

# TABLETALK

JANUARY 2025 | \$5



# Surrounded by Death

**I** HAVE STRUGGLED FOR WEEKS to write this article. As I write in the dark, early-morning hours from my study at home, I am reflecting on the memorial and graveside services I conducted yesterday for a friend and member of our church. A few days ago, I was speaking with a dear couple whose son died in a car accident when he was sixteen. The next day, I learned of the passing of a very close friend's grandmother, who was like a mother to him, and just yesterday morning his dear mother-in-law, who lives with him and his family, was admitted to the emergency room. Two months ago, my precious mother passed away, and her memorial service took place only two weeks after the memorial service for my stepfather. Both had been diagnosed last spring with different types of dementia. Last month marked the thirty-second anniversary of the passing of my father in 1992 at the age of 68, whose first son was killed in a hunting accident at the age of sixteen. My father would have turned 100 years old in 2024. My experiences are not unique. The harsh realities of disease and death surround us. Death and disease come to every family, and all of us mourn. Our stories and experiences with disease and death are all similar because we are all sons and daughters of Adam, in whom we all died because we all sinned in him and fell into a state of sin and misery with him. Thomas Watson said, "We spend our years with sighing. It is a valley of tears. But death is the funeral of all our sorrows."

Yet although we all mourn, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). For we who are united to Christ alone through faith alone by the grace of God alone rejoice in the sure and certain hope that to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21). Therefore, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6-8). The gospel of Jesus Christ makes us no longer fear the grave. Indeed, as George Herbert wrote, "Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener." **TC**

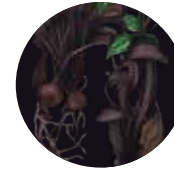
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## The ORIGIN of DEATH



Where can we begin as we think about the Bible's testimony to death and dying? We will begin . . . at the beginning. The first three chapters of the Bible, in fact, give us a wealth of information about life and death. We may look at five points in particular that Genesis 1–3 raises.

### DEATH IS NOT PART OF THE ORIGINAL CREATION

First, the Bible makes it clear that God does not build human death into the original creation. Genesis opens with the words "In the beginning, God . . ." (1:1). Before the world was, there was only God. And God is the living and the true God, in

whom there is no death or dying. He is life itself.

God, and God alone, makes the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing (v. 1b; Heb. 11:3). When God creates the world, He both forms and fills—He creates habitations and sets "living creatures" in them (Gen. 1:20–21, 24). These living creatures are, in turn, commanded to be "fruitful and multiply" (v. 22). Living creatures model themselves after their Creator by bringing life into the world.

Then God creates man, the crown of creation, the only creature who is said to be made "in our image, after our likeness" (v. 26). The image of the living God presides over the life of the creation ("let them have dominion"). Men and women likewise must be "fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (v. 28).

When God finishes making the world in the space of six days, He reviews the whole of His handiwork with complete satisfaction: "And behold, it was very good" (v. 31). The living God makes a world that is teeming with life and suited to promoting the life of His creatures. His creatures are endowed with the potential to produce more life. This includes human beings. All this is good. There is no hint whatsoever from the original creation that humans will die.

### GOD CREATED MAN A LIVING BEING, BODY AND SOUL

Second, Scripture tells us that God specially created man. We read a detailed description of Adam's creation in Genesis 2:7: "Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." God shows us something important about our humanity. God made Adam in two stages, reflecting the two constitutive parts of man. First, there is Adam's body. Adam's body was

formed immediately by God from the dust of the earth. Second, there is Adam's soul. Adam's soul was formed when God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Only when soul and body are joined together (and not before) does Adam become a "living creature." We may fairly infer that if a person's soul and body were ever to be separated, that person would cease to be a living creature. But there is no hint of death or of the principle of death in man as God creates him in Genesis 1–2. God created us, body and soul, to be living creatures in fellowship with Him and to serve Him on this earth.

### DEATH IS THE PENALTY OF SIN

Third, before sin enters the world, God gives Adam a warning in the garden of Eden: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16–17). It is important to remember that God speaks these words to Adam before he sins or is even tempted to sin. Even before Adam's fall into sin, then, Adam had some idea or notion of what death was. To die is to be deprived of life, to lose the life that Adam had. Death, furthermore, was the penalty for disobeying God's command. Death, in the words of the Apostle, is "the wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23). Consequently, after Adam sins, God tells him that the threatened penalty will surely come upon him: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). God's words make it clear that death for Adam will be the separation of his body and soul, and the return of his body whence it came—the dust of the ground.

Death is not, as so many understand it, a natural part of the cycle of life and

existence. It is not built into our humanity. Death is not a debt to nature but is God's judgment on sin. Had sin not entered the world, death would have remained an abstract idea to human beings.

#### DEATH IS UNIVERSAL IN ITS SCOPE

Fourth, death is universal in its scope. Experience tells us that all people will die. So does Scripture: "It is appointed for man to die once" (Heb. 9:27). This is graphically demonstrated in the genealogy of Genesis 5, just a couple of chapters after Adam's fall into sin. Early in the

chapter we read, "Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died" (v. 5). The phrase "and he died" becomes a lamentable refrain throughout the chapter. All of Adam's listed descendants die. The one exception in Genesis 5 proves the rule: "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (v. 24). Enoch does not experience death, but God removes him all the same from the face of the earth. Scripture is plain: no one escapes death. Neither rich nor poor. Neither powerful nor downtrodden. Neither beautiful nor ugly. Neither strong nor

weak. Neither pious nor wicked. Death strikes at all ages and stages of life—the aged, people in their prime, youths, infants, even children in the womb. There are, of course, all the precursors to death that afflict people in this life—disease, injury, illness, bodily weakness, mental decay. These are not merely "part of living" or "growing old" but hints and harbingers of death. Why is it that all die? [Editorial note: This question is explored further in chapter 5, *Facing the Last Enemy*.] For now, it is enough to say that if all die, then it is because all have sinned (see Rom. 5:12b). God is a just God. Death is the penalty of sin. God would not inflict death for no reason at all. He does not treat the innocent as though they were guilty. The universal reign of death testifies to the universal reach of sin in humanity.

#### DEATH IS COSMIC IN ITS REACH

Fifth, death is cosmic in its reach. We often think of death in terms of individual human beings. And that, of course, is right. But the Bible tells us that accompanying the infliction of death as the penalty for sin is the curse of God on the creation. Listen to what God tells Adam after Adam has sinned against God: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field" (Gen. 3:17–18). The world will continue on, and Adam will continue to work the ground, just as God had commanded him at his creation. From now on, however, the world lies under God's curse. It will be marked and marred by frustration, pain, suffering, and death. The Apostle Paul gives eloquent testimony to this sad reality:

*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself*

*will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom. 8:20–22)*

The creation did not, as it were, ask God to be the way that it now is. It has been brought into "bondage to corruption" and has been "subjected to futility." Animals suffer and die violent deaths. Earthquakes, wildfires, and hurricanes ravage the landscape. With one voice, then, the creation "groans together." But that groan accompanies the "pains of childbirth." This points to a greater, blessed reality that lies ahead—new heavens and a new earth. For the present, the creation is enslaved to decay and futility as the result of the entrance of sin, and with it death, into the world through Adam.

#### CONCLUSION

It is never pleasant to think about death. Yet death is real. It is not something that we can afford to ignore, to wish away, to sentimentalize, or to trivialize. Scripture owns up to the reality of death and does so from its opening pages. Issues of "life and death" importance mark the first three chapters of the Bible. If God wants us to think about death, then what does He want us to know? In the first place, death is loss. It is something to grieve and lament. It is not the way things are supposed to be. Therefore, it is the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). It is right to weep in the face of death. **✠**

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*God's words make it clear that death for Adam will be the separation of his body and soul, and the return of his body whence it came—the dust of the ground.*

## The DEATH of DEATH



I hate death. It is an enemy. No matter how many euphemisms we employ to distract us from its insidious reality, the fact remains that when loved ones “pass,” “depart this life,” or “fall asleep,” they are taken from us. They die. Relationships that we cherish are disrupted. Life as we have grown to know it irreversibly changes. Real loss results.

That is why I do not want a “celebration of life” when I die. I want a funeral. Death, in all its ugliness and unnaturalness, should be appropriately protested. It was not part of God’s original creation.

The truth is that death is a malevolent intruder that mocks both life and the Giver of life. Solomon recognized this, and it

caused him to publish his meditations on this painful reality:

*Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. (Eccl. 2:15–17)*

It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul calls death an enemy. It is the “last enemy.” The longer you live, the more familiar that enemy becomes. Not only that, but also the final battle with that enemy grows closer with each passing year.

Fortunately, Christians do not face death alone. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has gone before us. He has faced and defeated death. Each of the four Gospels describes our Savior’s battle with death in graphic detail. The three years of His public ministry were preparation for that cosmic conflict. Every event, every teaching, and every step that Jesus took was along the path that led to Calvary.

As He entered Jerusalem the Sunday before His crucifixion, Jesus spoke of the necessity of His impending death. With the cross only a few days in front of Him, He said: “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27). He was born to face death.

And face it He did, in all its repulsive, destructive fury. On the cross, Jesus experienced the agonies and shame of death. His body was torn. Oxygen stopped reaching His organs. His blood stopped flow-

ing and His heart stopped beating. After committing His spirit into the hands of His Father, “he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46). He died.

The visible realities of Jesus’ crucifixion and His physical death are the ones that resonate most with our senses. Watching someone die is a sober, grief-inducing experience. There is a last breath. A final heartbeat. A moment when death overtakes life. Jesus experienced that. Yet the physical trauma was not the most significant reality of His death. As has been well said, the soul of Jesus’ suffering was the suffering of His soul.

Scripture has a variety of ways to describe the internal suffering that death inflicted on Jesus. The fourth and final Servant Song found in the book of Isaiah (52:13–53:12) focuses on the painful experience that the Messiah must endure. Words such as “griefs,” “sorrows,” “stricken,” “smitten,” “pierced,” “crushed,” “oppressed,” “afflicted,” and “grief” are used to depict the agonies of our Lord in His crucifixion. They primarily describe not His physical suffering but “the anguish of his soul” (53:11) that He must experience to fulfill His mission.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, He labored in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane as He awaited His betrayal and arrest. Hours from having a crown of thorns pressed on His head and being nailed to a cross, knowing what He was facing, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” and then, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (Matt. 26:39, 42).

Why such graphic language by the prophet? Why such plaintive petitions by Jesus? After all, other men have faced unjust death—even the humiliating and torturous death by crucifixion—without such expressions of agony. Was the death

that Jesus experienced different from that of other men?

Indeed, it was—not because He experienced less than others who die but because He experienced much, much more. Because of who He is (His person) and what He was accomplishing (His work), Jesus' death is unique. Others die as mortal sinners. Jesus died as the eternal, sinless Son of God who became flesh. Others die as a consequence of the sin in which they participate as members of a fallen race. Jesus died as the only man who knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21) but who chose to lay down His life to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

“The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). God made that clear to Adam when He warned him not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden of Eden, “for,” God said, “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17).

The question can legitimately be asked, “Why didn't Adam and Eve immediately die the day they ate the forbidden fruit?” God judged them, showed grace to them, and provided forgiveness for them before exiling them from the garden. But He did not immediately bring their lives to an end. Why not?

We can understand the answer to this question when we consider that the Bible teaches that we all face three kinds of death in this world. They all result from sin. First, sin brings spiritual death by separating sinners from God's favor. Second, sin results in the decay leading to physical death when the soul is separated from the body. Third, eternal death results when a spiritually dead person experiences physical death. At that point, the sinner is cast into hell to endure everlasting punishment for sin against God.

Adam and Eve immediately experienced spiritual death when they ate the forbidden fruit. The wonderful fellowship and

communion that they had enjoyed with God was broken by sin. They immediately became spiritually lost, in need of being found, and spiritually dead, in need of spiritual life. Furthermore, their sin caused the seeds of physical death to be planted in their lives. Though they did not immediately die physically, from the moment of their disobedience they began the process of physically dying. Life as they had known it would now one day come to an end. What is even more tragic, because of their spiritual death and certain impending physical death, the prospect of eternal death loomed over them.

All this is what sin does. It separates us from the life of God. It brings death. Every cemetery you drive by is a testament to that original sin that sprouted in the garden of Eden and has since permeated Adam's race in every age. As Romans 5:12 says, “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”

We rightly teach our children, “In Adam's fall, we sinned all.” As our representative, Adam plunged the whole human race into sin when he fell. That is why funerals exist. That is why friends and loved ones, as well as you and I, face physical death.

That is also why each one of us came into this world spiritually dead. Sin separates us from God's favor. Sinners must be reborn by the power of God's Spirit so that they can turn away from sin and trust the Lord Jesus for salvation. Until our sin is dealt with, until it is forgiven, we remain spiritually dead, in need of new spiritual life.

Spiritually dead people are headed toward physical death, which, apart from the saving grace in Christ, will result in eternal death. All this is because of sin. For death to be destroyed, sin must be overturned.

That is exactly why the Son of God took on flesh. As Hebrews 2:14–15 explains:

*Sin separates us from God's favor. Until our sin is dealt with, until it is forgiven, we remain spiritually dead, in need of new spiritual life.*

*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

God became man to set us free from the power of sin, Satan, and death.

Jesus Christ, by His life of obedience to God's law, secured the spotless righteousness that God requires of every man, woman, and child. By His death on the cross, He atoned for the sins of His people, canceling the debt and condemnation that their sin incurs. By His resurrection from the dead, Jesus conquered death. As Peter put it on the day of Pentecost, “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24). It was not possible because He was and is the God-man.

All that Jesus accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection is freely given to those who believe. Through sheer grace,

God saves anyone and everyone who trusts Jesus as Lord. That grace, Paul says, “has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). By His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus “abolished” death. He destroyed it. He deactivated it.

Why, then, do believers still die? They don't—at least not spiritually or eternally. Though believers were once “dead in our trespasses,” by the power of the gospel God has “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5). Further, because we believe in God's only begotten Son, we will “not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Certainly, physical death—the separation of our bodies from our souls—still awaits us. But even that dimension of death has been defanged. By Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead, our Lord has demonstrated that He has defeated physical death, too. His resurrection guarantees the resurrection of all who by faith are “in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:20–23).

When a believer dies, his soul is transported into the presence of the Lord while his body returns to dust. This is what it means to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Physical death ushers the soul of a believer in Christ into the immediate presence of Christ. This is why Paul could say, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Believers have Christ now through faith. Upon physical death, their souls will have more of Christ, since faith is no longer needed to behold Him. In that disembodied state, they remain until the day of Christ’s return, when their “perishable” bodies will be raised to be “imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:42; see vv. 35–49; 1 Thess. 4:13–17).

This understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus transforms how those who trust Him understand and face their own death. Physical death, though still “the last enemy,” is a defeated enemy for Christians. Death cannot destroy believers because our Savior has destroyed it. It immediately delivers us into the presence of Christ, where we will await its final, ultimate banishment on the day of the resurrection of our bodies in Him.

So with the Apostle Paul, every Christian can say:

*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. (1 Cor. 15:54–56)*


Christ has taken away our sin and fully satisfied the just demands of the law. One Puritan referred to death as leaving the land of the dying and entering the land of the living.

The nineteenth-century evangelist D.L. Moody expressed this confidence when he wrote in his autobiography:

*Someday you will read in the papers that Moody is dead. Don’t you believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I was born of the flesh in 1837, I was born of the spirit in 1855. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit shall live forever.*

Indeed, Christians will live forever because the death of death is certain. The Captain of our salvation has defeated it. Like a mortally wounded animal, it still thrashes about, but the day is coming when even the last vestiges of it will be completely removed. On that day, our Lord will make everything new. On that day, there will be a new heaven and a new earth in which only righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13). God Himself will live personally and directly with His people. There will be no more “mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” God Himself “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:4).

So at my funeral, I hope that those who gather will, in addition to protesting death, also appropriately mock it as a defeated enemy. Though it has done its worst, it does not and cannot have the last word. Jesus has secured forever the death of death by His life, death, and resurrection.

Therefore, in Christ and with Christ, the destiny of every believer is this: though we die, we most assuredly will live. 

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## The INTERMEDIATE STATE



My father died more than forty years ago as a result of a tragic accident at home. I remember standing at his graveside, having just watched his coffin being lowered into the ground. In those moments of solemn silence, a ministerial colleague stood beside me and quietly repeated the words of answer 37 from the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

*The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection.*

In my hour of loss, I found that summary statement of biblical truth enormously

*We are created as embodied souls, and the separation of soul and body is only a temporary condition between death and the final resurrection.*

encouraging and comforting. In pastoral ministry, I have frequently quoted the same words to grieving loved ones.

Death is a solemn reality that everyone must face. Ever since the fall into sin, humanity has had to deal with the effects of sin, and chief among those effects is the reality of death. Adam was made from the dirt and dust of the ground, and at death we return to that condition. God explained this to our first parents:

*“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Gen. 3:19)*

At death, every human body, except one, sees corruption (Acts 13:36). But the wonderful truth for Christian believers is that while the human body may disintegrate

and return to dust, the human soul does not. There is an aspect of every human person that never dies. Our soul, which the Westminster divines referred to as “an immortal subsistence,” never dies nor sleeps but returns to God who gave it (Eccl. 12:7).

The biblical evidence to support this truth about what happens to believers at death is clear. In Philippians 1, Paul faces a dilemma. He is unsure what he might choose with regard to his personal future. If he were to depart, he would go to be with Christ. If he were to stay alive, it would be so that he might continue his ministry among the Philippians. Both options have their appeal, and he is fully convinced that if he departs this life, he will be with Christ, which is “far better” (v. 23).

In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul again compares the options of being at home in the body and away from the Lord and being

away from the body and at home with the Lord. Clearly, he understands that the souls of believers will be with the Lord when they are separated from their bodies at physical death.

The words of Jesus to the penitent thief who was crucified next to Him are also instructive. In response to his expression of faith, Jesus assures him, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Jesus knows that the thief will soon die, and He knows that the thief’s body will be buried. Jesus is affirming that there is a separable part of human nature, the immaterial soul, which in the case of the believing thief will upon his death go to be with Jesus in God’s presence, which He describes as “paradise.”

So when a believer dies, his soul goes immediately into God’s presence, while his body goes to the grave. He enters what theologians have called the *intermediate state*, a period between physical death and the final, future bodily resurrection. This distinction between the intermediate state and the final state helps us think clearly about the Christian’s future after death.

Some people blur the various stages of the afterlife. Many unbelievers seem to think that those who have died are now in heaven doing whatever they did on earth, only better. If they enjoyed golf, they are now smashing long drives down the middle of a celestial fairway. If they were musicians, they may be jamming with some heavenly ensemble. While unbelievers speculate on the destiny of their friends without any biblical justification, believers need to avoid the tendency to run all of God’s promised future together and assume that at death we get everything that God has promised all at once.

We believe that our loved ones who died trusting in Jesus are now “with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), but we understand that they have not yet received all that God has

promised them. They are still waiting for their resurrection bodies. On the last day, when Jesus raises the dead, disembodied souls will be reunited with their bodies, which will then be made glorious and imperishable (1 Cor. 15:53–55), in preparation for an eternal life in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21).

We are created as embodied souls, and the separation of soul and body is only a temporary condition between death and the final resurrection. Our resurrection at the last day, when our souls will be reunited with our bodies, is the restoration of our true condition in which we were created. The intermediate state is a wonderful gift that can be described as *paradise*, but it is not the final state, when all things will be brought to a glorious perfection and completion.

The Bible says little about the intermediate state as compared to the future state. John Calvin offers some wisdom on this topic:

*It is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our souls’ intermediate state. Many torment themselves overmuch with disputing as to what place the souls occupy and whether or not they already enjoy heavenly glory. Yet it is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know. Scripture goes no farther than to say that Christ is present with them, and receives them into paradise (cf. John 12:32) that they may obtain consolation, while the souls of the reprobate suffer such torments as they deserve. (Institutes 3.25.6)*

The biblical data does not answer all our questions about the intermediate state, but what the Bible says should be enough for us. That is because the intermediate state is not the main focus of Scripture. Rather, the Bible’s emphasis is on the great

climax of history when Jesus returns to resurrect and judge all people and to restore all things.

In the past, some have spoken about “soul sleep,” believing that at our death we fall asleep and reawaken only on the day of resurrection. This idea finds its roots in the “sleeping” metaphor that is often used for bodily death. Although this metaphor appears in Scripture, a careful study shows that the metaphor of sleep refers only to the earthly body’s inanimate state after death, not to the soul.

A consideration of the intermediate state reminds us of another truth, that of the two destinies of humankind described in the Scriptures. Christ’s words of reassurance to the penitent thief are not spoken to the other criminal, who was unrepentant. Those who are unrepentant end up in their “own place” (Acts 1:25), a location quite different from the destination of the righteous. The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is another example of the two different and permanent destinies that await believers and unbelievers after death. The Bible does not mention any third location for the souls of the departed.

According to Roman Catholic teaching, purgatory is the place where sinners, after death, continue to make satisfaction for their sins. The sins of this life must be purified and cleansed in purgatory, thus making one fit for God’s holy presence in heaven. So the intermediate state, the period between death and the future state, is a time for sanctification and salvation.

But there is no evidence in Scripture to support purgatory or the possibility of earning or meriting salvation after death. In fact, the Bible is clear that one’s eternal destiny is sealed and determined at the point of death. The hope of eternal life is based on one’s response to Jesus Christ in this life (1 John 5:11–12). A lawyer (Luke

10:25–28) asks how he may inherit eternal life, but Jesus does not indicate that this goal is achievable after death. Similarly, Nicodemus is told that one must be born again if one wants to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3), with no indication given that this transaction can happen after one has died.

Our salvation and our hope of glory are secured by trusting completely and entirely in Christ crucified and risen from the dead. We stand clothed in His perfect righteousness, imputed to us by faith alone, with no need to spend time in purgatory, seeking further merit or atonement.

Thomas Boston (1676–1732), in his famous work *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, does not reflect at length on the details of an intermediate state. Rather, in the face of death, he offers a great word of hope and confidence to all who trust in Christ: The righteous at death are “adorned with robes of glory,” and in departing from this present world “they shall have a joyful entrance into the other world.” He continues:

*Death can do them no harm. It cannot even hurt their bodies: for though it separates the soul from the body, it cannot separate the body from the Lord Jesus Christ. Even death is to them but sleep in Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14). They continue members of Christ, though in a grave. Their dust is precious dust, laid up in the grave as in their Lord’s cabinet. They lie in a grave mellowing, as precious fruit laid up to be brought forth to him at the resurrection.* ■

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## PREPARING *for* DEATH



About 150,000 people die every day, adding up to sixty million deaths per year. Most of us rarely consider these global numbers, but accidents, disease, and aging bodies remind us that every generation from Adam and Eve onward has experienced the end of this life and will continue to do so, until the day of the return of our Lord. The

writer of Hebrews reminds us that God has appointed our death as the moment of transition to giving account to Him: “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Unless the Lord returns first, the specific day for our death is steadily approaching. We do not know when it will be. Many assume

and wish it to be distant. God's Word, though, tells us that we should live with the awareness that it may not be far away. The rich fool said, "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry,'" not realizing that God had decreed, "This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:19–20). Even if death is decades away, that is not long, as any elderly person will tell you. A realistic, sober awareness of coming death is good. No doubt this is a reason that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes tells us that it is "better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting" (Eccl. 7:2), as much as we enjoy the latter. For the Christian, a healthy awareness of our death gives perspective on the present, as well as humble and hopeful anticipation for the future. Realizing that the day of our death is coming, how can we meaningfully prepare for it?

First, preparing for our death requires taking God's Word to heart. This starts by coming to our Lord in faith, confessing our sin to Him so that we enter eternal life in communion with the triune God through Christ. Steady, ordinary use of the means of grace is what our Lord delights to use to nourish and strengthen us in life with Him that is eternal. Walking through life in communion with the living God prepares us for both the easy and hard things that He will call us through on the way to death. Walking close to Him also prepares us for the far greater reality of entering His glorious presence the moment that we do die. When we become distracted spiritually, stagnating or backsliding in the Christian life, we put ourselves on a trajectory of being poorly prepared for navigating anything well, whether prosperity, adversity, or the day of our death. Do you want to be ready for your death? Ask the Lord to increase your faith, giving you increased spiritual sight of who He is and the wondrous works He

has done and is doing. Ask Him to deepen your repentance and increase your loving, thankful communion with Him.


Living in communion with God also helps address our fear of death. Most people fear death. Non-Christians do because even a suppressed conscience whispers the reality of the holiness of God; they continue in unrepentant sin against the reality of their infinite Creator and Sustainer. Many Christians also fear death, both because we have greater awareness of our own sin and the holiness of our God and because death itself is unknown to us. We have never died nor experienced what comes afterward, so we fear the final trial of death, the last enemy. Yet our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, has conquered sin and death ahead of us and for us. He is infinitely stronger and greater than our sins, fears, and frailty. While we tremble at the thought of holy judgment, we have God's sure promise that Christ is our "righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). We can safely entrust ourselves to Him. His promise is that "whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). By our Lord's grace, we can grow in echoing the Apostle Paul: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . . To depart and be with Christ . . . is far better" (Phil. 1:21–23). Countless Christians have safely passed through death into His presence ahead of us.

A second, related aspect of preparing for death by taking God's Word to heart is stewarding the spiritual riches, life, gifts, skills, responsibilities, and opportunities that the Lord gives us. Every Christian has sad regrets that can find their answer only in Christ Jesus, their all-sufficient Savior, but no Christian on the day of his death will regret the times he spent in communion with God. You will not regret your growth in sanctification. You will not regret striving for increasing victories over old patterns of sin. You will not regret the time that you

chose to spend in spiritually nourishing books and teaching. You will not regret choosing to spend more time listening to the good news of the kingdom. You will not regret time spent loving your husband or wife, children, friends, and neighbors by listening, talking, and encouraging them in the Lord. You will not regret time spent in prayer, the Word, and worship. You will not regret giving away money to Christ's work in the world. You will not regret stretching yourself to share the gospel with the lost. You will not regret time spent with lonely, elderly saints. Pursuing the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, and excellent (Phil. 4:8), looking to Jesus (Heb. 12:1–2), brings great goodness now and prepares us well for our deaths.

A third area of preparation involves wise practical planning with our loved ones, along with planning with the local church. Some congregations have new members fill out a brief form listing favorite Scripture passages, psalms, and hymns in preparation for their funerals so that elders and deacons can be better prepared in coming alongside a grieving family. This provides opportunity to help all members prepare for death, including those who do not have healthy family ties outside the spiritual family of the church. For husbands, wives, and families, some prayerful conversation about at least the contours of desired care in old age, and illnesses leading to death, is spiritually and practically beneficial. Once children reach the age of eighteen, visiting a lawyer to create a set of disability and estate plan documents is an act of good stewardship and wise love for those around us—as it is for any adult without established plans. This process will name personal representatives, guardians, trustees, and beneficiaries in advance, saving others from probate courts with significant, needless work and time-consuming difficulties. It is wise to append a list of bank accounts, retirement

and investment accounts, mortgage and loan information, and utility accounts, as well as technology (computers, phones, etc.), social media, and other online account information, to your storage of estate documents. Making sure that these things are done and updating them as needed stewards the care of your life and death and the time, emotion, and energy needed by others to navigate your affairs in the time leading to and after your death.

Finally, preparing well for death includes helping others prepare for death. The center of this is in our glad mutual encouragement to come and worship the Lord together, "not neglecting to meet together. . . . but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25). We hear the Lord Himself speak to us by His Word together. We pray together, including for one another. Worshipping the Lord together, we sing, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). We participate in the sacraments together, receiving God's sure promises in communion with Christ. Talking together in Christian fellowship about life, death, and the things to come—heaven, hell, the consummation of all things, and the new creation—helps us all place our coming deaths in the context that our Lord desires for us. Ministering His love and wisdom to each other helps us see why "the death of his saints" is "precious in the sight of the LORD" (Ps. 116:15). As we do, we are strengthened with anticipation for the coming day when He "will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore," because "God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev. 21:3–4). 

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## When DEATH Is NO MORE



In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan (1628–88) describes the final stage of Christian and Hopeful's journey—crossing a turbulent river (symbolizing death) to gain entrance into the Celestial City. Christian, distressed by doubts and troubled by his sin, finds encouragement from his companion, who reminds Christian

of the Lord's continuing presence, even in death: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (Isa. 43:2). With that, they both took courage, the waters stilled, and they found firm footing. As they entered the Celestial City, Bunyan notes that "they left

their mortal garments behind them in the river."

The Bible describes death as the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26), a tragic reality that every person will face (Heb. 9:27) because of the fall, except for those who are alive at Christ's return (1 Thess. 4:17). The Christian today can find great comfort in the future reality when death is no more, however, for the believer's great comfort is that he belongs—body and soul, in life and in death—to his faithful Savior, Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism 1).

### CHRIST'S RETURN

Christ's return, also referred to as His second coming, will be a literal and personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ. It will initiate a series of events—the general resurrection, final judgment, and eternal state—often considered collectively as the last day, when He will usher in a new heaven and a new earth where God will dwell with His people (Rev. 21:1–5). Thus, Christ's return relates to the reverse of the curse and the eschatological hope of the restoration of all things, even creation itself (Rom. 8:19–22). At the last day, death will finally be defeated and will give way to the full consummation of the victory that Christ has secured through His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session at the Father's right hand.

When the gospel is preached throughout the whole world, the "end will come" and Christ will return "on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:14, 30). Christ's return will be public, so that "every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7), and it will be glorious and triumphant.

Christ's return will also catch people by surprise, for nobody knows the exact time of His coming (Matt. 24:36). In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus describes five wise virgins and five foolish virgins who went to meet the bridegroom. The

wise took extra oil, while the foolish did not. The bridegroom was delayed, and the virgins all became drowsy and slept. Suddenly, the cry came that the bridegroom had come. The foolish virgins did not have enough oil and had to leave to buy some. But the wise virgins were prepared and entered the marriage feast with the bridegroom. Then Jesus says, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matt. 25:13). Christ will come "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2), so we are to understand that Christ's return is always near (Heb. 10:25).

Thus, the Christian is to be ready for Christ's return by leading a life that is pleasing to Him in faithful obedience. The reality of the second coming of Christ invites believers to live now with an expectation of the fulfillment of God's promises and to live with a sense of purpose and mission. Such an event puts our present tasks and vocations in their proper perspective. If we know that Christ could return at any moment, such a thought shapes both our morality and the meaning with which we live. We will be more eager to bear witness about Jesus to our friends and neighbors, and we will be more focused on that which truly matters in this life. So let us be prepared for His coming.

### THE GENERAL RESURRECTION

When Christ returns, both the "just and the unjust" will rise from the dead (Acts 24:15), which is often referred to as the general resurrection. We find this reality referenced in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body." The Westminster Larger Catechism states, "The bodies of the just, by the Spirit of Christ, and by virtue of his resurrection as their head, shall be raised in power, spiritual, incorruptible, and made like to his glorious body." On the other hand, "the bodies of the wicked shall be raised

up in dishonor by him, as an offended judge” (Q&A 87).

The Old Testament speaks of the general resurrection as something of hope and joy for the believer. Isaiah 26:19 states: “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” Daniel’s vision captures the resurrection of both the just and the unjust—namely, that “those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

The New Testament provides greater clarity on the resurrection from the dead. The Apostle John writes that the “hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28–29). Paul speaks of Christ’s resurrection as the “firstfruits” of all who are united to Him: “Each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:23). If Christ

has not been raised, neither will we be raised. But in fact, Christ has been raised, which is the guarantee of our resurrection at the last day. Thus, Christ’s resurrection is both the pattern and the promise of the believer’s resurrection.

When considering the general resurrection, Paul contrasts our present bodies—frail, weak, and subject to death—with our glorified bodies, when death is no more. Thus, it not only is a spiritual event but also involves the physical glorification of the body, which will be imperishable and glorious, in contrast to the mortal and weak body that is sown.

The doctrine of the general resurrection has practical implications for how we are to live now. It gives perspective and hope to someone suffering with cancer, a debilitating disease, or the loss of a loved one. But it also reminds us that whatever suffering and tribulation may come, it is but a “light momentary affliction . . . is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). In this way, the general resurrection offers hope that the trials of this life are not in vain but will ultimately be used by God for His glory and our eternal good.

#### THE FINAL JUDGMENT

After Christ’s return and the general resurrection, He will judge the living and the dead. Paul writes, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10). The final judgment is not just a moment of reckoning but also the culmination of God’s redemptive plan, when His justice, mercy, sovereignty, and love are on full display. As the Creator and Sustainer of all things, God has the ultimate right and authority to judge His creation. The judgment is not arbitrary but is rooted in His own holy and righteous character.

Scripture repeatedly affirms that God’s judgments are true and just (Rev. 16:7). This assures believers that the final judgment will be carried out with perfect justice, without any partiality or error.

Moreover, God the Father has appointed His Son to execute judgment (John 5:22–23), and the Son will “separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:32). In addition, God’s people will have some role in assisting in the judgment (1 Cor. 6:2–3; Rev. 20:4), though exactly how is not clear. But as the chief Judge—having perfectly fulfilled the law and borne the penalty for sin through His sacrificial death on the cross—Christ is uniquely qualified to judge humanity. For believers, this judgment is not something of which to be afraid, for Christ is both their Savior and their Advocate (1 John 2:1). This will be a time of condemnation for those who do not belong to Him, however, for they will be judged according to their deeds (Rev. 20:12–15). The wicked will receive the just sentence of condemnation pronounced against them, and then they will be cast away from the favorable presence of God to be punished with eternal torments of body and soul.

The standard of judgment will be God’s holy law, as revealed in His Word. Every person will be judged according to his works, but this is not a contradiction of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. For believers, their works will be evaluated as evidence of their faith (James 2:18). Good works, therefore, do not merit their salvation but are the fruit of genuine faith. Moreover, the believer’s condemnation has already been poured out on God’s only begotten Son; thus, there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). In contrast, the works of unbelievers will reveal their rebellion against God, leading to their just condemnation.

*The final judgment is not just a moment of reckoning but also the culmination of God’s redemptive plan, when His justice, mercy, sovereignty, and love are on full display.*

Westminster Confession of Faith 33.2 explains that the purpose of the final judgment is “the manifestation of the glory of [God’s] mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of his justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient.” The reality of the final judgment should deter all people from sin and console God’s people in their affliction. For believers, the judgment is a source of hope and assurance, knowing that their salvation is secure in Christ and that every wrong will be made right. For unbelievers, the final judgment serves as a warning of the inevitable judgment to come and the need to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus. The final judgment will ultimately usher in the full consummation of God’s kingdom, where sin and death are no more (Rev. 21:4).

#### THE ETERNAL STATE

The final judgment will result in the confirmation of the eternal destinies of all people. Those who are in Christ, having been justified by faith alone, will be welcomed into eternal life in the new heaven and new earth, a place that the Bible calls “heaven” (a term used nearly seven hundred times in the Bible). This is not because of any merit in them but solely because of Christ’s atoning work of taking the penalty of their sin upon Himself and the imputation (or crediting) of His righteousness to them. Conversely, those who remain outside Christ will be cast into the lake of fire, called “hell.” This stark contrast underscores the seriousness of the gospel message and the urgency to repent of sin and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

The doctrine of the eternal state addresses the final, fixed, and unchangeable condition of humanity in differing spheres after the resurrection and final judgment (Luke 16:19–31), and it highlights the stark contrast between the eternal destinies of

believers and unbelievers. For believers, the eternal state is characterized by eternal communion with God with the great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1) in a renewed creation as the culmination of God’s redemptive work through Christ. It is described as one of perfect joy, peace, and holiness. Believers will experience the fullness of their salvation, living in the favorable presence of God in a transformed and glorified new heaven and new earth. This state is often referred to as “eternal life,” a concept not merely of endless duration but also of quality—a life that is truly realized and fulfilled, with complete joy and in unbroken fellowship with God.

In contrast, the eternal state of unbelievers is described as a state of the unmitigated wrath of God for sin. In this state, unbelievers will face the consequences of their rebellion against God. Though many never actually hear the gospel proclaimed, what they know about God through the general revelation of creation is sufficient to render them “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). This condition is often depicted using imagery from Scripture such as “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46) and “the second death” (Rev. 21:8). The doctrine of the eternal state underscores the seriousness of sin and the ultimate justice of God in the final judgment. It is a state of enduring consequence, in which the absence of God’s favor and the presence of judgment result in perpetual, unending suffering. This reality is not merely a reflection of divine retribution but also an affirmation of the integrity of God’s justice and righteousness.

It should not be missed that the eternal state conveys great significance to both our community and our worship now. While we may have unbelieving biological family members, we will spend eternity with those ransomed “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9)—namely, God’s elect. The believing, church-militant com-

*Believers will be raised to consummated eternal life and ushered into the eternal state.*

munity here will be the seeing church triumphant there. This affects our worship, for our worship now is but a small reflection of that heavenly worship of the Lamb in glory. Such a reality frames our current worship on earth as preparation for our eternal worship in heaven.

The doctrine of the eternal state also highlights the importance of evangelism and faithful witness because the eternal destinies of people are at stake. Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). But this also offers comfort and hope, encouraging believers to live faithfully *coram Deo* (before the face of God) and to trust in God’s ultimate plan for justice, redemption, and joy for His people.

The end of death is not just a physical resurrection or eternal bliss but also the removal of the curse of sin that brought death

into the world (Gen. 3). Believers will be raised to consummated eternal life, clothed in immortality, judged in union with Christ, and ushered into their eternal state, in which death will no longer have power over them. And there, the Lord “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Thus, Christ’s return, and its successive events, is our present hope for the day when death is fully and finally vanquished, giving way to the eternal, joyous communion between God and His people. And so may we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20). **11**

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JANUARY 2025 DAILY BIBLE STUDIES

# INTO *the* WORD

## SCRIPTURE’S SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

**S** ECOND TIMOTHY 3:16–17 says that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Those verses are rightly regarded as some of the most important teaching we have on the nature of Scripture. Yet they also contain vital instruction on what we must do with Scripture. Since God’s Word is profitable for “training in righteousness” and can equip us “for every good work,” we have a duty to engage Scripture and plumb its depths so as to be trained and equipped. In other words, we are to learn Scripture’s systematic theology.

**“THEOLOGY IS TAUGHT BY GOD, TEACHES GOD, AND LEADS TO GOD.”**

—Widely attributed to Thomas Aquinas

This year, our daily devotionals will take us through the system of theology taught in Scripture, covering the major doctrines of the Christian faith as they have been expressed under several major loci or headings. Scripture comes to us as a collection of different writings by different human authors, but it has one divine Author—God—and teaches one coherent system of truth. Knowing at least the basics of this system is essential for healthy Christian living.

We begin this month with what we call *theological prolegomena*, or introductory matters regarding the study of theology. We will pay special attention to the doctrine of revelation and especially the doctrine of Scripture. **TL**

### ABIDING IN THE WORD

*These verses parallel the themes of the studies each week. We encourage you to hide them in your heart so that you may not sin against the Lord:*

- Week of January 5 ..... PSALM 19:1
- Week of January 12 ..... 2 PETER 1:21
- Week of January 19 ..... HEBREWS 4:12
- Week of January 26 ..... ISAIAH 55:10–11

## WHY THEOLOGY?

**EPHESIANS 4:11–14** “So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (v. 14).



### CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

Growing in our understanding of Christian doctrine is useful for deepening our relationship with God, developing a more effective ministry, and finding unity with other Christians based on the truth. There are many other benefits as well, of course, but these reasons alone are enough to encourage us to study the systematic theology of the Bible.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalms 46:10  
Hosea 6:6  
Titus 2:1  
2 Peter 1:2

### THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 1–2  
Matthew 1

Every discipline must focus on a particular subject and have a reason for its existence, and Christian theology is no exception. As we begin our study of systematic theology, then, we will consider the subject and reason of theology, the what and the why of Christian doctrine.

The English word *theology* comes from two Greek words: *theos*, meaning “God,” and *logos*, meaning “word.” Thus, theology essentially consists of a word about God just as the discipline of biology is a word about *bios*—that is, “life.” More specifically, as Dr. R.C. Sproul writes in his book *Everyone’s a Theologian*, “The science of theology is an attempt to gain a coherent, consistent knowledge of God.” It is grounded on the assumption that such coherent and consistent knowledge can be attained truly, if not fully.

Why would we want to have a “coherent, consistent knowledge of God”? First, the alternative to such knowledge would be an incoherent and inconsistent understanding of our Creator, and surely we do not want that. We can make sense only of what is coherent and consistent. An incoherent and inconsistent knowledge of God gives us no foundation for trusting Him or loving Him. Jesus tells us that eternal life is to know the only true God (John 17:3), so striving for a coherent and consistent knowledge of this God is essential for enjoying our salvation to the fullest.

Ephesians 4:11–14 gives us other reasons for studying theology. Paul explains that Christ has given various officers to the church to equip us for ministry according to truth (vv. 11–12). Soundness in doctrine is essential for soundness in ministry to other Christians and to the world. As we increase in our comprehension of the theology that God has revealed, we move closer to unity in faith and the fullness of Christ (v. 13). Some people want to avoid thinking about theology because they believe that doctrine divides. That is not Paul’s view. Fuller doctrinal knowledge actually enables us to achieve greater unity in our local churches as we all come to share the same fundamental theological convictions. It also provides a foundation for working with Christians from other traditions that is based on the truths on which we agree. Finally, knowing theology gives us stability, keeping us from being led astray into serious error (v. 14). 📖

## THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE THEOLOGIAN

**MATTHEW 22:34–40** “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (vv. 37–40).



### CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

Having covered the *what* and the *why* of theology, we will now consider the qualifications of the theologian, of the one who engages in theological study. At the outset, we must recognize that while not every Christian is called to be an academic theologian or to pursue the study of theology with the same depth, every believer is actually a theologian. Dr. R.C. Sproul made this point often during his ministry because all Christians—indeed, all people—have some concept of God in their minds. Once we begin to ponder who God is and what His works are, we have begun to engage in theology. Consequently, since everyone is a theologian, the real question is what kind of theologian we are: a good one or a bad one.

Being a good theologian requires that we meet several qualifications. Here we are not talking about acquiring the knowledge of other languages or pursuing a formal course of study, though many Christians will do that. Moreover, we are not referring, at least not primarily, to the acquisition of knowledge through Bible study and reading great works of theology. Even a nonbeliever can study theology. The great Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield tells us in his address “The Religious Life of Theological Students” that “theology has as its unique end to make God known: the student of theology is brought by his daily task into the presence of God and is kept there. Can a religious man stand in the presence of God and not worship? It is possible, I have said, to study even theology in a purely secular spirit. But surely that is possible only for an irreligious man, or at least for an unreligious man.”

Warfield’s caution gets at the heart of what we mean by the qualifications to be a good theologian—namely, that we must be worshipers of God who also love those around us. The goal of theology is to grow in our knowledge of God, and as we know God better, we should love Him and His people more. Otherwise, something has gone wrong. This is part of what Jesus meant when He identified the two great commandments: love God and love neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40).

The goal of theology is ultimately worship and the building up of the church, so to be good theologians we must be people who seek the face of the Lord and adore Him in prayer and worship both individually and corporately. We must be those who love the church of Jesus Christ and who want to see it grow in faithfulness. 📖

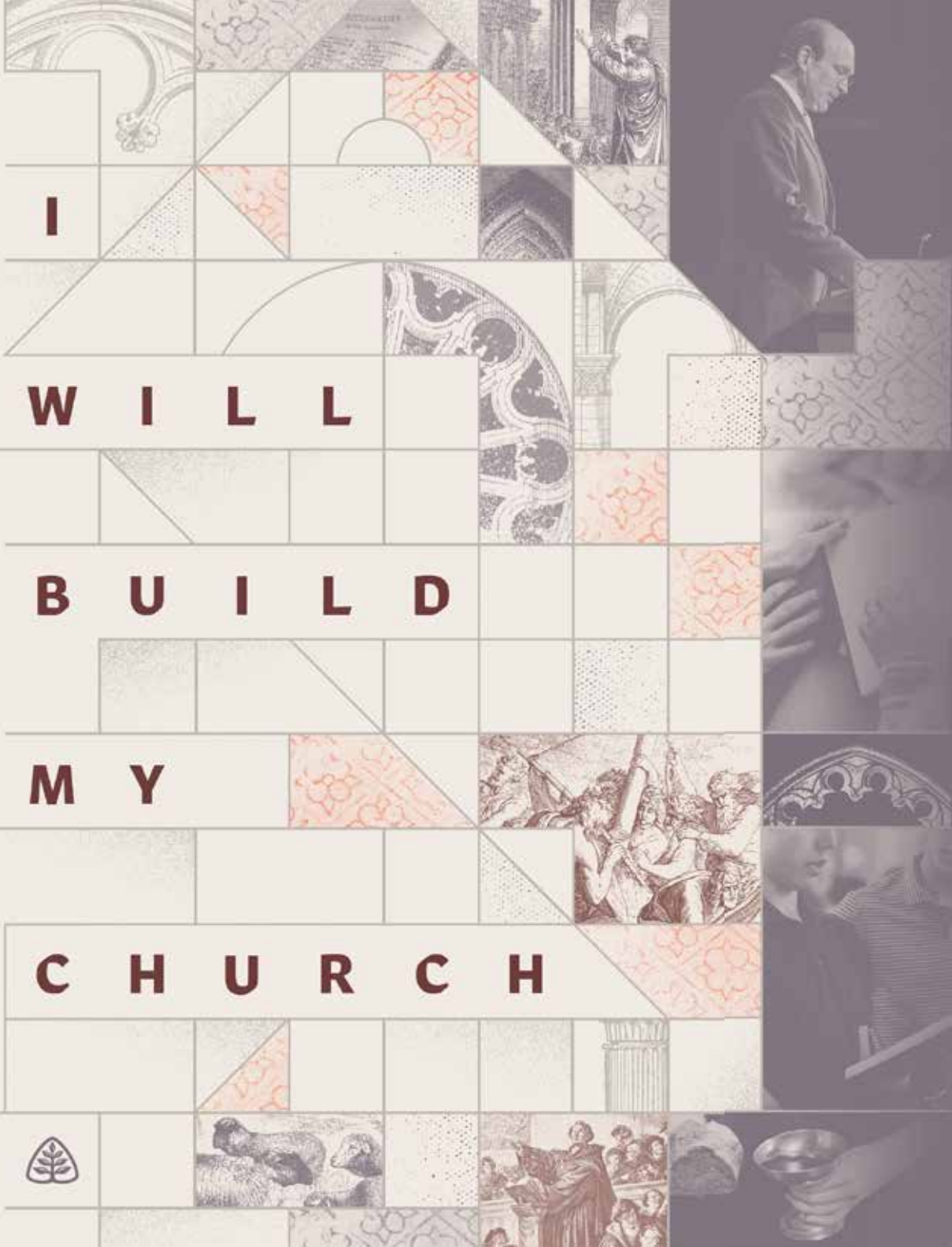
We study theology not merely so that we can fill our heads with knowledge, even though attaining knowledge is an important part of theology. Our engagement with theology has the goal of making us better worshipers of God, more faithful servants of Christ, more affectionate adorers of the Lord, and more selfless neighbors to others. Let us pursue love of God and neighbor, that we may be well-qualified theologians.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 6:5  
Ecclesiastes 12:13–14  
Acts 8:9–24  
1 Timothy 6:11

### THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 3–5  
Matthew 2



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# THE FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION IN THEOLOGY



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL  
JANUARY 4–5

**NUMBERS 23:19** “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the  
face of God*

We seek to remember the distinction between Creator and creature so that we do not become puffed up with pride and presume that we can attain mastery over God by knowing Him fully or by knowing things the way that He knows them. That was the goal that Adam and Eve aimed at in their sin (Gen. 3:1–7), but it is an impossible goal for creatures to achieve. Let us always understand that we can know God truly but never fully.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 55:8–9  
Romans 11:33–36

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 6–8  
Matthew 3

## THE WEEKEND

Genesis 9–14  
Matthew 4

**T**heological study has as its aim improving our knowledge and worship of God and our service to God’s people. Consequently, love of God and love of neighbor are the fundamental qualifications for theologians as they seek to grow in their doctrinal understanding (Matt. 22:34–40). Before we begin our study of the various loci or topics in systematic theology, however, we should consider one more fundamental issue: the distinction between Creator and creature.

We have said that theology as a science exists so that we can gain a coherent and consistent knowledge of God. Thus, God is the “object” of our study. We put the word *object* in quotes because, in fact, the Lord is not an object to be studied, at least not in the same way that we study other topics. It is possible to attain a degree of mastery in other areas, whether we are talking about music, economics, history, chemistry, mathematics, or something else. Yet we will never become masters of the Lord God Almighty. As we will see in a few months when we study the names and attributes of God, our Creator is incomprehensible. That is, while we can know God truly and appropriately as creatures, we will never know God fully and we will never understand God as He understands Himself.

Comprehensive knowledge of God that is identical to God’s own understanding of Himself is impossible because of the distinction between Creator and creature. To put it another way, God is God and we are not. There is a qualitative difference between the Creator and His creation, between God and that which depends on Him for its existence. Scripture stresses the Creator-creature distinction in many places, including Numbers 23:19, where the Lord gives us a fundamental difference between God and man: human beings can change and can fail to fulfill their promises, but it is utterly impossible for God to do so.

The qualitative difference between God and humanity means that we cannot of ourselves find our way to the Lord or know Him without His assistance. Yet the Lord can bridge the gap between Him and us by revealing Himself to us. He has done this in nature and in Scripture, having made us in His image so that we can understand Him when He speaks to us (Gen. 1:27). The Lord by His revelation stoops down and gives us truths about His character and His ways, but He remains God and we remain man. **TC**

## PROTECTING THE INNOCENT

WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

**F**orty years ago, President Ronald Reagan appointed a National Sanctity of Human Life Day. He was specifically protesting the legalization of abortions in America. But he recognized that “to diminish the value of one category of human life is to diminish us all.”

Scripture requires us to be fully pro-life. The sixth commandment, which prohibits unjust killing, requires us to be “patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly” toward our neighbors, to “protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies,” according to the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 107). Reagan was right: we have a “responsibility to guard with care the lives and freedoms of even the weakest of our fellow human beings.”

Pro-lifers can’t be selective. We must care for women in unexpected pregnancies and support adoption and foster care just as we oppose situations that put children in danger of abuse. We must support proper authorities in avenging the wrongful killing of God’s image bearers (Gen. 9:6) even as we protest the sometimes shoddy defense of death-row prisoners and careless military killing of civilians. We must be committed to “protecting and defending the innocent” (Westminster Larger Catechism 135) even in instances that challenge our preferred cultural narrative. And we should listen when critics accuse some Christians of being choosy advocates of human flourishing.

But we should also call out critics for their own inconsistency. Getting abortion wrong means that you are not a defender of life. If personhood is not sacred in the

womb, it is sacred nowhere. Fetuses are unique humans (Ps. 139:13–16; Isa. 44:24; Luke 1:44). God knew Jeremiah before he was born (Jer. 1:5; see Gal. 1:15). And He imposed penalties for even unintentionally harming children *in utero* (Ex. 21:22–25).

All children are a heritage from the Lord (Ps. 127:3) even if not all births are equally happy. Some are inconvenient; it must have felt so for Israelites who became parents under a tyrant (Ex. 2:8). Some children will be born with complicating health issues; one of the greatest evangelists of Jesus’ day was born blind (John 9). Children are sometimes conceived through atrocious criminal acts. The Bible lays out strict penalties for such crimes without deprecating the child who might result (Deut. 22:25). Every human life, from conception, bears God’s image and presents an opportunity for faithful service to the Creator.

The pro-life position shouldn’t simply be the Christian position. It should be the humanitarian position. So let us be as unashamedly pro-life as God is (see Ezek. 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9). Abortion is but one awful example of the sin that separates us from God. But even our greatest sin is met by a greater gospel. God’s Son inhabited a human womb to save sinners by His sacrificial death. God wants us to choose life and to help others see why life is the best choice that they could make. **TC**

**REV. WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN** is pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, Mich. He is author of many books, including *Finding My Vocation: A Guide for Young People Seeking a Calling*.

## THE BOOK OF NATURE

**PSALM 19** “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard” (vv. 1–3).



## CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

As we will see in our next study, there are limits to general revelation (i.e., the book of nature) and what it can accomplish.

Nevertheless, that God has spoken to all people through creation means that we can find a point of contact with all people that allows us to present them with the truth about the character of our Creator. Deep down, everyone knows that God exists, and everyone also knows something about His divine nature.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 50:6  
Ecclesiastes 3:9–13  
Matthew 5:45  
Acts 17:22–28

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 15–17  
Matthew 5

**B**ecause of the fundamental, qualitative difference between God and humanity, people cannot know or find their way to the Creator without divine assistance. In other words, the Lord must speak to us in a way that we can understand if we are to know and enjoy a blessed relationship with Him. One of the most basic tenets of the Christian faith is that God has indeed spoken to mankind, and He has done so through general revelation and special revelation.

*General revelation*, also referred to as *natural revelation* or the *book of nature*, consists of what God has revealed about Himself to all people in and through the things that He has created. Psalm 19:1–6 clearly teaches the concept of general revelation when it says that the heavens declare the glory of God in such a way that there is no language in which their voice is not heard (vv. 1–4a). All people know something about the Lord from the things that He has made, including that He is a God of all glory. Creation also tells us something about God’s providence or governance of the world, for David in verses 4b–6 describes God’s placement of the sun in the heavens and its circuit across the sky to give light and heat to the entire earth. Such things reveal the goodness of the Lord, since His ordering of nature and His gift of the sun are necessary to sustain life. Creation tells us that God is glorious and good, and it also reveals to us other “invisible attributes,” such as His eternal power, as Paul explains in Romans 1:20. We look at the world around us, see its beauty and order, and rightfully conclude that a powerful and wise Being must have designed it all. The seventeenth-century Reformed theologian Francis Turretin writes in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* that “not only do the heavens declare the glory of God, but every blade of grass and flower in the field, every pebble on the shore and every shell in the ocean proclaim not only his power and goodness, but also his manifold wisdom.”

In considering the book of nature, we should also make special mention of the human conscience. God made man in His own image, and part of that involved His granting to us a conscience that has a basic sense of right and wrong. The work of God’s moral law is written on the heart of every person (Gen. 1:27; Rom. 2:15). Thus, no one will be able to stand before our holy Creator and claim that he had no idea that He existed and that he did not know the difference between good and evil. 📖

## THE LIMITS OF THE BOOK OF NATURE

**ROMANS 1:18–32** “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (v. 21).

**G**od has spoken clearly to all people in the book of nature, in what theologians call general or natural revelation. Such revelation consists of what our Creator has made. Men and women can look at the created world and discern something of the character and moral requirements of its Maker (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:20; 2:15). The book of nature means that ultimately, there is no true atheist and that Christians can appeal to the evidence for the one true God in nature as they seek to reach lost people with the gospel (Acts 17:1–29).

For all that general revelation tells us, however, there are limits to what the book of nature can give us. Paul tells us as much in today’s passage. As the Apostle explains how the Lord has spoken in nature, he also tells us that fallen human beings suppress the truth that they see in creation. Unredeemed sinners do not honor God or give Him thanks even though they know from the book of nature that they should. Instead, they become idolaters who exchange “the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23).

Looking at the world around us, we cannot deny Paul’s teaching. Human beings have chosen to worship a vast number of beings that they call “God” or “the gods.” Some of these so-called deities in certain of their attributes bear a superficial resemblance to the God of the Bible, while others do not look like Him at all. All these idols, however, have one thing in common: they are not the one true God revealed to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the fall into sin, John Calvin says in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “the human mind is . . . a perpetual forge of idols.” At times, people even create pictorial representations of these deities, but one can be an idolater without bowing down to a statue or image. The sin of idolatry occurs whenever we conceive of God in ways that He has not revealed. Any of us can fall into the trap of making God in our own image, of serving the Lord as we would like Him to be instead of who He actually is. Calvin warns us that “the human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a god suited to its own capacity; as it labors under dullness, nay, is sunk in the grossest ignorance, it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God.” The book of nature can tell us something about who God is, but it cannot keep us from descending into idolatry. 📖



## CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

The book of nature shows all people truths about God, but it cannot prevent the descent into idolatry or show us the way out of it through God’s plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. Thus, we cannot be saved by reading the book of nature alone. We take the gospel to the ends of the earth because people can be saved not by general revelation but only by knowing the Lord Jesus Christ.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 53:2–6  
Jeremiah 10:1–16  
Romans 3:9–20  
1 John 5:21

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 18–19  
Matthew 6

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## SPECIAL REVELATION IN HISTORY

**GENESIS 28:10–22** “Behold, the LORD stood above [the ladder] and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring’” (v. 13).

Natural revelation, also called general revelation or the book of nature, gives all people some understanding of God and His standards. Because of sin, however, human beings invariably twist and suppress the truth, turning away from the one true God and fashioning idols in His place (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:18–3:20). Moreover, while the created order, the means by which the Lord communicates His general revelation, can tell us much about our Creator, it cannot give us understanding of God’s covenants with humanity or His plan of salvation. For us to know such things, the Lord must speak to us in other ways, and this speech is known in systematic theology as *special revelation*.

In special revelation, God tells people things that He wants them to know but that cannot be discerned through natural revelation. Most people who have heard the term *special revelation* probably think immediately of sacred Scripture. Indeed, as we will see, Scripture is special revelation and the only special revelation available to the church today. Historically, however, our Creator has given special revelation through other means as well. For example, in today’s passage we read about Jacob’s dream at Bethel wherein the Lord appeared to the patriarch and reiterated His promise to Abraham and confirmed Jacob as the inheritor of that promise (Gen. 28:10–22). Jacob could not have learned that truth from creation, but God gave it to him in a special way—namely, through a dream.

Another means of special revelation in the history of redemption was angelic visitation. We can think here of the unnamed angel who told Manoah and his wife that they would give birth to Samson or of the angel Gabriel, who spoke to Mary and revealed that she would be the mother of the Messiah (Judg. 13; Luke 1:26–38). Other forms of special revelation that we read about in Scripture include the revelation of God’s will through objects such as Gideon’s fleece and the confirmation of Elijah’s and Elisha’s prophetic office through various miracles (Judg. 6:36–40; 1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 4).

These forms of special revelation prepared the people of God for the apex of special revelation, which occurred in the incarnation and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and His teaching through His Apostles (Heb. 1:1–4). At the close of the Apostolic age, God ceased delivering new special revelation to His church, having laid its foundation once for all in the “apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). **TC**



### CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

The various forms of special revelation prepared God’s people for the coming of Christ and the establishment of the new covenant church. To look for new special revelation today is to misunderstand God’s purpose in revealing Himself during an early stage of the history of God’s people. Today, God’s special revelation comes in the pages of Scripture.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Exodus 3  
1 Samuel 14:41–42  
John 2:23–25  
2 Timothy 3:14–15

### THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 20–22  
Matthew 7

# SPECIAL REVELATION INSCRIPTURATED

EXODUS 24:4 "Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD."



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

God wants His people to know what He requires of them—faith that demonstrates itself outwardly through repentance and obedience—and that He is faithful to His covenant promises. Thus, He has given the Scriptures to His church. In them, we learn of God's covenants and are reminded that He always keeps His promises. When we doubt that the Lord is faithful to His Word, we should turn to the Scriptures to be reminded of His faithfulness.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Ecclesiastes 12:10  
Jeremiah 36:4  
2 Peter 3:15  
1 John 2:12–14

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 23–24  
Matthew 8

Over the course of redemptive history—God's work in time to reveal Himself to His people and to save them from their sin—our Creator spoke in various ways (Heb. 1:1–4).

As we have seen, these ways included dreams, revelation through objects, miracles, and angelic visitations. To that list we may add the words of the prophets, Jesus Himself, and the Apostles, who delivered their message first in oral form through oracles, parables, and sermons (e.g., see 1 Kings 14:18; Matt. 13:34; Acts 2:14–41).

While the Lord was speaking in those various ways, however, He also moved people to write. The prophets and Apostles committed to written form what God intended for His church to have for all time. We find references to this writing throughout the Scriptures. Exodus 24:4 provides us with one of the first accounts of a prophet's recording divine revelation; it tells us specifically that Moses wrote down all the words that the Lord had given in the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20:22–23:33). In fact, writing down divine revelation was so important that God even involved Himself in the process, inscribing the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets at Mount Sinai (31:18). We also have written revelation from God through the unnamed authors of the Historical Books, David (many psalms), Solomon (much of the Wisdom Literature), the writing prophets (Isaiah–Malachi), and the Apostles (the New Testament). This work of writing down the words of God is called *inscripturation*, with the result that the Bible is what we may call *inscripturated special revelation*.

Lest we think that the writing of Scripture was incidental to God's purposes of salvation, we should understand that our God makes covenants and that covenants entail certain things (see Ps. 25:14). We noted a few days ago that for us to know our Creator, He had to bridge the distance between Himself and us by speaking to us in a way that we can understand. God revealed Himself in the context of the ancient Near East, where nations routinely made covenants with one another that involved promises of loyalty from a lesser king to a greater king and promises of protection from a greater king to a lesser king. These nations produced written documents that outlined the terms of the covenant and the responsibilities of each party. By having prophets and Apostles commit His covenant to writing in Scripture, God accommodated Himself to His people, demonstrating that He makes and keeps His covenants. 📖

# THE MEANING OF BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

2 TIMOTHY 3:16 "All Scripture is breathed out by God."



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

In our day, many people are tempted to treat Scripture as something other than or less than the very words of God. Paul's teaching on biblical inspiration, however, will not allow us to do that. To have the Bible is to have the very words of God Himself, so we must attend to them as we would attend to the Lord Himself.

The one true God, who is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—of the same essence, makes covenants with His people and gives them written documents that outline the terms and responsibilities of these covenants. These written documents, sixty-six in total, constitute the Bible. Moreover, the Bible has always been confessed by the church to be the very Word of God, inspired by our Creator Himself.

Our subject today is what it means that Scripture is inspired by God. Few passages are as significant for answering this question as 2 Timothy 3:16, which states that "all Scripture is breathed out by God." Other versions translate "breathed out by God" as something like "inspired by God" or "given by inspiration of God," but the English Standard Version gives an excellent literal rendering of the Greek. The Greek term translated as "breathed out by God" is *theopneustos*, which means "God-breathed." Here Paul compares Scripture to the act of breathing during speech. When we speak, we breathe out air over our vocal cords to produce words. To say that Scripture is "breathed out by God," then, is to say that God spoke the words of Scripture in such a way that they are His very words. Of course, we can also say that they are the words of the human authors of Scripture, which we will discuss more fully in our next study. Nevertheless, the words of Scripture are divine words, given by God Himself and possessing all the attributes that belong to God's speech, including truth and authority.

Scripture tells us that it is the very Word of God in other ways as well, such as by referring to the words penned by a human author as the words of God Himself. For example, Hebrews 1:8–9 quotes Psalm 45 as something that the Lord says even though the psalm comes to us through the instrumentality of the "sons of Korah" (see superscription of Ps. 45). The psalm features the words of the sons of Korah, but those words are also fully the words of God.

B.B. Warfield, one of the most important theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has contributed much to our understanding of the Scriptures' being God-breathed. He wrote in his article "God-Inspired Scripture" that the concept "affirms . . . that the Scriptures owe their origin to an activity of God the Holy Ghost and are in the highest and truest sense His creation." Scripture, in short, is the very speech of God. 📖

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

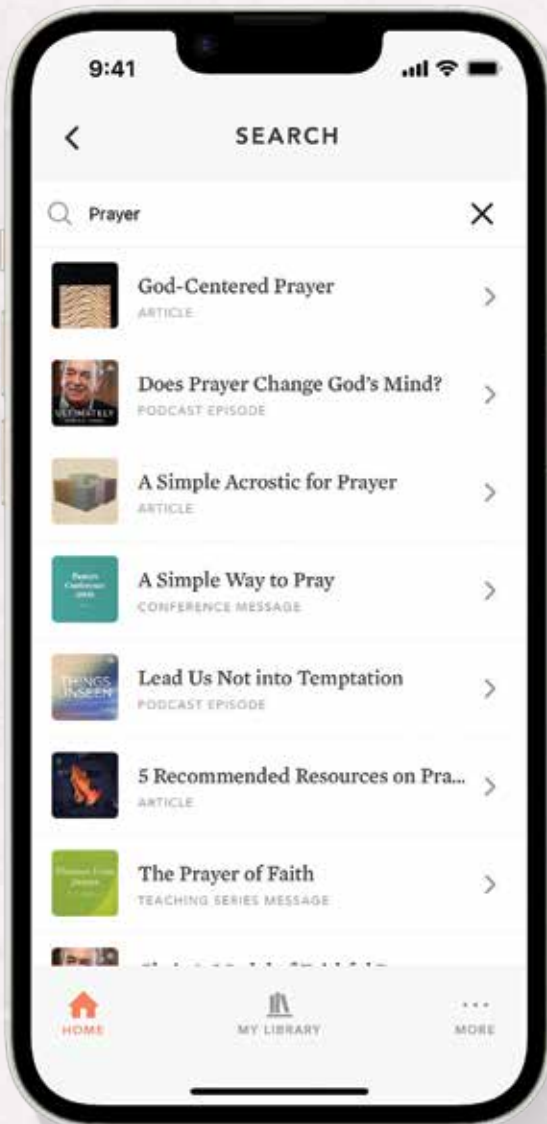
Ezekiel 1:1–3  
Hebrews 3:7–19

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 25–26  
Matthew 9:1–17

**THE WEEKEND**

Genesis 27–30  
Matthew 9:18–10:15



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## PORTRAIT OF A PRAYER WRESTLER

ROBERT W. CARVER

Another new year has come, and with it comes this perennial question: “How can I make this year better than the previous one?” For the spiritually minded, thoughts turn to spiritual wellness. Most Christians will have to admit that the area that needs most improvement is their prayer life.

Although the Scriptures abound with examples of great heroes of the faith in prayer, one worthy example is a little-known individual named Epaphras. Although there are only five verses of Scripture about him (Col. 1:7, 8; 4:12, 13; Philem. 23), he is set forth as a model for serious prayer. He was a native Colossian, apparently converted during Paul’s lengthy ministry in Ephesus on the third missionary journey, who himself became the founder of the churches in the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis). He was their faithful circuit-riding pastor.

When false teachers began to infiltrate those churches, seeking to take the saints captive to their soul-destroying errors, Epaphras made the thousand-mile trip to Rome to report the threat to Paul and seek his counsel on how to deal with it. Paul, at that time under house arrest, penned with urgency the epistle to the Colossians. When that letter had been dispatched, Epaphras remained with Paul for some time. In Colossians, we read Paul’s commendation of their faithful pastor: “Epaphras . . . greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Col. 4:12). In somewhat abbreviated form, Paul

described the *frequency*, the *fergency*, and the *focus* of the prayers of Epaphras for his people. Note especially the words “struggling on your behalf in his prayers.” This word has been variously translated as “laboring earnestly” or “wrestling” and can be transliterated as “agonizing.” It pictures the serious effort and energy of an athlete contending for the victor’s crown. Similar language is used to describe the agony of Jesus in prayer in Gethsemane. Concerning the prayers of Epaphras, Andrew Bonar said: “His were Gethsemane prayers. He made [Paul’s place of confinement] fragrant with the sweet incense of prayer.”

We speak often of “prayer warriors,” and we know the great blessing of having such saints pray for us. Epaphras may be described as a “prayer wrestler,” and what a gift from God it is to have such people praying for us.

What characterizes a prayer wrestler? Such a person (1) knows that he is in a serious war, (2) knows that this war is constant, (3) knows that the most important things to pray for are spiritual needs, (4) knows that the task will never be easy, (5) knows that he himself is in great need of prayer, (6) knows that he has divine help in his praying, and (7) knows that God can do much more than he could ever ask or imagine.

Let us thank the Lord for the prayer wrestlers who have prayed for us. May He help us all to be serious and intense in our prayers. **TC**

**ROBERT W. CARVER** served as associate professor of Greek and Bible at Clearwater Christian College in Clearwater, Fla., for more than thirty-five years.

## THE MANNER OF BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

**2 PETER 1:21** “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Second Timothy 3:16 makes plain that Scripture is breathed out by God such that it is the very Word of God even though it comes to us through human authors. Thus, we can speak of the *verbal, plenary inspiration* of Scripture. Not only are the ideas of Scripture inspired by God, but so are the very words themselves, down to the letter (verbal), and every word or all the words of Scripture are inspired (plenary). Jesus assumes this concept in Matthew 5:18, where he says that “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” “Tota” is the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet, and “dot” is the tiny extension or flourish on Hebrew letters that allows us to distinguish two letters that otherwise look identical. If these tiny parts of the words of Scripture cannot pass away, they must be inspired by God as much as the words, sentences, paragraphs, and ideas of Scripture are inspired.

This leads us to consider the manner of biblical inspiration. How did God inspire the biblical authors to give us His words? The Apostle Peter tells us that the prophets, the authors of Scripture, “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). As we consider the phenomena of the biblical books, we soon discover that we cannot conceive of this “carrying along” as a mechanical process, as though the Lord would set aside the individuality of each human author. For example, even though Moses and Isaiah describe the same God and affirm the same truths, their literary styles and emphases are different. Mark and John both give us the true story of Jesus, but Mark is oriented more toward the actions of Jesus while John is oriented more toward our Lord’s discourses. We can feel the tenderness of John as we read his epistles and can discern the intellectual rigor of Paul when we read his writings.

Inspiration was not like programming a robot with no personality. God worked organically, allowing each author to give us God’s words in his own words. Dr. R.C. Sproul writes in *Scripture Alone*: “Through divine inspiration, God made it possible for his truth to be communicated in an inspired way, making use of the backgrounds, personalities, and literary styles of these various writers. The human writers were not machines and ought not to be conceived of as being without personality. What is overcome or overridden by inspiration is not human personality, style, or literary structure, but human tendencies to distortion, falsehood, and error.” **TC**



**CORAM DEO**  
*Living before the face of God*

God did not have to override the personalities of the biblical authors to give us His Word but was able to speak to us using the unique voice that each human author contributes to Scripture’s united and harmonious truth. Similarly, God does not override our personalities when He calls us to Christ. Instead, He sanctifies us and uses our uniqueness as He grows His kingdom.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**  
Exodus 2:1–10  
Amos 7:14–15  
Acts 4:13  
Philippians 3:4–5

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**  
Genesis 31–32  
Matthew 10:16–42

## THE NECESSITY OF SCRIPTURE

**EPHESIANS 2:19–21** “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

Scripture is necessary because God is no longer giving special revelation. Thus, if we want to know the truths that the Lord wants us to believe and the things that God commands us to do, we must turn to the written Scriptures.

They are the necessary source of divine special revelation and the only infallible rule of faith and practice for the church.

**N**o building will remain standing without a sure foundation, and the New Testament applies this principle metaphorically to the church. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:24–27 that those who hear and do His words are like the wise man who builds his house on a rock so that it will be safe from the storm. Christians individually and the church corporately must have divine revelation as the foundation of their faith and practice, or else they will not endure. This foundation of divine revelation today consists only of “the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20), whose teachings we find with certainty only in the Old and New Testaments.

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1 explores this idea. Having recognized that God has provided special revelation over the course of redemptive history in many ways, the confession states that God was pleased, “for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.” Because the Lord has ceased granting public, special revelation to the church, Scripture is “most necessary” for establishing God’s people in all truth and holiness. Before the end of the Apostolic age, there were times when God’s people could receive a word from a prophet. Once our Creator spoke finally and decisively in His Son and through His Son’s Apostles, no further revelation is to be expected, at least until the return of Christ (Heb. 1:1–4). A foundation is laid only once, so Paul’s statement that the Apostles and prophets form the church’s foundation informs us that special revelation has ceased.

We have no other teachings that we can verify as coming from the prophets and Apostles besides that which is found in sacred Scripture. Thus, theological debates in the church have always centered on the interpretation of the Bible. Scripture is indispensable for formulating sound doctrine and for knowing the Lord’s will for His church. These written Apostolic and prophetic teachings are God’s gift to us, for oral traditions can be corrupted. Written documents, on the other hand, preserve the authoritative words and give them to us in a public manner so as to guard against individuals who would lead us astray by claiming private revelation. **TC**

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Deuteronomy 12:32  
2 Kings 22:1–23:25  
John 10:35  
Revelation 22:18–19

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 33–35  
Matthew 11

## THE INHERENT DIVINE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

**JOHN 10:35** “Scripture cannot be broken.”

**C**ontinuing our look at the doctrine of revelation as it is expounded in systematic theology and taught in the Bible, we come today to the authority of Scripture. The issue of authority arises in relation to our understanding that the church has relied on several sources and tools in formulating Christian doctrine, including Scripture, church tradition, Christian experience, reason, and church liturgies. We can even say that in some sense all these sources serve as authorities that we consult. Given the existence of multiple authorities, we are forced to ask which has the final authority. When our sources conflict, which of them has the final say?

As Protestants, we confess that Scripture is the only final, infallible authority for Christian faith and practice, a principle known as *sola Scriptura*. Our understanding of scriptural authority recognizes that there are many authorities that we look to and even that we should subject ourselves to, especially the church. Nevertheless, all these authorities are ultimately accountable to the inscripturated Word of God and are not permitted to deviate from biblical teaching. None of these authorities has a right to proclaim something contrary to Scripture, and we are to reject any doctrine that is not directly taught in Scripture or that is not deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence.

Scripture has final authority because it is *theopneustos*, or “God-breathed” (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). The words of the Bible are the very words of God Himself, who possesses authority in and of Himself. Thus, anything that He says has unquestionable authority. As Dr. R.C. Sproul writes in his commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy: “God and God alone has intrinsic authority. That intrinsic authority is given to the Bible since it is God’s Word.”

The inherent divine authority of Scripture is also seen in passages such as John 10:35, where Jesus says that “Scripture cannot be broken.” What the Bible teaches must be true and cannot be violated with impunity because to go against God’s Word is to go against our Creator. Our Savior also shows us the final authority of Scripture in His use of it to correct the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees (Mark 7:1–13). Tradition at its best helps us understand Scripture, but when it is contrary to Scripture, we submit to Scripture, not to tradition. **TC**



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

The final authority of Scripture does not deny that we need lesser authorities such as church tradition and teachers to help us understand Scripture. It simply affirms that all authorities for Christian faith and practice are subordinate to Scripture and are to be judged by the Word of God. To have Scripture is to have the very words of God, which by their nature have ultimate authority over the church.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

2 Kings 22:1–23:25  
Psalm 1  
Matthew 15:1–9  
Acts 17:10–15

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 36–37  
Matthew 12:1–21

**JOB 34:12** "Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice."



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

As the very words of our infallible God, Scripture can be trusted never to take us in a wrong direction. It is easy to look for other sources to give us infallible guidance, but only the words of the Bible have been protected from teaching error. That should encourage us to read and study Scripture with unique care and devotion, for doing so will help us avoid making errors or committing sin.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Deut. 18:15–22  
Psalm 119:65–67  
Isaiah 45:19  
Titus 1:2

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 39–40  
Matthew 12:22–50

Since the Bible is inspired by the Lord such that its words are the very words of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17), several consequences follow. We have already looked at two of these consequences. First, Scripture is necessary because it is where He reveals to us His plan of salvation. Second, Scripture has the highest authority because there can be no authority in existence higher than God and what He has spoken. Today we will consider a third consequence of the divine inspiration of Scripture—namely, that the Bible possesses the attribute of infallibility.

When speaking of biblical infallibility, we mean that the Bible is incapable of teaching error or otherwise leading people astray. In our day, some people say that the infallibility of Scripture means that the Bible cannot teach error in faith and practice but that it can teach errors of history, science, and other matters. That position cannot stand, however, if God has inspired all of Scripture, as the Bible itself claims. This is because the Lord Himself is incapable of error. We find this truth repeated throughout Scripture. In today's passage, for example, we read Elihu's factual statement that God will not do wickedly regarding a truth and that He will not pervert justice (Job 34:12). In other words, God will certainly not tell a lie, which means that any words He speaks must be true. Indeed, not only will God not speak any falsehood but it is impossible for Him to do so (Heb. 6:18). Thus, Jesus states that the "word [of God] is truth" (John 17:17). Such an unqualified assertion assumes that God has not lied and cannot lie. Because of His very nature, God could never produce a revelation that would lead people into error.

Of course, we do see that many people misinterpret Scripture and end up going astray from divine truth. Yet we cannot blame God or Scripture for that. Just as sinful hearts misuse God's law to encourage themselves to further sin, apart from grace sinners will twist God's Word so that they believe error (Rom. 7:7–20). Consequently, we must pray for the Holy Spirit to keep us from misunderstanding the Bible and work diligently to interpret it accurately.

Even the best human tour guides and maps can lead people into error. Scripture, however, cannot. It always shows us the true way and gives us sound, trustworthy principles for making decisions. Because Scripture is the revelation of the God who cannot lie, we can always place our confidence in the teaching of the Bible. **■**

**PSALM 12:6** "The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times."



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

The inerrancy of Scripture pertains not only to its religious teaching but also to its affirmations about history, science, and every other matter that it touches. If there were even one error in what God has inspired, we would never be able to discern what is true and what is false in Scripture. We defend biblical inerrancy because it is a necessary consequence of Scripture's divine inspiration.

As the Word of God, Scripture possesses several attributes that necessarily follow from its having been inspired by the Lord. *Infallibility* pertains to what Scripture is capable of—it is incapable of leading people into error and it was impossible that God should inspire falsehood, for God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). *Inerrancy* speaks of Scripture as it exists. Biblical inerrancy means that the original text of Scripture contains no errors in what it intends to teach. Since whatever God says is true, the text produced under His inspiration must be free of error. "The words of the LORD are pure words" (Ps. 12:6).

Note the qualifiers "original text" and "intends to teach." First, by "original text" we mean the so-called autographs, or the actual manuscripts that the prophets and Apostles themselves penned and not the copies of these manuscripts. We possess thousands of copies of the original text of the Bible, and each of these may contain errors because the original text is inspired, not each copy thereof. These errors are for the most part easily recognized through the science of textual criticism, such that we can be confident that we have the actual words of the Apostles and prophets even if we do not have the original parchments that they wrote on.

Second, inerrancy applies to what the Bible "intends to teach." Here we recognize that the Bible can make use of numerical approximations and poetic devices without teaching error. For example, Isaiah 11:12 refers to the "four corners of the earth." Opponents of inerrancy might point to this and say that the Bible teaches error because to talk about four corners of the earth is to imply that the earth is flat. That Isaiah uses such an expression does not mean that he is teaching a flat earth, however. He is simply using a common poetic expression that means "the whole earth" and not commenting on the geometric properties of the planet. Furthermore, the Bible can use approximate numbers without teaching error because human beings commonly use estimates and reserve precise measurements for exacting scientific observations. Scripture has much to say about science, but it is not a science book in the sense of modern science, so we should not expect it to follow modern standards of scientific precision.

In the end, the point of defending biblical inerrancy is to safeguard what must be true if God actually inspired Scripture. He cannot lie or err, so Scripture does not err in anything that it affirms. **■**

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Psalm 119:160  
John 17:6–8

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 41  
Matthew 13:1–32

**THE WEEKEND**

Genesis 42–46  
Matthew 13:33–14:12



## WHO'S GOT THE POWER?

SARAH IVILL

If we were to reflect on our prayers over the course of a week, we would likely notice that we have done a lot of asking and thinking. Some of us have asked God to increase our faith, take away suffering, or deliver us from temptation. Others have thought about dreams that we want to realize, goals that remain unmet, conflict in relationships, and financial difficulties. As we've thought about these things, we've likely laid them before the Lord. But we still wonder what He will do. Will He answer in the way that we hope He will? Or will this be another lesson in learning that His plans are not our plans and His thoughts not our thoughts?

As we wrestle with these questions, we can be confident that we pray to the God “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph. 3:20). Notably, it's not for our glory but for His—“to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (v. 21).


This doxology from Paul is a declaration of praise for God's goodness and glory. Paul is careful to build a strong case for God's power. God is able. He is able to do. He is able to do far more. He is able to do far more abundantly. He's able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask. He's able to do far more abundantly than all that we think. And all this is according to the power that is at work within us.

What is this power? The same power

that raised Jesus Christ from the dead (see 1:19–20).

We have resurrection power within us. In the midst of battling sin, as we suffer, and as we serve God, we can be confident that God's power is at work in us to do more than we ask or think.

Not only this, but from one generation to another and from one age to the next, God will receive praise in Christ and His church as His manifold wisdom is displayed to all. Think of it: God's resurrection power in us. God's glory on display through the church. And all this is generational. We have work to do, dear believer. And the good news is that we have the power to do it.

In the midst of asking God for things in our prayer life, we'll be more attuned to the truth that He is doing more abundantly than all that we ask or think. Instead of wondering how He'll answer our prayers, we will take every opportunity to worship God, work for His glory, and witness about His great name. No longer running on empty or thinking that we've got the power, we can confidently go about our week, knowing that God's power is at work in us. And this confidence in God's power is not to be kept to ourselves but is to be shared with the next generation. 


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## BIBLICAL SUFFICIENCY

**2 TIMOTHY 3:17** “That the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

Does Scripture contain everything that God requires us to believe for salvation and every duty that He demands of us, or do we need other sources in addition to the Bible to have a complete accounting of what we must believe and do? According to the doctrine of biblical sufficiency, God's Word written—the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments—features all the truths necessary for redemption and all the duties that God requires of human beings.

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is essential to historic Protestant theology and sets it apart from other theologies such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy that posit additional sources of divinely mandated doctrines and duties. Instead of viewing the teaching tradition of the church as a help to understanding Scripture, both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy tend to view church tradition as a medium of revelation alongside Scripture. This makes church tradition a source of faith and practice alongside Scripture instead of something that is subservient to Scripture and finally accountable to Scripture. Yet the Apostles and prophets know of no other source of doctrine and duty besides Scripture. For example, after declaring in 2 Timothy 3:16 the divine inspiration of Scripture, Paul goes on in verse 17 to say that Scripture makes us complete and equipped for every good work. That good work includes formulating doctrinal statements and outlining our moral obligations to God. Paul's point is that what Scripture reveals is enough for such things and that there is no other source of divine revelation for the church in this present era.

Remembering the sufficiency of Scripture helps us avoid adding to what the Lord has revealed, which is a perennial temptation for the church. Professing Christians in every generation have looked to church tradition, the teachings of popes and bishops, mystical experiences, and much more as authorities and sources of theological information equivalent to or even superior to Scripture. While many things can help us better comprehend the Word of God, nothing can bind our consciences except Scripture. The Reformed theologian Robert Letham writes in his *Systematic Theology*, “The bottom line is that there is no truth required by God to be believed for salvation or duty required of us to perform other than what is found in Scripture.” 



### CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

When we confess biblical sufficiency, we refer to its teachings on God and salvation and its guidance for obeying God. We do not mean that it is a sufficient source for science, car repair, a healthy diet, mathematics, or anything else besides what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of us (Westminster Shorter Catechism 3). Thus, when we read Scripture, we should read it to know what to believe and how to please the Lord.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 119:9  
Isaiah 66:1–2  
Acts 17:10–15  
Galatians 1:8–9

### THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 47–48  
Matthew 14:13–36



# ALWAYS READY PREPARING TEENAGERS TO GIVE AN ANSWER

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In today's world, many young Christians find themselves in a constant search for identity. As countless voices pull them in different directions, teens are often left wondering: Who am I, really? Ligonier's Always Ready youth conference invites Christians ages 12–18 to step away from the noise and turn to God's Word for clarity about who they truly are. Invite your youth group, young family members, and friends to join us at one of our upcoming apologetics events.

**Phoenix, AZ**

February 1

**Calgary, Alberta**

March 8

[Ligonier.org/events](https://Ligonier.org/events)



**2 PETER 3:15–16** “Count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

Augustine of Hippo writes that “among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life.” Confidence in the clarity of Scripture on the essentials of salvation has always been evident in the Christian church. If we reject the clarity of Scripture, we are basically saying that God is incapable of communicating the message of salvation to His people.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Deuteronomy 29:29  
Psalm 119:105, 130  
Luke 18:15–17  
Romans 10:5–10

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Genesis 49–50  
Matthew 15:1–20

**W**e have been studying what is often referred to in systematic theology as *theological prolegomena*, which concerns matters such as divine revelation. God has revealed His plan of salvation in special revelation—Scripture—and His plan of salvation is a special focus of what we call the *clarity* of Scripture.

The clarity of Scripture, also known as the *perspicuity* of Scripture, means that while not everything in the Bible is equally clear, “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7). Scripture is not a book that can be understood only by professional scholars or the clergy. Instead, biblical teaching on issues central to faith and life can be discerned by all those who prayerfully put in the work to read and understand the Bible in dependence on the Holy Spirit.

God has spoken in Scripture, and He has spoken clearly. This does not mean, as 2 Peter 3:15–16 recognizes, that no passages in the Bible are difficult or perhaps obscure to us. Yet God gave us His Word to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15), so He has made the basic gospel and requirements for pleasing God plain. He did not fail when He spoke through the prophets and Apostles to communicate His plan of salvation.

This does not entail that every truth related to salvation and pleasing God is effortlessly discerned. We must, as the Westminster Confession says, make “due use of the ordinary means.” The truth of the Bible comes to us only if we read it and hear it preached and if we ponder its explicit teachings and the necessary implications of those teachings. An advanced education is not required, though teachers with formal training can be of great assistance to us in comprehending Scripture. Nevertheless, to discover what God has plainly revealed, we must pay careful attention to the words and grammar of Scripture, how one passage of Scripture interprets another, and more.

Our Creator expected ordinary Israelites who had no seminary training to be able to teach His Word to their children (Deut. 6:4–9). Such an expectation makes sense only if the Bible is essentially clear on all that we must believe and do for faith and life. **✠**

**LUKE 24:44** “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

**A**cknowledging the divine origin and authority of Scripture is essential for sound theology, since the Word of God is sufficient to equip the church and the individual Christian for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). That leaves us with another question, however: How do we know which books constitute Scripture?

The list of the books that make up Scripture is known as the *canon*, and how we recognize the extent of the canon is an important question to address in systematic theology. At the outset, we must be clear that the canon exists apart from the church even before the church weighs in on the question. Divine inspiration, not the church’s approval, makes a book Scripture and therefore canonical (v. 16). As soon as a divinely inspired book is completed, it belongs to the canon of Scripture even if it might take the church some time to acknowledge it as part of the Bible. The church has an important role in recognizing the canon, but it does not create the canon or make something into Scripture. Only the Lord does that. Francis Turretin writes: “It is one thing to discern and to declare the canon of Scripture; quite another to establish the canon itself and to make it authentic. The church cannot do the latter (as this belongs to God alone, the author of Scripture), but it does only the former.”

In recognizing the canon of the Old Testament, we need go no further than Jesus and the Apostles themselves. Today’s passage refers to our Lord’s taking the travelers on the road to Emmaus through the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). That division reflects the traditional threefold Jewish division of the Scriptures, whose contents correspond to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament canon. Furthermore, the New Testament never refers to any book outside those thirty-nine books as Scripture. Certainly, we want to have the same Old Testament canon as Jesus and His Apostles, and that is exactly what we have in the Protestant Old Testament canon.

Discerning the extent of the New Testament canon took some time. As the church considered the question, it received as canonical those books that could be traced back to an Apostle or a close associate of an Apostle, books that were read throughout the entire church and not only in a localized area, and books that taught the Apostolic faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). **✠**



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

God established the canon of Scripture when He inspired the books of the Bible, and He established conditions by which the church could objectively evaluate whether a book was a part of Scripture. We can be confident that the church has rightly discerned which books of the Bible belong therein and that our thirty-nine-book Old Testament canon and our twenty-seven-book New Testament canon are complete.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Nehemiah 8:1  
Daniel 9:2  
Acts 28:23  
2 Peter 3:15–16

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 1–3  
Matthew 15:21–39

## THE INTERNAL PERSUASION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

**HEBREWS 4:12** “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

John Calvin writes that “Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit.” Arguments for the divine authority of Scripture have their place, but they cannot finally convince us. Only the Holy Spirit can do that, and we should ask Him to convince those who have not yet received the Bible as His Word.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Genesis 12:1–9  
Isaiah 6:8  
John 10:27  
1 Corinthians 2:6–16

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 4–6  
Matthew 16

Recognition of the full canon of Scripture took place over time, but this does not mean that the church ever entertained significant doubt about which books are canonical. Jesus Himself held to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament canon (Luke 24:44), so while some churches have added books to the Old Testament, they have done so contrary to the example of Jesus Himself. The vast majority of the New Testament books were universally recognized as canonical by the end of the first century, with some in the church having questions about only Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. In the end, however, the link of these books to an Apostle, their widespread use in the church, and their orthodoxy—right doctrine—helped God’s people to recognize that they are divinely inspired.

Nevertheless, we would be mistaken to think that any of the objective factors such as Apostolicity are the final reason that the church receives a book as canonical. If that were so, we would be saying that something other than the Lord is what makes a book part of the canon of Scripture. We would be granting the authority for determining what is revelation to something other than the Revealer Himself. For instance, if we finally accept the canon because the church says that it is canon, then we have said that the church somehow makes Scripture the Word of God. If the church makes Scripture the Word of God, however, then Scripture no longer has inherent divine authority. It has no power to command belief and duty outside the say-so of the church. Scripture testifies to its own inherent authority.

The final reason, then, that we receive a book as canonical can be only that the Holy Spirit convinces us that it is. We refer to this as the internal witness (or persuasion) of the Spirit. Objective markers of canonicity are important lest we fall into purely irrational subjectivism. Still, these objective markers cannot convince us that the canonical books are the Word of God. Only the Author of Scripture, God the Holy Spirit, working in our hearts and minds, can persuade us that the Bible is His special revelation.

Scripture speaks of its power to persuade in several places, including Hebrews 4:12. The author describes Scripture’s ability to get to the very core of our hearts. Scripture alone, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can reveal to us that it is the true Word of God and that we must attend to it as such. **📖**

## THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

**EPHESIANS 2:19–21** “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (vv. 19–20).



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

God did not just hand us a Bible and expect us to go and interpret it on our own. Instead, He gave His Word to His church, which has authority to build up God’s people in faith and love, through the power of the Spirit, by teaching the Word of God. *Sola Scriptura* does not deny our need for the church; it informs us that the church is a servant of the Word of God.

Historic Protestant theology affirms the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, which says that Scripture is the only infallible authority for faith and practice and therefore is the final authority for the church and Christians. This doctrine remains vital for the church because it prevents the church from speaking where God has not spoken and from imposing on people rules and teachings that God has not revealed. Yet as we have said in past studies, that the Bible is the sole infallible and final authority does not mean that it is the only authority for the people of God. The Lord, after all, has established His church as an authority over Christians. What, then, is the relation of the church’s authority to Scripture’s authority?

Today’s passage helps us answer this question. Paul tells us that the “household of God,” the church, is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19–20). As an entity, the church is built on the foundation of the prophets and Apostles, whose words we have only in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and who are established by our Savior. Thus, any organization professing to be a church does not live up to its claims if it is built on a foundation other than that of Jesus and His appointed emissaries, the prophets and Apostles through whom we have the Holy Scriptures.

Christ’s prophets and Apostles form the foundation of the church, but they do not constitute the entirety of the church. The church is to build on this foundation, and it does so primarily through the church’s teaching ministry. We see this especially in Ephesians 4:9–14, where Paul says that Jesus gave various spiritual gifts, offices, and officers to the church for “building up the body of Christ.” The church has authority to guide us into the “fullness of Christ” by teaching us the truth of Christ. We follow the church as we would follow a good teacher in any other subject, trusting in the collective church’s greater familiarity with the subject and expertise in exploring its depths so that we can likewise become adept at understanding the Word of God.

As with other teachers, the church’s authority is not absolute. Where there is evident error, where doctrines and practices are built on a foundation other than Scripture, the church must repent and change course. Still, God has given wisdom to His churches, and we should follow their counsel so long as it is in keeping with God’s Word. **📖**

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Proverbs 13:13–14  
1 Timothy 3:14–15

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 7–8  
Matthew 17

**THE WEEKEND**

Exodus 9–13  
Matthew 18



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL  
JANUARY 25-26

## PROMISE BOX

DEREK W.H. THOMAS

**I** first came across one some fifty years ago: a somewhat small, ornate box, complete with tweezers with which one pulled out a tiny card on which was printed a promise from the Bible. Sure enough, there were 365 cards, one for each day of the year. Some of these promises were taken out of context—promises made to specific individuals but not meant for everyone. But the idea was a good one, considering that the Bible contains many promises that are designed to help us in our pilgrimage through this world and into the next.

Consider Hebrews 13:5: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” It is a quotation from Deuteronomy 31:6, wherein Moses is preparing Joshua and the people of Israel for the conquest of Canaan. Given the specific historical setting, we might be tempted to think that this promise was exclusively for Joshua and the people of God encamped in Moab at the place where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea (Deut. 1:5). But the author of Hebrews picks it up as a promise that covers the entirety of God’s redemptive purposes, in the old covenant as well as the new. It is a promise for every Christian to cherish.

In Hebrews 13, the promise is made in the context of an exhortation to keep our lives “free from love of money” (v. 5). What appears initially as a statement of God’s omnipresence (He is always *with* us) becomes more of a statement about God’s faithfulness to provide for His people all that they need: His presence is reassurance of His *care* for us. He will provide us with all that we *need* rather than all that we *want*.

In the covenant renewal recorded in Deuteronomy 29:1–31:13, the statement “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (31:8) is a testimony to God’s *faithfulness to His covenant promise*. He will keep His promise to give to His people the land of Canaan, just as He now continues that promise to bring us all the way home:

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom. 8:28–30)*

The final stanza of the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” captures well the promise of Hebrews 13:5:

*“The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”*

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## THE SPIRIT'S WORK OF ILLUMINATION

**1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–15** “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. . . . No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (vv. 10–12).

**B**ibliology, otherwise known as the doctrine of Scripture, has been our focus this month in our study of the major loci or headings of systematic theology. Having considered the inspiration of Scripture and its various attributes, we now turn to issues related to the interpretation of Scripture. As we have seen, Scripture is the only infallible authority of faith and practice, and the church has a derivative authority as the creaturely teacher to help us understand the Bible (Eph. 2:19–21; 4:9–14; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). But as we read Scripture and sit under the church's teaching of Scripture, how do we attain comprehension of Scripture? In particular, today we want to consider how we come to a saving knowledge of Scripture. We are not talking so much of knowing what the Bible means; rather, we are looking at how we come to believe what the Bible teaches.

This brings us back to the idea of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, for persuasion that the Bible is the Word of God and coming to believe what it teaches are closely related. Because Scripture is of divine origin and has divine authority, we finally believe that the Bible is the Word of God because the divine Author, the Holy Trinity, says so and He convinces us of it. Similarly, we believe what Scripture teaches because the divine Author grants us trust in what He has revealed. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, “We acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word” (1.6).

First Corinthians 2:6–16 explains our need of God to understand His Word. Paul notes that “no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (v. 11). Because of that reality, we can understand the thoughts of God, which are given to us in Scripture, only if the Spirit grants us comprehension. In fact, one of the reasons for God's gift of His Holy Spirit to His people is so “that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (v. 12).

Even if sin had never entered the world, we would need God to illumine His speech. The Creator-creature distinction means that the Lord must reveal Himself if we are to know Him. But because He is infinite and we are finite, He must also grant understanding of His speech for us to know Him. The fall has made His illumination even more necessary. Apart from grace, we would remain darkened in our understanding of the words of the Lord (Eph. 4:18). 



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

The Spirit's work of illumination does not circumvent the ordinary work of reading the Bible and hearing the Scriptures preached. Instead, the Holy Spirit illumines the Word of God for His elect in and through our study of the Bible on our own and under the tutelage of the church. Thus, we cannot ever claim credit when we rightly understand Scripture even though we must make an effort to do so.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Job 38:36  
Psalm 119:33–34  
Acts 16:14  
Ephesians 1:15–21

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 14–15  
Matthew 19:1–15

MONDAY

27

# SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE

**HEBREWS 2:5–9** “We see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (v. 9).



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

Many false doctrines arise when people use unclear passages to interpret clear ones. For example, Mormons take the less clear passage of 1 Corinthians 15:29 as justification for baptism on behalf of the dead to provide the possibility of redemption after death even though other passages tell us that we can be saved only if we believe in Christ before we die (Luke 16:26; Heb. 9:27). Using clear passages to interpret less clear passages will help us avoid false teaching.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Matthew 5:21–30  
John 8:51  
Galatians 1:6–9  
2 Peter 1:16–21

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 16–18  
Matthew 19:16–30

Scripture must be read and interpreted to be of use to us, and since God is the ultimate Author of Scripture, we want to find the meaning He intends. Only the Holy Spirit can give us a saving understanding of scriptural doctrine (1 Cor. 2:6–15), of course, but He does so as we read and study the Bible and hear it preached. Our goal is to uncover what the human author intended to communicate, for the human author was inspired by God, and his intent can never be contrary to God’s intent. We also recognize that Scripture, because it is divinely inspired, has a depth of meaning that is not always evident on our first reading (Ps. 119:96). Thus, we seek to plumb the depths of Scripture as we return to the text again and again, looking for the fullness of what the Lord wants to teach us.

Our efforts at finding the full sense of Scripture will not succeed if we approach God’s Word in a piecemeal fashion. Since the diverse books of the Bible have the same divine Author, Scripture ultimately teaches the same truth, though we recognize that there are many facets to this truth that complement one another. Consequently, we must read each text of Scripture in light of the whole. This is the interpretive principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.

One application of this principle involves interpreting earlier revelation by later revelation, examining the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. In today’s passage, later revelation interprets earlier revelation as the author of Hebrews applies Psalm 8 to Christ. Reading Psalm 8 in isolation from the rest of Scripture might lead us to see only an exposition of humanity’s dominion over creation as God originally ordained it. But when we read Psalm 8 in light of Hebrews 2:5–9, we see the fuller meaning of the psalm. It is about mankind’s dominion over creation, but it also points us to the fulfillment of this dominion in Christ through His incarnation and exaltation.

Another way that we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture is given to us by Augustine of Hippo. He wrote in *On Christian Doctrine* that “from the places [in Scripture] where the sense in which they are used is more manifest we must gather the sense in which they are to be understood in obscure passages.” This principle, enumerated also in Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9, tells us that we should let clearer texts in Scripture interpret the less clear texts and not the other way around. We will avoid many errors if we do this. **TL**

# DERIVING DOCTRINE AND DUTY FROM SCRIPTURE

**MARK 12:18–27** “As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong” (vv. 26–27).



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

Like all other texts, Scripture must be interpreted. We must read, study, and consider the words of the Bible to know what we are to believe concerning God and what duties He requires of us. That raises the issue of how we are to derive our doctrines and duties from Scripture. In particular, we want to consider whether only what God’s Word says explicitly is binding or whether its implicit teachings must be followed as well.

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6 provides guidance here, stating that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” In other words, the truth of Scripture is found both in what it says directly and in what we rightly deduce from it. Christians have always recognized this, and proof of that lies in the fact that so many of the doctrines that we believe are vital for salvation are not actually explicitly stated in Scripture. For example, no verse in the Bible expressly states that God is one in essence and three in person. Looking at the whole scope of Scripture, however, we must conclude that God is triune if we are to make sense of what the Bible does say explicitly about monotheism and the distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In stating that what we deduce from Scripture by good and necessary consequence is as binding on us as what the Bible says explicitly, we are following the example of Jesus Himself. As we see in today’s passage, Jesus showed the Sadducees that the books of Genesis–Deuteronomy, which were the only books that the Sadducees turned to for doctrine, actually teach that we live on beyond the grave even though they contain no explicit statement to that effect. God did not say “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” after they died but “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Such a statement is meaningful only if the patriarchs did not cease to exist at their deaths. That the Lord continued to be their God long after they were dead and buried necessarily implies His ongoing relationship with them and thus their continuing existence (Mark 12:18–27).

Christian theology does not merely restate the explicit teaching of Scripture but makes good and necessary logical deductions to help us know God better and to answer new challenges. Putting in the work to do this leads to a firmer grasp of divine truth. **TL**

God has made us as rational creatures, so it makes sense that He would reveal Himself in such a way that we must think seriously and deeply about His revelation. He wants us to engage our intellectual faculties and meditate on His truth to plumb its depths. Not everyone is called to be a professional theologian, but all Christians should put in the effort to think through God’s Word as deeply as they can and as their vocations, schedule, and aptitude permit.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Psalm 1:1–2  
Ecclesiastes 7:13  
Matthew 12:9–14  
1 Corinthians 9:1–14

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 19–21  
Matthew 20:1–16

## THE UNITY OF SCRIPTURE

**JOHN 5:39–40** “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

John Calvin comments, “We ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them.” In finding Christ in the Scriptures, we are also finding God and man, for our Savior is both God and man. In finding Christ, we are getting a window into the Holy Trinity, for Christ is the Son of God sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord is the key to the Scriptures.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Psalm 110  
Isaiah 52:13–53:12  
John 1:43–51  
Romans 1:1–7

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 22–24  
Matthew 20:17–34

**O**ur study of Scripture must be thoughtful, done in reliance on the Holy Spirit and using Scripture to interpret Scripture while paying attention to both what the Bible says explicitly and the good and necessary consequences of God’s Word (Mark 12:18–27; 1 Cor. 2:6–15; Heb. 2:5–9). These principles, of course, assume that there is an inherent unity to Scripture, that it ultimately teaches the same truth even if it does so in such a way as to help us see that the truth is multifaceted. Where, then, do we find the unity of Scripture? The Christian answer to this question is that we find the unity of Scripture in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finding the unity of Scripture in the Lord Jesus Christ means that we see Him as the heart of the biblical message. Everything in Scripture exists to direct us to Christ and to cultivate faith in Christ and love for Christ. What holds Scripture together is its unified teaching about our Savior. The Bible makes this clear in several passages. In John 5:39–40, for example, we read about one of the debates between the Lord and the Jews wherein He stressed that the Scriptures bear witness about Him. We can also look to the short summaries of God’s Word found in places such as 1 Timothy 3:16. In that passage, Paul sums up the mystery of godliness revealed in Scripture as the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In saying that the unity of Scripture is found in the Lord Jesus Christ, we do not mean that the Bible’s teaching on other subjects is not unified. Rather, we are taking seriously Paul’s statement that in Christ all things hold together (Col. 1:17). All creation exists for, is sustained by, and finds significance in our Savior. Given that reality, God’s special revelation must also be unified in Jesus. All truth holds together in Him, including every individual fact taught in Scripture.

Looking to Christ for the unity of Scripture does not require us to speak only of Christ and His person and work. It does mean that as we consider the teaching of Scripture on any one subject, we must at some point consider it in relation to Christ. When studying the Bible’s revelation about God, we must remember that Jesus, as the incarnate God, embodies this teaching. If we are thinking about what the Bible says about human beings, we must look to the Savior’s obedience and love as the exemplar of what the Lord created us to be. No matter what specific text we are reading, we do not interpret it adequately if we never look at it with respect to Christ. **TC**

## THE POWER OF SCRIPTURE

**ISAIAH 55:10–11** “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

**H**uman speech can have much power, moving people to action. World history is marked by great speeches that motivated men and women to defend their country from attack, to change constitutions and laws, and to devote themselves to a cause. Yet for all that human speech cannot accomplish, it does not invariably bring about the results intended by the speaker. Sometimes our words fail to achieve the effects that we desire.

This is not the case for God’s words. As we conclude our study of the division of systematic theology that deals with divine revelation, we note today that the Word of God always produces what the Lord intends. His speech really is that powerful. It must be, for God could not truly be the King who rules over all if He could not bring about everything that He has spoken (Num. 23:19; Ps. 103:19).

Isaiah 55:10–11 presents some of the clearest teaching in Scripture on the power of the Word of God. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord compares His speech to the rain and its certain effects. Just as the rain surely waters the earth so that it brings forth vegetation, the words of our God surely produce what He has intended. In fact, given the difference between the Creator and His creation, it is more certain that the words of the Lord will achieve His ends than that the rain will grant life. John Calvin comments: “If we see great efficacy in the rain, which waters and fertilizes the earth, much greater efficacy will God display in his word. The rain is transitory and liable to corruption; but the word is eternal, unchangeable, and incorruptible, and cannot, like the rain, vanish away.”

The prophet was predicting Judah’s return from exile, and that original audience needed to hear the surety of God’s Word with respect to salvation. Isaiah 55:10–11 would encourage the Jewish exiles that despite their weakness relative to great empires such as Babylon and Persia, the Lord would accomplish His good purposes for them. God’s words concerning the Jews’ coming back to the land had to come to pass, for they were spoken by the omnipotent Creator Himself through Isaiah. Note, however, that the efficacy of God’s Word is not limited to salvation. Sometimes the Lord intends that people not obey His Word, that they harden their hearts against Him, as was the case with Pharaoh (Ex. 4:21). Even when people disobey the words of the Lord, they still accomplish His purpose, because even their disobedience is ordained by God. **TC**



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

Disobedience does not please God even if He intends to harden people by His Word, and we can never blame Him for our unbelief. Moreover, the power of God’s Word assures us that we do not have to rely on special means to bring about His will. We merely need to be faithful in proclaiming God’s Word. God brings about His purposes every time when we do so.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Psalm 147:12–20  
John 6:63

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

Exodus 25–26  
Matthew 21:1–22

**THE WEEKEND**

Exodus 27–31  
Matthew 21:23–22:22

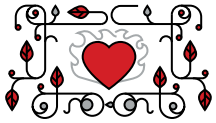


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# Cultivating Comfort in Christ

DAVID GILBERT

**M**ANY PEOPLE IN OUR CULTURE crave comfort above all else, which is nothing more than a me-centered hunt for ease. The kind of comfort sought is an aversion that dulls the pain, gives a sudden euphoric feeling, or turns your mind away from your miseries. But the true, lasting comfort found in our Father through Jesus Christ is not a fleeting feeling like a tranquilizing drug. It's not a flash of fleshly pleasure found in comfort food. God gives comfort that abides in Christ. Just as the believer can never be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, so Paul assures us that God "comforts us," or more literally: He is the One continually giving comfort, dispensing never-failing comfort "in all our affliction" (2 Cor. 1:4). In other words, God meets us with an ever-readiness to console and to provide real, lasting comfort of every kind.

For the biblical authors, and the Apostle Paul particularly, doctrine always leads to doxology. The truth of God always trumpets praise to God, and that's a fact even in the fires of affliction. Paul was no stranger to affliction as his life was conformed to Christ, but the fraudulent teachers in Corinth dared to depict the Christian life as a distress-free, triumphalistic life. The

flesh craves this kind of teaching, which pitches ease and peace now rather than presenting the cross-shaped pattern of the Christian life. But for Jesus, it was humiliation and then exaltation, just as it had been for Joseph, Moses, and David. This is the norm for those who follow in Jesus' steps. The Apostle Paul, therefore, does not aim to empty the godly life of suffering. Instead, he focuses the hearts of his hearers on the God who meets us in the highways of affliction. Our comfort is not finding a worldly escape from the present crisis. Such a life of complete ease is not possible this side of glory, no matter what lie the devil tells us. Our comfort is tasting and seeing God's mercy as it meets us in our sorrows. This is the truth that Paul ponders as he opens 2 Corinthians.

Paul begins with an eruption of praise. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3). This opening echoes a Jewish benediction. "Blessed be the LORD" is all over the Psalms. Paul, however, gives this praise a distinctly Christian bent. This God whom we bless is blessed as our Father only through Jesus Christ. By virtue of the work of Christ and approaching God in Christ, we are led to the fountain of eternal love, the Father

Himself. The Father sent His Son to save, and Jesus has secured for us the mercy and comfort of God. Therefore, even when darkness draws near, we have the sunshine of our Father's face. We have peace with God through Jesus' blood, access to the Father's presence, and the hope of glory. The deepest pit cannot put out the comfort of these consoling realities.

Paul aims to plumb the depths of our Christian privileges. So he praises the Father as "the Father of mercies [note the plural] and God of all [or "every kind of"] comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). Paul is explaining here that our heavenly Father is characterized by mercy. Step one to cultivating comfort in Christ is to view our Father rightly. He is not cold, austere, or harsh. He is abounding in love, tender, and a giving God, and "his mercies never come to an end" (Lam. 3:22). One cannot find the bottom of God's well of mercy. Being a God

rich in mercy, out of His deep love, He sent Christ, saved us through Christ, raised us up with Christ, and has made us to taste unceasing grace in Christ. Our destiny is secure irrespective of the inconveniences, piercing pains, and great griefs of a fallen world. What a comfort that is to our souls, and this comfort is found in Christ.

Are you fearful? Be steadied with the truth. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isa. 43:1). If Jesus sank into the lowest pit, even tasting death for us, will He not meet us in our valleys? Are you downcast? Paul will say in just a few verses that

he and his companions "were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8). That is a melancholic spot. But what did he learn in the dungeon of difficulty? He learned not to rely on himself but on God who raises the dead (v. 9). It's not just that God raised Jesus. God raised Paul from a deadly situation. That's the kind of God that He is. He is a God "who daily bears us up . . . ,

and to God, the LORD, be-  
long deliverances from  
death" (Ps. 68:19–20).

Our comfort is cultivated when we see that even the deep darkness, whether a figurative darkness or death itself, cannot swallow us. Christ has conquered the grave. Our true comfort lives. Death has been defeated. Suffering will not last. Jesus is enthroned, and His purpose will prevail. What is that purpose? It is to see "our lowly body" transformed "to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21). That is our hope,

and therefore in the greatest of calamities we have a comfort that cannot fail. Do you ponder it? Do you muse on your privileges? Do you fight off heaviness of soul by fixing your faith on the gift of Jesus for your salvation? Do you bless the Father of mercies? Our circumstances may rise and fall in a broken world, but God's comfort in Christ will never be cut off. The Lord's commitment endures, and that comfort will carry us home. Let us think on these things. **TC**

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# Assuming the Best of Fellow Christians

CARL D. ROBBINS

**T**HE MARK of a truly converted man is the fruit of the Spirit that is love (Gal. 5:22). Love for the brethren was Christ's new commandment (John 13:34–35). After Jonathan Edwards saw a spiritual awakening of his congregation in 1734–35, he preached a sixteen-sermon series on 1 Corinthians 13:1–8 titled “Charity and Its Fruits.” Edwards did this because he was deeply concerned, as a pastor, to lead his congregation to Christian maturity, and so he repeatedly stressed that love among believers is the primary evidence of conversion. Edwards was pastorally wise to preach 1 Corinthians 13, since this powerful text is the clearest guideline on how to love other believers. In verses 4–8, Paul gives an exhaustive listing of the characteristics of true Christian love in the church (that is the context). How should I believe all things (about my fellow believers) and hope all things (about my fellow believers)?

*Love believes all things.* The way of the world is to believe the worst about others and to project nefarious motives on their actions. But Christian love is always ready to assume the best about people's lives and words.

Love is not pessimistic or cynical but

instead believes that God is at work in the lives of other believers. Christian love believes that God is progressively sanctifying them, making them holy. So the Christian must believe that his fellow disciple is driven by good motives and intends no harm. The Christian will not believe the contrary except on irrefutable evidence. Christian love chooses to pay attention to someone's virtues and strengths, rather than the person's weaknesses and annoying traits.

The difficulty here is how to harmonize this truth with texts that encourage us to be wary, to test all things, to exercise discernment. Thus, to assume the best about other Christians cannot mean that the Christian man who loves is a man of foolish gullibility. Still, while the believer does not ignore sin, he must choose to cover offenses (1 Peter 4:8). When a brother in Christ has sinned against us and asks for forgiveness (which entails a commitment to not sin in the same way again), we must love him by believing that he will (in the future) treat us rightly.

By forgiving him, we are saying, “Because I love you, I believe that you will not sin against me in that way in the future.” And the believer continues to

respond this way seventy-seven times (Matt. 18:21–22).

The person who always thinks the worst of other Christians, who reads evil into the most innocent of actions, who questions motives, who refuses to give the benefit of the doubt is like the scribes and Pharisees. You'll remember that they always believed the worst of Jesus. When Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5), they accused Him of sin. When Jesus healed a mute man and cast demons out of him (ch. 11), they accused Him of demonic possession. Job's counselors were guilty of the same thing. They were absolutely certain that he was suffering because he was guilty of some heinous, hidden sin (Job 4). But by the end of the book (ch. 42), God had rebuked these “friends” for their false assumptions.

*Love hopes all things.* The world looks for the downfall of others and assumes that they cannot survive difficulties. The stance of the mature Christian, however, is not one of gleefully waiting for another believer to fail or for the same fallen believer to fall again. Believers have a deep desire for their fellow Christians to succeed, persevere, bear fruit, and mature. Thus, there's a time orientation to Paul's statements concerning love. “Believes all things” looks at the present, while “hopes all things” looks to the future. The Greek word translated as “hope” is *elpizō*, which means “to trust or expect.” Christian hope is based on the sure word of God's promise. So when the Christian “hopes all things,” he is trusting that God is at work in the life of fellow believers just as God has said that He is (Phil. 1:6). To hope all things is the confident, trusting expectation of the long-term spir-

itual growth of fellow Christians. To hope all things means that we can never write off a fellow believer as a lost cause. Even when other believers fall hard, the Christian believes that God can and will restore them. (After all, don't we see Jesus restoring Peter and encouraging Thomas after they have failed and disappointed Him?)

When we consider other believers, we should always look ahead to what they will be when God has brought to completion their likeness to the image of Christ on the last day. Whenever we don't “hope all things” about fellow Christians, we shortchange God's long-term work of purifying His elect and His commitment to finishing the good work He started in

them. Thus, failure to hope all things is unbelief. It is a refusal to believe God's Word that He will bring His work of grace in the life of other Christians to completion.

Ultimately, the reason that the believer is hopeful about other Christians is not because we trust them in and of themselves. It is because we trust the One who indwells them. We firmly believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of our fellow believer. Christian love, then, is never pessimistic about fellow believers but is fundamentally optimistic, hoping that they (by God's sanctifying grace) will outgrow all their pettiness and sin and bear fruit thirty-, sixty-, and a hundredfold.

Really, how could we ever be hopeless about other Christians when we are followers of “the God of hope” who has granted to all His children His sanctifying Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13; 1 Thess. 4:8)? **TC**

**CHRISTIAN LOVE IS NEVER PESSIMISTIC ABOUT FELLOW BELIEVERS BUT IS FUNDAMENTALLY OPTIMISTIC.**

**REV. CARL D. ROBBINS** is senior pastor of Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church in Simpsonville, S.C.



# The Holy Spirit's Work through Us

DANIEL SCHROCK

**H**OW SHOULD CHRISTIANS engage with culture? The answer to that question is hotly contested, and many proposals set down the wrong track. We discover in Jesus' description of His people in Matthew 5:13–16 key principles to guide our answer. His choice images—the salt of the earth and the light of the world—give us sure footing for an essential orientation to the question.

The metaphor of salt focuses on its preservative power. Salt's antiseptic qualities make it a fitting picture of how Christians are to live amid a world that is putrefying in sin. As it lives in obedience to Christ, the church plays a role in staving off the world's moral decay.

The metaphor of light focuses on another feature of our life amid the world: illumination. It is conjoined with the notion that the church is a "city on a hill." In this image, our Savior is referencing not just the way that a city on a hill is visible on the horizon during the day but also how it is especially visible in the evening when it is lit up by the collective lamps burning within it. If one traveled at nighttime to a city like Jerusalem, he could not have missed the lights of the city shining against the black of the night sky.

Like an illumined city in the night, the righteous lives of Christians should stand out against the darkness of the world. We must be so thoroughly transformed by Christ that the world cannot but perceive in all our conduct something that seems completely idiosyncratic and thus unavoidably noticeable.

Yes, we need to think carefully about how to proclaim the gospel to the cultures in which we live. Yet we ought never to delude ourselves into believing that we can make the gospel more attractive to the culture around us by hiding certain things about it, such as how it calls us to live. To the contrary, light is an attractive force precisely because of its stark contrast to the darkness that surrounds it. The gospel does not need us to conceal its distinction to the world.

In both facets of engaging the world—preservation and illumination—we must rely on the Holy Spirit. The antithetical character of spiritual salt as it interacts with infection and spiritual light as it pierces darkness will countenance no attempt at manipulating outcomes through the devices of the flesh.

We are salt and light by virtue of the new relationship into which we have entered

with God through the grace that has broken into our lives through the reign of Jesus. There is no other way to enter that relationship but through the Spirit-empowered dynamics of the gospel. The sovereignty of God's grace through the Holy Spirit regenerates dead men and causes them to be crucified with Christ so that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in them (Rom. 8:4). The Spirit makes us to be salt and light, and only He can make others to be salt and light as well.

This orients us properly to the missional nature of what Jesus adds in Matthew 5:16. He says that men will see our good works. Yet they do not glorify us. Rather, they glorify our Father who is in heaven. By our good works, other people recognize that God has wrought these things.

In making us agents of preservation and illumination, Christ uses us as instruments to gather the nations to Himself. A missional hope is embedded in the calling to be salt and light. Through Christ's disciples, men and women will glimpse His light and be invited to glorify God themselves.

We do well to note that though this missional hope is executed in the arena of human culture, it is not about the transformation of human culture per se. The redemption of the earth is a prerogative that resides in the hands of Christ Himself as the second Adam. Try as we might, we cannot bring the new creation down from heaven through our cultural efforts. We cannot set all things free from their bondage to corruption. Rather, we wait in hope for what we do not yet see (Rom. 8:18–25).

What we must do is to be fully active as cultural agents in this world, serving

as an antiseptic force that staves off corruption and as rays that pierce the shadows. We are to be blessedly different. In our every endeavor, we are to be peculiar to a watching world.

We do this in reliance on the Holy Spirit, in the hope that through that same Spirit, men and women will turn to glorify our Father and in so doing embrace the Son whom the Father has sent to extract them from their caves of misery and gloom.

Jesus' commission is neither fearful world-flight nor naive triumphalism. It is resilient witness bearing. His commission accepts the perpetual reality of persecution in this passing age until Christ returns

(Matt. 5:10–11). But it accepts this in the hope that as we are salt and light, Jesus is working through the Holy Spirit to draw the nations to Himself.

Christ calls us to do something difficult: to remain in the world yet to be distinct from the world. His call places us in the middle of the cascading pressure of cultures that are hostile, corrupt, and tempting. In the crucible of that opposition and seduction, we are to be salt that does not lose its saltiness and light that never blends in with the darkness.

This arduous balancing act is an indispensable feature of the mission of the church. Every generation of God's people must engage in it afresh with faithfulness in their time and place, becoming neither Christian separatists nor Christian assimilators. Instead, we must be salt and light. And we cannot be salt or light without uncompromising reliance on the Spirit. ■

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## JESUS' COMMISSION IS NEITHER FEARFUL WORLD-FLIGHT NOR NAIVE TRIUMPHALISM.



# Empathy, Sympathy, and the LGBTQ+ Movement

ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

**E**MPATHY MEANS STANDING in someone else's shoes. In a world where kindness is the most important virtue, empathy is the highest manifestation of this love. But is empathy always a good thing? Is empathy ever dangerous? When did empathy become more virtuous than sympathy?

## DO WE NEED EMPATHY OR SYMPATHY?

*Empathy* is a relatively new word; it didn't enter our language until the twentieth century. The dictionary defines *empathy* as "the power of mentally identifying oneself with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation." When people say, "My thoughts and prayers are with you," they are likely referring to the power of empathy, which holds that if you mentally identify with something or someone, you comprehend (apprehend with your senses) their pain. And your ability to feel with them helps break the isolation of their experience, which in turn helps them heal. My dictionary contrasts empathy to sympathy: "Pity is feeling sorry for someone; empathy is feeling sorry with someone." If you pity someone, you are observing some identifiable and objective problem experienced by that person. Being the object of

pity means that something is terribly wrong, and something must be done about that. Sympathy identifies an objective problem and seeks an objective solution.

The character of Satan in John Milton's magnificent *Paradise Lost*, a seventeenth-century epic poem that boasts ten thousand lines of iambic pentameter, has a word for us about this matter of pity. In the poem, the character of Satan says, "The mind is its place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. . . . / Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." In other words, Satan would rather be anything but pitied. Rather than be the object of pity or the agent of prayer to God, calling out to him for mercy and begging him for the grace to repent, the fallen angel would rather play mind games, somehow "making" an imaginary heaven out of a real hell. The seventeenth-century poet John Milton helps us ask the twenty-first-century question, Do people in real trouble benefit from pity or empathy? Do people in real trouble need real help (sympathy)? Or do they just need to reframe their troubles?

In contrast to empathy, sympathy is an old word with an old history. It describes "the quality or state of being affected by the suffering or grief of another; a feeling

or expression of compassion or condolence." Sympathy recognizes a problem that someone else has, and sympathy grieves and longs for a solution. This means that when your daughter comes home from college and tells you that she is a man named Rex, you ought to feel sympathy, because something is terribly, dreadfully wrong with your daughter. But LGBTQ+

an even greater problem. Sympathy allows someone to stand on the shore, on the solid ground of objective truth where real help might be found. Empathy's intent is good—connecting with another person in pain. But when the person in pain needs to be rescued, empathy leads to alienation. This constant state of alienation reiterates the false idea that there is no real help avail-

WORDS DO MORE THAN COMMUNICATE IDEAS;

THEY SHAPE OUR IMAGINATIONS. CHANGE

THE WORDS, AND YOU CHANGE THE WORLD.

propaganda wants you to feel empathy instead. LGBTQ+ propaganda wants you to reframe your point of view, not help fix your daughter's problem.

While empathy is not always unwarranted, we are never called to empathize with sin. In this context, empathy puts you squarely into Milton's satanic paradigm—the mind is so powerful that it makes a reality of its own will.

Author Joe Rigney has traced the movement in this term, empathy, and he suggests that while empathy certainly has a place in our lives, we all tend to use the term selectively. We empathize with perceived victims only. (Who, for example, wants to empathize with a murderer or rapist?) Selective empathy is one of the key contributors to tribalism and polarization. To Rigney, empathy is dangerous because if the highest form of love is standing in someone else's shoes, no one is left standing in a place of objective truth. If someone is drowning in a river, jumping in with him may break up his loneliness, but having two drowned people produces

able and that all we have is loneliness—the autonomous individual seeking meaning in his own pain.

Words matter. And we are living in a world that has become a war of words. Christians are called to be peacemakers, not passive dupes in this war. Words do more than communicate ideas; they shape our imaginations. Change the words, and you change the world. And Jesus is still the Word made flesh. Jesus is also our high priest who offers us sympathy, not empathy:

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14–16)*

This matchless description of the person



and work of Jesus invites us to a place so perfect that it exceeds our imagination: the throne of grace. Jesus is prophet, priest, and king, but this passage in Hebrews focuses our attention on his priesthood—Jesus as man’s representative before God.

**THE NEED TO KNOW JESUS**

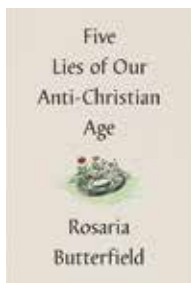
Any Christian struggling with homosexuality needs to know the resurrected Jesus, the Son of God, as high priest. Jesus is fully man and fully God, which is fully a mind-boggling mystery.

God loved us so very much that he gave us Jesus (John 3:16), and Jesus fulfilled the terms of our ransom. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly, and he did this as a man. Jesus died a shameful death on the cross, taking ownership and making payment for the sins of all his people for all of time. Puritan John Flavel wrote:

*Christ Jesus set himself wholly apart for believers. We may say, “Lord, condemnation was yours, that justification might be mine; agony was yours, and victory mine; pain was yours, and ease is mine; agony was yours, and victory mine; the curse was yours and the blessing mine; a crown of thorns was yours, and eternal life mine!”*

Jesus loves his people more than we can ever understand this side of eternity.

The resurrected Jesus is our high priest,



**Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age**

BY ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

The world is constantly propagating unbiblical views of human identity and sexuality. In this book, Dr. Rosaria Butterfield confronts five lies that the culture promotes, including lies about sexuality, femininity, gender roles, and modesty.

and he sympathizes with our weaknesses. Christ’s sympathy is far greater than human empathy because God is able to do more than reframe our troubles. He can cure us of all our infirmities. He offers us sympathy, not mocking or shame. Even if we are suffering because of our sin, Jesus does not heap shame on us. He calls us to come boldly to him. He is the great physician who knows our sin disease better than we do. His power to resist temptation was real. Christ fought sin as a man. His fight was not a sham. His

hunger and want and temptation were real. And to his people, Jesus is offering real healing, real cure. But his terms are not what we would expect. Jesus suffers with us, but Jesus does not sin with us. He will cure us on his terms, which include stepping into the power that his resurrection offers to fight sin every day of our life on earth. His power to resist temptation is given to us by grace.

Sometimes we just want someone to say that we are okay just the way we are. But that is not what Jesus offers. Are we willing to be healed on Jesus’s terms? Or are we insisting that Jesus heal us on our own terms?

John 5 records a story of a man who had to confront this problem head on. He had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, lingering by the healing waters at the Sheep Gate. He trusted that the water would heal him, and he was waiting for someone to put him in. But day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year,

no one did. Then Jesus arrived. But Jesus didn’t put him in the water either. Instead, in sympathy, Jesus asked him a question: “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6).

Let that linger for a moment. Do you want to be made well? Do you want to be made well on Jesus’s terms or your own? Does the Christian who calls himself gay want to be made well on God’s terms?

and grit and strain and action on our part. Trusting Jesus is an action. Accepting Jesus’s terms of sympathy means abandoning our own notions about how we need to be helped. It means doing what he says.

The second matter revealing the now-healed man’s heart happens in the next scene. The very next time Jesus encounters the man, he is in the temple. The setting implies

**ARE WE WILLING TO BE HEALED ON JESUS’S TERMS? OR ARE WE INSISTING**

**THAT JESUS HEAL US ON OUR OWN TERMS?**

Importantly, the sick man didn’t take offense at this question, as perhaps someone like the rich young ruler might have (see Luke 18:18–25). After all, why would the man be sitting there for decades if he didn’t want to be made well? The question was meant to reveal that Jesus heals on his own terms, not ours. For the man to be healed, he needed to embrace the terms that Jesus was going to set.

The paralyzed man answered, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool” (John 5:7). True enough. While we don’t know what was happening in the man’s heart as he looked up at Jesus, we do know that he embraced the terms that our Lord offered. We know this because of two things. First, when Jesus said, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk” (5:8), the man obeyed. He trusted that he could do what God asked of him through the power of Jesus. And what is the power of Jesus? It’s grace. Unmerited favor. Jesus gives us the power to do that which we could not imagine or do on our own terms. We obey in grace. But this is not passive; it still requires trust and faith

something important—the man knows that God has healed him. (Whether he was worshipping, the text does not say.) Jesus approaches the man and says, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you” (5:14). We know that not all suffering is the consequence of active sin, but Jesus’s words imply that this man’s sin was. So we know from this encounter that the man received Jesus’s terms in two ways, in active obedience (5:9) and in repentance (5:14). Both his active obedience (walking, after thirty-eight years of paralysis) and his repentance (receiving Jesus’s gentle rebuke), as well as his evident change and healing, suggest that this man needed the saving grace of our high priest. **✠**

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NEW

## LOOKING TO CHRIST DAY BY DAY

Christians can easily lose heart as they look out at the world. The Apostle Paul evidently felt the same way. His remedy was to teach us to focus not on the things that are seen but on the “things that are unseen” (2 Cor. 4:18). Every day, we must reorient our thoughts around the unchanging truth of Christ: who He is and who we are in Him. In *Things Unseen*, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson brings his signature warmth and wisdom to daily meditations on the Christian life. Take up this new yearlong devotional, with each week’s reflections following a theme to help you look to the Lord and live by faith. **Available now.**



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