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them; They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, And make gardens and eat their fruit."

Isaiah 32:17-18, "And the work of righteousness will be peace, And the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever. Then my people will live in a peaceful habitation, And in secure dwellings and in undisturbed resting places"

The Millennium is going to be a time of plenty, prosperity, peace, and righteousness. That's why, v6, you are blessed & holy if you have a part in this resurrection. "Rest of the dead," v5, those who died w/o Christ, will have a resurrection, too. We'll see that in a few minutes.

Final Revolt

Satan loosed, v7-8. Satan is bound 1,000 years, then released. Why? Why would God release him? I believe there are 2 reasons: 1) show the true character of sin, final proof of the reality that man is a hopelessly depraved creature, the nature we inherited from Adam is thoroughly, utterly evil. 2) destroy rebellion against him once & for all.

Do you realize there will be non-Christians living in the world during the Millennium? Those still alive at the end of the Tribulation enter the Millennium in normal human bodies, and they have children and they live a long time:

Isaiah 65:20-23, No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, Or an old man who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred Will be thought accursed. They will build houses and inhabit them; They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They will not build and another inhabit, They will not plant and another eat; For as the lifetime of a tree, so will be the days of My people, And My chosen ones will wear out the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, Or bear children for calamity; For they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD, And their descendants with them.

In 1,000 years, with the conditions of the Millennium, reproduction could be exponential. There could be millions of regular people living on earth. So we will be there, all the saints, ruling with Christ in our glorified bodies. And at the same time, there will be regular people, mortals, who are born, live, have children, and perhaps die.

And if you have regular folks having regular children in the regular way, it means you are producing sinners who need to be saved. Here's the amazing thing: while many will come to faith in Christ, many will not. Many will love their sin and refuse the Lordship of the King of the earth.

Though Christ reigns, though he has absolute power over everything and everyone, though everything is exactly the way it ought to be, people will still reject Christ.

Shows that the kind of world we live in isn't the issue. God will loose Satan to show beyond the shadow of a doubt the evil of sin and the hostility of fallen man toward God. Rom 8:7, "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God."

People living in the Millennium will have ample proof that Jesus is God, that they need him as Savior, but they will reject Him, just like the Pharisees. John MacArthur has said that the issue regarding salvation is never a lack of information. Romans 1 says we have enough knowledge of God to be without excuse.

It says something about the depth of our sin that even in the most moral culture the world will ever know we will still love our sin. But that's not a surprise. Wasn't the Garden of Eden a perfect environment?

Whether Satan is present or absent, man is still depraved. The devil doesn't make you sin, he just helps you along. Take Satan out, and you've still got depravity. Put depraved man in a perfect environment, and he's still depraved.

Enemies destroyed, v9-10. So, there is a generation that rejects Christ and Satan is let out to deceive them and lead the final revolt against God. He is the father of lies, so this is no different. He deceives them into thinking they can fight against God, reveal one last time man's incredible depravity, so God can destroy it for all time.

And does he ever. Millions, v8, gather around Jerusalem, v9, but that's as far as they get. This last great revolt fizzles in a single, instantaneous divine blast. And when it does, v10, Satan is thrown into the lake of fire where Antichrist, false prophet already are. Then comes final judgment.

Great White Throne, v11-15. All the unsaved of all the ages will be resurrected, brought to the God's throne, and judged. Books are opened, their deeds, what they did with their lives.

And the Book of Life is opened, with the names of those who trusted Christ. We aren't saved by works, so no matter how good your deeds are, if your name isn't in the 2nd book, you go into the lake of fire, the 2nd, ultimate death.

Here's the ugly truth of hell: tormented day and night, forever and ever. There is no end, no relief, no annihilation. If you believe Scripture, you have to believe in a literal hell, eternal separation from God.

Finally, v14, the death of death. Death, Hades itself tossed into the Lake of Fire. "Then comes the end, when He delivers up the Kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death." 1 Cor 15:24-26.

Eternity

What will heaven be like? 1st thing that marks the eternal state is new heavens & earth, v1. After the Millennium and the final judgment, God is going to literally engulf the whole universe and turn it into the final heaven.

Isaiah 65:17, "For behold I create new heavens and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind but be glad and rejoice forever in what I create."

When we get new heaven, new earth, we won't even remember what the old was like. Hebrews 1:10-12 says the heavens will perish, will become old like a garment, be rolled up, changed like a garment. 2 Peter 3:10 says "the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."

God will recreate the universe, & when he does, "the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ: and He shall reign for ever and ever." (Rev 11:15)

Note, no more sea, v1. Hmmm. Being from Southern California, in my humanness, I admit this puzzles me. Not sure why there would be no ocean in eternity, except maybe since the oceans as we know them formed during the flood, there will be no more reminders of judgment. Also, no more need of oceans. They are the source of salt, which we need to prevent decay, corruption. No corruption in heaven.

New Jerusalem, 21:2-27. "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; identifies in v9 as bride of Lamb, the Church."

21:10-14, "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."

What is this? It's the church, the saints of God; OT saints and NT saints, symbolized here by 12 gates which are the 12 tribes of Israel & 12 foundation stones, which are the 12 apostles.

Is this literal or figurative? I confess to being unsure. It is pictured as a literal city, v15-21, measured as a vast cube made of precious metals, stones. But is it a symbol of the Church or is it a literal city, home of the church, capital city of new earth? How is city a bride? Is city the bride itself, or home of the bride?

Tend to lean toward symbol of perfection, completion, strength, wealth of Christ's Church. But I'm willing to be wrong.

Paradise Regained, 22:1-2. "Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

River of life, water of life that flows thru heaven – Holy Spirit. Living waters, Jn 7:37-38 that give life.

Recognize Tree of Life? Gen. 2:7, 3:22. Back to Garden, the Fall is no more, the Curse is reversed. God has restored what was lost at the very beginning of Creation. Massive, both sides of river.

22:3-5, "There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever."

What is heaven like? No way to describe it. How can you describe a place so beautiful it never grows familiar? Paul refused to attempt it, 2 Cor. 12. Apostles, prophets only say what is not going to be there, no sorrow, no tears, no separations, no weakness, no fear, no war, no death.

Still heaven must be something we can relate to, even in our humanity. AA Hodge, Heaven's "joys and occupations must be rational, moral, emotional, voluntary, and active. There must be the exercise of all faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all talent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts,

the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength and power native to the human soul, must all find in heaven exercise and satisfaction."

Think we can say heaven is a place of ultimate fellowship. John 14:3, "I will come again and receive you to myself." We're going to enter fellowship with God and his Son, and we'll never leave his presence. It will be an intimate, face to face fellowship.

Revelation 21:3, *Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.*

In heaven we will actually see the Lord face to face, we will know him fully, 1 Cor 13:12, and that's what we were made for. Heaven will be paradise regained, but far beyond what Adam and Eve had in the Garden. We will enjoy unending fellowship with God.

Ever wondered if you'll be bored in heaven? No way. I imagine we will have all the time in eternity to learn all that God did in human history; time to get to know everyone in heaven, and their stories; unlimited time with the ones we love; & all in the presence of the Lord himself.

And since God is infinitely perfect, we will enjoy him infinitely, forever. We will never grow bored of being with Him. We'll enjoy ultimate fellowship, and ultimate fulfillment.

In fact, for the first time we'll understand what true contentment, true enjoyment is. We'll be rid of our too easily bored, too self-consumed flesh.

Like a child graduating from pre-school, we can't imagine what lies in store and struggle to understand what eternity will be like. But if we can trust God to make our earthly lives worthwhile, we can trust him to make eternity worthwhile. In truth, in heaven, our real life begins.

Ecc 3:11, God has set eternity in our hearts. Get a bare glimpse of it from time to time, in our fallen nature can't really understand eternity. But when we get there, we'll know we are truly home at last.

In the last of C. S. Lewis' Narnia books, "The Last Battle," Aslan introduces the characters to the new Narnia, heaven. Lewis writes:

The new Narnia...was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there, you will know what I mean. It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed and then cried:

I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this...Come further up, come further in!"

He shook his mane and sprang forward into a gallop—a Unicorn's gallop which, in our world, would have carried him out of sight in a few moments. But now a most strange thing happened. Everyone else began to run, and they found, to their astonishment, that they could keep up with him.... The air flew in their faces as if they were driving fast in a car without a windscreen. ...Faster and faster they raced, but no one got hot or tired or out of breath."

The book ends, "*For [those who died] it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world & all their adventures...had only been the cover & the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*"

Every chapter better than the one before. That's what we were made for. Paul pictures it in Romans 8:23-24, "we groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved."

We long for fulfillment, we're tired of a cursed body in a cursed earth, groan to be released. In heaven, we will be.

1 John 3:2 says we'll be like him. Paul, we are going to be conformed to his image, Romans 8:29. Hebrews 12:23, made perfect. Sinful nature done away with, spirits conformed to Christ-likeness.

Heaven is the world we were made for, not this. "Our citizenship is in heaven, Phil. 3:20-21, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory."

At resurrection, our perfected spirits will be united with our glorified bodies, untouched by sin, all the power, health, vitality God originally intended. Will be more at home in these bodies than in the ones we carry around now.

"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

We've seen some wonderful things in God's word, haven't we? We've seen that God's greatness, reality of our own evil; promise & provision of a Savior; saved by grace, empowered to obey by the indwelling Holy Spirit, privilege of worship, all come to maturity, fulfillment in coming kingdom.

Revelation 22:17, "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!