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	Title	Author	Synopsis
3	The True Treasure of the Church	Rev. Daniel R. Hyde	It is centered in Jesus Christ, it is revealed from God, it is promised by prophets and it is offered to you.
5	The Good Portion	Rev Steve Swets	Prayerfully consider Luke 10:38-42 and this article as an encouragement to serve others as you walk with the Lord.
9	Marks of a Healthy Reformed Church: Gospel-Shaped (2)	Rev. Michael J. Schout	To be a healthy church, we must be regularly and intentionally shaped by the gospel that both saves and sanctifies.
12	We're All Going to Die (3)	Rev. William Boekestein	With a biblical vision for the future and held tightly in the hand of God, these jarring words can also be words of hope.
17	Six Ways in Which Noah's Ark Is a Type of Christ	Rev. Brian G. Napjapfour	How Noah's ark points us to some of the truths about the person and work of Jesus.
19	The Promise in the Clouds: The Common Grace Covenant (5)	Rev. Michael G. Brown	Read how the Noahic covenant comforts us with the assurance that nothing can thwart God's plan, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
23	Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History? (8)	Rev. R. Andrew Compton	Divided monarchy, part 1, Israelite and Judean kings mentioned outside the Bible.
27	IRBC's Philosophy of Counseling (9)	Dr. Jeff L. Doll	God created man to work. This principle, as with the last one, primarily serves as the foundation for the <i>Secondary Dominant Domains</i> , particularly the <i>Production Domain</i> [™] .
29	Bible Studies on Nehemiah (1)	Dr. Norman De Jong	Lesson 1 - A Godly Governor in a Difficult Time - Nehemiah 1 Lesson 2 - Nehemiah, a Godly Man - Nehemiah 2
36	RYS Youth Convention	Mr. Tate Kiledjian	Report on the RYS Youth Convention that was held at Biola University, La Mirada, California.

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"Exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."
—Jude 3

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“The True Treasure

of the Church is the most
holy gospel of the glory and
the grace of God”

This was the sixty-second of Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses of 1517. Five hundred years later it is a thesis we still need to embrace for ourselves daily as believers and weekly as preachers and congregations. It’s still a thesis we must assert against all works-centric religion.

One of the places in Scripture where we see the gospel on display in such a powerful way is Romans. Luther said Romans was “the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.”¹

Romans was written by Paul, the savage persecutor turned bondservant of Christ Jesus, that is, one who “belonged to” Jesus Christ. Even before calling himself apostle, that is, one sent out by Christ himself as an ambassador, he calls himself servant (Rom. 1:1). How different is Paul from the pope, who gives lip service to being “servant of the servants of God” all the while claiming to be “the representative of Christ on earth”? How different is Paul from those charlatans today who run around calling themselves “apostle” or “bishop” or “prophet” with their bodyguards, with their entourage, with their designer suits—all the while pasturing themselves on their sheep? Paul was formerly a Pharisee, that is, one set apart from the Israelites as a cut above the rest in terms of external obedience to the law (Phil. 3:5–6), but later he was “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1). This gospel is the true treasure of the church for several reasons according to Paul in Romans 1.

It Is Centered in Jesus Christ

You may think Christianity is right-wing politics. But this is cultural Christianity. You may think the gospel is loving God; loving neighbor; doing unto others as you would have them do to you; feeding the homeless. But these are not the gospel—the good news of God to sinners. These are the fruits and results of the gospel. What is the gospel? And why is it the true treasure of the church? It is centered in Jesus Christ. The gospel that Paul was set apart for and that the prophets promised long ago is “concerning [God’s] Son” (Rom. 1:3). John Calvin therefore said, “The whole Gospel is contained in Christ.”²

As Christians we talk a lot about the gospel in such impersonal, third-person ways. “The gospel saves.” “It’s the gospel that sanctifies.” “He’s a gospel preacher.” But what do we mean by these statements? We get closer to the truth when we speak of the gospel as being the good news about Jesus Christ. But Paul says here that the gospel is Jesus Christ. As he says elsewhere, it is “him we proclaim” (Col. 1:28). “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him whom they have never

heard?” (Rom. 10:14). “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20).

Why is Jesus Christ the gospel? Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:3–4). Paul makes this interesting contrast between “flesh” and “Spirit” not between what is physical and immaterial or between Jesus’ humanity and divinity, but to speak of two phases of his life. As the eternal Son of God he came down and took to himself true humanity being “descended from” the ancient Jewish line of king “David according to the flesh.” This is what we call in theological terms his state of humiliation. But in his being raised “according to the Spirit of holiness he was declared to be the Son of God in power.” This is what we call his state of exaltation. That word declared is used for appointing. As the Son of God in human flesh he was appointed to an authority he did not have in his humiliation; he was appointed to the place of power as “the Son of God in power.” That’s his title now! In Philippians 2 we read of this humiliation and exaltation:

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him. (Phil. 2:6–9)

Why is Jesus the gospel and therefore the true treasure of the church? Because he’s done everything I cannot do to save me! He’s God; I’m not. He was a perfectly obedient man to God’s commands; I’m not. He died an unjust death that I might be justly acquitted by God; I’d hardly die for another. He rose again to newness of life; I couldn’t do that with all the money in the world. What is the gospel? Jesus!

It Is Revealed from God

But where did this gospel come from? I know if you watch History Channel or network news specials during the time of Christmas and Easter you’ve been fed a diet of Jesus Christ being a myth based on ancient religions. Others say a bunch of men gathered in ad 325 A.D. to condemn everyone but themselves and determine orthodoxy.

What does Paul say? He says the gospel is “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1). The gospel is the true treasure of the church because it is revealed from God. The gospel is God’s gospel. God is the author of the gospel. God is the origin of the gospel. God is the source of the gospel. Our gospel is not the religion of Paul but of God himself. And coming from him it is good news to us that he—a holy God—saves us—sinners. The gospel is God’s revelation of grace, not law; acceptance with God, not condemnation from God.

It Is Promised by Prophets

“But how can I know Paul was telling the truth? I mean, he says the gospel is from God, but why should I believe him?” What if I told you that you were the heir of an ancient kingdom in Africa? That would be a stupendous claim! But what if I then showed you your family tree, tracing you back and back, and then I showed you pictures and documents chronicling this kingdom and how it all led to you? The New Testament makes a stupendous claim about Jesus. But it doesn’t just make it up. He is traced back through ancient prophets who preached and wrote of a Savior to come. The gospel is the true treasure of the church because it is promised by prophets: “which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:2).

Jesus Christ is the most verifiable figure from the ancient world. The New Testament manuscripts are the most abundant and verifiable of the ancient world. But it goes farther back than that. Beginning at the beginning of the world, there have been promises and prophecies that all come to fruition in Jesus Christ. The Creator spoke to Adam and Eve of a son to come who would crush the serpent that led them into sin (Gen. 3:15). Enoch prophesied of the coming of the Lord with ten thousands of his holy ones (Jude 14). To Abraham the Lord spoke of blessing all the nations through his family line. To Israel the Lord made his promise of salvation tangible in the sacrifices of lambs—pointing to one final sacrifice of a perfect lamb; in the priesthood of men—pointing to one final high priest who was no mere man; in the tabernacle and temple that housed God in their midst—pointing to God’s becoming human and dwelling among us. To David the Lord made a promise of a son to sit on his throne forever. Through the prophets specific promises were made of where he would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), how we would be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14), how he would die by crucifixion (Ps. 22; Dan. 9), and the list goes on and on and on.

You might be thinking, “Jesus isn’t relevant to my life.” God has orchestrated the millennia of human history to bring his Son, Jesus Christ, to this world for exactly your problem: you are separated from God by your sins against God’s commands. There is nothing more relevant!

It Is Offered to You

This true treasure of the gospel that is centered in Jesus Christ, that is revealed by God himself, and that has been promised by prophets for thousands of years is offered to you. Paul says “that through Jesus we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:5–6).

The gospel Paul offered to the Romans is the gospel offered to you today in Jesus’ name. It does not matter where you are from. It does not matter the color of your skin. It does not matter how rich or poor you are. It does not matter what you have done or have not done. God speaks to you and says, “Trust in Jesus, and when you do I will regard you as obedient to me.” When you do this you will know the blessing of being loved by God (Rom. 1:7). When you do this you will know the blessing of being called to be a saint (Rom. 1:7). When you do this you will know the blessing of God’s grace in your life (Rom. 1:7). When you do this you will know the blessing of being at peace with God (Rom. 1:7). When you do this you will know this true treasure of the church.

1. Martin Luther, “Preface to Romans,” *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), xiii.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary*, 15. See also *Institutes* 2.9.2, where Calvin contrasts the general sense of “gospel” being “all the promises by which God reconciles men to himself” with the proper sense: “By the Gospel, I understand the clear manifestation of the mystery of Christ . . . Paul . . . claims for the Gospel the honourable distinction of being a new and extraordinary kind of embassy, by which God fulfilled what he had promised, these promises being realised in the person of the Son . . . he has in his flesh completed all the parts of our salvation.”

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The Good Portion

Rev. Steve Swets

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

–Luke 10:38–42, English Standard Version

There are women reading this who have likely studied this passage before. There have been books written on this passage, and most women find themselves having a character a bit more like Mary’s or a bit more like Martha’s. Prayerfully consider this passage as an encouragement to serve others as you walk with the Lord. This article focuses primarily upon women.

As we turn to this passage, we see Jesus traveling on his way to Jerusalem. As he is traveling he comes to a village where, verse 38 says, a woman named Martha opened her house to him. She had a sister named Mary. We know this family. These sisters also had a brother named Lazarus, and Jesus loved this family. Remember, when Lazarus later dies (John 11), Jesus weeps. The village is Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. What kind of family was this? We don’t know, but it was likely a wealthy family and the parents were likely dead. We do not read about them, and it is strange that this house would be called Martha’s. This house was likely big.

How many people were with Jesus? Well, the seventy-two had just returned from preaching and teaching and healing earlier in Luke 10 . . . they might all be with Jesus. There could be a hundred guests coming to the home of Mary and Martha. Martha, as the woman of the house in a day and age where hospitality was extremely important, would have been busy preparing a meal. Put yourself in Martha's sandals for a minute: you have dozens of guests coming over for a last-minute meal. What would your attitude be? If my wife and I invite someone over unexpectedly from church, we send the kids into the house to do a twenty-second clean-up sweep of the living room in one last rush before the guests arrive.

In the busyness of all of this preparation, Martha sees Mary sitting at Jesus' feet listening to what he said. Mary had taken the position of a disciple or a student, that is, the position at a teacher's feet. This clearly annoyed Martha, who had been busy, and so she brings her complaint to Jesus, calling him Lord. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

Let's pause a second. It is easy at this point to be condescending to Martha. C'mon, Martha, Jesus, the most important person to ever walk on the earth, is in your house, and you are too busy to listen to him? As I mentioned, hospitality was important. Poor hospitality reflected poorly upon a family. Think about hosting without running water and without indoor plumbing. Martha wasn't the strange one in the text. Mary was. It was not normal for a woman to take the place of a disciple. It also would have been expected that women would have prepared the food, especially with such honored guests. Martha must have thought Mary was being lazy or negligent. "Do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!"

Jesus before had commended diligent servants. Matthew 24:45–46 (English Standard Version) says, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes." Or think about the parable of the talents. Just before our passage we find the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of that parable focused on loving and serving your neighbor. That parable ends with Jesus saying in Luke 10:37b, "Go and do likewise." Now, in what Jesus is going to say, it is as if he is going to balance out that teaching. But in verses 41–42 Jesus reproves Martha. Why does Jesus reprove Martha? Let me tell you what it was not for. It was not because she was busy. Jesus also does not reprove Martha for her hospitality.

Rather, the problem with Martha was that she was anxious and troubled about many things. Martha was serving out of anxiety and worry, not grace. She was anxious and worried about many things, and when that happens, isn't it the case that we are worried and concerned about ourselves? Who are we serving? This anxiety can be subtle, and it can be a danger to each of us. Why is this subtle?

First, it is subtle because the root is selfish, but the fruit looks deceptively unselfish. Isn't this a problem with great philanthropy . . . if you give this much money we will put your name on this building. It isn't always the case, but self-glory is a real danger there.

A second reason this is subtle is because this is a desire for approval disguised as a desire to serve. What was Martha so worried about? How many trips to the well she would have to make to get water without Mary's help? Not at a base level; she was concerned about herself, and this is why Jesus reproves Martha.

A third reason this anxiety is subtle because it is my caring what you think of me, dressed up to look like my caring for you. And the danger is that we might not even notice, just like Martha. We don't know what happens after verse 42, but we do know in John 11, Martha seems to have understood Jesus' teaching, as she is the one who is quick to encounter Jesus. Nevertheless, we must pause and ask ourselves who it is that we are serving. Even when we serve others, there is a danger in serving ourselves.

But Mary has chosen the better way or the good portion, depending on what translation you use. In the original Greek, this word likely means the best. The best option. The only one thing that is needed is to sit at Jesus' feet. Mary was more enthralled with Jesus than she was with Mary. She cared more about what Jesus said than about what people thought.

Physical service and spiritual disciplines are often pitted against each other in discussions of this passage. Though they can be helpfully distinguished, we must not separate them, for there is much overlap. We must do both of these things. Both of those things are important.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it would not have been okay for the priest to see the man who was beaten up on the side of the road and say to the man, "Sorry, I would love to help you, but I am late for a prayer meeting. In fact, we will pray for you there." No, that is not service. That is not love. That is selfish. We must be diligent in both love and service. And yet, Jesus calls one better. The first and the great commandment is to love God with our whole being. Mary longed to listen to the words of Jesus, and Jesus said, "It will not be taken away from her." She will not be forced to stop listening. May the same be true of us. Once we find our place at the feet of Jesus, and once we recognize our security and

acceptance in him, we then will be freed to live unto his glory. The gospel leads to gratitude.

As we take a step back from this passage, let me say what this passage does not mean. This passage is not teaching that a life of contemplation is greater than a life of service. This has been the view of monks and nuns for centuries. This is not what this passage is teaching. This passage is also not teaching that there is a separation between loving neighbor or loving God. The one who loves God will be able to love her neighbor best, and the one who is loving her neighbor is at the same time loving God.

Let me give you some thoughts to take to heart by way of application.

1. Don't worry about the lesser things. Many things had Martha worried and upset. Oftentimes it is many little things that push us to exhaustion and burnout. Jesus says in the parable of the soils (Luke 8:14) that the thorny soil pictures the cares of the world which can choke out the word of God.

What are those things in your life? Certainly at times we have many competing allegiances and many things vying for our time and energy. Be wise, be stewardly, keep a calendar, but don't worry about tomorrow. Let tomorrow worry about itself.

2. Practice hospitality. Open your home to others. When you open your home, you are opening your life to others. This is genuine Christianity. The danger we face is individualism, or maybe family only-ism. Open your home and share it and yourself

with others.

Your house doesn't have to be spotless. People will not enjoy themselves more if your home is perfectly clean. Nobody has ever said, "What a boring time at the Smiths' today, but at least their house was clean."

When my wife and I went to our first church I served, we obviously didn't know anyone. In fact, we were there as an interim pastor. There was a family from the church who invited us over to their house that first Sunday. As we were going to walk in, the mother who invited us said, "Please excuse the boxes." Their whole house was packed up; they were moving that week to a new house. I don't remember what we ate, but I remember as I watched her kids play among moving boxes, how wonderful it was that they would have us over when their house was in disarray. We ate off of paper plates, and we loved it. It was refreshing to us.

Hospitality is a focus upon people. Though you might enjoy a meal

together, and good food and drink is a delight, the focus is on people. It is on building relationships and showing love. It is serving others as a Christian disciple. When you open your home, you open your family.

The more means you have, the more you can physically give to others. I say this because Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were wealthy. This get-together in Bethany would have been a large financial undertaking. Later, Mary would take extremely expensive perfume and wash Jesus' feet with her hair. But with little means, there is always an opportunity. God blesses service. I knew of a lovely widow who opened her home to college students. Some Sunday nights there might be thirty of them there for a meal. That was a financial hardship, but she told me once in a while someone would put some money in her church mailbox



anonymously, or she would find a hundred-dollar bill under her coffee pot. That was a beautiful picture of service, and God provided.

Hospitality and welcome are why many visitors end up joining churches. It isn't for the sermons first of all; it is for the people connection.

3. Slow down. There is a principle taught in this passage, lying under



“I know not the way God leads me, but well do I know my Guide”

Martin Luther

the surface of quiet learning. We are busy. Sometimes we need to say no. We need to evaluate how much time and focus we are committing to social obligations and how much focus we have upon God's Word. How much time are we spending at the ball field compared with how much time we are spending in family devotions? Then you have to ask yourself, Is it worth it to be so committed to extracurricular activities?

4. Godliness and Christian piety are a calling that we each have. We cannot go out and serve well if we don't do so after leaving the prayer closet and the feet of Jesus.

We have likely all been taught that we ought to engage the culture around us instead of fleeing from this world. We cannot hide away in a corner until Jesus returns, this is true. But we must engage culture based on a foundation of Jesus Christ and godliness in our life, and a continual growing sanctification in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. We will get our priorities messed up, just like Martha did. But Jesus' response to her was an act of love: "Martha, Martha . . ." It was tender shepherding and teaching. We need that too. Sometimes, we need a sermon to give us a little, gentle kick to the seat. How are your priorities? This is a conversation to have with your husband. Where you are in the trenches of raising children or considering how to spend your retirement? Everyone can find it easy to get their priorities messed up. When we do this, listen to the voice of the Lord from Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God."

6. See your role in the kingdom of God. There may be some women reading this who feel like they are

living day by day. Especially if you are a young mother or have little kids in the home to take up so much time and attention. You might see women who seem to have it all together. Maybe they have young children and a career and from the outside all looks perfect. Don't worry about them . . . they are not you. Remember your calling and place in the kingdom. Don't feel guilty about a dirty home or the fact your husband comes home and says, "Let's do something or have someone over," and all you feel like doing is going to sleep.

God has called you to the very place that you are. If you are a mother who is tired, then take the time you need. Be in prayer and the Word, but don't feel guilty about the little stuff in life. You are raising the next generation. It is an interesting study about how much influence mothers had upon the great leaders of the past.

7. Be comforted, sisters in the Lord. Jesus receives us in love and frees us from the anxiety of what others think. After this episode, Martha and Mary were dear friends of our Lord. The same is true for us by faith and repentance. We will not be accepted by everyone. How often do we have to remind ourselves that we cannot please everyone? However, there is one we must seek to please, and he is not an angry ruler who is unapproachable, but rather, he is a loving Father who has sent his Son to save us and to become the friend of sinners.

This article is adapted from a speech given at a women's conference.

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Introduction

In the previous installment, I introduced a new series of articles on the marks of a healthy church. Notice healthy. The Belgic Confession already defines the marks of a true church as the following: the pure preaching of the gospel, the faithful administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. Our churches can't be healthy if they're not true.

But my concern in these articles is not to distinguish the difference between true churches and false churches, or even true churches from less faithful churches. It is, particularly, to facilitate a conversation about what it looks like when our confessionally Reformed churches are healthy.

We all want to be healthy. The challenge is to define what healthy means. I think we can all agree that the Bible must be our measuring stick. But what does the Bible say? Does it speak about healthy churches, or are we left to navigate these waters ourselves? I believe it does tell us. We don't have to draft a vision statement based on the latest Barna poll or the pragmatic pressures of the day. The Word sets our agenda, and anything less misses the mark.



Yet there is no verse in your concordance that reads, “The marks of a healthy church are as follows . . .” So, where do we start?

I believe we must start with the gospel.

The vision statement I suggested last time, the one our church leaders have adopted, reads as follows: “Grace URC seeks to be a gospel-shaped community of biblical grounded, confessionally Reformed worshippers, disciples, and witnesses of Jesus Christ.”

Notice that gospel-shaped comes first. This is intentional. In what follows, I want to explain why the gospel is the first and primary mark of any church that is truly healthy in the biblical sense.

Gospel-Shaped Defined

The gospel has seen a resurgence lately across evangelicalism, at least in terms of terminology. Just check your local Christian bookstore and you’ll see an entire category of books that have “gospel” in the title: gospel centered, gospel driven, gospel shaped, gospel everything. And in this we should rejoice! There seems to be a growing awareness of the dangers of legalism and moralism, together with an understanding that the gospel must take center stage in all that we do.

However, like anything, especially when something becomes popular, the word can easily lose its meaning. Just because our vision statement says gospel-shaped doesn’t guarantee our church is shaped by the gospel. Moreover, the term gospel means different things to different people. Before we go any further, we should define our terms.

When we speak of the Gospel, we mean, as the word itself means, “good news.” Properly speaking, the gospel is an announcement of an event which we did not do but was done for us. The gospel is not the call to obedience, nor is it, strictly speaking, even the Word of God. The good news is the proclamation of the

life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Listen to how the apostle Paul defines it: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:1–4, English Standard Version).

J. Gresham Machen, in “The Christian Faith in the Modern World,” wrote: “What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?”

The gospel is an announcement we receive, not an exhortation we do. That is what makes it such good news. We can’t save ourselves, but thanks be to God that we are saved by faith in Christ!

And here’s where a danger looms. Our tendency is to think we’ve graduated from the gospel. It’s what got us in, but it doesn’t really help us grow or show gratitude. That part is up to us.

Yet as soon as we think the gospel is only for outsiders is the moment our self-righteousness can take over. Our worship services become solely about what we give to God and nothing about what God continues to do for us in Word and sacrament. Where the gospel is assumed, absent, or misunderstood, our churches can quickly become insular, joyless, and legalistic. We become interested only in what we are to do instead of what Christ has already done, which often leads to frustration, pride, and confusion.

But when the gospel is of “first importance,” our churches become hospitals for sinners, places of refuge for the weary, and beacons of hope for those who thirst for God. When the gospel is central, our worship becomes saturated by humble dependence. Our fellowship really becomes focused on what unites us instead of what makes us different. Our discipleship is fueled by God’s acceptance of us in Christ, which makes us want to know him more and obey his commands. And outreach becomes the natural result: we’ll want to share this good news in a world where bad news dominates the headlines.

So to summarize: the gospel is not something we do. We can’t live the gospel any more than we can be incarnated. The gospel is the good news that Jesus, God incarnate, lived a perfect life and died an atoning death so that by faith in him we might be made right with God. We live in light of the gospel, because of the gospel, and are called to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. But the gospel is the announcement we preach and the news we receive.

Gospel-Shaped in Practice

As we all know, theory and practice are two different things. It’s one thing to say we’re gospel-shaped. It’s another thing to be gospel-shaped. So, what would it look like for our churches to be centered upon the gospel of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection?

While I want to explore this answer further in future articles by looking specifically at the four coordinates (worship, fellowship, discipleship, and outreach), here I want to suggest two areas where being gospel-shaped helps us become healthier.

Hospitality

The first is hospitality. As we’ve been welcomed, so we welcome. “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7).

If we are honest, sometimes, and perhaps much more than we like to admit, our conservative Reformed churches aren't setting the standard for welcoming outsiders and visitors. We have our cliques, our comfort zones, and our cultural expectations. At times we act surprised and unprepared when strangers enter our doors, and often stand staring, hoping somebody who's good with people will break the awkward silence.

But when the gospel takes center stage, our natural response is to welcome gladly the stranger and outsider. This becomes normal. We look for them because we were one.

If you've ever been an outsider to a church, you probably know the feeling of wondering if anyone will welcome you. Here's the gospel: in Christ we have all been graciously and undeservedly welcomed by God! And not just put up with, but really welcomed. Invited. Treasured. God left heaven to pursue us, welcome us, save us, and protect us.

Where is that same gospel-shaped hospitality in our churches? What would the last month of visitors say about your church? Is it a place where the gospel shapes your welcoming practice, or just something we toss

around in theory? What about people from different ethnic backgrounds? How about poor people? What about people with special needs? What about with different political views? What about people struggling with same-sex attraction? What about sinners?

Preaching

The second area where being gospel-shaped makes a difference is in the week-by-week event of preaching and in the overall tone it fosters.

Preaching that focuses its attention almost exclusively on the law and our response tends to create an atmosphere that is more critical, self-righteous, and fake. Preaching that majors on the good news tends to build a community of joy, humility, and genuineness.

Admittedly, I'm painting in broad strokes here. I'm speaking in generalities. But preaching that understands that what we need most is not another list of do's and don'ts but the amazing news that Christ is all our righteousness will produce Spirit-filled Christians whose response to the gospel is wonder and awe and obedience.

This is not to suggest that we don't preach the law. As free followers of Christ, the law becomes our delight as we walk on its path. Yet there is

a difference from preaching that regularly centers upon our response and preaching that consistently centers upon Christ and his work for us and in us.

We need the gospel every Sunday in the preaching of God's Word. The gospel is where the power is. May our preachers and our churches be committed to the weekly exposition of the Scriptures as they center upon Christ and him crucified. "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Col. 1:28-29).

Conclusion

To be a healthy church, we must be regularly and intentionally shaped by the gospel that both saves and sanctifies. We could be booming with programs, bustling with numbers, and building new buildings; but churches without the gospel, even when it says Reformed on the sign, are unhealthy indeed.

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TEACHING VACANCY – NEW ZEALAND

The Reformed Christian School Association in Upper Hutt, New Zealand, is seeking a teacher to teach at our Composite Christian School. We are a small school and teach Year 1 through to year 12. Our aim is to develop a biblically consistent world and life view in our students based on the Reformed faith. Applicants should be committed to the Reformed faith and to Christian education. This is an exciting opportunity to be part of a small covenant school, and we look forward to your

application. If you have any questions or would like more information please do not hesitate to contact us. Short-term contracts will be considered. Please forward your C.V. or any questions you may have to: board@silverstreamchristian.school.nz.

*"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."
—Proverbs 1:7*



The seventeenth-century Puritans and their more contemporary heirs commonly wrote about “the four last things”: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Earlier audiences were rightly concerned about their future and wanted to learn about their looming eternity. Today, all of these topics have largely fallen out of favor, eclipsed by subjects that focus more explicitly on the here and now.

But despite our aversion to talking or thinking about death and what follows, we continue to die.

Isaac Watts’s paraphrase of Psalm 90 puts it well: “The busy tribes of flesh and blood, with all their lives and cares, are carried downward by [God’s] flood, and lost in foll’wing years. Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day.”¹ And, as always, for all of us, after death come judgement (Heb. 9:27) and an eternity in heaven or hell. Nothing is more certain, unless Christ returns first: Everyone who has ever lived will die. Surely this is not a topic that we should avoid.

With the subject of death we begin to study individual eschatology, or the study of the end of all people prior to the end of all things. We need a realistic, hopeful, and biblical perspective on death and how to process our own end and the deaths of those around us.

The Idea of Death

From mere observation, we know that ordinary life ceases at death. But to understand death beyond what we can see we need to listen to know what God says about it.

Death is the antithesis of life, the foil of the beautiful portrait painted Genesis 2:7. In death God draws back to himself and keeps safe until the final judgment the spirits which had animated our material frame, while our physical bodies decay and return to the elements from which they were formed (Eccl. 3:18–21; 12:6–7). Louis Berkhof puts it succinctly: “Physical death is a termination of physical life by the separation of body and soul.”² And yet, Scripture insists that “Death is not a cessation of existence, but a severance of the natural relations of life.”³

Death is contrary to nature.

And yet, like the stunted perspective of a person who has never traveled beyond the limits of his blighted, boarded-up city, death and decay seem normal to us. Everything we observe breaks down over time. It is easy to assume, as many people do today, that death has always been built into life, a sort of planned obsolescence to promote progress in the human race.

But the Bible insists that human death is a curse. God warned the first humans that they would forfeit life if they disobeyed his holy will (Gen. 2:17). When Adam violated

God’s command against eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he tested God’s integrity and found it intact. He and all who were connected to him by covenant headship,⁴ that is, his wife and his natural seed, began to die. To use James’s language, Adam’s desire conceived and gave birth to sin which always results in death (James 1:15). Paul sums it up thus: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12, New American Standard Bible; cf. Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:22). Death is not natural but “foreign and hostile to human life; it is an expression of divine anger (Ps. 90:7, 11), a judgment (Rom. 1:32), a condemnation (Rom. 5:16), and a curse (Gal. 3:13), and fills the hearts of the children of men with dread and fear, just because it is felt to be something unnatural.”⁵

Sin’s curse brings not just physical death but also moral death—death to the blessings of God—and, if uncured, eternal death. Where the curse reigns humans are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). This grim reality helps us treasure the promise of the gospel; all who live by faith in the Son of God are redeemed from the curse of the law; Christ has become a curse for them (Gal. 3:10–13). Understanding the cause of death is vitally important. If death is natural then we have to accept it. But if death is caused by sin, then if sin is defeated death can be reversed. As Jesus told Martha, while both of them grieved the



death of their brother and friend Lazarus, it is possible to taste death and not die in an absolute sense (John 11:23–27).

Preparing for Death

For each of us, death is both imminent and unpredictable. Every week the local paper contains obituaries of both old and young people. Some expected to die; others were blindsided. No one can cheat death. But we can prepare for death so that our deaths will not be eternal punishment for our sin, “but only a dying to sin and an entering into eternal life (John 5:24; Phil. 1:23; Rom. 7:24–25).”⁶ Do we?

In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, young Jane was asked if she knew where bad children went when they died.

‘They go to hell’ was my ready and orthodox answer.

‘And what is hell? Can you tell me that?’

‘A pit full of fire.’

‘And should you like to fall into that pit and to be burning there forever?’

‘No sir.’

‘What must you do to avoid it?’

I deliberated a moment. My answer when it did come was objectionable. ‘I must keep in good health and not die.’

How many people are like Jane, trying to prevent death rather than prepare for the life to come with true godliness (cf. 1 Tim. 4:8)?

Prepare for Death by Entrusting Yourself to Christ

No one is ready to die who is not entrusting their eternity to the eternal Son of God. The only way to die well is to have your life “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3) so that Christ’s life, death, and resurrection become yours. Christ died to answer the just and true God’s demand for the satisfaction of our sins (Heb. 2:9; Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 40). He was raised to “overcome death . . . make us partakers of the righteousness which He has obtained for us by his death,” raise us up to a new life, and offer a “sure pledge of our blessed resurrection.”⁷ God graciously offers us the eternal life we forfeited by our union with Adam (original sin) and by our actual transgressions.⁸ We can receive God’s gift “and make it [our] own in no other way than by faith only (1 John 5:10).”⁹

Prepare for Death by Bearing Fruit

Too many people enter old age woefully financially unprepared. And this, despite the urging of economists—armed with striking compound-interest graphs—to start investing for the golden years early. Similarly, too few people value Jesus’ admonition to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20, English Standard Version). John Piper reflects on Jesus’ words:

Evidently there are two ways to live: you can live with a view to accumulating valuable things on earth, or you can live with a view to accumulating valuable things in heaven. Jesus says: the mark of a Christian is that his eyes are on heaven and he measures all his behavior by what effect it will have on heaven—everlasting joy with God.¹⁰

Those who commit to investing in eternity, by beginning early, working hard, and finishing well, by God’s grace store up treasure in heaven.

Prepare for Death by Meditating on Death¹¹

Macabre meditation can be unhealthy. But it doesn't have to be. As evidence, and as a pattern for our reflection, the Scriptures frequently speak of death. The words "death," "dead," and "die" occur more often than "life," "alive," and "live" more than one thousand times. God still laments over his people's lack of thought on ultimate things: "If they were wise, they would understand this; they would discern their latter end!" (Deut. 32:29, English Standard Version). Moses understood and asked God to "teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12, English Standard Version). Other psalms propose out-of-style-but-essential language for preparing to meet God.

Make me, O Lord, to know my end,
Teach me the measure of my days,
That I may know how frail I am
And turn from pride and sinful ways.¹²

Likewise, Christian hymns teach us to find in Christ's presence hope for life and death.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes,
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heav'n's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.¹³

They help us to trust God to shepherd us even though he leads us to death.

And when my task on earth is done,
When by thy grace, the vict'ry's won,

E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,

Since God through Jordan leadeth me.¹⁴

They help us process the inevitable: One day we will all long to be reclothed with immortality.

When in dust and ashes to the grave I sink,
When heav'n's glory flashes o'er the shelving brink,
On thy truth relying through that mortal strife,
Lord, receive me, dying, to eternal life.¹⁵

Modern reluctance to think, talk, and sing about death could signify a superstitious attitude about, or an unpreparedness for, and a fear of death.¹⁶ Christians, for whom Christ has sanctified the grave, should not be overwhelmed by fear of death.

But we most certainly should grieve death.

Grieving Death

Believers lament death because it testifies to the treason of Satan and the fallenness of man. More concretely we grieve because a very real part of the deceased's life is over. We miss them. We are saddened over the destruction of their "earthly house, this tent," their body (2 Cor. 5:1). The current habit of referring to funerals as "celebrations of life," while well-intentioned and partly appropriate, threatens to underestimate the tragedy of death. Our celebrations of the life of departed loved ones should never paint over the genuine distress (2 Sam. 1:26) we feel over the departure of our friends. Jesus wept (John 11:35). These two words contain a world of wonder: God cried. Indeed, "he groaned in spirit and was troubled" (v. 33). In full understanding that Lazarus was not lost, Jesus grieved over the treachery of the curse and in protest over the stinking corpse of a man who had previously been

strong, beautiful, and good; the image of God. Believers must feel the freedom to cry, trusting that God puts our tears into his bottle and records them in his book (Ps. 56:8).

At the same time, believers must resist grieving inordinately, sorrowing as others who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Extreme efforts to remember departed loved ones and retain their memory can unintentionally conflict with God's plan for our healing. Perhaps this is why God told his people, "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:28, New King James Version). Not only is the practice heathen in origin, but also it tends to extend artificially the grieving process and falsely suggest that self-imposed pain is redemptive.

By contrast, David engaged grief in a way that respected God's gift of healing, even after he was dealt the crushing blow of the death of a child. Though filled with sadness, "David arose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house; and when he requested, they set food before him, and he ate" (2 Sam. 12:20, New King James Version). David understood that he could not bring back his son from the dead and should make no attempt to do so, not even a symbolic attempt. He measured his grief against God's promise to be a God to him and his son (Gen. 17:7). He gained perspective, insisting that he would one day see his son on the day of resurrection (2 Sam. 12:23). Believers grieve for other believers against the backdrop of hope.

But how do we grieve for departed unbelievers? In these moments of seemingly unredeemable tragedy we need to reserve judgment

to God. We should be careful of declaring the eternal fate of the dead either by condemning them to hell or by marshaling false comfort of their salvation. When faced with terrible questions about God's judgment against sinners we should content ourselves with the posture of Abraham: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25, New King James Version).

Honoring the Dead

Part of the typical grieving process involves a funeral or memorial service. How should we use funerals to help cultivate an end-times spirituality?

If Possible, Attend the Funeral

Death should take priority over almost everything else in our schedule. This may mean taking a day off work or rearranging an important appointment even for a funeral of someone you have never met, if you have a relationship with the bereaved. The funeral is not, after all, for the deceased but for the living, including yourself. There is often no medicine for the soul like a gospel-infused memorial service if we follow John Donne's advice. "By this consideration of another's danger I take mine own into contemplation, and so secure myself, by making recourse to my God, who is our only security."¹⁷

Don't Say Too Much

In an increasingly secular world funerals represent rapidly shrinking sacred ground. Fewer settings better remind us that "God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few" (Eccl. 5:2, New King James Version). Silence is a modern taboo. But in the valley of the shadow of death it can be a healing balm. When Job's friends heard of the adversity that had befallen him, including the death of his children, "each one came from

his own place . . . sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great" (Job 2:11, 13, New King James Version). But they grew impatient of silence. Their mouths began to pour out counsel, prompting Job to answer, "I have heard many such things; miserable counselors are you all! Shall words of wind have an end?" If we are anxious about what to say to the bereaved we should remember, "I'm so sorry for your loss" will usually suffice. Those in the clutches of grief are not looking for logic but comfort. At all costs, avoid trite phrases like, "This will work out for your good," or, "Isn't God great!"

Insist on God-Centered Funerals

Very often, bereaved families are able to influence heavily the memorial service of their loved one.¹⁸ This means that family members can and should give careful thought to how the funeral will best honor God. A basic guideline is to not make the deceased the focal point. Over a century ago, Abraham Kuyper observed, "Sometimes in so offensive a way you hear addresses at the grave, when he, whose breath was in his nostrils, and now died, is exalted as in a halo of glory, and every remembrance of the name of the Lord remains wanting."¹⁹ Where this is not already understood, families should ask of the funeral officiant that "a brief homily should be given after the gospel, but without any kind of funeral eulogy."²⁰ Funerals should be both biblical and personal. But eulogies tend to crowd out the preaching time, provide ample opportunity to communicate bad theology, and exaggerate the deceased's good qualities minimizing their need for God's grace. Might it not be best, if a eulogy seems necessary, to leave it for the fellowship time following

the funeral, not unlike what often happens at weddings? If a eulogy must be given it should be brief, true, simple, and God-centered.

Honor the Body

The witness of Scripture is unambiguous: Human bodies are made by God, bear his image, can be indwelt and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and should, therefore, be treated with respect after death. The burials of Sarah (Gen. 23:19), Abraham (Gen. 2:25), Isaac (Gen. 35:29), Jacob (Gen. 50:13), Lazarus (John 11), and Jesus (John 19:38–42) illustrate how God's people have always cared for the bodies of the departed. The Bible's few examples of cremation (e.g., Josh. 7:25; 1 Sam. 31:12; 1 Kings 13:1–3; Amos 2:1) call to mind God's displeasure toward the deceased. Following the tradition of the Old Testament believers, Christians from the time of the apostles until the late twentieth century almost uniformly buried their dead. The first cremation in America didn't happen until 1876. It was "accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin and the Hindu Scriptures."²¹ No Christian should doubt that God is able to resurrect one's body whether they were buried or cremated. But, despite social and financial pressure to favor cremation, a Christian burial seems to best reflect a robust hope in a bodily resurrection. With planning and creativity, a God-honoring funeral can cost much less than the North American average of \$7,000 to \$10,000.

How we face death should be understood as the premier test of our life. After all, "when a person dies, we can see much more clearly who they really turned out to be, which is eternally significant . . . when a season of life ends, we see, at least to some degree, the true fruit of all our dreaming, planning, labor and investment."²² What

Isaiah said to Hezekiah, God says to all of us: “Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live” (Isa. 38:1, New King James Version). If we have a biblical vision for the future and are held tightly in the hand of God, these jarring words can also be words of hope.

Questions

Are you, and those close to you, comfortable talking about death? If not, why not?

How does the ministry of Christ affect your view of death?

Can you remember a time that you grew in godliness by attending a funeral?

How would you advise those wrestling over whether to take their young children with them to a funeral?

How, in John 11:32–44, does Jesus model appropriate grief over death?

How do his words and actions (see also vv. 20–27) encourage hope in the shadow of death?

How has God healed you after the hurtful loss of a loved one?

How can a Christian rightly wrestle with the cremation option?

The article cautioned against the use of funeral eulogies. If given the appropriate context to comment on the life of a loved one, what kind of themes might you want to emphasize?

1. *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA.: Great Commission Publication, Inc., 1990), song 30.

2. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 668.

3. *Ibid.*

4. On covenant headship and original sin see, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 2.1; John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: P&R, 1959); Michael Grant Brown and Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 2012).

5. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 669.

6. Heidelberg Catechism, answer 42, in *The Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation: Volume 2, 1552–1566*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 779.

7. Heidelberg Catechism, answer 45, in *Reformed Confessions*, 2:779.

8. See Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q/A 18, in *Reformed Confessions*, 4:355.

9. Heidelberg Catechism, answer 61, in *Reformed Confessions*, 2:783.

10. John Piper, “Don’t Be Anxious, Lay Up Treasure in Heaven, Part 1,” March 2, 2003, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/dont-be-anxious-lay-up-treasure-in-heaven-part-1>.

11. See, for example, Abraham Kuyper, *In the Shadow of Death: Meditations for the Sick-Room and at the Death-Bed* (Audubon, NJ.: Old Paths Publications, 1994), and John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Death's Duel* (New York: Random House, 1999).

12. Metrical version of Psalm 39 from *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), number 104.

13. *Trinity Hymnal*, song 402.

14. *Trinity Hymnal*, song 600.

15. *Trinity Hymnal*, song 568.

16. Pastoral experience indicates that even in the church, God’s people seldom feel the freedom to say with Jacob (Gen. 48:21) or Joseph (50:24), “I am dying.” One can’t help but notice how our reluctance robs us of the beautifully frank conversations our forebears had with their loved ones on the brink of death.

17. Donne, *Devotions*, 103–4.

18. The position of the United Reformed Churches in North America is helpful advice: “A Christian funeral is neither a service of corporate worship nor subject

to ecclesiastical government, but is a family matter, and should be conducted accordingly.” Article 49 of the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America, 7th ed., http://www.urchna.org/1651/file_retrieve/23868.

19. Kuyper, *In the Shadow of Death*, 299.

20. From *Ordo Exsequiarum*, no. 41, cited in John Allyn Melloh, “Homily or Eulogy? The Dilemma of Funeral Preaching,” *Worship* 67 (November 1993), 502.

21. Timothy George, “Cremation Confusion: Is it Unscriptural for a Christian to Be Cremated?,” *Christianity Today* 21 (May 2002), 66.

22. John Bloom, “Lord, Prepare Me to End Well,” February 28, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lord-prepare-me-to-end-well>.

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Ways in Which Noah's Ark Is a Type of Christ

Noah's ark is a type of Christ. It points us to some of the truths about the person and work of Jesus. How then is Noah's ark a type of Christ?

1 Just as the ark was graciously provided by God for sinners, so is salvation in Christ graciously provided by God for sinners (Gen. 6:13–14).

Noah by nature deserved to be destroyed because of his sin against God. "But Noah found favor [or grace] in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen. 6:8, English Standard Version). God graciously provided him and his family the ark—a means through which they could escape from the flood of God's judgment against sin. Likewise, in our natural condition, we deserve to perish in hell; but God graciously provides us a savior in the person of his Son through whom we can escape from the fire of God's wrath in hell. Noah and his family did not deserve the ark. We do not deserve Christ. We do not deserve heaven; we deserve hell. But God gives us the exact opposite of what we deserve. Amazing grace!

2 Just as the ark was planned by God, so is salvation in Christ planned by God (Gen. 6:14–15).

Noah did not design the ark. God did. Noah did not plan for his deliverance. God did. In the same manner, God is the one who plans for our deliverance from the power and penalty of sin. God gives us his Son, so that through faith in him we might be saved from sin. And God has planned this provision of salvation before the creation of the universe (Eph. 1:4). Imagine this: If you are a believer in Christ, God was already planning for your salvation

even before you were born. He was already thinking of you, before you were even able to think of him. You think of him because he first thought of you.

3 Just as the ark was a place of safety, so is Christ a place of safety (Gen. 6:17).

The ark was a place of safety for Noah and his family. It sheltered them from the flood of God's judgment. Similarly, Jesus is our shelter against the storm of God's wrath. Those who are in Christ are protected, but those who are outside Christ are perishing. Indeed, those who are in Christ are saved forever. Those of you, however, who are struggling with assurance of salvation may say, "I believe in Jesus, but I don't feel like I am saved." Let me respond to you with this story that I read:

A man once came to D. L. Moody and said he was worried because he didn't feel saved. Moody asked, "Was Noah safe in the ark?" "Certainly he was," the man replied. "Well, what made him safe, his feeling or the ark?" The inquirer got the point. "How foolish I've been!" he said. "It is not my feeling; it is Christ who saves!"

4 Just as Noah and his family must come into the ark for their safety, so must we come to Christ for our salvation (Gen. 6:18).

God says to Noah, "You shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you" (Gen. 6:18). How shall they come into the ark?

First, they shall come into the ark in response to God's command. In Genesis 7:1, God commands Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household." To deliver them from the flood is God's work, but to enter the ark is their responsibility. If Noah and his family don't come into the ark, they will perish. Jesus also commands us to come to him: "Come to me . . . and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). To give you rest is Christ's work, but to come to him is your responsibility. You must come to Jesus by faith, or else your soul will forever be restless!

Second, they shall come by faith in God's promise. God's promise is twofold: to destroy those who don't believe in him and to deliver those who believe in him. Noah and his family believed God's promise, and so they entered the ark (Heb. 11:7). In the gospel, Jesus promises never to cast out those who come to him (John 6:37). He promises to save those who believe in him. Do you believe his promise?

Third, they shall come into the ark individually. Noah must enter the ark and so must his family. Noah cannot come on their behalf. They must come by themselves. In the context of salvation, no one can come to Christ on your behalf. You

yourself must come to Jesus by faith. Salvation is personal.

5 Just as the call to come into the ark was a limited-time offer, so is God's call to come to his Son a limited-time offer (Gen. 7:16).

The door of the ark did not stay open all the time. God shut it in his appointed time. God shut the door for the protection of those inside and as a punishment for those outside.

Once the door has been shut, there is no more opportunity for people to come into the ark and be rescued from the flood of God's punishment. Imagine those who were outside the ark when the flood came! "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near" (Isa. 55:6). Remember, the offer of the gospel is a limited-time offer. If you are still an unbeliever, I urge you to come to Jesus now for your salvation, while he may be found. Knock, while the door of heaven may be opened for you. Once the door is shut, there is no more hope for you. Oh, dear unbeliever, when will you repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?

6 Just as the coming of the flood was unexpected, so is the second coming of Christ unexpected.

The flood came down suddenly upon the ungodly in Noah's day. Although they were informed and warned, they did not know the exact time of the coming of the flood.

Jesus proclaims, "For as were the days of Noah, so will be the

coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:37–39).

Jesus will come again, and he will come unexpectedly. Do you prepare for his return? Are you prepared to meet him?

Concluding Thoughts

At Calvary, God poured his wrath upon his only begotten Son. The flood of God's wrath came upon his Son. God the Father shut the door of heaven, as it were, and Jesus was locked out. This inexpressible feeling of being shut out caused Jesus to cry out loudly, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Imagine the cries of the people who were locked out in Noah's days. But here's the gospel: at Calvary, God locked his Son out, so that he could open the door of heaven for sinners who will believe in his Son. Through faith in Christ, sinners can now enter into the joy of heaven (Matt. 25:21). Do you believe in Jesus Christ? "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36).

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“I’ve got so much work to do today, I’d better spend two hours in prayer instead of one.”

Martin Luther

The Promise in the Clouds: The Common Grace Covenant

Rev. Michael G.
Brown

It seems that every year another film is released that portrays the end of the world and a dramatic fight for the survival of the human race. Whether the disaster is a nuclear holocaust, alien invasion, or environmental abuse, the apocalyptic tones are usually the same. Each movie features some sort of Noah figure who survives to give the human race a new beginning. No matter how far-fetched the movies get, their presence and popularity seem to reflect humanity's sense of guilt and fear that the world will one day crumble in destruction. There is a common sentiment that this world cannot continue the way it is; humanity needs a fresh start.

The Bible, however, does not leave us in doubt about these things. First of all, our Lord Jesus has promised to purge the earth of all evil at his second coming. He will usher in the new heavens and new earth, where his people will dwell with him forever in glory. Second, God has also promised that there would be no more Noah figures. The Lord of heaven and earth will not destroy the world again by water, requiring another Noah. No matter what storms may come, God's promise stands. His rainbow still shines after the rain, because of his covenant with Noah and all the earth.

In order to understand the Noahic covenant, it is necessary to define common grace. *Common grace is God's undeserved kindness to all people, no matter what their spiritual status.* We label this grace of God as "common" only in the sense of its contrast to his redemptive and saving grace. God's redemptive grace in Christ is not common to all people. Rather, this grace is reserved only for God's elect, bestowing on them

all the blessings earned by Christ: regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification (Rom. 8:28–30). The blessings of common grace, however, are common to both regenerate and unregenerate, both the church and the world. These common blessings include things like sunshine, rain, food, and possessions (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17), wisdom or skill in crafts, trades, and learning (Dan. 1:4–5; 1 Kings 5:6; Prov. 30:1; 31:1), family, and friends. No one deserves these blessings. They are common graces from God.

The Noahic covenant, therefore, can be defined as God's covenant of common grace with the earth to sustain its order despite mankind's depravity until the consummation, which is consistent with the pre-flood order.

What Does the Bible Teach?

Genesis 8:20–9:17. The flood account ends in Genesis 8:15–19 with God commanding Noah and all the animals to leave the ark and fill the earth. Verses 20–22 form a bridge between the flood account and God's covenant. Noah, as God's righteous servant, builds an altar and offers sacrifices to the Lord out of gratitude. At the smell of Noah's sacrifice, God says, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (vv. 21–22).

There are two things about God's statement we should notice. First, it makes a promise with two parts. The

first part is that God vows never to destroy the earth again with a flood. In the second part, God promises to preserve the normal cycle of seasons. Animals will continue to live and God will uphold the environment and climate necessary for life on earth. He will sustain the change of seasons, the rain to make seeds grow until the harvest, and the passage of time in day and night.

Second, God makes this promise despite humanity's depravity. The intention of humankind's heart is still evil from his youth. Fallen man is no better after the flood than before. God grants them life under the sun even though they still deserve punishment. God's promise is not dependent on man's performance, whether it is righteous or wicked.

Parties of the Covenant. As we have explored in previous articles, covenants are agreements between different parties. Who are the parties of this covenant? The first party is God. It is *his* promise and covenant. The second party, however, is multiple in character. God makes his covenant with Noah, his descendants, and the animals (livestock, birds, and every beast), as in verse 10. But God names the second party over and over in varying ways. In verse 12, the covenant is with you and every living creature, for future generations. Noah, then, represents all future humanity. Verse 13 lists God and the earth, and the parties continue to be listed: between me and you and every living creature (v. 15); between God and every living creature of all flesh (v. 16); between me and all flesh (v. 17).

It is unmistakable that this covenant is common, not limited to God's special people. It is God's covenant with the

earth, every living animal on the earth, and all humanity descended from Noah and his sons. God's promise is to sustain, uphold, and govern the earth with all human and animal creatures on it. This makes this covenant non-redemptive. The promise is not to save the second party from sin and its curse, but to preserve the natural order of the world so that life can continue to exist.

Sign of the Covenant. This covenant also has a sign of commonness. Remember, God's various covenants typically have visible and symbolic signs that help administer or maintain the covenant relationship. Covenant signs, though, are given only to those who are party to the covenant relationship. For example, the Abrahamic sign of circumcision is only for the covenant family, and the new covenant signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper are only for members of the church. Those outside the covenant community do not receive the sign. In distinction from these redemptive covenant administrations, the Noahic sign is public and part of the natural world. The rainbow sign shines out from the clouds for every man and beast to see. Every creature included in the second party is witness to the sign of the covenant.

This public sign has further significance in that it is symbolic. Signs are symbolic of a particular idea or meaning. So what does the rainbow symbolize? First, the Hebrew word for "rainbow" can mean either "rainbow" or "bow," as in bow and arrow. God calls it "my bow" in verse 13. In ancient iconography, victorious kings and gods were often portrayed as coming back from war with their bows in a horizontal position (like a rainbow). Going into battle, the king or god has the bow vertical in hand, ready to shoot; but after battle it is horizontal, symbolizing the peace after war. The rainbow, then, may well be symbolic of God's war bow that hangs in the sky, symbolic of peace. God will not destroy the world again; he is no longer hostile.

Second, the ancients understood the sky or firmament as a dome-shaped barrier that held back the waters above, as in Genesis 1:6–7. Hence, when God judged the world in the flood, he opened the windows of heaven, releasing the waters above (7:11). In fact, the Hebrew word for "flood" refers specifically to these celestial waters. Thus, God's promise is that he will never wipe out all flesh by the waters of the flood. The rainbow then visually represents the dome-shape firmament as shut. The rainbow appears when it rains to show that the celestial waters will not be released.

The symbolic value of the rainbow could be either of these, or perhaps both. Either way, the effect of the symbol is clear. The rainbow reminds us that the floods will never come again. The beautiful arch points to God's promise that he will never judge the world by the waters of the flood. The firmament is shut; there is peace after the storm.

Terms of the Covenant. What are the terms of this covenant for its continuing validity? First, the sign identifies that it is a sign for God: "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (v. 16). God sees the sign and remembers his promise not to destroy but to sustain. The only term of the covenant is God keeping his promise. There are no terms for humanity or creation to meet for the covenant to continue. The covenant is a unilateral promise of God. It is by definition unbreakable. There are no conditional terms whereby the covenant can be broken.

This invincible nature of the covenant is reflected in Jeremiah 33:20–21a, "If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken." The point of the Lord's

comparison between his covenant with day and night and the Davidic is that they both are impossible to break; man can do nothing to invalidate them. Hence, God calls the Noahic covenant eternal. It is everlasting; it will last as long as the earth endures.

This aspect should strike us as outstanding. When we see the rainbow, we can know God is also gazing at it and remembering his everlasting covenant to uphold seedtime and harvest, day and night. With all the terror and grievous evil that humans have inflicted on each other, we may wonder why the globe keeps spinning. From our point of view, it is not an easy thing to keep this promise. But God is greater than we are, and his thoughts are higher than ours. He is the God who keeps his promises.

Regulations of the Covenant. The everlasting and unilateral nature of the Noahic covenant does not negate the fact that there are some obligations for mankind within this covenant. Indeed there are, but the continuance of the covenant does not depend on these obligations. The imposed regulations define how God governs his creation and how mankind should act in it. Yet the existence of the covenant is not dependent on man's fidelity to the regulations.

The regulations of the Noahic covenant are found in Genesis 9:1–7. First, God calls Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply (v. 1). This imperative reiterates what God told the animals in 8:17, and it parallels God's command in Genesis 1:28. Mankind and animals are to procreate. God sustains and orders this world through the increase of mankind and animals. Assumed in this command to be fruitful is marriage. Therefore, marriage and procreation are a good and normal part of human society.

Second, God gives Noah all things for food (v. 3). The distinction between clean and unclean animals in the ark is no longer in force. Noah can eat from all types of animals and

The Covenant of Redemption

The Covenant of Works

The Covenant of Grace

The Common Grace Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant

The Davidic Covenant

The New Covenant

plants. God has given mankind a lordship over the animals. The good effect of this regulation is often overlooked. In fact, Paul has this regulation in mind when he says, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4–5). Likewise, Paul states that it is “God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). God gave us these things to be enjoyed, for his glory. Our everyday meals then are about more than just nourishment but about gratitude to God.

A corollary of this regulation is work. To eat of both animals and vegetation implies being a tiller of the soil and shepherd of herds. Cultivation and labor are the necessary means for taking all things for food. God’s food regulation displays his will that work is a good and necessary part of human life.

Third, God declares that whoever sheds the blood of man, by man his blood shall be shed (v. 6). This regulation not only reveals that murder is wrong but also that man has the right, even the duty, to punish murders with capital punishment. Indeed, the mention of man being made in the image of God is the basis for man being able to judge criminals. The mention of image is not to establish the value of man’s life but to establish man’s right and duty to judge wrongdoing. The apostle Paul reflects on this in Romans 13 when he states that governing authorities bear the sword, even calling the governor “the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (v. 4).

The regulation of Genesis 9:6 is the covenantal foundation for God’s instituting the state, that is, governments that regulate human society, particularly by protecting their lives. The state, imperfect as it is, is God’s instituted means whereby he punishes wrongdoers, thereby restraining



human depravity. This is why Peter and Paul can say what they do about the Roman government (Rom. 13; 1 Pet. 2).

This regulation further exhibits that God has preserved in humans a sense of law. Even though the inclination of man is evil from youth, God reveals his natural law on the conscience of humans. Thus, Paul can say, “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves,

even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness” (Rom. 2:14–15). The Noahic covenant is the covenantal foundation for God ordering the world by natural law and preserving in fallen man an awareness of this law, so that man does not act as badly as he might.

These three regulations demonstrate that God ordered all of human life in the Noahic covenant. Fruitfulness covers the realm of marriage and family; food encapsulates the realm of vocation and enjoyment of good things; murder includes the arena of state and society; and natural law is evident in them all. Both Christians and non-Christians participate in all of these fields, and all of these arenas are necessary for preserving human society. They are founded on the Noahic covenant and are an important part of our lives as Christians in this world.

Continuity with Creation. The common grace covenant upholds and governs all of human history and the world. Nevertheless, to identify accurately the Noahic covenant as the covenantal foundation for all these regulations, we have to recognize the Noahic covenant’s continuity with creation. The command to be fruitful and multiply repeats Genesis 1:28.

The image of God mentioned in 9:6 ties with Genesis 1:26. The regulation that protects the life of man is similar to God’s sign to Cain that protected his life from murder (Gen. 4:15). Jeremiah’s mention of a covenant with day and night that recalls 8:22 is also reminiscent of God’s call for the sun to rule the day (1:16–18). Humankind having to work for food links with God’s curse in Genesis 3:17–19. Moreover, God’s statement in 8:21, “I will not continue to curse the ground any further” (my translation), demonstrates that God is not changing his previous curse in 3:17.

Other connections could be listed, but the above illustrate that God is reinstating the natural order previous to the flood. There is an essential continuity in the created order before and after the flood. This is not to minimize the differences that Peter mentions in 2 Peter 3:5–7. Nonetheless, humanity is still in the image of God and imprisoned to the curse of sin and death. Seasons come and go as before. The theology of Genesis 1–4 still informs and guides our faith and life.

For the Seed to Come. Finally, the common grace covenant provides the arena for Christ to come. God promised Adam and Eve salvation through a Champion. Had God destroyed the world completely, this promise would not have been fulfilled. The Lord’s promise entails an ongoing conflict between the offspring of the Serpent and that of the woman, which needs a stage on which to unfold. It is the common grace realm secured in God’s promise that provides this stage for the drama of redemptive history.

God’s common grace sustains and upholds the natural order and human society so that Christ could be born of a woman, and under the law, in the fullness of time. After Christ’s ascension, the Lord did not bring the final judgment. Instead, according to his great mercy, the Father ordained the second coming of Christ to be in the distant future, so that many more

generations might be born, hear the gospel proclaimed to them, and receive the free salvation found in Christ. One day, the heavens will be torn in two like a newspaper. The sun will turn black as coal and the moon blood-red. The mountains, tall and solid, seemingly indestructible, will be picked up like rag dolls and thrown away. The islands that are locked down to the sea floor will be sent skipping across the sea like a smooth stone. With the same ease with which God spoke the world into existence, he will send in his demolition team to tear it down. Common grace will come to an end when that seventh trumpet is blown and Christ rides forth on his glorious chariot cloud.

But until that day, common grace serves the purpose of God’s saving grace. As long as the sun shines, the gospel will be proclaimed, and those who were once lost will be found in Christ. Christ will continue to build his church, protecting her from the onslaughts of the Evil One, until he brings this world to a close.

In the meantime, the rainbow gives us assurance in the unshakable promise of God. Whatever disasters lie in the future, the rainbow reminds us that God will preserve winter and spring, marriage and childbirth, and human society until Christ comes in glory. The Noahic covenant comforts us with the assurance that nothing can thwart God’s plan, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

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“I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.”

Martin Luther

Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History?

Divided Monarchy, Part 1, Israelite and Judean Kings Mentioned Outside the Bible

Rev. R. Andrew
Compton

In our last article, we looked at archaeological finds that shed light on the kingdom of David.¹ Until fairly recently, critical scholars had assumed the historicity of the united monarchy and doubted only the earlier periods (the time of the judges, the settlement of the land, the exodus, the patriarchs, etc.). But as we noted, the united monarchy of David and Solomon has come under fire in recent decades. There is, however, some irony in this. Criticism has been leveled against the united monarchy because it was claimed that the only solid historical and archaeological footing that could be found was in the ninth century B.C. and beyond: the period of the divided monarchy. Since David and Solomon did not find the same degree of corroboration as did later Israelite and Judean kings, their reign was thereby suspect. But in spite of this incorrect assessment of the period of the united monarchy, it does demonstrate that most scholars see the period of the divided monarchy as very well attested. Even a critic like Lester Grabbe is willing to state:

For the first time since the Merneptah Inscription, it is in the reign of Omri that we finally begin to find extra-biblical data (apart from archaeology) with which to compare the picture given by the biblical text. Some are arguing that this is where the story of Israel begins—that Omri founded the first state in Palestine. In any case, the ninth and eighth centuries are dominated by the kingdom of Israel or northern kingdom.²

This does not mean that critics are suddenly allies with regard to the historicity of the divided monarchy;

Grabbe's "comparing" of the biblical text frequently leads to his disputing it. It does, however, mean that maximalists and minimalists alike agree in broader areas than before.

In these next two articles, we will look at archaeological finds related to the period of the divided monarchy (930–586 B.C.). Since there is so much relevant data, we are forced to be somewhat selective with what we cover. In order to do justice to what we do look at, however, we will divide this material into two different articles. In this article, we will consider examples of Israelite and Judean kings who are named in extrabiblical sources. In our next article, we will look at some important archaeological finds from this period.

Extrabiblical Mention of Biblical Characters

The Bible mentions a host of people who are also attested in extrabiblical texts.³ Kings of foreign nations (Egypt, Moab, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia) are most easily identified, though there are some examples of other figures who may also be found in ancient texts. For example, Numbers 22–24 tells the story of Balaam son of Beor who was sought by Balak of Moab to curse Israel. Three different times Balak was foiled; Balaam not only refused to curse Israel but also pronounced a blessing upon it. In 1967, at the Jordanian site of Deir Alla (ca. 36 miles northeast of Jerusalem, just across the Jordan River), an ink-on-plaster inscription was discovered telling a story of Balaam son of Beor.

Though Numbers 22–24 shows Balaam as ultimately obeying the Lord and refusing to say anything he had not commanded, other passages

show him to be a diviner (Josh. 13:22) and opposed to the living God (Deut. 23:5; Josh. 24:10; 2 Pet. 2:15–16; Rev. 2:14). This is exactly what we find in the Deir Alla version of Balaam: "The misfortunes of the book of Balaam, the son of Beor, a divine seer is he. Then the gods came to him at night and he beheld a vision in accordance with El's utterance." After receiving a message from this council of gods, he conveyed it to a group of leaders who were opposing these deities' message: "Be seated, and I will tell you what the Shadday-gods have planned. . . . The gods have banded together, and the Shadday-gods have established a council."⁴

Thus, while this story comes from some five hundred to seven hundred years after the events of Numbers 22–24, and though it tells a story of Balaam not found in the Old Testament itself, it nevertheless attests to the existence of Balaam son of Beor, mentioning him by name and describing him much as the Bible does: as one who practiced divination.

The Moabite Stone and Tel Dan Inscription Redux

Our interest in this article, however, is on the mention of Israelite and Judean kings mentioned outside the Bible in more or less contemporary records. In our last article, we made mention of two inscriptions that name the House of David: the Tel Dan inscription and the Mesha Stele. Each of these is also famous in that they mention Israelite and Judean kings. The Mesha Stele reads:

As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years, for Chemosh was angry at his land.

And his son followed him and he also said, "I will humble Moab." In my time he spoke thus, but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished forever! Now Omri had occupied the land of Madeba, and he (Israel) had dwelt there in his time and half the time of his son, forty years. . . .⁵

Though this comes from a time after Omri, who reigned from 885–874 B.C., it is unlikely that it comes from much later than 830 B.C. Thus the stele's claim that "Israel has perished forever" is hyperbole, as Israel did not experience destruction and exile until 722 B.C., long after Mesha's reign (mid-ninth century B.C.). But more relevant to our topic here is the mention of King Omri of Israel by name. We will say more about him in a moment.

The Tel Dan inscription is unfortunately broken in several key places, although it makes mention of both an Israelite and a Judean king:

Hadad went before me [and] I went from [. . .] of my kings.

I killed kings who harnessed . . . chariots and thousands of horsemen,

[Jeho]ram son of [Ahab] king of Israel,

And [I] killed [Ahaz]iahu son of [Jehoram king] of the house of David.

I imposed [tribute] . . . their land . . .⁶

Though the names Jehoram and Ahaziah (= Ahaziah) are reconstructed (brackets indicate breaks in the text), and though the names Ahab and Jehoram are missing, this reading is on strong footing as it makes best sense of the time period (late ninth century B.C.) and the letters that have not been damaged on the inscription. After all, there is only one time period when an Israelite king whose name ended in "-ram" reigned at the same

time as a Judean king whose name ended in "-iahu." Thus here too we have attestation of Israelite and Judean kings by an Aramaean king, likely Hazael of Damascus.

King Omri of Israel

Omri of Israel is an especially interesting king. The books of Kings give him only thirteen verses of airtime (1 Kings 16:16–28). He was, however, quite prominent, founding not only a new dynasty but also building a glamorous royal palace and acropolis in Samaria. In the eyes of the surrounding nations, Omri was perhaps the most famous of the Israelite kings. Though the Omeride dynasty lasted only four generations, it was prominent enough for the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) and Adad-Nirari III (810–783 B.C.) to name the entire region after him. Assyrian texts referring to the land of Israel called it by names such as "mār Ḥu-um-ri-i" (= land of Omri) and "KUR <Bit>-Ḥu-um-ri-i" (= land of the House of Omri).⁷ Even when the Omeride dynasty ended, later kings were still associated with it by these terms.

King Ahab of Israel

Omri's son Ahab (874–853 B.C.) receives a great deal more attention in the books of Kings. The stories are infamous: the wiles of his wicked wife Jezebel, his coveting and exploitation of Naboth, his encounter with Elijah on Mount Carmel. His battles with Damascus are also described, but in the Assyrian sources, he is best known as an ally of the king of Damascus at the famous Battle of Qarqar (located ca. 55 miles southwest of modern-day Aleppo, Syria) in 853 B.C. Shalmaneser III's Kurkh Monolith inscription reads:

I departed from the city of Argana. I approached the city of Qarqar. I razed, destroyed and burned the city of Qarqar, his royal city. 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalry, (and) 20,000 troops of Hadad-

ezer of Damascus; 700 chariots, 700 cavalry, (and) 10,000 troops of Irḫulēni, the Hamathite; 2,000 chariots, (and) 10,000 troops of Ahab, the Israelite. . . .⁸

Most scholars recognize the excessive and propagandistic nature of the Kurkh Monolith, and most doubt that Ahab would have sent two thousand chariots (more than all his allies put together), but this does not change the fact that Shalmaneser viewed Ahab as a powerful military leader.

King Jehu of Israel

When Jehu son of Jehoshaphat son of Nimshi became king in Israel (2 Kings 9), the mighty Omeride dynasty came to a close. Though Jehu (841–814 B.C.) continued to walk in the sins of Jeroboam (2 Kings 10:29, 31), as did all the northern kings, he nevertheless played an important reforming role: "Thus Jehu wiped out Baal from Israel" (1 Kings 10:28). In fact, it has been noted that "the portrayal of Jehu is unusually favorable: divinely elected, prophetically anointed and righteously evaluated."⁹ In terms of archaeological discoveries, one of the most famous Assyrian monumental inscriptions, the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, not only mentions Jehu but depicts him as well. The Black Obelisk is a two-meter-tall pillar with four sides, sculpted out of black alabaster. Each side contains five horizontal panels, all of which depict scenes of Shalmaneser receiving tribute from kings throughout the known world. While there were certainly more than twenty kings who would have been vassals to Shalmaneser, Jehu was selected since he was the king of the most prominent kingdom in the southwest corner of his empire.

The image on the Black Obelisk shows Jehu prostrated before the Assyrian king, followed by a retinue bearing gifts and tribute. The cuneiform above the panel (not pictured) reads: "I received the tribute of Jehu of Bīt-

Ḥumrī: silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden goblet, golden cups, golden buckets, tin, a staff of the king's hand, and javelins."¹⁰

Not only is this yet another reference to an Israelite king in an extrabiblical text, but also it is a visual representation of that king. And while it might be pushing things too far to suggest that this is a detailed portrait of Jehu, it is nevertheless the closest thing to a picture of an Israelite or Judean king as we have. (Note: Though Jehu was not technically from the Bīt-Ḥumrī, "house of Omri"—after all, he brought the Omeride dynasty to an end—this label attached to Jehu in the Black Obelisk is further proof of Omri's prominence in the ancient world; even a future king of a different dynasty is still known by the former "realm" of the Omerides.)

References to Judean Kings

Several other Israelite kings are described in ancient Near Eastern sources: Ahaziah (853–852 B.C.), Jehoash (798–782 B.C.), Menahem (752–742 B.C.), Pekah (752–732 B.C.), and Hoshea (732–722 B.C.). In Judah, the references are fewer. There are a few reasons for this. In terms of location, Jerusalem was considered off the beaten path, tucked away in the Judean hill country some distance

from the major highways running through the region. Control of Judah was not as strategic for ancient Near Eastern kings, as no major trade routes were dramatically affected by their presence. In terms of fame, Judah was less cosmopolitan than Israel; thus it was not viewed by ancient Near Eastern kings with the same prestige as was Israel. This helps to explain why Judean kings are not as internationally attested.

For those of us familiar with the Bible's history of the monarchy, this may seem surprising. After all, Judah and Jerusalem stand at the center of God's redemptive interventions throughout most of the Old Testament. But as ancient Near Eastern kings did not share the biblical view of the world or of God's redemptive work, their views of greatness and centrality differed from that of the Bible itself.

Having said this, there *are* references to several Judean kings in ancient extrabiblical texts. The Tel Dan Stele mentioned Ahaziah (841 B.C.), as we noted above, and several seal impressions have been found with the names of other Judean kings: Azariah/Uzziah (792–740 B.C.), Jotham (750–731 B.C.), Ahaz (735–715 B.C.), Hezekiah (729–686 B.C.), and Manasseh (696–642 B.C.). But two

kings receive special reference in international sources: Hezekiah and Jehoiachin.

Hezekiah of Judah

The story of the great reformer king, Hezekiah, is described not only in the books of Kings and Chronicles but also in Isaiah 36–39. He is regarded by nearly all scholars as being a major figure in Judah's history. Archaeologists have found numerous artifacts from his reign (we will consider some in the next article), and biblical scholars believe that his reign was an especially fruitful time for the writing and collecting of Old Testament books.¹¹ The book of Proverbs alludes to this very thing: "These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied" (Prov. 25:1). As Jerusalem experienced significant growth during Hezekiah's reign, he attracted the attention of king Sennacherib of Assyria (705–681 B.C.), who invaded Judah and besieged several cities including Jerusalem.

Sennacherib commemorated this invasion by commissioning a series of reliefs—a type of mural—that hung in his palace at Nineveh and depicted the siege and destruction of the Judean city of Lachish (2 Kings



18:13–14; 2 Chron. 32:9). But he also commissioned royal annals of the invasion, written on three prisms (one of which is housed at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago). After describing the freeing of Padi, the Philistine king of Ekron, who had been imprisoned by Hezekiah in Jerusalem, Sennacherib continues:

As for Hezekiah, the Judean, I besieged forty-six of his fortified walled cities and surrounding smaller towns, which were without number. . . . He himself, I locked up within Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthworks, and made it unthinkable for him to exit by the city gate. . . . I imposed dues and gifts for my lordship upon him, in addition to the former tribute, their yearly payment.

Sennacherib does not share how the siege ended since, after all, he was driven from Judah by a miraculous deliverance by the Angel of the Lord. But he does record that Hezekiah eventually did send tribute to Assyria, a detail not recorded in the biblical text.¹² While the Assyrian account is marked by overstatement, it nevertheless demonstrates that the invasion of Judah, and especially locking up Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage,” was an event of which Sennacherib was especially proud.

Jehoiachin of Judah

The Judean monarchy ended with chaos. After reigning for only three months, Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.) was sent into exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon (605–562 B.C.). He was replaced by his uncle, Mattaniah, whose name was changed to Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.). As a puppet king, all seemed to be going well for Zedekiah until he decided to rebel against Babylon nine years into his reign. Nebuchadnezzar

responded by sacking Jerusalem and exiling Zedekiah after first killing his sons and then blinding him. But 2 Kings ends with a story of Jehoiachin being taken out of prison and given a seat of prominence in the Babylonian king’s presence: “So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king’s table, and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, as long as he lived” (2 Kings 25:29–30, English Standard Version).

Many critical scholars doubted the authenticity of this story until excavations of Babylon uncovered four administrative tablets translated by Ernst Weidner in the 1930s. These texts were among a number of ration receipts. One of the more prominent ones reads: “10 (sila) to *la-ku-ú-ki-nu* (= Jehoiachin), the son of the king of Judah; 2 ½ sila for the 5 sons of the king of Judah. . . .”¹³

Here, among the ruins of Babylon’s famous Ishtar Gate, was found an ancient receipt for the very rations described in 2 Kings 25:30! Though this mention of Jehoiachin and his sons is not overly glamorous, it does corroborate the events of 2 Kings 25, showing that Jehoiachin, like many other captured kings, served in an official capacity in the Babylonian royal court, likely as an advisor to the king concerning administrative policies for the region of Judah.¹⁴

In our next article, we will look at a few exciting archaeological discoveries from the period of the divided monarchy that illustrate and contextualize some key events in the history of Israel and Judah.

1. See *The Outlook* 67, no. 4 (July-August 2017): 23–26.

2. Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 123.

3. Lawrence Mykytiuk, “Archaeology Confirms 50 Real People from the Bible,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 40, no. 2 (March-April 2014): 42–50, 68.

4. Translation taken from Baruch A. Levine, “Deir Alla, Texts,” *New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 2:84.

5. Adapted from William Albright’s translation in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relation to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

6. Translation adapted from William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture, Vol. 2: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2000), 161–62.

7. Brad E. Kelle, “What’s in a Name? Neo-Assyrian Designations for the Northern Kingdom and Their Implications for Israelite History and Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 121, no. 4 (2002): 640.

8. *Context of Scripture*, 2.263.

9. D. T. Lamb, “Jehu Dynasty,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 534.

10. *Context of Scripture*, 2.270.

11. See William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64–90. Schniedewind must be read discerningly, but this is a rare and interesting synthesis of biblical interpretation and archaeology.

12. Alan Millard provides a helpful recounting of this historical event, “Sennacherib’s Attack on Hezekiah,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985): 61–77.

13. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 308.

14. For Jehoiachin’s biblical-theological importance, see Matthew H. Patton, *Hope for a Tender Sprig: Jehoiachin in Biblical Theology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

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IRBC's Philosophy of Counseling: God Created Man to Work

Dr. Jeff L.
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We are now ready to take under our consideration the fourth foundational principle underlying IRBC's philosophical model of counseling: God created man to work. This principle, as with the last one, primarily serves as the foundation for the *Secondary Dominant Domains*, particularly the *Production Domain*[™].

Introduction to the Production Domain

The grounds for including labor or production as a dominant domain in IRBC's model of counseling are rooted in the primary role that work is to play in the lives of the creatures that were created in the image of God—an eternally existing Being who works. The Bible begins with an account of God working. In fact, the whole first chapter of the first book of the Bible describes God's work of creating the universe and everything in it. In the second chapter of God's inspired book, we read of God's resting "from all his work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3, English Standard Version). A few verses later God begins to reveal the fact that work is part of his plan for humanity: "When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground . . ." (Gen. 2:5). After God created Adam, he gave him specific work to do in accordance with God's intentions. In Genesis 2:15 we read, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it." In John 5:17 (King James Version), Jesus makes mention of the fact that both he and the Father work: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." As creatures created



with the ability to work, fashioned in the image of a God who works, we must work in order to glorify God and find true fulfillment during our earthly pilgrimages. Problems arise in people's lives when they fail to work (see also Prov. 21:25; 2 Thess. 3:10–11).

Gainful employment is not necessarily the focus of the *Production Domain* in relation to the way it fits into IRBC's counseling philosophy. One can be retired and engage in volunteer work, wherein one is using one's gifts and talents for the glory of God and finding much fulfillment in such work. One can even be severely restricted from physical labor due to health problems associated with old age, yet still be engaged in work that greatly profits the kingdom of God.

You possibly know aged saints who are involved with prayer and prison ministries (as homework graders, etc.) who are bearing much fruit in their old age despite physical restraints. Such people are often kept from depression, boredom, and problems associated with self-concept and self-worth because they continue to labor for the Lord as they are able. On the other side of the age spectrum are those who could greatly benefit from receiving vocational guidance counseling. Greater leadership could be provided by Christians in all vocational fields if covenant youth's natural gifts were identified and they were encouraged to receive training in the vocational field which would most benefit from the use of their gifts.

Inactivity in the Lives of Youth Is a Significant Contributing Variable to Depression

Suicide is currently one of the leading causes of death among teenagers in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control report that it is the third leading cause of death, behind accidents and homicide, of people aged 15 to 24. Even more disturbing is the fact that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for children between the ages of 10 and 14. Although the suicide rate is lower in Christian circles than in the world, for which we can praise the Lord, cases wherein young people experience suicidal ideation and deep depression are very high. One of the significant contributing factors in teen and child depression is inactivity, a lack of being regularly engaged in work.

Family-Induced Inactivity

A large number of teenagers in America occupy most of their free time watching television, playing electronic games, or engaging in unsupervised communication via handheld devices. Insufficient supervision and/or the lack of parameters for usage of these things stunt spiritual and social growth and thereby increase the potential for experiencing depression. It is of paramount importance for parents to establish and encourage their children to fulfill legitimate purpose- and objective-driven responsibilities—work—in their households

if they are going to develop properly as image bearers of God. Parents need to understand that their children are hard-wired to work. If children are not engaged in regular, meaningful, age-appropriate work, it will yield them a poor work ethic and predispose them to depression. Helping around the house and yard is not only helpful for parents; it is a great antidepressant for children.

Church-Induced Inactivity

Many church youth group ministries are nothing more than glorified play lands for adolescents. Their focus is upon entertaining the youth in one way or another with games, activities, and charismatic leaders and speakers. Other groups function more or less like modified theological academies or societies. Both extremes often make for poor youth programs. While some of the key elements of a youth program should include objectives aimed at nurturing the spiritual and social growth of our covenant youth, a key and often neglected element is work in the form of kingdom service. There are often many needs within a community of faith and its surrounding neighborhood that can be addressed by service projects. The mowing of lawns, raking of leaves, and shoveling of sidewalks are practical good works which can greatly bless elderly and health-impaired congregants and neighbors. They are also a no- or low-cost means of bolstering the mental and emotional health of our precious covenant youth. Service projects are less expensive than antidepressants, and they have no side effects; sounds like good medicine to me!

Work is important. It is an important philosophical principle in a comprehensive counseling model, and it is an important part of the Christian life. May we view work as a gift from God, a source of blessed purpose in our lives.

MARTIN LUTHER
A CHRISTIAN'S QUEST FOR ASSURANCE
BY REV. NATHAN LANGERAK

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Bible Studies on Nehemiah

Lesson 1: A Godly Governor in a Difficult Time

Dr. Norman
De Jong

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 1
Background Reading: Esther 9:29–10:3

Introduction

As we thumb through our English Bibles, we find four books that deal with events in the Persian Empire. In order of appearance, they are the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel. If you have been following our Bible studies during the last year, you will recall that we have just finished a study of Ezra. Our study over these next months will focus on the book of Nehemiah. Since the Old Testament begins with Genesis and moves through a number of historical books, most of us assume that these four are in correct chronological sequence. Of the four, Daniel tends to generate a lot of interest because it contains events and miracles that fascinate us. Daniel is full of Sunday school lessons, but we tend to focus only on the first six chapters. We tend to find the last half of that book to be somewhat confusing and difficult to understand. When we realize that much of that is prophetic and is rooted in the Persian Empire, we have added reason to avoid that section.

In addition to those historical books, we also need to note that the last three books in the Old Testament are also rooted in the Persian Empire. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are all commentaries on the situation in Jerusalem during the time of Ezra. Look at Malachi 2:10–12, for example, as a commentary on Ezra 10. God is sending his messengers to address serious problems.

Typical pastors and professors know very little about the Persian Empire because that subject seldom is studied by Reformed theologians. Most of our seminaries in the Western world do not teach courses on Persian history or culture. Since Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are completely set in the Persian Empire, we tend to ignore what we don't know. In fact, most laypeople assume that those last three books are in correct chronological order, with Esther being the latest book and the latest person of the four. That is

a wrong assumption, as any serious study of chronology will indicate.

The Biblical Sequence

- ▼ Ezra
- ▼ Nehemiah
- ▼ Esther
- ▼ Daniel

The Chronological Sequence

- ▼ Daniel
- ▼ Esther
- ▼ Ezra
- ▼ Nehemiah

If we are going to interpret Nehemiah correctly, we will need to look carefully at the texts of these four books in order to arrive at a correct chronological sequence. After some serious efforts, and a few revisions, I have arrived at the following.

The Chronology of Nehemiah

(all dates are B.C., before Christ)

740–701 The prophet Isaiah foretells the destruction of Israel and the coming of Cyrus, king of Persia (see Isa. 44:24–45:13)

605 Nebuchadnezzar begins the siege of Jerusalem; Daniel and friends are carried into captivity (2 Kings 24:10–16; Jer. 52:4–11; Dan. 1:1–2)

586 Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed (2 Kings 25:8–10; Jer. 52:12–16)

539 The Medes and the Persians conquer Babylon and kill Belshazzar; Darius and Cyrus become co-rulers over the Medo-Persian Empire (Dan. 5:30; 6:28)

538 King Cyrus issues his edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra 1:1; 6:3; 2 Chron. 36:22)

536 Work on the temple begins, is opposed, but continues (Ezra 1–4)

530–522 Cambyses [Ahasuerus] is king of Persia (Ezra 4:6)

530 Work on the temple is stopped by force of arms (Ezra 4:6, 23)

522–486 Darius I reigns over Persia (Ezra 5)

520 Work on the temple resumes (Ezra 5)

515 The temple is completed and dedicated (Ezra 6:15–18)

494–449 The Persians wage war against the Greeks and the Egyptians

486–465 Xerxes [Ahasuerus] reigns over the Persian Empire (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1:1)

479 Esther becomes queen of Persia (Esther 2:16)

465–424 Artaxerxes I becomes king and reigns over Persia (Ezra 4:7; 7:11)

458 Ezra is commissioned by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and teach the law of God (Ezra 7:7)

445 Nehemiah is commissioned by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and repair the walls of the city (Neh. 2:1); he governs for twelve years

445 The walls are finished in fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15)

433 Nehemiah returns to Susa to report to the king (Neh. 5:14; 13:6)

If we operate with the assumption that Ezra and Nehemiah occur before Esther, we will make a rather serious mistake. Notice, too, that Daniel appears much later in our Bibles but predates the other three. He is a very old man by the time that Darius, one of the Persian kings, puts him in the lions' den (Dan. 6). The Lord shuts the mouths of the lions. King Darius is mightily impressed. Notice also that this Persian king then issues a decree for all the people within his dominion to "tremble and fear before the God of Daniel for he is the living God" (Dan. 6:26–27). As we peruse this chronology, note first of all that Daniel and his friends are taken captive to Babylon in the year 605 B.C. Note next the date for Esther becoming queen (479 B.C.) and compare that with the appearance of Ezra (458 B.C.) and Nehemiah (445 B.C.). The book of Ezra is primarily about rebuilding the temple of the Lord. The book of Nehemiah is primarily about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem that had been demolished in 586 B.C. Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem and repairs the damage in 445 B.C., 141 years after the destruction of the walls. A lot has happened during that lengthy interlude. God's chosen people are not only spared but also become a dominant force in Persia. Esther might well have been queen or queen mother when Ezra is commissioned. Furthermore, she could have been the mother or the stepmother of King Artaxerxes, who commissions Nehemiah thirty-four years after she becomes queen. With that in mind, it would be beneficial if one read the book of Esther before tackling a study of either Ezra or Nehemiah. To complicate matters, Mordecai, the Jew, might be the second-highest official in the Persian Empire during this era (see Esther 10). His influence and power were exceptional.

In between these dates there is another significant event. It is celebrated as the Feast of Purim, recorded for us in Esther 9:20–32. In

order to understand the significance of this feast, we need to go back into the book of Esther and read through chapters 3–9. In those chapters we read about the devilish plot devised by Haman to annihilate all the Jews in the empire. Originally, Haman is deeply offended by Mordecai, who will not bow down to him and worship him. Mordecai rightly sees that as idolatry and refuses to bow down. Haman plans to hang him but also arranges for all the Jews in the empire to be killed. Remembering that we were taught in the book of Daniel that "God is sovereign over all the affairs of men and nations" (Dan. 4:17), we see that sovereign control being worked out in unusual ways. God has placed Esther on the throne of Persia and inclined the heart of the king toward her. Through a series of events, Esther is able to present her plea to King Ahasuerus and is able to identify Haman as the real culprit. Haman is hanged on his own gallows, and all the Jews are allowed to defend themselves in the face of all their enemies. The Jews are victorious, and Mordecai is elevated to the second-highest office in the empire.

These are not accidents. These are events controlled and directed by the God of heaven. In a very real sense, God is fulfilling the dream that he had placed in King Nebuchadnezzar's head more than a century before. In that dream, the "rock cut out of the mountain, not by human hands" (Dan. 2:34), is crushing the Persian Empire in such fashion that Christ is triumphing over evil. Jesus Christ, the rider on the white horse, is ruling the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:18). He uses Haman, Esther, and Mordecai to accomplish his goals. That victory resonates down through the empire and influences King Artaxerxes to issue his astounding decrees. History is the outworking of God's plans.

During the Old Testament era and much of the New Testament period, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were considered to be one book. According to tradition, Ezra contributed much of it, especially the section that we know as Ezra, while Nehemiah contributed much of what is known by his name. As the time line suggests, there is a thirteen-year gap between the arrival of these two ecclesiastical giants in the land of Judah. Ezra comes in 458 B.C., while Nehemiah is not commissioned until 445 B.C. Ezra is commissioned by the king and his seven counselors to teach the people the law of God. He is recognized as God's leading authority and a gifted theologian-teacher. He does much to inform and disciple the church, but he also confronts a major problem of intermarriage between some of the Levites and pagan women. Ezra is commissioned by King Artaxerxes and is given all the authority and provision that he needs, suggesting that this king is a God-fearing man. Ezra is sent on official government business, by the king and his seven counselors, with the specific assignment to "make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God" (Ezra 7:14, 25–26). That same king commissions Nehemiah, thirteen years later, to oversee the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. As we read, we will be amazed at the speed with which the walls were rebuilt. At the same time, we should not be surprised at the opposition that came from neighboring people.

We get little information about the man Nehemiah from the text. We are told that he is "the son of Hacaliah" (v. 1), that he lives in Susa, "the capital" of the Persian Empire (v. 1), and that he is "cupbearer to the king" (v. 11). Beyond that, we could conclude that he is a devout disciple of God and that he is fervent in prayer. In contrast to the information about Ezra (Ezra 7:1–6), we have little information about Nehemiah's

family history. With Ezra, we are told a lengthy family listing because he is a Levite and has to trace his lineage all the way back to Aaron in order to justify his priesthood. Nehemiah, by contrast, is a member of the noble class and serves a vital role in the king's inner court. His role is distinctly different from that of Ezra. Both are honored by King Artaxerxes and given significant assignments in Jerusalem.

We are told that Ezra "came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king" (Ezra 7:8). By contrast, Nehemiah approaches that same king "In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes" (Neh. 2:1). That implies a time lapse of thirteen years. During that time, Ezra was given great opportunities to teach the people the law of God but also was given extensive authority by King Artaxerxes to govern the entire area and even to appoint all types of government officials (see Ezra 7:11–28). Ezra, the religious leader of the Jews, was also a powerful civic official appointed

by the king. King Artaxerxes was unusually benevolent toward the Jews and did much to promote the worship of God. During that time period, the church also experienced a tremendous crisis due to the number of priests who had married pagan women. Those marriages were annulled and families broken up, but God blessed their obedience. True to his many warnings, God did not want his children to marry pagan persons. True worship and idolatry might not mix.

As we work our way through the book of Nehemiah, we will be posing inductive questions, with the intent that the reader will carefully examine the text of Scripture so as to discover the riches of this book. Each reader should pore over the assigned texts multiple times before answering the questions. Preparation will make the discussions that much more meaningful. Your benefits will be measured by the amount of effort put into each lesson. Each lesson will contain reading assignments and discussion starters. It is my prayer that each lesson will be a blessing to all those involved in the study.

Discussion Starters

- Which four books of the Old Testament are set in the empire of Persia?
- What is the correct chronological (historical) sequence of these four books?
- How does Daniel's overnight stay in the lions' den affect King Darius?
- How large is the Persian Empire? What are its boundaries?
- Does the king's decree reach to the far corners of the empire? What effect would that have?
- How is the sovereignty of God demonstrated in the book of Esther?
- What explanation might be offered for the names of God to be omitted from Esther?
- Why do some scholars question the inclusion of Esther in the biblical canon?

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Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 2

As we continue our study of the book of Nehemiah, it will soon become apparent that much of our time will be devoted to a rebuilding of the walls around the city of Jerusalem. Those who are conversant with the political developments in the United States over the last two years will also recognize that wall building has been much debated in our country. President Donald Trump promised repeatedly during his campaign for the presidency that he would build a wall along the southern border to stem the flow of illegal immigrants into the United States. His supporters loudly proclaimed that such a wall is essential to our safety. His critics claim that such a wall would be ineffective, horribly expensive, and anti-American. Wall building has its proponents but also its enemies.

It might be of interest to many of us to know that President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence were the recipients of a well-crafted sermon on inauguration day, January 20, 2017. On that morning, before any of the public festivities started, Reverend Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, met with the two families and some close advisors. Rev. Jeffress delivered an excellent message based on the first chapter of Nehemiah. The title of that sermon was "When God Chooses a Leader." The pastor made numerous explicit references to the building of the wall around Jerusalem. He

also focused on the opposition that came from multiple sources, which were providentially overcome. The primary point, though, was that this election was clearly a case of sovereign control. The new president and vice president were clearly a divine choice. God directed that election so that his outcome would be guaranteed. God was going to take control of our nation's direction. God was going to exercise his sovereignty.

As we reflect on that, we need to go back into the book of Daniel, where God made it plain to King Nebuchadnezzar that it was he who appoints kings and rulers. We see it demonstrated in that first dream that God had planted in his head. In it, he revealed that there was "a stone cut out by no human hand and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces" (Dan. 2:34). He later made it plain to stubborn Nebuchadnezzar and to all of us "that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets it over the lowliest of men" (Dan. 4:17). That same God performed a miracle of shutting lions' mouths so that King Darius of Persia would exalt and praise the God of Daniel, "for he is the living God" (Dan. 6:26). Much later, God spared the lives of Esther and Mordecai so that they became powerful leaders in the Persian Empire. From all indications, it was Queen Esther

who became the stepmother of King Artaxerxes, the God-fearing ruler who commissioned Nehemiah to rebuild the wall.

Sad Reports from Jerusalem

Nehemiah received a report from Hanani in the month Chislev, which would correspond to our November–December calendar, in 446 B.C. Nehemiah makes the claim that Hanani is "one of my brothers." If Hanani is a blood brother, a member of his biological family, that raises interesting questions as to why he is coming from Jerusalem. Is he coming on official business? Is he one of the Jews who had gone to Jerusalem with an earlier migration? Why are these two brothers separated by such vast distances? Why would Hanani make a trip of approximately a thousand miles that takes four months one way? Lynn Austin, a Christian novelist, offers a plausible answer to those questions in *On This Foundation*, a powerful novel about Nehemiah. I recommend it highly.

Nehemiah makes his request to the king in "the month of Nisan," which would be our March–April of 445 B.C. Both of these dates are in the "twentieth year" of King Artaxerxes' reign. This would suggest Nehemiah mulled over that sad situation in Jerusalem for four to six months before he confessed to the king why he was so sad. Nehemiah had been praying that God would make the king sympathetic to his concerns (Neh. 1:11), but he does not approach the king with a request. He waits



Nehemiah's response is a beautiful example of a God-fearing man who loves the church.

for the king to inquire about his sad demeanor (Neh. 2:2). God is answering Nehemiah's prayers, while his Holy Spirit is preparing the mind of the king. Nehemiah knows that his God is sovereign.

Hanani and the men with him offer a bleak picture of conditions in Jerusalem and Judea. Nehemiah's questions are focused not on overall conditions but "on the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem" (Neh. 1:2) The question does not seem to focus on the remnant who had returned and who had built the temple but on a more defined group who had been left behind by Nebuchadnezzar to farm the land (Jer. 52:16) and to those who had fled to Egypt to escape being exiled to Babylon (2 Kings 25:26). Their report is also focused on "those who survived the exile." They report that this "remnant" is "in great trouble and shame." They follow that with the report that "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire" (Neh. 1:3). Nehemiah's response is to hearing "these words," implying that his sorrow is focused on the walls and the gates rather than on the people's condition. The walls and gates had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., so they were in this broken-down condition for 140 years.

The report of Hanani and his men did not focus on the spiritual condition of the church or on the work of Ezra, who had been commissioned to teach the law of God to the people. The last chapters in Ezra would force one to conclude that there was an obedient, worshipful attitude among the people, thus being cause for rejoicing. Hanani's report, therefore, is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Its focus is narrow.

Nehemiah's response is a beautiful example of a God-fearing man who loves the church. He does not engage in cold, analytical reaction but in spiritual concern. He "sat down and wept and mourned for days, and continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." He realizes that God was righteous and holy in his punishment. He confesses the sins of the people but includes himself and his father's house as being guilty. He takes full responsibility for their sins and admits that the people of Judah and Jerusalem had broken all of God's laws and statutes. He then quotes Moses from Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26, along with other passages. He obviously knows his Bible. He also senses the embarrassment to the church and name of God. He is reflecting on a civic junkyard of broken walls, gates, and homes. How humiliating! No repairs for 141 years? Why not?

Nehemiah's prayer has many similarities to that of Daniel. Both men are living in exile, but in different times. Daniel is living earlier and

is a much older man when he utters his prayer. At the time of his prayer, Daniel is living in Persia during the first year of King Darius, shortly after the Persians had overthrown the Babylonians. He is serving in

the royal court. Nehemiah is much younger when he prays, but he is also serving in the court of the Persian king. Neither man would need to take personal responsibility for the sins committed by the

Jews, but both of them put that responsibility on themselves. They are both acting as priests, bringing confession to God for the sins which brought about the destruction of the temple and the city. Both men quote Scripture in their prayers, with Daniel focusing on the writings of Jeremiah, while Nehemiah focuses more on the Pentateuch. Both are pleading with God to be merciful to his bride, the church.

Nehemiah expresses a deep appreciation for the law of God. He obviously had access to Deuteronomy and Leviticus but does not focus on specific laws or commandments. He does not cite a litany of the laws that the people broke but concentrates instead on the covenant themes that come through Deuteronomy. He reminds God of his covenant promises and the promises that God would always be their God and they would always be his people. "You" and "your" are interspersed throughout his prayer. We are "your servants" is a dominant theme.

Discussion Starters

1. What do we learn about Nehemiah in this first chapter? How does his introduction compare with that accorded to Ezra in Ezra 7:1-6? Why the difference?
2. By consulting the chronology and the introduction to this study series, how many years have elapsed between the arrival in Jerusalem of Ezra and Nehemiah? What major events transpired between these two arrivals?
3. How much time had elapsed from the time that Nehemiah had gotten the report (Chislev, v. 1) and Nehemiah's petition to King Artaxerxes in the month Nisan (2:1)? How did Nehemiah occupy that time?
4. How would you characterize Hanani's report of conditions in Judea and Jerusalem at this time? What did he emphasize, and what did he not report?
5. How would you characterize Nehemiah's response to the news he had received? Was that a fitting, appropriate response?
6. How would you compare Nehemiah's prayer with that prayed by Daniel in Daniel 9:1-8? What similarities do you see? What differences are there?
7. What attitudes does Nehemiah express toward the law of God? Did he have access to the Pentateuch? Did he have access to the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel?
8. Based on your reading of Nehemiah 1, how frequently would there have been travel between Jerusalem and Susa? How would that affect communication?
9. Is there divine justification for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem? Are the Jews responding to God's commands or acting out of fear?

Dr. Norman De Jong

is a semi-retired pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.



“All the cunning of the devil is exercised in trying to tear us away from the word.”

Martin Luther

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FRIDAY

4:00PM What was the Reformation?
Prof. Ronald Cammenga

7:00PM The Reformation's Return to
Sola Scriptura *Rev. David Torlach*

8:15PM The Reformation's
Restoration of the Office of Believer
Prof. Barrett Gritters

SATURDAY

8:30AM The Reformation's Recovery
of Right Worship
Rev. Martyn McGeown

10:00AM The Reformation's Response
to the 'Radical Reformation'
Prof. Russell Dykstra

11:15AM The Reformation's Progress in
the Lowlands *Rev. Steven Key*



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RYS Youth Convention Biola University, La Mirada, California

Mr. Tate
Kiledjian

For the last three years The Reformed Youth Service Convention has been the one thing that I look forward to most in the year and fortunately, I have never been disappointed. This year was no different in that case. When I arrived at Biola University in La Mirada, California, for the RYS Youth Convention, I was absolutely buzzing with excitement for the upcoming week. Between the music, the fellowship, the community, the workshops, and the sessions, I knew that this week was going to be amazing. The theme for the week was centered around the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, which happens to be in October this year. The sessions were dedicated to the “5 Solas” of The Reformation which are: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus*, *Sola Fide*, and *Soli deo Gloria*. Rev. Jon Bushnell of Prinsburg, Minnesota and Rev. Ed Marcusse of Salem, Oregon, were the designated main session speakers,

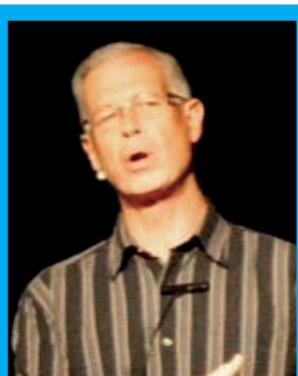
and as we headed into the week I was anxiously anticipating their sessions. Aside from the sessions, I was also enthused about the workshops and the time I would get to spend with friends.

Something about the main session speakers this year really drew me in. Both Rev. Bushnell and Rev. Marcusse have drastically different exhortation styles. Each session I found myself sitting on the edge of my seat. Whether it was the gentle voice of Rev. Bushnell or the authoritative voice of Rev. Marcusse, I was completely absorbed and I left each session with my spirit soaring.

Session #1, was chock full of amazing illustrations from Rev. Bushnell as he explained to us the doctrine of “*Sola Scriptura*,” which means “Scripture Alone.” One such illustration involved Rev. Bushnell dumping a bag of soil onto a table and asking us what the difference was between the dirt and a

poor unfortunate conventioneer in the front row. Rev. Bushnell’s responded by saying that the only difference between them was the breath of God. Using 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5 and this illustration, Rev. Bushnell enforced the authority of the Bible and the proper usage of the Bible.

Session #2 on Tuesday morning was led by Rev. Ed Marcusse who spoke on the doctrine of “*Sola Gratia*” or “Grace Alone.” Rev. Ed Marcusse began by emphasizing the magnitude of our depravity and comparing it with other views in our world. Using a piece of paper, he demonstrated the difference between being slightly wrinkled (not completely depraved) and a burnt pile of ash. This emphasized our need for a Savior and our need for a complete outpouring of grace. Without Christ and God’s grace on us, we are incapable of contributing to our salvation. Another example that resonated with me was



the story of John Newton, the writer of “Amazing Grace.” John Newton was raised as a Christian until his parents died. Afterwards, he began living his life “to the fullness of his sin.” Rev. Ed Marcusse has a way of absolutely blasting through my sin to convict me and make me shrink in my seat. After his conviction he raised me up out of my guilt with the promise of God’s grace and how it is by grace alone we are saved.

Session #3 brought us back to Rev. Jon Bushnell, who spoke this time on the doctrine of “*Solus Christus*” which means “Christ Alone.” Throughout the session Rev. Bushnell talked of the importance of Christ in our lives and how it is through him alone that we are saved. He began by expressing the supremacy of God in our lives and how he is in all and over all. Everything we do is for his glory. Christ’s death and resurrection on the cross was to break us free from the Covenant of Works and place us into the Covenant of Grace that Christ earned for us. Christ was raised so that we may receive the his grace. Rev. Bushnell said a lot of great things, but one thing that stuck in my head was, “My infidelity was crucified on the Cross and Christ’s perfect life was

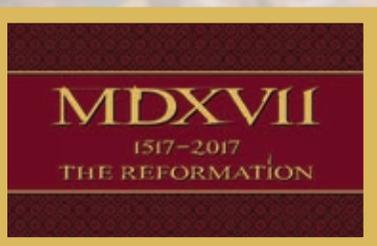
imputed onto me.” He then moved on to instruct us that since we have been given this grace, we must reconcile our sins with God and live for him.

Session #4 allowed for us to hear from Rev. Ed Marcusse again as he spoke about the doctrine of “*Sola Fide*” which means “Faith Alone.” This session spoke to me on a really profound level. Something in the presentation and content of this session made my chest heave. Rev. Marcusse stressed the importance of this doctrine and impressed upon us that we must take ownership of our own faith. We cannot rely on our parents, our church, or friends to maintain and strengthen our faith. We must do this ourselves; otherwise we will perish. He depicts our faith as a canvas and we must use God’s Word as the paintbrush to create a beautiful painting that displays our faith. He emphasized that in order to have a blossoming faith we must have the “Three C’s”: Content, Confession, Commitment. Content pertains to the knowledge in our brain that we have about the Bible. We must have strong biblical knowledge because knowledge is the platform upon which our faith stands. After gaining Content we must Confess the content in our hearts.

The most profound sentence of the entire RYS convention came from Rev. Marcusse when he said, “*Don’t die 18 inches away from heaven.*” Of course this is referring to the distance between someone’s heart and mind. If we do not confess the truth of the Bible in our hearts, then we are going to die eighteen inches away from heaven. After this we must Commit our lives to Christ and living for him.

Finally on the last day, we entered into **Session #5** where we learned of the doctrine of “*Soli Deo Gloria*” which means “Glory to God Alone.” Rev. Bushnell began by explaining that all the other solas point to this one. In all the others, each gives glory to God. Rev. Bushnell spoke to us about how all things come from God, live through God, and all things are to God. He emphasizes that our worship is not about us or how it makes us feel. It is how it gives glory to God. Every decision we make should be to the glory of God, and to God all things are due. Our lives are in service of him.

Outside of the main sessions each conventioneer signed up for five courses that a different pastor would teach: These are called workshops. More often than not there is a mandatory workshop for



men and women. This year there was “Act Like Men” by Rev. Mike Schout of and “The Biblical Woman” by Mrs. Katie Pratt of New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, CA. Both workshops were phenomenal and reassuring to us as young men and women. There were other great workshops like “How to Read the Bible” by Rev. Angelo Contreras of the Zion URC in Ripon, California. Overall, all of the workshops were amazing and I have heard nothing but positivity about all of them and their leaders. The workshops and sessions are all available for listening on the Reformed Youth Services Website.

On Thursday night, there was a talent show that allowed for many people to give glory to God through the gifts they have been given. There were many amazing acts and a few stood out. There were many piano players, a bunch of singers, a karate demonstration, a magician, and a few comedy skits! Each act did an amazing job and it was an amazing night. Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer did a form of karate that in the end had the entire auditorium on their feet! A group of conventioners led by Emily Lieffers from Little Farms, MI, and Willem Pettit

of Hudsonville, MI, did a funny comedy sketch that had many people dying of laughter. There were a few singers who sang with ukuleles! Kees Kiledjian of Chino, CA, and Kaiden Tolkamp of Demotte, IN, did a fun mash-up of songs whose themes had to do with saying “hello.” I also did an act, that involved a ukulele. In my act I sang a song called “The Rainbow Connection” by Kermit the Frog. I accompanied this song with a little bit of comedy and a few impressions of Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy! In the end everyone had a really great night at the talent show and we finished it all off with a beautiful song from the choir.

Each of the main sessions were sandwiched by a time of singing that allowed for the magnificent chorus of 853 believers to rise from our souls and give glory to God. On the first evening we sang the hymn “How Great Thou Art” and as the song progressed the entire auditorium was filled with this feeling of, “RYS is here at last.” The singing is honestly one of the best parts of RYS because it can move you to tears, which was not uncommon. At the last session it is custom to link hands and sing a benediction that goes “My friends, may

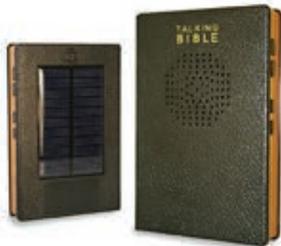
you grow in grace.” This song is really difficult to sing because for us it means that RYS is over and we must say goodbye to the friends that we have made. This convention, for some of us, is the only place where we feel like we belong. Where we feel that we can be ourselves, and where people are accepting, loving, and genuinely interested in you on a personal level. I know I’m not only speaking for myself on this matter when I say this. I have made lifelong friendships even though I have only known some people for 4-12 days. The friendships made at RYS are unlike any in the outside world and it is beautiful. I for one cannot wait for the next year, and I eagerly await the opportunity to learn and to spend time with people who believe the same as I do and who love in the same way I do.

Mr. Tate Kiledjian

is a seventeen-year-old from Chino, CA, and is a senior at Ontario Christian High School and has been in the Reformed church all his life. He enjoys writing and playing volleyball. This is his third RYS youth convention.



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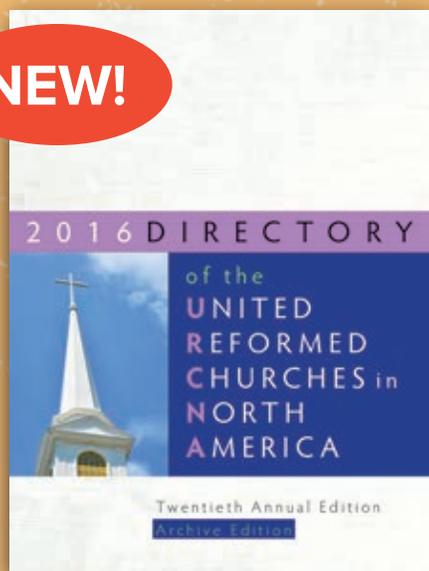
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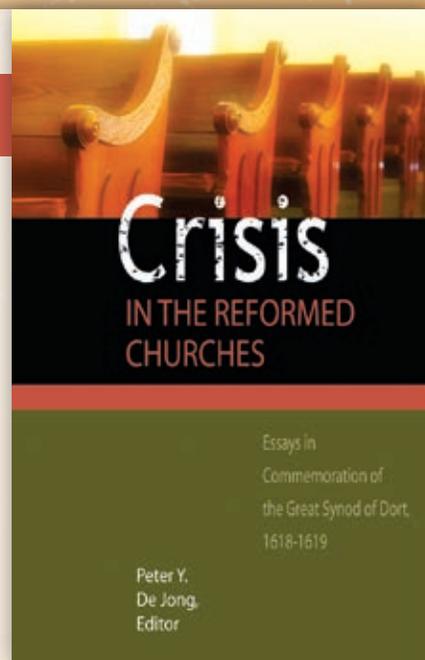
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