

CAMERON D. ARMSTRONG

TREASURING CHRIST IN SEMINARY



AN EXERCISE IN
NARRATIVE PREACHING

FOREWORD BY
Ezekiel A. Ajibade

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Institutes for Orality Strategies
OralityResources.International
Manila, Philippines

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8470 Poinsettia Street, Marcelo Green,

Paranaque, NCR 1700, Philippines

publish@oralityresources.international

<https://oralityresources.international>

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To the anonymous preacher.

Our Lord knows your name.

When I have taught about narrative preaching, students have sometimes asked me where they can read more about it. I have at times recommended certain books with the caution, “Learn from the author’s homiletical methodology, but don’t embrace his [non-evangelical] theology.” Consequently, I am pleased to commend *Treasuring Christ in Seminary*, which does not require that warning. Cameron Armstrong ably explains how a high view of Scripture and evangelical theology are compatible with narrative preaching rightly understood. Sermons from his own ministry illustrate well what he means by “narrative preaching.” I recommend this book, and especially for theological conservatives who have dismissed narrative preaching until now.

GRANT LOVEJOY, PHD

Director of Orality Strategies

International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention

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FOREWORD

As I sit in a hotel room in Lagos, Nigeria, to write the foreword to this book, I have just arrived from Tamale in northern Ghana where, since the beginning of this year 2022, I have been an observer on a Bible Storying training team led by Judy Miller of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB). One defining moment in the training was when the story of Nathan and David was told, and the six usual inductive questions were asked. Responding to the question, "What do you like about this story?" one of the participants said, "I like that when Nathan wanted to bring such a sensitive matter to the attention of King David, he packaged it in a story." Then Coach Judy looked at me and said, "You see, story is not only for children; it is for kings!" When she said this, it was like that lesson from the story had never struck me in that way before.

This is one of the profound truths that Cameron D. Armstrong seeks to establish in *Treasuring Christ in Seminary*. It is not just a pushback on the lie that stories are for children; he has also disproved the fact that theology taught through narrative cannot produce real disciples or that narrative theology cannot be evangelical. And that is a big contribution of this book to evangelical theology. One would have thought Cameron wanted to simply let everyone see and understand his thesis by reading the sermons he preached for a whole week in a Filipino Seminary but dedicating a whole chapter to "Can Narrative Theology Ever Be Evangelical?" is quite significant. While he appreciates Evangelicals' concerns about narrative theology and agrees that there are certain dangers it presents, the

opportunities are too critical for our gospel witness that the best we can do is to redeem rather than ignore it.

The seven sermons published in this book practically illustrate Cameron's position and the idea he intends to project to his target audience. I have preached about the "I am sayings" of Jesus, and I have heard others do the same. Never have I seen each "saying" in its well-set-out narrative context. But Cameron had his style. There are several narrative preaching models, styles and structures out there, depending on who is writing. While he wanted to structure his narrative sermons into an introduction, context, exposition and conclusion, his liberty and dynamism, ultimately, almost made one day or episode different from the other as he preached each sermon for the period of the Spiritual Emphasis Week. Yet something remains constant: each sermon is a product of diligent exegesis and a model of sound biblical and systematic theology.

Some proponents of narrative preaching are opposed to application because that should be left to the hearers. Cameron does not subscribe to this as he aptly applies each "I am saying" in its context and makes it relevant to the hearers. He also seems to capture my position that narrative preaching can be quite effective when a preacher can skillfully blend the inductive and deductive elements. So, as he told the stories, he taught the lessons. Perhaps, most exciting are the rich illustrations coming from the personal experiences of a man who has worked with God for a while, an avid reader, a storyteller, and one who listened to and learned from events happening around him and his family daily.

Treasuring Christ in Seminary is a collection of sermons that were preached at the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary. This spiritual-academic community was so blessed that Cameron D. Armstrong decided to publish the sermons for the whole world to read. It tells that narrative preaching presents such great potential and

opportunity for effective pulpit ministry in contemporary times when 80 per cent of the global population is largely oral. And the fact remains undisputed that everyone likes stories. It tells that one of the ways to treasure Christ is to see the beauty of his words in a rich narrative setting as it was during his earthly ministry, and as Christ would be glad to see us do again in our time. I strongly recommend this book to every preacher, every seminarian, and as many believers who love God's word and want to be blessed by it and share it with others.

EZEKIEL A AJIBADE, PHD

Senior Lecturer in Christian Preaching

Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso

Education Gateway Leader

International Orality Network, Africa

Author

Expository Preaching in Africa: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation

INTRODUCTION

Everyone loves a good story. No matter how old or educated we get, that fact never changes. This is because storying – hearing and telling stories – is an intrinsic part of what makes us human. We were created to love stories because God is himself the Great Storyteller.

Somewhere along the way, we believe the lie that stories are for children. We know this is not actually the case, though, and that the world's greatest storytellers rise to the very heights of power. The world's most powerful people become so because they learn to communicate stories well.

Yet this is not how theology is usually taught. Theology taught via narrative, we are told, is childlike, non-linear, and dangerous. Therefore, theology taught via narrative cannot produce real disciples. At least, that is the narrative we are told. It is an anti-narrative narrative. This book pushes against the anti-narrative narrative. A bit of context is in order.

As you will read in the following pages, I am a Southern Baptist missionary. I love the Scriptures and unashamedly believe in the inerrancy, infallibility, and sufficiency of the Bible. Yet I am also a believer in the use of orality strategies to communicate God's word. Simply put, orality is communication that integrates non-textual mediums such as storytelling, drama, music, dance, and art. Oral communication calls for interactive teaching methods. Oral communication involves all five senses. Oral communication embodies.

As much as 80% of the world prefers to communicate through oral, non-textual means.¹ Yet that statistic is ten years old. Since then, we have gone through a worldwide Covid pandemic that has forced even the most technologically resistant of us to learn to make short videos that may or may not be watched by people with shortening attention spans.

Jesuit scholar Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* gave us terms like *primary oral learners* and *secondary oral learners*.² Primary oral learners cannot read and write and have never encountered written text. Secondary oral learners can read and write but, given the choice, would rather not. That is the world of the 80%. The question becomes, how do we teach them the Scriptures? I believe orality strategies may hold the key. Let me tell you why.

In Fall 2011, I needed one more class to graduate with my M.Div. in Missiology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. My advisor, an ex-IMB missionary to the Philippines named Al James, suggested I take an intensive course over Fall Break called Bible Storying. "Sounds easy enough," was my response. To prepare for the class, I read two books: *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* and *Truth That Sticks*.³ These books introduced me to the reality that, while 80% of the world prefers to learn through non-textual means, over 90% of the world's pastors, missionaries, and ministry leaders learn and teach using highly literate methods. I became fascinated with this reality and decided to employ orality

¹ Grant Lovejoy, "The Extent of Orality: 2012 Update," *Orality Journal* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 29.

² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

³ International Orality Network, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Lima, NY: Elim, 2005); Avery T. Willis and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

strategies that very week in the counseling ministry I was involved in at the Christian crisis pregnancy center down the road, where I counseled the boyfriends of pregnant women.

The result was astounding to me. For weeks I had had difficulty transitioning our conversations to spiritual topics with a high school dropout I was counseling. I'll call him James. "Let me tell you a story from the Bible," I said to James. "I'll tell it to you twice. Then I want you to tell it back to me." So, I told him the story of the First Sin from Genesis 3. James told the story back to me perfectly.

"Does it really say in the Bible that Adam was with Eve when she ate the fruit?" James asked.

"Well, yeah, it does," I answered.

"Let me see that!" Then James did something he had never done before. James reached for the Bible on the shelf beside us and asked me how to find the story. I'll never forget the widening of James' eyes as he read the biblical story for himself, a story he had learned to tell in roughly four minutes. We then had the most spiritually deep conversation about sin, God, and the purpose of marriage. That evening evolved into a weekly "Bible storying" group with other male counselees. I knew I had stumbled onto something significant.⁴

I learned that day in the counseling room that telling Bible stories, and stories in general, can lead to robust theological engagement. In what follows, I take these understandings and apply them in preaching. The book follows the following trajectory. Chapter 1 lays a foundation for how I understand narrative theology. Due to narrative theology's dubious beginnings arising out of a postmodern rejection

⁴ This event led to my pursuing a ThM and PhD in the use of orality in theological education and missions. Now, ten years later, I direct a ThM/PhD program in Orality Studies at Asia Graduate School of Theology – Philippines, hosted at Asian Theological Seminary.

of absolutes, evangelical theologians tend to view narrative theology with suspicion. Some of these cautions are warranted, especially as narrative theologians push against a passage's authorial intent and authentic historicity. Yet the chapter also argues that narrative theology can greatly assist in the task of interpreting biblical texts, specifically narratives, and building a Christian's "biblical theology."

The majority of the book is a series of seven sermon manuscripts. Using the concepts I develop in the first chapter, I preached these sermons in more narrative style.⁵ The context of these sermons is "Spiritual Emphasis Week" at Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary (PBTS) in Baguio, Philippines in late August 2022. Started first by IMB missionaries in the 1950s, PBTS and IMB largely parted ways circa 2005 for a number of practical and theological reasons. For some years, the relationship grew rather cold. Yet the relationship never fully died. Part of my role in coming to the Philippines is to renew that relationship, building bridges and restoring friendships. I am thankful for the warm reception given me by the PBTS community. I am also thankful for the wonderful response to my narrative sermons, which even now a year later faculty and students still reference in conversation.

One other word must be noted. In the sermons, I also employed pictures via PowerPoint. Instead of slides filled with text that no one likes to read (and often read faster than the presenter reading the text aloud), I opted for a multiplicity of pictures taken from various cultures. This would hopefully create both a memorable effect and force the listener to wonder what I would say to explain such an

⁵ I agree with Ezekiel Ajibade, professor of Christian preaching at Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, that the use of orality strategies can lead to effective exposition of a passage, while at the same time assisting in the contextualization process. Ezekiel A. Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2021).

image. For example, for the story of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, I showed an African rendering of the miracle scene with African faces, baskets, and breads.

It is my hope that reproducing these manuscripts here, which I have left virtually unedited, will lead preachers to consider employing oral strategies, especially the use of story, in their preaching. Written to be delivered aloud, receptive readers will also note the attention I take in trying to be culturally sensitive and contextually relevant in a Filipino Baptist seminary, using stories that hopefully relate to seminarians in a cross-cultural, Baptist context.

Everyone loves a good story. The Bible is not only full of good stories; *it is* a good story. Let's learn to tell it.

CAMERON D. ARMSTRONG

Manila, Philippines

1

WHOSE STORY? OR, CAN NARRATIVE THEOLOGY EVER BE EVANGELICAL?⁶

“Tell people a fact and you touch their minds. Tell them a story and you touch their souls.”

– HASIDIC PROVERB

“And you shall remember the whole way the LORD your God has led you.”

– DEUTERONOMY 8:2

INTRODUCTION

My entry into the world of orality and narrative was not a smooth one. I was raised in an evangelical home filled with books, and my college-educated parents taught me never to question the predominant theological pedagogies we learned in church every Sunday. There was, however, a strong emphasis on the performing arts in our home,

⁶ This chapter was originally published in the *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 2 (2023).

<https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3295/4455>

particularly music from my dad and drama from my mom. Christians all from a young age, my siblings and I imbibed this dual emphasis on both evangelicalism⁷ and an appeal to the imaginative. As I grew in my understanding of God and learned to communicate his word through preaching, I assumed the three-point expository sermon was the homiletic apex.⁸ Such sermonizing was precisely what my wonderful professors taught me in seminary. Then came what was, for me, a paradigm shift.

When I was newly married and one course away from graduating with my MDiv, my advisor suggested that I take a course over Fall Break in Bible Storying. The instructor, a long-time missionary with the International Mission Board, required students to read two books prior to day one: *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* and *Truth that Sticks*.⁹ I

⁷ David W. Bebbington defines the term “evangelical” based on four characteristics: biblicism (the authority of Scripture), crucicentrism (the death of Christ on the cross as central to the gospel message), conversionism (the need for sinners separated from God to repent from their sins and believe the gospel), and activism (the belief that all Christians ought to engage in the Great Commission task of making disciples of all nations). David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1930s to the 1980s* (London, UK: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2. I disagree with the common contention that the term “evangelical” be dropped or redefined in light of contemporary political realities. Insofar as Christian groups uphold Bebbington’s fourfold formula, the term remains a helpful qualifier to distinguish from other Christian communities like the Catholic or Orthodox Churches.

⁸ By “three-point expository sermon,” I mean sermons that elucidate, or exposit, a text or passage of Scripture giving a single “main truth” and supporting that truth statement with specific points rooted in the text. Expository preachers often use three points in their sermons. See Ramesh Richards, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

⁹ International Orality Network, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Elim, NY: Lausanne, 2007); Avery T. Willis and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to*

immediately began applying orality and storying in my local ministry, seeing the men I counseled open up to spiritual conversation in ways they never had before. The next year, I studied for a Th.M. on how orality interacts with the evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy.¹⁰ By this point, my wife and I were on the mission field and using storying in our ministries in Romania. I then completed a Ph.D. in Intercultural Education at Biola University on the use of orality in a formal seminary context.¹¹ I now lead a ThM/PhD program in orality missiology in the Philippines.¹²

Needless to say, then, I believe in the power of theologizing through narrative. I also believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. What I do not believe is that the two cannot be reconciled. The task before us is to show that such reconciliation is possible. As my parents taught me, it is possible to remain evangelical while allowing for adjustment and growth based on imaginative communication forms that touch the heart. In what follows, I argue that an evangelical narrative theology takes from and builds upon the best from both worlds—the world of traditional evangelicalism and the world of the oral-narrative nature of Scripture. After defining “narrative theology,” I address evangelical concerns and recent

Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

¹⁰ I later adapted my unpublished ThM thesis for publication in Cameron D. Armstrong, “Contextualization, Biblical Inerrancy, and the Orality Movement,” *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics* vol. 7, no. 1 (2014): 244-304.

¹¹ Cameron D. Armstrong, “Finding Yourself in Stories: Romanian Theology Students’ Experience of Oral-Based Teaching Methods,” PhD diss, Biola University, 2020.

¹² See <https://www.agstphil.org/orality-studies/>. The story of the formation of our program is detailed in Cameron D. Armstrong, “A Graduate Program for Orality Missiology,” *Journal of Asian Mission*, forthcoming Fall 2022.

developments. I conclude by offering five ways scholars might construct an evangelical narrative theology.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE THEOLOGY?

Growing out of a reaction to the unfulfilled promises of modern philosophical theology, namely that single, objective answers exist to solve theological dilemmas, theologians grew skeptical and began exploring new paths to divine understanding. Theologies “after modernity,” or “post-modernity,” emphasize instead the contextual nature of theological perspectives. Narrative theology became one of these perspectives.¹³

According to German theologian Gabriel Fackre,

Narrative theology is discourse about God in the setting of story. Narrative (in its narrow sense) becomes the decisive image for understanding and interpreting faith. Depiction of reality, ultimate and penultimate, in terms of plot, coherence, movement, and climax is at the center of all forms of this kind of talk about God.¹⁴

Narrative theology, then, is primarily concerned with the use of story mediums to communicate who God is. Using the various pieces of story structure, narrative theology believes it is possible to know and understand God through God’s word revealed to God’s people.

¹³ Some scholars label these theological perspectives in the negative, such as “critical,” “liberal,” or “post-liberal.” I prefer the term “narrative theology” since it is more positive in the sense that it describes what it is instead of what it is not.

¹⁴ Gabriel Fackre, “Narrative Theology: An Overview,” *Interpretation* vol. 37, no. 4 (1983): 343, cited in Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 49.

The rub comes as narrative theologians declare knowledge of God cannot be fully analyzed, explained, and exhausted.¹⁵ To use the terms of Grant Osborne, there is a desire to drill deeper into knowing God as our hermeneutics “spiral” further into understanding the narratives of God as expressed through the communities of God.¹⁶ According to narrative theologian Roger Olson, narrative theology lies somewhere between both conservative theology’s search for a single truth and liberal theology’s denial of any truth at all.¹⁷

Could narrative theology be a kind of middle ground? To answer this question, we must examine evangelical concerns and see if they hold up to scrutiny. To the extent that evangelical authors press for narrative theologians to come clean on their belief in the veracity and historicity of biblical narratives, conservative warnings are entirely warranted. Yet if, in fact, these concerns are merely generalizations that fail to appeal to sources or worse, the source of Scripture itself, perhaps it is time for evangelicals to reevaluate narrative theology.

EVANGELICAL CONCERNS

Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson, in his magnum opus taught in theological education institutions the world over, holds that there are five components of theology for it to be Christian. These are:

1. Theology is biblical.

¹⁵ See, for example, Roger E. Olson, “Narrative Theology Explained,” *Patheos*, January 15, 2016, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained/>

¹⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1991).

¹⁷ Roger E. Olson, “Back to the Bible (Almost): Why Yale’s Postliberal Theologians Deserve an Evangelical Hearing,” *Christianity Today*, May 20, 1996: 31-34.

2. Theology is systematic.
3. Theology also relates to the issues of general culture and learning.
4. Theology must also be contemporary.
5. Theology is to be practical.¹⁸

Narrative theology, by definition, draws away from abstract systematizing. Indeed, narrative theology cannot be systematic.¹⁹ While narrative theologians may consider cultural and practical issues, skeptics note the tendency to shun systematic theology and tend to infer that a denial of Erickson's second component necessarily entails a denial of the first. Why?

According to missiologist Charles Van Engen, evangelical theologians charge narrative theologians on multiple counts of mishandling the Scriptures.²⁰ In this section, I address two of the most widespread charges and use quotes from the premier "fathers" of narrative theology.

First, narrative theology, critics charge, denies authorial intent. Often scholars trace the narrative theology discussion to an article by

¹⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, unabridged and one-volume edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 21-22.

¹⁹ South African theologian John Klaasen notes that narrative theology is an attempt to make sense of the world issues that systematic theology fails to address. John Klaasen, "Practical Theology and Narrative: Contours and Markers," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* vol. 3, no. 1 (2017): 457-475. This does not mean, of course, narrative theology is unorganized. On the contrary, narrative theology strives for coherence in developing and "expositing" a biblical narrative.

²⁰ Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 44-68.

H. Richard Niebuhr titled "The Story of our Life."²¹ Niebuhr defends the premise that Christian preaching through the centuries chiefly concerns the proclamation of biblical events in story form:

*The preaching of the early Christian church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience, unhistorical and super-social in character. It was primarily a recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.*²²

Niebuhr does not discount the historical nature of biblical events. On the contrary, it is the confession that Jesus Christ appeared to real people in human history that makes a genuine confession of belief possible. However, Niebuhr hinted in this article that differences exist between Christianity's "external history," meaning the historical course of events, and the "internal history" of the story of the ecclesial community.²³ Although the two innately interact, making this distinction smacks of a Barthian divide between revelation and the natural world. Theology thus became, for many narrative theologians in the line of Niebuhr, a process of "performance" of Christian norms to formulate a Christian identity that may or may not originate in the biblical text.²⁴

²¹ Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 55, no. 4 (1987): 687. Niebuhr's article is reproduced in full in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 21-44. Is there no primary source for the article?

²² *Ibid.*, 21.

²³ "External history is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life." *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ See, for example, David F. Ford, "System, Story, Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology," in Stanley

These thoughts were developed most prominently through the work of theologians of the “Yale School,” particularly Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.²⁵ While the two differ widely in theological method, both agreed that theology arising out of narrative and narrative criticism leads to a Christian character formation rooted in the narrative character of the Christian gospel. Their point is not proving the Bible’s historicity. Their point is ensuring the believer’s transformation.

All well and good, evangelicals respond, yet what is the genesis of theology? If the jumping off point is merely connecting the transformation story of a community, albeit a Christian community, to a biblical narrative, that is insufficient exegesis. Authorial intent is not given the seat of honor it deserves. Thus, if this significant rule of conservative hermeneutics is denied, narrative theology fails to take the Bible seriously.²⁶

Second, evangelicals accuse narrative theologians of downplaying the transcendent God, focusing instead on the stories of

Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 191–215. More recently, Kevin J. Vanhoozer expanded this idea of theology as doctrinal performance via speech–act theory in his influential *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

²⁵ Especially influential are Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CO: Yale Univ., 1980) and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984).

²⁶ See John Frame’s review of George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* in John M. Frame, “Review of Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*,” *The Presbyterian Journal* vol. 43 (1985): 11–12. Frame applauds Lindbeck’s upholding of the importance of doctrine yet decries as “liberal” Lindbeck’s emphasis on doctrinal language as symbols for Christian communities.

immanent Christian communities. Theology, it is said, becomes the story of a religious group (or groups) more than the story of God.²⁷

Like all forms of theology, narrative theology moves from the experiences of biblical characters and principles to the practical outworking in the life of the Church. Grenz and Olson argue that this must be so for theology to be called such. They write, "The genius of narrative theology lies in its assertion that faith entails the joining of our personal stories with the transcendent/immanent story of a religious community and ultimately with the grand narrative of the divine action in the world."²⁸

Narrative theology, then, links our personal stories as part of God's community with the metanarrative of the Scriptures. This ongoing task is by no means heretical until it begins labeling such links "revelation." While few narrative theologians are willing to go this far, evangelicals often suspect such equivocation. One example that flirts with this idea is David Ford's explanation of Christian worship as neither attention to doctrinal truths nor a soul's inner communication with God. Instead, Ford says, Christian worship is a "social meal- and word-centered communication informed by the key events of the Christian story."²⁹ Thus, narrative theologians are said to favor progressive experience over and above revealed truth by relying more on the conclusions of literary criticism about the Bible than on the fact that God says the Bible is his Word.³⁰

²⁷ See, for example, John Frame, "Narrative Theology," The Gospel Coalition, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/narrative-theology/>

²⁸ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 272.

²⁹ David F. Ford, "System, Story, Performance," 201.

³⁰ "Theology is our best human attempt to understand the biblical drama-story and that includes developing canonical-linguistic models (complex metaphors, doctrines) that express its meaning for the church's

These two evangelical charges, denial of authorial intent in interpretation and focusing more on progressive communal experience than the revealed, transcendent God, cause many bristling debates. Yet they are and should be well-noted. Distinguishing between a mystical “biblical-spiritual history” and “external-natural history” will not do, since Christianity’s central claim is that the supernatural truly entered the natural. To quote the evangelical titan Carl F. H. Henry,

Representations of biblical history by many narrative theologians leave one with the uneasy sense that their commendable reservations about the historical method are correlated with a view that important aspects of biblical history belong to a different historical category than the history that contemporary historians investigate . . . Evangelical theism insists that God reveals himself in external history and nature, and supremely in redemptive history.³¹

Evangelical calls are poignant, then, for narrative theologians to choose whether they believe biblical narratives are genuinely historical. Waffling has no place in Christian preaching and discipleship. Sooner or later, we must choose sides.³²

belief and life. But a theologian cannot do that properly unless he or she is ‘living the story’ together with a community of faith shaped by the story.” Roger E. Olson, “Narrative Theology Explained,” Patheos, January 15, 2016, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained/>

³¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 11-12; cited in Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 63.

³² Keven Vanhoozer portrays the discussion a different way. Using the Catholic concept of the “seven deadly sins,” Vanhoozer says that the sin of modernism was Pride in the absolute ability of human reason and ingenuity. The sin of postmodernism that embodies much of narrative theology

REDEEMING NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

While narrative theology presents real dangers, it also presents opportunities. In this section, I present five opportunities for evangelical theology to learn from narrative theology. In this way, theology may take both the Bible and narrative seriously so that narrative theology can be redeemed.

First, narrative appeals to modern readers. The sharing of stories, especially spiritual stories, ignites emotion. Stories inspire, challenge, embolden, model, sadden, encourage, discourage, clarify, humanize, and question. In short, stories generate empathy.

Narrative theologians are quick to point to the ethical nature of stories.³³ Stories instill a community's values into their members. Commenting on the formative essence of narrative for the Church, Grenz and Olson note, "[Narrative theology] rightly calls theology and ethics to consider the role of the Christian community in the formation of believers as people of character."³⁴

Second, narrative is often misunderstood in theological discourse. This is especially true in Christian preaching. Even though preachers know the vast majority of Scripture is narrative,³⁵ most preachers are trained in analytic exegesis that dissects a biblical passage and pulls

proposals, however, is Sloth, due to their refusal to commit to anything. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ., 2003), 23–24.

³³ See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised and updated ed. (New York, NY: Basic, 2011). Alter's work is an excellent example of how studying the Old Testament using literary theory can bring out helpful insights that enhance interpretation, without detracting from historical-grammatical hermeneutics, leading to new ethical insights.

³⁴ Grenz and Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 360.

³⁵ Tom Steffen, "Pedagogical Conversions: From Propositions to Story and Symbol," *Missiology* vol. 38 (2010): 150.

out a single “big idea.”³⁶ Yet, as theologian Albert Mohler notes, such exegesis works well for a passage from Romans but less so for the book of Jonah.³⁷

The result is that either the biblical narratives are not preached at all, which is less likely, or that they could be preached in ways uncharacteristic of the narrative genre, which is more likely. What if a biblical story has more than one main point? Should preachers struggle to condense them into one? The problem then becomes that the preacher may be more faithful to his hermeneutic presuppositions than the biblical narrative he is preaching.³⁸

Third, narrative makes biblical characters more real. Little value comes from understanding the heart of a biblical story if it turns out the characters in that story are merely prototypes propping up a narrative’s (or a sermon’s) main theological principle. Failing to regard biblical characters as real people with real lives and perspectives quite literally drains the lifeblood from them. For example, in a rush to systematize our understanding of the divine-human nature of Christ, Christians may skip over the wonder Jesus’ Jewish friends felt by having a front-row seat to his healing and creating power.

³⁶ This was certainly the case in the Bible Exposition class I took, which leaned heavily on Ramesh Richard’s *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

³⁷ R. Albert Mohler, “The Gospel in Biblical Narrative,” Truth for Life, May 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2In6Qww8ZA8>.

³⁸ Perhaps even deeper, preachers do not consider narrative to be theology, considering it instead jumbled and messy. Writes Charles Van Engen, “The narrative of Scripture intends to be theology – it intends to point to and signify the reality of God.” Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 54. I would caveat it further with the claim that the narrative of Scripture *is* theology – it *does* point to and signify the reality of God.

Taking seriously the thoughts, words, and actions of all the characters in a biblical story will lead to diverse theological paths we would do well to follow. Such “character theology” assists Christian teachers and preachers in connecting with audiences who may not prefer more linear, abstract approaches.³⁹

Fourth, narrative fits the overall biblical story. One stream in which narrative theology has greatly aided the Church is the recovery of thinking of the Bible as a Grand Narrative. This approach is called *biblical theology*, and it has led to helpful discoveries. Christians are taught that, even though the Bible was written by over 40 authors in a span of 1,500 years on several continents, the Bible is one story of a good God who redeems his fallen people. Various parts, or movements, are proposed for this metanarrative. I learned to retell the Grand Story in terms of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Yet beyond the terms we use, the reality that the Bible is intended to be understood as a unified story in which we may all find our place is helpful on multiple fronts, including missionaries doing the hard work of contextualization.⁴⁰

³⁹ “Character theology” is developed in Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 164-195. Using this model, I wrote an advent devotional a few years ago to bring out honor-shame realities. See Cameron D. Armstrong, “Advent Devotional: Honor, Shame, and the First Christmas,” Honorshame.com, <https://honorshame.com/advent-devotional-honor-shame-and-the-first-christmas/>

⁴⁰ Consider, for example, the use of biblical theology among Filipino tribal Christians to counter heretical evangelists. “Tribals Reaching Tribals: A Conversation with Steve and Jen Hagen,” Orality and the Mission of God podcast, September 12, 2022, <https://anchor.fm/oralityandthemissionofgod/episodes/Tribals-Reaching-Tribals-A-Conversation-with-Steve-and-Jen-Hagen-e1nn0n4?fbclid=IwARlieI1swGpbD4fVA58FRMrZCQg5R5pB96cZBHuTqMJgtVV-fw4TCyoyY>

Fifth, narrative provides a less abrasive apologetic. Narrative is essential in soteriology, the study of salvation, because salvation stories “presume the sufficient conditions of a narrative: two states and an event that transforms the first into the second.”⁴¹ In other words, Christians use narrative in explaining not only their own salvation stories, but also the overarching story of the gospel. As Christians tell the story of their lives before Christ, how they met Christ, and the redeemed life since that time, others imagine what it might mean to live such a story. This is especially helpful in interreligious encounters.⁴²

Sharing how our stories dovetail into the biblical story is nothing new, as the Apostle Paul frequently used such an approach in the Book of Acts. Yet an overemphasis on systematically proving abstract statements in our evangelism strategies (God is holy, you are a sinner, etc.), can lead to fear whenever the topic of evangelism arises. Christians fear they are not fully trained in apologetics and doctrine

⁴¹ Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” in Hauerwas and Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?*, 263-264.

⁴² Drawing from Hans Frei’s identification of five types of Christian dialogue with world religions, Malaysian theologian Kang-San Tan advances that dialoguing with religious narratives helps non-Western Christians synthesize their worldview among non-Christian majority cultures in a way that traditional Western systematic theologies often do not. Tan writes, “Evangelicals rooted in a Western epistemology seem good at analyzing but not very good at synthesis; good at splitting fine doctrinal hairs, but not very good at allowing new shoots to grow into indigenous Christianity within the parameters of orthodoxy.” Kang-San Tan, “Hans Frei’s Typology of Theology for Religious Encounters in Asian Contexts,” 279-295, in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2019), 290.

to counter the lies of the enemy. Explanation through stories, however, may deflate those fears.⁴³

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

This article has introduced basic concepts and definitions of narrative theology. Arising out of a postmodern reaction to propositional thought that reduced rich narratives to abstract statements, theologians began to trace and intersect the narrational schemes of biblical stories and their own stories. Evangelical suspicion of a de-emphasis on the historicity of biblical narratives in favor of some sort of ahistorical, spiritual horizon is rightly warranted. That is a dangerous path that is often circular and leads nowhere except apostasy.

Yet a focus on the narrative structure of Scripture, both the individual narratives and the Grand Narrative of the whole, can also lead to a robust biblical theology. Understanding the unfolding plan of God (biblical theology) becomes richer through an informed evangelical narrative theology. As a result, Christians not only begin to locate how biblical narratives fit in the overall canon, but they also begin viewing their own stories as part of God's Story. On an even more personal level, Christians empathize with biblical characters, reliving their perspectives in ways that fortify their faith and spur them forward in the Christian journey. And if that kind of genuine Christian living becomes the result of our teaching, we may rest assured that the God who walked alongside the characters of the Bible will walk alongside our disciples also.

⁴³ "Storytelling evangelism" within community is the thrust of Sam Chan's *Effective Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News About Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018). For the use of story in apologetics, see Josh Chatraw, *Telling A Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

2

TUESDAY AM: I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE (JOHN 6:35)

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by thanking the administration, particularly Dr. Canoy and Doc Mhac Janapin for this great honor of preaching the messages for Spiritual Emphasis Week here at PBTS. Unfortunately, my family couldn't make the trip due to school commitments. As I've mentioned to some of you, we just arrived in the Philippines at the end of March. Before that, we spent ten years with IMB serving in Bucharest, Romania. I taught at the seminary and we were also involved in church planting ministries. In May, Dr. Janapin and I spoke over Zoom and he invited me to come here to Baguio. Everyone in Manila where we live talks about how they love Baguio and finally I can say that I've been there, too, and it is just as great as everyone says. But after talking with Doc Mac, I began praying about what God would have me share here. I began thinking about my own years as a seminary student – what was good, what was not so good, what were some dangers I faced. One of those dangers I think we all face in seminary world is immersing ourselves in studying the Bible while losing sight of the Person our studies point to. In short, we drift towards *treasuring study instead of treasuring Christ*. This is dangerous

because Bible study cannot save us. Only Jesus saves. As it turns out, I'll preach seven times over the next four days, and each time we will look at one of the seven "I Am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. But each time I'll try to remind us that, behind all of this, is a prayer that we who live in seminary world might swim against the riptides that pull us away from Christ.

One summer in college, I think I read the Gospel of John about 20 times. I remember one afternoon sitting and reading the dark crucifixion account from chapter 19, and the brilliant contrast in chapter 20 when Jesus storms out of the tomb and stuns the world. I love the Gospel of John! I love how Jesus uses earthy examples to teach majestic truths. It is one of those paradoxical books of the Bible where you send seekers and new believers to study as they get to know Jesus, yet at the same time it is a book that the most erudite scholars cannot plumb its depths. John Calvin, for example, says this about this Gospel (compared to the other three Gospels): "I am accustomed to say that this Gospel is a key to open the door for the rest; for whoever shall understand the power of Christ, as it is here strikingly portrayed, will afterwards read with advantage what the others relate about the Redeemer who was manifested."⁴⁴ I think he's right.

Like I said, there are seven "I Am" statements (or declarations); each one giving the believer an image/metaphor that allows us to see Jesus and his work a bit differently.⁴⁵ Kind of like a diamond, where each side and angle brings out different colors and sparkles as light scatters and refracts. This morning, we will look at the first "I Am" statement: "I am the bread of life." So, if you will please turn in (or turn

⁴⁴John Calvin, *John Calvin's Commentary on the Bible*, "Introduction the Gospel of John."

⁴⁵There are actually eight, when you include John 8:58: "Before Abraham was, I am."

on) your Bibles with me, I will read aloud John 6:35: *“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”* Will you pray with me as we begin?

CONTEXT

Before getting into interpreting this verse specifically, let’s begin with a word about context. From a wide lens, what is the purpose of the Gospel of John? Interestingly, the Apostle John tells us near the end of his Gospel: *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name”* (John 20:30-31). Lots of people come up with lots of theories about why the Gospel of John is so different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but here John tells us that he has specifically selected events and sayings of Jesus so that we may believe Jesus is the Son of God. As we encounter Jesus through the Gospel of John, the Apostle John’s prayer is that readers come to a saving faith in Christ.

From a narrow lens, this “I Am” statement occurs immediately following Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000. You’ve heard the story: a large crowd is following the miracle-worker Jesus up onto a mountain beside sea of Galilee. Jesus asks Philip, one of his disciples, *“Where will we buy bread for all these people?”* Philip answers, *“Two hundred denarii (about \$500, roughly nine months’ salary at the time) wouldn’t even buy us enough bread for all of them!”* But Peter’s brother, Andrew, finds a boy with five loaves of bread and two fish. So, Jesus has all the people sit down, he thanks God for the loaves and fish, and the disciples begin passing them out for the people to eat. Everyone starts eating and eats as much as they want, and still there were 12 basketfuls left over. The people were so astounded by this miracle that they were ready to make Jesus king on the spot. But Jesus will not

be crowned in that manner (he will be crowned with many crowns, but not like that), so he withdrew by himself and that night walked on water to his disciples' boat and crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It is there, in the little seaside town of Capernaum, where the crowd finds Jesus.

EXPOSITION

To understand this passage of Scripture and how Jesus is the "true bread of life," I believe it is helpful to think in three parts. In keeping with this idea of a diamond, I'll call these parts different "angles" from which we can understand this side of the Jesus Diamond better. The three angles all start with the letter W: The Warning, The Work, and The Wonder.

First, Jesus issues a *warning* to the crowd. After they ask, "Rabbi, when did you come here?", Jesus doesn't answer their question. Instead, he responds that they aren't actually looking for him, but for free food. Verse 36: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves." We would do well to pay attention when Jesus begins sentences with "truly, truly." This is actually a common occurrence in the Gospel of John, and it means Jesus is about to reveal something that may be hidden below the surface. Every "truly, truly" is very convicting. Jesus knows our real motives; he knows our hearts.

Instead of laboring for food that perishes, Jesus says that there exists food that doesn't perish. That is the food we should work to get (v. 27). The word here for "labor" or "work" actually means "toil" or "struggle."⁴⁶ Of the 20 or so translations I read, I like how The Message

⁴⁶ F. B. Meyer, "John 6," *Through the Bible Commentary*, accessed October 2, 2022, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/fbm/john-6.html>

renders this part of the verse: "Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that."

Ok, so what kind of food *should* we strive after? The kind that endures forever. The kind that lasts. The kind that never grows stale. Where can such stale-proof bread be found? Only from a baker with stale-proof ingredients, who is himself stale-proof. "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal" (6:27).

So, what is the warning: If you hope and strive and toil and work for anything less than the bread Jesus gives, you will never be satisfied.

A second angle from which we can look to understand the passage is this: Jesus tells us of the *work* we must do. In contrast to Jesus' indirect, almost cryptic response to the crowd's original question, here the crowd asks a question and Jesus responds point blank directly. "What must we do," they ask, "to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (v. 29). This is astounding to me because it is so simple. Believe in Jesus? Seriously?

If I may make an observation (based on my not-so-world renowned expertise), I truly believe that all of our problems come down to the fact that we want to complicate this verse. Surely there must be more to it than just believe in Jesus?! Think with me about this for a moment. If all we are meant to do to have saving faith is believe that Jesus is who claimed to be, that we can trust him as true, then that means that my salvation is not at all dependent on how holy I am. Instead, my salvation is entirely dependent on who Jesus is as the Son of God. If we encounter Jesus and believe he is who he says he is, the trustworthy Son of God and the only way to the Father, we naturally respond by obeying his commandments (we get

baptized, we pray, we love God and others, we give of our resources, we take the Lord's Supper, and we make disciples).

To this declaration, the crowd demands to know why they should believe in Jesus. "Wait a second, this is simply Joseph the Carpenter's son, right? Are you calling yourself the Messiah? Perform a sign for us, if you want us to believe in you, Jesus!" Honestly, this is amazing that the crowd demands a sign the day after they were all fed full by means of Jesus' *creating power*. Instead, the crowd compares Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 to Moses giving the Israelites manna from heaven (Ex. 16). Moses' miracle was greater, they say, so therefore Jesus cannot be greater than Moses. If it's Moses vs. Jesus, Moses is in the lead.

This discussion brings us to the third angle, which is the most profound. I'm calling this the *wonder*. Actually, Jesus says (and here there is another "truly, truly" where Jesus is about to reveal something spiritually significant), it was not Moses that gave you the manna. It was God. The Father "rained down bread from heaven" to save the Israelites from starvation (Ex. 16:4). This was life-giving bread at precisely the moment they needed it. It is bread that gives life to the world. And, just like the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, who asked for the life-giving water that Jesus spoke of, here the crowds plead, "Sir, give us this bread always" (6:34).

Imagine their astonishment then when Jesus does not give them a map to a hidden well or a formula for creating "true manna." "I am the bread of life," Jesus states plainly. "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Jesus says he is the one who came down from heaven to do to the Father's will, namely to seek and save the lost. Yet that is not all. Not only does Jesus seek and save sinners; he also keeps them. From the beginning, the Father's will has always been to create a people for himself of ransomed and redeemed sinners.

This is an important point. Too often our sermons and our outreach programs focus on bringing people to Jesus instead of teaching them what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Churches often lack a genuine theology of abiding in Christ. This is like trying to fly an airplane with one wing or rejoicing after seeing a baby born and then leaving them to figure out for themselves how to grow. This is like withholding the best and tastiest and most sustaining bread and offering the cheaper stuff instead. If you, Christian, are committed to sharing the gospel with others, do you know how you will help them abide in Christ and continue feeding on the true bread of Christ if they choose to respond positively to Christ's call? Are we effectively expecting people not to believe and follow Jesus?

I spent my first full summer in Romania in 2006 working in Roma gypsy villages. At one point, a friend invited me to his home in a remote village high up on a hill. That week it had been raining a lot, kind of like here in Baguio, and the dirt streets in their section of the village had all turned to mud. Although this family was quite poor, my friend's mom welcomed us with a huge spread of traditional Romanian food. When we arrived late on Friday evening, we put down our bags, washed our hands, and came to the table with growling stomachs. My friend's mom prayed with us, wished us "pofta buna (good appetite)," and then excused herself to trek through rain and mud down the hill to buy a loaf of "good bread" (they had bread but it was not the kind that the region is known for and is certainly more expensive). As much as I begged her to just sit and eat and not go trudging through the mud on my account, she would have none of it.

There are, of course, lots of cultural nuances in this story, such as how bread completes a meal (like rice does here in the Philippines) and honoring your guest, even if it brings you discomfort. The point I want to make, though, is this: my friend's mom knew of the good bread and wanted me to eat *that*, not some cheap stuff that anyone can get at any corner market.

Jesus is here telling us, "Look, the real thing is right in front of you!" But the Jews grumbled. "Surely, Jesus doesn't actually mean what he's saying! He's the bread from heaven? How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Once again, Jesus responds with "truly, truly": "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink" (v. 53-55). But lest we think Jesus is calling us to be cannibals, Jesus adds that the bread of life is "not like the bread the fathers ate and died" (6:58). In other words, the Israelites ate the manna and then had to gather more the next day. The nature of that bread was different, since it could only give physical benefits. But for spiritual nourishment that is life-giving, true "soul food," we need the Bread of Life. Clearly, this preempts the Lord's Supper, in which we as believers in Jesus eat the bread and drink the wine that reminds us of Jesus' broken body and shed blood for sins. Partaking of the Lord's Supper means we are united with Christ and share in his eternal life.

But what was the immediate result of this teaching? The grumblers turn into deserters. "That's not my kind of bread, Jesus. Thanks, but no thanks." So, they leave. Interestingly, Jesus is not surprised and neither should we be. Embedded in this passage is the clear teaching that Jesus knows who are his and those who are not. Just take a look at verse 64: "For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe." Nevertheless, he still shares the truth with them that he is the answer they are looking for. Yet we are told that they are offended by Jesus, and all they really care about are the physical benefits of Jesus' ministry.

We, however, are not Jesus. We cannot know who among us does not actually believe, and is in fact offended by Jesus (or at least Jesus as he portrays himself in the Scriptures). Neither can we know who is yet to believe, and so we share the gospel with everyone. To such a

person I'd say this: My friend, today you've come face to face with the words of Jesus. He is the Bread of Life. Are you striving after bread that tastes good for a moment but cannot last? What steps will you take *today* to take hold of and eat the Bread of Life?

CONCLUSION

So, how do we bring this home? What is the teaching for us – seminary students and faculty and staff needing to refocus, to hit the refresh button just so we can make it through today? Let me ask you this: what sustains you, future pastor? The promise of a big church? We all know the dismal statistics about pastoral longevity (three years on average before calling it quits), and even worse, pastoral depression and suicide (three out of four pastors say they constantly fight depression). What sustains you, Christian scholar? Another publication to add to your CV?

Are we chasing after the wind? Have we forgotten that only Christ satisfies. Pastoral ministry and scholarly service for the Church are noble pursuits. But if we miss Jesus, if we treasure anything else besides Christ, we are lost. Inextricably and undeniably lost. Like the scribe in Mark 12 whom Jesus said was “not far from the kingdom of God.” I like the way Bishop J. C. Ryle put it, “Education alone will never make a Christian in the sight of God . . . If we rest satisfied with being ‘not far from the kingdom,’ we shall find at last that we are shut out forevermore.”⁴⁷

Let me close with a personal story. In spring 2012, just before my wife and I went to the mission field, I decided to pursue a ThM. I was not working at the time, so I blew through this degree fast. My professors began affirming that perhaps I, too, was called to be a

⁴⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1985), 265.

professor someday. That was exciting to hear! I liked that kind of praise! One day as I was researching in the library, I was looking at the journals and I realized there is just no way I can read it all. So, later that day in class, I asked my professor, "How do you stay on top of all the new research in your discipline?" I thought it was a fair question for a budding scholar like myself. The professor got really quiet, looked me in the eye, and said, "Cameron, you start by renouncing idolatry."

That was not the answer I was expecting! But I thought about it, and he's right. If our ultimate goal in coming to seminary is to become the top scholar in our field, the greatest preacher in our generation, or the leading voice of Christianity in our part of the world then we have missed the point. My friends, we are here by God's grace to treasure Christ more deeply. To help others treasure Christ more deeply. To shout to a dying, hungry world, "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

Maybe you need to hear that today, just like I do. Jesus satisfies. Jesus saves.

3

TUESDAY PM: LIGHT OF THE WORLD (JOHN 8:12)

INTRODUCTION

Once there was a man who lived in a deep, dark cave. Let's call him Tom. Tom didn't live alone; he had lots of friends down there. Tom and his friends could never leave their cave, or even visit new parts of their cave. Why? Because they were chained to the wall. With only a flickering flame behind them, Tom and his fellow cave-dwellers spent their days watching their shadows dance along the wall in front of them. The little bit of light from the flame was the only world they knew.

One day, Tom woke up. There's no use saying it was morning because the cave was so dark that it was all the same – they just slept whenever they felt like it. So, one day, Tom woke up and felt a funny sensation on his wrists and ankles. The chains were broken. Tom didn't know what to do. Looking beside him, Tom saw that all his friends were asleep. He didn't want to wake them. After sitting there for a time, Tom decided he'd explore the cave (something he'd wanted to do his whole life). Not much further past the last cave-dweller, Tom noticed the path slanted upward. With great difficulty,

Tom climbed to the mouth of the cave and was blasted by extraordinary light. Imagine, years and years without daylight and then walking into the light. First, Tom hurried back inside the cave, but just as he was about to slide back down the hill, Tom's curiosity got the better of him and he looked out of the cave. For the first time in his life, Tom saw flashing colors, hairy creatures walking on four legs, magnificently small creatures crawling over and between rocks. Tom looked up and saw the unending sky with puffy, white clouds with the promise of spring drizzle. Tom saw it all and knew what he had to do. He had to go back to his friends and family and tell them about this terrifically strange outside world. But when Tom went back down and showed his friends his chains were broken and theirs could be, too, and they could follow him out of the cave, his friends all answered, "No. No, we think we will stay right here where we are safe and comfortable."

Maybe you all have heard this story before. It's an old story that was first told by an ancient Greek philosopher named Socrates.⁴⁸ It's a powerful story that has gripped people for more than 2,000 years. In many ways, that's what education is: helping others see/interpret vast new worlds beyond what they know in order to experience a richer life. There are several levels of Platonic philosophy that I'm sure many people here could discuss far better than I could. But the point I want to make is this: The problem is that such a vision is interesting, but it does not go far enough. We need something bigger.

The Gospel of John offers us the high Christology we need to construct a more robust vision of the world. As we saw this morning, Jesus said that *he* is the only bread that satisfies. Tonight, we will look at the second "I am" statement of Jesus. So, if you have a Bible, please turn in (or turn on) your Bibles to John 8:12-20. <Read verse>

⁴⁸ Socrates' "Analogy of the Cave" as told by Plato in his *Republic*.

What I want to do in these few minutes we have together is this. First, I'll bring us up to speed with the context of this passage. Then, we will look at the two characters and their two destinations. And then, finally, I'll draw out some applications for seminarians like us.

CONTEXT

So, first, how does this passage fit in context? As I said this morning, the Apostle John tells us in chapter 20 that he has selected narrative snapshots from the three-year ministry of Jesus on earth so that 1) we might *believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, and 2) *have life in his name* (20:30-31). So, we want to keep these things in mind whenever we're interpreting a passage from the Gospel of John.

We saw this morning that Jesus' words deeply encouraged some of the crowd, specifically those that know they are broken sinners. But his words deeply troubled others, mainly the religious leaders who knew and love the Torah. Some scholars believe that these guys spent up to 18 hours per day studying the Torah (I don't even know if I'm awake 18 hours/day!). So, the grand discussion is: Who really is Jesus? Can this man really be the Christ that we've been waiting for? Jesus says he comes from God, but does he really? In chapter 7, the chapter in between the Bread of Life passage and this morning's passage at the beginning of chapter 8, the Pharisees go so far as to send officers to arrest Jesus, but the officers are so mesmerized by Jesus' teaching that they cannot go through with it.

So, the scribes and Pharisees go and try to trap Jesus themselves. They come dragging along a woman caught in adultery, an ashamed, dejected sinner who knew exactly what was going to happen now that her sin had been found out. Throwing her on the ground at Jesus' feet, the leaders trap Jesus with a test: shouldn't we stone this hooker, Jesus? Then we hear the gentle heart of Jesus, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her"

(8:8). With one merciful sentence from Jesus, the leaders retreat in defeat.

TWO CHARACTERS; TWO DESTINATIONS

This brings us to our passage this evening in John 8:12, which reads, "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Now, you may know that the episode with the woman caught in adultery, whom Jesus responds to so tenderly, is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John. We don't have time to go into all that here, but personally I don't have an issue with it based on the context I just mentioned. The Pharisees feel threatened by Jesus, they send officers to arrest Jesus, but they don't, so they go themselves and confront Jesus. Whether you place John 8:1-12 here or not doesn't really change the fact that the line between the leaders and Jesus is now clearly drawn. Perhaps even drawn in the sand, as it were. Thus, we have the great struggle in the Gospel of John: those who believe Jesus is the Son of God versus those who don't. And remember, John wrote his gospel for the purpose that we *would* believe Jesus is the Son of God.

In the tenth verse of chapter eight, we read that Jesus was in Jerusalem celebrating the Feast of Booths (also called the Feast of Tabernacles). This was one of the three "pilgrimage feasts" of the Jews. Every year around mid-October, Jews traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest. God commanded Moses in Leviticus 23 that this would be a seven-day feast and the people would construct wooden booths to live in for the week. Leviticus 23:42-43: "You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Imagine the hundreds of rows of booths surrounding Jerusalem.

During the Feast of Booths, the priests would light four enormous lamps in the Court of Women in the Temple.⁴⁹ So, it is very possible that this was the setting. Jesus in the Temple. Everyone looking at these magnificent lamps, which had been burning bright for seven days, and Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world."

As I'm sure you're all aware, light is symbolic for all of the world's religions (both theistic and atheistic). Even secular humanists call on the "light of knowledge" or the "light of wisdom." Animistic religions identify the sun with divinity, such as the ancient Egyptian god, Ra, Apollo of the Greeks, or the Hindu god, Surya. But in the Bible, there is a qualitative difference between the sun and the sun's Creator, Yahweh, the LORD. The Jews, though, were familiar with references like Psalm 27:1, where David declares, "The Lord is my light." The very Feast of Booths that brought them all together in Jerusalem celebrated the Exodus, where God heard the cries of his enslaved people and led them out of Egypt with a great cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.⁵⁰ Dancing flames guided the Israelites to safety, and they knew God was with them. For Jesus to identify himself with that kind of imagery meant no less than he was the God from within those great spiraling flames.

As you can imagine, the Pharisees are ready to fight. "You're bearing witness about yourself. Your testimony isn't true!" "Actually," Jesus says, "my testimony is true. Your Law says you need two witnesses for a testimony to be true. Ok, I am one and my Father is the other." "Well, where is your Father, Jesus?" "You don't know the Father at all. And you don't know me. If you knew me, you'd know the Father." John gives us a hint here that this dialogue tipped off the Pharisees

⁴⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1991), 337.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

that Jesus was equating himself with God and that he ought to be arrested and stopped. But his “hour had not yet come” (8:20).

As I said earlier, there are two characters here, two types of followers, going to two different destinations. First, Jesus says that there are those who follow him. These people, Jesus says, do a number of things:

- They do not walk in darkness, meaning their eyes have been opened to the light
- They believe that Jesus’ testimony about himself is true
- They know the Father.

But, the opposite is true for the other character, the other group. There are people, Jesus says, who do not follow him. Jesus said these people also do a number of things:

- They walk in darkness, stumbling through life without light
- They do not believe Jesus’ testimony about himself is true
- They do not know the Father

Will the second group be saved in the end? Not according to Jesus. Not if they do not believe in him. One commentator put it like this: “He – no one else beside him – is that light, for it is only in and through him that God’s glorious attributes shine forth most brilliantly in the midst of the world.”⁵¹ Most scholars agree that Jesus’ statement, “I am the light,” echoes some of the words John chose to begin his Gospel: “In him [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:4-5). And then later in his life, when the Apostle John is old and the Roman

⁵¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, New Testament Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1954), 41.

authorities are closing in on him, ready to exile him to a tiny rock in the sea called Patmos, John still can't get over this image of Jesus as light:

This is the message that we heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:5-7)

Walk in the light. It is the only way to be cleansed and forgiven from all our sin. And when he says "all our sin," it means even the dark corners of your soul that you are ashamed to expose even your spouse. It is there, in those darkest of places, that the light graciously shines, and we receive forgiveness and "grace that is greater than all our sin."

APPLICATIONS FOR SEMINARIANS

I want to move now to applications for our lives. Here we are in this beautiful seminary. Maybe you're watching from home. But you have felt the call of God in your life to spread the good news that Jesus saves with others, whether down the street or around the world.

Church leaders have affirmed that calling and sent you here to PBTS to prepare for a life of holiness and compassion and ministry. What does it mean for you and for me today that Jesus is our light? Let me briefly ask five questions based on the passage we just read.

1. Seminarian, are you following Jesus? This perhaps seems like an odd question to ask a group of seminary students. On one hand, it's like asking people at McDonalds, "Do you like cheeseburgers?" Actually, it's not that simple. People go to seminary for lots of different reasons. Most people want to go into ministry of some sort and so they are willing to study a few years to become better preachers or Bible teachers or worship

leaders or missionaries or whatever. Some people are quite good at sounding Christian. They've mastered the "Christianese." Deep down, they know that this act can't last forever. Sooner or later, light will shine, and they will be exposed. Are you following Jesus?

2. Seminarian, are you walking in the light? Maybe you say, "Yes, I'm following Jesus. But my life right now certainly doesn't look like it. It's ok for you to preach following Jesus, but don't ask me about my life, man. Walking in the light? I'll get around to that after this semester." My friend, you are on a slippery slope that leads away from Jesus. Believe me, life only gets busier the older you get. Walk with Jesus now in seminary and there's a good chance you'll walk with Jesus after seminary, too.
3. Seminarian, do you believe Jesus' testimony about himself? One of the reasons people like the Gospel of John is because it is specific: *the* light. Not *a* light. Not *one of the great* lights. Not *a small light that points to a bigger light*. If we preach and teach and write, either implicitly or explicitly, that Jesus is not the single light that gives light to all men then it is not Jesus whom we are preaching and teaching and writing. We would do well to take our cue from St. Augustine: "If you believe what you like in the Gospels, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospels you believe, but ourselves."
4. Seminarian, do you celebrate your life in Christ? The gospel is the good news that Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth to save sinners like you and me by living the sinless life we could not, dying a horrible death on the Cross that we should have, and rising again victoriously on the third day, thereby reconciling God and man. My friend, if you have embraced this gospel it is cause for glorious celebration. As I said a few weeks back to our church in Manila where I regularly preach, our sin

marks us with a scarlet target for God's wrath, but Jesus' sacrifice washes us whiter than snow. Do you believe that? Do you realize how amazing a gift it is that today you stand forgiven before the Father for no other reason than because Jesus mercifully died for you?

5. Seminarian, do you believe that the world waits in darkness? The Bible says there are two kinds of people: followers of Jesus who walk in the light and enemies of Jesus who walk in darkness. Try as we might, Jesus did not give us a third option. Light or darkness. Life or death. Praise God that many of us have been called "out of darkness into God's marvelous light!" But if light and life are only found in Jesus, and millions still do not know the light and life of Jesus, it is up to us to go. It is up to us to say "yes" to the call to proclaim freedom to the captives and hope to the broken, to speak life and bring light where today there is only darkness and death. Can you answer "yes" to these questions?

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by returning to Socrates' cave. The man I named Tom breaks free. He climbs up the steep hill. He's blinded at first by the light but decides the pain is worth it to experience the unknown world. He pities his friends who won't break free themselves.

My friends, that's an interesting story but we are called to more than that. There is more to life than simply helping others break free intellectually and psychologically, as important as that is. Because enlightenment or self-actualization or "wokeness" is a windy, sometimes even circular, dead-end path to nowhere. What we believe is that light and life is possible only in Jesus. If that is what we are after in our seminary studies, if knowing Jesus and drawing near

to him and calling others to do the same is the great purpose behind it all, then what we are doing here matters. It matters for eternity.

So, let me close with the question: What does the world really need from you? Does the world need you to work hard so you can save it? Or does the world need you to show it the light that alone has the power to save? Are you pointing people to the light?

4

WEDNESDAY AM: I AM THE DOOR FOR THE SHEEP (JOHN 10:1-10)

INTRODUCTION

My wife, Jessica, and I moved to the mission field in October 2012. We spent ten years in Bucharest, Romania, where I taught at the Bucharest Baptist Seminary, and we were also involved in church planting work. Like I mentioned yesterday to some of you, my wife is a high school math teacher who taught for several years in the United States before we moved to Romania. When we got married, I was finishing my MDiv degree and was pretty sure I knew theology. After all, I had almost *mastered divinity*! She was lucky to be married to such a smart guy, I thought. Oh, how God humbles us!

Just a few short months before we left for the mission field, my wife and I were attending our weekly, Wednesday evening small group. The discussion was about church – what makes up a true church and what does not? It was a lively discussion, especially since 8 of the 10 of us in the room were all seminary students. Finally, somebody asked the important question, “Well, what is a church?” All of us intellectual seminary students started throwing around big words like “ecclesiology” and “soteriology,” but that didn’t seem to

help. I'll never forget my friend Alex finally saying, "I could give you Dr. Hammett's book, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*." So, then we launched into a discussion about that book and never came back to answering the question: what is a church. On the ride home back to our apartment that evening, my wife, one of the two non-seminary small group members there that night, said, "It's funny that you all never answered that question. I would have just opened the Bible to Acts 2."

My friends, the question we have to consider is this: where are we leading others? All of us are called to be church leaders. People are watching us. We are modeling for them how to think about and relate to Jesus. We will always reproduce in others what we are ourselves. Perhaps our need is to reevaluate our calling as leaders called to shepherd God's people. The best way to do that is to look to our Good Shepherd. In John 10, Jesus gives two "I am" statements. If you are just joining us, that is what we are doing this week: looking at the seven "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John with the overarching goal of learning to treasure Christ during our seminary years (whether that is three or four years or thirty or forty years). We will look at the first this morning and the second this evening. So, please open with me to John 10:1-12. <Read>

CONTEXT

Again, we always want to place passages in context. We want to see, as much as possible, how a specific set of verses fits within the chapter, the book, and the overall biblical story. The Apostle John, as we've seen, is chiefly concerned with proving to us that Jesus is the Son of God and that we should believe in him (20:30-31). Yesterday morning we looked at how Jesus called himself the "bread of life" (John 6) that truly satisfies. Last night we talked about how Jesus called himself the "light" (John 8). The Gospel of John is interesting because it is different, as you all know, from the other Gospels. That's

why we call Matthew, Mark, and Luke the Synoptic Gospels since they contain much the same information with slight nuances. But in the Gospel of John, there's several different stories and different sayings of Jesus. It is also much more concentrated in its time frame. Roughly half of the Gospel of John focuses on the end of Jesus' ministry on earth, the Last Supper narrative and the crucifixion and the resurrection, which is more than any other Gospel.

Sandwiched in between Jesus' statement of "I am the light" and "I am the door" is an amazing narrative. Here's what happened. As Jesus was walking out of the temple, having just declared himself greater even than Abraham,⁵² he saw a blind man (blind from birth even!). So, the disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned to make this man blind? This man or his parents?" But Jesus said, "It wasn't this man or his parents. He was born blind so that the power of God might be seen in him. We have to do God's work while it's still daytime, because night is coming when we won't be able to work. But while I'm here, I'm the light of the world." Then Jesus spit on the ground and stirred it up to make mud, smeared it over the man's eyes, and said to the man, "Go, wash in the pool there." So, the man went and washed and came back seeing!

But the people didn't believe he was the man who was blind. People were asking him, "Who healed you? What happened?" And even though he told them what happened, they dragged him before the religious leaders and made him say it again and again. Afterwards, Jesus found the man and asked him, "Do you believe in

⁵² John 8:58: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'" This is actually an eighth "I Am" statement, but since it is not a metaphor like the others, most people say there are seven "I Am" statements in John. Nevertheless, this is the most direct and thereby the greatest of the statements.

the Son of Man?" "Well, who is he, Lord, that I can believe in him." "I am," Jesus said. "Lord, I believe," said the man. And he worshipped Jesus.

Look with me in John 9:39-41 at how this story ends: Jesus states, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt (or sin); but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."

FOUR ROLES OF GOOD SHEPHERDS

So, we come to the beginning of John 10. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. These are the primary teachers of the Jewish religion. They spent hours reading the Old Testament, especially the Torah, and studying it and analyzing it. Because of that, they were considered the holiest people in Israel. But they also added laws on top of the OT laws, thinking that these extra laws would be like extra protection. So, for example, the Torah says, "Don't work on the Sabbath." So, the Pharisees added extra layers to help people figure out what that meant. "Don't work on the Sabbath" then became, "You can get only enough milk from your cow for one swallow," or "Don't carry a heavy spoon." But then heavy had to be defined. And on and on it went.

Jesus called these people "blind guides." They were supposed to shepherd God's people, but they were not. Because a blind shepherd is not a good shepherd. Why? What makes a good shepherd? What is a good shepherd supposed to do, according to Jesus? Let me suggest four roles of good shepherds based on these first ten verses of chapter 10 (and then tonight I will refer back to them).

First, good shepherds enter by the door. In verse 1, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber." Remember, he just finished speaking to the Pharisees, so that's the

context. These spiritually blind men who claim they can see, they are not good shepherds. They are thieves and robbers, trying to snatch the sheep that belong to someone else. Sheep stealers, not shepherds. In contrast, verse 2: “But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.” The good shepherd knows the correct door because he’s been through it himself. He doesn’t go trying to find his own way in.

How many examples must we endure year after year after year of our heroes in the faith whose sin has destroyed them? Mark Driscoll. Ravi Zacharias. Great preachers we all listened to and devoured their books in college and seminary. But have you ever heard the name Charles Templeton?

Charles Templeton was a Canadian who died about 20 years ago. At the age of 21, Charles Templeton earned international recognition as an evangelist. He began touring around the world with a man even younger than himself named Billy Graham. But between the two, all the newspapers agreed that Templeton was the more gifted preacher. In the late 1950s, Charles Templeton began doubting the Christian faith he was preaching. He went through a divorce and left ministry altogether, eventually declaring himself agnostic. At the end of his life, Templeton did an interview with Christian author Lee Strobel (*Case for Christ*). Templeton acknowledged, “I miss Jesus” and the life he had before, but he said it was too late.⁵³ Templeton was too far gone.

Second, good shepherds call to the sheep. Speaking of the actual shepherd, who enters through the door, Jesus says, “To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own

⁵³ Justin Taylor, “Charles Templeton: Missing Jesus,” The Gospel Coalition, 2013, May 9, accessed October 2, 2022 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/charles-templeton-missing-jesus/>

sheep by name and leads them out.” Or, the old KJV, “To him the porter openeth.”

I don't know if you've ever spent much time around sheep. I'm told it's not a big industry here in the Philippines, although you might have more sheep up here in Baguio area. I mentioned yesterday that, before moving to Manila in March, our family lived in Romania for ten years. We lived in the heart of Bucharest, the capital, so, not a lot of sheep there. But whenever we would leave the city, we'd see lots of sheep in the fields beside the road/train tracks. Usually the shepherds (on their cell phones) would often have at least one dog along with them to help them out.

This was not the case in Jesus' time (and still isn't in Israel). Shepherds called to the sheep. The sheep got to know the voice of the shepherd. It was soothing to them. It let the sheep know they weren't alone if suddenly danger struck. The shepherd would call to them from inside the sheepfold. In Jesus' time, sheepfolds were large stone structures with an opening at one end. This opening was guarded by a gatekeeper, or a doorkeeper, who let only authorized people in near the sheep.⁵⁴ This is the image to keep in mind: The gatekeeper opens the door for the good shepherd, who calls to the sheep that he knows by name.

Third, good shepherds lead the sheep. New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce says it beautifully, “In the picture here drawn by Jesus, it is the personal bond between the shepherd and his sheep that keeps them together as they follow his guidance.”⁵⁵ The shepherd goes into the sheepfold, calls the sheep, and leads them out. And then what? Verse 4: “When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” How comforting a thought

⁵⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 224.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

that, as the shepherd leads, they know that where they are going is somewhere safe.

A lot of preachers wax eloquent about how sheep are smelly and not the smartest of animals. That's true, but we are not talking about thoughtless sheep following the shepherd as if in some sort of zombie-like trance. The sheep follow the shepherd because they *trust* the shepherd. He's been good to us before, so I think we can trust him to be good to us this time, too. He leads them out. He goes before them. Verse 5 says the sheep won't follow just anyone with a strong voice, but they will follow the one who has faithfully led them before.

Finally, good shepherds give life to the sheep. Read with me verses 7-10:

So Jesus again said to them (this is after they didn't understand), "Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Thieves and robbers, evil shepherds, whose main objective is to steal sheep, lead them away from the door. To use the words of D. A. Carson, thieves come in and "brutalize" the sheep.⁵⁶ Good shepherds point to sheep to the one door. Where does it open to? To life. Life for the sheep can only come by opening that door. Let us be careful in examining which door we are really pointing people toward.

⁵⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 381.

QUESTIONS FOR UNDER SHEPHERDS

Imagine the division these words caused as Jesus contrasted himself, the Good Shepherd, with the Pharisees, whom he had just called blind guides, thieves, and robbers. They were not shepherding as their calling demanded, Jesus said.

So, now let me turn the conversation to us. How are we as Christian leaders (seminary students, pastors, preachers, teachers, worship leaders, missionaries, professors) meant to respond when Jesus says, "I am the door." Just like I gave four roles of good shepherds, let me ask four questions that I hope will stimulate thinking and maybe even cause us to reevaluate our approach to ministry, especially the ministry of studying and teaching the word of God.

1. *Have you entered the door yourself?* This should be self-evident, but it is not. There are so many examples of male and female church leaders who build great ministries, something happens and their sin is exposed, and then they fall with a mighty crash. Like an earthquake that suddenly strikes and it takes years to repair the damage, mighty ministers crumble and crash and their families and friends and churches suffer for their sin. You know what happened to Charles Templeton? He went to seminary. He enrolled in Princeton Seminary in 1949, the historical criticism crushed his faith, and he renounced the faith that he had preached so boldly around the world and claimed it had all just been a fun game. Don't play the game, my friends.
2. *Are you calling people to listen to Jesus?* You can build a successful ministry with a huge following if you're decent with words. Words are powerful. Short, thoughtful posts on Facebook and Twitter turn heads and may even make people come listen to you preach. But if you and I were to analyze each other's posts and preaching and the words we say each

day, would we find that it's Jesus we're calling people to? Or are we somehow calling people to something else? Preaching, as I understand it, is only "good" if you finish and people say, "Wow, what a merciful Savior is Jesus!" It is Jesus who saves, not Cameron. God forbid if people ever walk away from my preaching and say, "Yes, I want to follow Cameron!" God forbid it.

3. *Are you leading in a way that honors Christ?* We will talk more about leading like Jesus tonight, but I do want to ask this question here this morning. Do others see you following Christ? Because if they do, then they will willingly follow you as you follow Jesus. It is almost cliché to say that church leaders are often the most guilty of authoritative, forceful leadership. Why? Because it's tempting. It's tempting for both the leader and the follower. Let's follow the logic here. If you've been to seminary, that means you know God's word better than me, and that means you're probably right when you ask me to do this thing because you have God on your side. Who am I as an unlearned person to question you, an intellectual giant who uses big words like *sanctification* and *propitiation*? My friend, if that is you (and it was and still is me on a number of occasions), then you need to put away your words of sanctification and propitiation and practice some self-mortification! We need to die to self. We need a healthy dose of humility, to remember that we are no more saved than our mom or cousin or church member who never went to seminary. When we start to acknowledge that, we begin the process of loosening our grip on people and pointing them instead to the Good Shepherd.
4. *Is your ministry life-giving?* Another way to ask this is, do people feel freer to follow Jesus because your life empowers them to do so? Remember, the thief comes to steal and kill

and destroy. Jesus has come to give life abundant. What do you need to let go of today so that the people you work with and teach and mentor leave your ministry feeling empowered to live boldly for Christ? Remember, my friend, you will always reproduce what you are. What are we really modeling for the world?

CONCLUSION

I'd like to conclude this message by asking us all to stand. Let's read together the words of Psalm 23 (NLT), letting the words wash over us as we think about Jesus, our Good Shepherd who leads us well:

The Lord is my shepherd;

I have all that I need.

² *He lets me rest in green meadows;*

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

³ *He renews my strength.*

He guides me along right paths,

bringing honor to his name.

⁴ *Even when I walk*

through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid,

for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff

protect and comfort me.

⁵ *You prepare a feast for me*

in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

⁶ *Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me*

all the days of my life,

I Am the Door for the Sheep

*and I will live in the house of the Lord
forever.*

Will you pray with me?

5

WEDNESDAY PM: I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD (JOHN 10:11-21)

INTRODUCTION

I'd like us to begin a bit differently tonight. I'm going to tell a short story from the Bible. Then I'm going to tell the story again a second time. Then I'd like you to tell the story to your neighbor next to you. After both of you have told the story to each other, then we will move on with the message for tonight.

Once there were two men who decided they'd go up to the temple to pray. They entered at the same time. One was a well-known priest and the other one was an a tax man who no one really liked. The well-known priest went to the front of the temple, lifted his hands to heaven, and prayed out loud with his booming preacher voice like this: "Oh God, I thank you that you have not made me like other men. I don't lie or cheat or steal. I don't sleep around. I fast twice a week and tithe my money to the church. Thank you, God, that I'm not at all like this sinful tax man behind me." But the tax man stood way in the back and wouldn't even lift his eyes up to heaven. Instead, he beat on his chest and prayed quietly, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Jesus ended this story from Luke 18 with these words: "I tell you, this man (the tax man) went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

<Tell this story twice>

You see, we know that Jesus is gentle and lowly toward people that know they are sinners. But for people who are proud and tend to minimize their sin, Jesus' words cut like a double-edged sword right through us. In the wonderful book *Gentle and Lowly*, Pastor Dane Ortlund reminds us that Jesus' heart for sinners is to deal gently with us. He says:

What elicits tenderness from Jesus is not the severity of the sin but whether the sinner comes to him. Whatever our offense, he deals gently with us. If we never come to him, we will experience a judgment so fierce it will be like a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth at us. If we do come to him, as fierce as his lion-like judgment would have been against us, so deep will be his lamb-like tenderness for us . . . To no one will Jesus be neutral.⁵⁷

Tonight, as we continue through John 10, we will look at one of these passages where Jesus speaks of both his love and his judgment. So, if you have a Bible, please turn with me to John 10:11-21. <Read>

The question we want to ask ourselves as we go through this passage this evening is this: am I shepherding like Jesus? To answer this question, we will have to first ask: How does Jesus shepherd his sheep? Let me begin by giving some brief context.

⁵⁷ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 54.

CONTEXT

We saw this morning that this passage in John 10 follows the narrative of Jesus' healing of the blind man. Blind from birth, Jesus saw him on his way out of the Temple and healed him. But no one believed the he had been blind and healed, even though he kept saying, "Yes! Yes, I am the man." They even called his parents to confirm it, which they did, and this only confused everyone all the more. Then the religious leaders ask the man, "Were you healed? Is the healer from God?" The man responds, "Well, yeah! Of course! He must be!" Then Jesus says something amazing: The Pharisees, these great teachers of the Torah, are spiritually blind. So, the teachers of the people, who lead and shepherd the people and tell them how to follow God, are not good shepherds. They are blind shepherds.

So, Jesus contrasts these bad shepherds with good shepherds, ones who know the correct path and lead the sheep in and out of the correct door. The sheep know *that* shepherd's voice and trust him and follow him, because they know that he cares for them and will lead them safely to green pastures and beside still waters and that he will restore their soul.

Jesus says in verse 7, "I am the door of the sheep." There aren't any others. Only through Jesus can God's sheep find safety and satisfaction and renewal. I don't know about you, but I could use some renewal this evening.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Before we dig into these verses in John 10, we should pause and think about the Old Testament background for Jesus' talk about a single shepherd. This morning we read Psalm 23, which begins, "The Lord is my shepherd." Another Psalm that starts out like this is Psalm 80: "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Jacob like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth!" These psalms are

addressing not just any shepherd, but the Most High God. Obviously, we have several examples in the Old Testament of shepherds: Abel, Jacob, Moses, David. The Pharisees and the Jews listening to this dialogue in John 10 knew all these things. But they also knew something else.

The prophet Ezekiel was kind of an odd guy. At times he was engraving a city on a brick and building little walls around it to symbolize the siege of Jerusalem. Then he laid on his left side for 390 days, then afterward he flipped over and laid there for 40 days – all this symbolized the exile. Another time God asked him to take a sword and use it to shave his head and beard and divide the hair in three sections. He also saw scary visions of God on his throne. But in chapter 34, we read that God asked Ezekiel to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, the leaders of God's people. Look with me at Ezekiel 34:1-6 (NLT):

Then this message came to me from the Lord: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign Lord: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.

God is angry with the leaders because they haven't done their job as shepherds. They haven't fed the sheep, and now they are starving. They haven't taken care of the weak or the injured or gone looking for the lost sheep, who might be eaten up by wild animals. Instead, the shepherds take for themselves the best meat and rule with harshness and cruelty. So, what will God do to these lazy, gluttonous shepherds? Verses 7-10 (NLT):

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Lord, you abandoned my flock and left them to be attacked by every wild animal. And though you were my shepherds, you didn't search for my sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I now consider these shepherds my enemies, and I will hold them responsible for what has happened to my flock. I will take away their right to feed the flock, and I will stop them from feeding themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey.

And then, some of the most beautiful words in Scripture, verses 11-16 (NLT):

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I

myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign Lord. I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

What a promise!

So, this prophecy that God would act as the true shepherd had both an immediate fulfillment and a distant fulfillment. This idea is what some scholars call “foregrounding.” Just like with mountains, there are some you can see well because they are closer, but others you can barely glimpse their outlines because they are so far away. The more immediate fulfillment of this prophecy happened when God led Ezra and Nehemiah and the exiles back to Jerusalem. The distant fulfillment would come with the revealing of the Anointed One, the Messiah.

Thus, as we will see in John 10, Jesus declares himself to be the Good Shepherd. This is a big deal, and the Pharisees know it. Identify yourself as the Divine Shepherd from Ezekiel 34? They won’t let this one go without a fight.

How does Jesus shepherd? According to John 10, beginning in verse 11, it is Jesus’ self-sacrifice that distinguishes him from the other shepherds. Verse 11: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” The Greek here implies not just *for the sheep*, but also *in the place of* the sheep. The good shepherd is not just willing to die, but he actually does die in the place of the sheep. This is one of the reasons this passage is so powerful, because it

points to the Cross.⁵⁸ There the good shepherd will lay down his life of his own accord, Jesus said later in verse 18.

Other shepherds are unwilling to do this, Jesus said. Verse 12 says, “He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.” The sheep don’t belong to this guy; he’s just in it for the money. Maybe he can brag about it to his friends and family and his mom can tell her friends, “Look, my son is a great shepherd!” Actually, he’s not, Jesus says. And when the wolves come, he will take the money and run, leaving only disaster behind him.

Why does the hired guy flee? “He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” Yikes! That hurts. The guy runs away because he never cared for the sheep in the first place? What if he just wanted to protect his family and caring for sheep took too much time and started becoming kind of dangerous? No, Jesus says, these shepherds all failed. Where’s the hope?

Here’s the hope: “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says to us. “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (v. 14-15). The hired hand will not go this far. It isn’t that he has evil or “malicious” intentions like the thief or the robber, he’s not trying to kidnap and hurt the sheep, but the hired hand does not have personal care over the sheep. But the good shepherd does. Why? Because he is not just the shepherd, but also the owner.⁵⁹ And as owner of the sheep, he will do whatever it takes to bring home his scattered sheep. Even if it means sacrificing himself.

⁵⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John: Three Volumes Complete and Unabridged in One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 125.

⁵⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 226.

And Jesus, the owner-shepherd, is not finished: "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (v. 16). This prophetic statement of Jesus tells us that Jesus is a *pursuing* shepherd. He pursues his sheep, wherever they may be. Most scholars take this to mean the Gentiles, which is anyone who is not a Jew. So, unless you sitting here today or watching online are a Jew, we are the other sheep Jesus pursues beyond the Jewish fold.

Another way to say that Jesus is a pursuing shepherd is to say that Jesus himself is a *missionary*. What is a missionary? I know that term has been thrown around a lot and has lots of bad history, and some people conflate it to mean whatever they want ("everyone is a missionary and everything we do is missions"). But let me give you my own, narrower definition. A missionary is a person who crosses cultural boundaries to share and embody the good news of the gospel with the purpose that others may experience Jesus' saving grace, thereby becoming a disciple of Jesus and joining his Global Church. Let me say it again: A missionary is a person who crosses cultural boundaries to share and embody the good news of the gospel with the purpose that others may experience Jesus' saving grace, thereby becoming a disciple of Jesus and joining his Global Church. It is so amazing to me that even here in John 10, Jesus had the nations in view and said that they, too, possess sheep that must be brought into the fold. Wouldn't this create a bunch of cultural divisions among God's people? No. "One flock, one shepherd."

Jesus' willingness to sacrifice himself is the reason, verse 17, that the Father loves him. This is mind boggling to me! The magnificent love that exists between God the Father and Jesus, who is God the Son, is not simply tied to Jesus' sacrifice but *based* on it. This means that God the Father, High King of Heaven, the Creator of All, loves his Son (and has always loved his Son before the world began) because the Son willingly offers himself up for the sins of the sheep. And then

verse 18: Jesus lays his life down for the sheep and takes it up again on his own authority.

PHARISEES OR SHEPHERDS?

So, the question before us this evening is this: if this is what Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does, what are we to do as “under shepherds”? Another way to ask this is: How ought we to shepherd in a way that honors our Good Shepherd? This morning I asked four questions designed to make us begin this process of self-evaluating how we shepherd others. They were:

1. Have you entered the door yourself?
2. Are you calling people to listen to Jesus?
3. Are you leading in a way that honors Christ?
4. Is your ministry life-giving?

What I want to do now is probe further by causing us to consider the anti-hero from John 10. By anti-hero, I mean the Pharisee, the blind guide, the shepherd who is not fulfilling his calling. I mean no disrespect here, but I think it is helpful to humble us and remember that “But for the grace of God, there go I.”

Who were these Pharisees and how do we keep ourselves from becoming them? In the immediate context here, we read in John 9 that they were elite members of society that fielded people’s spiritual questions. The Jews couldn’t believe that a man born blind could be healed, nor could they even believe his parents who said, “We know that he is our son and that he was born blind” (9:20).

We also know that the Pharisees believed they had following God figured out. “Are we also blind?” they demanded of Jesus. They obviously thought much of themselves. “We aren’t sinners like all this rabble! We’re not like this sinful tax man behind me! We’re holy men

on a holy mission and people should listen to us.” They’d read the right books. They’d gone to the right theological education institutions. They’d studied under the right teachers. All the boxes were checked for people to now listen to them. “If you were blind,” Jesus said, “you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains” (9:41).

I hope this strikes home for you as much as it does for me. As I said before, Jesus was so gentle with people who knew they were sinners. “Woman, has no one condemned you?” “Zaccheus, I’m coming to your house today.” But with the self-righteous, like the Pharisees, Jesus reserved harsh words that cut to the heart: “Brood of vipers.” “You fools!” “You hypocrites!” The Synoptic Gospels list a whole series of “woes” that Jesus spoke to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. The one that gets me every time is from Matthew 23:15: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.” This is no laughing matter and cuts straight to my heart.

My friends, let us not be 21st century Pharisees. Let us not be Pharisees on the inside who wear Baptist-looking clothing and repeat Baptist-sounding phrases and sing Baptist-written songs, only to be found out before the throne of God that somewhere along the way we missed it. Somewhere along the way, we thought we had given our lives to the Good Shepherd but really we were just trusting in our Baptist education and culture. Woe to us if we travel across sea and land to make more Pharisees.

CONCLUSION

I like to swim laps. Does anybody here like swimming laps? Since we moved to the Philippines, we try to go to the pool a couple times each week. My kids have swim lessons on Saturdays and my wife and I take

turns swimming laps. When we first came to the Philippines in March and I started swimming, the lifeguard, Ricky, noticed how I wasn't quite breathing right while swimming laps. This was particularly true when I would swim the breaststroke.

In the breaststroke, every stroke under water should lead right into coming back up for air. One fluid motion where you blow out as you're going down under the water and then take a short breath when you come up. Kuya Ricky, the lifeguard, noticed that I was doing two things wrong: I wasn't breathing at all as I went under, and I would sometimes stay under for more than one stroke. This meant that I was staying underwater too long. When I did come up for air, my breathing was just a short blast that exhausted me.

In many ways, the seminary life is like swimming laps. We are so excited to go deep into God's word. We can't wait to jump into theology. But studying theology was never meant to be an end in itself. We must come up for air. How do we do that? Just like the best swimmers learn to synchronize their breathing and their swimming, we need to learn to synchronize our study of God and our relationship with God. We need to remember why we study theology at all. We don't get in the seminary lap pool just to be in the lap pool. Our object is to get from where we are to our destination onward and upward. Otherwise, we will just tread water and shepherd good people nowhere. Refocusing on Jesus, the Good Shepherd who died for us and leads us to make disciples of all nation, is the life-breath we need to propel us forward. My friend, when was the last time you came up for air in your swimming through these theological waters? Let's pray.

6

THURSDAY AM: THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE (JOHN 11:25)

INTRODUCTION

As many of you probably know, I am a missionary with the International Mission Board (Southern Baptist Convention, USA). Before the late 1990s, the International Mission Board was called the Foreign Mission Board. It was the Foreign Mission Board that, in August 1951 (so, almost exactly 71 years ago) authorized the establishment of a theological education institution called the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary and Bible School. Dr. Frank Lide of the FMB served as the first president and classes began in July 1952 (exactly 70 years ago) in the Chinese Baptist Church of Baguio. In 1999, the first Filipino president began serving here at PBTS – Dr. Alfredo Saure. Then Dr. Joyce Abugan served from 2006–2012, and now Dr. Armand Canoy, who has been serving as president since 2012. What a legacy of God’s grace and blessing for 70+ years!

So, I stand here today as a Southern Baptist missionary thankful for the partnership we’ve had since the beginning. I studied for my MDiv and ThM at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina under Dr. Al James, who as many of you might know taught

here at PBTS back in the 1990s. So, before coming to the Philippines was even on my radar, I was connected somehow through Dr. James to PBTS. On behalf of the IMB, thank you for not forgetting us and for your obedience to train Baptist pastors and leaders in the Philippines and beyond.

I know firsthand that we as a Convention and as IMB in particular are not immune to sin and pain. We have made mistakes personally, pastorally, and missiologically. I was not born into a Southern Baptist family. My family is from Michigan originally. My dad grew up Independent Baptist and my mom grew up Catholic. But when I was six years old, we moved to Tennessee and joined a small Southern Baptist church way out in the country ("*sa probinsya*"). Why? Because of the emphasis on preaching the Bible as the trusted word of God that moves us all to mission. I have stayed in the Southern Baptist Convention for this same reason. As headlines continue to emerge about sin among SBC leaders, some of whom were my own professors, I do not want to minimize the fact that we are broken sinners. That's why we need you. We need you to help us grow in understanding God's heart, that we might love Him deeper and obey Him more. I'm new to the Philippines and I've only heard bits and pieces of the sometimes rocky history between PBTS and the Southern Baptist Convention. But a major part of the reason I am here today is to formally and publicly say this: "Let us work together for the future of God's kingdom. We are done building our own little kingdoms and letting you all build yours. Let's work together."

That's why I'm thankful for this fifth "I Am" statement of Jesus. John 11:25, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'" Those are hopeful, forward-looking words. They are words that we all need to hear today. And they are found in the middle of one of the most beautiful narratives in all of the Gospels. Please turn with me to John 11.

CONTEXT

As I do in every message, let me begin with a bit of context. We recall that the Apostle John tells us why he chose the narratives and sayings of Jesus to include in his Gospel, namely that we may believe Jesus is the Son of God and that, by believing, we might have life in Jesus' name (20:30-31). So, John was very careful from chapter 1 through chapter 21 to present Jesus' divinity, showing that Jesus was not afraid of letting people know his identity as the Son of God. That is why we have all these "I Am" statements. Remember the story of Moses and the burning bush? Moses asked, "If I go to Egypt, and they ask, 'who is this God who sent you?', what should I say?" God answered, "You shall say I Am who I Am" (which is, Yahweh). Religious leaders taught people not to say, "I am" because those were holy words that came dangerously close to comparing oneself with God. But, in the Gospel of John, Jesus gives several I Am statements, giving us a symbolic metaphor steeped in Old Testament tradition. This morning we will look at the fifth of these: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Much like Jesus first "I Am" statement of "I am the bread of life," this statement in John 11 also comes in the context of a narrative. A dear friend of Jesus, a man named Lazarus, has just died. Jesus will restore him to life. Yet instead of just making observations about the story, what I want to do this morning is consider the story from two different perspectives based on various characters in the story: Martha and the Jews. This is what a friend of mine calls "character theology." Instead of reading our own theological systems into the story, we are using the characters themselves to draw out theological principles.⁶⁰ I think we will be surprised by what comes out if we are

⁶⁰ "By character theology I mean utilizing some of the more than 2900 human characters in the Bible, including groups, such as the Pharisees or Saducees, along with those associated with the spirit world, such as the Holy

willing to do theology this way. For both of these characters (one is a single person and one is a group), I will tell the story in the first person. Let's start with Martha.

MARTHA

Hi! My name is Martha and I want to tell you about the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen in my life! I say "extraordinary" because nothing like this has ever happened before, and probably never will again. Yesterday, my brother here beside was dead! I mean literally he had been dead for four days! Here's what happened.

My sister and I sent a friend to tell Jesus, you know, the healer and teacher from Nazareth (he's a friend of ours), that my brother, Lazarus, was sick. Lazarus and Jesus were good friends, so I was surprised that Jesus didn't come as soon as he got the message. My sister and I thought for sure he'd come right away and heal Lazarus! But he didn't. Two whole days went by. My brother died. We put his body in a tomb in a cave and then our friends and family came to grieve with us. That's when I heard Jesus had finally arrived.

Mary stayed back with our guests at the house, but I ran out along the road, tears streaming down my face. "Lord," I said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had only been here, my brother wouldn't have died." Then I looked in his eyes and felt a little bubble of hope. I whispered to him, "But I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give it to you."

Jesus lifted up my head and put his arms around me and said, "Your brother will rise again." There was confidence in his voice. "I know he will rise on again on the last day in the resurrection," I

Spirit, Satan, angels and demons, to teach abstract doctrines, morals, and ethics." Tom Steffen, *Worldview-Based Storying: The Integration of Symbol, Story, and Ritual in the Orality Movement* (Richmond, VA: Center for Oral Scriptures, 2018), 211.

responded. Then Jesus said to me, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even if he dies. Do you believe this, Martha?"

"Yes, Lord," I answered. "I believe you're the Messiah, the Son of God."

After this, I ran back to my house and told my sister, Mary, that Jesus was asking for her. Mary and I went quickly back to Jesus, and everyone followed us, weeping as they walked behind us. After we showed Jesus where the tomb was, Jesus said, "Roll away the stone in front of the cave." I started to tell Jesus that it was a bad idea, since it would be so smelly with the rotting body of Lazarus in there. But Jesus looked me in the eyes and said, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So, I motioned to the men to roll the stone away.

Then Jesus looked up into heaven and prayed, "Father, thank you that you have heard me. I know you always hear me, but I'm saying this for the people standing around me, that they might believe, too." And Jesus commanded in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." And a man bound head to toe in linen strips, my brother who I'd seen die, walked out of the tomb. And Jesus said, "Unbind Lazarus and let him go."

On a piece of paper or on your phone, jot down a quick answer to the following two questions:

1. What is one thing that stood out to you from Martha's perspective of this story?
2. How did Martha's faith in Jesus grow?

SIMEON, MARTHA'S NEIGHBOR

My name is Simeon. I am a Jew and I live next door to Martha. And Lazarus. Yesterday I saw something I cannot explain but will never forget. We all knew Lazarus was going to die when he got so sick, even though we thought Jesus, the Nazarene, might come and heal him. He didn't. That was five days ago. So, Lazarus got sick, and he died. His heart stopped beating. I've known the family since we were all kids together, so naturally I was invited to come over and help the sisters, Martha and Mary, grieve. I also offered to help roll a stone in front of the cave we made into Lazarus' tomb. Then four days went by. Four days of weeping over my friend. My dead friend, Lazarus.

On the fifth day, Jesus finally shows up on the road to our village. As soon as I saw him, I ran to tell Martha that Jesus was coming. When Martha and I ran back to Jesus, Martha fell down before him and said, "Lord, our brother wouldn't have died if you had been here." But Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." And a strange mix of anger and pain washed over me as Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Then Martha ran to get her sister, Mary, but I couldn't move. I just stood there and stared at Jesus in disbelief. When the sisters and some other friends, all weeping and crying, returned, Jesus looked straight at me and asked, "Where have you laid him?" "Come and see, Lord," I answered softly. And Jesus himself began weeping. This sight was too much for me, so I turned to my brothers who were with me and said to them, "See how greatly Jesus loved him!"

So, I led the way as we all walked to the tomb. Then we stopped. Jesus looked at Mary and Martha. Then he looked at me. "Roll the stone away," Jesus commanded me. I couldn't move. Martha tried to tell Jesus it was a bad idea, but after I saw that he was immovable, I motioned to my brothers to help me with the stone. Then Jesus prayed in a loud voice with his eyes looking upward, "Father, thank

you that you have heard me. I know you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of those standing near me.” Then Jesus spoke to the dead man: “Lazarus, come out of there.” And my friend walked out of that grave. All of his hands of feet were wrapped in linen cloth strips. Jesus said, “Unbind him and let him go.” So, we did. And now I, too, believe Jesus is the Messiah.

On the same piece of paper or on your phone, jot down a quick answer to the following two questions:

1. What is one thing that stood out to you from Simeon’s perspective of this story?
2. How did Jesus’ weeping affect Simeon?

Now, take a few minutes and share your answers with the person sitting beside you. One person share your answers from Martha’s perspective, and the other from Simeon’s perspective.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

We can be sure that Martha was already an intimate friend of Jesus who had seen him do great miracles.⁶¹ She had seen her sister, Mary, pour out expensive ointment on Jesus, covering his feet with tears because of her sin and then drying them with her hair. Jesus had gently rebuked Martha for choosing to serve instead of taking the opportunity to listen at Jesus’ feet like her sister. And here, as well, Martha did not see beyond the present.

But we should not be too harsh on Martha, especially here in John 11. After all, her brother, probably her only brother, had barely died. However, when Jesus showed up, he “corrected their vision.” According to one commentator named A. W. Pink: “Jesus diverts

⁶¹ Margaret M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2003), 138.

[Martha] from thinking only of a remote and general resurrection."⁶² We also need to think and live in the present. Do we have hope for tomorrow? Absolutely. We know God wins in the end. But we also fix our gaze on how the gospel, that Jesus died and rose again and raises sinners, gives us hope today. Thus, A. W. Pink continues,

*So, too, does He remove our ignorance, help our unbelief, and bear with our peevishness. Wondrous condescension, matchless patience, fathomless grace! And how the realization of these should humble us, and cause us to blush for very shame! 'Lord, increase our faith' in Thyself!*⁶³

Raising Lazarus to life is a signal that Jesus is greater than the greatest enemy, death. It was further proof that Jesus is who he claimed himself to be, the Son of God. The leaders knew he would go on doing things like this. That's why the Jewish leaders gathered their great Council together and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (11:47-48). But then, the Bible says, God spoke through the high priest, Caiaphas, who prophesied that Jesus would die. Jesus would die not only for the nation, the Bible says, "but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (v. 52). The raising to life of Lazarus, then, directly set in motion the events that led to Jesus' crucifixion and his own physical resurrection.⁶⁴

My friends, the raising of Lazarus signals that there is coming a time when death will be no more – the "death knell" even for death

⁶² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John: Three Volumes Complete and Unabridged in One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 186.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 249.

itself.⁶⁵ And likewise we who believe in Jesus, the Bible says, experience resurrection from death to life – spiritually in the present and physically in the last days. I like the way John Calvin put it in his commentary on this passage (a rather long quote but definitely worthwhile):

In what way is Christ 'the resurrection'? By his resurrection he regenerates the sons of Adam, who by their sin were alienated from God, so that they begin to live a new life. Away with those who idly say that people are prepared for receiving the grace of God by the movement of nature. They might as well say that the dead walk! Since no part or faculty of the soul is not corrupted and turned aside from what is right, the fact that men live and breathe and are endowed with sense, understanding, and will tends to their destruction. This is how death reign everywhere, for the death of the soul is alienation from God. So people who believe in Christ, although they had been once dead, begin to live; for faith is a spiritual resurrection of the soul and, as it were, brings the soul alive, that it may live for God.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

On April 3 of this year, four days after our family arrived in the Philippines, I awoke to a Facebook message from my friend, Sam. The night before, I had told Sam that I was planning to go to Nairobi, Kenya, at the end of May, where he is from, for a conference. Sam was excited and said that he, too, would probably be there at that time. I hadn't seen Sam in person, I think, since July 2016, when we were both

⁶⁵ The "death knell" was the tolling of a bell that sounded to announce someone's death.

⁶⁶ John Calvin, *John*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries, Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 277.

doctoral students at Biola University. We had spent a good bit of time together. He'd drove me around La Mirada, California, in his car and I'd help him edit his class papers since I was a native English speaker and he wasn't. So much joy and love for the Lord and people.

Due to uncertainty with not yet having our Philippines visas, I did not go to Kenya. Sam did. He went home to Kenya to see his family and the churches he'd grown up in. On Tuesday evening, June 7, Sam said he was very tired and went to bed at 7:30. Sam's adopted father, an elderly British missionary, said in Sam's memorial service that they were surprised when he did not come downstairs the next morning for breakfast. Sam died peacefully in his sleep. He did not have any issues that anyone knows of. He just died.

Passages like this one from John 11 give us hope. You see, what we believe about the end times and what happens after we die doesn't really matter in the seminary classroom or in our theological debates. Not too much. These are safe environments. But what we believe about the end times and what happens after we die matters at the graveside. I think one writer named Russ Moore said it best, "A Christian's eschatology does not consist in his prophecy charts but in his funeral service. At a funeral the church is perhaps at its most theological. Our crying reminds us that death is not natural but a horrible curse to be abhorred."⁶⁷

Praise God we have hope. Resurrection hope. Resurrection hope that is future-directed and present-directed at the same time. It's resurrection hope that says, "Behold, God is making all things new." Yes, we live in a world of sin and sorrow, of wars and rumors of wars, of mighty church leaders who sin and fall and repent, only to sin again and perhaps bring others down with them. Yes, we live in a

⁶⁷ Russell D. Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 858.

world of pain and death, of wonderful Christian friends like Sam who live for God and die in their sleep with no explanation. But Jesus stares into the face of death and conquers it by dying for his sheep – for his people. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says to us today. “He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” Resurrection power and resurrection hope. And hope, my friends, does not disappoint us. Shall we pray together?

7

THURSDAY PM: WAY, TRUTH, AND LIFE (JOHN 14:6)

INTRODUCTION

As I mentioned throughout the week, my family and I serve with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. Before moving here to the Philippines in March, we served for ten years in Bucharest, Romania, doing church planting work and mostly theological education. I taught at the Bucharest Baptist Seminary. The courses I was responsible for included Intro to Evangelism and Christian Life, which was like an introduction to the Spiritual Disciplines for seminary students.

Obviously, the Philippines follows the Julian-Catholic calendar, but since Romania is a majority-Orthodox country, we celebrated major holidays according to the Gregorian-Orthodox calendar. This meant that Easter was usually later in Romania than in countries like the Philippines or the US. The Sunday after Easter, though, was always Duminica Tomei, Thomas Sunday, when pastors would preach on “doubting Thomas” seeing the resurrected Jesus and feeling his pierced hands, feet, and side. This is usually a Sunday where

preachers hit the highlights of why people should actually believe in the veracity of the resurrection – that it is actually true. I find those apologetic arguments interesting. But ultimately, I do not believe that giving people a thousand facts will change their hearts. I believe what we need to do is tell people that their stories find their fulfillment in God's Grand Story.

The Grand Story of God, summarized in just a few sentences, is this: In the beginning, God made everything, visible and invisible. All that God made was good. And God formed mankind in his image, giving them the ability to think and create and rule over creation as God's vice-regents. But the man and woman became enticed to sin by God's adversary, and their sin brought death and pain into God's good world. Because of this sin, men and women and children are prone to wander from our God. Our sin begets more sin and further distances us from the God who loves us. Yet even in the midst of pain and curse and sin, God declared that a male offspring would come to break the curse of sin and restore the broken relationship between God and man. So, the Old Testament continually asks the question: Who is the promised offspring and what will he be like? The prophets told us he would be a king like no other, a priest whose sacrifice would atone for sin forever. And, in the fullness of time, the Promised One came. The Son of God took on flesh and was born Jesus of Nazareth. Living a life without sin, Jesus pointed everyone to God's eternal kingdom and verified his divine message through divine acts that only God can do: healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, walking on water, casting out demons, feeding thousands with only a few loaves of bread, and reaching down into death itself and restoring adults and children to life. Our sinful life merits death and separation from God, the Bible says, so Jesus lived the sinless life we could not, died the horrible death we should have, and on the third day he rose a victor from the dark domain. Hallelujah, Christ arose! And, according to Jesus' own words, he will return for his people, who

until that time join in God's great mission of calling men and women and children from every tribe and tongue and nation to repentance and faith in Jesus. And how will it all end? The great culmination of it all involves this multiethnic choir, inflamed with love for Jesus our Redeemer, casting down our golden crowns and worshipping before God's throne.

Yet, what of doubting Thomas? If you've ever seen the mini-series, *The Chosen*, Thomas is pictured as a concrete thinker. He is a smart guy and pretty good with words. But in the end, he needs physical proof to make sense of things. I think they did a good job depicting Thomas in *The Chosen*. He also possesses a quality that lots of people like to criticize him for, even though we shouldn't. Thomas is not afraid to ask questions.

In tonight's passage here in John 14, we will consider Thomas (and some of the other guys who followed Jesus) and look at their questions. We will see that it is not a bad thing to have questions. That's pretty much what proper, critical, graduate-level study is: questions that lead to further, deeper questions. I think this is especially true for theological education. Yet sometimes, we don't know the answers, or at least we don't understand them. But is it necessary for us to understand before we believe? *Fides quarens intellectum*? *Faith seeking understanding*? That great cry of the Reformation. Maybe, maybe not. Let's let this passage with Jesus and the disciples guide us.

CONTEXT

Once again, when we approach the Gospel of John, we consider the purpose for which he wrote this book: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his

name" (John 20:30-31). So, John tells us there are lots of other things he could have included, but he was guided by the Holy Spirit to include narratives and discourses that demonstrate to us the divinity of Christ. But if we stopped there, this would just be another intellectual-driven theology book. The ultimate purpose, according to John, is that we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. Our prayer, then, is that, as we read this Gospel, the Lord would breathe supernatural life into us that would remind us of our sin, our need for a Savior, and then to equip us to live for our Savior.

John 14 is set in the context of the night before Jesus was crucified. Even though Jesus knew that Satan, the great Adversary, had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus to death, Jesus took the very nature of a servant and washed the slimy feet of his disciples (including Judas). "Where I am going, you cannot come . . . Love one another," Jesus said, "just as I have loved you. By this all people will know that you are my disciples" (13:35). Jesus said these words on the heels of telling them that one of the very men who had walked with Jesus and talked with Jesus and stood near as Jesus taught the crowds and saw him firsthand healing the sick – one of them would betray him. Judas had hidden his hypocrisy so well that the disciples had no idea who the traitor could be. "Is it I, Lord?" Judas loved all this theological knowledge and the feeling of being somebody. Sound familiar? And Peter, ever the vocal one, exclaimed, "Lord, wherever you're going, I'm coming, too, even if it means laying down my life for you." Jesus, compassion mixed with broken-hearted sadness: "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

So, we find ourselves at the beginning of John 14 at a pretty low point for the disciples. Sitting around a large table, leaning in to catch every word, you can almost feel their sadness sinking deeper and deeper. Their Lord, whom they followed away from their jobs and families and success, has now told them: "I'm going away." The

disciples are trying to figure it out. And, just as much as it bothered Peter (who has just been shockingly put in his place and told he will deny Jesus three times), it really bothers Thomas.

John 14 opens with some of the most profoundly pastoral words of Jesus recorded for us. I'd actually like to ask everyone to close their eyes for a moment as I read these first few verses and just listen to me read these words. Try to imagine Jesus is speaking to you:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (14:1-3 NIV)

In other words, Jesus is on a mission to bring us safely to God. He will go there first and then return for his people. But then the statement that brings questions. "You know the way to the place where I'm going."

One of the things *The Chosen* gets right, I think, is how Thomas is more of an introvert sort of guy-on-the-sidelines who seems perhaps an accidental follower of Jesus. We know that he wanted physical evidence of the resurrection, to see Jesus with his own eyes. So, the producers of *The Chosen* create this backstory where he brought the wine to the wedding at Cana and became super frustrated when he ran out of wine. He tries to mix water with the little bit of wine that's left, hoping the wedding guests won't notice. But when Jesus fills the empty vats with the most sumptuous wine they've ever tasted, Thomas is convinced there's something going on. This quiet guy becomes vocal and needs answers.

That is precisely what happened here in John 14. "Wait a second, Lord. You're saying we know the way? We have no idea where you're

going, so how can we know the way there?" This whole time, they've just followed where Jesus said they should go. Jesus sets the travel agenda, not Peter or John or Thomas. Now all of a sudden, they are supposed to know where to go next? Jesus answered surprised everyone: Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

Many people use this verse in different ways. Some Christians might use it as a battering ram, meant to knock over false worldviews and religious systems that we think damage people's lives. Some Christians use it like the evangelistic key to somehow unlocking what people really think about Jesus. Some Christians just avoid this verse entirely in their preaching and discipleship because it is so divisive and draws such a sharp line. I wonder in which camp we fall here at PBTs. But more important than which camp we fall in concerning how we interpret this verse is to remember the pastoral context we've just been talking about. The disciples have just come face-to-face with the reality that their time with their rabbi is numbered. Jesus did not speak these words in John 14:6 to be used as weapons. Neither did he speak these words to confuse us, so much so that we skip over them like they do not matter. My friends, these words are life-giving and beautiful. Why?

First, these words are life-giving and beautiful because they give us hope. Remember the great question behind the entire Old Testament? Who will be the promised offspring who will break the power of sin and restore us to the Father? Thousands of years of searching and praying and fasting and interpreting prophecy and trying to zero in on who it will be. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says. "It is possible to come to the Father, because I am making the way." My friend, if you could use a dash of hope in your life right now, let Jesus' words wash over you.

Second, these words are life-giving and beautiful because they are precise. The story of human history is very much a story of how we can make our life count after we are gone. Everyone wants to enlarge their territory in some way and leave their progeny, their children, a better world than the one in which they grew up. We fight for that; sometimes quite literally by going off to war. The story of human spirituality is no different: people are willing to do whatever it takes for the unseen powers to help us thrive. Daily sacrifices to my household gods? Well, sure, if it makes my little girl walk again. But how many sacrifices? How many gods? How many times? That we do not know. In his commentary on this verse, John Calvin said, "People invent real mazes for themselves."⁶⁸ The fog is too thick, and we're left groping for any kind of answer we can possibly find. But Jesus cuts through the fog. Jesus mercifully gives us a precise response: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Exclusive? Yes. Divisive? Perhaps. Precise? Mercifully so. Calvin again:

*The whole may be summed up like this: 'If anyone turns aside from Christ, he will do nothing but go astray; if anyone does not rest on him, he will find no food, but wind and vanity; if anyone is not satisfied with him alone and wants to go further, he will find death instead of life . . . So all theology, when separated from Christ, is not only empty and confused but also mad, deceitful, and spurious; for although philosophers sometimes come up with excellent sayings, they contain nothing but what is ephemeral, and even mixed up with perverse errors.'*⁶⁹

⁶⁸ John Calvin, *John*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries, Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer, series editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Crossway, 1994), 339.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 338-339.

Yesterday I gave the illustration of learning to treasure Christ in seminary as my learning how to breathe properly while swimming laps in a pool. I'm still learning the proper breathing technique and I think I always will. I said that our theological studies are like going down into the water. Before we go under, we take a breath of air that fills our lungs so that we can stay underwater as long as we need. One of my friends in Cainta, where we live, used to do some freediving here in the Philippines (pre-children, that is). He said they teach you in freediving to take a calm, steady breath that will allow you to go even further down and for longer periods as you become used to freediving. Same thing with swimming laps – the best swimmers never ever take anxious breaths, but trust the rhythm of down into the water and then, in order to keep going, coming back up for air.

So, how do we come up for air after studying a passage like this? Let me suggest three spheres of our lives that each of us here in seminary lives in on a daily basis. I realize that, for many of us, these spheres often overlap. That is the nature of the seminary season of life. But I am separating them for specific reasons that hopefully will become clear as we move through them. Then I'll ask some questions for each of these spheres based on our passage tonight.

Sphere #1: The Classroom

Unless you are one of the guests from the community or were simply surfing the internet and decided, "Hey, I have nothing else to do tonight. Maybe I'll watch this American guy talk about the Bible," I'm assuming all of us here have some reason for being in seminary. We want to learn more about God and his word so that we can more effectively shepherd and lead God's people. This is a great desire that has eternal implications, both for us and the people we influence.

Yet maybe you find yourselves nearing the end of another semester, trying to juggle readings and class papers and due dates and that professor who doesn't really get you. Maybe you are married,

and your spouse is not so sure if you all can handle another semester without a steady paycheck. Believe me, friends, I have been there. Let me ask you a few questions, though.

Are you growing in Christlikeness? Has your time in seminary convinced you that you need God more than ever? Are you approaching God's word as a textbook or as God's love letter to you? If you take what you're learning in seminary (which you inevitably will), and share it with your friends back home, will they say, "Wow, how smart Michael is!?" Or will they say, "Wow, how wonderful Jesus is!?" Do you exit your classes empowered and burning with excitement to share the gospel with others, knowing that Jesus said it is the only way they can be saved? If we cannot answer yes to these questions, then perhaps somewhere along the way we lost the reason we entered the seminary classroom in the first place.

Sphere #2: The Church

My friends, Jesus did not die for seminaries. He died for people. He died for the Church. When Jesus returns and gathers his Global Church to him, and we in our multilingual joy sing, "Worthy, worthy, worthy is the Lamb," seminaries training men and women to minister in a broken world will not be necessary. For Jesus will mend our world and we will see him as he is. Yet until that day, theological education must go on and leaders must be trained. For what? To serve the Church and to reach the lost and bring them into God's family, the Church.

It is tempting to confuse or even substitute seminary for church. Sometimes they look an awful lot like each other. We read the Bible and come to chapel and pray. We have classes taught by expert professors that blow Sunday School out of the water. What do we need church for? Let me ask this: Why did you first come to seminary? Was it not someone at church who affirmed your calling? Do you recall the names of the old ladies from your little church back home

who pray for you, maybe even supported you financially out of the little they had? Do you have a church you attend regularly, where the pastor knows you and your gifts and wants to mentor you? Do you realize how much more you can learn about church work from a small-town pastor than a big-name seminary professor? My friends, it is a dangerous place to be when we seminarians neglect their churches. If they do, it will not be long before the churches dismiss the seminaries.

Sphere #3: The Home

It is almost cliché to say that pastors' families often dislike church. The same is true for missionary kids. I went to a Baptist university in West Tennessee where there were literally hundreds of pastors' kids and missionary kids (PKs and MKs). I was neither. My dad and mom worked in international business their whole career. But I remember talking with many of these PKs and MKs and hearing about how, more often than not, somewhere along the way (usually in their early teenage years) they became somewhat disgusted by how much time their parents' job with church work really took. Dads missing baseball games because it was their turn to stay an extra hour at the hospital, etc.

When I was ordained by our church in North Carolina in 2014, there were three parts to the ordination process: I had to complete a written exam with a bunch of essays, an oral exam before the elders at an elders meeting, and my wife had to fill out a survey assessing my spiritual health based on the characteristics of an elder from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. That was a nerve-racking thing. I had no idea what she would say. But it was also a great thing, because who really knows you better than your spouse? Our spouses and kids are the best people to ask, "What is dad really like?" So, just like with the other spheres, let me ask a few questions here.

Does your husband or wife (or your closest friend, if you're single) see you taking your faith seriously? Do they see you pray? Do they hear you sing at church? Can they tell you the last time they heard you talk about Jesus and how much you love him? Do they know your favorite Bible verse and your favorite hymn? What would they say about how you love them? Do they believe that you believe Jesus is the only way?

CONCLUSION

I don't know why, but I cannot remember hearing a single sermon about the Apostle Thomas that gives the rest of the story of Thomas' life after believing in the resurrected Jesus. It is unfortunate that people call him "doubting Thomas." Why? Because he went on to become perhaps the furthest traveled missionary of the Early Church. According to church tradition, after Thomas encountered the resurrected Jesus, he became inflamed with missionary passion and went everywhere he possibly could telling people about Jesus. In AD 52, about twenty years after Jesus said these words in John 14, Thomas boarded a ship bound for the Kerala coast in southwest India. Tradition holds that Thomas planted seven churches in Kerala over the next twenty years. There is even one story that says he visited China. According to Syrian Christian tradition, Thomas was executed with spears thrust into his torso in Chennai, India, in July 72 AD.⁷⁰

One thing is certainly clear from the life of the Apostle Thomas. He met Jesus and never got over it. He could not stop telling others that Jesus is alive, even though he knew it would almost certainly lead to persecution and death. Because, my friends, if we believe there is but one way to the Father, and we have by God's grace been shown that

⁷⁰ "Thomas the Apostle Biography," The Famous People, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/thomas-the-apostle-37216.php>

narrow, upward way that leads to life, we will exclaim with the Apostle Thomas, "My Lord and my God." And we will use every available means to make sure our neighbor also knows our Lord and God. Let's pray.

8

FRIDAY AM: A TALE OF TWO VINES (JOHN 15:1-8)

INTRODUCTION

I went to college, as I said last night, in West Tennessee. It was a little Southern Baptist university in Jackson, TN, which is pretty much the only major city between Nashville and Memphis. During my junior year, my friend, Paul, asked me if I could help him out with his youth ministry in a local church. Paul and I had actually spent a summer together working with the Roma gypsies in Romania, so he knew that I enjoyed preaching and teaching. Working at that church was a fantastic ministry outlet for me and it wasn't long before I became the go-to preacher for our Wednesday night youth meetings. God blessed our work and the youth group at this little church grew, so much so that we even were able to take them on their first youth mission trip to St. Louis that next year (of course, we caught a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game).

From the time I got into my little, white, Ford Ranger truck outside my dorm room, to the time I walked into the church, was about 20 minutes. About ten of those minutes were spent on regular-looking

roads. But for the final ten minutes, my truck and I bumped and curved along several backroads that were not paved well. On either side of these roads was what some people call the “bane of the South”, kudzu.

If you’ve ever seen kudzu before, you know that it grows all over things. Kudzu is actually a vine that is native to Japan. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, environmental agencies under the Soil Conservation Service, founded by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, decided that the soil erosion problem had to be stopped for crops to grow. Hundreds of young men scattered across the southern United States planting kudzu. For many of them, it was their first job in years. Planting kudzu did help with erosion issues. Except no one knew that kudzu would thrive so well and grow so quickly in regions with mild winters and hot summers. Kudzu usually grows at a rate of one foot per day, with many kudzu vines reaching 100 feet or more. By the early 1940s, one Southern journal exclaimed, “Cotton isn’t king in the South anymore. . . Kudzu is king!”⁷¹

As it turns out, kudzu is not a benevolent king. Although kudzu does its job of stopping erosion, it also grows all over everything and blocks plants from getting sunlight. So, the wonderful plant that was supposed to heal the land is actually destroying it. Research is ongoing in many of the great universities of the Southern US on how to stop kudzu from completely taking over. No one knew that this vine, this beautiful vine, could be so annihilating.

But my friends, there is another vine. There is a good vine that is truly beautiful. This vine brings life, not death. In this, our final session of Spiritual Emphasis Week, we will speak about the True Vine – who it is and what it means to abide in that vine. My prayer for us is that as

⁷¹ Channing Cope, quoted in Max Shores, “The Amazing Story of Kudzu,” maxshores.com, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://maxshores.com/the-amazing-story-of-kudzu/>

we focus on that Holy Vine, we will ourselves become more transformed by it. By him. Let's start with a word of context.

CONTEXT

John 15, obviously, follows on the heels of John 14, which we looked at last night. This is still Thursday evening of Passion Week. Jesus and the disciples have taken the Last Supper together. Jesus washed his disciples' feet, even though one set of feet would betray him to death and another set of feet would deny him three times that same night. Jesus has told them he is going away, and the disciples are deeply saddened. "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the answer people are looking for. I'm going to prepare a place for you. I will come back again." Later in chapter 14, Jesus said he will send us a Helper that will be with us forever – the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, who comes from the Father in Jesus' name. What will he do? John 14:26: The Helper, the Holy Spirit, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that Jesus has said to us. So, when we go through trials (like the betrayal Jesus himself was mere hours away from), we can have peace and even rejoice knowing that Christ has overcome the ruler of this world.

THE TRUE VINE

I've heard some preachers say that, as John 15 begins, Jesus and his disciples are walking to the Mount of Olives and Jesus stoops down to pick up a branch from a grape tree. That's interesting imagery, but we don't know for sure. What we do know is there are myriad vineyards filled with *mga puno ng ubas* all over Israel, so this image of Jesus as the true vine is a common, earthy metaphor.

We also know that Jesus was fond of using imagery common to the Old Testament. Some of the most well-known examples of trees, especially grape trees in a vineyard, include the following four:

Psalm 1: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (v. 1-5). The psalmist then compares this huge, deeply rooted, leafy tree that is continually being watered with dry chaff that is blown away by a little gust of wind. The righteous man is like the tree. The wicked man like the chaff.

Psalm 80: The Psalmist is pleading with God, the Shepherd of Israel, for restoration and healing and protection. Verses 8-11: "You (God) brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River (Euphrates)." So, the image is of God planting this vine that he saved out of Egypt and the tree grew so tall it towered over mountains and trees and its branches stretch thousands of miles east and west.

Isaiah 5: The song of the vineyard of the Lord: "Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (v. 1-2). Then verse 7 tells us that this is the Lord speaking to his people, they are his vineyard that have yielded wild grapes: "he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry."

Isaiah 11: Here the coming Messiah is compared to a tree branch that shoots forth out of the stump of Jesse, meaning the Davidic line, with the Holy Spirit resting on the branch (like a dove?). Verses 1-5 are powerful:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

So, when Jesus in John 15:1 says, "I am the true vine," this is some of the Old Testament background of which the disciples were doubtless aware. I like how John Calvin explains it: "When he calls himself 'the true vine,' he means, 'I am *truly* the vine, and people who seek strength anywhere else are working in vain. Useful fruit will come only from the branches produced by me."⁷² So, the question for us here is this: how can we become those people who are seeking strength from the true vine? To answer that question, let's first examine the three characters and the roles Jesus mentions in this passage.

First, Jesus says he is the vine. He is the true vine that gives life to the branches. What does that mean? Only by being connected to the vine can the branches bear any fruit.

⁷² John Calvin, *John*, 353.

Second, God the Father is the vinedresser. Some English versions say “gardener” or use the older word “husbandman.” Some of the newer translations, like the Message, say the “farmer.” The idea in Tagalog is more of the “keeper” or the “guardian” of the vineyard. He is not an idle gardener, but he is always pruning and clipping the branches, trying to help less fruitful ones get more sunlight. God the gardener cuts away those branches that are not bearing fruit.

And finally, the branches are the followers of Jesus. “I am the vine; you are the branches,” Jesus says in verse 5. The idea is that we have continual dependence on Jesus. Our connection to him is not simply vocational, it is relational. We produce no fruit of eternal value without being connected to Christ our vine.

Verse 6 is a reality check: “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” Some people take issue with this verse: does it mean that if we don’t bear fruit we were never true branches, true Christians, in the first place? This text does not say that outright, although some of John’s other writings indicate this is the case (consider 1 John 2:19). That is not really our concern here. Instead, the idea is that if a branch is truly connected to the vine, if a Christian is regularly receiving life-giving grace from Jesus, fruit will result.

We should note, however, that Jesus does not quantify how much fruit is necessary for us to define a Christian as a true branch. That is a dangerous path to go down: I haven’t seen anyone come to Christ this year in my church, therefore I must have a church filled with withered branches who were never branches at all. Or worse, I haven’t led anyone to Christ this year, therefore I must not be a true branch. I must not be a true Christian.

Please, my friends, don’t go down that path. The point is not how much fruit we bear. Let’s leave that to the vinedresser. The point here

is that we learn to abide in Christ. If we learn to do that, Jesus says, fruit will come. Then the Father will prune us and mold us and shape us. Maybe more fruit will come later to the glory of God.

So, how can we abide in Christ? How can we not just tap into the true vine every now and then, but remain connected? How we can keep ourselves from reproducing killer kudzu, which looks pretty nice at first but spreads like a cancerous virus and consumes everything in its path? Really, these questions are just another way of asking the big question we've been asking all week: How do I treasure Christ? And, for our purposes here, how do I treasure Christ in seminary?

SUMMING UP THE WEEK

As our time together draws to an end, let me sum up a few takeaways I have noted for my own personal life. I hope you also find these things helpful.

To answer the question of how can I treasure Christ in seminary, I proposed we look at the "I am" statements of Jesus. Specifically, we looked at seven metaphors Jesus gives to show us what he is like. The Webster Dictionary defines "metaphor" as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy." The Bible is full of analogies like God is our Rock – he is not literally a rock, but he is strong and unbreakable and immovable like a massive rock. In fact, Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest Catholic theologian of the medieval era, argued pretty convincingly that we can only describe God through analogies.⁷³

In the Gospel of John, we've looked at seven metaphors, seven analogies, Jesus gives about himself. I compared each of these metaphors with a metaphor of my own – various angles and edges

⁷³ Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 40.

of a diamond that allow us to see the diamond's mesmerizing brilliance a bit differently. If we want to truly treasure Christ, our great diamond, we would do well to look at each of these angles.

On Tuesday morning, we began the week thinking about Jesus as the "bread of life." I asked the question, what truly sustains you? Anything less than Jesus does not satisfy.

On Tuesday evening, we looked at the passage in which Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world." Here we are called to give an answer to the question, what does the world really need from us? Does the world need more biblical scholars? If those biblical scholars love Jesus and are inflamed with missionary passion to call their neighbors to know and love Jesus, then yes. The world needs infinite more men and women like that.

Wednesday morning's service focused on Jesus' declaration, "I am the door of the sheep." I asked the question, where are you ultimately leading people? My friends, there is one door that leads to true life and godliness. Your charge and mine is to lead people there.

Likewise, from the same passage in John 10, we looked on Wednesday evening at Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Filled with Old Testament imagery, we considered, what do shepherds actually do? Does your ministry, your shepherding, look more and more like that of the Good Shepherd?

Yesterday morning, we found great hope in Jesus' statement, "I am the resurrection and the life." In the midst of the heartbreak and death and sadness in John 11, which mirrors the heartbreak and death and sadness we face even today, we are faced with the question, where is your hope?

Then last night, we saw Jesus say to his disciples in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Instead of some sort of abrasive line-in-the-sand that often characterizes how we use this verse

evangelistically, we found that this verse comes as pastoral comfort for saddened disciples who do not see a way forward. Their world is crashing before their eyes, and now their leader is abandoning them. "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus says. Do you believe Jesus? Does your life match your doctrine?

And finally, this morning is a fitting capstone to our week as Jesus, still in pastoral comfort mode, says to us, "I am the true vine. Abide in me." What does spiritual vitality look like in your life?

To quote once more from the great Reformer John Calvin, whose impressive church in Geneva, Switzerland, I sat in front of when I first read these words, God's people "want the vital sap of the Holy Spirit, which enables them to bear fruit."⁷⁴ How we get it? Abide in Christ. How do we abide in Christ? Or, to say it another way using another illustration I have used several times this week, how do we come up for air when swimming laps after diving deep underwater into theological study?

Let me suggest five ways to abide in Christ during seminary. Five ways to come up for air so we may continue the laps we are swimming and learn to treasure Christ.

First, remember the gospel. Remember that, before you met Jesus, you were dead in trespasses and sins, blindly following your own whims and unknowingly worshipping the prince of darkness. But God, in his great mercy, sent Jesus to die for you and bear your punishment and call you into his kingdom. Do not ever reach a point, my budding theologian friend, where you cannot remember your first love.

Second, cry out to Jesus. He is strong. He is near. And he has promised that he will answer when we call.

⁷⁴ John Calvin, *John*, 356.

Third, reach the lost. If we have experienced the forgiveness and grace of Christ, how can we not share that with others? When I was in seminary and I found myself drowning in reading and papers, a one-hour trip down the road telling students at a local college about Jesus revived my soul. It reminded me why I need to study theology in the first place, so that others may know our merciful God.

Fourth, serve the church. Do not make the mistake that so many seminarians do of substituting seminary for church. Ask a friend or a professor where is a local church where I can learn and grow and use my gifts. Believe me, they will give you several options. Then when you get there, tell the pastor your desire is not to lead, but to learn.

And fifth, equip the saints. Seminaries exist to train Christians to reach the lost and equip other Christians. This is a high and holy calling that many of us ought to take far more seriously. Are you influencing other believers? Are you mentoring someone and modeling for them what it means to take our Christian life seriously?

I believe that if we do these things (remember the gospel, cry out to Jesus, reach the lost, serve the church, and equip the saints), your seminary and mine will grow and bear much fruit for the glory of God. When that happens, God will be pleased to use us to send out armies of Christ followers to the ends of the earth.

CONCLUSION

My last semester in seminary was in the spring of 2012. I was just finishing up coursework for my ThM and my wife and I were just months away from being commissioned and sent out to the mission field. I received an email one morning saying that I should report the next day for lunch to a banquet hall above the student activities center. I had no idea there was a banquet hall up there, but I dutifully showed up. The room was full of men and women I had never seen before. I did recognize one of our seminary's administrators, though,

so I went up to him and told him my name. He gave me a name tag that said, "Cameron Armstrong, ThM" and told me where to sit. Then all these people I didn't know sat down at various tables.

Turns out that I had been asked to serve as a representative for the ThM program. The men and women were part of an accreditation team from the Association of Theological Schools. They wanted to meet some of our seminary's students. I sat next to a polite Asian professor from North Park Seminary in Chicago, who actually turned out to be a Hebrew scholar and the president of that seminary. He asked us to share a bit about ourselves and why we chose Southeastern Baptist Seminary's ThM program. As I talked about what I was studying and how I was so excited to apply what I was learning to my counseling ministry, I noticed the Asian professor next to me taking notes. I didn't know if that was good or bad, so I just kept talking.

The next day, during my Theology and Culture class, I told my professor about that lunch and how I had met this kind Asian professor from North Park Theological Seminary. My professor's eyes lit up and said, "He's the one who stood up in front of everyone during their report to the faculty and exclaimed, 'I wish I could take all the spiritual energy from this seminary and put it in a bottle to take home to share with my seminary!'"

My friends, I believe God is calling us to radical spiritual heights. If we learn to love Christ, if we covet his word and do his works, if we abide in him and ask him to revive us again, he will faithfully cause us to bear much fruit for God's glory. To treasure Christ above all else is our great prayer, both for now and years beyond seminary graduation ceremonies.

Let me conclude our week together with the words of a song. It's a song I remember my dad singing along to loudly in the car as we drove to church and back home. It is a bit of an older song by a man

named Rich Mullins. But I think it is a fitting prayer for us all (seminary student, staff, professor, church member). It goes like this:

The stuff of earth competes for the allegiance I owe only to the Giver of all good things.

So, if I stand, let me stand on the promise that You will pull me through.

And, if I can, let me fall on the grace that first brought me to You.

And, if I sing, let me sing for the joy that has borne in me these songs.

And, if I weep, let it be as a man who is longing for his home.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Rich Mullins, "If I Stand," Reunion, 1996, accessed October 2, 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cameron D. Armstrong (PhD, Biola University) serves with the International Mission Board (Southern Baptist Convention) in Manila, Philippines. In addition to working with various Baptist seminaries and education institutions he directs the ThM/PhD Orality Studies program at Asia Graduate School of Theology – Philippines, hosted by Asian Theological Seminary. Cameron and his family attend the International Baptist Church of Manila. Prior to moving to the Philippines in March 2022, Cameron and his family served as missionaries in Bucharest, Romania, for ten years. Cameron is married to Jessica, and they have two children, Sara and Noah.



"Cameron Armstrong ably explains how a high view of Scripture and evangelical theology are compatible with narrative preaching rightly understood. Sermons from his own ministry illustrate well what he means by "narrative preaching." I recommend this book, and especially for theological conservatives who have dismissed narrative preaching until now."

GRANT LOVEJOY, PHD
Director of Orality Strategies
International Mission Board of the
Southern Baptist Convention

