

THE BANNER

OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH

SPECIAL THEME: Ecclesiastes
The Cycles of Life
The Vanity of Striving after Pleasure
The Counsel for Life
Doing Devotions
You Must Be Born Again



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SPECIAL THEME: THEMES FROM ECCLESIASTES

This edition of the *Banner* focuses on themes from Ecclesiastes. These themes are especially appropriate for navigating life in a materialistic and hedonistic society. The articles focus on a range of themes such as the cycles of life, the vain pursuit of knowledge, the vain pursuit of pleasure, the vain pursuit of wisdom, the vain pursuit of the results of labor, the inability to know what to do and to know the future, the evaluation of youth and old age, and counsel for life. All these articles are written to lead us to consider the vanity of life without God and to find our only fulfillment in the One who has created us and redeems sinners to transform our view of life in light of pursuing God as our highest good and live with an eye to eternity.

Doing Devotions

It has often been said that familiarity breeds complacency. If we are in a regular routine of practicing something, that routine can become mundane. Sadly, this is also true of spiritual exercises. That which is supposed to be spiritually vibrant becomes banal, ordinary. Sometimes that can happen in our daily routine of devotions.

As Christians we often speak about “doing our devotions.” Have you ever asked: *where* did that term come from? *Why* and *how* do we practice devotions? It might surprise us that the idea of the term “devote” carries the sense of *separation*. In Leviticus 27 the Israelites were called to separate or devote unto the Lord their lives and a portion of their animals, fields, and money. They did this to express their dedication and devotion to their covenant God.

In Christ we also are exhorted in principle to devote or separate some of our time to the Lord for Bible study and prayer. Paul urges us to redeem “the time because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16).

WHY DO WE PRACTICE DEVOTIONS?

- We need to be taught because we are naturally ignorant (Job 8:9).
- Scripture is the ultimate source of truth (John 17:17).
- The Word of God is the seed of life (1 Peter 1:23).
- God’s Word and particularly His promises are the normal means of our personal assurance of faith (Rom. 8:15–16; Heb. 10:22–23; cf. Canons of Dort, Head 5, Art. 10).
- The Word is what assists us to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).
- The Word blessed by the Spirit equips us for ministry and evangelism (Eph. 4:12).
- The Word equips us to fight sin and temptation in the good fight of faith (Eph. 6:10–18).
- God is glorified the most when we bear much biblical fruit (John 15:8).
- Prayer and Bible study keeps families together. The old proverb is tried and true: “The family that prays together stays together.”

HOW DO WE PRACTICE DEVOTIONS?

- Try to find a quiet place to be still and know that the Lord is God (Ps. 46:10). Elijah found the upper room. Peter was on a housetop. Jesus Christ went to a garden.
- Pray, pray, pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).
- Don’t approach the Bible unimpressed. The Bible is God

speaking to us. Over 400 times in the Bible we read the authoritative expression, “Thus saith the LORD”!

- Don’t approach the Bible prejudiced, thinking it exists to simply supplement our knowledge. God hates pride.
- We should not practice devotions just to ease a burdened conscience. When we engage in a religious act to only free our conscience our originating motivation is incorrect. Pray for a humble and hungry heart.
- Go through the books in an orderly manner rather than a hopscotch approach. The Lord is a God of order. We should be orderly as well. Many Christians find it helpful to follow a Bible reading plan, or a daily devotional.
- As you read and ponder, ask questions. What sin is warned against? What virtue is promoted? What are the main lessons? How can I apply this to my life? Always ask this most important question: What does this passage teach me about the Lord Jesus Christ—about His person and His work?
- Remember that practicing devotions is not an end in itself. We don’t “do devotions” just to say we did it. We practice devotions ultimately to give glory to God (1 Cor. 10:31). As we encourage one another in the faith we must emphasize the need to make daily devotions a priority with a properly oriented motivation.
- We need to be patient as we study God’s Word. Remember that the Bible took an eternity past to plan and about 2,000 years to write. Don’t be discouraged when we can’t figure it all out in a month, or even a year.
- Remember the words of Christ as He concluded His Sermon on the Mount. The foolish man heard the Word but didn’t put it into practice, but the wise man both listened to the Word and practiced it (Matt. 7:24–26). Let us seek to be wise by God’s good grace.

If you have never engaged in the practice of doing devotions, find a good Christian friend to assist you as you begin. If you have let your devotional practices slip—renew them today. A righteous man may fall seven times, but rises again (Prov. 24:16). If you are faithfully practicing devotions, continue on and don’t allow anything to sidetrack you. Persevere till the Lord calls you home.

As we regularly engage in devotions, I pray that we may sing David’s words, “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:103).

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You Must Be Born Again



Few things rejoice the heart more than life. When a pregnant mother feels the little one within her womb kicking or hears her baby's heart beating rapidly on the ultrasound, her soul is immediately filled with joy and gratitude. Conversely, few things bring greater sorrow than death. When the heart monitor indicates there is no pulse, when the final breath is taken, or when a loved one becomes a lifeless corpse, does it not bring the soul into the depths of anguish and despair? Words simply fail to describe the contrast.

The point is that life matters. It is of monumental significance. And if this is true in the physical realm, how much more so in the spiritual realm. When we talk about spiritual life as Christians, we are referring to what is often called the new birth. There are few subjects of such immense importance as this one. The new birth is the fundamental blessing of the Spirit's saving work. Without it, there is no hope for us. Without it, we remain dead in trespasses and sins. Without it, we head to a Christless, graceless eternity.

Jesus Himself had much to say about the new birth. In John 3 we are invited into a most enlightening discussion between Christ and a Jewish teacher by the name of Nicodemus. What is the initial subject of their conversation? The new birth. Of all the important topics Jesus could have talked about with this religious leader, He chose to begin with this one. It was, for Christ, the doctrine upon which the soul stands or falls. We would do well to pay careful attention to His words.

THE MAKEUP OF THE NEW BIRTH

The term *regeneration* is a synonym of the new birth. The prefix "re" means *again*. Generation means *to generate* or *to quicken into life*. Therefore, regeneration means *to be brought into life again*, or *to be born again*. It is vital for us to think through what the makeup of the new birth is.

What Regeneration Is Not

Jesus's discussion with Nicodemus helps us to understand, first of all, what the new birth is *not* by nature. Regeneration

is not the same thing as religion, not even the same thing as orthodox religion. You can give mental assent to the whole of Scripture, and yet not be born again. You can be very conservative, and yet not be born again. Nicodemus in John 3 is a prime example of this, is he not? He belonged to the Pharisees. He was not only a religious man but a religious teacher. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (v. 10). Yet our Lord warned him, "Ye must be born again" (v. 7). You can possess religious knowledge, have religious experiences, be involved in a frenzy of religious activities, and yet never have been born again.

Second, the new birth is not the same thing as reformation. No doubt, Nicodemus was open to changing some of his thought patterns and lifestyle choices. If not, he never would have risked coming to Jesus late at night. Seeing the wreckage sin has made in their lives, people often confess, "I need to change." And many times they do reform their lives, at least to some degree. But a self-produced morality is not the new birth. You can be reformed; you can see the emptiness of a worldly life, and yet not be born again.

The new birth, third, is not the same thing as religious education. That was, of course, one of Nicodemus's great mistakes when he came to Jesus by night. He came asking for teaching. What is problematic about this? He approached Jesus as a fellow teacher. He said, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (v. 2). Jesus reads right into what Nicodemus is doing. He wants a little instruction. But Jesus essentially tells him, "Nicodemus, it is not a little teaching you need. It is *life* that you need. You are dead, Nicodemus. You must be born again." It is possible to be taught much Christian truth, and yet not be born again.

What Regeneration Is

What then is the new birth? Regeneration is the radical transformation wrought by the Spirit whereby He makes

spiritually dead sinners alive in Christ. The Canons of Dort describe it as “a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid.... It is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable.”¹

Regeneration is *a divine miracle*. The whole thrust of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that a man can no more produce his spiritual birth than he can produce his natural birth. God works it in us, without any help on our part. The Bible makes it clear that fallen man is not merely impaired, but spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1–3). Therefore, it is impossible for him to cooperate in the new birth. Man is passive in regeneration; he is born of the Spirit (John 3:5–6), born of God, and not born of anything in man, not his blood, his flesh, or his will (John 1:13). The biblical doctrine of the new birth leaves no room for synergism. It is a monergistic work of the sovereign God, speaking life into the souls of dead sinners. As Jesus called forth the physically dead Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:43–44), so too Jesus speaks His life-giving Word into the hearts of dead sinners, quickening them by His authoritative, powerful voice.

Regeneration is *a comprehensive miracle*. When a baby is born, the principle of life pervades the whole of his or her humanity. Similarly, God doesn’t renew a part of man, but every faculty of man’s soul. He effectually renews the mind to understand the gospel, the heart to believe it, and the will to desire and respond to it. Stephen Charnock wrote, “The new birth is necessary in every part of the soul.... Because there was an universal depravation by the fall, regeneration must answer it in its extensiveness in every faculty. Otherwise it is not the birth of the man, but of one part only.”² Because the new birth entails the whole man, we are enabled to honor the Lord in every aspect of life.

Regeneration is *an irreversible miracle*. In the world of chemistry, there is a great difference between mixing two substances and making the two substances into a compound. In an experiment, you might take two substances, iron and sulphur, and mix them together. But this mixture can be easily reversed by taking a powerful magnet and passing it over the mixture of iron filings and sulphur; all the filings will be drawn rapidly to the magnet. The mixture is quickly reversed. But a compound is an entirely different matter. To make a compound, you would put the iron filings and the sulphur together and then subject them to extreme heat. And as you do so, the mixture becomes a new substance altogether. No magnet can draw out the iron filings again. Similarly, the Holy Spirit, in regeneration, makes a new

substance that is irreversible. No magnetizing power of the world, the flesh, or the devil, can draw that new life out of the sinner. John Flavel says that the new life of regeneration is “no transient, vanishing thing, but a fixed, permanent principle, which abides in the soul for ever.” Furthermore, “grace cannot be separated from the soul: when all forsake us, this will not leave us.”³ God keeps us in a state of life by His omnipotent grace.

Regeneration is *a necessary miracle*. Jesus tells Nicodemus three times that he *must* be born again (John 3:3, 5, 7). The new birth is not optional. J. C. Ryle wrote, “A man may be ignorant of many things in religion and yet be saved, but to be ignorant of the matter handled in this chapter [John 3] is to be on the broad way that leads to destruction.”⁴ Because human depravity is a universal reality, the necessity of the new birth is a universal reality. In other words, our pervasive need of regeneration exists because of our pervasive sinfulness. This is why Jesus says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). Apart from this gracious work in our lives we will die in our sins. George Swinnock put it helpfully, “There must be a change from Nature to Grace, before there can be a change from Grace to Glory.”⁵ Here is a necessity that is true throughout all ages. From Adam’s fall to the end of the world, there is not one person who ever walked the face of this earth who did not need to be born again.

This is what Jesus is referring to when He tells Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again.” He is talking about a divinely wrought resurrection from the dead: “You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). He is speaking about a comprehensive new creation: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). He is speaking of the new birth.

THE MEANS OF THE NEW BIRTH

As He instructs Nicodemus, Jesus illustrates this gracious work of regeneration with the wind: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). There is a double connotation to Jesus’s illustration. “Wind” in Greek and Hebrew is the same word for “spirit.” Not only is the new birth like the activity of the wind, but the Spirit who authors the new birth is the wind. He is not an impersonal power, but rather a powerful Person who brings about



regeneration in a manner similar to the way the wind blows in nature. Being the bond between believers and Christ, the Spirit makes sinners alive in the Savior.

The Sovereign Spirit

Jesus emphasizes that the wind is free and sovereign. “The wind,” He says, “bloweth where it listeth.” Listeth is an old-fashioned word meaning “desires”—the wind blows where it desires. No man can stop it. We cannot manipulate or control the wind. And in the same way, we cannot manipulate and control the Holy Spirit. He blows upon the hearts of whomever he pleases.

Like the wind, the work of the Spirit is mysterious. We cannot tell “whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” He often saves the most unlikely characters, at the most unlikely time, in the most unlikely way. He is sovereign, saving whom He will, where He will, when He will, by what means He will.

How fatal Jesus’s words are to the modern conceptions of revival! Men declare they will have a revival and put it on the calendar as if they have the power to control the Spirit. That is not true revival. Genuine revival is unpredictable and often surprising. It is not something we can manipulate, but it is something we must pray and plead for. The Spirit’s normal way of working in regeneration and revival is to stir up His people to pray for these things and then, in response to their prayers, to bring it. Are you crying out for Him to blow upon the dead hearts of lost family members, neighbors, and coworkers?

The Saving Scriptures

The Holy Spirit uses the Word He inspired as the great means by which He brings the new birth about. Jesus’s entire discussion about regeneration with Nicodemus reaches its climax in the proclamation of the gospel (vv. 14–16). The sovereign Spirit employs the instrument of the Word, in particular the gospel, to make men alive in Christ. Peter tells us we are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Peter 1:23). He goes on to explain that the Word by which the new birth is effected is nothing less than the gospel itself (v. 25).

The Spirit joins Himself to the Word of God. He delights to take the things of Christ and to reveal them to sinners. He plants the seed of regeneration through the hearing of the Word, and from that regenerating act comes saving faith.

A spiritual sight of the glory of Jesus Christ in the gospel can have no other response than a humble and ardent faith.

Let us be clear, it is the Spirit who alone does this work of the new birth. He is the final and sole agent. But He is pleased to use the means of the Word of God to bring it to pass. Is this not great incentive to lay yourself bare before the Scriptures? Should this not motivate us to share the Scriptures with others? Anthony Burgess exclaims, “Oh therefore how careful should people be both to get and to live under the preaching of God’s Word! This is the wind that must make dry bones live: This is the voice of a trumpet, that must make the dead come out of the grave. How insignificant, impotent, contemptible, men may esteem it, yet God hath appointed no other means to convey supernatural life, but after this manner.”⁶

Read the Scriptures, meditate on the Scriptures, proclaim the Scriptures to others, and bring the Scriptures before the throne of grace, asking God to make them effectual.

THE MARKS OF THE NEW BIRTH

Everything we have considered thus far about regeneration begs the question: “How may I know if it has happened to me? What are the inevitable fruits of the new birth? Teaching the necessity of regeneration without explaining what it actually looks like in real life would be useless. How may we know if this wonderful, miraculous, and irreversible work of regeneration has been wrought in us?

Wherever regeneration takes place it will evidence itself in spiritual fruit. Where there is life, there will be evidences of life. While there are numerous marks of the new birth revealed in Scripture, our attention will be given to that which Jesus sets forth in His discussion with Nicodemus in John 3. There are two essential fruits of the new birth which our Savior here reveals.

A Spiritual Perception

The first is found in the words of Jesus in verse 3: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God.” Where the Spirit makes a person a new creature, he or she will receive spiritual eyes to see the kingdom of God. This is an inevitable evidence of regeneration—*spiritual sight*.

Nicodemus, of course, saw a great deal. He saw that Jesus was a great teacher who came from God (v. 2). And yet, despite this, Nicodemus was utterly blind to the things of the kingdom of God. He had never been brought to

surrender all to the sovereign will and rule of Jesus Christ. He could not perceive his unrighteousness and his desperate need of the righteousness of Christ. He simply had no ability to see these things.

By nature, we are all like Nicodemus (2 Cor. 4:4). But when God causes us to be born again, we begin to see ourselves as never before. We begin to see our selfish motives, our sinful inclinations, and our grave need of cleansing. We begin to see God in the glorious panorama of His holy attributes. And the gospel which before was viewed as a putrid thing, becomes the sweetest, most joyous and liberating truth in all the world.

Dear reader, do you know anything of this spiritual sight? Have you seen Him in His majestic holiness and sovereign glory? Has your wretched condition in Adam been unveiled to you? Has your heart been drawn out to Christ? Have you come to see that He alone can deliver you from your woeful condition in sin?

The new birth will evidence itself in such a new-found spiritual perception. If you know yourself to be blind this day, seek His grace. Cry out to Him to open your eyes to His glory, your sin, and the all-sufficiency of Christ. And if the eyes of your soul perceive these truths, give praise and glory to God for His regenerating, life-giving, sight-producing grace!

A Spiritual Pursuit

Jesus gives a second evidence of regeneration in verse 5: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus presumed that he could earn God’s grace by his own achievements. He thought he could receive the privileges of salvation without the new birth. But Jesus crushes his fleshly confidence. To enter the kingdom, one must first know this inner transformation of soul.

When a man is born again, he longs, more than anything else in the world, to please God. He bows, imperfectly yet sincerely, to the rule of Jesus Christ. There is not only a *seeing* of God’s kingdom, but an *entering into* that kingdom. There is a newfound submission of heart, soul, strength, and mind to the King of kings.

This is why so many things change when a man is born again. His outward walk changes, his manner of conversation changes, the way he spends his time and money changes, his reading material often changes, and even the way he dresses may change. A man made alive by divine

grace desires to run in the way of God’s commands. His new heart longs for the smile of his King.

Jesus explains this further in verse 6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” By nature, we all live in the realm of the flesh—the realm of fallen, sinful, human nature. But when we are born again, we are transferred into the realm of the Spirit. And the Spirit works in us increasing submission and conformity to Christ the King. Do you long to be like Jesus? Such a desire is one of the surest evidences that you are born again by the Spirit of God.

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

According to Jesus the new birth is not optional. Without it, one cannot perceive Christ in His kingly glory and thereby exercise faith in Him. Without it, one cannot enter under the redemptive rule of Christ and thereby be delivered from the wrath to come. William Whately most pointedly states, “If Christ should come, and die, for one man, ten thousand times; all those deaths should profit that one man nothing at all for his salvation, unless he be made a new creature.”⁷ The way of eternal life is the way of the new birth.

The pressing concern is not whether or not you *know about* the new birth. But do you *know* the new birth in living experience? Has your soul been quickened and radically renovated by His grace? Stephen Charnock warns, “An evangelical head will be but drier fuel for eternal burning, without an evangelical impression upon the heart and the badge of a new nature.”⁸ You and I will perish eternally if we are not born again.

May these sober words of Jesus resound in our minds and hearts: “Ye must be born again.”

1. *The Canons of Dort*, Heads III & IV, Article 12.

2. Stephen Charnock, “The Necessity of Regeneration,” in *The Works of Stephen Charnock* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 3:26–27.

3. John Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 2:91.

4. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (1869; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 85.

5. George Swinnock, *The Door of Salvation Opened by the Key of Regeneration* (London, 1660), 9.

6. Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining* (London: A. Miller for Thomas Underhill, 1652), 207.

7. William Whately, *The New Birth* (London, 1622) 13.

8. Charnock, “The Necessity of Regeneration,” in *Complete Works*, 3:59.

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Zechariah's Revelation of Christ (1)

The Old Testament prophets, in whom was the Spirit of Christ, “testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (1 Peter 1:11). Christ Himself said, “Search the scriptures...they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39). In another place the Lord declared that Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms all spoke concerning Him (Luke 24:44). These passages highlight Jesus Christ as the great theme of the Bible. Both the Old and the New Testaments reveal God’s “Anointed One” as the only Redeemer of sinners. Both Testaments reveal this Christ to be very God, possessing the divine nature and all of its perfections. Both Testaments reveal the Messiah to be truly man, derived by generation from the stock of Adam and the root of David. What man knows about Jesus Christ he knows from the Word of God. To miss the message of Christ in the Scriptures is to miss the most important revelation God has made to man.

True to Christ’s stated purpose of Scripture, the prophet Zechariah contributes to God’s unfolding revelation of the Savior. Zechariah, the great prophet of hope, ministered to Israel after the years of Babylonian exile. Although the captivity was over, there seemed to be little hope for the devastated land and discouraged people. The city lay in ruins, the walls were rubble, and the temple was desolate. To this hopeless people, Zechariah proclaimed a message of hope, victory, and restoration. As a true prophet, Zechariah carefully and clearly directed the people’s faith to the only legitimate object of hope; his message focused on the Messiah. He directed attention to Messianic times, marking aspects of both the first and second advents. Most significant are the titles that Zechariah used to highlight truths concerning the person and the work of the Christ. Each of these titles in one way or another unveils some facet of Christ’s work of salvation and His mediatory work as prophet, priest, and king. Because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and for ever” (Heb. 13:8), these Old Testament revelations are just as relevant today as when first given. It is as true in the twenty-first century AD as in the sixth to fifth centuries BC that Jesus Christ is the sinner’s only hope. In this study I want to focus on Christ as the ideal Priest.

In Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12, the prophet used the term “Branch” to designate the Messiah. The Messianic significance of this title had been established long before

Zechariah, first by Isaiah (4:2) and then by Jeremiah (23:5; 33:15). Whereas Isaiah associated the term with Messiah’s deity and Jeremiah with His sovereignty, Zechariah underscored an aspect of the title that was latent in his predecessors’ messages as well. He used the title to stress Messiah’s humanity. The imagery pictured by the word “branch” readily suggests the Messiah’s human nature. Referring to a sprig or a new growth rather than a large bough, the word implies the Messiah’s human lineage from the family of David. Although the Davidic throne was at that time empty and seemingly defunct, a new sprout would one day appear fulfilling God’s unconditional promise that “David shall never want a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel” (Jer. 33:17; see 2 Sam. 7:16). Zechariah took this term inherently connected to the Davidic promise of an ideal king and linked it to the priesthood. This linking of kingship with priesthood testified to Zechariah’s understanding of the term’s Messianic significance. In both chapters 3 and 6 the prophet used the title “Branch” in the context of Joshua, the high priest.

THE SERVING PRIEST

In Zechariah 3:8 God declared, “behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH.” Significantly, this Messianic proclamation immediately followed Zechariah’s vision of Joshua’s symbolic justification. Joshua in his official role as high priest stood as the people’s representative before the Lord. Although the description of his filthy condition applied to his own status, it was illustrative of the condition of all God’s people. The divinely ordered removal of the foul garments and their replacement with costly, royal attire graphically depicts God’s gracious forgiveness of His people’s sins and His clothing them with the garments of salvation, the robes of righteousness (3:4–5). God’s declaration of forgiveness and gracious provision of a righteous standing is the only way that sinful man can hope to stand accepted before the Lord. Zechariah’s vision of Joshua’s transformation makes it clear that man does nothing to earn or merit his acceptance before God. Throughout the whole transaction, Joshua remained silent. He offered no self-defense against the accusations of Satan. Apart from God’s gracious pronouncement, man would remain filthy and unacceptable. Justification is indeed an act of God’s free grace.

Free justification does not, however, mean that God deals capriciously with man's sin. Paul makes it explicitly clear that this justification is "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood..." (Rom. 3:24–25). Zechariah 3 parallels Romans 3:26 in teaching that God is both "just" and the "justifier" on the basis of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Zechariah's revelation of God's servant, the Branch, sums up this vital message. Throughout the Old Testament the term "servant" is an honorific title attributed to those who enjoyed an intimate relationship to God. Isaiah, Zechariah's predecessor, raised this title to ideal Messianic significance, demonstrating the elect Servant's unique association with the Lord and His faithful obedience in life and death (see Isa. 42, 49, 50, 52–53). It is imperative to understand the continuity in God's revelation of Messiah. So theologically significant was Isaiah's revelation of the Servant that it becomes impossible to interpret later instances of the term without reference to that definition. Even the classic New Testament passage identifying Christ as servant links the concepts of exalted status with humble and absolute obedience (Phil. 2:5–11). Though not expressly detailed, these ideas of honor and humble obedience are not far from the surface in Zechariah's revelation of the servant Branch. It is the righteous work of the Branch that constitutes the basis for God's justifying the guilty Joshua. By His obedience in life, the Branch earned the righteousness that was symbolized by the rich garments. By His obedience in death, the Branch merited the ground for forgiveness. The reference in Zechariah 3:9 to the removal of iniquity in one day can refer prophetically only to the atoning work of Christ. If anything is crystal clear in Scripture, it is that "without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9:22; Lev. 17:11). Although Zechariah does not provide the details of the Branch's life and death that only the incarnation could provide, he applies the theology of it with Pauline precision. He makes it perfectly clear that this servant Priest is the sinner's only hope.

THE RULING PRIEST

After the final of Zechariah's eight visions, he conducted a divinely directed object lesson involving Joshua. At the prophet's command representatives from the captivity took silver and gold, formed a magnificent crown

(note the plural of excellence, "crowns"), and placed it on Joshua's head (6:10–11). That this coronation had significance beyond Joshua is clear from the declaration, "Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH" (6:12). The accomplishments of this Man-Branch exceed anything that the contemporary Joshua could possibly or legitimately do. This one would be a King-Priest sitting and ruling from His throne (6:13). Since the founding of the Aaronic priesthood and Davidic kingship, the union of these two offices was reserved for the coming Messiah and no merely human officer from either division could usurp the authority of the other. It was part of Messianic theology that David's Lord would be "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek," that mysterious "king of righteousness and peace" who was a priest of the Most High God (Ps. 110:1, 4; Gen. 14:18). Joshua's symbolic crowning was an encouraging reminder that God's unconditional promise of a King-Priest was certain although the ruins of a fallen temple and empty throne suggested otherwise. Even after the token ceremony was finished, the splendid crown was to remain in the soon-to-be finished temple as a continuing memorial that the rightful King-Priest would be this temple's consummate glory (6:13–14; see Hag. 2:7).

The theological implications of the ruling priest are far-reaching. The day will come when the serving Priest who removed iniquity in a day will "appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28). In that day Messiah will wear the royal crown for all to see; however, that public crowning day is not the commencement of His priestly reign. He now ever lives and sits upon the throne at the Father's right hand exercising His ruling and interceding priesthood in His heavenly mediation for His people. Whereas the serving Priest of Zechariah 3 concerns the humiliation of Christ, this ruling Priest focuses on Christ's exaltation. The deep humiliation was the way to earned glory (see Heb. 2:9). In His exalted session at God's right hand, the Man-Branch, knowing the infirmities of His brethren, sympathizes and effectively intercedes for them without failure. If the serving Priest was the sinner's only hope, the ruling Priest is the saint's certain hope.

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The Gospel Solidity of God's "Yes" (2)

In an unsettled world with unsettling news all around, the gospel alone gives solidity. Preaching must reflect the unwavering truth of the gospel, not with a "yes-no" preaching that holds out the gospel and then takes it away. Paul would have none of this, as he makes clear in 2 Corinthians 1:19–20. In the previous article, we saw that gospel solidity means taking an unwavering stand on the unshakeable faithfulness of God's gospel promises in Christ. We covered two aspects of gospel solidity, namely, God's unwavering "Yes" in the gospel itself, and God's glorious "Yes" in Jesus Christ. We now conclude by applying two more aspects of gospel solidity to hearts that are often so wavering and fickle.

THE "YES" OF THE PROMISES

In his treatment of God's glorious and unwavering gospel of "Yes," Paul now takes a step closer, for a question might have arisen in our minds: "How does this gospel solidity reach me, when I am so fickle and faltering?" Paul knew that it couldn't depend on him or on any human preacher. Earlier in 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to himself as "pressed out of measure, above strength, inasmuch that we despaired even of life" (2 Cor. 1:8). We don't get gospel solidity automatically through human rhetoric or moral persuasion.

Instead, Paul runs to the promises of God (2 Cor. 1:20), which become so precious, precisely in the providential difficulties of life, as well as our own inadequacies, frailties, and sins. We are nothing without the promises of God, and the Bible is filled with "exceeding great and precious promises" (2 Peter 1:4). The promises are the overflow of the Lord's love. They are indications of His will. God is so eager to declare His will that He tells it to us beforehand in His promises, that we might believe them. Richard Sibbes said about the promises of God: "A promise is nothing but a manifestation of love; an intendment of bestowing some good and of removing some evil from us. A declaring of a man's free engagement in this kind, is a Promise; it always comes from love in the party promising and conveys goodness to the believing soul."

Some of the promises tell of what God *will do*: He will bruise Satan's head (Gen. 3:15). Other promises tell of what God *will give*: "A new heart also will I give you" (Ezek. 36:26). Some tell of what God *will forgive*: "I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). Some tell of what God *will be*: "I will be their God" (Jer. 32:38). Some

tell of what sinners *will become*: "Thou shalt be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God" (Isa. 62:3). Robert Traill fittingly wrote: "Take away God's promises out of the Bible, and there is nothing left in it, but bones, and stones, and poison, and darts for poor man."

We break so many promises to ourselves, to others, and to God. Sometimes we've been unable to keep a promise despite our best efforts. All of us have to admit we have failed our word so many times. All of us have had a life of "Yes and No." Shouldn't we confess this inconstancy, fickleness, and insincerity of our hearts in our relationships to each other and especially toward God? My salvation can never rest on my *own word*; I need something so much greater.

Paul uses two words for "Yes" in our text: "Yea" and "Amen" (2 Cor. 1:20). The "Yea" or "Yes" is Greek and the "Amen" is Hebrew, but they mean the same thing. It is as if Paul is saying: If you must use two words, it's not "Yes" and "No," but "Yes" and "Yes"—"Yea" and "Amen." Literally, Paul says in the original Greek: "As many promises as there are..." In other words, wherever you might find a scriptural promise, in Christ, it holds true! Whatever promise you find, tucked away somewhere in the pages of God's Word, it is a "Yes" in Christ!

Sometimes people wonder whether we can believe all the promises given us in God's Word, or whether we can and should only believe the ones that are applied personally to our own souls. Our text answers this question: "For all the promises of God in him are yea and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." Notice the "in him." They aren't "Yes" anywhere else than in Him. They are not made sure by your religious acts, devotional activities, or spiritual experiences. You must go to Him and find them sure in Him who sealed them with His blood. God's promises are all "Yes" in Christ! Faith clings to the gracious Savior and finds that all the promises—no matter how many, how large, or how small, are all doubly "Yes" in Jesus Christ.

People have compared God's promises to currency. When you take a coin or bill to the bank or store, if it is genuine, it is acknowledged. It has worth and you can use it. In a much greater way, God's promises are all owned by God, when even the weakest believer brings them before God. God will never throw His promises back at you and say: "I don't accept that." The promises of God are heaven's

currency. No matter how big or small, they are like coins stamped with the image of Christ. They are “Yes” and “Amen” in Christ.

Is there anything that we can cling to in our darkest moments other than the promises of God? They are most precious to us then. Thomas Brooks encourages us:

These spiritual and absolute promises are of nearest and greatest concernment to you; these carry in them most of the heart of Christ, the love of Christ, the good-will of Christ; these are of greatest use to satisfy you, and to settle you when you are wavering; to support you when you are falling; to reduce you when you are wandering; to comfort you when you are fainting; to counsel you when you are staggering. Therefore, make these your choicest and your chiefest companions, especially when it is night within your souls, when you are sensible of much sin and but little grace, of much corruption but of little consolation, of much deadness but of little quickness, of much hardness but of little tenderness, of many fears and but a little faith.

THE “YES” IN THE HEART

We already mentioned that the Corinthians had been questioning Paul’s actions. They feared he was wishy-washy, fickle, and constantly changing plans. But Paul was not like that. His life was on the altar of God. He was willing to suffer all things for the cause of Christ. This chapter tells us how close death came to Paul, as he had the sentence of death in himself (2 Cor. 1:9). He cared so deeply for people and God’s cause, he gave his all for them. That was only a small thing he could do in return for what Christ had done for him. Through the Spirit, God had put a “Yes” in the heart of Paul, and he was living that out as he served his Master wholeheartedly. As he preached the gospel to others, he was looking for that same effect to be worked in others. “Now he which stablisheth (steadies) us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts” (2 Cor. 1:21–22).

This is all through faith alone, which the Spirit works in our heart. Solidity cannot come through works, rituals, or experiences, but only by faith, which receives Christ in the gospel. John Calvin helpfully defines faith as “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

Notice that word: “stablish.” This “Yes” of God gave *stability* to Paul’s life and profession, even amid the greatest sufferings. No matter what happened to him, Paul had this strong foundation to fall back on. Whatever opposition he faced, whatever detractors said, whatever suffering he endured—all this was only there to throw him back on the unshakable “Yes” of God in Christ. It refined him so that the “Yes” of the gospel shone more clearly through him. In God’s children the gospel gives hope and a way forward when everyone and everything around you is saying “No.” When the world said “No” to Paul, he could still feel God’s “Yes” in his heart.

All of us know people whose lives radiate a giant “Yes,” a lovely assurance and steadfastness that not even suffering or death can shake. This is what Paul had and what we should want. When Satan said “No” to him, Paul could still find God’s “Yes,” and go forward. When the Corinthians said “No” to Paul, the “Yes” of God drove him to pray and work until the hurdles were overcome.

Do you have the “Yes” of God in your heart by the Spirit through faith? If you do, you will know something of being consumed with God’s glory, as Paul was. Once Saul had been breathing out slaughter against Christians. But God in Christ had triumphed in Paul’s heart and life. The Spirit broke down all the resistance and put into Paul’s heart, “yea and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Cor. 1:20). From that moment on, as the commentator Lenski says, “Paul labored tirelessly to see the ‘Yes’ of God placed in human hearts everywhere.”

All of us need Christ. He alone is the Door to the Father and eternal life with Him. As the apostle John says, “He that hath the Son hath life” (1 John 5:12). Nothing apart from Christ gives any solidity to life. Religious upbringing, church membership, and listening to preaching are all privileges, but none of these can substitute for falling in with Jesus Christ, who speaks the “Yes” to your heart. With Christ, by the Spirit, comes steadiness, assurance, and confidence in Christ. Then, even if the whole world said “No” to you, for Christ’s sake, there is a “Yes,” which gives an eternal solidity. Everything a wavering sinner needs is in God through Jesus Christ.

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THE CYCLES OF LIFE

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–11

Solomon's purpose in writing Ecclesiastes is to direct us in the right way to true happiness. He does this both negatively, by assuring us that happiness cannot be found in anything under the sun, and positively, by instructing us that it can be found only in God and in His service. Solomon had devoted his life to experimenting with what caused happiness, and his conclusion was: "Vanity of vanities... vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). His repetition teaches us that this truth is unquestionably certain, that it must be persistently taught in order to sink into our hearts, that we naturally tend to ignore it, and that Solomon is passionate about passing this truth along to others.

Solomon knows, of course, that what God created is good and excellent, but it is good only in the use God intended, and excellent only in setting forth God's glory, power, wisdom, and goodness. Searching for happiness is vanity because that which makes us happy must be proportionate to all the wants, desires, and capacities of the soul, and must be of an equal duration. There is nothing to be found under the sun that meets these qualifications.

This is why Solomon tells us that it is all vanity. We put so much anxious and toilsome labor into things that will perish. Nothing of them will remain for us or abide with us. Our hard and toilsome labor for worldly things may be useful to our earthly lives, but it is totally unprofitable for true happiness because it adds nothing of real worth to us and does not abide with us. The only works which are

beneficial are those which abide and abound beyond our mortal lives.

CYCLES OF PEOPLE (ECCL. 1:4)

The principles of change and mortality are constantly at work in every human being. People are born, and people die, and life is like a tent in which we stay, but only temporarily. The earth itself lasts much longer than any of us will. And so, although our labor may bring us riches and honor here, it cannot make us live longer, and we will not be able to take our riches or honor with us. If we could, it might make sense to try to find happiness in the things of this world. But the earth stays where it is when we pass away, and we cannot continue to enjoy it.

There are several observations to draw from this continuous cycle of mortality. First, we each have service to do, warfare to accomplish, and a race to run, but only for the span of our own lifetime. Second, God's works of providence are carried along in pieces through different generations and will, in the end, gloriously set forth His wisdom, justice, and goodness. Third, our earthly labor is for ourselves and our children while we and they are on the earth, but only our heavenly labor will abide with and benefit us forever. Fourth, while generations continue, the earth will continue because God gave it to us for our support and salvation. But when generations end, we will see that all of creation was subject to vanity and corruption. If we are to be made happy by something, it must be something that will abide with us forever.



CYCLES OF CREATED THINGS (ECCL. 1:5–8)

When we look at nature, we can see evidence that God's created world will not abide forever. Nature is filled with cycles that come and go and never arrive at a fixed condition. The sun rises, but then it sets. The wind blows south, but then it blows north. The rivers flow into the sea, but the sea is never full, and the waters return to where they came from. There is much we can learn from these cycles about the vanity of placing our happiness in the creation rather than our Creator.

If the sun brings us happiness when it rises, it removes that happiness again when it sets. It may benefit us while we live, but it cannot give us durable happiness that lasts after death. If it has never yet made anyone happy, then it never will because it can only continue the same cycle day after day. It is as impossible for us to find happiness in created things as it would be for us to stop the sun in its cycle. And although the sun rises again after it sets, when we go, we will not return.

The winds also have their courses, and they teach us of the uncertainty of outward things. If wind brings happiness, it will soon cease or turn and remove the source of that happiness. God's providence is evident in the circuits of the wind—He directs them as He pleases, making them helpful for a while in one part of the earth, and later in another part. In the restless and busy motion of these circuits, we see a picture of the mind of a man who has not fixed himself on what is unchangeable.

Another picture of restlessness and vanity is that of the river running into the sea, and the water returning to the sky and then again to the river. Wherever we turn our eyes in nature, we see evidence of inconstancy and changeability. The continuous cycles of sun, wind, and water seem to describe the restlessness in our own minds when we search for what is good. Just as all the rivers in the world cannot fill the sea, so all created things cannot fill the heart of man.

In this search for satisfaction, it is our eyes and ears that we use most. It doesn't take much effort to see beautiful objects or hear excellent music. The delights our eyes and ears bring us are sweet, and yet we cannot see or hear enough to be satisfied. None of us can remember all the objects or experiences which have brought us some delight and yet left no satisfaction. Our eyes are not satisfied with seeing, nor our ears with hearing.

CYCLES OF DISCOVERIES (ECCL. 1:9–11)

We have seen and heard of many new discoveries and inventions, but they are all subject to the same principle of being insufficient for happiness. Just as the discoveries of former ages could not satisfy, neither can the discoveries of today or of any future age. As soon as new things are found out, old things are forgotten, and the new is as defective towards happiness as the old. The shortness of our lives and the narrowness of our experience make it so that we can never see all the excellent things from every age laid out before us. If we

could, we would see that the new is not more excellent than the old, and that it therefore cannot bring more satisfaction.

No matter what new thing comes along, we grow used to and wearied by it, and our hearts continue to itch for something new. It is vanity to think that we will find some satisfaction in something that is new when our forefathers could not find satisfaction in the things that were new to them. It is only in spiritual and heavenly conversation, in the study of God's Word and ways, and in God's mercies and judgments that we will discover what is new, durable, and excellent.

SOLOMON'S EXPERIENCE (ECCL. 1:12–18)

If any man could have made himself happy with earthly things, it should have been Solomon. He had the position, desire, wisdom, and wealth that allowed him to make an accurate and thorough search for satisfaction. Still, having seen all the works that are done under the sun, he concluded that all of it was vanity and that none of it could bring happiness. That's not all. He also realized that the search itself brought much affliction and trouble to the human heart. He had gained much knowledge, yet that knowledge, too, was vanity. It was hard to get, but easy to forget; it exposed more ignorance than he had observed before; it was impossible to perfect; and it only increased his desire for more knowledge. Knowledge cannot fix anything in us which is amiss or supply anything which can make us happy. It was sin that brought disorder and confusion into creation, and sin is not a problem that can be corrected with mere human knowledge.

The problems sin cause cannot be corrected with wisdom either. Solomon had increased in and delighted in wisdom, and yet the wiser he became, the more he saw the lack of wisdom and abundance of folly around him. Neither the perfection of moral wisdom nor the pleasures of foolishness could settle the heart of man. The more wisdom he had, the more ignorance he discovered in himself, and the more effort he had to put into gaining still more.

Yet in all this, Solomon's purpose is not to deter us from the noble labor of searching for wisdom and knowledge. Instead, he desires to raise our minds to the study of heavenly wisdom and the fear of God. It is true that all things under the sun are insufficient to bring us happiness and satisfaction. But they can be useful and beneficial within their own sphere, when sanctified, to sweeten the lives of those who have placed their happiness in God. When our focus is heavenward, then earthly knowledge will be sanctified, sweetened, and made useful to us. We can find true satisfaction and lasting happiness, but only if we look outside of the cycles of life under the sun.

Dr. Edward Reynolds (1599–1676) was a faithful Puritan pastor and author. He was one of the most influential divines at the Westminster Assembly. Adapted from *The Works of Edward Reynolds* (Morgan Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1988), 4:36–58.

THE VANITY OF STRIVING AFTER PLEASURE

ECCLESIASTES 2:1–11

The words of Ecclesiastes are especially apropos for our day and age, which is focused on the endless pursuit of pleasure. It seems that humanity is focused on finding pleasure in every aspect of life—the pleasure of wealth and luxury, the pleasure of sex, the pleasure of travel, the pleasure of food, and the pleasure of mindless entertainment. In the words of Neil Postman, we live in a world that is amusing itself to death. It seems that the “Preacher” of Ecclesiastes had experienced every single pleasure that the world had to offer and had nearly amused himself to death.

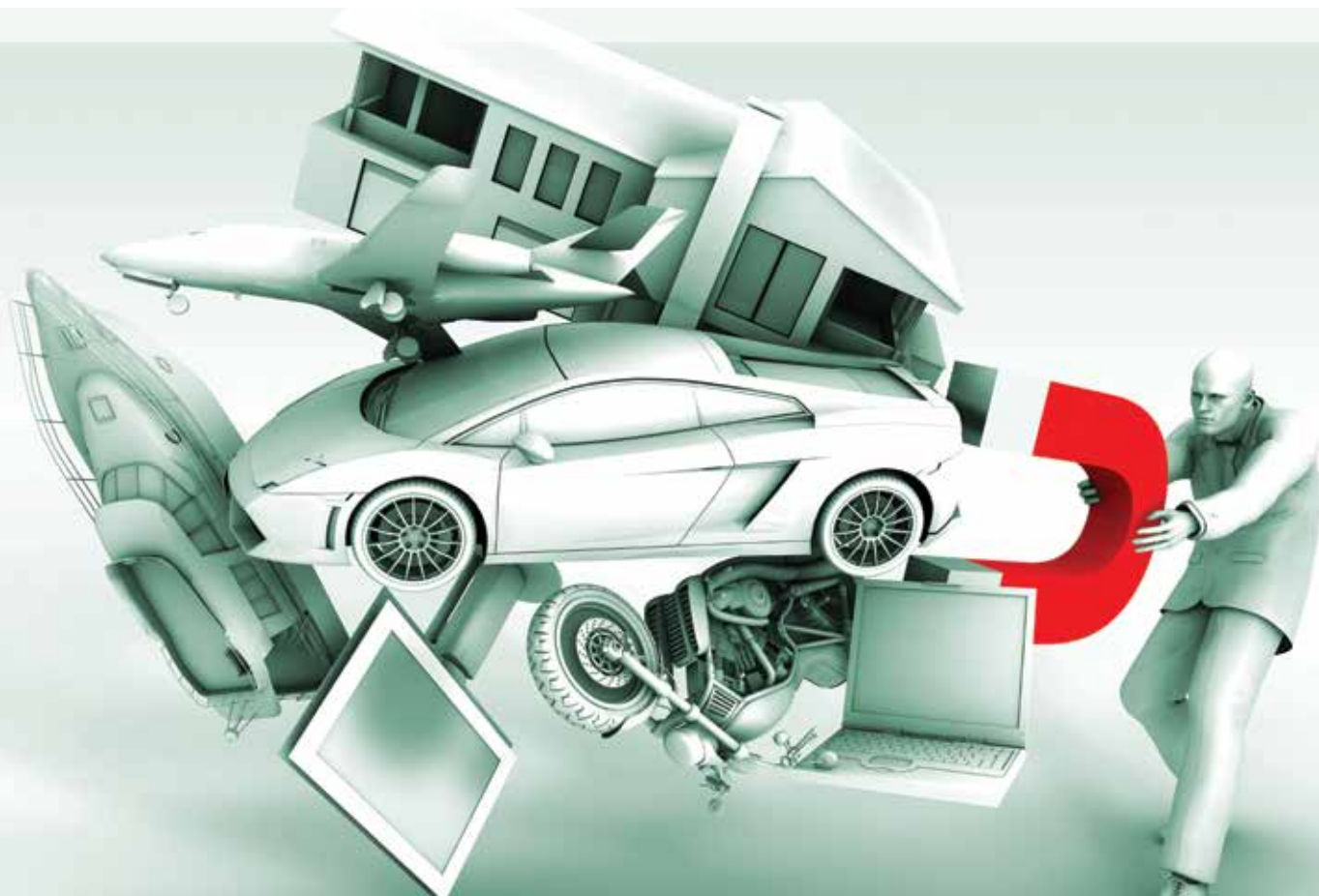
THE TEST OF PLEASURE

In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon conducts a pleasure test by experiencing every kind of pleasure. In verse 1 he writes, “I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and behold, this also is vanity.” The test of pleasure took place in his heart and he gave expression to every desire of his heart. He gave himself to the pursuit of every kind of pleasure in life to test it to see what fruit it would bear. But this pursuit of pleasure also proved to be vain and empty. The test of pleasure conducted in Solomon’s pleasure lab proved to be an empty experiment. It is interesting that this vain pursuit of pleasure is not only

inscribed in Scripture, but also in the songs of the world expressing this vain philosophy of a life without God and focused only on pleasure. The song that comes to mind is, “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” which has been played and remixed several dozen times since the 1960s. It captures the vanity of the pleasure test and no matter how hard humanity tries, there is no satisfaction in the mere pursuit of pleasure. Solomon records for us the inner workings of the heart without thought of God and bent on the pursuit of pleasure alone. Ryken remarks on this verse, “So Qoheleth [Preacher] becomes an experimental hedonist. In other words, he chooses to make his own personal happiness his chief end in life. This is the way that many people live today, and it is a temptation for all of us—to live for ourselves rather than for God.”¹ Have you experienced the pleasure test? What were the results of that experiment? Solomon’s point is that the test will only end in vanity.

THE TERRAIN OF PLEASURE

And where did the Preacher attempt to pursue pleasure? Wherever he could find it. In fact, he traverses the terrain of life in order to find satisfaction in pleasure. He begins with finding pleasure in laughter (Eccl. 2:2). It is the laughter of



moral perversity that the Preacher finds to be madness. How much of today's comedy culture centers around the laughter of moral perversity instead of the holy laughter of joy that glorifies God? Next, he turns to give himself to wine (v. 3). How many have pursued the elusive power of the bottle to quell the pressures of life and get lost in a drunken buzz or stupor only to wake up and feel miserable? The bottle has been found wanting for true, lasting, and eternal pleasure. He tried to find pleasure in building lasting monuments and feats of architecture (v. 4). How many have erected monuments to themselves as lasting reminders of their greatness? This, of course, does not negate the philanthropy of individuals who give generously to build hospitals, schools, and other places that enhance the communities in which we live, but building monuments to enhance our own legacies is ultimately vanity. The Preacher then tried to find pleasure in horticulture, in getting his hands dirty and knowing the satisfaction of finding lush grapes on the vine that in turn could feed his desire for good wine (v. 4). He planted orchards and gardens in which he could enjoy the shade in the heat of the day and hear the birds singing (v. 5). He dug pools to irrigate forests and orchards (v. 6). Now I know firsthand the relaxing pleasures that come from horticulture and gardening. This is one of my favorite hobbies to offset the pressures of ministry life, so this one in particular hits home with me. But the Preacher is speaking about this being more than a hobby. He is speaking of industry and farming without reference to God. The preacher also accumulated servants and maidens (v. 7). The modern equivalent of this would be building a business and hiring employees to reflect the size of the business without reference to the God who has blessed the business. His eyes fell on his vast herds of cattle, both great and small, as he rode along the countryside (v. 7). He had no shortage of gold and silver and unique treasures from civilizations around the world (v. 8). His travels and the guests he entertained brought all sorts of interesting exhibits into his home. He had exhilarating choirs and inspiring symphonies play music to suit his fancy. His interests in the arts knew no bounds, but this too could not satisfy him.

In sum, whatever he laid his eyes on, he wanted and rejoiced in (v. 10). But then he looked at all these things and realized that they were just a puff of air—vanity and vexation of spirit. In the final analysis, these things were merely just things. There was no lasting pleasure in them. That is the warning to us, in particular the younger generation, who seem intent on pursuing pleasure for pleasure's sake.

THE TRANSIENCE OF PLEASURE

What was the end result of the pleasure test performed by the preacher? The final result was that pleasure without God is inherently transient and fleeting. The pleasures of this world alone are not ultimate pleasures. In fact, they

are vacuous and empty when pursued apart from God. The transience of pleasure is captured in the words of verse 11, "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun." They are all vanity, that is, a puff of wind, existing one moment and gone the next. The only evidence of a gentle breeze is tousled hair. The only evidence of a tornado or hurricane is the wreckage left behind. Both images give a sense of insecurity and that is the point of the Preacher's test of pleasure—to get us to see the transience of a life of pleasure without God. Sure there is pleasure in the things of this life, but these are not ultimate pleasures. As long as you are not finding your ultimate joy and pleasure in God, this life will be subject to vanity. This is the difficult lesson that Solomon learned, and I suspect this is the difficult lesson that many of us need to learn and relearn. But that is not the end of the story of this pleasure test.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PLEASURE

There is a transformation of pleasure that takes place through the grace of God operating in our lives. This comes from the reordering of priorities in our lives. The pursuit of God as our highest good or ultimate pleasure is what breathes meaning into our lives. With God at the center of our lives, there is new meaning in the simple pleasures of life because they are undertaken with reference to God. I had a friend in seminary who shared his conversion story with me, how his life was reordered by grace. Upon sharing this he stated with excitement, "Man, even the pop I drank tasted differently." What he meant to say was that the pleasure of truly knowing God transformed even a simple act of drinking a soft drink and made it more pleasurable. That soft drink was viewed as a gift from the hand of a gracious Father. The pleasures of life should not then be viewed as ultimate pleasures to be consumed for the sake of those pleasures, but a life lived in reference to God recognizes that the pleasures of life are gifts from God and they should bring us to God who is the ultimate pleasure of life. Simply put, this is another application of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's first question and answer, "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

The pleasures of this life are not an end in themselves, but a means to bring us to recognize the Giver behind these pleasures and to bring us to worship Him (James 1:17). In what or whom are you finding ultimate pleasure? That is the question that the Preacher leaves us to grapple with.

1. Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 46.

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THE VANITY OF STRIVING AFTER WORLDLY WISDOM

ECCLESIASTES 2:12–17

In the first half of 2019, an astounding story has been regularly circulating in the news about a college admission scandal. The story revealed that dozens of wealthy parents paid huge sums of money to get their children into certain colleges. The money was used to falsify standardized test scores and to bribe coaches at prestigious universities to fake the applicants' involvement in the school's sports programs. All this money and deceit was for one purpose—for parents to get their children into elite universities. Such are the lengths to which people will go to give their children access to top education.

People often idolize academic degrees and learning in our days (among other things), leading them to think that if they become smart or earn a degree from a certain school, success will be guaranteed and their lives will achieve meaning and importance. Surely, that was the motivation for those in the scandal above, although exposure of the scheme has had the opposite effect. Lives have been ruined and people have been betrayed by folly masquerading as wisdom. Here we see vanity, emptiness, wrong, and ruin.

But this is not the first time we read of the folly of striving after worldly wisdom: just consider Ecclesiastes 2:12–17.

Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon and is classified as wisdom literature. It was written by the wisest king of all and its purpose is to lead the readers in the way of wisdom. Wisdom is defined as living in the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Eccl. 12:13), and it includes right belief and right practice according to God's law. In 1 Kings 3 Solomon asked for wisdom and it was granted to him. While wise in the things of God, Solomon also was very wise in the affairs of this world (see many of the Proverbs). He had the gift of wisdom and knowledge to measure and evaluate. Yet, all this worldly knowledge that Solomon amassed led him to one conclusion: "For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Eccl. 1:18).

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon seeks satisfaction and purpose in life in various ways. At the beginning of chapter 2, Solomon attempts to find satisfaction in worldly pleasure (vv. 1–11) and at the end of the chapter he strives to find



satisfaction in work/labor (vv. 18–26). We are focusing on the middle section of chapter 2 (vv. 12–17) where Solomon seeks satisfaction in the pursuit of wisdom for wisdom’s sake, or “wisdom from below” (James 3:15). This is not the pursuit after godly wisdom in the fear of the LORD, but it is the pursuit after wisdom that consists of cleverness, smarts, or brilliance, along with the high reputation and gain that can follow from them. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes all of his search for satisfaction with the admonition to the reader to “fear God and keep His commandments” (Eccl. 12:13).

In this article, I will show how Ecclesiastes 2:12–17 exposes the vanity of striving after the wisdom of this world, and then consider why so many people (even Christians!) do so. Finally, I will set forth how God changes people and brings them to value the wisdom that is from above (James 3:17).

Ecclesiastes 2:14b–16 gives an honest assessment of wisdom. All the knowledge and wisdom of this world does not exempt a person from death (v. 14b), for it is appointed unto man once to die (Heb. 9:27). Also, there is no guarantee of any lasting remembrance of the wise person (Eccl. 2:16), for people’s memories are short and time hastens quickly onward. There is also the fact that death is the great leveler—not discriminating between its subjects but bringing them all to the same state (v. 15). Here is the unmistakable message: it is vain, a striving after the wind, to seek lasting and ultimate life-fulfillment by accumulating wisdom. Reckoning with death’s inevitability and finality drives this point home to the heart.

Why then do people go to such great extremes to obtain “wisdom”? Well there are two relative reasons that are given in Ecclesiastes 2:13–14. The first is the inherent value in wisdom, for it is to be preferred before folly, like light is better than darkness. There is, then, usefulness in worldly wisdom and knowledge, enabling the person to conduct one’s life better, to be aware of matters of importance, preparing for them, and interacting and responding to them. These are the relative benefits of wisdom over folly. It is desirable, and it is useful in this earthly life.

What else drives people to invest their resources to accrue wisdom? For many, knowledge, wisdom, and cleverness can bring a sense of power. They have a higher standing (perhaps for pride’s sake) and more power than those “without” knowledge or wisdom. There is also the longing for acceptance, especially in certain well-regarded circles, since by attaining wisdom we can develop friendships with others who are viewed as wise and successful—the upper echelon of society. Safety and security can be a sought-after by-product of this type of wisdom. Often those who are wise in the things of this world have the appearance of being untouched or unaffected by anything or anyone that can

disturb or disrupt their lives. All these are the desires that drive the incessant pursuit for wisdom. Yet, all of this pertains to life “under the sun” lived in the context of the here and now, from birth to death, and nothing else.

So how does the Lord expose the emptiness of this pursuit, bring conviction of its sinfulness, and give that which truly satisfies as the chief good? Well, He can do so in many different ways, since everyone who has been converted is truly unique. But there are common threads in the way He works. The Lord humbles people by showing them that they will never truly achieve the goals they are reaching for by striving after this type of wisdom (see 1 Cor. 1:19). These goals and others like them may appear desirable to the mind, and, through mental powers, they might be close to being attained. But the heart’s capacities will not be satisfied. Learning doesn’t automatically lead to uprightness and integrity. Knowledge doesn’t necessarily give foresight to prepare for death and eternity.

When God humbles humanity, He elevates Himself and His wisdom by decreeing and working out the plan of redemption. Christ is the Light of the World (John 8:12)—absolutely valuable in Himself as God. Christ is the fount and fullness of true wisdom (Col. 2:3), which means that believers need not be duped into thinking they need worldly wisdom. Yes, even the historical event at Calvary where folly and darkness appeared to have eclipsed the Light became the stage where the wisdom and power of God was most fully seen. It is the preaching of the cross—foolishness to those who are worldly-wise—that is the power and wisdom of God to those who are being called (1 Cor. 1:24). This is the “scandal” of the cross.

God will also continually call us to put to death our pursuit of meaning and glory sought for in learning or knowledge apart from Him. There is no glory or ultimate good achieved in isolation from God. This is why Christ calls His own to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). The wisdom of this world that is focused on exalting ourselves will not be an asset for one’s standing before God, but a liability to be confessed, fought against, and forsaken. “Confounded” is the epitaph of the life lived by one’s own “wisdom” and for one’s own glory. Those who have forfeited their achieved wisdom in favor of a more greatly prized wisdom received from God have “Christ” and “gain” as their life and death. This is the “scandal” of the Christian life!

In the words of Jeremiah 9:23–24, “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom.... But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD.”

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THE VANITY OF STRIVING AFTER THE RESULTS OF LABOR

ECCLESIASTES 2:18–6:12

A key to rightly interpreting Ecclesiastes is understanding the significance of the little phrase “under the sun.” Miss this and it’s likely that the book will seem confusing, if not self-contradictory. The expression is found twenty-seven times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in Scripture. “Under the sun” means “as if God didn’t exist” or “without reference to God.” It is an idiomatic statement.

In Ecclesiastes 2:17 we read, “Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought *under the sun* is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (emphasis added). Solomon, the wisest man aside from the Lord Jesus, hated his life because the work he observed grieved him. He wasn’t complaining about having to work. His comment refers to work done with no reference to God. Such work is vain. It vexes one’s spirit, or at least should. Why? The answer will prove important for our outlook on work, so let us consider this carefully and with God’s help.

God worked in creation. It wasn’t as if creating was laborious to God, tiring to Him, or wearisome. Still, on the seventh day we read He ended His labors and *rested* from all His work (Gen. 2:2). Exodus 31:17 says God was *refreshed* on the seventh day of creation. Since we were created in God’s image, the Lord gave Adam work to do (Gen. 2:15). Since sin had not yet entered into creation, work was also not laborious for Adam but instead pleasant. In his primitive state, Adam would undoubtedly have done his work to the glory of God. Sin, with its many corrupting influences, also corrupted work, making it tedious for our first parents (Gen. 3:18–19). Original sin in us and the curse which followed plagued our work life. But two things did not change. God still calls man to labor, and God still calls us to labor for His glory, the many impediments notwithstanding (Ex. 20:9; 1 Cor. 10:31).

We can perhaps now understand why Solomon would have written what he did in Ecclesiastes 2:17, that “under the sun” he found labor vain and vexing. Disconnected from the glory of God, prayer to God, conscious dependence on God, how could it be otherwise, no longer answering the purpose for which God gave it to us?

It’s safe and sad to say that for the vast majority of persons, including not a few professing Christians, work is done essentially disconnected from God in our daily experience. How much do we think of Him, pray to Him, rely on Him with regard to our work? A God-fearing farmer might more readily see his dependence on the Lord since he is unable to

control essential aspects involved in agricultural success. But are we not all just as dependent on the Lord’s blessing even if we might not see the connection as clearly?

In Ecclesiastes 2:18–19 Solomon gives an additional reason why he hated the labor he had personally done: “because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.” Solomon well understood the transitory nature of our work, our accomplishments. Do you see it? He realized that all his careful planning, detailed execution, dedicated preservation and maintenance could not ensure that he who inherited it all might be a fool and squander it. Solomon’s heir, Rehoboam, was in fact not nearly as wise as his father and ultimately lost his authority over ten of the twelve tribes of Israel.

A story was once told of a miser who said to his wife that he wanted all of his riches buried with him, to which she consented. Upon his burial she wrote out a check for the total value of his assets and laid it in the coffin. The old adage remains true, “You can’t take it with you.” In Ecclesiastes 5:15 we read, “As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?” Think of that expression, laboring “for the wind”! It speaks for itself. Paul put it this way, “For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out” (1 Tim. 6:7).

Solomon did not observe this vanity passively, “Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun” (Eccl. 2:20). Notice how he needed to make an effort to bring his heart to despair of what he had so labored to accomplish. He realized much of it had been done *under the sun*, without regard to God and His purposes. We so need the grace of God to be honest about whether we have done the same. How incredibly painful and dreadful would it be to realize that we toiled without reference to God *too late*, when lying on our deathbeds! How awful to look back over a lifetime of labor and realize it was all for me, perhaps even for others, yet all *under the*

sun. Would to God that we would examine our labors in this light now!

Solomon ends this section, “For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.” Sorrow, travail, grief, restlessness even in the night—how vain! Think of all the hours, sweat, pains, headaches, muscle aches, tossings and turnings, disappointments and setbacks we’ve experienced in our work life! Surely we can relate to Solomon here. Have we ever sat still and concluded, “Vanity”?

Lest we come to wrong conclusions, Solomon is not saying work itself is vain. In Ecclesiastes 2:24 he wrote, “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.” This might seem contradictory if we didn’t notice a subtle but clear change. He does not write “under the sun” but rather “it was from the hand of God.” With God in the picture, one may enjoy good in laboring and even the fruit of one’s labor. He returns to this in 3:12–13: “I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.” But there’s more to this joy than meets the eye as we shall shortly see.

Another source of grief to Solomon was envy, one person’s labors being envied by another. “Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:4). The flip side of this is 1 Timothy 6:6, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” Discontent fueled by envy and covetousness can ruin a person, yet these vices appear to be integral to Western economies! Advertising regularly aims to make us think we need more, or need what others have. Life under the sun is like a troubled, restless sea. Are you driven, tossed, plunging ever onward, propelled by desires for more, better, bigger, faster, and newer things? Are we envious? Envy is a canker that devours us slowly over time. What is Solomon’s response? “Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:6).

In Ecclesiastes 4:8 Solomon describes a single person who never considers for whom his labors are destined: “This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.” In verses 9–12 he extols the blessing of having a companion. They help one another, comfort one another, and protect each other as they stand united. He does not say, however, that they help and encourage each other to acquire more.

Solomon comments on the deceptiveness of material gain in Ecclesiastes 5:10–11, “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with

increase: this is also vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?” Materialism is a mirage, a phantom. In Ecclesiastes 6:7 we read, “All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.” The satisfaction earthly goods provide is transient, its longevity dubious. They can choke the Word of God (Mark 4:18–19).

In Ecclesiastes 5:12b–13 Solomon says materialism can be downright injurious, “The abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep. There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.” Think of the seemingly endless miseries that seem to befall lottery winners! Others, Solomon says, have much but can no longer enjoy it. I remember visiting a wealthy man who, because of age, lived in a small room in an assisted living home. Despite his earthly success he had little left to show for it and was troubled with uncertainty about his eternal future.

In Ecclesiastes 6:11–12 we find the language of despair with regard to labor *under the sun*, “Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?” Increasing vanity. Indeed, what is good in this life, a life that’s like a shadow? What will happen after we’re gone? Life under the sun is pointless, vain, dark, and hopeless. Nothing on earth will make it any better after all is said and done. The shadow passes away.

Over and over, in various ways, Solomon is leading up to a grand conclusion, a final determination. We could reference the end of chapter 12 where he writes of the “whole duty of man.” Better still, however, would be to turn directly to the Savior for His wisdom in this matter. He says, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matt. 6:19–20). What might these riches be? That which the Lord will be looking for on Judgment Day (see Matt. 25:31–46). Whatever we do in service to Him and His kingdom matters. Whatever else will amount to rubbish fit for the fire. Are you rich toward God? Is your faith accompanied by good works? For whom are you laboring? For what are you laboring? “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). We all stand at this crossroads every day. What is your choice?

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THE INABILITY TO KNOW WHAT TO DO

ECCLESIASTES 7:1–8:17

There are times in believers' lives when we just don't know what to do. Matters arise that boggle our minds. What we had expected to happen didn't happen. Just when we thought things were going well, they took a turn in a completely different direction. Recently I experienced something totally new for me. Since the time the Lord saved me, bringing me to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, I have always been an optimistic believer. Those who know me best would say that I almost always find something positive in every situation. No matter how dark things look I can find some light. Even the cloudiest days have lots of silver lining. And then my wife was diagnosed with cancer! From the moment I heard that, my outlook on life changed dramatically. Instead of optimism, I was filled with pessimism. Instead of expecting the best outcome, I began to expect the worst. I truly did not know what to do, or how to handle this news. Instead of committing my way to the Lord, I fretted, worried, and became somewhat depressed when considering the future. My children could see that their father was not his usual optimistic self. Instead of silver lining, all I saw was ever darkening clouds.

I believe the Lord was teaching me a most valuable lesson through my wife's bout with cancer. What I

desperately needed to learn was that my identity was not in my wife, nor in my ministry, nor in my positivity, but in Christ alone. The more I see that now, looking back at least, the more I realize that my Lord Jesus Christ must be the center of my life. The problem, you see, was that I was so afraid to lose my wife to cancer that I lost sight of the Lord. He taught me that it was He Himself that I needed for life. An old faithful preacher in my past used to say, "Don't put your tent pegs too deep." That's exactly what I had been doing for years with my marriage. My dear wife's life was spared, after she went through many appointments, tests, scans, ultrasounds, surgery, and more appointments. She is cancer-free now! For the most part, my life has returned to its former bright, optimistic outlook, yet with a difference. The Lord has taught me that while I might have to live without my wife, and by His grace would be able to, I will never have to live without Him! What I experienced is not new or unique. In the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon writes about times when we just don't know what to do. Following the outline in the Reformation Heritage Study Bible, we are given four reasons for the inability to know what to do.



BECAUSE THE BETTER THINGS ARE CONTRARY TO EXPECTATION (7:1–14)

We are faced with probing questions in Ecclesiastes 7:1–12. How can the day of our death be better than the day of our birth? How can it be better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to a house of feasting? How can sorrow be better than laughter? How can it be better to hear rebuke than to hear a song? How can the end of a thing be better than its beginning? Why are the former days better than these days? I could add, How can a cancer diagnosis be better than a clean bill of health? You can fill in your own question here. Ultimately, the answer is found in turning to the Lord. “Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked” (v. 13)? Solomon reminds us that with all our puzzling questions, we need to consider that it is all God’s work. Death and life, health and sickness, prosperity and adversity—all come from our heavenly Father’s hand. Our Reformed confessions also make that very plain: “all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand” (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 27). In all our perplexities, not knowing what to think or do, let us always “consider the work of God.” We cannot make anything straight that He has made crooked. Nor should we want to, since He does all things well.

BECAUSE LIFE IS UNPREDICTABLE (7:15–24)

We are often in positions in which we do not know what to do because life is so unpredictable. The Lord reminds us that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and His ways higher than ours (Isa. 55:9). We want to know what is going to happen ahead of time. Yet, in His wisdom our gracious God does not reveal all things to us. The tension between the unpredictability of life and our desire to know, when blessed by the Holy Spirit, will lead to increasing dependence on God. As the wise man says, no matter how unpredictable situations may be, “he that feareth God shall come forth of them all” (v. 18b). When looking to an unknown and unpredictable future, let us heed his sobering conclusion: “That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” (Eccl. 7:24). As James writes, “ye know not what shall be on the morrow” (James 4:14). With all our planning, organizing, and arranging for the future, let us keep in mind that we really do not even know what *today* will bring. This day and every future day belongs to the Lord. He is always in control, and will always do what is best for us. Trust Him with your unpredictable life.

BECAUSE FOOLISHNESS ABOUNDS (7:25–29)

Many times we do not know what to do because of abounding foolishness. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes tells

us, “I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness” (v. 25). Indeed he found that foolishness is wickedness! He searched high and low, near and far, among men and among women, and what was his conclusion? “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (v. 29). It is no wonder that we are often plagued with the inability to know what to do. Not only are the people around us foolish, but we ourselves keep seeking our own inventions. Instead of turning to our Lord in our perplexities, we think we can count on our own wisdom, but we find by bitter experience that our wisdom is but foolishness. Let us therefore be wise and seek out wisdom. Surely, among the Lord’s saints there are those who are wise! Let us hear them as they direct us to Him who, according to Proverbs 8 *is* wisdom, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ.

BECAUSE LIFE IS FULL OF INCONGRUITIES (8:1–17)

As fallen human beings we are faced with the inability to know what to do because life is full of incongruities. Many times there seem to be absurdities and inconsistencies. For example, “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity” (v. 14). According to our human reasoning, that just makes no sense. Indeed, we would conclude with Solomon: this is vanity! Yet, when we remember that every aspect of life is under the constant care of our heavenly Father, then we can bring those incongruities to Him, trusting that, to the Lord, they make perfect sense. We do not need to understand everything in life. In fact, we should always remind ourselves that even the Lord’s dear children do not see all things clearly. The Preacher concludes this section of his book with a sobering thought. “Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it” (v. 19). Notice that just as in 7:13 Solomon reminds us to consider and behold the work of God. There is the solution to the inability to know what to do: remember always to notice in everything that it is the work of God. The reasons for our inability may be many and varied, but the solution is to turn or return to the Lord and acknowledge His work.

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OUR INABILITY TO KNOW OR PREDICT THE FUTURE

ECCLESIASTES 9:1–11:6

It is a humbling thing that we have been created in the image of God. This is the greatest distinguishing characteristic between mankind and the animal world. Animals come in every class and species, but none are made in God's image. Human beings, however, have been made in God's "image" and "likeness" (Gen. 1:26–27).

That being the case, we may share in some of the attributes, or characteristics, of our Maker. In a limited way we share in what we commonly call God's communicable attributes. One of those attributes is His knowledge. God has knowledge and, therefore, we may know things as well. However, there is a great difference between God's knowledge and ours. God has infinite knowledge; that is, He knows all things at all times in an eternal way. This is often referred to as His omniscience. We have finite or limited knowledge. We don't know all things, but we may know some things in a limited way.

Solomon realized he was naturally ignorant, so he humbly asked God to grant him understanding (1 Kings 3:9). God was pleased with his request, so He gave His servant a wise and understanding heart in a greater measure than anyone else (vv. 11–12). But even Solomon realized that the scope and breadth of his knowledge was limited. In Ecclesiastes 9:1–11:6 Solomon wisely communicates mankind's inability to know, and therefore, his inability to predict the future. He lays out three reasons why we can neither know nor predict the future.

BECAUSE LIFE IS UNCERTAIN AND BRIEF (ECCL. 9:1–10)

First, in a series of contrasts Solomon writes that no one knows the varied events of each passing day (vv. 1–3). Neither the Christian nor the non-Christian, neither the righteous nor the wicked, know what a day will bring. Life is uncertain for all.

Besides this, all the living do know they will die someday (v. 5). However, no one knows with certainty when that day will occur. We do know that life is brief. Seventy or eighty years is the common lifespan of human beings and "it is soon cut off and we fly away" (Ps. 90:10). By unveiling the uncertainty and brevity of life, Solomon is teaching that we cannot know or predict the future—not the distant future, nor the next day or hour.

Since the events of life are so uncertain and death is so sure, we might grow despondent and reclusive. So, interestingly, Solomon continues with an exhortation for us to enjoy life with the ones we love (Eccl. 9:7–9). Not in the spirit of, "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you'll die." Rather, since God guides all things, the counsel comes to us, that whatever our hand finds to do we are to engage in those tasks with all of our might (v. 10). Whatever you do, "throw your whole heart into it," he writes. Whether that is education, or employment, or prayer, or worship—we are to engage in all that is scripturally legitimate with a heart of sincere zeal. The Lord would have us live a focused, intentional Christian life.

Solomon commands the enjoyment of life despite the uncertainty of life and the reality of death. Are we doing that to the glory of God? (1 Cor. 10:31). Despite the reality of uncertainty and the inevitability that we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ one day (Rom. 14:10), are we trusting in Christ and living to the praise of His glory? (Eph. 1:6, 12). The Lord desires that we adopt a humble, yet confident posture amid the instability and transiency of life.

BECAUSE WISDOM DOESN'T GUARANTEE SUCCESS (ECCL. 9:11–10:15)

Second, Solomon writes that since wisdom can't guarantee success, therefore we cannot know what tomorrow brings. Often times we reflect on past patterns in God's world of order and, in turn, we predict the success of this or that. Even though Solomon also exhorts us to get wisdom and understanding (Prov. 4:5, 7; 16:16), yet even the wisest man is not equal to God and therefore cannot predict what tomorrow brings.

It is not the intelligent and the wise who are successful in God's eyes (Eccl. 9:11). Both the wise and the foolish can be like a fish that is caught, or a bird that is captured (v. 12). We can be like a poor yet wise man who guided a small city to victory against a mighty foe (vv. 13–15), yet with all his wisdom he faded into obscurity (v. 16).

Yes, we are to prayerfully pursue education. Yes, we are to seek after wisdom because it is the principal thing (Prov. 4:7). But let us never think that being wise somehow gives us the edge to know the future. This knowledge belongs to God alone! Education and cognitive ability that leads to wisdom is a wonderful thing. But with great wisdom, pride can quickly rear its ugly head, and soon, the wise might think that

for them future success is certain. The Lord shows us here through Solomon's pen that the wisest person is susceptible to pride and failure in the same way the foolish would be.

I pray that we all might pursue and seek for godly wisdom that comes from Christ alone. Paul writes that believers, "are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God" (1 Cor. 1:30). Let us never trust in the gift of intellectual wisdom that He gives to us. If we do, we might then presume that future successes in this life will be certain for us. Rather, let us pray for one another, "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him" (Eph. 1:17).

BECAUSE EVIL HAPPENS (ECCL. 10:16–11:6)

Lastly, Solomon notes that we cannot know or predict the future because we live in a fallen world and consequently evil, that is, difficulty or trouble, happens. He uses several everyday occurrences to illustrate this.

A slothful home owner doesn't fix his aging house and it decays and leaks (Eccl. 10:18). This is a difficulty that happens. Words of criticism, even though spoken in private, will eventually be heard by those who were being spoken about (v. 20). Disasters of every kind occur in this earth (Eccl. 11:2). Just read the daily news headlines to affirm that truth. When a storm passes through and uproots trees, they fall in every direction (v. 3). Even with the beauty of new life, Solomon writes, we don't know if a child growing in the womb will any have physical anomalies (v. 5). We don't know with certainty that every seed that is planted will grow (v. 6).

In other words, this life is full of uncertainty. Solomon calls it *evil*—not *moral evil* but *natural evil*. He is referring to things going wrong in this fallen world that is affected in every conceivable way as a consequence of the fall in Paradise. Mankind encounters as many troubles as sparks fly up from a grinding wheel (Job 5:7).

Sometimes we hear people presumptuously counseling others, "Everything's going to be alright, you'll have no problems." That may be true for a while, but we live in a world where things can and do go wrong. Some false preachers say that we have to "speak or declare future victories for ourselves." This is no more than pop-psychology trying to get unsuspecting parishioners to engage in self-fulfilling prophecy so they feel better about themselves. Ultimately, such unwise guidance does more harm than good to people's souls. Rather, the Lord would have us to be honest that we live in a world deeply affected by sin and He does not want us to predict the future, because we cannot! Such knowledge belongs alone to God.

We cannot know or predict the future because of the uncertainty of life. We cannot know it because wisdom doesn't guarantee future success. Neither can we predict a cloudless tomorrow because we live in a stormy world. Rather, amid all earthly uncertainties let us put our trust in Jesus Christ who is the same, "yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 12:8). The Bible tells us that both day and night are alike to the Lord (Ps. 139:12). He mercifully and sovereignly rules over all and those who wait in faith on Him shall not be put to shame (Ps. 25:3). This is true wisdom!

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Trust in the LORD wi

THE EVALUATION OF YOUTH AND OLD AGE

ECCLESIASTES 11:7–12:7

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment (Eccl. 11:9).

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them (Eccl. 12:1).

These two passages, taken from the larger context of Ecclesiastes 11:7–10 and 12:1–7, contrast the two bookends of the brief journey of life: youth and old age. They are the seasons of life during which our assessment of life will differ profoundly. The inspired wisdom of Solomon gives us a perspective regarding these two seasons of life that is unparalleled in Scripture.

Recently I had a unique encounter with the dramatic contrast between youth and old age. On a Saturday, after I had officiated a wedding, my wife and I, as invited guests, went to the reception, and thus to the house of feasting. At such an occasion, very few reflect on the brevity and uncertainty of life. For the young couple bliss, joy, and high expectations were uppermost on their minds. However, when we left the house of feasting, we traveled to a hospital to visit an elderly brother who was seriously ill. Less than half an hour after our arrival, he breathed his last breath. And suddenly, surrounded by a mourning family, we found ourselves in the house of mourning. Within a few hours, we had witnessed the joyful beginning of a new marriage and the end of the lengthy marriage of an elderly couple.

This experience was a powerful illustration for us that “it is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house

of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart” (Eccl. 7:2).

This brings us at once to the focal point of this article: the divergent evaluation of life by the young and the old. The passages we are considering highlight the fact that the young generally do not take to heart the inescapable reality that it is appointed unto all men—regardless of age—once to die, and after that the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Solomon reminds young people of this when with holy irony he urges them to live life to the fullest—to follow the dictates of their own heart and to feast their eyes on all that this tantalizing world appears to offer. How tempting it is for young people to be seduced by the siren song of a world that fosters the illusion that happiness is to be found in the pursuit of possessions, pleasure, popularity, prestige, and power!

However, Solomon then adds the sobering warning that a day of reckoning is coming for having lived a life in pursuit of the world’s agenda—a life governed by the worship of Mammon rather than the worship of the living God. The temptation of youth—even Christian youth—is to lose sight of our frailty and mortality and to order our lives according to the world’s agenda.

Young people often fail to recognize that at any given moment their dreams can be shattered by crippling injuries, terminal illness, and death itself. The day that we will stand before our Maker could be just around the corner—an appointment that cannot be cancelled.

Since, however, our Creator has no pleasure in the death of sinners, but rather, that they would turn to Him and live (Ezek. 33:11), He not only moved Solomon by His Spirit to



warn young people of the judgement to come, but also to seek Him in the days of their youth, saying, “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.” The urgency of this exhortation is inescapable, and is expressed throughout the Word of God: “To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart” (Ps. 95:7–8); “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2); “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33).

Furthermore, Solomon adds a compelling argument for remembering our Creator in our youth: “while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (Eccl. 12:1). In the verses that follow, Solomon gives us a graphic description of what these evil days are—days that will greatly hinder us in devoting our time to seek our Creator as He has revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in which He proffers peace and pardon. During the evil days of old age there will increasingly be a systemic failure of our physical and mental faculties. They will be days when debilitating illness and weakness will often manifest themselves.

The pain, discomfort, and anxiety that will progressively become a daily reality can so preoccupy the elderly that it will render them nearly incapable of devoting their time and energy to their spiritual needs. How profitable it would therefore be for young people to visit the elderly in a nursing home and to witness the painful and graphic evidence of these evil days—to witness what the end of life’s journey looks like!

They might then learn from the elderly how rapidly youth becomes a distant memory and how quickly and relentlessly old age will overtake us! They would hear the often repeated phrase, “Where have the years gone? It seems like yesterday that I was young and full of energy, and now I am old and my body is breaking down.”

Visiting the elderly in a nursing home would remind young people of another truth expressed by Solomon, that there is “a time to be born, and a time to die” (Eccl. 3:2a). How striking that the day of our birth and the day of our death are only separated by a comma! He does not say a word about there being a time to live. That comma represents the brief span of life that separates our birth and our death—a comma that places our brief lives in the context of eternity. In light of eternity we are all the same age!

Thus, after having warned young people lovingly of the judgment to come, he now also lovingly urges them not to postpone seeking God (by repenting and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ) until the evil days of old age. Everyone dreams of becoming old, but reality tells us that no one enjoys being old. Solomon tells us that it is the time when our limbs begin to tremble, when our strong bodies become weak, when teeth will be lost, when eyesight will grow dim, when one will be restricted to his home, when anxiety will increase, when hearing begins to fail, and when our basic bodily functions begin to fail.

Solomon then tells us that all this will happen as a graphic reminder that “man goeth to his long home” (12:5b)—that our dust shall “return to the earth as it was,” and that our spirit (soul) will “return unto God who gave it” (12:7).

That profound reality should compel young people not to order their lives according to this world’s agenda. It is an agenda so appealing, and articulated so strikingly by the rich fool who said on the eve of his unanticipated death, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:19). How sobering are the words that follow: “But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God!” (Luke 12:20–21). Jesus summarized this when He said, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

When we are young, we are not often inclined to take these matters as seriously as we ought to, being deluded by the dream of a prosperous and successful future—by pursuing a treasure on earth rather than a treasure in heaven. That’s why it is so profitable for young people to visit the house of mourning so that they may be reminded—and take to heart—that our youth is the golden age to remember our gracious Creator by responding to His loving invitation, “My son [my daughter], give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways” (Prov. 23:26).

What a blessing it is, therefore, if our youth culminates in a life in which we love and serve our Creator as He has revealed Himself in the person of His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—and when a life of serving Him may culminate in an old age of which it can be said, “Those that be planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing” (Ps. 92:13–14). What a privilege when at the end of our journey, being “full of days,” we may say with Jacob, “I have waited for thy salvation, O LORD” (Gen. 49:18). Such is the confession of all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, for He is Jehovah’s salvation! Only when we find our salvation in Him are we living indeed! Then Asaph’s confession will also be ours, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever” (Ps. 73:25–26).

Thus, having considered the biblical perspective regarding youth and old age, “let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:13–14).

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THE COUNSEL FOR LIFE

ECCLESIASTES 12:8–14

Ecclesiastes is one great message about life, and as other sermons must reach their conclusion, so must this one. In Ecclesiastes 12:8–14 the Preacher concludes his message with four final applications, the fourth being the grand conclusion of the whole book. These points can be summarized as truth, motivation, contentment, and the fear of God.

TRUTH

In verses 9 and 10 we read that the Preacher in his wisdom “set in order many proverbs” and “acceptable words; and what was written was upright, even words of truth.” He is, of course, referring to the whole book. Everything he has said, has been “truth.” The whole composition has been upright words. This is the key to realizing that this is a positive book, and not a negative one, as some describe it.

Indeed, Ecclesiastes is seen by many as a discouraging book. Some enjoy it because they mistakenly think it is contradictory to other portions of the Scriptures. Seeing it is God’s Word, it cannot be contradictory to Scripture. It is a life-giving book because it contains the truth. This book says the truth about life. It reveals what we must know about it.

It is true when it says that life is “vanity.” At the close of the book, the author of Ecclesiastes returns to the words of his text, “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity” (12:8). He has used the word “vanity” thirty-eight times throughout his sermon and now is ready to bring it to a conclusion. “Vanity” has been used in this book as a metaphor for life, as it has been considered, studied, and evaluated. The word “vanity” is the translation of the Hebrew word *hevel*, which can be translated as “vapor, breath, or smoke.” The Preacher is pointing to the brevity of life, as well as to its paradoxical nature. As vapor comes and goes within seconds, so life is brief; as smoke may seem dense yet it cannot be grasped, so life is an enigma and is unpredictable. These things are true of life, even when life is lived in wisdom (2:12–15). The wise does not live forever, neither is the

upright free from afflictions. The Preacher has been teaching the truth about life for everyone: it is brief and enigmatic.

However illogical some things in life may seem, given these two truths, we can then understand the perfect logic of preferring the house of mourning over the house of feasting, and preferring sorrow over laughter (7:2–3). Why would sorrow be better? Because it better reflects the reality of life as “vanity.” If life is brief, and unexpected, and if our names shall be forgotten as will our labors, then those who laugh through life live an illogical life. On the other hand, those who realize sorrow is of the essence are wise, for they are living more in tune with the truth.

MOTIVATION

Ecclesiastes 12:11 says that the “words of the wise are as goads.” The goad is a prodding device used with sheep and cattle. As soon as the goad touches the animal, it is persuaded to move. This metaphor for the message in this book tells us two things. First, since goads are highly effective, the truths found in Ecclesiastes must be an effective encouragement to help us understand what life is and how to live it. These words motivate us not to love the world nor the things of the world. Why would we love mere vapor? These words assist us in having our priorities straight and having the right view of our work, our leisure, relationships, etc. We learn to take the advice of the Preacher when he “commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (Eccl. 8:15). This is not promoting hedonism, but Christian contentment. Our days are short and uncertain; thus we must learn to enjoy what the Lord has given us while we have it.

The “goad” metaphor says one more thing—this prodding will occur despite our dislike of it. Animals respond to the goad by necessity, not volition. Likewise, it is not naturally pleasant to hear that life is brief, that the grinders shall cease because they are few, or that desire shall fail (Eccl. 12:3, 5). We don’t naturally like to hear of the

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

—ECCLESIASTES 12:13

pitcher breaking at the fountain, and the dust returning to the earth (Eccl. 12:6–7). These are sad realities, but they *are* realities as real as the nail at the end of the goad. Truth gives us a sober encouragement that we must heed, even though it may not agree with our reason and desires.

We must also appreciate one final important matter. Notice how gracious God is with us. Animals cannot reason as humans can, so their goad is a sharp stick, and that is all they have. They don't get a metaphor: they get a real goad; no poems, no figures, no words of wisdom. However, the Lord graciously treats us with dignity and gives us this wonderful treatise, explaining and exposing the life that lies before us. Instead of a crude and sharp stick, God "set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words," even upright and true ones (Eccl. 12:10). We can read and reason, so the Lord goads us with words of wisdom and love.

Through Ecclesiastes, we are being made to understand life—not so much the enigmas themselves, but the fact that they exist—thus helping us obey the summons, "Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (9:10). We must not allow the incongruities and paradoxes of life to discourage us. Ecclesiastes tells us that this is how life is, and we therefore must keep our focus on realizing how much we need the Lord, His Word, and His help.

CONTENTMENT

The brevity and enigmas in life are a reality—a settled fact. No matter how much we were to study them, we would never fully understand why things happen the way they do. Why is it that the wealth of a holy man ends up in the hands of a wicked man? Why is the wicked allowed to live while the righteous dies? In Ecclesiastes 12:12 we are admonished to be content and to cease further exploration of the matter: "And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

There must be a time in which we simply stop philosophizing about life, and begin living it—especially given its brevity! Many find themselves buried in books, either studying them or writing them, who have not yet climbed a high mountain to contemplate the world that has existed for thousands of years while generations have come and gone. This is part of the beauty that we experience and often cannot put into words. We are seeing sights that emperors of old may have seen, we are contemplating galaxies that no man has ever finished counting, yet many have lived, tried and died, and there are still more to be counted. We must not seek to study it in greater depth to make "many books" (12:12), for there will never be an end to all that could be written. We must be content simply to know these things are true and climb the next mountain.

THE FEAR OF GOD

With these truths before us, motivating and prodding us, filling our hearts with contentment, living life with a spiritual logic, we find that the final two things that sum up the whole matter are the fear of God and obedience (Eccl. 12:13). One is a demeanor while the other is an action, and neither exists without the other. As soon as you truly obey, you also honor the Lord whom you follow. By listing the "fear of God," first, the Preacher is teaching us that this life is to be lived first of all with a certain demeanor and attitude. The primary way by which we respond rightly to the message of this book is not by some activity, accomplishment, or action, but by a disposition of the heart. We are to have a heart that honors, reverences, and worships the Lord.

The Lord graciously *goads* us toward this fear and obedience as He concludes with the revelation that every secret work, be it good or evil, shall be brought into judgment (Eccl. 12:14). The reality of judgment immediately produces a demeanor of reverence in our hearts and a desire to obey the Lord.

This last verse in the book has one more amazing effect. All things that have been considered "vanity" have been things "under the sun." However, the book ends with things that are not a breath or a vapor, for they are not from below. They are not a matter of brevity or incongruity, but they are certain and absolute: God and His judgment—the reality that He takes the works of men, the secret things, the good and the evil, and judges them in His holy justice. There is no enigma here!

This last verse solves the enigma in the book itself, for it reveals that in heaven things shall not be brief and fleeting, neither shall there be any more incongruities or unexpected things. On earth something good may not be noticed, but in heaven God shall bring it to light! On earth evil may seem to go unpunished, but in the day of judgment it will be judged. The last verse reveals that only the things under the sun are vanity. But the things above are not.

The greatest enigma of all, therefore, is the fact that He who is from above came to live life under the sun, enduring this life of vanity for our sake. It is sin that ushered into this world the element of vanity. Therefore, as Christ Jesus atoned for sin, all who trust in Christ are made ready for this day of judgment. In Him, the brevity and enigma of life is resolved in the eternal and solid hope of heaven—in a communion and an existence that shall never know brevity, paradoxes, or unpredictability, only mirth, joy, and contentment—forever.

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WHO WERE THE PURITANS?



More than four hundred and fifty years ago, God raised up a people in England who loved His Word and wanted to live just as the Bible said. Because other people made fun of them as God's "pure" people, they came to be known as the *Puritans*. But they called themselves "Christians." They tried to live out the teachings of Reformers such as Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, Henry Bullinger, and John Calvin.

Who were the Puritans, and what were they like? Some people have strange ideas about them. They think the Puritans always dressed in black and white, never let anyone have fun, and were mean and cruel. Supposedly, "Puritan" means a religious person who is bad and dangerous. However, none of those things are true.

In many ways, the Puritans were like other people who lived in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They worked on farms or at their trades and callings, while their children played at home or studied in school. Some of them attended college to learn to be lawyers, pastors, or teachers. They enjoyed racing on foot or horseback, hunting, fishing, target practice with guns, and wrestling. They loved singing and music. They were interested in the latest discoveries of science and medicine. They believed that government should respect people's rights, and they fought in wars to defend those rights. They wrote poetry and kept journals and diaries about their lives. They loved their spouses and dear friends. In all these ways, the Puritans were ordinary people like you and me.

But the Puritans did stand out, for they worked to apply the Reformed faith to all things according to God's Word. In the middle of the sixteenth century, much of England knew very little about the Bible. For many years, English Christians had been part of the Roman Catholic Church with its false teachings, man-made rituals, and spiritual ruler, the pope. King Henry VIII had pulled the Church of England away from the pope's control, and though Queen Mary I put the English church back under the Roman Catholic Church, Queen Elizabeth I separated it from Rome once and for all. Nevertheless, the Reformation was only beginning to affect England. Queen Elizabeth did not want people to change too many things in the church, but the Puritans believed that God's Word must be preached throughout their nation and worship must be according to God's will. This caused the Puritans a lot of trouble from

leaders in the government and the church. Some Puritans had to leave England and live in exile in the Netherlands, where they found friends in the Reformed churches. Others came over the Atlantic Ocean to plant the colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut. For a short time (1649–1660), Puritan leaders ruled England as a republic and the nation had no king. The Puritans played an important part in English, Dutch, and American history.

How do we explain what made the Puritans who they were? The difference between the Puritans and most other people started with their *faith in the Bible as God's Word*. The Puritans believed that when they read or heard the Bible, God was speaking to them. Therefore, the Bible is perfect and should be believed and obeyed in all that it teaches. They taught their children to read, so they, too, could read God's Book. Many of the other books they read and wrote were about the Bible. They loved good sermons, which for them meant sermons that helped them to understand and obey the Bible, to hate sin, and to love the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Their favorite songs were the psalms of the Bible set to music. The Bible was the spiritual food they ate and drank every day.

From the Bible, the Puritans learned the *knowledge of the great and good God*. Their God is the majestic King who rules over heaven, earth, and all that is in them—for He made them. He is in control of all that happens, for even bad things are planned by God for good. God is not like a human king, for God is a Spirit who lives everywhere; He was never born and will never die. The Puritans believed that God loves sinners even though they hate Him. God loves them so much that God sent His Son to die for the sins of His chosen people and sent His Spirit to live within them. The God worshipped by the Puritans is the God of the Trinity: one God who is three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many people say they believe in God, but the Puritans loved God and wanted to know Him and think about Him as much as possible.

This God, the Puritans knew, can be known only through *the person and work of Jesus Christ*. Whatever part of the Bible they were studying, the Puritans asked how it points us to Christ. They were amazed that God the Son would become a man like us, while remaining fully God. They taught that

the Lord Jesus is the Prophet who teaches His people the truth, the Priest who sacrificed Himself for their sins, and the King who rules them by the Holy Spirit. He is the only Mediator, or middle-man, who can bring us to God. They spent time thinking about and rejoicing in each of Christ's many names and titles in Scripture. The Puritans believed that Christ is altogether lovely, and so they wanted to be as close to Him and as much like Him as they could. All of the Puritan hope hung upon Christ. Therefore, the Puritans had great hope because God the Father will honor His Son and Christ's kingdom will not fail.

Since people can receive Christ only by faith, the Puritans believed in *everyone's need for conversion*. People all start life as sinners because of Adam's sin. One of the first things Puritans taught their children was, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." Sin is not merely a mistake or imperfection; it is evil, the worst of evils, far worse than the greatest pain. The most deadly sin of all is our unbelief. The Puritans did not believe that baptism or the Lord's Supper had the power to save sinners apart from an inward change of heart. They urged people to repent of their sins and trust in Christ alone to save them. Many Puritan sermons and books talk about what conversion is and how it happens, so that people could know whether they are saved. The Puritans thought the sweetest thing in the world is to know that you are God's child.

With conversion as the beginning of Christian experience, the Puritans pursued *godliness that involved their head, heart, and hands*. Since God has spoken, and we have His Word, we must learn about Him with our minds. Puritan Christianity was thinking Christianity and demanded that people meditate or carefully consider what they heard from the Bible. Their preachers filled their sermons with points of doctrine to understand and believe. However, it did not stop there. The Puritans sought to know God in the experience of their hearts. They warned sinners that they need to feel the evil of their sins if they are going to repent. They wanted Christians to taste a little of heaven on earth by the Holy Spirit given to them. They studied how the Holy Spirit kills evil lusts in God's children and makes them more like Christ. They also called Christians to put their faith into practical action, giving specific directions based on the Bible for how people should treat each other as husbands and wives, children and parents, pastors and church members, government officials and citizens, and so forth. They were convinced that God's grace in the heart produces fruit in good works. Holiness was not just for church meetings, but for the whole of life.

The Puritans viewed godliness and spiritual growth as *the Christian pilgrim's journey to heaven*. They knew that this world is not their home, but believers in Christ are citizens of a better country, the heavenly city of God. Life is a vapor, but Christians are headed for glory. The Puritans measured a man's life not by how much money he got in this life, but in this progress as a pilgrim through trials and temptations

toward heaven. They often meditated on the everlasting rest of God's people with Christ in glory. As a result, they were bold in life and ready for death.

As pilgrims on their way to their heavenly home, the Puritans showed *patient endurance under trials*. Life was hard in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Puritans experienced a lot of suffering. They suffered when disasters came, such as a terrible disease known as "the Plague" or the Great Fire of London (1666). They suffered when England was torn apart in civil war and thousands of men perished by sword, musket, and cannon. They suffered when they buried the many wives who died in childbirth in those times and many children who died young. Christians sometimes feel discouraged even when life is good, what the Puritans called "melancholy" but we call depression. Through all these sorrows, the Puritans were teachers and models of trusting God's promises and submitting to His will.

The Puritans, however, did not try to overcome trials by themselves, but through *the help of the true church*. Though they knew that the Holy Spirit works when and how He pleases, they understood that the Spirit blesses what they called "the means of grace." These means are the reading and hearing of God's Word, worship with God's people, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and godly conversations with Christian friends. History had taught them, however, that not every church was true and faithful to God; many churches had replaced God's Word with man's ideas and traditions. Therefore, the Puritans said that the church, its leadership, and its worship must follow the pattern God gives us in the Bible, neither adding to it nor subtracting from it. Preaching must be plain, clearly based on the Bible, informing the mind and shooting straight for the heart. Though they had strong beliefs about the church, the Puritans were not a separate organization or denomination; what held them together were their shared beliefs and friendships between people who loved Christ and loved one another.

The place where Christian love was first lived out for the Puritans was *the Christian home*. They took very seriously



the responsibility of fathers and mothers to raise their children in God's ways. They wrote books about marriage and family life to show how God's Word should direct each person in his relationships at home. They expected parents to lead family worship, believing that the family that prays together enjoys the smile of heaven, and the family who reads the Bible together hears the voice of God in their home. Puritan pastors wrote many catechisms to help parents and children learn the basic truths of God's Word. Without taking away from the need to go to church, the Puritans wanted each family to be a little church where God was glorified through Jesus Christ. They understood that Christian families are a major way God raises up the next generation of leaders and members for the church, and trusted that their faithful covenant God would bless their efforts to raise their children in the Lord.

The Puritans did not hide in their homes and churches, but showed a real *concern for the welfare and righteousness of their nation*. Though they knew that this world was not their home, they longed for Christ to be loved and honored in

their cities, towns, and countryside. They sought to model government and business on the Bible's teachings, while recognizing that God's laws for ancient Israel were not necessarily His laws for England. When disaster struck, the Puritans responded with prayer and fasting for God to be merciful to their nation. They wanted the Lord to be honored in the planting and gathering of the harvest, the buying and selling of goods at the market, and the judgments of the courthouse. In a word, the Puritans wanted all of life to be reformed by God's Word to the glory of God.

Though the great age of modern missions would not dawn until a century after the Puritan era, the Puritans had their hearts set on *the spread of Christ's kingdom throughout the world*. Their churches regularly prayed for the salvation of the Jews, the strengthening of the persecuted church in other nations, and the advance of Christ's kingdom among all peoples. They trained and sent out hundreds of gospel preachers to places of darkness in their own land. They supported colonial missions to the Native Americans so that they too might hear of Jesus Christ and be saved, and entire villages became places of prayer.

Starting a new religion was not the Puritans' goal, but to follow *the old paths revealed to God's people in God's Word*. Today, people pay little attention to the past and think that the newest ideas are best. That may sometimes be true of inventions and machines, but the Puritans knew that when it comes to God, church, and how people live, the old ways are usually best because God does not change. Therefore, the Puritans saw themselves as part of a long line of godly men and women through the ages. They read old books and learned from Christians who lived many centuries before they did. In this manner, they followed in the footsteps of the Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, who also aimed to restore the church to a simple and pure devotion to God's Word that is not mixed or obscured by man-made traditions and rituals added to the church over the years.

The Puritans were Reformed Christians. Christianity had been deformed by teachings and practices not found in the Bible. It needed to be reformed by the Word of God. A special mark of the Puritans is that they realized reformation must begin with the application of the Bible's truths to the heart and flow outward into practical living in family, workplace, church, and nation. Hence they strove for *purity of Christian doctrine, worship, and life*. Although we do not live in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and therefore cannot be "Puritans," we can learn much from them about what it means to live unto God by faith and obedience toward His Word.

Adapted from *Puritan Heroes*, a new title for young people and families from Reformation Heritage Books.



HERMAN BAVINCK (1854–1921)

A Reformed Theologian in Tension with the Science and Culture of His Time

Herman Bavinck was one of the greatest Dutch theologians. The publication of his four-part *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (*Reformed Dogmatics*) was received with admiration not only by supportive colleagues, but also by those who completely disagreed with his Reformed convictions. It is still recognized to be a work of monumental theological value.

Bavinck is one of the most noble-hearted sons of the churches of the *Afscheiding* (a Dutch word for secession, referring to those who left the national Dutch Reformed Church in 1834). In him, we see a love of Reformed confessions combined with a truly Catholic attitude, two things which should never be opposed to each other.

Bavinck was born on December 13, 1854, in Hoogeveen, where his father was minister of the Christian Reformed Church. The climate in which Bavinck grew up was characterized by the conviction that God confirms His covenant from child to child, an emphasis on the necessity for personal faith, and the concept that the Christian is a stranger on the earth. Conforming to the attitude to life common in the *Afscheiding*, Bavinck was inspired with a sense of detachment from culture. The emphasis on the fact that a Christian is a pilgrim on earth is reminiscent of Paul's admonition to walk in temperance, righteousness, and godliness (Acts 24:24–26). Nevertheless, Bavinck was not educated to be a legalist. He did not consider the abstention from culture to be a galling yoke. Rather, the commitment to God's Word allowed for ample Christian liberty.

When his father accepted a call to Kampen, Bavinck went to grammar school in Zwolle. There he was noticed for his outstanding endowments. Bavinck and his parents agreed that he should study theology. It was assumed he would do this at the seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in Kampen; however, his father was convinced that, considering the extraordinary talents of his son, he should attend the state university of Leiden, which in those days was a bastion of outstanding academic science and modern theology. Much like Augustine, the Rev. J. Bavinck saw no conflict between the notion of pilgrimage and the pursuit of science.

This decision was not well received in the church community, however. A very indignant Rev. Brummelkamp, professor in Kampen and one of the founding fathers of the Christian Reformed Church, snapped at Bavinck's father, "You cast your son into a lion's mouth." At this, Bavinck's father answered, "I trust in God who is able to protect my son." Thus Bavinck

went to Leiden, carried on the wings of his parents' prayers, who pleaded God's promises sealed to their son at his baptism. In addition to theology, he also studied Hebrew.

It is from this period that his lifelong friendship emerged with Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, a modern but altogether sympathetic man, who eventually nominally converted to Islam just to investigate it better. Bavinck had a lifelong correspondence with Snouck. He opened his heart and shared his disappointments in ecclesiastical life with him, even more so than with anyone who stood much closer to him spiritually. He wrote to Snouck: "Leiden has been very useful to me; I hope to remember it thankfully. But it also often impoverished me, it freed me from so much dead weight (I am happy about that), but it also deprived me of much that later, especially when I had to preach, I learned to consider as indispensable for my own spiritual life. If I have any reason to be grateful to Leiden it is for this: trying to understand the adversary."

Bavinck experienced the poverty of modern theology to his core. This brought about a certain melancholy and loneliness in his life, the more so because he highly appreciated the friendship of those with whom he disagreed. He marveled that he kept the faith in which his parents had raised him. He finished his study in Leiden with a dissertation on the ethics of Zwingli. On June 10, 1880, he was awarded a doctor's degree in theology *cum laude*. He made no effort to hide his attachment to the Reformed confession. One of his theses was, "The concept of God's fatherly love in the parable of the prodigal son does not exclude the mediatorship of Christ."

Shortly before his promotion, Abraham Kuyper offered Bavinck a position in Semitic languages at the Free University of Amsterdam. Bavinck did not accept the offer, mainly because he felt obliged to apply the fruits of his academic education to the edification of the Christian Reformed Church. This was not the last time that a chair at the Free University would be offered to him.

Bavinck's first devotional speech was delivered in the church at the Hooigracht in Leiden on Sunday, January 26, 1878. This was the church that Bavinck attended during his stay in Leiden. He had complied with an urgent request from the consistory the preceding week to fill an unexpectedly empty pulpit. Dr. Prins, his professor of practical theology, attended this on Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the

life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Bavinck had a lifelong connection with this text and preached on it often. He usually preached on texts in which the main doctrines of the gospel are prominent. Upon obtaining the official consent to preach, he gave his first sermon as a student in Enschede on July 21, 1878. His text was 1 John 5:4: “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” The choice of text indicated the manner in which he faced the confrontation from modernism in Leiden.

Shortly after his promotion in Leiden, Bavinck took the first candidate exams in Kampen. Part of the exam consisted of a trial sermon. The text for this sermon, dictated by the curator, Rev. F. J. Bulens, was Matthew 15:14: “Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind.” This alluded obviously to his professors in Leiden, whose scientific and human qualities Bavinck held in such great esteem. He submitted with difficulty to this choice of text. After being pronounced eligible, he accepted a call to Franeker, where he was ordained by his father on March 13, 1881. He began his ministry there with the words from 1 Thessalonians 2:4: “But as we were allowed of God to be in trust with the Gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts.”

Bavinck continued his studies while also devoting himself wholeheartedly to the work of a pastor and teacher to the congregation. He liked to visit members and converse with them about salvation in Jesus Christ their Lord. While in Franeker, he overcame the inner conflict between his period of study in Leiden and his upbringing. Profoundly impressed with the limits of human knowledge and the fact that reason should never be a judge of the truth of faith, his love and affinity with the church’s confessions deepened. Furthermore, Bavinck was convinced that Reformed theology was the most biblical way to set forth the message of the Scriptures.

On August 24, 1882, the young minister of Franeker was assigned to the post of professor at the theological seminary in Kampen by the synod of the Christian Reformed Church. He moved into a room in his parents’ parsonage. On July 2, 1891, he married Johanna Adriana Schippers, who was thirteen years his junior and to whom he had first been introduced in 1888. They had a very happy marriage. She brought the warmth and cheerfulness of love that Bavinck needed to their home. On November 25, 1894, their daughter was born: Johanna Geziena. Johanna was the only child of their marriage.

BAVINCK’S REFORMED DOGMATICS

In 1895, the first part of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* was published. The fourth and last part came out in 1901. Within the context of the history of theology, Bavinck explains the doctrine of faith. The source of knowledge is God’s revelation, written in the Holy Scriptures, being the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. The testimony that the Bible gives of itself takes a central place in Bavinck’s theology. Like

Kuyper, Bavinck speaks about organic inspiration, emphasizing that God made use of men to materialize the Bible, without diminishing the revelation’s absolute divine character. To Bavinck, the ultimate incentive for a Christian to bow before the authority of the Bible is the Holy Spirit’s inner testimony. Thus Bavinck expounds the external principle, namely, the witness of the Scriptures, and the internal principle, namely, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

Being an irenic man, Bavinck was very open-minded toward the so-called ethical movement in the national Dutch Reformed Church. The theologians belonging to this movement united in order to find a middle road between liberal theology and Reformed orthodoxy. Among them, some stood closer to Reformed orthodoxy than others. Bavinck disagreed with them in their view on the authority of the Scriptures and subsequently in their view on the relation between revelation and experience. Bavinck emphasized the faith of the church can only last when it is built upon the rock of the Scriptures. Time and again, Bavinck made a stand for the self-authenticating character of Scripture, to which he wished to surrender unconditionally. The ethical theologians did regard Scripture as a source of faith, but their standard of the doctrine was the living faith of the members of Christ’s church. Bavinck wished to value the individual’s experience of faith as well as the experience of the church of all ages. However, his principle was to give priority to the objective revelation in the Bible over experience. He wished to go from Scripture to experience—not the other way around.

Bavinck had much in common with the American theologians Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield. It was his desire to find biblical answers when science questioned the Christian faith. Kuyper and Bavinck proceeded from the idea of two kinds of science, while the Princeton theologians assumed that Christians and non-Christians had the same scientific approach—but that only the Christian solution gave a true answer. Bavinck wished to show to society’s intellectuals that the Christian faith endures—that Christianity is relevant and holds the key to the ultimate character of reality.

Bavinck’s personal life was marked by godliness and simplicity. He could be indignant and distressed about the secularism and materialism in his own circles, but at the same time, his perception of culture shows great openness and generosity of mind. Like Kuyper, he held the opinion that, after the fall, God’s image was visible in the development of culture, not solely within the church. He argued that the development of culture should be related to the image of God. In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, he wrote in this context that God’s image in its depth and richness can only become visible to some extent in mankind’s ethnic and cultural variety. The phrase “to some extent” shows his caution.

PROMOTING UNITY AND BROADENING INTERESTS

As a professor in Kampen, Bavinck published many smaller works, including the elaboration of his address as principal

in 1888, called *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (*The Catholicity of Christianity and Church*). This booklet is truly a pearl. It is saturated with Bavinck's passion to promote peace and unity, which made a party leader's cloak too narrow and heavy for him to wear. The Reformation, according to Bavinck in this work, involved not only a church healing but also a church-dissolving element. In order to give the Word of God and its message priority, the Reformers gave up the church's outward unity. For them Augustine's doctrine of grace had more impact than his church doctrine. Even the Reformation itself did not remain united; in the following centuries, Protestantism became more and more fragmented worldwide.

Bavinck agreed with Kuyper's opinion that the church in its visible form has more than one true manifestation. However, according to Kuyper, there is a positive connection between the many manifestations of the Christian church and the power and vitality of the Christian faith. This excludes the possibility that the Christian faith should have only one form of appearance. Bavinck accepted that the church in its visible form has more than one manifestation and that refusing to admit this leads to sectarianism and unchristian narrow-mindedness. For Bavinck, it was impossible to identify just one denomination as the body of Christ; nevertheless, he considered the fact that the visible church of Christ is fragmented into many denominations as a fruit of sin. Unity was essential for the church. He positioned this unity not *above* but *in* the many denominations and movements. Real unity is a unity of faith. It is a unity of belief in the triune God as the God of salvation. All differences in understanding between God's saints will finally disappear when Christ returns. In the New Jerusalem, the unity of the church will be complete.

Bavinck strongly supported the unification of the Christian Reformed Church and the Nether Dutch Reformed Churches in 1892. Out of this, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*) were founded. Bavinck could not understand why Kuyper remained in the national Dutch Reformed Church so long and welcomed the Doleantie of 1886. He was hardly aware of the drawbacks of Kuyper's theology, which kept some from joining the unification of 1892. After all, he was too much of a neo-Calvinist himself to agree with these reservations.

Bavinck was deeply disappointed that the Theological Seminary in Kampen did not merge with the theological faculty of the Free University of Amsterdam, which would have put the latter under the supervision of the synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. But the former's Christian Reformed Church did not wish to give up the school in Kampen, to which they felt deeply attached. After refusing earlier appointments, Bavinck accepted a call as professor of systematic theology at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1902. He succeeded Kuyper, who had become prime minister of the Netherlands. He accepted this call partly out of

disappointment that the two theological institutes could not join forces. The disappointments of these years deepened his melancholy tendencies.

While in Amsterdam, Bavinck's interests expanded outside of church life. He set out to promote Christian schools and Christian politics. During these years, a second revised and extended edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* came out. He also published a number of works dealing with the relationship between the Christian faith and philosophy. Around the year 1914, Bavinck's thoughts upon theology and philosophy reached a point of rest. In Bavinck's period at the Free University, we notice how his interests move from theology to pedagogy. Did Bavinck change his theological views in the last years of his life? Asserting so may be going too far; a more accurate statement would be that his positions altered.

PROMOTING TRUE CONVERSION AND PERSONAL FAITH

Bavinck wished to combine the spirituality of the *Afscheiding* with Kuyper's passion for Europe to return to Christianity. This was first expressed in what is arguably his best religious work, *De zekerheids des geloofs* (*The Certainty of Faith*). In this book, Bavinck emphasizes that real assurance cannot ultimately be founded on experience, but only on the revelation of God in Christ. He writes discerningly about the developments of the spiritual life in the churches after the Reformation. The Reformed pietism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may have kept the objective truth of the Christian faith, contrary to other forms of theology, but its attitude was sometimes too subjective. Bavinck stressed that the certainty of faith is related more to the object on which it leans than to itself. The certainty is founded on the promises of the gospel: Christ offers Himself as the Savior of sinners. Bavinck emphasized that certainty is an integral aspect of faith itself. He wrote: "Whoever is stricken by guilt and crushed and honestly seeks refuge in Christ is already a believer. To the degree that he exercises a refuge-taking trust he also possesses an assured trust. How else would a sinner convicted of his own guilt ever dare to approach God and evoke His grace unless in the depth of his heart, without being consciously aware of it himself, he shared in the certainty of faith and the hope that the Father of Jesus Christ is merciful and great in loving kindness?"

Although Bavinck became one of the neo-Calvinistic revival's leaders, he was aware that, in his own church, faith was regarded as knowledge instead of an experience. Bavinck knew by experience that the certain knowledge and the assured confidence of faith never are without temptation and inward struggle. When a new edition of the complete works of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine was published in Dutch, Bavinck wrote an introduction. He wrote, "Here we have an important element, which we lack in many respects. We miss the spiritual knowledge of the soul. It is as if we don't know anymore about sin and mercy, debt and forgiveness, regeneration and conversion. We know them in theory but I am afraid many of us don't know them in the awesome reality of life."

Another striking remark can be found in *The Certainty of Faith*: “Nowadays we are out to convert the whole world, to conquer all areas of life for Christ. But we often neglect to ask whether we ourselves are truly converted and whether we belong to Christ in life and in death. For this is indeed what life boils down to. We may not banish this question from our personal or church life under the label of pietism or methodism. What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, even for Christian principles, if he loses his own soul?”

KEEPING THE FAITH

Bavinck was aware that an experienced assurance of faith, as it relates to the certainty of the truth as well as having a personal share in salvation, is rare, specifically among theologians. In *The Certainty of Faith*, he wrote,

Nowadays, many people take into account only what they can see; they deify matter, worship Mammon, or glorify power. The number of those who still utter an undaunted testimony of their faith with joyful enthusiasm and complete certainty is comparatively small. Families, generations, groups, and classes have turned away from all authority and broken with their faith. Even among those who still call themselves believers, how many must yield to a forced, unnatural belief? How many believe as a result of habit, laziness or lack of spirit? How many act out of an unhealthy attempt to recover the past or out of a misleading conservatism? There is much noise and movement, but little genuine spirit, little genuine enthusiasm issuing from an upright, fervent, sincere faith. Nowhere is this more true than among theologians. They are the most doubting, vacillating group of all. They have plenty of questions, doubts, and criticism to offer. But what we expect from them more than from anyone else—unity of outlook, consistency of method, certainty of faith, eagerness to give an account of the hope within them—for these traits we often look in vain.

The poverty of modern theology was specifically evident at sickbeds and deathbeds, Bavinck thought. Modern theology was powerless to give comfort and surety in the face of death. For him, this was the very power of Reformed theology. In this context, the Utrecht professor Ritter remarked, “Bavinck is a man you would wish to be at your deathbed.”

In 1908, when Bavinck celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as a professor of theology, he remarked emotionally that he had kept the faith. Time and again, Bavinck felt how miraculous it was that he remained standing in the truth of the Christian faith and the gospel of God’s grace.

In the autumn of 1920, Bavinck had to put aside his work. The following summer, on July 29, 1921, Bavinck’s life came to an end. During the last months of his life, he became totally dependent on help. Rev. Landwehr, one of Bavinck’s students of the Theological Seminary in Kampen, wrote in his *In memoriam Prof. Dr. H. Bavinck*, “Then this active man became still and it was the greatest privilege to see the power

of the faith that began to reveal itself. He lost everything, his knowledge, his science, literally everything, and he became again a poor sinner before God. At that time again he could bear witness: ‘I have kept the faith.’ He began to be filled with a peace that passes all understanding, that sweet rest of faith, that glorious knowledge that we are the Lord’s own.” The funeral took place on August 2. At the grave, the stanza of the metrical psalm was sung that had lingered in Bavinck’s mind to the last:

O God Jehovah, good and kind,
On Zion’s mount in clouds enshrined
Thou art our sun and shield forever.
To upright souls that seek Thy face
Thou givest glory, truth, and grace;
E’en in death’s vale Thou failest never.
O Lord of hosts, how blest is he
Who puts his steadfast trust in Thee!

When the coffin had been lowered somebody started to sing and was spontaneously joined by all:

*And blessed be His glorious Name,
To all eternity;
The whole earth let His glory fill.
Amen: So let it be.*

1. J. H. Landwehr, *In memoriam prof. dr. H. Bavinck*. Herdacht door een zijner oud-leerlingen (Kampen: Kok, 1921), 9.

2. Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921), 84.

3. Landwehr, *In memoriam*, 18.

4. Landwehr, *In memoriam*, 17; R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 35. Landwehr (*In memoriam*, 16) incorrectly states that Bavinck’s first address was on the parable of the prodigal son.

5. The desire to be relevant to the culture shows the neo-Calvinistic bias of Bavinck’s theology. Neo-Calvinism wished to connect Reformed theology with its own time and culture. It rejected the connection of church and state made by classic Calvinism and had a much greater openness to culture than classical Calvinism—especially the Calvinism colored by the Dutch Puritans.

6. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, third unaltered edition (Kampen: Kok, 1918), 595ff.

7. Herman Bavinck, *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk*, edition with an introduction of G. Puchinger (Kampen: Kok, 1968), 21ff., 35ff.

8. Bavinck, *Katholiciteit*, 36.

9. The first edition was published in 1901. A second somewhat revised and extended edition came from the press in 1903.

10. Herman Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs in Geloofszekerheid*. Teksten ingeleid en geannoteerd door Henk van den Belt (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2016), 89; *The Certainty of Faith*, translated by Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980), 85–86.

11. *Levensgeschiedenis en Werken van Ralph & Ebenezer Erskine*. Met een inleidend en aanbevelend woord van Prof. dr. H. Bavinck, Hoogleraar aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam (Doesburg: J. C. van Schenk Brill, 1905), 5.

12. Bavinck, *Zekerheid*, 95–96; *Certainty*, 94.

13. Bavinck, *De zekerheid*, 23; *Certainty*, 8–9.

14. Landwehr, *In memoriam*, 78.

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Plastic Bags and Eternal Hope

When my daughter was young, she loved to go on walks. She sat in her stroller without making a sound, staring in awe at the world moving by. One day, just as I was getting her ready to go in the stroller, she found a plastic bag and began crinkling it. I didn't want her to put it in her mouth, so I took it from her and told her that instead of playing with the bag, we were going to go for a walk.

She threw a fit.

With her limited understanding, she couldn't comprehend that I needed to take something away from her—something that could harm her—in order to give her something better. It wasn't until I placed her into the stroller that she calmed down.

Later that afternoon, I put my daughter in her crib for a nap. I planned on an hour or two of peace and quiet in order to finish a few things. But that day, she didn't nap.

I threw a fit.

My fit may have looked different from my daughter's—I wasn't crying or clenching my entire body—but in my mind, my frustration was intense. I desired those quiet hours so much that I had placed all of my hope in naptime. When I didn't get it, I reacted like an immature child.

When asked where we place our hope, most of us would give the correct Christian answer: we hope in God. But when we look at our reactions to the discomforts and inconveniences of life, it becomes clear that our natural tendency is to place our hope not in God but in a well-behaved child, a productive morning, even a bowl of ice cream eaten in peaceful solitude. These things become the “plastic bags” that we love to hold and can't bear to lose. When God starts taking one of them from us, our grip on it tightens and we question Him. *Would it be so hard for Him to let me have just this one thing?*

It is easy to feel frustrated when a comfort we feel entitled to is taken away from us. But rather than questioning God, we can and must take Him at His word. When we feel disappointment or anger well up, we must use it as a trigger not to think negative, bitter thoughts but to remember and meditate on truth: God is good and if we love Him, He will work all things, big or small, together for our good (Rom. 8:28). Having reminded ourselves of that, we can logically

conclude that anything He takes from us was taken in love for our good, and that we are eternally better off without it.

If everything went “perfectly” according to our plans, if we never experienced inconvenience or discomfort, we wouldn't feel our need for God as strongly and we might never put our faith in Him. When He takes one of our plastic bags away and we are overwhelmed by mess or noise or needs that must be met, we begin searching for something else to place our hope in, something outside of this hour, something bigger than this world. And what a blessing that is because now we have the opportunity to seek for and find the only source of true hope, the only Person who can fulfill our hope. We now have a chance to discover the thrill of placing our hope in the resurrection, the glory to come, and most of all, in Jesus Christ, the ultimate source of rejoicing for weary moms.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:3–9).

Who would choose a plastic bag over the hope, joy, and salvation God offers? Whatever He might take away, we rejoice, knowing that what He has in store for us—now and eternally—is far better.

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10 Mistakes Churches Make *with Families with Special Needs*

Persons with disabilities are an indispensable part of the church and yet churches often make mistakes when ministering to families with special needs. Here are the ten most common mistakes I've come across in churches and some remedies to improve our care in this area.

WHAT MISTAKES DO CHURCHES MAKE WHEN IT COMES TO FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

Inaccessibility: It's difficult to access the main sanctuary or other facilities and services.

Inflexibility: There is resistance to adjusting service times and formats, as well as youth activities.

Impatience: There is frustration with inevitable service disruptions, but also a lack of empathy in staying with the family through difficult seasons.

Insensitivity: Comments, conversations, and decisions are made that unintentionally wound families with special needs (SN) or parents of children with special needs.

One-sidedness: Exclusive focus on how the church can minister to families with SN rather than also how they can minister to the church.

WHY DO CHURCHES MAKE THESE MISTAKES?

Lack of knowledge: They simply are not aware that what they are doing/not doing is having such an impact.

Lack of theology: There is an absence of a theology of disability, or a poorly developed one.

Lack of leadership: The leaders are not being good examples in this area.

Lack of vision: Failure to cast positive vision for serving children with special needs and their families

Lack of initiative: Waiting for problems/complaints to arrive is more common than seeking feedback and input.

Lack of money: Some of the accommodations and adjustments are expensive.

Lack of people: There are not enough of the right kind of people to offer some services.

Lack of love: There is pervasive self-centeredness that focuses on what the church is losing by welcoming families with SN in worship services and church activities.

Lack of communication: Discussions and decisions are often not communicated or explained.

Lack of specialization: Educational programs that take little account for kids with special needs.

WHAT CAN CHURCHES DO TO MAKE THINGS EASIER FOR FAMILIES WITH SN?

Knowledge: Ask for input from families with SN. Consult with other churches on what they have done.

Theology: Read Michael S. Beates's *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012).

Leadership: Leaders can model and exemplify attitude, words, and actions towards families with SN.

Vision: Cast care for families with SN as part of God's and church's mission. Also, promote the role of kids with SN and families in serving the church and others.

Initiative: Regularly survey families with SN to see if any problems have arisen, not just after problems arise. Ask them about their biggest challenges/needs

Money: Raise and allocate funds for a graduated program of building accessibility into the church and also paying for respite care.

People: Identify and train people to offer suitable care in the nursery, in "buddy" services, and for home respite. Remember non-SN kids in family.

Love: Teach people how to care for and include SN families. Address failures. Provide opportunities for date-nights and marriage-refreshing. Express affirmation and appreciation for the families.

Communication: Consider the consequences of decisions made with regard to families with SN; explain the "why?" behind the "what?" Also, promote people-first language: https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityand-health/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf

Tailored programs: Include one-on-one discipleship of kids with SN.

Think about what other mistakes you have seen churches make in this area, and how can churches better serve people with special needs.

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MATTHEW 18 PRINCIPLE

Someone said we should use the “Matthew 18 Principle.” What is this?

Suggested Reading: Matthew 18:15–35

The “Matthew 18 Principle” is a teaching of Jesus that instructs you how you should respond when another Christian says or does something that you believe is wrong against God, others, or yourself when this is only known by you or a few others. This principle is found in Matthew 18, which is how this principle gets its name.

The Matthew 18 principle teaches that you should not simply ignore the sin of a fellow Christian, but that you should try to encourage repentance and to seek resolution of the conflict the sinful words or actions evoked (1 Thess. 5:14–15; Rom. 15:14). You are to do this prayerfully, humbly, and privately; in other words, involving as few people as possible. The steps to take are outlined below. When proceeding, you need to be sure about the issue and not act on mere hearsay. You must act and speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). You must pray much and do all with a humble spirit. You must stay focused on doing the best for the person who sinned, for his repentance and Christian walk.

What steps am I to follow when using the Matthew 18 Principle? The following three:

1. *Speak with the person alone.* Pray and look for a fitting opportunity, for the right time and place. For example, this might be inviting the person out for “coffee” at a restaurant. In this way, the person knows ahead of time that you would like to speak to him about something. He is better prepared, as you did not spring your conversation as a surprise and the setting lends itself to conversation. Explain, humbly speaking the truth in love, what your understanding of the circumstances is and that your motive is to follow the Matthew 18 Principle. You want to speak privately with him to

seek his best. Ask if your understanding is correct. It may be that it is not. It is possible that your perceptions and understandings are mistaken or that you are not aware of the full truth. The matter might be easily cleared away simply by your better understanding. If your understanding is correct, the person may repent and decide not to speak or act in the sinful way anymore (Matt. 18:15). This would be wonderful and a clear answer to your prayer.

It may be, however, that the person does not repent and your speaking with him does not achieve the results you desired. The person states that he is going to continue in his own way and that this is none of your business. Then, with a humble spirit of genuine care, you should inform him and then proceed to step 2.

2. *Speak with one or two others.* Pray and choose a person(s) very carefully to assist you. Ask one or two other Christians who you know are confidential, wise, and one(s) who the person would respect. Arrange a meeting between the three or four of you. Choose a date, time, and location that would work for all. When meeting together, talk through the whole situation together and then ask the wise friend(s) for their advice. It is possible that the person involved will repent from his sin and change after meeting with the three of you. If not, inform him and then proceed to step #3.

3. *Speak with the church elders.* Pray and tell two or more of the person’s church elders (this could include his pastor as one of the elders) all that has happened and the results from the previous meetings. Then continue to pray and trust the matter in God’s hands, as you have followed the steps our Lord taught us in the Matthew 18 Principle.

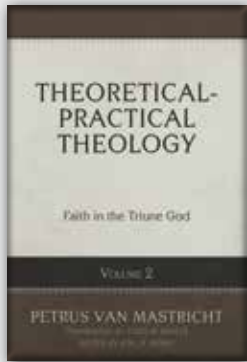
Why would it be wrong to simply ignore the sinful behavior of a Christian friend?

Why is a humble spirit so critical in the Matthew 18 Principle process?

Why is genuine love for the person and his welfare so important? Why is prayer essential in this process?



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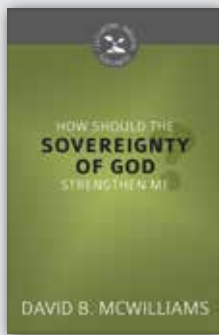
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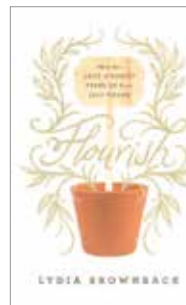
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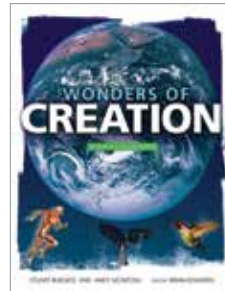


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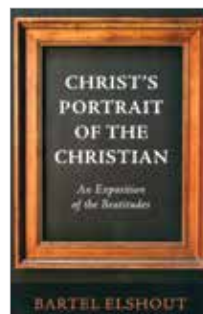


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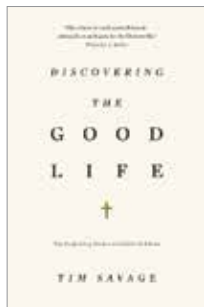
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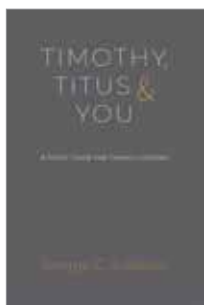


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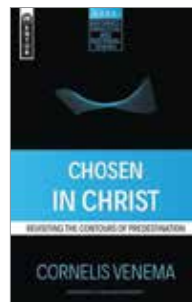
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SMALL BEGINNINGS (2): A Final Lesson

Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD (Psalm 150:6).

The sun was shining cheerily as Ella skipped down the sidewalk, a knapsack on her back and a potted hyacinth in her arms. With each bounce, the sweet perfume from the pink flower would waft up, and Ella couldn't stop the grin from spreading over her face. Today was Tuesday, it was 3:45 in the afternoon, and that meant she was on her way to piano lessons!

After talking to Mr. Balinski over two months ago at the old-age home, Ella's parents had been thrilled when he had insisted that he would love to give lessons to Ella, free of charge—no ands, ifs, or buts! Since then, Ella made a weekly jaunt to the old-age home, often with a small gift of baked goods. Today, however, was special. Mr. Balinski was turning 81 years old this week! Ella had made a card to give to the old man, along with the beautiful hyacinth flowers her mom had purchased.

The fifteen-minute walk flew by and Ella was soon pushing open the front doors of Sunrise Rest Home. A nurse greeted her as she entered. "Look who's here! Miss Sunshine herself! And what a gorgeous flower!"

Ella smiled shyly and then moved down the hallway. "103, 104, 105...and 106," she counted. She knocked gently and then pushed open Mr. Balinski's door.

"Come in," a somewhat slurred voice called out. Ella entered the small living area and plopped her knapsack onto

the ground beside the piano. Mr. Balinski then walked in with a cup of water sloshing in one hand and his cane in the other. His feet shuffled slowly along the carpet, and his shoulders were stooped down with old age. But Ella knew that beneath the wrinkles, slow speech, white hair, and trembling hands was the finest piano teacher a girl could ever have! Already after only eight lessons, Ella was learning that appearances could be deceiving. Take, for example, Mr. Balinski's slurred speech. Although he couldn't enunciate his words clearly, he never missed a note of her playing. He could accurately call out any note that she messed up, without even looking at the music!

Sitting down heavily in the chair next to the piano, Mr. Balinski thanked Ella for the flowers and her card and asked her to place them in the windowsill. "And now, how about you play *Happy Birthday* for me?"

Ella began to pick out the notes one at a time, but her teacher quickly stopped her. "Ella, this song can be used so many times a year! Every piano player should know how to play it, and play it well. Let me have a go." Ella quickly hopped off the piano bench and her teacher carefully slid on. Although she had had lessons for two months already, she had never heard Mr. Balinski play. And play he did! The notes filled the room as his long fingers confidently moved along the keys. After the last rousing chord was played, Mr. Balinski turned with a wink to Ella. "That's how it's done, my girl. And I shall teach you how to play it." With that, another piano lesson had begun.



An hour later, Ella walked home, her arms now empty but her backpack still filled with her music, as well as a new piece titled “Happy Birthday.” Her stomach was growling, and she couldn’t wait to get home to a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs with cheesy garlic bread. As soon as she entered the back door and kicked off her shoes, she rushed into the kitchen. “Mom, guess what Mr. Balinski told me?” Without waiting for an answer, she rushed on. “He told me that I’m from the line of Beethoven!”

“Who’s Beethoven?” her younger brother, Tim, questioned.

“You don’t know who Beethoven is?” Ella asked in disbelief. “He’s only a world famous composer! He lived a long, long time ago.”

“You’ll have to tell us more about it at supper, Ella,” her mom said. “Let’s all sit down now.”

Between mouthfuls of slippery noodles, Ella explained how Beethoven had piano students, and then they had piano students, and then those students had their own piano students, all in a long line. Well, Mr. Balinski was one of those students in the line, and of course she was his student, which made her a part of Beethoven’s line!

It all sounded rather complicated to Tim, who was focusing more on his garlic bread than on Ella’s excited chatter. But her dad smiled. “It sounds like you have a lot to live up to, Ella! And now I’ll be expecting you to practice your songs all the more!”

“Of course I will! I’ll have lessons for years and years and years, and then someday, I’ll maybe have my own students.” Ella didn’t mention her other secret dream of playing the piano in concert, even though it seemed possible now that she had lessons.

“Ella,” her dad said seriously. “Be careful of what your expectations are. It’s not wrong to dream of the future, but Mr. Balinski is now 81 years old. While he seems to be in good health, every year that he has is a blessing from God. We don’t know how long you’ll be able to have lessons... perhaps five more years, or it could be far less.”

“Don’t talk like that, Dad!” Ella protested. “Mr. Balinski is old but he’ll live for many more years!” Ella felt a fear surging up in her. She had prayed for piano lessons for years, and now God had answered her prayers! Would God snatch away her dreams?



Spring slowly changed to summer, and then to autumn, and then to winter. A year passed by, and then two years. As time went on, Ella’s piano playing continued to improve. She no longer stuck to Psalters that had few flats or sharps, but she could now play many more difficult ones. While she had struggled greatly with her classical piano exercises in the beginning, she was becoming quite a good sight reader.

Ella smiled as she walked down the sidewalk to her piano lessons. Today was Tuesday, it was 3:45 in the afternoon,

and she was on her way once more with a hyacinth in her arms. Mr. Balinski was turning 83 years old, and Ella was ready to play him a rousing version of “Happy Birthday.” Pushing her way through the doors of Sunrise Rest Home, she walked down the quiet hall toward room 106. Just as she reached the door, a nurse caught sight of her and rushed over.

“Ella, come with me. Mr. Balinski isn’t here today. He’s...” the nurse’s voice trailed off and her eyes flooded with tears. “He’s gone.” Ella numbly followed the nurse to a chair and sat down. She stared straight ahead with eyes unfocused as her mind whirled.

“Where did he go? He has to be here. I have this for him, for his birthday!” Ella lifted the fragrant hyacinth.

“I’m sorry, Ella. I wish we had a way to call you. Mr. Balinski passed away this morning, in his sleep. Let me call your parents and have them pick you up.” The nurse placed a warm hand on her shoulder, but Ella shrugged it off.

“No,” she cried. “I can go home by myself.” She got up quickly and ran for the front doors. Shoving them open, she started running down the sidewalk, hardly noticing the soil that was flying out of the hyacinth pot. Her breath came in gasps as she ran and ran. *Her beloved Mr. Balinski couldn’t be dead, gone forever. He was healthy as can be last week!*

When Ella reached her house, she sat breathing heavily on the back steps, unwilling to meet anyone. Her mom, however, had noticed her running up the driveway with hyacinth in hand, arriving at a much earlier time than usual. Sensing that something was wrong, she opened the back door and sat next to her daughter.

“What’s the matter, dear?” she gently questioned.

Ella flung herself into her mom’s arms and started weeping. Between her sobs, she told her mom what had happened. “And I never want another teacher, and I never want to play another note as long as I live! Mr. Balinski is gone forever, and my dreams are gone with him.”

Her mom rubbed Ella’s back and smiled sadly. “You said he was gone. Yes, he is. But where? We have a good hope that he’s now in heaven, praising God more beautifully than he ever could on earth. Would you deny him that? And would you stop praising God through your piano playing here on earth? I know this is so hard, but think some more about it.” Ella’s mom quietly went back into the house, and Ella was left alone.

Above her, a bird merrily sang and whistled. Ella glanced up wistfully. If the birds could sing praises so beautifully even though their life was so short, couldn’t she do the same? She smiled up toward the sky, even while a tear slipped down her cheek. With God’s help, she could.

Andrea Scholten is a school teacher, a writer for children, and a member of the HRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Adapted from *Open Windows*.



Obedient & Happy



I was in the back corner of the grocery store when I heard high-pitched crying. As I made my way to the check-out lane, the noise grew louder. I tried not to stare, but I couldn't help but see a girl, about four years old, lying on the floor, kicking and flailing her arms. She kept screaming, "I want that doll!" She shook with rage. Tears streamed out of her bulging eyes and down her red cheeks. Her mother finished her business quickly, picked up her daughter, and pushed the cart along. The girl kicked and hit her mother and kept crying and screaming. Mom did not give in. The girl did not get the doll. She was not happy at all.

Another time I was in the store waiting in line. A child ahead of me wanted some candy. Mom said, "No." The little boy looked very sad, put his head down, and shed a few tears. But a few minutes later, he snuggled up to her and he looked calm. He was happy.

What was the difference between these two children? Both wanted something badly. Both moms said, "No." The girl flew into a rage because she couldn't imagine life without that doll. She felt she deserved to have it. She was angry at her mom for not giving it to her. She didn't care if she obeyed her mother or not. She couldn't see her mother's love beyond her mother's "No." She wasn't aware of the commotion she made. And she thought her temper tantrum might gain her the toy in the end. But the boy knew that the chocolate was not going to be melting in his mouth any time soon, and although it made him very sad, he accepted it. Deep down, he knew he had to obey. So he moved on. He went to his mom for comfort because he knew she loved him, even though she hadn't given him what he wanted.

How do *you* react when you can't have something you want very badly? Do you get angry? Or do you obey? You know what you *should* do. But maybe you do what you *want* to do. Let's see what God thinks of this situation. And let's try to understand ourselves and how to think through our actions.

The Ten Commandments are our guide for life. God requires you to honor your mom and dad. This isn't always easy, but when God says it, we must do it. But listen, God

is so kind that He promises you long life and blessings when you honor your parents.

The tenth commandment says, "Thou shalt not covet." That simply means that we must not want what we don't have. God wants us to be content with what He provides for us. Now, if your dad said, "You can do extra work and earn money to pay for that toy," and you are motivated to earn it, that's fine, so long as you aren't desiring a sinful thing.

Proverbs says that when we control ourselves and our anger, we are better than a mighty soldier who takes a city (Prov. 16:32). But when we *don't* control ourselves, we are like a city that is broken down without walls (Prov. 25:28). The sooner we learn this, the happier we will be. Tell yourself, "My parents love me, so they're doing what's best for me. Anger will bring me more trouble. They aren't going to change their minds anyway. They'll give me toys and candy at another time. I feel yucky when I go against my parents. I'm happier when I obey."

Jesus set a wonderful example for us. As He grew up, He increased in favor with God and man. Jesus was obedient, so His family and friends respected Him and enjoyed being with Him. A good name is more valuable than having a lot of money or toys.

But we all sin. Even we adults struggle to control our own spirit. So how can we win? Only with God's help. When you have disobeyed your parents, or coveted, or lost your cool, confess your sin to your parents and to God. You need to clear the slate. God promises that "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Jesus Christ died on the cross to save sinners like you and me. Pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to truly repent of your sin, and to believe on Jesus Christ. Then you will love God the most of all and your neighbor as yourself. And you will have God's strength to obey your parents, to be content with what God gives you, and to control your emotions. And you will be happy.

Mary Beeke is a homemaker, wife of the editor, and member of the Grand Rapids Heritage Reformed Congregation.

BIBLE QUIZ for children

CHERYL DEWAAL

TIME

Have you ever noticed the mysterious thing about time? When you are on vacation or having fun with friends, it seems to fly by. When you are doing chores or something you don't enjoy as much, time seems to drag. And yet, every day contains the same amount of minutes and hours. The Bible has a lot to say about time. For instance, did you know that God's sense of time is totally different from ours? As you read these texts and complete the word search, I hope you will learn about God's perspective on time: He has numbered all of your days and has a plan for each one of them!

1. 2 Peter 3:8 tells us how God views time: "One day is with the Lord as a _____ years."
2. In Psalm 31:15, David recognizes God's control over time: "My times are in thy _____."
3. Daniel understood that it was God who changed "the times and the _____." (Daniel 2:21)
4. Wise Solomon observed that our orderly God has set a "time to every _____ under the heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3:1)
5. God has determined a time for His people to be saved: "Behold, now is the day of _____." (2 Corinthians 6:2)
6. God, in His perfect plan, has made a way of deliverance for sinners: "But when the _____ of time was come, God sent forth his Son..." (Galatians 4:4)
7. How are we to spend our time? Solomon reminds us to "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy _____." (Ecclesiastes 12:1)
8. Paul tells us in Colossians 4:5 to make every minute useful for God's kingdom: "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, _____ the time."
9. The shortness and uncertainty of life should "teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto _____." (Psalm 90:12)
10. God, in His great love for sinners, reminds us: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: _____ ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15)
11. God desires to have His people live with Him forever! "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have _____ life." (John 3:16)
12. In 2 Corinthians 4:18, Paul instructs us to focus on Christ and things that will last forever: "The things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are _____."

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ANSWERS TO LAST MONTH'S PUZZLE

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| 1. darkness | 7. sweet |
| 2. fire | 8. Gentiles |
| 3. shine | 9. glorify |
| 4. countenance | 10. armour |
| 5. garment | 11. fellowship, blood |
| 6. path | 12. lamb |

"I am the light of the world."





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Obituary notices, church events, and marriage and anniversary notices will be printed free of charge and under no obligation of a gift received. Other announcements and/or requests will be approved by the editorial committee on an individual basis as received.

CONGRATULATIONS

We wish to congratulate our dear brother and colleague, Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven, on sustaining his oral defense and graduating from Calvin Theological Seminary with his PhD degree. His dissertation examines several Reformers' views of Christology in a variety of psalms. May God bless his work for much practical use in his own life and preaching, and for those he pastors in the Grand Rapids HRC. Hearty congratulations!

OBITUARIES

SYSWERDA, Pauline Eunice, age 76, of Hudsonville, passed away on Monday, April 29, 2019. She was preceded in death by her brother, Dan Windemuller; sister-in-law, Alice Syswerda; brothers-in-law, Jim Teerman and Ken DeFeyter. She will be lovingly remembered by her husband of 44 years, Joseph; her children and grandchildren, Jeffery Syswerda (Logan), Eric and Vandy Syswerda (Alexis, Danielle, and Vanden), Brent Syswerda; sisters, Salome Teerman, Lynn DeFeyter; brother, David (Marcia) Windemuller; many nieces and nephews. (Dr. Joel R. Beeke, 1 Corinthians 15:19–20, 42–44, 58).

VERHEY, Linda B., age 56, left this world of suffering on Wednesday, May 8, 2019 and is now with her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. She is survived by her husband, David; her children, Rachel and Brett Smith, Brad and Lisa Verhey, Melissa and Andrew Euker, Daniel Verhey; grandchildren, Kaylin, Ethan, and Dillan Smith, Benjamin, Austin, and Savanna Verhey, Tyson, Andrew, and Jameson Euker; her mother, Ruth (Mort) Zylstra; father, Reynaldo Longoria; brother, David (Lisa) Longoria; sister, Reyna (Joe) Zimmer; brothers-in-law and sister-in-law, Mary (Dave) Bazen, John Verhey; many aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins. (Dr. Joel R. Beeke, 2 Corinthians 12:9–10; Rev. Mark Kelderman, Psalm 116:5).

NOORDUYN, Ruth (Deur), age 88, transitioned from this earthly life to her eternal home on Saturday, May 25, 2019. She was preceded in death by her first husband, Dr. Gordon Deur, and second husband, William Noorduyn. Surviving are her children: Cheryl and Dirk Schipper, Evonne and Doug Gritter, Del and Marilyn Deur, Lynn and Dick Westrate; her step-children: John Noorduyn, Frieda Koppelaar, Bill Noorduyn, Gilbert Noorduyn, Liz Whilton; sister, Edith (George) Van Strien; brother, Bill Vogel; 16 grandchildren; 43 great-grandchildren. (Rev. Don Overbeek, 2 Corinthians 5; Mr. Del Deur, John 11).

TEACHERS NEEDED

PROVIDENCE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL is accepting applications for a full-time Jr. or Sr. High School teaching position commencing August 12, 2019. We would favour applicants who are strong in the subject areas of Science, Math, and P.E. We also may have a possible teaching position in grade 5 or 6.

We are looking for enthusiastic teachers who have a passion for Christian Education. We encourage applications by qualified teachers who submit to God's Holy Word, subscribe to the Reformed confessions, and are committed to educating children and youth for formation of a distinct Christian worldview. Suitable candidates are encouraged to electronically submit a letter of application, a résumé containing three references, and a brief philosophy of Christian Education statement.

Providence Christian School is a growing Christian school in

Monarch, Alberta. It is situated in a beautiful, southern, rural community, minutes from Lethbridge. It has grades K-12 with over 150 students and with 12 staff members. PCS offers a four-day school week, attractive working and living conditions, a growing, committed school community, and a dedicated team of teachers.

For inquiries check out our website: pcsmonarch.com, or contact the principal, Mr. Hugo VanderHoek, principal@pcsmonarch.com, 403-381-4418.

OXFORD REFORMED CHRISTIAN SCHOOL is a vibrant, unified, parent-run Christian school that has been serving the educational needs of several local Reformed Church communities for the past 14 years. We have been blessed with a new facility located in Mount Elgin, a rural village just south west of Woodstock, Ontario. We offer a Kindergarten to Grade 12 Christ-centered education. For more information, see our website (www.orcschool.ca), visit our school, or simply talk to one of the families enrolled here.

Our enrolment is now over 350 students, and we anticipate an ongoing increase in our student enrolment so that we will be required to begin splitting our elementary grades into two classes. As well, the goal is to continue to expand the high-school program. Qualified, passionate, motivated **high-school teachers** and **elementary school teachers** committed to the Reformed faith and to Christian education, are encouraged to investigate our school and community. We are looking for additional staff to complement our present teaching team as we expand and prayerfully strive, with God's help and blessing, to achieve our Statement of Purpose: *to provide an academic education that glorifies God and is founded on biblical truths; requires the integration of those truths into all areas of life; encourages the development of the whole person; and nurtures students to be discerning and responsible citizens of the community.*

Applications must include a résumé, statement of faith, philosophy of Christian education, and references. Email applications to Mr. W. Van Brugge (principal@orcschool.ca).

We would also welcome a conversation with young people graduating from high-school, or who are in university/college, to encourage them to prayerfully consider the wonderful calling and career of a Christian school educator.

SPECIAL NEW ENGLAND TOUR ANNOUNCEMENT

Wonderful news! A generous PRTS donor has contributed \$25,000 to offset the price of the New England Fall Tour, October 15–23, with Dr. Beeke, Dr. Haykin, and Pastor Woollin. The next 25 individuals to sign up will receive \$1,000 off, bringing the price down to \$2,000 USD per person for this stunningly beautiful tour that will take in dozens of historic sites related to Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, the Puritans and Pilgrims, etc. To take advantage of this amazing offer visit wittetravel.com and use the booking code 101519BEEK when registering. To speak to a Witte travel agent call 1-800-469-4883.

NATIONAL NEWS

GEORGIA GOVERNOR SIGNS HEARTBEAT ABORTION BAN, JOINING A U.S. MOVEMENT

Georgia became the fourth U.S. state this year to outlaw abortion after a point in pregnancy where a doctor can detect a fetal heartbeat. Opponents called the legislation a virtual ban because fetal heartbeats can be detected as early as six weeks, before a woman may be aware she is pregnant.

"Our job is to do what is right, not what is easy," Georgia Governor Brian Kemp said as he signed the bill, surrounded by applauding supporters.

Kentucky, Mississippi, and Ohio have each enacted heartbeat laws since mid-March, and Iowa passed one last year. Courts have blocked the Iowa and Kentucky laws, and the others face legal challenges.

Between Georgia and Mississippi is Alabama, where the state's Governor has signed a bill that would ban all abortions unless the mother's life is threatened, raising the prospect of an extensive "abortion desert" in the Southeast. (*Daniel Trotta | Reuters*)

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

MASSIVE "SUPER STATION" RADIO SIGNAL CARRYING MESSAGE OF JESUS CHRIST TO BLANKET NORTH KOREA

Communist North Korea is about to receive a massive new radio signal carrying the gospel message of Jesus Christ, like never before.

"It's an AM station, 250,000 watts, which will clearly cover North Korea," said Ed Cannon, president of Far East Broadcasting Company, also known as FEBC.

Cannon says the radio signal will launch in a few months and will broadcast gospel programs produced from neighboring South Korea.

"The strategy of our organization is to use indigenous people in their native language to produce programming," Cannon said. "We have a large segment of South Korean people broadcasting and we also have a number of escapees, refugees from North Korea, who've come to our organization."

Cannon claims the signal will be "unblockable" by North Korea's regime and will "reach far past the northern boundary of North Korea covering the entire country with the message of Jesus Christ."

North Korea is the most dangerous country in the world for Christians. Cannon says anyone caught listening to FEBC programs faces severe consequences. (*CBN News*)

PERSECUTION FOCUS

80 PERCENT OF WORLD'S PERSECUTED ARE CHRISTIANS, NEW REPORT SAYS

An estimated 80 percent of all persecuted religious believers around the world are Christians, according to new British report that also says that the level of persecution in some areas "is arguably coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide."

The report was prepared by a panel headed by Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen, Bishop of Truro of the Church of England, and commissioned by British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

The worldwide persecution of Christians, the report says, is only worsening.

Christianity now faces the possibility of being wiped out in parts of the Middle East where its roots go back furthest. In Palestine, Christian numbers are below 1.5 percent; in Syria the Christian population has declined from 1.7 million in 2011 to below 450,000, and in Iraq, Christian numbers have slumped from 1.5 million before 2003 to below 120,000 today.

The report cited other studies that said:

- Christians were targeted in 144 countries in 2016, an increase from 125 in 2015.
- A total of 245 million Christians suffered "high levels of persecution" according to a 2019 report—an increase of 30 million from the previous year.
- 736 attacks on India's Christians were recorded in 2017, up from 348 in 2016.
- As many as 2,000 churches in China's Zhejiang province were targeted between 2014 and 2016. They were either completely destroyed or had their crosses removed by government officials.
- More Christians were killed in 2018 in Nigeria because of their religious faith than in any other country in the world. Nigeria accounted for 3,731 of 4,136 fatalities in that category. About 200,000 Nigerian Christians are at risk of being killed.

"Given the scale of persecution of Christians today, indications that it is getting worse and that its impact involves the decimation of some of the faith group's oldest and most enduring communities, the need for governments to give increasing priority and specific targeted support to this faith community is not only necessary but increasingly urgent," the report says. (*Michael Foust | Christian-Headlines.com*)



Christian MINISTRY to Israel

www.cmisrael.org

A MISSIONS ORGANIZATION
THAT IS SEEKING TO SPEAK TO
THE JEWS ABOUT THE MESSIAH
JESUS CHRIST

"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to
God for Israel is, that they might be saved"

Romans 10:1



Bread for the Hungry

The fourth sign that Jesus performs centers on human appetites, both physical and spiritual. John 6 records this amazing miracle where Jesus multiplies the five loaves and two fish to feed the five thousand. There is such rich abundance that there are twelve baskets of fragments left over. This alone is a spiritual picture of the abundant grace that is in Christ Jesus. He takes the emptiness of the human belly and fills it with good things. He also takes the emptiness of the human soul and fills it with His own superabounding and overflowing grace! This is a beautiful sign that points to the satisfaction that is in Jesus.

In performing this sign, Jesus addresses several human cravings and desires that will never be satisfied outside of Him. The first craving is simply the craving for physical blessings. Jesus rebukes those who seek Him only for those things that matter for this immediate life when He says, “Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled” (John 6:26–27). Jesus also addresses the human appetite for power to perform miracles like He did (v. 28). Furthermore, there is also the ever-present craving for more evidence. Who doesn’t want more evidence to believe in Jesus? But Jesus is clear that “this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent” (John 6:29). Even then, the crowds wanted more evidence. There is the desire to know who Jesus is and how He could claim to have come down from heaven and how He could give His flesh to eat. There are many who are puzzled at Jesus’s identity and want to know who and what He is to satisfy their craving for more knowledge, and so their pursuit of the truth becomes more of an intellectual pursuit than one of faith seeking understanding. Finally, there is the ever-present human craving for inclusiveness. Some in Jesus’s day balked at the thought that some would be left out of the kingdom because of unbelief, and they thought this was too hard a saying of Jesus to take (John 6:60). Do you see yourself mirrored in these cravings? These cravings are part of our sinful human nature and often mask the reality of the spiritual hunger that exists in every human being.

So Jesus corrects these misdirected cravings and desires by teaching the spiritual reality behind His fourth sign. He encourages the crowds and you to seek satisfaction, not in

the meat which perishes, but in the food that endures to everlasting life (John 6:27). This eternal Bread is none other than Jesus Himself who beckons empty and craving sinners to find their deepest need and desire fulfilled in Him alone. For those who crave power to do miracles and great things for Jesus, the greatest thing is this, “That ye believe on him [Jesus] whom he hath sent.” For those looking for more evidence, either in themselves or in some special work of God, let me paraphrase what Jesus says in verses 32–33: “My Father supplies bread from heaven. The sign that I just performed points to a deeper spiritual reality. Look to Me, for I am the Bread of Life which has come down from heaven.” What more evidence do you need? Perhaps you are confused at the identity and mission of Jesus or you have perplexing questions about your faith. Those questions are not wrong, but they should lead you to the satisfying answer that Jesus gives, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). He quenches the thirst for truth and knowledge by revealing Himself and arguing that He is spoken of in the prophets (John 6:45, 53). He is gracious and compassionate and satisfying.

He is the Bread for the hungry. By faith, He brings hungry and thirsty sinners into union with Himself as He says in John 6:53, “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” He satisfies the longing soul with Himself, not just once, but again and again: “He that cometh to me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.... For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” (John 6:35, 55). All those who hunger and thirst for Christ alone will not be turned away because, as He says in verse 37, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” This sign invites you to come to Christ with all your misguided thirst and hunger and be satisfied in Him! Finally, Jesus gives eternal satisfaction as the Bread of life. In verse 54, Jesus reminds you that if you are in Christ, you have eternal life in you. There is satisfaction in this life and for the eternal life to come in Jesus. Where will you be filled?

FROM OUR MAILBOX

BANNER OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH

FROM AN E-MAIL FRIEND:

Thank you so very deeply for the complimentary issue of *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* included with my order from Reformation Heritage Books: what a wonderful discovery! I find it so much more substantial than other publications. I especially appreciate the theme on reading for worldview, as I am a heavy reader myself, and I especially appreciate the breadth of topics covered, including death. But the first article to which I turned was an article on hospitality, admittedly with some skepticism, because my experience of dutiful “hospitality” in my church has struck me as forced and superficial. Mrs. VanderZwaag immediately won me over with her forthrightness and frankness, and her sentiments resonated deeply with me, as I am an avid reader myself.

Thank you so very deeply; I wish your nearest church weren’t 150 miles away. I am a former Roman Catholic for 49 years, and it has been very difficult for me to integrate into a church.

Thank you again so very deeply for your ministry, which sustains my inner life along with the Word and Holy Spirit of God.

REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS

FROM AN E-MAIL FRIEND:

Thank you so much for your kind and thoughtful (and helpful) response. I will take all of that to heart and have shared it with several families as well. I’m really trying to stress daily family worship in the local congregation. I came to faith about eight years ago in large part as a result of my six-year-old son asking me about who Jesus was. I committed myself to reading the Gospel of Matthew every day until I either accepted or rejected it completely, but in a very short period of time my own depravity became so clear to me that I became desperate for the mercy of God. It became clear to me one night, wrestling in the dark on my knees after reading Romans 7, that salvation must come from a living Christ who alone can save us from this body of sin and death. And then He gave me peace!

All that to say, in a sense my faith was born in feeling the weight of my responsibility for the soul of my son and my own lack of the true knowledge of God. I’ve since also learned how easy it is to be a hypocrite and speak of the great things of the gospel of Christ in the local church, and yet neglect the greater duty of my own home. It’s so much easier to speak to men, and there even seems to be more power given when addressing men, with much weakness in family worship, and yet somehow I sense that true godliness is cultivated in the faithful, diligent means of grace applied in the home, through much weakness.

Thank you so much for your faithful ministry. You are helping many people I know in their pursuit of true godliness. The Teellinck book is very helpful. à Brakel on the Sabbath has helped me convince my wife and teenage son that Sabbath-keeping is not legalistic. A friend of mine who doesn’t read anything is now reading *Puritan Theology*! I pray the Lord will gift the church with thousands more Reformed experiential preachers. There’s a huge resurgence of Reformed head knowledge, but it’s all worthless if it doesn’t lead to true godliness and experiential preaching in the Holy Spirit. May Christ pour out the Holy Spirit in much power on your ministry according to the richness of His grace on undeserving sinners!

FROM A PASTOR:

I was reading in *A Puritan Theology* under the heading “Practical Lessons from Puritan Theology Today” and it says,

“I have spent thousands of hours with Puritan writers in my life and sold tens of thousands of Puritan books over the spread of the last forty years. Why? This book has laboured to show the Puritans were richly biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical in their theology. They sought to apply the Word to every circle of life, from private devotions to the family, from the church to national citizenship and international concerns. In this chapter, we will round off our answer ‘why?’ by considering several specific practical lessons from the Puritans.”

When I finished reading this I was reminded of a quote by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

“We need the truth that was preached by the Puritans, but, preached in a manner that will show its relevance, its adaptability to the most urgent modern situation. We need the old truths in a modern suit.”

This quote, by God’s grace and mercy and love, is exactly what you are trying to accomplish. You are bringing old truths (sound, rich old truths) in a modern suit. We pray that our heavenly Father by His Son, Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit continues to give you the wisdom to remain faithful to do what you are doing and to endure your race, giving Him the glory in everything.

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PERIODICAL
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LORD, WHEN I ALL THINGS WOULD POSSESS

Lord, when I all things would possess,
I crave but to be Thine;
O lowly is the loftiness
Of these desires divine.

Each gift but helps my soul to learn
How boundless is Thy store;
I go from strength to strength, and yearn
For Thee, my Helper, more.

How can my soul divinely soar,
How keep the shining way,
And not more tremblingly adore,
And not more humbly pray?

The more I triumph in Thy gifts,
The more I wait on Thee;
The grace that mightily uplifts
Most sweetly humbleth me.

The heaven where I would stand complete
My lowly love shall see,
And stronger grows the yearning sweet,
O Holy One! for Thee.

—THOMAS H. GILL

the **Banner** of Sovereign Grace Truth

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE
HERITAGE REFORMED CONGREGATIONS

A PERIODICAL FOR FAMILIES