

**ASKING FOR A
FRIEND...**

**DIFFICULT
QUESTIONS ABOUT
FAITH AND LIFE**



LIVING WORD
— FELLOWSHIP —

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Note: Most scripture passages are taken from the New International Version Bible. (2011). The NIV Bible. <https://www.thenivbible.com> (Original work published 1978)

INTRODUCTION

*"The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint,
and whoever has understanding is even-tempered." - Prov. 17:28*

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." - 1 Corinthians 13:1

As God's people, we need not be timid when it comes to speaking about even the most challenging topics that face humanity. At the same time, there is great wisdom in using restraint with our words, listening first, and attempting, as much as we are able, to think through issues from a variety of perspectives. We should aim to speak with gentle clarity (1 Peter 3:15) whenever possible.

At the same time, many things in this world are not abundantly clear. In those areas, we do well to embrace the mysteries of our faith. There is far more virtue in admitting and embracing the unknown than there is in faking certainty.

My goal in this sermon series is, perhaps, best expressed in the following statements.

Child of God, please know that:

- God's Word is sufficient for all of life and eternity. At the same time, God's Word doesn't answer every question in the way that we would like. That is where faith begins.
- We can talk graciously about difficult topics over which we may or may not have agreement. Disagreement over secondary issues doesn't have to divide.
- The authority of Scripture is absolutely essential.
- Difficult topics are intended by God to summon you deeper in trust and faith.

It's my prayer that the exploration of these topics and the proclamation of God's enduring Word will be a blessing to you.

Peace to you in Christ,

Scott Skones, Pastor
November 2023

Sermon 1
IS THE BIBLE TRUSTWORTHY?

Preached on September 10, 2023

2 Timothy 3:16-17

2 Peter 1:20-21

We are beginning a sermon series today that I know many of you are excited about and interested in. It's a series that we've titled "Asking For A Friend" – with a goal to provide answers to questions that you have about matters of life and faith.

I will say from the beginning that there is no way for us to address all of the questions that we received. I think that all-total we received somewhere in the neighborhood of 25 different questions, making it a difficult task to sort through them.

If your question didn't make the list that we will be addressing in this series, please know that you can always come meet with me and I'd love to discuss whatever it is that's on your mind. I'm always available to talk through difficult questions of life and faith, so don't be afraid to ask.

Another caveat that I want to share is that every one of the topics that I'm going to be addressing in this series is complex. The very reason that they are part of this series is that they are difficult questions.

There is this tendency among human beings, and Christians are no exception, that we continually want to relieve the tension and the dissonance that we experience, and so we often settle for inadequate answers to just stop thinking about it. We find the quickest path to a perceived resolution – and then we check it off our list. But so often those answers aren't really answers at all, but a choice to live in ignorance.

Let me share one controversial political example, because, why not?

Immigration Policy.

There is no shortage of immigration experts on the internet. But the problem with the immigration question is that it's much larger than just border security. Border security is one part of the issue. But the question of immigration has many other components as well. There are economic, historical, moral, humanitarian, religious, and racial questions involved in the discussion. And each of those pieces of the immigration puzzle is viewed differently depending on where you live, your vocation, your experience, and your priorities for our nation.

Many questions of faith and life for the Christian are difficult in this same way – they have fingers into many other areas, and to truly wrap our minds around them, we have to put in some work to gain some depth of understanding of related issues and contexts and interconnectedness.

And so as we approach the questions in this series, one of the aims is to be theological and academically careful and wise. Care and wisdom take work. They take some measure of commitment. If you want to understand difficult things, you must put in difficult work.

Two more brief things that I want to mention by way of introduction.

1 - Most of these questions have multiple books written specifically about them. Some even have hundreds of books written about them. We will not be able to deal with every angle of every question. It's impossible. But we will do our best to share that which is of the greatest theological, missional, and practical importance for us in each discussion.

2- It's ok for you to disagree with me. We don't have to agree on everything to be part of a church family together. I have great respect for many people with whom I disagree. So long as you can disagree respectfully, we will be just fine. These are hard questions and we can expect some level of disagreement. But I know your collective maturity level and that you are fully capable of loving people that you might disagree with.

Let's get into our topic for today. The question is this:

Is the Bible Trustworthy?

Let's not pretend like you don't know how I'm going to answer the question. If I didn't believe that the Bible is trustworthy, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing.

Believe it or not, I didn't become a pastor to get rich and famous. I have vast and varied interests. I went to college to be a teacher. In fact, I maintain my teaching license in North Dakota in case you fire me someday. When we lived in Minot I had my own technology consulting business on the side, managing tech needs for several clients. I used to work at a museum. I worked in radio. I worked in law enforcement. I've always had an interest in funeral work. And I have a dream of working in a greenhouse or nursery someday or maybe being a historical tour guide in a place like Washington DC. I have very diverse interests. But why am I a pastor?

Apart from the issue of call (both God's call and the congregation's call), it comes down to the fact that I have become convinced that the Bible is the Word of God.

And if you know me at all, you know that I've spent some time wrestling with that question. Can I trust that these words of the Bible are actually the words of God and not simply the product of a human being?

So as we explore this question let's first allow the Bible to speak for itself, and then talk about some of the most common points of confusion and argument.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Peter 1:20-21

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

The first question when considering the trustworthiness or authenticity of something is to consider what it claims about itself. So:

What does the Bible claim about itself?

For today’s purposes, we will summarize the claims made in our two passages today into three points:

First, The Bible is “God-breathed”.

This, of course, comes from 2 Timothy 3:16 – *“All scripture is God-breathed.”*

Some translations use the word “inspired” in place of “God-breathed.” The version that we read just maintained the imagery.

Scripture is not “inspired” in the sense that a bad breakup might inspire the next country song – or in the way that a trip to the mountains might inspire one toward a deeper engagement in conservation efforts. Rather, inspiration here means emanating from – That the word of God is actually breathed out by God himself.

The emphasis here is that the scriptures find their origin with God, and not mankind. These are not human stories about God. They are God’s revelation.

The church has emphasized this over the millennia by referring to the Bible as the “Holy Bible.” Set apart, unique, not just another book. Why? Because it is a revelation from God. It comes from God himself, not from mankind.

All scripture is God-breathed.

Second, The Bible was delivered through human authors as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

This flows right out of the first point – but we see this most directly in the 2 Peter passage:

2 Peter 1:20 says, *“no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*

The scriptures are God-breathed – but they were breathed into the hearts and minds of the Prophets and apostles – who put pen to paper.

This is such an important concept. God uses the individual personalities, knowledge, experience, style, and perspective of each human author to fashion his Holy Word. We see this, perhaps, most clearly in the four Gospel accounts. Each account is coming from a different angle, focused on different details and emphasizing different aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. And yet they are one cohesive unit. Why? Because, while there are many human authors, there is one true Divine Author.

This phrase “carried along” deserves a moment of our time. It comes out of the world of sailing. It’s a phrase that is used to speak of the ship, with its sails raised, being carried along its course by the wind.

God is the source, the inspiration, and the wind in the sails. The message is his. He is controlling the process. The human authors are merely vessels.

The Bible is “God-breathed”.

The Bible was delivered through human authors as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

And the final thing that I’ll point out that scripture says about itself is this:

Third, The Bible is the final authority in matters of faith and life.

We see this back in 2 Timothy 3:

“All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...”

The Bible is the basis, the textbook for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

Another way of saying that is to say that the Bible is the authority. It is the measuring stick by which we evaluate our faith and our life.

And when we consider what the Bible says about itself, we pretty quickly understand that there is no room to see the Bible as simply “The good book.” There is no space for us to think of the scriptures as merely a helpful guidebook for life.

We must either accept the Bible as God's authoritative word, to which we must submit our lives – or we must reject it as not being what it claims to be. It either is what it says it is, or it is a fraud. There is no middle ground.

Now, people have been trying to carve out some middle ground since the scriptures were written. People have been attempting to see the Bible as valuable, without seeing it as authoritative. But when pressed, they will always end up casting aside parts of the Bible that they don't like as offensive or antiquated. Like Thomas Jefferson, they will cut out the parts of the Bible that don't seem advantageous to them – or that they can't reconcile in their minds – and just focus on the things that seem to be good for today.

But, of course, the moment one begins that work, they place themselves as the true authority, assuming the place of the divine word-bearer – usurping the authority of God.

The Bible is the final authority in matters of faith and life. It will not allow us to see it in any other way.

We've established what the Bible says about itself. It asserts that it is inspired by God, brought about through human authors, carried along by the holy spirit, and that it is the authority for faith and life. Let's change our focus now:

What are the common questions regarding the trustworthiness of the Bible?

1 - How do we measure the trustworthiness of the Bible?

This is a gigantic question because our Bible has 66 books written over 1500+ years. And so for today's purposes, I want to focus our thoughts about the trustworthiness of the Bible specifically on the MOST IMPORTANT claims or aspects of our faith: The life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

That's not to say that the Old Testament isn't important. We will talk about that briefly in a while. But the Apostle Paul tells us that the main and central idea of our Christian faith is the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

So how do we measure the trustworthiness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection?

The first step that any historian would take would be to try to verify it through statements and interviews and writing of witnesses. Of those who were there. And to this point, there is very little contention or argument. Those who spent time with Jesus wrote about it. We have four Gospel accounts, along with letters written by others who claimed to be there.

But we have more than that. We have other contemporary letters and accounts written that aren't part of the scriptures. These have varying degrees of trustworthiness. But there are certainly many many statements by witnesses who claim to have seen Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Additionally, the Jewish historian Josephus, who was the son of a Jewish priest, lived around the time of Jesus and rejected Jesus as the messiah and ultimately became a Pharisee, establishes that Jesus was a real person and even records for us that Jesus performed miracles and attracted both Jews and Gentiles.

Those are powerful words coming from someone who didn't believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be, but, nonetheless, had admiration for him.

And so very few people actually deny the existence of Jesus the person. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus mentions Jesus' crucifixion, and both he and a Roman governor known as Pliny the Younger speak about what they referred to as a "superstition" among the early Christians. Incidentally, most believe that the "superstition" that they are speaking about is the closely held belief that these first-century Christians held that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

And so what we discover is that we don't only have the Biblical accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but we have extra-biblical accounts verifying the story and even recognizing that these people truly believed that Jesus rose from the dead.

Pliny observed that these Christians get up before the light and worship Jesus as if he were a god – even in the face of persecution. They stuck by their story to the death. They lived their lives as if they were really convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

And keep in mind that we aren't talking about generations and generations later. Some of these Christians lived during the New Testament era.

So there is ample historical evidence – enough that a rational thinker will agree that Jesus lived, that he was crucified, and that those who were closest to him really believed that he rose from the dead and that he was God.

There are other ways that we can measure and examine the trustworthiness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. For example, how early are the records? We have records that are incredibly close to the actual events. Most historical documents from the ancient world experience a 500+ year gap between the originals and the manuscripts and copies that still exist today.

Here's what I mean: Let's consider the works of Julius Caesar. The time frame of original writing is likely 100-44 BC. So in the century leading up to Jesus' birth. The earliest copy that historians have today is from around 900 AD. So that's about a 1,000-year gap if you're doing the math. Historians have access to about 10 ancient copies.

Consider the works of Aristotle. Aristotle lived 3 centuries before Jesus. The earliest copies of his writing that still exist today are from about AD 1000-1100. So that gives us a 1300-1400-year gap between when Aristotle wrote and the earliest copies that we have. And there are about 49 ancient copies.

So let's talk about the New Testament. The New Testament was written in the first century. We have copies dating to the Middle of the 2nd century. And so what that means is that there are manuscripts that are within 100 years of the originals. So, from an ancient history perspective, that's incredibly proximate. And, by the way, there are between 5000-6000 copies.

We have both reliable witnesses attesting to the events of the New Testament and we also have an abundance of old manuscripts that are very close to the writing of the originals.

We've focused on the central claims of the Christian faith. Historically, there is every reason to assume that the copies of the New Testament that we have are accurate to the originals written by eyewitnesses – and many of the claims have been verified even by those who thought Jesus was simply a Jewish teacher.

Let's move on to the second question:

2 - Can we trust the process by which the Bible was written and compiled?

We've spoken about this to some degree already. We have good historical reasons to assume that those human authors of the Bible were there. There's not much debate about that. But what about the process of compiling the Bible? We will talk about the Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonical books in a moment, but first, let's look at the overall compilation process, which varies from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

By the time of Jesus, the Hebrew Bible was intact and complete. And there wasn't much argument about it. Jesus and the Apostles had available to them the 39 books of the Old Testament that you have in your Bible today. The books were organized a little differently than we typically organize them today, and some of the books were combined into one, but aside from editorial differences, Jesus, Paul, and Peter read the same Old Testament as you.

This is verified by Josephus who declared that it had been settled for centuries, and that nobody had ventured to add or remove a syllable.

Then we get to the New Testament, and we have documents as early as about 170 AD. Within less than a century of the completion of the final New Testament books, we have what is essentially a complete listing of New Testament books including the Gospels, all the way through Revelation.

We have another update from the late second century written by Clement of Alexandria that isn't intended to be a complete listing but mentions many of the New Testament books and, noticeably, doesn't mention any that AREN'T in our New Testament today.

And then about 50 years later we have a story written by Origen of Alexandria in which he mentions essentially all of the New Testament books.

And by the year 367, we have records of very clear collections of the 27 New Testament books in the order in which we find them today in our Bibles.

So, starting very early we have general agreement – moving toward essentially complete agreement on the books. Even early on there was almost no dispute of the Gospels or other major works of the New Testament. Any dispute came about generally surrounding the books of 2 Peter, Jude, James, and 2&3 John.

We call this collection of books the Biblical Canon. The early church tested, evaluated, and verified the theology and the historicity of books before they would consider them part of the canon. There were many other writings, some of which I'll mention in a minute, that didn't make the cut.

But, again, we can have great confidence in the process and compilation of both the Old and New Testaments.

The next question is related to this:

3 - Why do our Catholic friends have a different Bible? Who is right?

Perhaps partly because of our location and context, in a heavily Roman Catholic part of the state, this was asked by several of you in different ways.

In short, I want to first make mention of the fact that there is no disagreement between Protestants and Catholics on the composition of the New Testament. We are in complete agreement on the New Testament.

The primary discrepancy between the Protestant and Roman Catholic Bibles comes in what we might call the “Inter-testamental” period. The window of time between the Old and New Testaments. And I should mention that it's not just the Roman Catholics – The Eastern Orthodox Church and some others also affirm some or all of these books.

The Jewish Believers in Jesus' day affirmed as scripture the same Old Testament that we have in our protestant Bible. However, they also recognized a series of other books as valuable for teaching, history, and devotion.

We often refer to this collection as the Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonical books. Deutero means “second” – so “Second Canon.”

When you go to a Roman Catholic funeral mass you might hear a reading from the Book of Wisdom. This book is dated to the century or so before Jesus' birth. Or you might be familiar with 1 & 2 Maccabees. These books tell the history of the Jewish Revolt against Greek forces that invaded Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple. The books date to approximately 150 BC.

Almost all faithful Jewish Scholars to this day see these 2nd-canon books as helpful, but not as Scripture. And that's how the early church primarily dealt with these books as well.

There was debate over the role of these books throughout the early church era. Some church fathers included them, while others denied their value.

There was, however, consensus that they were on a level of lower authority and value than the Hebrew Old Testament and the New Testament. This was even true of Saint Jerome who was responsible for translating the scriptures into Latin. He said that the Apocryphal books were valuable and helpful, but in a lower class than the rest of the books. He differentiated between "canonical" books and "ecclesiastical" books.

That changed drastically in 1545 when the Council of Trent was convened in response to the Protestant Reformation.

Much of the manipulative and errant teaching of the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, such as indulgences and purgatory, had its origins, not in the New or Old Testament, but in these Apocryphal books. And so at the Council of Trent, it was important to clarify and double down on the fact that they saw these books as authoritative and part of the Canon.

One quick example: Tobit chapter 12 says that the giving of Alms (which are gifts to the poor) has the power to save and purify from sin. Teachings, like this one, were essential to the profitability of the church.

While there has certainly been debate about the role of those extra-canonical books, both before the Roman Catholic Church existed, and after the reformation, the consensus among the faithful has been that they are helpful, and worth reading, but certainly not inspired scripture.

This was, for example, the position of the translators of the King James Bible. They also translated the Apocrypha as part of their translation work.

The firm emphasis on their Canonization by the Roman Catholic church is because so much doctrine, which is denied or not taught in the true canon, depends upon these extra books being considered authoritative. In short, they wanted to continue selling indulgences, and when people could start to read the Bible for themselves they needed these books to be on authoritative "par" with the rest of scripture to accomplish that.

I do have more resources on this I'd love to share if you have a particular interest, but I better stop there for now, because there are a couple of other important questions.

4 - Hasn't the Bible changed over time?

This is a common criticism that is found both within the church and is frequently mentioned by skeptics. I find that almost always these accusations relate to one of two things: They are either speaking of differences and updates in translation, or they are talking about the handful of what are typically referred to as "textual variants."

Let's talk briefly about translation differences first:

In order for you to read the Bible, someone had to translate it into the language that you speak and read. In other words, someone had to take the Bible from the source language – which is Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic – and then decide which words best bring both the meaning and the structure of the original text into the English language. This is no small task because we have, for example, one concept that can be expressed in several different words, and several different concepts that are expressed in one word.

For example in our text for today in 2 Timothy 3, we read that "all scripture is God-breathed and is useful...so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The word for "servant" is the word *Anthropos*.

Some other translations used the word "man". "*So that the MAN of God.*" But, when Paul writes this, he's speaking of *Antrhopos* as Human being, not so much "man" as in the male sex of the human species.

And so how do we translate that? I think I would have chosen the word "person" there. I think that conveys the original inclusive meaning without introducing a new word like servant.

However, "man" is fine too, so long as we know that we are talking about mankind and not male.

And this is a great illustration of why people will argue that the scriptures have been changed. When in fact, it's a wrestling and struggle to bring the concept most accurately and helpfully into the target language. It's not a change in the Bible, but a change in translation. Translation work is always challenging and there are always compromises, particularly when we remember that language is dynamic. New words are constantly being added, and the way that we use words is constantly drifting and being adjusted.

The other area in which you'll hear accusations of Christians changing the Bible is with what are called textual variants. Now, we don't have time, nor are most of you interested in me doing a deep dive into this. So let me give you the 10,000-foot flyover.

A textual variant is when there is a variation between original language manuscripts regarding a particular word, verse, or paragraph of scripture.

I will give you examples of two primary types of variations that we see.

The first one is a difference in the division of words or variations in punctuation. Here's an example of that:

GODISNOWHERE

What does this say?

Some of you might read this as "God is Now Here", while the pagans in the room might read this as "God is nowhere".

We run into this type of thing in the scriptures. Both in the Old Testament because Hebrew doesn't have vowels – and in Greek where manuscripts might cram words together and not follow strict punctuation and editorial practices like we might insist upon today in English.

And so there are situations where editorial decisions have to be made when a manuscript is being copied. One translator might read a word as "God is Now Here" and the next might assume that it is "God is Nowhere." That's one type of textual variant.

The second one that I'll talk about is the one that you've probably heard about or seen on the internet, and it relates to a handful of passages – most notably Mark 16 verses 9-20 and John 8:1-11 where there are sizable portions that are set aside, bracketed, or moved into the footnotes of some Bibles and Bible translations.

There are also about 16 other New Testament verses that are included in older Bible Translations such as the King James, but are either partially or completely omitted or moved to the footnotes by almost all newer translations.

And, again, the explanation is quite simple. When the King James Version was translated in 1611 they had a very limited number of manuscripts available to them. They weren't able to compare every known manuscript of a given passage, categorized by age, to determine which are more reliable and accurate.

The younger the manuscript is, the less reliable it is. Translators today can pull up manuscripts on their computers and compare side by side every fragment of every known manuscript that is related to the passage that they are analyzing. And what they find is that the older manuscripts – those closer to the originals – don't contain all or most of these variants. The assumption is that they were added in at some time later. Speaking specifically of the John 8 and Mark 16 passages, it's quite likely that they are true. They don't show up in the oldest manuscripts, and so shouldn't be viewed as original to those documents.

The scriptures weren't changed – translations were simply tested for accuracy to the oldest manuscripts – and there were a small handful of verses that were seen as in question. And so our translators mark them for us.

In reality, this should cause us to grow in our trust in the reliability of the scriptures. There is robust scholarship evaluating the scriptures to make sure that what we are reading is actually what was written by those original witnesses and, therefore, is the word of God.

The final question for us to consider today is this:

5 - Hasn't the Bible been disproved by scholars and historians?

I'm not going to give much time to this today, because we could talk in circles about some particular nuances of, for example, the creation account – or the presence of a real Adam and Eve - and how those portions of God's revelation intersect with science and history.

But I'm much more interested in talking about the big picture of the Bible. We see tremendous consistency and historical accuracy when it comes to anthropology and geography in both the Old and New Testaments. There have been books written, for example, on the overlap between Jewish history and Egyptian history. Or between Jewish History and Babylonian history.

To put it simply, when we look at a broad outline of the Biblical timeline we know that the central people of the Old and New Testaments lived in the places they claimed to live and did many of the things that they claimed to do. And there is no historical evidence to the contrary.

So, no, the Bible hasn't been disproved by science or history. And I'm very satisfied with saying that in areas where there is presumed conflict, one of two things might be true. Either our science or history may be flawed or incomplete, or our reading of certain passages of scripture might be flawed. But there is nothing about my study of history or my reading of science that would lead me to assume that the scriptures are wrong in any way.

This conversation is much like the debate of the Chicken and the Egg. Does a person believe in Jesus Christ because they have become convinced that the Bible is true and trustworthy? Or Does one become convinced that the Bible is true and trustworthy because they believe?

Think of it this way: Faith is required in order to affirm what the Bible says about itself. But faith is a product of God's word.

Apart from faith, one might find the scriptures to be captivating, historically accurate, and beneficial for society. But they will never be fully true and personal and authoritative without faith.

When I look at the historical record, the consistency, the scholarship, the staggering number of manuscripts, the critical analysis it's been given for centuries, and the way that scripture provides an explanation for so much of what I see and observe – I can't help but argue not only for its trustworthiness – but also for its authority over our lives.

Consider this warning: You lose little if you affirm the reliability and authority of the Bible in this life and are proven wrong in the next.

However, You lose everything if you deny the Bible in this life and are proven wrong in the next.

And so the reasonable mind, when considering the trustworthy nature of the Bible, will do as Jesus invited us to do: Repent and believe the Good News. The good news that Jesus didn't just live and die for no reason – but that he lived and he died and that he rose again for you.

Repent and believe the good news.

Sermon 2
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

Preached on September 24, 2023

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

1 Corinthians 15:51-55

We continue this morning in this series that we've titled "Asking for a Friend" in which we are answering difficult questions of life and faith.

Today our topic is at the very heart of the human experience. It is something that all of us have considered and wrestled with to some degree.

This is a topic which has also been of great interest in popular culture as well. And there is no shortage of theories and thoughts on the matter. In fact, in my research and preparation for today, I even took some time to read and watch some of what our world has said about life after death, including an episode of the old Cartoon Tom & Jerry in which Tom dies, rides the Heavenly Express to the Pearly gates and is denied entry unless he can get Jerry to sign a certificate of forgiveness for all of the years that Tom spent tormenting him.

I also watched part of a classic episode of the Simpsons in which Homer Simpson and Ned Flanders get hit by a car and end up in heaven together. Didn't get any real inspiration for this sermon, but I did laugh a little.

And no sermon preparation on the topic would be complete without listening to Joe Diffie's song "Prop Me Up Beside the JukeBox if I Die."

You can thank me later for getting that song stuck in your head.

Let's take just a moment to see what some in history of said about death:

Marcus Aurelius, who was Emperor of Rome during the 2nd Century AD, said: "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live."

Or the great and ever-humble Winston Churchill - "I am prepared to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter."

And then there is Will Rogers: "The only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets."

And finally, one of my favorite quotes on death and eternity for those who are in Christ. Saint Augustine said: “You will come to the fountain, with whose dew you have already been sprinkled. Instead of the ray of light which was sent through slanting and winding ways into the heart of your darkness, you will see the light itself in all its purity and brightness.”

It has been said that perhaps my most important job as a pastor is to help you prepare to die.

Death is something that, apart from Christ’s return, we will all face. You can’t deny it or run away from it. And so we need to understand what the Bible teaches about death and what follows it. What happens when we die?

We will be looking at several scripture passages today, but I want to focus our attention on Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. We find, in those two letters, perhaps the most thorough and helpful treatment of the topic in all of the scriptures. And so I would invite you to stand if you are able, as I read first from 2 Corinthians 5 – and then from 1 Corinthians 15.

2 Cor. 5:1-10

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. 2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

6 Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 For we live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

1 Cor 15:51-55

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

Using these two passages of Scripture as a framework from which to work, let's address the question that is before us today: What happens when we die? Allow me to share four clear realities from Scripture, and then address a common question.

First - At death, the soul is separated from our mortal body.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1, Paul uses the imagery of a tent to refer to our body. He says that if this body is destroyed - when this body breaks down - we have a building from God. We have an eternal house.

And then he says, "While we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened."

In Romans 7, he uses a little different language, referring to this body as a "body of death" or "body that is subject to death."

The soul is that which gives life, uniqueness, personality, and identity to the body. Jesus refers to this distinction in Matthew 10 when he encourages us not to fear those who are capable of killing the body but cannot kill the soul. And then we see this distinction quite clearly when Jesus is on the cross and he bows his head and gives up his spirit, committing it into the hands of his father.

His body remained nailed to the cross until it was taken down and buried, but his soul or spirit was separated from his body.

Most simply defined, death is the moment at which our soul separates from our body. It's the moment foretold by God in Genesis 3:19 when he declares to Adam: "You are dust, and to dust you will return."

Now it's worth paying attention to those words from Genesis 3 because they offer us a correction on some common unbiblical assumptions that you hear among Christians. Often you'll hear Christians, when talking about the distinction between body and soul, speak of it as if the soul is the REAL person and the body is just the place in which the soul, the real person, dwells.

But, that's not consistent with the creation account, God's words in Genesis 3, or our understanding of resurrection and what lies in front of us as human beings.

Think, for example, of the creation of mankind. God didn't gather the pre-existing souls of Adam and Eve and say, "Hey you, come down to this garden with me so I can give you a body."

Adam didn't exist before God fashioned his body from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. It was at that moment that Adam began to exist. He wasn't a soul who took on a body. His very existence, as a human being, is inextricably tied to his body.

And so that's why in chapter 3 when God pronounces his judgment against sin, he says "You are dust, and to dust you will return."

Certainly the breath of God, that eternal soul is that which brings the life and the identity to the human person, but, at the same time, to be human is to be embodied. Because of the corrupting power of sin, God, in his mercy, allows us to die. But he promises another body one day.

More on that in a little bit.

At death, the soul is separated from our mortal body.

Second, at death, we enter into the Judgment of God.

There is a great deal of confusion regarding the timing and purpose of the Judgement. In part, that's true because there are several scripture passages that speak about God's judgment, but none that lay it out systematically.

Our text in 2 Corinthians 5:10 says this: *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."*

Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 25. ALL will face the judgment. But what we see in scripture is that there seem to be two types of judgment that take place.

Hebrews 9:27 says, *"It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment..."*

There is an instantaneous judgment upon death. Of course, this makes sense because God sees our hearts and he knows all those who belong to him. The judgment isn't like a human courtroom where a judge will have to do his best to figure out what is true, right, and appropriate.

Those who have faith in Christ, who have received the forgiveness of sins – or to use Paul's language those who have been justified by faith – enter immediately into the presence of God. And those who have rejected Christ, who haven't repented of their sin and believed the Gospel are in Hell or Hades. For our purposes today, I'm going to use the terms Hell and Hades interchangeably, understanding that the fullness of Hell will come after the final judgment.

The Bible speaks consistently of two groups in the judgment. Jesus differentiated between the Sheep and the Goats. Or between those who have done what is good versus those who have done what is evil. Or, as Jesus says in John 12, a distinction between those who have believed his words and those who haven't believed.

And here is the good news: In John 5:24, Jesus gives us great clarity on this issue:

"Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."

And so all, upon death, face judgment. But all who are in Christ, all who believe the Gospel, will not be judged. The judgment has already been rendered. They will cross over from death into eternal life.

But, there is another understanding of judgment that we must briefly mention as well, and that is the final judgment. Matthew 25 and Revelation 20 both speak of this final judgment. After Christ returns, in those final moments, he will permanently separate the sheep from the goats, and pronounce his final sentence upon all who have rejected him.

In some ways, you can think of it like a criminal case. The jury has already issued their verdict, and yet the condemned must wait for the judge to hand down his final ruling.

And, yet, that illustration falls short, because in this final judgment, it's not just the guilty who stand before the judgment seat, but those who were declared not guilty as well. All who are in Christ have been justified. They stand before the judge in the righteousness of Christ. As Paul declared, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." All of your sin and failure is absorbed by the cross of Christ. You will stand before the judgment throne with nothing to fear, as if you'd always obeyed the Lord. And at that final judgment, we hear the divine judge pronounce the gospel to us.

For those who reject the savior, the judgment throne is where the judge issues his righteous and irreversible condemnation.

But for those who die in Christ, the Judgment throne is more like showing up at the courthouse to hear the Judge open the will and settle the estate, in which you've been promised a beautiful and eternal inheritance. No fear, just joyful anticipation of what has already been promised and guaranteed.

At death, the soul is separated from our mortal body.

At death, we enter into the Judgment of God.

And third, All who are trusting in Christ are immediately present with the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:6 - "Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 For we live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

So Paul sets up this reality for us, that when we are here in this body, we are away from the Lord, but when we are away from this body we are with the Lord.

We see this same idea also in Philippians 1:23 – it says this: *"I desire to depart and be with Christ..."*

Paul certainly lived with the firm expectation that upon death, he would be in the presence of the Lord.

Again, this is reiterated in Acts 7 – Stephen is about to be stoned to death for his faith in Christ. Acts 7:59: *“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.”*

Stephen's last words are spoken with the assumption that his soul, or his spirit, would be with Jesus upon his death.

And so it seems pretty clear from scripture that the New Testament understanding is that when we die in Christ, we will be in the presence of God.

The Acts text about Stephen did mention one common misunderstanding that you may have encountered.

How does the text conclude? With Stephen “falling asleep.”

Some have held the position that upon death, we don't go to Heaven or Hell, but that we just sleep. Many throughout the history of the church have held to this position, teaching that we enter a state, outside of the bounds of time, in which we sleep until the resurrection on the last day.

And, to be clear, that teaching isn't heresy. It actually doesn't make that much of a difference. If you're sleeping you're not conscious of time and so you'll wake up at the resurrection with no idea of whether it was a day, a century, or several millennia.

But, I think those who hold to that position generally are trying to be too literalistic with a common metaphor.

When scripture says that Stephen “fell asleep,” or when the Bible refers to death as sleeping elsewhere, it's a metaphor -- a word picture given to us to remind us that death isn't eternal.

We have many metaphors, idioms, and word pictures for death. We might say “he kicked the bucket” or “he passed away” or “he bit the dust” – all of which aren't intended to be read in a hyperliteral way.

And so just like we don't always come out and say in a blunt way that someone died, neither did folks in the 1st century.

So, the consensus, and I think the plainest reading is scripture is to understand that when we die, believing in Christ, we are present with the Lord.

Fourth - At death, we begin Awaiting the bodily resurrection, final judgment, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Now, depending upon your eschatology – your understanding of how events will unfold in the last days, you might understand these events to be essentially instantaneous, or separated by many years. Either way, those who have died in Christ are awaiting three primary things to take place: The bodily resurrection, the final judgment, and the re-creation of all things.

Let me hit each of them briefly.

The first is the bodily resurrection. If you remember earlier, I mentioned that we were never created to be only a soul. At death, our soul is separated from our mortal, perishable body. But in our text in 1 Corinthians 15 we heard this: “The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable.”

Paul taught very specifically in 1 Corinthians 15:12-14 that there will be a bodily resurrection, and that to deny the bodily resurrection of all believers is to deny the resurrection of Christ himself.

When Jesus returns all who have died will rise and be given a new body. And that body will be imperishable, immortal – it will last for all eternity. Our soul will once again be embodied as it was designed to be.

1 Thessalonians 4 says that on this day when Christ returns, those who have died in Christ will rise first.

Paul also ties this promised resurrection to our baptism. Hear these words in Romans 6:

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."

He says that when we were baptized into Christ, we were buried with Christ. And then he says, so it follows logically that if we have been buried with him, we will also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

This is the great undoing of sin. When we will know and experience the goodness of God’s creation as he intended it to be.

We talk often of going to heaven – but, in reality, scripture places our hope NOT so much in the prospect of Heaven, but in the reality of the coming resurrection.

The second event that I want to mention is the Final Judgment.

We mentioned this previously and so I won’t say too much, other than to make note that in Revelation 6 we see this scene in which the Saints in heaven, those who had previously died, are asking, crying out, “How long” until the judgment.

This is not so much a longing for someone to be punished – but a longing for evil and wickedness and disease and death to be condemned and destroyed forever. This is an anticipation of all things being made right.

At the final judgment, all of the wickedness and evil and rebellion and sin and hatred and disease and hurt and abuse will be sent to hell. And that is worth anticipating. That is worth longing for.

Again, I dealt with the idea of the final judgment earlier, so I want to move on now to the third event that those who die in Christ are anticipating:

Third, the re-creation of all things.

In Luke 21, Jesus said that Heaven and Earth will pass away.

In 1 Corinthians 7:31, Paul reminded us of the same thing – that this world is passing away.

Or listen to this description in 2 Peter 3:10:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Romans 8:19 and following tells us that creation itself is groaning, awaiting its redemption.

There is discussion and disagreement about the manner in which this will take place and whether there will actually be total destruction of all things, or whether God will transform what he has already created and remake it as he intended it to be.

Either way, the point is that, with wickedness and rebellion and sin condemned to hell forever, God will re-create his perfect world, uniting heaven and earth as one. And God will dwell among his people.

Perhaps we see this anticipation most clearly at the very end of the Bible. How do the scriptures end? With a prayer: “Come, Lord Jesus.” And that is the posture of all who understand what God has promised, whether here on earth or in heaven today. Anticipating that re-creation of all things. Waiting for all to be made right again.

We see the beautiful description of this re-creation – the thing for which we are longing – in Revelation 21:

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people,

and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

Our true hope, our true longing is NOT just for heaven apart from this body, but for the new heaven and the new earth when sin is no more and we are free to enjoy it for eternity with glorified, imperishable bodies as God intended. No tears, no mourning, no pain, no death, no sin. That is the sure and certain hope for all who believe.

So allow me to recap briefly, and then we will talk about another major question that often arises:

At death, the soul is separated from our mortal body.

At death, we enter into the Judgment of God.

At death, we are present with the Lord.

At death, we begin Awaiting the bodily resurrection, final judgment, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

So now let’s quickly address one major question that came up as I was gathering questions for this series.

The first was related to the teaching of **Purgatory**.

The word Purgatory is a word that comes from the same root word as “purge” and means a place of purification or purging from sin. The Roman Catholic Catechism says that purgatory is a place you go after death for “purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven...”

I’m going to deal with this head-on by being as clear and succinct as possible.

1. There is no scriptural basis for an understanding of purgatory as taught by the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, or any other.
2. A passage in 2 Maccabees 12, part of the Apocrypha, is typically the chief passage used when arguing for it.
3. To believe in purgatory is to deny that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
4. To believe in purgatory is to deny the sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross for sinners.
5. Purgatory is a false doctrine that appeals to human reason, our desire for justice, and to cooperate with God for salvation, and should, therefore, be rejected.
6. The teaching of purgatory is an essential piece of a fundraising model.

1 John 1:7 and following says that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. That if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness.

You don't need your relative to pay money for the cleansing of your sin. You need only trust in Christ. You need only repent and turn to Jesus, whose blood shed on the cross is sufficient for ALL of your sins. And to believe otherwise is to deny Christ himself, to make a mockery of his sacrifice, and to believe a lie from the Devil.

Those words may sound offensive, but a doctrine that explicitly teaches that Jesus' sacrifice isn't enough is anti-Christ in every way and deserves to be dealt with in the harshest of terms.

We do not, upon our death, drift into a place of punishment awaiting a loved one to broker a lucrative enough deal with the church on our behalf. We enter into the loving care and presence of our heavenly father. Thanks be to God.

In Matthew 25 we come across a passage that wraps up our time on this question in such a helpful way. Jesus says something that is of great hope for all of us who are in Christ. As we conclude our time together today on this topic of what happens when we die, hear these words from Jesus about that great final judgment:

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world..’”

It's all by God's grace through faith. Believe the good news, and this inheritance is yours. You can leave this life, and be swallowed up by true and everlasting life.

At death, the soul is separated from our mortal body.

At death, we enter into the Judgment of God.

At death, we are present with the Lord.

At death, we begin Awaiting the bodily resurrection, final judgment, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

This is our confidence, the promise of God to us. In it we rest, and in that assurance we die - knowing that God will do all that he has promised. He is true to his word. When you breathe your last, trusting in the promises of God, you will be swallowed up by life.

Sermon 3

BAPTISM!?

Preached on October 1, 2023

Romans 6:1-7

We continue today in our Asking for a Friend Series, and today's topic carries with it particular interest among many. It's a topic that has been discussed and debated by the Church, quite likely since the time of the Apostles.

We received many questions about various aspects of the doctrine of baptism, and so we've simply titled This question Baptism - exclamation point - question mark. That perhaps best summarizes the varied questions that you all had.

Before we get too deep, it's important to acknowledge two things:

First, let's acknowledge that this has been a long-standing discussion and debate between competent Biblical scholars who have agreed to disagree on the doctrine. Throughout the history of the church there have been pastors, scholars, and theologians who confess a high view of the scriptures and who are far smarter than you and I who have held any number of varying positions on this topic. And so there's a certain level of humility with which any of us should approach such a subject.

Second, let's acknowledge the reason that this particular doctrine has caused lines to be drawn in ways that other doctrines have not. And that's simply because this is a type of doctrine that requires people to take a position. It has to play out in tangible expression. In other words, parents will either baptize their children or withhold baptism from their children. Pastors will either take the position that the amount of water matters, or that the amount of water doesn't matter.

This differs from Communion, for example. Scripture is quite clear that, in the Lord's supper, we receive something – that God gives us his son Jesus, and all that he accomplished for us – that we receive the promises of God as we partake in the sacrament. But you can disagree with my understanding of scripture regarding what exactly communion IS or what exactly happens DURING communion – without there being any practical, tangible difference in your practice.

Baptism is different in that regard. If your view of baptism is different from mine, there will be tangible, visible differences. And so part of the reason that this particular doctrine causes lines to be drawn is because every congregation has to take a position. And our reading and understanding of scripture will inform that position.

But while every church must take a position, it doesn't mean that there isn't room within the congregation for a variety of views. Many in our church family hold a position that varies to some

degree from the official position that we hold and confess in our statement of faith. And so, of course, the focus for the congregation and the Christian should be on unity first.

I have often said that, for me, conversations about baptism are best had over a cup of coffee, in a spirit of unity.

And so, with those two acknowledgments out of the way, let's turn to God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. We begin in Paul's letter to the Romans, and use that as our foundational text – and then we will explore other places in scripture as well.

I'd invite you to stand if you are able as I read from Romans 6:1-7:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

There are many questions surrounding the doctrine of Holy Baptism. From questions of the proper age, comprehension level, or spiritual depth of the one being baptized – to questions of how much water is required and how wet the baptized person needs to get – to questions of what baptism actually does or accomplishes.

But what I've come to recognize is that all of those questions are **DOWNSTREAM** of one significant question that determines the course of our processing and understanding of baptism.

And so today we are going to address one foundational question, and then a series of related questions.

The foundational question to consider today – the question that lies at the heart of most disagreements regarding baptism, is this:

Is baptism something that we do for God or something that God does for us?

There is, perhaps, no question that is more central to understanding the doctrine of baptism than this one.

Is baptism primarily something that we are doing for God, or is baptism something that God does for us?

Or, we might think of it this way. Is baptism an act, offering, ritual, or ordinance that we perform for God, or is it a means through which God gives to us? Who is the active party in baptism?

How you process and answer this question will determine your understanding of baptism.

But where do we start? Perhaps we can start where the conversation of baptism starts in Holy Scripture. In Matthew chapter 3, John the Baptizer is doing his thing, and he says this: *“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

And then Matthew records for us that Jesus comes to the Jordan River and asks John to baptize him. And, while John tries to convince him otherwise, Jesus insists. And when he is baptized the spirit of God descends like a dove, and so from that moment onward, baptism is no longer merely a baptism of repentance like John’s was.

In Matthew 28, Jesus pronounces his words of commission and instruction for all who would follow him. He says, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

In other words, Jesus says that our task is to make disciples of all nations. But how is that disciple-making work accomplished? Through baptizing and teaching.

But it’s not just any baptism. Did you hear what Jesus said? Baptizing them in what? In the NAME of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul would use the phrase *“baptized into Christ.”*

The apostle Peter used the phrase *“Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”*

So here’s what we’ve seen so far: Christian baptism is not merely an act of repentance, but we are being baptized into the name of the triune God – into the name of Christ. Or, as Paul says, into Christ himself. We aren’t baptized merely with a baptism of repentance, but a baptism into Christ.

Here’s why this point is significant. It may be best expressed in the words of Peter in Acts 2: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will*

receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Peter is preaching the Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners and the people are cut to the heart and ask “What should we do?” And what is Peter’s response?

He says *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

Peter calls them to repent and to be baptized, and he says two things will happen: Your sins will be forgiven, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.

Now let me ask you: as Peter presents this understanding of baptism, who is the one doing the work? Who is the one pouring out the gifts? Is baptism merely a symbolic human act, or is God doing something and giving something in baptism? I would say that, in baptism, God is giving the forgiveness of sins and he is delivering the Holy Spirit just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in HIS baptism.

Another passage that might be helpful for you is Acts chapter 22. It’s the account of Paul’s conversion, and we read these words: Acts 22:16 - *“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away...”*

I think we would all agree that none of us have the power to wash away sin. It is in Holy Baptism that Paul’s sins are washed away.

Many will try to turn that into a metaphor, saying that baptism doesn't REALLY wash away our sins. Certainly, Peter didn't REALLY mean to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. In Acts, when Luke recorded those words, he didn't REALLY mean that baptism will wash away sins. Peter and John didn't REALLY mean that in baptism we receive the Holy Spirit.

I have become convinced by the plain reading of Holy Scripture that baptism isn't MERELY symbolic. That God is the one who is at work in baptism. That baptism is something that God does for us, not primarily something that we do for God.

In case you're not convinced, let's look at our sermon text for today from Romans 6, starting in verse 3:

“...don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Listen to Paul's very plain words. *“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death....”*

We need not allegorize these words, or treat them as symbolic. Paul actually, literally, clearly, said that when you were baptized you were buried with Christ. THAT'S AMAZING!

And then listen to this because it gets better! Verse 5 - *“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”*

Did you hear what Paul said? In baptism, you were united with Christ in a death like his. You were buried with him in baptism. And here's the good news. If you have been united with him in a death like his, you will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

That's incredible! Paul takes the promise of God to us in baptism and says it's not just the cleansing of sin and it's not just the gift of the Holy Spirit: it's also the promise of a future bodily resurrection.

There are two more verses that I want to share with you briefly, and I would encourage you to take some more time to read and process these.

The first is from Galatians 3:27. Paul says *“All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ...”*

So in our baptism, we are clothed with Christ. This is the same imagery of the Prodigal Son who has his father's robe placed over him.

The second passage is from 1 Peter 3:21. Peter is talking about Noah, and listen to what he says: *“...this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”*

Peter says that the waters in Noah's day are symbols intended to point us to our own baptism that now saves us. He then doubles down and answers the question of HOW water saves us. Exactly what Paul said in Romans 6: that our baptism isn't just washing, but it unites us with Christ in his death first, and in the promise of resurrection.

These are the promises that God has given us in baptism.

These aren't my words. This is the Word of God.

Is baptism something that we do for God or something that God does for us? I can't wash away my sin. I can't forgive sin. I can't give myself the Holy Spirit. I can't bury myself with Christ and give myself the promise of future resurrection. I can't clothe myself with Christ, I can't save myself.

And so if the Scriptures are to be consistent we MUST say that all of these things that baptism does are done by God and not by us. Baptism is NOT something that I do for God, it is something that God has done for me.

The focus is on the promise of God. Not the amount of water. Not the location. Not the person administering it. God is the one who is at work in baptism. It's him doing the promising and the washing and the saving and the Holy Spirit imparting.

That is the foundational question regarding baptism. But of course, many other related questions flow from that one.

And so let's address several of those now.

If baptism does all of these things, what is the role of faith?

The response to this question is simply that you cannot separate faith from baptism. There is no proper and biblical understanding of baptism apart from the presence of faith. We will talk about children in a moment, but it's super important to understand that every single time we talk about baptism, we are doing so as directly connected to faith.

But there is one important nuance and that's the Biblical teaching that faith comes, not from within your heart or your intellect, but from the Word of God.

Neither the scriptures nor sound doctrine teach baptism apart from faith. Baptism is part of how faith is created and confirmed within us.

In John 3:5, Jesus says, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."*

Paul said something similar in Titus 3:5: *"he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit..."*

Of course, there is no other water – no other washing – known to the New Testament believers other than the waters and the washing of baptism in the name of the Triune God.

We are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Baptism is simply the means, the vehicle, that God uses to deliver faith, the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of future resurrection to us.

What is the role of faith? It is inseparable from any conversation about salvation, baptism, forgiveness, or eternal life.

The next question to address is this:

Who should be baptized?

This is the point in the conversation where many people feel the controversy in baptism. Is baptism only for those who have a conscious, expressible faith in Jesus Christ, or are the developmentally disabled, our children, and even infants welcomed?

There are often three mistakes that lead people to what I would humbly label a false conclusion regarding this question of who should be baptized:

1- Over-Intellectualizing faith

I mention this quite often during baptism services, but the way that most Evangelical Christians talk about faith is quite different from the way that the scriptures talk about faith and the way that Jesus talks about faith.

God's covenant with Abraham, which I will talk more about in a moment, seemed to assume that children were believing members of the kingdom of God. They were culpable for their sin. From infancy, they needed to receive the sign and seal of God's love and promises for them and to them.

David spoke of it most clearly when he said in Psalm 51 that he was sinful from conception, but that God was at work, imparting to him wisdom in the womb before he was born.

And then there's Psalm 22 which is perhaps the Psalm with the most significant New Testament connection because it was the Psalm that Jesus quoted from the cross. David says this:

*11 Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.
10 From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.*

So the Old Testament impresses on us that from conception we need the grace and promises of God, and also that God is imparting wisdom and causing even unborn children and nursing babies to trust in him.

And then we move into the New Testament and that understanding continues.

The very first human person to acknowledge and respond to the yet-unborn savior was John leaping within the womb of his mother.

In Matthew chapter 18, when the disciples are arguing over which of them was the greatest, Jesus calls a little child over and places the child in the midst of them and says, “*Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” And then in verse 6 just to clear up any confusion or any controversy, Jesus makes it clear that these little children to whom he is referring actually have faith in him.

In Luke chapter 18, we have a little different scenario. People are bringing babies to Jesus, and listen to what Jesus says: Luke 18:15 - “*When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*”

The clear teaching of both the Old and New Testaments is that saving faith is not a matter of human intellect and maturity and reason, but a work of God in which he brings even children in the womb to trust in him and nursing children to believe in him. True faith, according to Jesus, is that faith that those babies have when they just receive what he freely gives.

To over-intellectualize faith is to tell Jesus that he was wrong. To, like the disciples, assume that an adult, conscious, reasoned faith is somehow superior to the pure, simple faith of an infant. Jesus says and teaches exactly the opposite.

Can children believe in Jesus? Can children have faith? Both David and Jesus answered yes.

The second mistake that I often see is this:

2- A failure to view baptism in its theological context with its connection to the Old Testament/Old Covenant.

One of the comments that is made often is that we don't see any infant baptisms in scripture. And I would agree that we don't see any explicit examples of believing parents bringing their children to be baptized. But the problem is that we don't see any examples of believing parents doing anything at all.

The closest thing that we have is the couple of times that we see that someone who came to faith had their whole household baptized. The most obvious is the Philippian Jailer in Acts 16. He comes to faith in Christ and verse 33 says, “*...then immediately he and all his household were baptized.*”

Now, the plainest reading of this seems that “*all his household*” means exactly what it says. All. But some would argue that when Luke wrote “All” in Acts 16 he didn't mean all. I'm okay just believing what the word says. That ALL his household were baptized. And that probably included children. Luke could have been very specific there. He could have said “all the adults in his household” or “all his household except the children” but he didn't say that.

Think of it this way: If I were to stand up here and say that “all of my household had the stomach flu over the weekend,” you wouldn’t assume that meant only my wife and I. You’d assume that I meant exactly what I said. All. So, Why would we approach this differently with Acts 16, unless we had an agenda pushing us to do so?

Let’s take a moment to consider what the average person in the New Testament would have concluded about whether or not children born to believing parents were to be baptized. It seems logical that their starting point would be what God had done previously.

Whatever we believe about Christian baptism, we would all agree that it is initiatory. It is the rite or act or ordinance or sacrament by which one is brought into the true faith. Whether you believe Baptism has great significance, or is merely a symbol, we can all agree that it is initiatory.

And so how has God worked in the past? What was the means by which people were brought into the kingdom of God in the Old Covenant? It was through circumcision that people were counted among the people of God. Circumcision was the sign and seal that the person and their family were part of God’s people.

And so when God instituted this sign of circumcision among Abraham and his people in Genesis 17, all males had to be circumcised. And any man who refused was to be cut off from the People of God for breaking the covenant.

So that was the first generation. But what about the second generation? The second generation was to be circumcised NOT when they could decide for themselves if they wanted to believe in God – NOT when they had grown and could reason and have a conscious, adult faith in Yahweh. No, they were circumcised at 8 days of age. They were given the sign of the covenant and welcomed into the family of God at 8 days old. And if they weren’t, they weren’t part of God’s covenant. They were to be cut off from the people (Genesis 17:14).

So we get to the New Testament and God does something amazing. There's a new covenant and so he gives a new sign, a new right of initiation, a new mark and seal that would identify you as part of the people and family of God. And this new seal wasn’t just for males, it was also for females.

This new covenant sign was the means by which one would be made a Christian, by which one would be counted among the covenant people of God.

And just in case we doubt that circumcision would have been the reference point and the backstory when first-century Christians thought about Baptism, Paul makes it clear for us in Colossians 2:11:

“In [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in

baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

What is Paul saying? Do you remember circumcision? In your baptism, you received an even better circumcision. A circumcision not done by humans but by God. A circumcision that buried you with Jesus, has given you true life, and promises you the hope of resurrection.

Paul understands baptism to be the new and better circumcision.

If you don't think of baptism within the context of the full counsel and teaching of God's word, you might be quick to think that it is something that it's not. But when we start with Abraham and see God's covenant relationship with his people and view that as the context and the background into which baptism is given, and when we follow Paul's teaching about the connection between baptism and circumcision, it becomes clear how the average 1st century Jew would have understood baptism. Having come to faith in Christ, and seeing baptism as the new and better circumcision, they would have been eager to bring their children to the waters of baptism to receive the promises of God. We must view baptism in its theological context with its connection to the Old Testament and Old Covenant.

There's one final common mistake that people make when thinking about the question of who should be baptized:

3- Reading through the lens of abuse or misuse of the doctrine of baptism

Many people will look at the abuse and misuse of baptism in some Christian traditions and approach the topic from the perspective of “I don't know what I believe, but I don't want anything to do with that.”

But as people of the Word, We must always do our best to remove every cultural or experiential lens we can when it comes to studying scripture. We must distance ourselves from whatever feelings we have and immerse ourselves in the 1st-century context and understanding of how one was initiated into the family of God. Then we can read the text properly and not through the lens of what we don't like or appreciate in churches around us. This is an important practice with scripture reading in general, and should not be limited only to baptism. But it seems to be a common mistake here.

This often surfaces in the teaching that so long as you are baptized, it doesn't matter how you live your life and that you can sin all you want.

But that's the question that our scripture text in Romans 6 was answering: What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

When confronted with the question of whether those who have received the promises of God should just go on sinning because of those promises, Paul actually points them to their baptism. He says, "No, of course not, in your baptism you were baptized into Christ's death. Your sin nature was crucified with Christ!"

And so simply because some treat baptism as the one thing to which they look to try to prove the salvation of someone who had rejected Christ for the rest of their life – we needn't throw it out. We take Paul's advice and look to it for assurance of what God has done for us.

Who should be baptized? Anyone who, by faith, will receive what God offers. Whether the infant or new convert – God offers his gifts to all who will receive.

The final question to consider this morning is this:

Is baptism required for salvation?

As with any question, the best thing to do is just to say what scripture says:

- *“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...”*
- *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*
- *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit...”*
- *“...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”*
- *“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away...”*
- *“this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also...”*
- *“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”*

The New Testament doesn't conceive of true salvation apart from Christian baptism. And so if you haven't been baptized today, I ask you the question from Acts 16: “What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away...”

Now, we haven't answered every question related to baptism today. But, Lord willing, we've received the Biblical framework by which we can understand the doctrine. And so let's end where we started. In baptism, God is the one who does the work. And in your baptism, he gave you faith, he washed you, he forgave your sin, he filled you with the Holy Spirit, he buried you with Christ, he raised you to walk in the newness of life, and he has given you the promise of resurrection.

Scripture teaches that all of those things are yours, delivered to you as simple water is paired together with the living and enduring word of God. And in those promises, we should take great comfort and assurance and hope. Because of your baptism, you are His. You belong to him. And there is no greater joy.

Sermon 4
HOW DOES PRAYER WORK?

Preached on October 8, 2023

Matthew 6:5-13

If we were to highlight one area of spiritual life and practice that seems to be most difficult for many Christians, it might be prayer. I have heard countless people mention to me over the years their difficulty with prayer. And oftentimes that difficulty falls into two main categories:

The first area of prayer that people seem to struggle with is discipline. The second area of struggle that many people have is in their theology of prayer – or understanding what prayer actually is and does. Or, as we summarized in the title of today’s sermon, “How does prayer work?”

And so today we may deal briefly with the discipline and practice of prayer – but most of our time will be allowing God’s Word to shape our understanding and theology of prayer – what it is and how it works – in order to posture us for better discipline when it comes to prayer.

All of us should live with some measure of mystery when it comes to prayer. At its very core, prayer is the intersection of humans with the eternal and omniscient God. Think about that: prayer is the intersection of humans, who haven’t always existed and only exist inside of the bounds of time, and don’t have the power to see and know all things – with our God who does. Who has always been and will always be. Who knows all things and sees all things – from whom nothing is hidden or unknown. And so there will always be a measure of mystery associated with prayer.

Additionally, we have all seen prayer used and misused in any number of ways. For example, most of us have heard people twist the words of scripture to say that anything your sinful heart desires can be yours through prayer. Treating God like a cosmic vending machine – if you just push the right buttons, you can get whatever you want from him. And these various abuses of prayer cause us to wonder what prayer is really all about.

And so as we consider this topic of prayer, let’s turn to God’s word. Like I have all through this series, I will use one passage as the foundational text, and then share a number of other scripture passages to help you see the fullness of Biblical teaching on this topic. So we will begin today with Jesus teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 – this is part of the sermon on the mount.

And as we consider these words from Jesus – we do so recognizing that they are, at the same time, teaching us HOW to pray – and also supplying us with a prayer that we, as the people of God, can pray.

Matthew 6:5-13

5 *“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

9 *“This, then, is how you should pray:*

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
10 your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’*

Martin Luther is quoted as saying, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”

Well as we consider this topic of prayer, I think there are really two main questions before us as we consider the topic: What is prayer, and What does prayer do?

So today we’re going to address these two main questions, and then three warnings, and five encouragements.

Two questions, three warnings, and five encouragements.

The first question is this: **What is prayer?**

In confirmation, we teach this from the Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism and we find this exact question: What is prayer? Notice how succinct and clear the answer is. What is prayer? Prayer is talking to God silently or aloud from my heart.

Prayer is talking to God. On its most basic, and also on its most profound level, this is true. Sure, you could find a more theologically robust and complicated way to express the Biblical definition and

understanding of prayer – but the scriptures just don't present it in that way. Take the Psalms, for example. Of course, the Psalms are a collection of prayers, songs, and poems.

Listen to how some of the Psalms begin:

Psalm 25 - *“In you, Lord my God, I put my trust.”*

Psalm 51 - *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.”*

Psalm 71 - *“In you, Lord, I have taken refuge...”*

Psalm 90 - *“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”*

Psalm 139 - *“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.”*

And we could go on and on. But we would always return to that basic and clear understanding of prayer: Prayer is talking to God silently or aloud from my heart.

And we see this reflected in the prayer that Jesus shares as he teaches how to pray. He begins that prayer, *“Our Father in heaven...”*

Prayer is talking to our heavenly father which should, in and of itself, be a little mind-blowing. We are allowed and invited to call the all-powerful, sovereign, eternal, immortal, invisible, creator and sustainer of all things in heaven and on earth, “our father.”

Yet, while that simple definition is good and right and true, perhaps the proper understanding of prayer is a little deeper than just talking to God. And so I would add this. Prayer is also the essence of relationship with God.

It's been said that prayer is the natural outpouring of knowing God. And there's some truth to that. Others have said that prayer is like oxygen for the Christian. And I think that's good. But both of those are a little limiting. Let's simply say that Prayer is relationship with God. It's not the byproduct of a relationship but at the very core of it.

Prayer is talking with God. Prayer is relationship with God.

But that leads to our second question – **What does prayer do?**

Today we will highlight four things that prayer does:

1 - Prayer gives us the proper posture before God.

The opening words of the prayer that Jesus teaches are “Our Father in heaven” Think about those words for a minute. They are words that set and determine our posture. We are approaching God, in prayer, as our heavenly father.

By their very nature, those words place us in a position of subordination and submission to the Lord. God is our father, but not fallible like our earthly father. He is our Heavenly Father. And so we are to trust and respect and obey him.

Any time we pray thoughtfully, we will recognize the reality that we are a lowly human with the privilege of speaking to the omnipotent creator of all that exists and that we are invited to address him as our father.

Part of this proper posture before God is seen in verse 8 right before the model prayer: “*Your father knows what you need BEFORE you ask him.*”

Knowing that to be true, prayer gives us the proper posture before God. The all-knowing God who knows what we need before we ask him. And, yet he both invites and commands us to ask.

Why? Because this proper posture before God isn’t intellectual. Comprehending intellectually that God is our father, that God knows all that we need, is not the same as believing it. And so God has given us prayer in which we practice a proper perspective of the Lord. We grow in our belief and trust and expression of that understanding. It becomes real as we pray.

The next phrase that we see is: “Hallowed by your name.”

The proper posture before God is not only recognizing him as our father, and knowing that he knows what we need before we ask, but a desire for God himself to be praised and revered in and among us.

Some of you may have been taught posture when you were younger using a yardstick against your back to keep you up straight or a dictionary on your head to make you sit up. That’s exactly what we are talking about here. God has created prayer, and particularly the content of this Lord’s prayer, as a means to train our posture before God. That we would come before the Lord knowing that he knows what we need, viewing him as our heavenly father, and with a desire for, above all, his name to be praised and glorified among us.

And any time we pray thoughtfully, this is what God does. If we pray thinking about the one to whom we pray, we are faced with these realities.

And so the very act of praying gives us the proper posture before God.

What else does prayer do?

2 - Prayer molds our hearts to the will of our Heavenly Father.

V. 10 - *“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done.

Think about those words, about what Jesus teaches us to pray in those simple phrases.

God, you are the true king. And I am not. You are the one who determines the standard of right and wrong, of true and false, of good and bad, not me. You alone God are the one who sets the standard. You call the shots. Your decisions are authoritative. And mine are not.

Praying “your kingdom come” is a way of confessing that MY kingdom and the kingdom of this world are inadequate and that we need something better, something right, something good. It's a way of confessing that our best attempts at self-rule, regulation, and governance will always fall short, whether in our families, our churches, or our nation.

The thought is paired together with the next statement:

“Your will be done.”

This is bending the knee to Jesus. Declaring that while my sin nature demands that I get my way, I am prayerfully setting aside my own way and asking that God would do what HE desires and what HE deems right.

And that's the beauty of allowing Jesus' teaching to shape our prayer. That we will always confess the inadequacy of our own way and our own plans – and rest in the wisdom and power and knowledge and goodness of God.

Martin Luther said this: “God therefore wants you to lament and express your needs and concerns, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and open and spread your apron wide to receive many things.”

Prayer kindles our hearts to stronger and greater desires and opens us up to receive what God has for us.

Prayer molds our hearts to the will of our Heavenly Father.

3 - Prayer confronts us with our own sin.

Those words: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Or, as we say in our memorized version of the Lord's prayer - "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" If you read Luke's version of another time Jesus taught the prayer it says "Forgive us our sins."

Any way that we look at the meaning of what is said here, it becomes clear that confession of sin is an essential part of prayer. And it's only natural to confess our sin when we pray if we at all understand what is happening in prayer. We are talking to our sinless creator, against whom we have rebelled, and compared to whom we are wicked. And so the only response when standing in the presence of perfect holiness is an expression of our guilt and sorrow over our sin and a longing to be made right. And so when we pray we confess our sins.

We see this in Isaiah 6 when the prophet sees the Lord. What is Isaiah's response when he sees the Lord? He is overwhelmed by his sin. "*Surely I am a man of unclean lips...*"

Every time we pray we enter the throne room of God and see the Lord, and so every time we pray we should respond as Isaiah did, in confession and repentance.

Prayer confronts us with our own sin.

4 - Prayer inclines our heart toward others.

We see this in verse 12 of our text - "*Forgive us our debts – as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" But, we see this in an even greater way when we zoom out to see the larger scope of Jesus' teaching.

In the chapter before, Jesus said this:

"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Pray for those who persecute you – WHY? Jesus is clear: So that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

In other words, praying for your enemies – for those who persecute you – has the ability to change your heart. Prayer has the power to give you a heart like your heavenly father.

In Luke 6 we see similar teaching – Jesus says "*Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*"

Why would he tell us to pray for our persecutors and abusers? Because it changes US. Because it softens our hearts. Because it makes us more like our Heavenly Father. Because it inclines our hearts toward others.

What does prayer do?

- 1 - Prayer gives us the proper posture before God.
- 2 - Prayer molds our heart to the will of our Heavenly Father.
- 3 - Prayer confronts us with our own sin.
- 4 - Prayer inclines our heart toward others.

So now allow me to share three warnings.

Three warnings:

1 - We must not believe that God is unaware of what is happening, and see our job as bringing it to his attention.

This seems like such a silly statement to have to make, but I can't tell you how many times I've caught myself falling into this mindset – sort of functionally denying, or at least forgetting, that God knows and sees all things. I've heard it in my own prayers and in the prayers of other people.

Most Christians don't claim to believe, in a formal sense, that God is unaware of what's happening. But functionally speaking we've probably all seen this happen: we start to functionally doubt that God actually knows and sees.

2 - We must not believe that God is unconcerned or ambivalent, and needs to be convinced by our praying.

This is perhaps an even greater concern and more frequent pitfall. Believing that God is sitting on the fence, unsure what to make of our situation, happy to stand back and just let situations play out unless He's bothered or begged enough to get involved.

Prayer is not finding the right words to convince God to start caring and intervene in our affairs.

But how often have you observed people praying in this way? And, of course, this is often our natural feeling. And it's okay to feel this way at first. Several of the Psalms express this sentiment: "God, are you even listening? Do you even care?"

But we can't stay in that place of thinking that prayer is the means by which we convince God to care enough to act. The truth is that God sees more than you and cares more than you. And so we must push back on that very human tendency to view it in that way.

3 - We must not believe that God will change his eternally ordained plans in order to accommodate our comfort or feelings.

This is where much of the difficulty of prayer comes in. There are things that God has placed in motion from eternity past that will not and cannot be subverted or thwarted. And there are yet other things to which God has given human freedom within a certain framework. God still foreknew all of those things but has given human freedom, allowing it to play out.

But, again, if we really believe that God knows all things before they come to be, then even the areas that he has given to human freedom are areas in which he knew what humans would choose before he made them matters of human freedom.

And this is the great mystery. God knew every decision of human freedom before he gave humans the opportunity to express their freedom.

A core reality of God's nature is that he is unchanging. There are certainly times in scripture when God is revealed as changing his mind or altering course, but those are always given from the perspective of the human. Because, for God to be God, he had to know that he would do what he ended up doing. From the angle of human beings, it appears that he changed his mind. He didn't bring the calamity he had promised. But from the perspective of God, he knew what would happen all along.

There will always be conflict in our understanding of God's actions and his seeming response to us. RC Sproul expressed it this way:

Does prayer change God's mind? No.

Does prayer change things? Of course!

We see this in James 5:13 and following:

"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

But how do we make sense of this? How do we reconcile the fact that God never changes his mind with the fact that Scripture teaches that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective?

And the answer is simply this: We don't reconcile it. We don't make sense of it. We believe it because our God has said it.

In order to “make sense” of it, we would have to be God.

God has declared that he never changes – and that he doesn’t change or alter his divine plans in order to accommodate our comfort or feelings – and at the very same time, he has said, “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*”

And so we just believe that it is so. In unknowable ways, it is true. And so we believe it and we do it. Prayer is faith lived out. Knowing and trusting in an unchanging, all-powerful, all-knowing God, and yet sharing our concerns and hopes and fears and longings with him.

We pray confidently. But we also pray in the way of Christ: praying, “*not my will, but yours be done.*”

Finally, consider these Five Encouragements:

1 - There is help.

Romans 8:26-27 - “*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.*”

This is such an encouraging verse. God’s spirit helps us in our weakness in two ways. Giving us words to pray, and praying on our behalf according to the will of God.

This takes so much of the pressure of prayer away. There is help. Ask God to give you the words.

2 - God never grows tired of our prayer.

1 Thess 5:17 - “*Pray without ceasing*” or you might know it as “*pray continually.*”

Make sure that you hear this as an invitation more than a command. God invites you to pray in all circumstances. He never grows tired of hearing you pray and of hearing your voice. For small things and big things, God has invited us to pray to him in all things.

3 - Don’t be afraid to pray pre-written prayers.

Some of you grew up in churches and homes where this was common – and others of you didn’t. It’s common to hear people bashing the use of pre-written prayers in both worship and personal devotion. But think of it this way:

Praying a pre-written prayer is no less spiritual than singing a pre-written worship song or hymn. If you can sing a pre-written song from your heart in praise to the Lord, then you can pray a pre-written prayer from your heart to the Lord. Simple as that.

In fact, I would say that a thoughtful, pre-written prayer with good theology and a proper view of God, is far superior to the random babbling that you hear in many spontaneous prayers. And so don't be afraid to pray pre-written prayers. There are some great prayer resources that will lead you in prayer.

4 - Pray the scriptures.

I will often, when I'm praying, have my bible open, read a verse or two, and then pray specifically about that verse. Confessing my sin, asking for faith to believe, and asking God to make what he has said true in my life.

Pray the Psalms. Use them as a guide and pattern for prayer. Pray the parables. Use them as a springboard for your conversation with the Lord. Pray the scriptures.

And then the final encouragement that I want to share with you is this:

5 - Embrace the mystery of God.

You cannot and will not fully understand prayer on this side of eternity. Your mind is limited. You can't see as God sees. And your sin nature clouds and muddies everything that you do see. And so, rather than trying to dissect prayer, learn to embrace and celebrate the mystery of it.

God has invited you to pray to him as your heavenly father. In all things and in all situations. And so lean into that mystery. Give praise to the Lord, confess your sin, and pray for the needs in your life and the needs that you see around you. Allow him to change your heart and incline you both toward him and toward your neighbor. And watch while he gives you your daily bread and brings his kingdom of grace among us. And he will, just as he has promised. Hebrews 4 reminds us to "*approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*" In prayer, the divine intersects with our lives and our world. Prayer is relationship with God.

Would you join me in praying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon 5
CAN WOMEN BE PASTORS?

Preached on October 15, 2023

1 Timothy 2:11-14

According to my records, this is the 254th sermon that I've preached from this pulpit since taking the call to Living Word Fellowship, and that doesn't count weddings or funerals.

And of those previous 253 sermons, this is my least favorite subject to prepare to preach on.

As you likely know already, today's topic is "Can Women be Pastors?" Now, this isn't my least favorite sermon topic because I'm afraid of the controversy surrounding it. I've never been one to shy away from the difficulty of a topic or a scripture text.

The reason that I dislike this particular question is that it is so charged with cultural assumptions and personal feelings and perceptions that it is almost impossible to address it in a way that people won't mishear and misunderstand what I'm saying.

Let's establish three points for clarity as we begin today:

First, my highest calling as your pastor is to rightly teach and preach the Word of God. James chapter 3 says that those who teach will be judged more strictly. Hebrews chapter 13 reminds me that as a pastor, I must give an account for that which has been entrusted to me.

And so that is the spirit in which this sermon is given to you today. I revere God more than I fear you, more than I fear anyone who might listen online and more than I fear this culture in which we live. And so the chief concern today is with what God has said, not with how humans feel about what God has said.

I ask that you hear me, and all that is said, from that perspective and with that heart, knowing that I love you and that I am absolutely concerned about how you feel, but that I am called by you, and by God, to teach and preach the word. You may disagree with how I interpret the scripture passages today, and we can still be friends.

And that brings me to the second thing that should be made clear today: This isn't personal.

This sermon is not targeted or agenda-driven. I didn't WANT to preach on this but many of you asked about it and I felt like I'd be taking the easy way out if I dodged a question that was asked by multiple people.

And then the third point of clarity: And I want to state this as clearly as possible: **Men and women are created in God's image with the same value, dignity, and worth.**

Genesis 1:27 says “*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*”

May this be absolutely clear: The Bible teaches that men and women are created in God's image with the same value, dignity, and worth.

God doesn't love men more than women or women more than men. And the same is true for the church. God doesn't value one more highly than the other. He has given the ministry and the mission of the church to both men and women, as he sees fit.

And so with those points of clarity, let's examine our text for today. And it's a text that has bothered many people, and that is seen as blatantly offensive and, maybe even wicked, in the eyes of some people today. But that doesn't change the fact that God has said it.

1 Timothy 2:11-14

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

You've heard what the scriptures say from 1 Timothy on this topic and question that we are faced with today. While our primary focus is on the 1 Timothy passage, it's worth noting that 1 Corinthians 14:34 and following contains similar wording to this 1 Timothy text.

So here's how we will handle things today: We will do a brief study through each of the major statements of the text, and then I want to address three major topics: Identity, Interpretation, and Authority.

So First let's examine the major statements of the text:

We begin in verse 11:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

Now, before we get too worked up about this let's pause and appreciate the fact that there is an underlying assumption to what Paul writes that women are, in fact, encouraged and expected to learn. Women weren't relegated to the kitchen. This was a sign of the freedom that the Gospel brought about because there were contemporary cultures that didn't allow women to enter into any kind of study,

religious or otherwise. This included some Jewish traditions that limited the teaching of the scriptures to male audiences only.

We just take this for granted, but there is confirmation here that Paul assumes that women would be learning and sitting under the teaching of the word of God. Don't be too quick to pass that by.

This passage encourages women to follow the order that God has put in place for his church. He has organized his church in the same type of way that every human institution is ordered. There are guidelines and a structure that are intended to ensure unity and clarity.

He's dealt earlier in the letter with distractions in the church like anger, quarreling, and trying to outdo each other by wearing the fanciest jewelry. And then here he directs his focus to the order of teaching and preaching in the congregation. This isn't a command for women to be mute, but rather an instruction to ensure that the proper order that God has intended for his church is followed.

The emphasis here is on the posture of women when it comes to preaching and teaching in the church – quietness and submission to the order and plan of God – as opposed to a vocal and rebellious spirit.

And this flows right into the next sentence in verse 12:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man

As if Paul's words aren't culturally offensive enough for us, he says this.

Notice first that Paul says, "I do not permit...." These are important words because he's sharing his approach to this topic which is larger than just one local church or region of churches. The understanding among the New Testament churches was that women do not teach men or assume authority over men.

Paul sort of says, "This isn't a matter of debate for me. I don't permit it."

But what exactly are the two prohibited things mentioned here?

First is teaching. When we read the larger picture of how the New Testament speaks of teaching, we pretty quickly see that this is a reference to the gathered, authoritative, preaching and teaching of God's Word within the church.

Generally, this has been understood by the church to say "I do not permit a woman to teach a man." And that has been the position of the church because we have examples in scripture of women being encouraged to teach younger women. The prohibition isn't that women can't teach but that women aren't allowed, according to 1 Timothy, to teach or preach to men during the formal, gathered worship of the church.

The second part of this is the matter of authority. Verse 13 says *“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man.”*

Many have argued, and I find myself in agreement, that the phrase “exercise authority” is a better translation than the phrase “assume authority.” “Assume” authority makes it seem like what Paul is speaking about here is women pushing men aside and selfishly grasping for power. That doesn’t seem to be true of the context here.

Paul is saying that he does not permit a woman to teach men in the gathered worship of the church, and he doesn’t permit women to exercise spiritual authority in the congregation over men.

I don’t think that we can see those as two unrelated prohibitions. Think about that two-fold description: one who teaches and one who exercises authority. What is that describing? It’s the office of Pastor or Elder as we see defined elsewhere.

In 1 Timothy 5, we read: *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”*

So this combination of teaching and exercising authority that Paul prohibits women from is a clear description of the office of elder and pastor. If we were to summarize the office of Pastor or Elder most simply I think we would say that a pastor or elder is one trusted with the teaching and spiritual oversight of the congregation.

Whether we like what Paul is saying here or not, the fact is that he has said that it’s his practice to not allow women to step into the role of pastor or elder. And if you don’t believe me on this, just keep reading into chapter 3. And remember those chapter breaks are added by editors.

What are the very next words after our text for today? A description of the qualifications of those who are to serve as overseers, those entrusted with teaching and exercising authority in the congregation.

He says this – again flowing directly out of our text for today – 1 Timothy 3:1 -

“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the man of one woman, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach...”

Paul prohibits women from teaching men and exercising authority in the church and then goes on to describe the office of overseer in the congregation as a man who is able to teach, among other attributes.

So what comes next? Grammatically, we see a conjunction. The English version of this conjunction is the word “For” or “Because”.

Why is the church structured this way?

V. 13: *“For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”*

This is the same argument that is used in 1 Corinthians as well. The reason for this order in the church is that it reflects God’s order of creation. This is simply the way that God has chosen to structure things.

This is not a matter of value, dignity, or worth. It’s a matter of order. And this order existed before sin.

And then it’s sort of like Paul says, “In case that’s not enough reason, think about this one...” and it brings us to verse 14: *“And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.”*

The previous makes clear that from before the fall of mankind into sin, God had established a certain order for his creation, for marriage, for the home. And this order is a gift. It is good. It is right. It is how things operate best when done with mutual love, trust, and care.

But then we also live in a post-fall / post-eden reality. And so he draws on this reality from the first rebellion of mankind where Eve took the lead in being deceived and rebelling against God.

The New Testament talks about Adam’s guilt in that first sin elsewhere, so suffice it to say that Paul isn’t letting him off the hook. He’s just asserting that this order prescribed for the church in which men hold the offices of teaching and authority is consistent with both the pre-fall reality in Eden, as well as the order of the fall of mankind.

God’s perfect order for his church is not simply an instruction for the time and location to which the letter is written, but Paul says it reaches back thousands of years to the creation of humanity.

And then we arrive at the last, and what many have tagged as the most difficult verse in this passage: verse 15:

But women will be saved through childbearing...

Paul is not saying that men are saved by faith and women are saved by childbearing. He is pointing to the ultimate difference between men and women in God’s design.

What is the ultimate distinction between men and women according to God’s design? The potential for bearing children.

Paul is illustrating the beautiful and unique roles that he has given to men and withheld from women: preaching and authority in the gathered worship of God’s people. And the beautiful and unique role

that he has withheld from men and given to women: life-giver of his greatest blessing, the blessing of children.

Paul is emphasizing that there is certainly a distinction between men and women, but that it is not in their value, but in their roles.

This is such an important part of the conversation. The New Testament is not subjugating women, but, rather, elevating them.

So now that we have a basic understanding of what this passage says, let's talk about what it means on a more practical level. So we will examine 3 areas: Identity, Interpretation, and Authority.

Identity

Fundamental to this discussion is the issue of human identity. Scripture teaches us that God created us and that he has given us our identity. Psalm 100:3 - "*Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his...*"

One of the essential pieces of this conversation is the understanding that God made us male and female for a reason as part of his order and design for his creation.

Previous generations worked hard to convince our culture of a significant and disastrous lie; a lie that some have referred to as the "interchangeability" of male and female. Our world has come to believe that there are no functional, foundational, or intrinsic differences between men and women.

And some of this is good, right? Some of the cultural advancements that have been achieved have been profitable. For example, society has come to recognize that women have the intellectual capacity to vote in elections. That's a really good advancement.

Women are as capable as men when it comes to leading organizations, to engaging in meaningful debate, to contributing to society. So some of what we have seen has been good and healthy progress.

But what is not good is the lie of interchangeability. Interchangeability is the lie that men and women are "the same." Or, as you hear it expressed so often, that men and women are "equal." If by equal you mean having the same value, dignity, and worth, then yes, absolutely! But if by "equal" you mean interchangeable, then absolutely not.

To believe that men and women are interchangeable is to believe that God's design of distinct and beautiful realities, nuances, gifts, and roles of human personhood can be redefined. It's to deny both the Bible and human biology.

We've seen where the lie of interchangeability has ended up – with the belief that by simply adding or removing genitals and augmenting physical features you can be something you are not. It's madness. And it's a lie that must be refuted with the truth.

And that truth is this: God created men and women to bear unique roles and functions in life, family, society, and church. And those unique roles and responsibilities are beautiful and good.

Womanhood and femininity should be celebrated and valued, not as interchangeable with maleness, but as distinct, fashioned by our God, and endowed with certain blessings, opportunities, and beautiful roles that men can not and will not fill.

If God intended us to be androgynous he would have created us that way. But he didn't. Instead, he has ordered his creation in such a way that there are differing roles and functions that must be celebrated and that are not interchangeable.

The order that God has created, including male and female, is a fundamental part of the identity that we are given by God.

The next area that we will look at is:

Interpretation

Pastors and theologians will refer to this as Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the study and principles of interpretation of Scripture. How do we understand the Bible? How do we teach and preach it in a meaningful and faithful way today?

And when it comes to our discussion today, two major hermeneutical errors are often made:

Error 1 - A cultural interpretation of God's design of the office of Pastor/Elder and the role of women in ministry.

While there may be confusion about how we make sense of what Paul has said, there was very little question about our topic today in the 1st century.

The Bible is clear in its teaching that the pastors and elders ordained in the first century were exclusively men.

Also, Jesus' disciples and ultimately the apostles were all men.

Also, the backdrop of Jewish history consisted of a system in which all priests and people in spiritual authority – people teaching the Torah publicly – were men.

And this is where much of the difficulty comes in. Almost everybody agrees that Jesus' understanding, Paul's understanding, and the rest of the Apostles' understanding was that the first Apostles and then the first pastors and elders were to be men. So how has the church gotten to a point where many denominations and congregations will ordain women?

It's not helpful to give you a caricature of what other people believe. There's this tendency, and you see it in politics all the time, to take another's beliefs or practices or actions and highlight the silly features and overlook the substance of their arguments. I don't want to do that today. And I will add that the justifications that differing churches use to deviate from the New Testament consensus and go their own way on this are many. There are at least 5 or 6 basic arguments that are used, and then many varieties of those.

But there is one thing that is consistent among all of those who have chosen to welcome women into the office of Pastor or Elder: a belief that we are free to take scripture out of its given context and reinterpret the "heart" of it in light of the current culture.

And that is exactly the case with this conversation. We are taking something that God has said and established in a fairly clear manner and reinterpreting it in a world and culture that denies the order that God has put in place. Culture has labeled God's order for church and home as outmoded and even oppressive.

The problems with that approach to interpreting scripture are many. We could be here all day. But let me share two problems:

First - it places mankind and the current culture as the theological referee.

Rather than just simply asking "What does Scripture say about this," this approach allows teachers, preachers, and theologians to dream up whatever they think Jesus might say if he were today. It allows us to place into the mouth of God the words that we wish he would have said.

It's a rejection of the sufficiency of scripture. What the Bible says is perceived as embarrassing and regressive, and so this approach allows us to update what God has said for a modern audience. I think you all see the problem with this.

But there's another problem with the approach and that's this: it can be used to attack anything that we don't like in the Bible.

If we can reinvent God's view of issues that he has spoken pretty clearly about in view of a changed culture, where does that train stop?

We don't have to wonder where the train stops. We can look around at church bodies that have adopted this model. A church that claims a similar theological heritage to ours has, in recent years, ordained a trans bishop.

The reality is that the train doesn't stop. It devolves and eventually crashes into the ravine of Godlessness.

If God says something that you don't like, something that you don't agree with, this approach to scripture allows you to find a creative way around it. It's full of creative ways to deny what God has said.

Error 2 - The tendency to interpret with our desires first.

Let me explain this by giving a real-life example. One of the verses that is used most often by those arguing for the ordination of women is Galatians 3:28 - It says this: "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

Some take the phrase "nor is there male and female" as if this is proof that in Christ any distinction between biological sexes is erased. But the truth is, this verse only says that if you want it to say that.

Look at the larger context. Let's read the passage in its context starting with Galatians 3:26: "*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*"

Is Paul saying that because of Jesus there is no longer a distinction between men and women? Of course not.

He's saying that, regarding your salvation, there is no difference between Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, male or female. We are all children of God through faith. This is an amazing message. Let's not gut or pervert the message to prove a point that the text isn't trying to prove. This is the gospel: it is by FAITH that you are saved. He's not erasing biological sex or God's order for his creation. It's saying that when it comes to God's love for us in Christ and our eternal hope of salvation, we are all children of God through faith: women and men the same.

This and the other verses that are used to advocate for a view of gender and the office of pastor/elder that is different from the one taught in the New Testament are examples of interpreting with our desires first -- starting with an end in mind and grabbing scriptures to end up where you want.

And this leads directly into the last area that I want to discuss, and that's the area of:

Authority

On its most basic level, this is a question of whether or not we are willing to believe and submit to what the scriptures say, even when we don't like it.

And I'll be honest, I don't really like the way that God designed this. I think that many women would be more gifted in the pastoral office than I am. Better preachers, better leaders, more empathetic, better theologians. There are many women whose gifts are greater than mine. If God had asked my opinion, I would have told him that it's perfectly fine for women to serve in the office of pastor. But here's the reality: God didn't ask me. And my opinion doesn't matter, because I'm not the authority.

Our statement of faith as a church says that the Bible is "*the final authoritative guide for faith and conduct.*" In other words, the Bible gets the final say in all matters regarding faith and life. And while from my limited perspective, it seems that some women would be very capable and make good pastors and elders, I don't stand above scripture. I must submit to and subject myself to God's word. In faith and in life.

Whatever your position on this question, whether you agree with my reading of scripture or whether you think I'm just a product of the patriarchy, I beg you to consider this question: **Is the Bible the final source of authority in your faith and life?**

Are you willing to submit yourself to the Word of God even when you don't like it? Are you willing to submit yourself to the Word of God even when you can't understand why God would say what he's said? Are you under the word or over the word?

To re-arrange God's order is to tell God that he's wrong. It's to put yourself above the Word of God.

We have all placed ourselves above the word of God in certain areas of our lives and our faith. God's call to us today is to repent. Repent of that first sin of our first parents: of doubting that God really said what he said. Repent of our desire to be the authority. Repent of our weaponization of the word to say what we want it to say. Repent of our doubt and unbelief. However you come down on this issue, please consider your relationship with the word. Are you under the word? Or are you placing yourself ABOVE the word? Only one can be true. And your sinful nature will consistently attempt to elevate you above the word. So repent of that today. And let's be people under the word.

And what we discover when we are under the word, submitting ourselves to the Word of God, is that true freedom is found in submission to God's word and God's order and God's plan and God's will.

Listen to what Jesus said in John 8:31-32: "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

If in a quest for liberation and equality, we end up abandoning God's design and order for human persons and for his church, we will inevitably find ourselves a rudderless ship in the middle of the ocean. That is not freedom. That is not liberation. That is a disaster. And we will end up wherever the currents take us.

But Jesus promises that if we abide in his word, if we place ourselves under his word, then we will know the truth and the truth will make us truly free.

Women play an irreplaceable role in ministry and the life of the church.

Women are created in God's image with the same value, dignity, and worth as men.

Women have gifts of teaching, discernment, and leadership that often exceed those of their male counterparts. It is not a matter of value, but a matter of God's authority over roles and order.

By faith, both women and men are children of God.

We are simply not free to change what God has said or to reform the order that he has established in his word. And therefore we confess in our statement of faith what the scriptures have said: *The office of pastor and elder is to be filled by men only.*

Sermon 6
WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

Preached on October 22, 2023

Job 42:1-6

John 9:1-3

Today is the last week in our series entitled “Asking For A Friend.” I’ve had such good feedback and so many discussions that have come from this series that I think you can probably be assured that we will do it again in the future.

One of the things that has been a guiding principle during this series was the desire to say clear things clearly. We tried to clearly say what God’s word says.

At the same time, we have to recognize that complex questions typically have complex answers. And while we want to be clear, we also don’t want to oversimplify complex issues, because that isn’t helpful for anyone. And so our goal has been to be clear and direct when it’s appropriate, but to also help you feel and sense the complexity of some of these questions.

Well today as we conclude this series, we’re answering the question “Why do the innocent suffer?” When we were collecting potential questions, this one came in a few different forms. For example, one person asked about the death of innocent children. Another asked about the specific example of the death of Job’s family. And still, another asked about how a truly good God could allow the depth of suffering that we see in our world. There were a couple of other questions that hit on this theme as well. And so rather than zoom in too deeply on any one question, we will today be dealing with a more generic question: “Why do the innocent suffer?”

We are going to shine a spotlight on two particular incidences of suffering that we see in the Bible that I think are helpful, and then we will discuss some common errors that we make when it comes to suffering, and then look at the reasons why God might allow suffering in our lives.

The first passage that I’ll read is near the end of Job. As you know, Job suffered greatly. He lost his family and essentially everything he had. Throughout the book of Job, there is a back-and-forth conversation dealing with our topic for today. But our reading from Job 42 is at the conclusion of Job’s interactions with God. God just called out Job for questioning his character and his motives. And our text today is Job’s response. It’s a description of what he had come to understand through his suffering.

Job 42:1-6

Then Job replied to the Lord:

2 *“I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*
3 *You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.*

4 *“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.’*
5 *My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.*
6 *Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.”*

And then we will turn to John chapter 9. And in this we see Jesus addressing a question from his disciples about a man who was born blind.

John 9:1-3

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

3 *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”*

Several common errors are made by humans as they try to make sense of the suffering that we see in our world.

So let’s look at some of those common errors. **First, we fail to see human suffering as a spiritual matter.**

That happens in any number of ways. Sometimes we chalk our suffering up to bad luck or misfortune. Other times we, like the society around us, just try to find secular explanations and solutions.

And this shouldn’t come as a surprise to you. Just look around at our world and how we, as a society, have tried to rationalize the problem of pain and suffering.

The secular academic world, for example, has felt the need to come up with a way to explain the problem of human suffering. And so, rather than point the finger at sin, they are constantly shifting the blame onto another people group. And what you’ll observe is that anytime there is a complex issue, society tries to find a convenient target to blame.

It might be the wealthy, or those in power, or the police. And once we make changes and we shift the power balance and still don't see any results, then it's the system. Then we need to dismantle the entire system because the system is causing suffering.

Now, don't get me wrong. There are some systemic problems related to wealth, race, and justice in our world. Without question. But it's not the fundamental problem. The fundamental problem is that we are a society of sinners. And sinners will do what sinners do. Human suffering is central to the human experience. And while we might be able to ease some measure of suffering through social or political policy, those policies aren't the cause of it. And most of us know that. We know that there are no simple answers because to be human is to suffer.

Jesus told us exactly that: He said, *"In this world, you will have trouble..."*

And so, as Christians, we reject the overly simplistic explanations or political solutions offered regarding the issue of human suffering. And we recognize that human suffering is a spiritual matter.

The next common error is this: **We forget that there are things we can't understand.**

Think of the words of Job in our sermon text. What was it that Job came to understand during his trials and sufferings?

Job says: *"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."*

Job comes to realize that there were things that he didn't understand. That he couldn't understand.

God sees all things, knows all things, and can recognize how things fit together. We don't have that luxury. We are stuck in the valley and don't have the same perspective on our suffering that God has.

I find this confession of Job to be so helpful. *"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand..."*

Deuteronomy 29 puts it this way: *"The secret things belong to the Lord our God..."*

And Paul says it this way in Romans 11:

*"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"*

We easily forget that we are so limited in our perspective. We look around us and it's easy to think that this is all there is to know. And so we evaluate our suffering in light of what we know. And we make judgments about God's character and goodness in light of what we know. Forgetting that there is so much that we can't see. So much we can't ever know.

We do well in our suffering and doubts and struggles to remember this confession of Job: *“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.”*

The third error that we make regarding human suffering is this: **We see ourselves as the center of the universe.**

This is sort of the perpetual human problem, isn't it? We try to construct our universe, or at least understand it, with us at the center.

If something happens that we like, we declare it “good”.
If something happens that we dislike, we declare it “bad”.

As if we are the center around which the universe spins. As if we are the ultimate moral authority.

Just previous to our text in Job, in chapter 38, God questions Job. And it's such a humbling couple of verses:

Job 38:4-6

“Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

*6 On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone...”*

This is such a healthy understanding, not only in making sense of suffering but in every aspect of life. We are not at the center of the universe. We don't determine good and bad, right and wrong. God is the center of the universe. And Just because we struggle to make sense of how he works and what he allows, doesn't mean that we have any grounds upon which to argue against him.

The fourth error that we make is that: **We have a tendency to presume guilt.**

We see this in our text from John 9 when the disciples ask “Who sinned, this guy or his parents?”

When we see something bad happening to other people we tend to presume that they did something to deserve this. This is the pagan idea of Karma, right? That you will get what you have coming to you.

If you suffer it certainly must be because you made God mad at you.

But Jesus says “Stop it!” Don't think that way. He tells his disciples that this didn't happen because someone sinned, but because God had a purpose for it.

You see this after every major natural disaster. There is some idiot television preacher who has a “word from the Lord” explaining exactly why an earthquake happened or why a hurricane hit a particular city.

But, of course, that’s trying to play God. Because we aren’t capable of understanding why God allows certain things in certain places and not others. But inevitably when it’s suffering related to someone we don’t like, we will always presume guilt.

But, not only do we have a tendency to presume guilt, we also:

Fifth, We have a tendency to presume innocence.

The word “innocent” is part of our question for today. Why do the *innocent* suffer?

We might rightfully respond to a question like this by asking, “Is anyone actually innocent?” And to get at the heart of that we have to define what we mean by innocent.

We might think of two types of innocence, or two planes upon which we can think of innocence: Horizontal vs vertical “innocence”.

When we speak of vertical innocence, we are referring to our standing before God. And scripture is pretty clear that, before God, there are no innocent people. None. Period.

Romans 3 says that all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God. And just in case we think there’s an age limit, David says that he was sinful from conception.

Scripture speaks clearly. No human person can stand before God with a claim of innocence.

Ephesians 2 says that we are all, by nature, children of wrath.

And so we have no claim to innocence before a holy, perfect God.

But, what many mean when they say “innocent” is horizontal innocence.

While we have no biblical argument for vertical innocence before God, scripture certainly recognizes levels of horizontal innocence. The Bible speaks of people who do good and people who do bad. Scripture speaks of the preciousness of children and warns against those who would corrupt it.

It’s the conflating or confusion of these two types of innocence that causes some of the problems. All human persons, from the very beginning of our existence, are guilty sinners before God. You don’t have to like that, but it’s what the Bible teaches in both the Old and New Testaments.

You might say, well what about “the age of accountability.” And my simple response is that no such thing exists. The age of accountability is a product of human logic and is not in the Bible.

We are all deserving of God’s wrath. God owes us nothing. And so we want to be careful that we don’t presume some innocence that just isn’t fact or reality. You may be less sinful in terms of volume and severity than your neighbor, but you are still a sinner guilty before God.

Don’t presume guilt like the disciples in John 9, but also don’t presume innocence.

And I understand that can sound cold. And so that brings me to the final error that I will discuss, and that’s:

Sixth, We forget the goodness of God.

This is truly the point in the discussion where faith enters in. You will not be able to make any sense of human suffering without the belief that God is Good, even when we can’t make sense of it, and even when it feels like he isn’t.

If you believe that God is good, then you can respond like Job in Chapter 1 when he says “*The Lord Gives and the Lord Takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*”

But you can ONLY declare praise to God amid suffering if you believe that he truly is good: that all that he does is good, even when our eyes and our feelings say otherwise.

And so this is a critical part of the discussion. That Scripture teaches that God is good in everything that he does. Every day. In every situation.

Six errors:

We fail to see human suffering as a spiritual matter.

We forget that there are things we can’t understand.

We see ourselves as the center of the universe.

We have a tendency to presume guilt.

We have a tendency to presume innocence.

We forget the goodness of God.

Let’s now consider why God might allow suffering. I say the word “*might*” because we always want to assume the posture of Job from our text. We want to consider suffering with the realization that we don’t see everything and we don’t know everything. And we don’t want to make the mistake of the disciples in our text from John, assuming that there is a direct behavioral or moral cause of the suffering.

And so why might God allow suffering in our lives?

I want to preface this by saying that there are a thousand stories of deep suffering just in this room this morning. Essentially all of us could look back at our lives and identify one or five or a dozen stories or examples or situations of deep suffering.

Some of you had a fairytale marriage that fell apart. Some of you are alienated from family members that you once held so dear. Some of you have been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused. Some of you have buried your children. Some of you have been abandoned. And, at the same time, some of you have been the cause of some of these types of pain in another, and have been unable to forgive yourself. Some of you have suffered debilitating pain or chronic illness. Some of you have been tortured by your brain chemistry your entire life. Some of you have wrestled internally with your sexuality. And the list could go on and on.

There are many instances and varieties of suffering represented here this morning. And I want to make sure you hear this. These reasons why God *might* allow suffering in our lives are exactly that. I'm not God. And so I don't know exactly why you have experienced what you have experienced. I don't know why God has allowed a certain painful path for your life and spared another person from that same path. And so don't hear these as the pastor saying this is why you suffered or are suffering. Hear these as questions. Could it be? Could it be that this is what God had in mind when he allowed this? Could this be a window through which I can begin to grasp God's purposes? Could it be that God was doing THIS during that dark time?

And so with that in mind, let's consider why God might allow suffering in our lives:

First, Suffering can cause our eyes to be opened to God.

In Job's story, we find this amazing confession. Listen to how Job describes the change that happened because of his suffering:

Job 42:5 - "*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.*"

Job says that because of his suffering, he went from having heard of God, to actually knowing God and seeing God.

The man who was born blind had the same testimony. When grilled by the Pharisees, he says that he had no idea who Jesus was. We see that in the opening words of the passage. The man doesn't approach Jesus. It is Jesus and the disciples who see this blind man and the disciples make their inquiry of Jesus: "*Who sinned?*"

But by the end of the chapter, things had changed dramatically. In John 9:38: the Blind man declares, "*Lord, I believe!*"

So God used the suffering of Job and the suffering of the blind man to open both of their eyes to him. Both stories end with the sufferers seeing God.

Some of you have had this very experience. God used times of suffering and pain to open your eyes to see him.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon used the illustration of a ship on the ocean overloaded with things. So much stuff piled on this ship. Listen to what Spurgeon says:

“You are like a ship that is going down through overloading, and you will have to be unloaded so that you may float—and blessed is that hand of God that does unload you of many an earthly joy, so that you may find your all in the world to come! Affliction is God’s black dog that he sends after wandering sheep to bring them back to the fold.”

Is it possible that God has allowed suffering to take place so that our eyes might be opened to him?

Second, Suffering can be the training ground for character and hope.

Romans 5:3-4 says: *“...we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.”*

Our nature tells us that suffering will destroy us. But God tells us that suffering produces something. It produces perseverance, which in turn produces character and then hope.

In other words, suffering leads to us being who God wants us to be and having our eyes focused where God wants our eyes to be focused.

1 Peter 4:1-2 - *“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. 2 As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.”*

Suffering changes us. It changes who we are and what we live for and who we worship.

Or, think of it this way: Suffering can make our pride seem foolish. We take pride in what we do and how strong we are, how smart we are, how beautiful we are, how wealthy we are. And there are times when God takes those things away so that we see just how utterly foolish our pride is.

And when we come to the end of ourselves, we are now ready to see and believe and receive the sufficiency of Christ and his grace. As long as we are trusting in ourselves, we perceive no need for Christ. But when we suffer God changes us. He releases our grip on the things of this world and opens our hands, readying us to receive the provision and sufficiency of Christ.

Suffering can cause our eyes to be opened to God.

Suffering can be the training ground for character and hope.

Third, Suffering can make us long for Christ's return.

When Jesus returns he will, in the words of Tolkien in *The Return of the King*, "make everything sad come untrue."

In suffering, our vision is focused and narrowed. We stop looking for temporary and passing solutions and begin seeking permanent and eternal solutions.

Why is it that church attendance and openness to faith increase as we age? It's not because we become more foolish or gullible. It's because we've suffered and have seen the inadequacy of ourselves. We've come to recognize that government isn't the solution and money isn't the solution. Suffering focuses our attention. And, specifically, it focuses us on the longing for things to be made right.

And that's the promise of scripture. That there is coming a day when all will be made right. And what is almost always true is that the people who most readily long for Christ to return are those who have suffered. Those who have loosened their grip on this world and are living with great hope for the next.

And so is it possible that God has allowed suffering so that your eyes would be opened to him? So that we would be who God wants us to be, and so that we would long for Christ's return.

Why do the innocent suffer? I've been helped by the way that CS Lewis processed this and related questions: "*Suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting.*" - CS Lewis (*A Grief Observed*).

Suppose that God is wholly good and wants nothing but the very best for you. He wants you to trust in him alone. He wants your heart to desire the right things. He wants you to long for eternity, and not be distracted by the empty promises and lies of this world.

Then isn't it possible that in his goodness, in his kindness, in his love for you, he will go on cutting? Focusing your attention. Reminding you that you aren't God and that you don't see and understand everything. And leaving you with a fierce longing for all to be made right.

Isn't it possible that a Good God allows suffering because we need it?

In 1 Peter 5:10-11, Peter writes these words to sufferers: "*And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*"

Our suffering today is temporary, Peter says, because of the promises of God. Because Jesus suffered once for your sin and mine, and he overcame the grave, and he has gone to prepare a place for us where sin and suffering are no more.

Our suffering today, while oh so difficult, is temporary. It will not last. Because God has promised. And because he is good.

We can't fully wrap our minds around human suffering. We can't make perfect sense of everything that we experience. I can't tell you exactly why that event in your life took place. Because to do that I'd have to be God.

But I can tell you that God is good in all that he does. And I can tell you that he cares about you more than you could ever know. And I can tell you that Jesus is with you right now, he will never leave or forsake you. And I can tell you that he is coming again to make everything right.

Did you notice how our text in Job ended? Job 42:6 - *“Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”*

Job humbles himself before God and repents. He says, “God, I trust you. You are right and good, even when I can't see it.”

I leave you today with these words from 1 Peter 5.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:10-11)