

UNLEASHING GOD'S TRUTH, ONE VERSE AT A TIME

DYNAMIC RESOURCES

*"Life is full of trials.
How we deal with those trials
manifests the genuineness
of our faith or the lack of it."*

John MacArthur

MINISTRY UPDATE
FROM GTY EUROPE

GOD'S PURPOSE
IN YOUR TRIALS

MY
MOTHER'S DAY

CHOOSING A
NEW CHURCH HOME



D Paul Mitchell



John MacArthur



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On "social justice" And the Gospel

John MacArthur

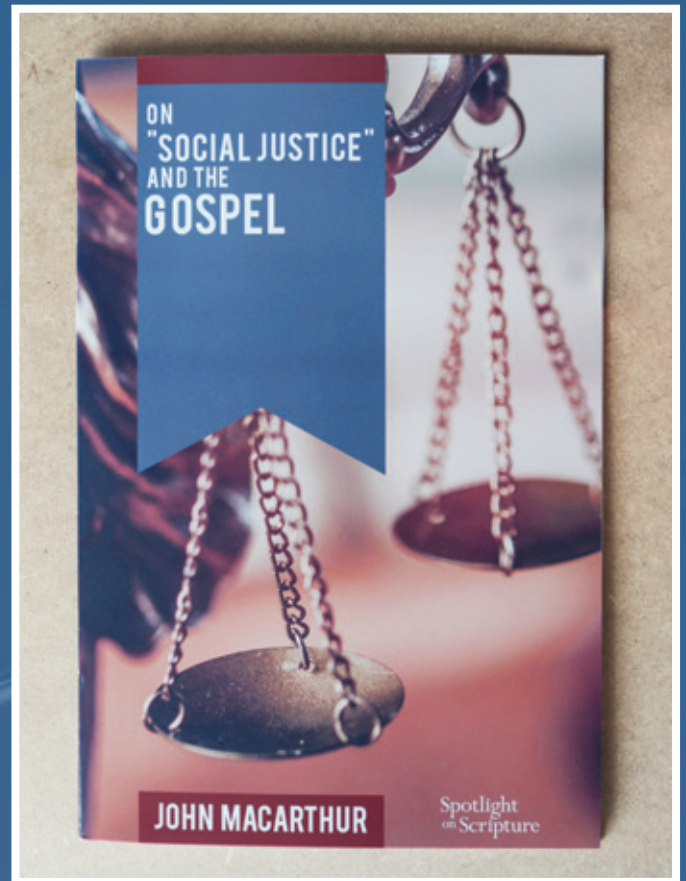
We live in a fallen world. And across the millennia, nowhere has the curse of sin been more visible than in human relationships. That people have always mistreated each other, in countless ways, needs no explanation.

In the midst of that constant tumult, the church ought to stand out (Matthew 5:14-16). God has given us everything we need to deal with even the most difficult conflicts. Yet today when it comes to dealing with the wrongs of society, many believers are echoing worldly wisdom rather than bringing God's Word to bear on those matters. Christians are embracing a notion of "social justice" that has nothing to do with biblical justice – true justice. Worse still, they drag the secular influence of identity politics and victim culture into the midst of God's people, corrupting the church and hindering its progress.

John MacArthur digs into the modern fascination with "social justice" and how the church should respond to this issue. This booklet contains important, biblical truth for you, your family, and your local fellowship.

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"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

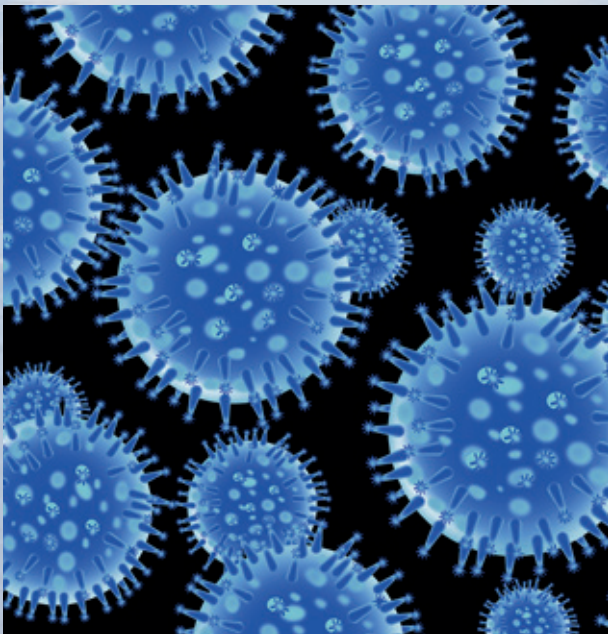
Matthew 5:14-16

Ministry Update

MINISTRY UPDATE FROM GTY EUROPE DIRECTOR, D PAUL MITCHELL

Since the last edition of Dynamic Resources a great deal has changed in the world, and sadly many of those things that we once took for granted may never be the same again. However, there are some things that the COVID-19 pandemic has not changed and never will change; most obvious of which is that men and women continue to sin and that Jesus Christ is the only One that can save men and women from their sin and all its dreadful consequences.

Throughout the pandemic we were able to continue our daily radio broadcasts and we experienced a noticeable increase in people contacting us in response to the offer of free resources, especially for the book [Anxious for Nothing](#). We also received many more calls and emails from people asking for



prayer because of particularly fiery trials and intense suffering. It has been our privilege to stand with these dear brothers and sisters in Christ during their time of purifying in the Refiner's fire and each day we bring before the Throne of Grace a lengthy list of names and needs. Some members of our staff team, whilst committed to praying for others, were also afflicted by trials and endured severe suffering of their own. But by the sufficiency of God's grace they discovered a renewed joy, a deeper peace and a more profound experience of Christ's heart of love and compassion for His people in their suffering.

Trials and Suffering

In this edition of Dynamic Resources you will find a special feature by John MacArthur that specifically

addresses the subject of trials and God's purpose in allowing His people to pass through times of suffering. If you are currently passing through a trial or time of suffering, I would urge you to read prayerfully, in order to understand what God is doing in your life through the trial and suffering. If you are not currently passing through a trial or time of suffering, I would also urge you to read prayerfully, because if you truly belong to Christ you will need to be prepared for the trial and suffering that may be just around the corner. Not only do our trials and sufferings result in greater sanctification – but greater usefulness in ministering to others in their trials and sufferings (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

Equipping Pastors and Preachers

During the last four years our ministry in Romania has continued to grow and we've been particularly focusing on helping pastors and preachers to become more competent in their handling of the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and be more thoroughly equipped

for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17). We have done this by organising conferences where we've looked specifically at what the Bible teaches concerning the role and responsibilities of pastors and elders and provided each attendee with a pack of free resources to supplement their personal libraries.

Earlier this year we completed our biggest project so far for Romanian pastors and that was the translation and publication of Biblical Doctrine, a systematic summary of Bible truth which was produced by the Master's Seminary, under the editorial oversight of John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue. This project was made possible by the sacrificial generosity of our U.K partners who also enabled us to gift 200 copies to seminarians and pastors at the commencement of their ministry.

Unleashing Gods truth in Romanian Language

Whilst we have been busy equipping pastors, the pastors have also been asking us to make more of





our teaching resources available to a much wider audience beyond the congregations they serve. After several months of seeking the Lord's will and guidance in this matter, we have begun a project to re-voice a number of John MacArthur's key sermon series for broadcasting in the Romanian language. Not only is there a potentially large listener audience in Romania and Moldova, but an increasing Romanian speaking diaspora numbering into the millions living in the U.K, Europe and North America whom we can reach through radio and internet, as we do with our existing English and Spanish language broadcasts.

Unprecedented times

Whilst the times in which we are living may be unprecedented, they are not cause for Christians to despair, or a reason to become despondent. The God of Heaven still sits on the Throne of Grace ruling both time and eternity with invincible power and authority.

The Lord Jesus Christ remains at the Father's right hand as our Great High Priest, constantly interceding on our behalf. And the Holy Spirit continues to indwell all those who truly belong to Christ, ministering His comfort and peace in a world where there is no authentic and lasting peace. But we also live in unprecedented times for the preaching of the gospel. Never in the history of the world has it been easier, through the utilising of new technology, to disseminate information (whether that is for good or evil) and we at Grace to You are harnessing that new technology to ensure that an ever increasing number of people all over the world hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for partnering with us though your prayers and your financial support, both are necessary as we remain committed to our mission of Unleashing God's Truth, Once Verse at a Time.

God's Purpose in Your Trials

by John MacArthur

Trials: The Keys to Perseverance

Any trial can be a joyous experience for a Christian if his perspective is right. Unfortunately, the anticipation of sorrow and trouble often casts a shadow over our greatest joys. The book of Job reminds us that trouble is inevitable: "Man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7).

We all dream of a perfect environment of comfort and tranquillity. Although any temporary rest from trials may lead us into believing we might find permanent exemption from them, our lives in this fallen world will never be without them. We can live in a fool's paradise, never forecasting any trouble and predicting a future of ease, but that is fantasy. Christ warned His disciples and all who follow in His footsteps to expect trials in this life (John 15:18—16:6). What ought to sustain us in the midst of them is our faith in God, knowing He is working all things out for our good and His own holy purpose (Rom. 8:28), and that we will have victory over them through God's presence (Psalm 23:4). The book of James was written to help believers endure their trials. In James 1:2-12 James discusses the reason for trials, the appropriate responses to trials, and the result of trials.



The Reason for Trials

Jewellers use "the water test" as a means for identifying a true diamond. An imitation stone is never as brilliant as a genuine stone, but sometimes the difference cannot be determined with the naked eye. So jewellers immerse the stone in water. A genuine diamond continues to sparkle brilliantly while the sparkle of the imitation is virtually extinguished. By way of analogy, the faith of many people under the water of sorrow or affliction is nothing but an imitation. However, when a true child of God is immersed in a trial, he will shine as brilliantly as ever.

James is saying that if your Christianity is genuine, it will prove itself in times of trouble. If my faith in God is good only when I'm doing well, then it's of little value. True faith will sustain the believer when life goes wrong.

James 1:2 says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren,

when you encounter various trials." The Greek word translated "various" (poikilos) means "many coloured" or "variegated." It emphasizes not the number but the diversity of troubles that can come our way. The Greek word translated "trials" (peirasmos) refers to that which breaks the pattern of tranquillity or happiness. The verb form means "to put someone to the test," regardless of whether the results of the testing are positive or negative.

Every trial that comes into your life becomes a test of your faith. You either pass or fail. To fail the test by wrongly responding to it allows it to become a temptation. If it ends up leading you to sin, it has proven to be successful in tempting you. If it ends up in victory, it has proven to be successful in strengthening you.

Trials are tests that reveal the genuineness and strength of one's faith (James 1:3), and therefore apply to believers as well as unbelievers. If you consistently persevere through trials and never abandon your trust in God, then you prove to have genuine faith.

When a false Christian goes through a test, it will inevitably reveal his true colours. When a true believer goes through a test, he will be driven to prayer, leaning on the strength of God rather than his own weakness. Trials burn up imitation faith but strengthen true faith. They may cause us pain when we are confronted by our weaknesses, but they have the good result of causing us to turn from ourselves to the infinite strength of God.

Responding to Trials

Believers respond properly to trials when they persevere in them. But what are the means to persevering? James describes five requirements for enduring trials in James 1:2-11.

In verse 2 he says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." The Greek word translated "consider" could also be translated "evaluate." Evaluating a trial as being joyful is something a Christian must discipline himself to do, because joy is not the natural human response to troubles. It takes a conscious commitment. Paul made such a commitment while a prisoner in Rome. He told the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always" and "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am" (Phil. 4:4, 11).

The Greek word translated "when," used in the subjunctive mood, means "whenever," implying the inevitability of trials. The compound Greek verb for "fall" (peript[ma]o) literally means "to fall in the midst of." It conveys the idea of being surrounded by an

unplanned or inadvertent situation. All of us will fall into the midst of inadvertent troubles where there appears no clear way out.

Jesus never looked for trouble, but He always accepted it when it came. It was "for the joy set before Him [that He] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2). He endured the humiliation and suffering of crucifixion because He looked beyond the trial to what it would accomplish. We have not suffered to the degree Jesus did (Heb. 12:4). If He could endure the cross and see it as a joyous opportunity to accomplish the purpose of God, then we should be able to endure our small trials with joy.

Since Jesus endured pain to experience joy, we shouldn't expect anything different. In John 15:18, 20 Jesus says, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." While trials are a necessary part of the Christian experience, they also can provide new opportunities for joyful dependence on the One who allows them. A trial will become a welcome friend when we see it as a means to draw closer to our Saviour. Trials bring about a greater sensitivity to the Lord's presence. Our communion with Him increases as we search the Scriptures to find answers to our problems.

Trials should be faced with a joyful attitude because they bring about proven faith, strengthen us, draw us into communion with God as we identify with Christ in His sufferings, and promise us better things to come.

An Understanding Mind

James 1:3 says, "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." The Greek word translated "knowing" (gin[ma]osk[ma]o, "to know through experience") directs our attention to the mind. You need to know that your faith will be tested. When you come out of a trial and still have faith, that will confirm you are a true believer.

The Greek word translated "testing" (dokimion) means "proof." The Greek verb for "produces" means "to achieve" or "to accomplish." Don't ever believe trials don't accomplish something. They're designed to produce "endurance," which is the tenacity of spirit that holds on under pressure while waiting patiently on God's timing to remove the trial.

Each trial strengthens us as we gain more endurance. God builds us up in the same way that a runner gradually develops the ability to run a long distance.

He starts small and works up to his maximum capacity. God allows increasingly greater trials in our lives to increase our endurance for greater ministry and joy. The more difficult the battle, the sweeter the victory. When you have come out of a difficult trial, you can rejoice over God's delivering you. That proves Him to be trustworthy, and that strengthens your faith.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul says, "No temptation [trial] has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able." Not everyone has the same ability to endure trials. A new Christian with limited knowledge and experience doesn't have the ability to endure the trials a mature Christian might undergo. This verse is God's promise that He will never put us through a trial we can't handle. The Lord will bring trials to test and strengthen our faith, thus producing the necessary endurance to encounter greater trials. God faithfully works in our lives in a personal way to allow trials, unique to each individual, to take us to higher levels of spiritual maturity.

A Submissive Will

James says this in verse 4: "Let endurance have its perfect result." This is a command demanding submission to God's purposes for the trial. Don't fight the trial and shake your fist at God. Accept it. If you refuse to submit to God, you may bring yourself under His chastening hand. Hebrews 12:5-7 warns, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons." If you fight against God's perfecting work, the trials may become more difficult.

The only productive way out of a trial is through it. If God wants you in a trial, there are no shortcuts you can take that will accomplish His purpose. 1 Corinthians 10:13 tells us that God provides a way of escape from each trial - but only after enabling us to endure it.

After stating the command, James tells us what the result should be: "That you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4). Perfection, not endurance, is the goal of trials. Endurance is only the means to that end. When you go through a trial, you are strengthened and acquire greater endurance, which allows you to experience greater trials and greater endurance. The ultimate purpose is to bring about spiritual maturity. When our faith is tested we're driven to deeper communion and greater trust in our Lord. That produces the stability of godly character

and righteous living.

The Greek word translated "perfect" conveys the idea of balance. It's referring to a stable, balanced righteous life-style. That's what Paul is alluding to in Galatians 4:19, where he says, "My children, with whom I am again in labour until Christ is formed in you." God's ultimate goal is for every believer to become like Christ.

James also says that trials will make us "complete" (Gk., holokleros; holos means "whole" and kleros means "all the portions"). God wants you to be well-rounded - fully put together spiritually. The flip-side of being complete is "lacking in nothing."

A Believing Heart

If you are experiencing a trial and desire to keep a joyous attitude, an understanding mind, and a submissive will, but are still struggling, you probably lack the wisdom and the power to endure. You need wisdom - the practical insight needed to face the circumstances of life. You'll not be able to maintain the first three elements of a living faith unless God gives you more than just your human faculties to work with. James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God" (James 1:5). Divine wisdom is especially important when you're going through a trial and desire to endure it for the holy purposes of God. Human reasoning will provide few answers. When a believer is being tested, he will recognize his need for strength and will look for a greater resource to hold on to in the midst of the trial - God Himself.

The kind of wisdom we are referring to is not philosophical speculation; it is the absolutes of God's will - the divine wisdom that is pure and peaceable (James 3:17). Divine wisdom results in right conduct in all of life's matters.

The initial response of many Christians to their troubles is to seek out some other human resource. Although God may work through other believers, the Christian's initial response to trials should be to ask God directly for wisdom. That will allow him to be joyous and submissive in finding and carrying God's will.

Verse 5 is a command to pray - it is not optional. It is as mandatory as Paul's instruction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). Trials have a way of enhancing your prayer life. They drive you to your knees to call on God for what you do not have and so desperately desire. God intends for you to recognize the limitations of human reason. Proverbs 3:5-7 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise

in your own eyes." When you're going through a trial, you must put your faith in God's wisdom and not in your own limited understanding.

The search for wisdom is man's supreme search. In Job 28:12 Job asks, "Where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" The answer comes in verse 23: "God understands its way; and He knows its place." The supernatural wisdom needed to understand the trials of life is not available in the world around us. If you need wisdom, you must acquire it from God. Seeking God for answers is more valuable than running to your friends or professional counsellors for them. The promise of wisdom for those who seek it is one of the greatest promises in all Scripture. What more would we want than divine insight to understand and respond properly to every trial of life?

In James 1:5 James explains God's response to our prayers for wisdom: "[He] gives to all men generously and without reproach." We have a gracious God who desires to give us what we desire and need. The Greek word translated "generously" speaks of something that is given unconditionally, without bargaining. It is reminiscent of Matthew 7:7-11: "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" When you go through a difficult trial, go to God in prayer. He will generously give you the wisdom you need to understand that trial and properly respond to it.

God will provide the wisdom to understand any trial if we will ask Him. If we don't ask, the Lord may allow the trial to continue until we demonstrate that we have learned to be dependent on Him through the trial.



The phrase "without reproach" in James 1:5 means God will not scold us for requesting wisdom. On the contrary, He will hold nothing back, giving generously without reservation. James 1:17 affirms that: "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow."

Once the believer asks God for wisdom the promise is: "It will be given to him" (James 1:5). No wisdom needed for the believer's perseverance through a trial is ever withheld from him who asks. But sometimes we don't ask God; we do everything except that. We ought to be on our knees crying out from our hearts for God to direct us.

Notice that verse 6 gives a condition for the request for wisdom: "But let him ask in faith without any doubting." The believer should ask with confident trust in God. The Greek word translated "doubting" conveys the idea of someone whose thoughts are divided. If he lacks wisdom, it's not God's fault. If you don't understand your trial, you probably haven't asked God with unwavering faith to give you wisdom. Perhaps you have prayed somewhat insincerely with wrong motives, like those who James condemned for praying for things to satisfy their lusts (4:3). You might be doubting whether God is able or willing to help.

Undivided faith simply believes that God is a sovereign, loving God who will supply everything necessary for understanding and enduring a trial. Whatever the trial may be, you are to believe that God allowed it for His purpose and your spiritual maturity.

In James 1:6 James gives an analogy of the doubting person: "The one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind." The doubting person who goes to God but doesn't believe He can provide him the necessary wisdom is like the billowing, restless sea, which surges back and forth with its endless tides, and is never able to settle. In 1 Kings 18:21 Elijah condemned the Israelites for their wavering faith, saying, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him."

Then James tells us what the double-minded man should expect: "Let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord" (v. 7). When faced with a trial, an unbeliever who professes to know Christ will doubt God and get angry with Him, eventually severing his association with a church. A true Christian who is spiritually immature may respond in a similar manner. He reacts emotionally to his difficult circumstances and doesn't fully trust God. In the midst of trials he doesn't experience a joyous attitude, an understanding mind, a submissive will, or a believing heart. He is unable to ask for wisdom from

God and unwilling to take advantage of the resources God has provided. As long as He continues to doubt God, he will never know the resolution available to him through faithful, persistent prayer to God.

In verse 8 James gives his analysis of the doubter: "A double-minded man [is] unstable in all his ways." Being "double-minded" (Gk., dipsuchos) is the state of having one's soul or mind divided between God and the world. James 4:4 affirms that "friendship with the world is hostility toward God." Then in verse 8 James commands, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." A double-minded person is a hypocrite who believes in God only periodically. But when trials come, he fails to place his trust in God and therefore receives nothing. Loving the world and trying to love God at the same time is impossible.

When you enter a trial, you will be able to endure it through divine wisdom and the confidence that God will freely give you what is necessary for victory. But the condition is that your faith be unwavering. Otherwise you will be unstable in every area of life and never receive the wisdom you requested. True stability in life is characteristic of those who trust God in the midst of trials.

A Humble Spirit

James 1:9 is a command for the poor Christian: "Let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position." The scattered believers James wrote to (v. 1) were victims of persecution and deprivation, so poverty among them would have been common.

The Greek word translated "humble circumstances" is used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, to refer to the financially poor. "Glory" refers to boasting about a privilege or possession. It is the joy of legitimate pride. The poor Christian may have nothing in the material world to rejoice about, but he can rejoice in his high position in the spiritual realm. He may be hungry, but he has the Bread of Life. He may be thirsty, but he has the Living Water. He may be poor, but he has eternal riches. He may be cast aside by men, but he has been received by God. He may have no home here, but he has a glorious home in the life to come. And in this life he may have trials, but God is using them to perfect and exalt him spiritually. In Romans 8:17-18 the apostle Paul said that as children of God we are "heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified in Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to

us." True riches are ours, so poverty is a short-lived trial to be endured as we look ahead to a glorious time of exaltation. Don't look for your joy in worldly circumstances and possessions. Seek your joy in the fact God saved you and is moving you toward Christ-likeness.

James also has some instructions for the rich: "Let the rich man glory in his humiliation" (James 1:10). Well-to-do Christians, who don't often experience the trials related to poverty, should rejoice in their humiliation. The trials they experience help them to realize that their possessions can't buy true happiness and contentment. Their dependence ought to be on the true riches of God's grace.

Whether rich or poor, trials humble all believers to the same level of dependency on God. Money doesn't buy people out of their problems, although it may solve some economic ones. Equality is driven home through trials. When you lose a daughter, son, wife, or husband, it doesn't matter how much money you have. No amount can buy your way out of that trial. We should not exalt those who have much over those who have little because earthly possessions are inadequate to buy us what we need spiritually.

James concludes this thought with an analogy of temporal values in verses 10-11: "Like flowering grass he [the rich man] will pass away" (v. 10). The picture James paints is that of the flowering grasses and flowers of Israel, which flourish with beautiful colour in February, but are dried up by May. Wealthy people often don't realize that their riches can't be taken with them. Only those who have been humbled before God realize that life is "a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes away" (James 4:14).

James borrows the rest of his illustration from Isaiah 40:6-8: "The sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away" (James 1:11). The scorching wind could refer to what we know as a sirocco, a burning wind that destroys any vegetation in its path. That illustrates the fury of death and the judgment of God that will put an end to the rich man's life and earthly possessions. The rich man should rejoice in his trouble because it keeps him from depending on his material resources. When they are burned up, he will have the true riches, just like the poor man.

A Christian facing trials is to have a joyous attitude, an understanding mind, a submissive will, a believing heart, and a humble spirit that trusts not in his possessions, but values the provision of God and His heavenly reward.



The Result of Trials

James ends his discourse on trials in verse 12 by saying, "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." James 5:11 reiterates the same thought: "Behold, we count those blessed who endured." "Blessed" means "happy," "satisfied," or "fulfilled with inner joy." People who successfully endure trials are truly happy.

James is not saying happiness comes in freedom from trials but in victory over them. There is a big difference. It's not the shallow joy of the spectator who never experienced conflict; it's the exuberance of the participant who fought and won.

Persevering through trials is proof of living faith. James identifies those who persevere as people who love God (v. 12). In 1 John 4:19 the apostle John says, "We love, because He first loved us." Christianity is a love relationship between God and man. Salvation is not a transaction whereby God grants us eternal life no matter what our attitude might be toward Him. Those who are truly saved have a deep ongoing love for Him. 1 John 2:15 says, "If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in Him." People will love God or the world, but not both. And it is in trials that our love for God will be manifested. 1 John 2:19 says, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us."

A true believer has an ongoing love for God that holds fast even in trials. Several times Jesus said that the person who loves Him will keep His commandments (John 14:15, 23; 15:9-10; 1 John 2:5-6; 5:1-3). Genuine faith is built on love that obeys God. But to be demonstrated as genuine, love must be tested.

As believers we may experience times of struggle and doubt, but our faith will never be destroyed. We cling to the Lord despite our trials because we love Him. That kind of loving perseverance results in true blessing.

The reward for the believer who doesn't collapse under trials is eternal life. James says, "Once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life" (v. 12). The "crown of life" is an appositional genitive in the Greek text, which means it could literally be translated, "a crown which is life." The crown is eternal life, which God has promised to those who love Him. That is the believer's ultimate reward. Although we presently experience some of the benefits of eternal life, we possess it on promise; someday we're going to receive it in its fullness. We are still waiting to enter into our future reward. At the Lord's coming, He will grant to us the fullness of eternal life.

In 2 Timothy 4:8 the apostle Paul expresses a similar thought: "In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing." When Christ returns for the church, Christians will be granted a life of eternal righteousness.

The Greek word translated "crown," in James 1:12 is *stephanos*. In the ancient Greek world it was used to refer to the wreath put on the head of a victor in an athletic event. Those with the perseverance of an athlete will receive the crown of eternal life.

Life is full of trials. How we deal with those trials manifests the genuineness of our faith or the lack of it. If we endure, persevere, and are victorious, we demonstrate that we possess true saving faith. Eternal life, eternal righteousness, and eternal glory will be our reward.

Prayer: The Heart of Endurance

While James 5:13-18 is an encouraging passage for those who are undergoing trials, it also raises significant questions of interpretation. James says, "Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the

church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit."

In reading through that text many questions come to mind. When James mentions suffering in verse 13, what kind of suffering is he referring to? When he talks about sickness in verse 14, what kind of sickness does he have in mind? What do the elders of the church have to offer in prayer that other people don't? Do they have a special access to God? What does the anointing with oil refer to? Does the prayer of faith always restore one who is sick and allow the Lord to raise him up? What does sin have to do with it? What kind of healing is James referring to in verse 16? Why does he give an illustration of rain in the midst of a passage on healing?

To answer those questions I decided to lay aside all my presuppositions in an effort to determine what the passage really means. The first thing I did was read what many commentaries and books said about the passage. Curiously enough, they all said essentially the same thing. Now, I am not the kind of teacher who goes out on a limb to interpret a passage of Scripture that doesn't have some kind of precedent. Yet after my study I remained unconvinced that I had found an interpretation I could live with. So I asked the Lord to show me what the passage was saying. I have found He answers my prayers when I study hard, so I went back to my Greek material and the sources of the original language of the text. Over a period of two days of study, the truth of what James was teaching came alive to me.

I understand the risk of a new approach, yet it is something I am enthusiastic about. The key to the interpretation of any passage is the context. Each section of Scripture must be interpreted based on its position within the whole book, particularly what chapter it's in, and what comes just before and after. Every passage of Scripture has an environment of thought in which it exists and makes sense. So let's set the context of James 5:13-18 before we study the passage itself.

James wrote his letter to an assembly of believing Jews who had been scattered abroad (James 1:1). They had been forced to leave Palestine in persecutions

recorded in Acts 7—8. Because they were Christian Jews, they experienced much hostility. So James began his epistle by teaching them how to patiently endure their severe trials (vv. 2-12). He calls his readers to endure their trials without doubting, looking past the pain and persecution to the glory to come.

James returned to that same theme in chapter 5. He says, "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (vv. 7-11). James is calling his readers to be faithful in persecution.

The opening and closing thrust of James's epistle is an exhortation to people under persecution to patiently endure their sufferings for the sake of Jesus Christ. With that theme in mind as the overarching context of the epistle, we shouldn't be surprised when James says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray" (James 5:13). The key phrase in that verse is "let him pray." Prayer is mentioned in every verse from 13-18, and that is the subject of these verses. The heart of endurance is prayer. If you want to endure, you must depend on God, who is your divine resource. The persecuted church will find at the heart of its endurance a strong commitment to prayer.

In James 5:6 James addresses the rich saying, "You have condemned and put to death the righteous." The persecution the Jewish believers were undergoing was severe. By implication of that verse some had died because of it. No doubt some suffered bodily injury through physical persecution. Surely some of them were crushed in their mental and emotional spirit. I'm sure the feeling of defeat had set in for some. Some had been wounded deeply. So James says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray." Prayer is always our resource.

Based on verse 13, James gives primary attention to the casualties of the battle: those who are weak and defeated, who have lost the victory in their spiritual lives. You may have experienced that at some point in your life. When the battle becomes too hot to handle, your spirit may be broken. I am convinced that the thrust of this passage has nothing to do with healing physical sickness or disease. The focus is healing

spiritual weakness, weariness, and depression, which calls for prayer. No compelling reason exists to think James was discussing physical healing. The prior passage would not lead you to expect that type of discussion, and neither would the last two verses of the chapter. But a section on how to help people who are spiritually weak and wounded makes sense in the context.

With that as a background we can see that James 5:13-18 is a passage about prayer. James discusses four aspects of prayer: its relationship to comfort, to restoration, to fellowship, and to power. Prayer provides the wounded warrior with comfort, restoration, fellowship, and power. Each is a wonderful resource to the loyal Christian who is suffering in his spiritual experience.

Prayer and Comfort

James 5:13 says, "Is anyone among you suffering?" The Greek word for "suffering" is exactly the same word used in verse 10. It means "to suffer evil treatment." Verse 13 could be translated, "Are any of you persecuted?" Anyone who is being abused and treated wickedly should pray. When we are being persecuted we ought to turn to God for comfort. The apostle Peter says you should cast "all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

The Greek word translated "pray" in James 5:13 refers to a continual pleading. When your life isn't going the way it ought, and you're weary from the battle, continually plead to God for comfort.

Then James asks, "Is anyone cheerful?" (v. 13). Perhaps he asked that somewhat sarcastically since that circumstance would have been characteristic of a very few. But should someone be cheerful, "let him sing praises" (v. 13). The Greek word translated



"cheerful" is *euthume* (*eu* meaning "well," *thumos* meaning "the principle of life, thought, or feeling," which is the soul or spirit). James is asking if anyone has a happy attitude?

Then James says if he is cheerful, "let him sing praises" (v. 13). When you're happy in spirit and have a strong disposition, you should sing. James uses the Greek word, *psalloto* from which we derive the word "psalms." Praise is basic to spiritual comfort.

In verse 13 we see that James contrasts those who are cheerful with those who are suffering. He's not referring to physical things, but to spiritual wellbeing. On the one hand you have the suffering soul, on the other the happy soul. One is pleading for comfort, the other is singing praise. When you're in deep spiritual pain, pray. When your soul is rejoicing, praise God.

James is not concerned with prayer for those who are physically sick, but for those who are mentally and emotionally suffering the effects of trials and persecutions. Consequently, as we approach the next point, James moves beyond the one who is suffering to the one who has lost the ability to endure suffering. Verse 14 characterizes the wounded warrior - the weary, depressed Christian.

Prayer and Restoration

James says, "Is any among you sick?" The root Greek verb translated sick is *asthene[ma]o*. Most versions of the Bible translate that word as "sick." At times *asthene[ma]o* can refer to sickness, and it is so used in the New Testament. But all Greek lexicons agree that its primary meaning is "to be weak, feeble, or impotent." It is most often used that way in the epistles. In Romans 4:19, 14:1-2, 21 it is used of being weak in faith. In 1 Corinthians 8:9, 11-12 it is used of spiritual weakness. In Romans 5:6 it is used to refer to the spiritual impotence of the unsaved. In 2 Corinthians 11:21 it is used to refer to the weakness of personality.

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul is discussing his persecutions, specifically a thorn in the flesh that he asked God to take away (v. 7). According to verse 9 God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness [Gk., *astheneia*]." Then in verse 10 Paul says, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses [Gk., *asthene[ma]o*], with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties." The same word used in James 5:14 is used here for the weaknesses experienced as a result of the difficulties of life.

If we translate James 5:14 consistently with its common use in the epistles, it would say, "Is any

among you weak?" They may have been weak and defeated from persecution or sin. They may have been mentally weak, emotionally weak, and even physically weak. The point is they were spiritually defeated. Perhaps they had tried to pray, but they had been unable to draw on the power of God. When someone hits the bottom of their spiritual strength, it's hard to pray effectively. What he needs is to find someone to pray for him, preferably someone who is spiritually strong. In verse 14 James suggests who he should turn to: "Let him call for the elders of the church." They possess the necessary spiritual strength that the spiritually weak believer needs. The elders are the godly men of the church, those who are victorious and are able to patiently endure persecution.

The Greek word translated "call" (proskale[ma]o) means "to call alongside." The spiritually weak person should call the elders to come alongside him to lift him up. That's the same idea as Galatians 6:1: "If a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one." If you're suffering, pray. If you are overwhelmed by trials and persecution, and the power has gone out of your life and your prayers, go to the spiritually strong and let them pray for you.

In Acts 6:4 the twelve said, "We will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." God has called his pastors to a ministry of prayer and teaching. When you've hit the bottom in your spiritual life, you can go to the spiritually strong, get on your knees with them, and be strengthened by the power of their righteous prayers. I have understood well the ministry of the Word, and now I understand better than ever before the ministry of prayer. My pastoral duty is to come alongside the wounded warriors, the broken-hearted people who don't have the strength to call on God. On their behalf I can lift up prayers to God.

Key to the interpretation of James 5:14 is the phrase "anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." The Greek verb translated "anoint" (aleiph[ma]o) means "to rub" or "to oil." The best way to translate the phrase is: "rubbing him with oil in the name of the Lord." The word literally means "to crush over." It is used of the outward anointing of the body, in this case with olive oil (Gk., elaion).

Some believe the anointing is ceremonial, emblematic of the Holy Spirit. But a completely different word, chrio[ma], was used for that type of anointing. Aleiph[ma]o is never used in Scripture to refer to ceremonial anointing, but it is used to refer to an application of oil. People would do it after a bath. Since oil was the base of soap, it also could refer to washing someone. It was also used to refer to pouring oil over a person's head or feet (Luke 7:38, 46). It was used in Luke 10:34 when the good Samaritan poured

wine and oil on the wounds of an injured man. The fermented wine cleansed the wounds and the oil soothed him. Athletes were often rubbed down with oil to sooth their sore muscles.

It is possible for aleipho to be used in two different ways in James 5:14. It most certainly refers to the literal application of oil. Perhaps the persecution had been physical, so the elders would apply oil to the believer's wound. If the believer was weary and exhausted from overwork at the hand of some unbelieving employer, the elders could apply oil to sooth his sore muscles.

Aleipho might also be used in a metaphorical sense. Anointing with oil could refer to the encouragement and stimulation the believer would receive from the elders, thus providing strength to his weakness. In Psalm 23:5 David says this about the Great Shepherd: "Thou hast anointed my head with oil." Certainly David wasn't referring to a literal anointing, but to the refreshment he received from the Lord in the midst of trouble. David may have been picturing the following scene: when the shepherd brought the sheep back into the fold after they had grazed all day, he laid his staff at the entry so only one sheep went through at a time. That way he could check each one individually for wounds. If he found any he would pour oil on it to sooth it. Wherever the skin was parched, he rubbed it soft. That's the shepherd's ministry - a ministry of restoration.

So James is showing us that the weak and weary soldiers go to their pastors, who in turn come alongside them, get on their knees, and pray with spiritual



strength on their behalf. The elders are to reach out in compassion to strengthen, stimulate, bind up the broken hearts, and minister to the wounds.

James concludes verse 14 with the phrase "in the name of the Lord." That means consistent with who Christ is. To pray for the spiritually weak in the name of the Lord is to do something Christ would want you to do.

In verse 15 James says, "The prayer [of the spiritually strong] offered in faith will restore the one who is sick." The Greek word translated "sick" (kamn[ma]o) actually means "to be weary." It is used elsewhere only in Hebrews 12:3. The writer of Hebrews says we are to fix "our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him [Christ] who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary [kamn[ma] o] and lose heart" (vv. 2-3). The people who are weary from persecution have fixed their eyes on their trouble rather than on their Saviour. So kamn[ma]o is not only translated "weary" in Hebrews 12:3, but also used in the same context as James 5:15.

The prayer offered in faith by the godly men of the church will restore the one who is weary and has lost heart. Obviously the prayer has to be "offered in faith." James 1:6-7 indicates that anyone who asks doubting receives nothing. But when godly men pray using their strong faith vicariously for the believer's weak faith, those prayers will restore those who are weary. The Greek word translated "restore" (soz[ma]o) can also be translated "save," "deliver," or "rescue." It can mean "to preserve" or "to make whole." In the gospels it is used in the phrase "thy faith hath made thee whole" (Matt. 9:22; KJV). It's important to note that soz[ma]o doesn't have to refer to physical sickness. So we see that the prayer of faith will restore the weary.

Then James says, "The Lord will raise him up" (James 5:15). The Greek word for "raise up" (egeir[ma]o) means "to rebuild," "to arouse," "to excite." The weary believer may have lost all his excitement and enthusiasm, but the Lord will restore and excite him again.

James concludes verse 15 by saying, "If he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him." When weariness and spiritual defeat is the result of sin, God will forgive the believer who has sinned. The phrase "if he has committed sins" is a third-class conditional, which means it's a possibility that his sin contributed to his weakness and his weariness. A believer can be weakened in the battle solely by persecution, but he also can compound that weakness with sin. He needs to go to the pastors to confess not only his weakness,

but also any sin that has contributed to that weakness. The elders will then be able to pray for his strength and confess his sin, resulting in forgiveness.

Prayer and Fellowship

Verse 16 introduces the third point: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." If the prayers of the godly men can assist the weakness in a believer's life, all believers ought to be confessing their sins to each other and be praying for one another continually. James is saying don't wait until you hit the bottom. Maintain a praying relationship with other believers along with mutual confession of sins. That doesn't mean you should pour out every bit of garbage in your life, but it does mean you shouldn't hide your evil. Sin wants to isolate you. As long as sin is private and secret, you can nurture and feed it. But God wants it exposed to people who love you and will pray for you. The Greek word translated "confess" (exomologe[ma] o) is a compound verb that implies open and honest confession. You should share your struggle. Let people know you're in a battle so you won't become weak and defeated.

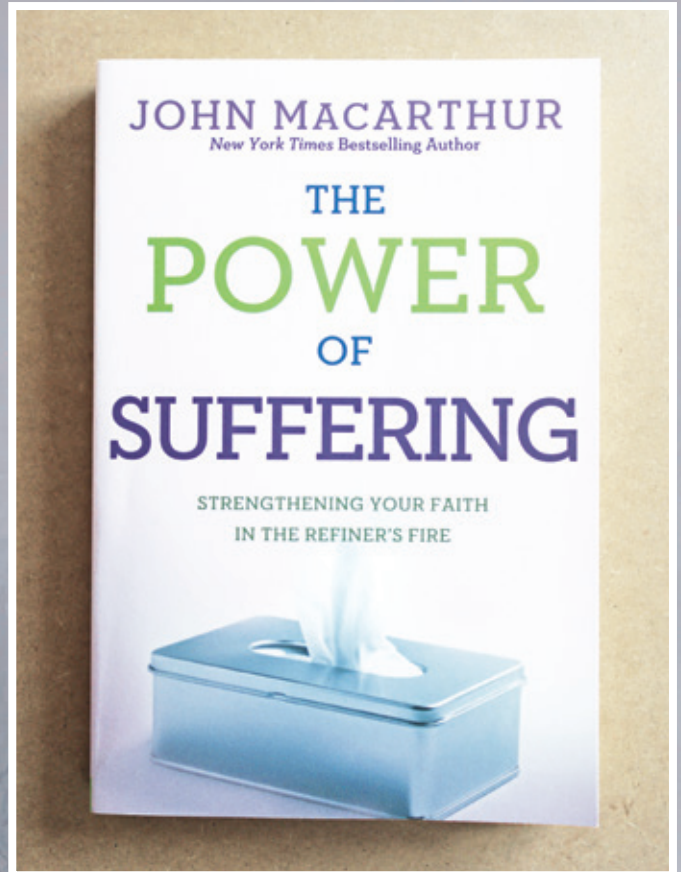
The phrase "one another" refers to one another of the same kind. That means you should confess your sins to another believer. Continue to confess that particular weakness until God gives you the victory over it. Don't ever let yourself become spiritually weak over a failure to confess your sin to another believer. James also says to pray for one another. Tell another believer about your battle, and then pray for him and his battle. The reason we should share our lives is so we may be healed (Gk., iaomai). This word can be used of healing from physical sickness, but it also can be used for deliverance from many things. For example Matthew 13:15 says, "The heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn again, and I should heal them." In that verse iaomai refers to salvation—spiritual restoration. It is also used in the same way in Luke 4:18, John 12:40, Acts 28:27, Hebrews 12:12-13 and 1 Peter 2:24.

If you're suffering, keep your prayer life hot. As a prevention from ever having to go to the elders for spiritual strength, share your burdens with each other and pray for each other so you'll be continually dealing with crucial issues in your life.

Prayer and Power

James concludes verse 16 by saying, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." That's one reason you go to the elders. That's also why you should be sharing with another believer who is dealing with sin in his life. The Greek word for "effective" refers to energetic, empowered prayer. Only a righteous man, who is dealing with sin in his life, will have a great impact in his prayer life. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." You need to be right with God so you can help other believers with the power of your prayers. I want to be right with God so when someone comes to me with their spiritual weakness, I can help to lift them up. The phrase "can accomplish much" literally means "is very strong." The energetic prayer of a man who is living righteously before God is very strong. That indicates to me there is such a thing as weak prayers. Weak prayers are offered up by weak people, and that's why weak people have to go to strong people for help. To cement his teaching on the relationship between prayer and power, James provides an illustration from the life of Elijah. James says, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours" (v. 17). He was a man who suffered like we suffer. 1 Kings 17:11 tells us he was hungry; 19:3 tells us he was afraid, and 19:4 tells us he grew tired from battle. Then James says, "He prayed earnestly" (v. 17). The literal Greek says, "He prayed with prayer." Some people pray, but they talk to God as if He was a divine waiter and they were giving Him an order. But Elijah "prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (vv. 17-18). Elijah was a man like us, but he was righteous. As a result, his prayers were so powerful that it didn't rain for three and a half years. When he prayed again, the sky poured rain and the earth produced fruit. Elijah was strong in some areas and weak in others, but because he was a righteous man, look what God did in response to his prayers. Prayer is at the heart of endurance in trials. If you need comfort, ask God to help. If you have become so weak that you can't pray, go to the godly men of the church so they might pray on your behalf. Continue to deal with your weaknesses by continually confessing your sin to other believers and praying for them as well. Finally, live righteously before God so that you may know power in your prayers.

This article was adapted from the booklet "When the Healing Doesn't Come".



The Power of Suffering

John MacArthur

In today's modern world of convenience and comfort, suffering can seem senseless. This idea has even crept into the church, where many believe that if we make the right choices and do the right things, pain can be avoided. So it's little wonder that when do encounter tough situations, we face even tougher questions: Why does God allow suffering? Where is God when I'm hurting?

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MY MOTHER'S DAY

By D Paul Mitchell

It was 1pm on Sunday 22nd March, Mothers' Day here in the U.K, when our home phone rang and I knew that the incoming call was the one I was both expecting and dreading. The voice that responded to my "Hello" was that of my older sister calling to let me know that just a few minutes earlier our beloved mother had passed from this world into the eternal presence of her Lord and Saviour.

Mum had experienced some health issues and a cancer scare during the latter half of 2019, but on the whole she was quite fit for her ninety years. In fact, by Christmas she seemed to have improved to the point that she was more or less back to her old self. Mum was a real "people person" and a loyal friend, so it wasn't unusual for her to receive a 100 + cards on her birthday and 200 at Christmas. She was a great letter writer and kept up regular correspondence with some of the "girls" whom she had been with at school prior to World War II. In later years, as arthritis made writing difficult, she would spend hours and hours each week on the phone maintaining her friendships. And most importantly; she spent many hours each week praying for her family and friends.

During recent months two of Mum's oldest and dearest friends had died, and I knew that had a most profound effect upon her because she began to tell me what hymns she wanted to be sung at her funeral, and she especially asked me to ensure that there would be a clear Gospel message preached. I assured her that I would carry out all her wishes, whilst hoping that her funeral would still be a good few years away. However, by early January her health deteriorated quite quickly and she was admitted into a hospital for patients with respiratory problems.

By late February, just before I was due to make my annual trip to the U.S in order to attend Shepherds' Conference and the Grace to You offices, I visited Mum and even though the hospital facilities were excellent, the staff kind and caring, and she was being visited on a daily basis by her family and pastor, I sensed that she was yearning for her eternal home. I knew she longed to take her place in the Father's House and to occupy that room which Christ speaks of in John 14:2-3:

In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will

come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

I wondered if because of her condition I should cancel my visit to the U.S, but she wouldn't hear of it, and so I went with her blessing. On my return 10 days later my sister told me that Mum's condition had continued to deteriorate and the doctors were arranging for her to be moved to a nursing home specialising in palliative care, just a short walk from my sister's house - and she was due to be moved on her 91st birthday. But the day after she arrived at the nursing home everything changed and the nursing home went into full lockdown with no visitors allowed because of COVID-19.

Just over a week later the nursing home Matron called my sister and told her that she thought our mother had only a short time left in this world, so the management team were making a special exception to the no visiting rule so that her children could say good bye. As my wife and I began the 160 mile drive across country to be at Mum's side, we instinctively tuned in to that day's edition of Grace to You and found help from the Lord as we listened to John MacArthur preach on The Resurrection of Believers. However, towards the end of the broadcast my colleague and GTY host Phil Johnson especially grabbed my attention when he turned to John and said: *"Talk to that person, who may be even now, today, at the bedside of a dying believer, family member or friend, who knows his loved one has maybe only hours left in this life. What words of comfort and hope would you give to a person at a moment like that?"*

Unbeknown to Phil, I was that very person who needed to hear what the Lord had to say through John's message of hope and to be comforted by it. There was no way that Phil and John knew about my circumstances at that point in time. The only other person who knew about my situation was my wife, and she was sitting right next to me in the car. But of course, in eternity past our omniscient God knew I would need to hear that specific message on that specific day, and by His amazing ordering of providence He made sure I heard it at exactly the moment when I needed it the most. By the time we arrived at my mother's bedside she was already unconscious, but my wife read aloud Psalm 71 (Mum's favourite psalm) and I prayed, with verse 9 being very appropriate as a prayer in such circumstances:

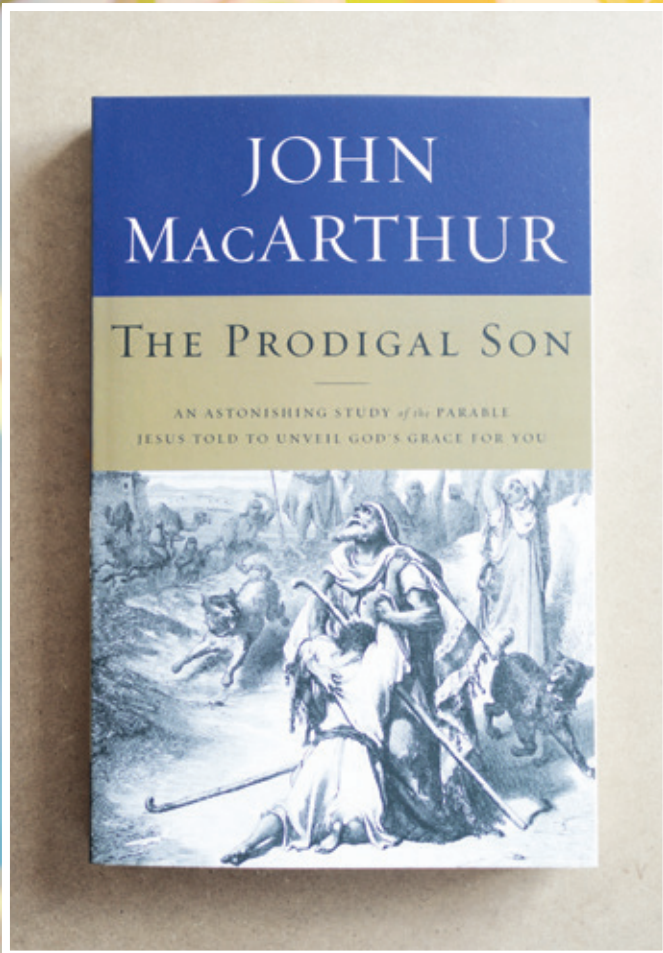
*Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
Do not forsake me when my strength fails.*

All too soon the time allocated for our visit came to an end and shortly after, on that special day in the year when we honour our mothers, she slipped peacefully into the Lord's glorious presence in full assurance of all that Christ had done for her on Calvary's cross. Yes, we her children were sad, but we also found comfort in Psalm 116:15, which tells us: *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints.* This was the best Mother's Day our Mum could ever have wanted; instead of being surrounded by her sorrow-filled children in a nursing home, she was in the glory of heaven worshipping Christ and beholding Him face to face.

Sadly, because of Government social distancing restrictions, my Mum's funeral was a very small affair, conducted by her faithful pastor who fully utilised the short time allocated, but there were so many of her grandchildren, great-grandchildren and friends who couldn't be there to celebrate her long life and to hear the gospel preached as she had wanted.

As I thought about how I could fulfil Mum's wishes, it occurred to me that there was a way. I knew that she had been greatly blessed by the Bible teaching ministry of John MacArthur, so I decided that I would send a letter and copy of John's book, The Prodigal Son, to her family and friends, inviting them to read it because the book contained the message of God's astonishing grace that Mum had wanted them to hear if they had been able to have attended her funeral. Not one person objected to receiving the book, because they all knew beyond doubt that my mother's life had been radically transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ when she had put her faith and trust in Him for salvation at the age of sixty. This transformation was testified to by the pastor who conducted her funeral, after all, he was the very same pastor who had preached the Gospel to her and then baptised her thirty years earlier. Sometimes our family members can be the hardest people to reach with the Gospel, but the death of a beloved family member or close friend is a poignant reminder that we will all die one day. Let's be prepared to prayerfully and sensitively take advantage of God's ordering of providence in the most unlikely of circumstances and to make use of some of the many dynamic resources that Grace to You has available for Christians to use in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ who has triumphed over the powers of sin, death and hell.

D Paul Mitchell is Director of Grace to You Europe and a member of Grace Baptist Church Thanet.



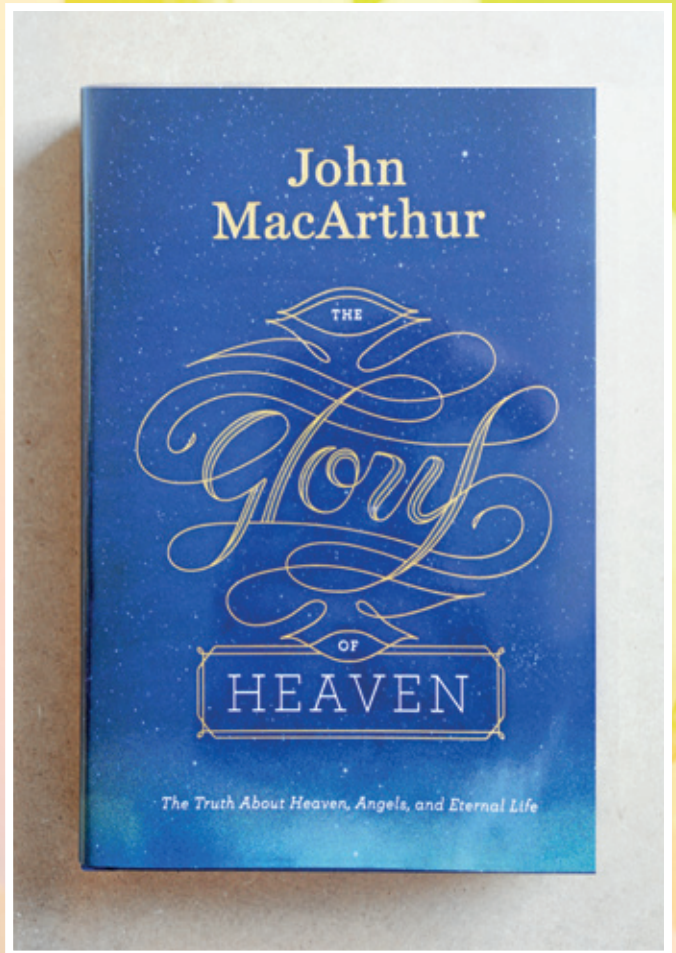
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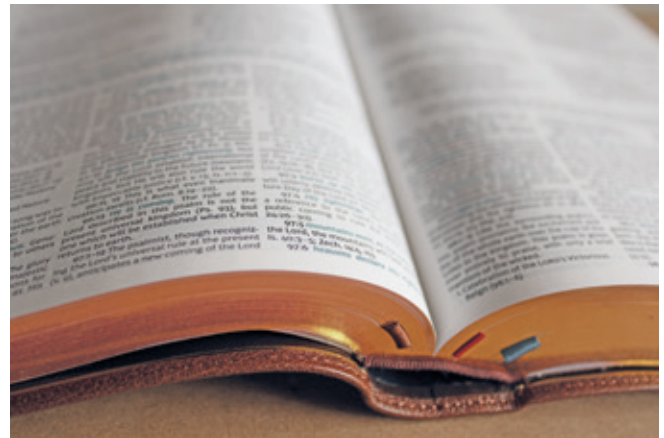
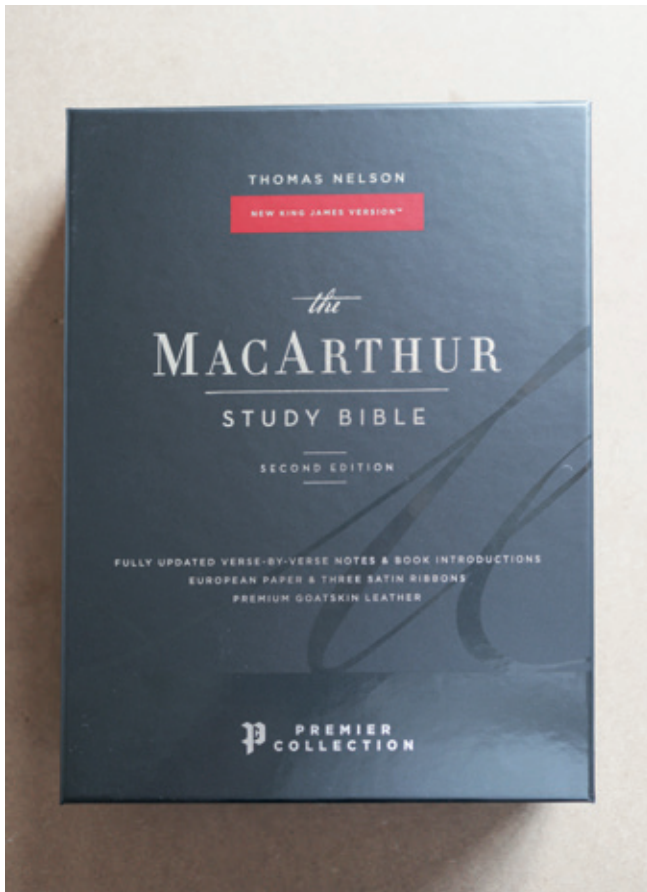
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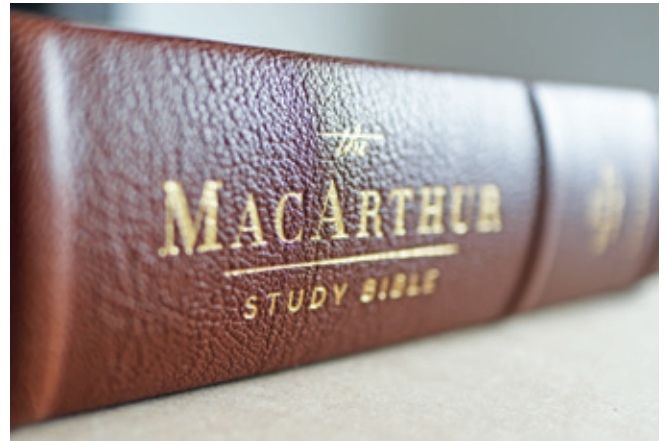
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WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR WHEN CHOOSING A NEW CHURCH HOME?

By John MacArthur

We've all heard that the choice and purchase of a home is one of the most significant decisions a person will ever make. In this temporal world that may be true. However, choosing where you and your children will learn the things of God and serve the Lord Jesus Christ has eternal ramifications. Every week at Grace to You we receive letters from people asking us to recommend a good church in their area. Those requests indicate three types of people wanting to make a wise choice in selecting a church home: those who have moved or will be moving, new believers wanting to choose a good church, and those whose current church has departed from biblical principles. Such circumstances force us to consider what's really important in a church.

IS THIS CHURCH RIGHT FOR ME?

What are the biblical criteria you need to be aware of when considering a new church? Let's compare the search for a new church to that of a new home. When looking for a house, people typically ask, "How much does it cost?" "Is it large enough to meet our family's needs?" "How well is it built?" "What

kind of neighbourhood is it in?" "Does it have a warm and homey atmosphere?" "Is it conducive to hospitality?" Similarly, before choosing a church home you need to consider its foundation, structure, function, and environment. Before we consider those important components, please realize that no church is going to be perfect. Some local churches may be in seemingly excellent condition, while others are obvious fixer-uppers! Many fall somewhere in between. You must seek God's will and be led by the Holy Spirit in selecting a church. Also you need to evaluate how you and your family can contribute to that ministry so it is not just another church, but truly a church home.

INVESTIGATING ITS FOUNDATION

Jesus said that the wise man builds his house upon rock and the foolish man builds his house upon sand (Matt. 7:24-27). When storms come, the stability of the foundation determines both the direction and durability of the structure. Whether you're searching for a home to live in or a church to worship in, its foundation is crucial. There are four main components that make up the foundation of a strong local church:



A PROPER VIEW OF SCRIPTURE:

When investigating a potential church home, pay particular attention to how it views the Bible. Does it hold to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures? Does it believe the Bible is the only rule for faith and practice? (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21)

AN EMPHASIS ON BIBLE TEACHING AND PREACHING:

Observe what kind of preaching is done. Is it primarily expository, topical, or evangelistic in nature? Is the main diet repetitive salvation messages each week, or are believers being fed from the Word? (Acts 20:27; 1 Tim. 4:13-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5) There should be a strong commitment to high-quality Bible teaching.

DOCTRINAL SOUNDNESS:

Just as you would inspect the soundness of a house's foundation, so you should investigate the doctrinal stance of the churches you visit. Where do they stand on such crucial issues of the Christian faith as the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ; the depravity of mankind; the work of Christ on the cross; His death, burial, and bodily resurrection; salvation by grace through faith alone; the second coming of Christ; and the ordinances of baptism and Communion?

DOCTRINAL PRACTICE:

Observe whether the church practices the doctrines it claims to believe and teach. As James said to the church at large, "Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves". (James 1:22; cf. Luke 6:46; John 13:17)

EXAMINING ITS STRUCTURE

Once you are satisfied with the foundational aspects of the church, you need to look at its structural components. Recently I walked through a new house under construction. I noticed posts that weren't plumb, seams that didn't meet properly, and beams that were crooked and uneven. Those were glaring structural defects in a home advertised as being built by "the last of the true craftsmen"! The structural components of a local church provide not only its strength, but also dictate the character and direction of its ministry. Those components include:

CHURCH GOVERNMENT:

Find out if the church's leaders function according to New Testament principles. (1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:17-20; Titus 1:4-9; Heb. 13:7, 17) Do they understand the centrality of Christ as head of the church and His desire to rule His church through a plurality of godly men? (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col.1:18; 1 Cor. 11:3)?

EVIDENCE OF ORDER:

The church's ministry, including its services, teaching, and administration, should have an obvious sense of order. Some church services exhibit as much lack of planning as do homes with poorly thought-out floor plans. Some churches handle the Lord's resources and work in such a haphazard way that they bring shame to the name of Christ. As Paul said in speaking of the church, "Let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner". (1 Cor. 14:40)

FUNCTIONAL GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

As you investigate a new church, find out if the leadership has set any goals. Has the church planned for future progress and direction? Does it have in mind particular methods of reaching those goals? Like Paul, we as a church need "to run in such a way, as not without aim". (1 Cor. 9:26)

THE SIZE:

When purchasing a home, some people prefer the warmth and quaintness of a small home in a quiet rural setting. Others prefer living in a larger structure in an urban area. The same is true when considering the size of a church. Some Christians love being involved in a large urban ministry with hundreds or even thousands of people. Others feel lost in the vastness of such a ministry and fare much better in a smaller congregation. Again, finding your niche in the Body of Christ requires the leading of the Holy Spirit in your life.

SEEING HOW IT FUNCTIONS

When satisfied that the foundation and structure are what they should be, the wise home buyer will then look at how functional the house is. Does it fulfil the purpose for which it was designed? Does it meet the needs of the family? As you observe how a church functions, look for an emphasis on worshipping God. See if the leadership stresses the importance of honouring and glorifying God in all things. (1 Cor. 10:31; Col.3:17) Also observe the involvement of the individual members. Do they exercise their spiritual gifts among the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), or do they seem to expect the pastor to do everything? Does the church emphasize evangelism as one of its primary functions? Are home and foreign missions an important part of its ministry? (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8) What about discipleship? Do you see church members and leaders seeking to make disciples and reproduce themselves in the lives of others? (2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 2:3-7; Matt. 28:19-20) A strong local church is marked by love. Do the members seem to genuinely care for one another? Do they minister to each other's needs?

As you become acquainted with the church, do you sense that the members love one another as Christ commanded? (John 13:34-35) Notice if friendships form easily (cf. Heb. 10:24-25; Phil. 2:1-4; Eph. 4:1-3). The leadership of the church you choose should be committed to teaching and supporting God's design for the family. (Eph. 5:22--6:4; Col. 3:18-21; Titus 2:1-8; 1 Pet. 3:1-7) Does the church schedule contribute to or take away from the strength of the family?

CHECKING ITS ENVIRONMENT

If you have ever gone house hunting, you know what it's like to walk through and sense the atmosphere of the place. It can feel cold and gloomy or warm and inviting. It can have a homey feel or it can be impersonal - almost like a museum. Doubtless you have had the same experience when attending various churches. Certain observable factors contribute to the overall atmosphere of a local church. Those environmental components are usually manifested in attitudes.

A HIGH VIEW OF GOD:

Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It should be obvious that the people, from the leadership down, focus on the glory and majesty of God. Do they take God seriously and exalt Him in all they do? Their view of God will affect every aspect of their lives and ministry. Ask yourself if God is the focus of their worship or if they're preoccupied with each other or themselves.

THE PRESENCE OF A SINCERE FAITH:

Is it obvious to you that the church lives and operates by faith? Are the people willing to trust God? (Heb. 11:1, 6; Eph. 3:20; 2 Cor. 5:7; 1 Thess. 5:24)

SPIRIT OF SACRIFICE:

Can you see that the church members are willing to sacrifice themselves and their possessions to advance God's kingdom? (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 8:3; Matt. 6:33) Do you sense they would sacrifice themselves for one another? (Phil. 2:3-4; John 15:13; Eph. 5:1-2)

PROPER ATTITUDES TOWARD

THE PASTOR AND OTHER LEADERS:

As you talk with the people, be sensitive to how they regard their leaders. Do they appreciate and esteem the pastor and other leaders "very highly in love because of their work"? (1 Thess. 5:13) Are they fully behind them, giving their spiritual, emotional, and material support? (1 Tim. 5:17-18; Heb. 13:7, 17)

SPIRIT OF UNITY:

This is often the most obvious attitude radiating from a local congregation. An outsider is usually able to sense very quickly whether a church is unified in its ministry. That has a great effect on its testimony to the community and reflects on the name of our Lord. (John 13:34-35; 1 Cor. 1:10-17; 3:1-9; Eph. 4:1-6; Phil. 2:1-5; 4:1-5)

AM I RIGHT FOR THIS CHURCH?

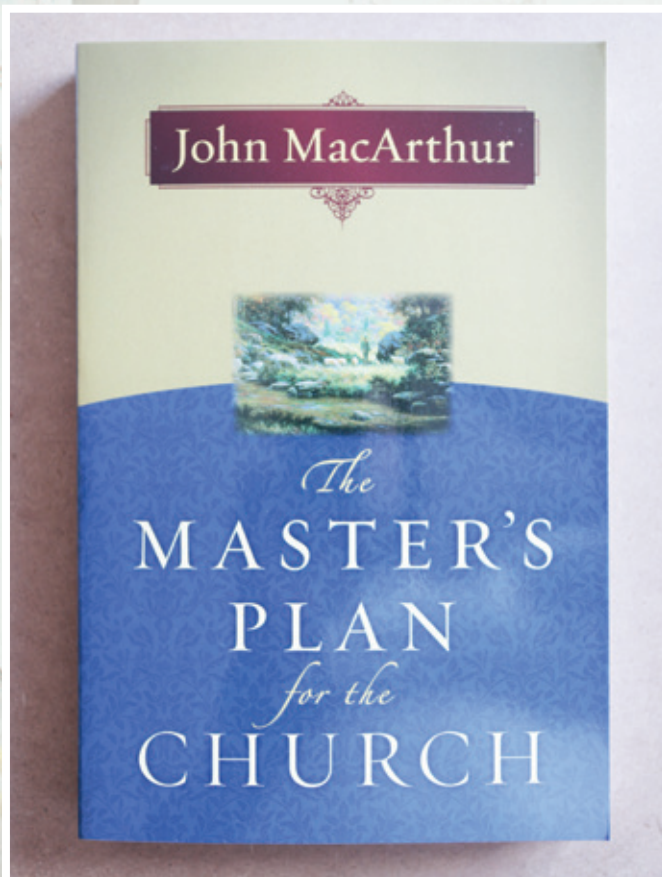
We have looked at the foundational, structural, functional, and environmental components of a vital, healthy local church. Now look at yourself and ask, Are there opportunities here for me to serve and exercise my spiritual gifts? Does this local body have a need that by God's enabling I can meet? Am I willing to get what the church can do for me, but also what I can do for the Lord as I serve Him in this church? Am I willing to give of my time, money, energy, and prayers to contribute to the success of this church? (Mark 12:30; Rom. 12:1)

A house is not a home until all the members of a family contribute to its success. The same is true of a church home. Only when each member in the family of God exercises his or her God-given gifts will God's children feel at home in His church.

The decision you make about what church to attend will greatly affect your spiritual life and the lives of your children. In fact, the decisions you make now will affect your descendants and the generations to come. That's a sobering reality.

Remember that no church will ever perfectly fulfil all these criteria. There is no perfect church. Also, remember that every church is going to have its own special blend of the characteristics we have examined. The key is to find a church that has them in proper balance, not overemphasizing some or de-emphasizing others. A balanced ministry is a Spirit-controlled ministry. If you find a church that possesses most but not all of the characteristics we've mentioned, don't immediately disregard it. Consider whether God wants to use you to help improve that local body as you exercise your own particular spiritual gifts.

Choosing a church home is one of the most significant decisions you will ever make - one that reaches into eternity. May each of us spend at least as much time and effort making that decision as we do deciding on our earthly dwelling.



The Master's Plan for the Church

John MacArthur

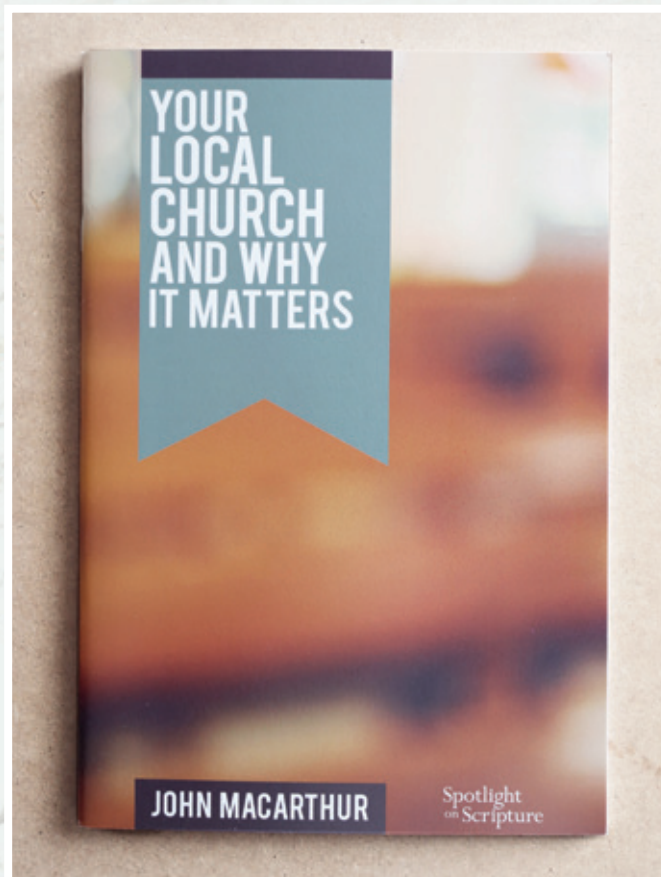
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John MacArthur

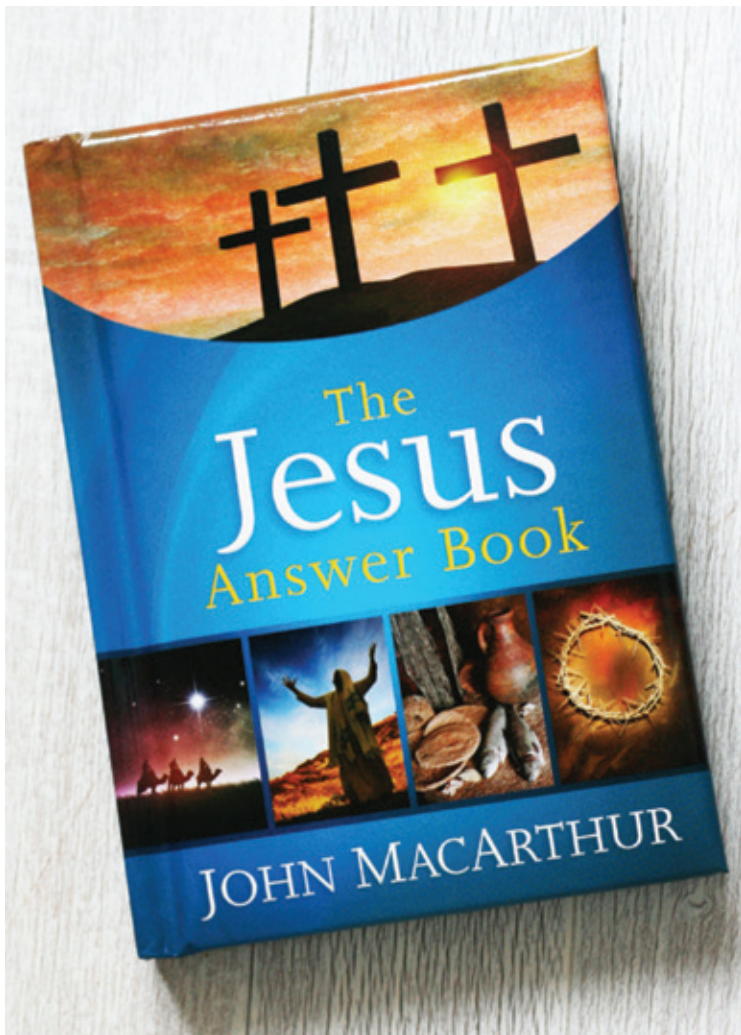
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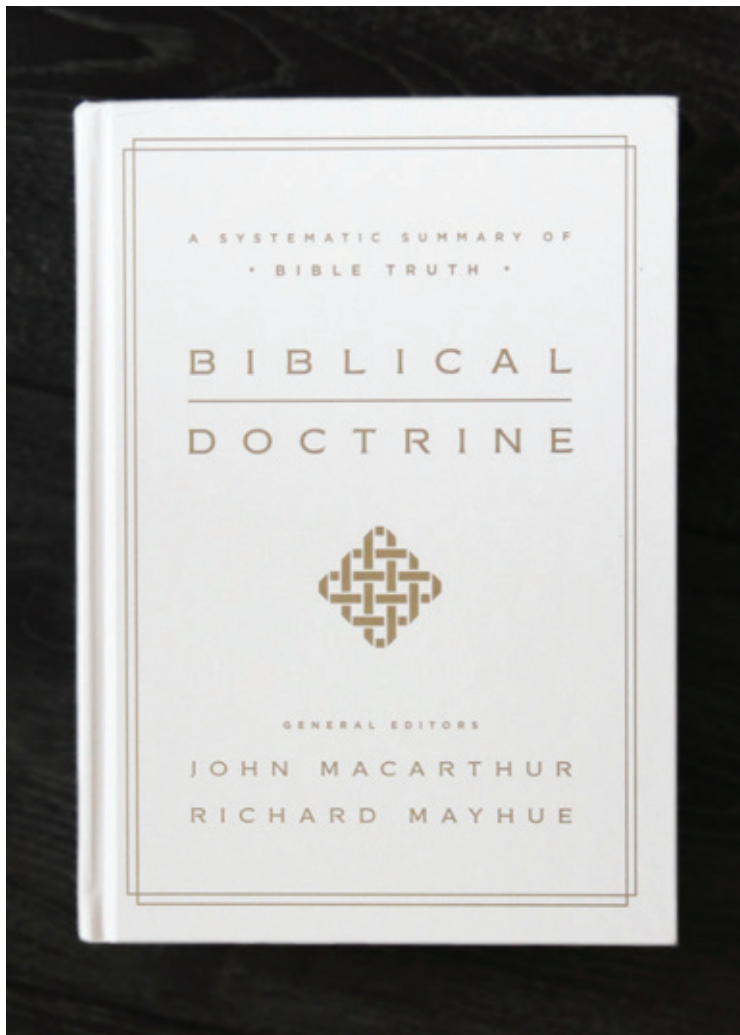
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