UNLEASHING GOD’S TRUTH, ONE VERSE AT A TIME

DYNAMIC RESOURCES

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CAMERON BUETTEL

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2023
40 LIVES IN 40 DAYS

Have you ever wondered why God uses ordinary people to accomplish His work and to spread the good news? Join bestselling author and Bible teacher John MacArthur as he takes a closer look at the everyday lives of the men and women that God trusted to carry His message and lead His people. 40 Lives in 40 Days is a brand-new devotional compilation of MacArthur’s extensive studies of the Bible characters who show us that we don’t have to be perfect to do God’s work. From the twelve disciples to the Samaritan woman, MacArthur shares that Jesus chose average people—fishermen, tax collectors, doubters, political zealots—and gave them a remarkable mission.

These encouraging stories, based in Scripture, help shed light on these real men and women who endured struggle, pain, and heartache, just like us. They were perfectly ordinary sinners—living proof of God’s kindness—who went on to serve an extraordinary purpose in spreading the gospel. By tracing the lives of these unlikely heroes, MacArthur shows us that the difficulties and temptations that they lived through are the same trials that modern believers face today.

Throughout 40 Lives in 40 Days, MacArthur will:

- Dive deep into the stories of Jesus’ earliest disciples
- Teach us that God continues to mould and use ordinary people today
- Share the surprising ways God accomplishes His purposes
- Provide an honest look at all of God’s people
- Help you experience God’s goodness and grace

As you get to know each of these 40 figures even better, you’ll see why the lives they led can still serve as an inspiration to believers today.

JESUS UNLEASHED

John MacArthur

Walk through the gospel records of the “bold confrontations” of Jesus and discover how to use your newfound knowledge of the person of Jesus to defend the biblical truth of the Christian faith. Do you have any idea who Jesus really is? “What you think of Jesus Christ will thoroughly colour how you think about everything else,” writes John MacArthur. This is a critical truth in the life of every believer. Your view of Jesus affects the way you view God, the world, and every one of your decisions.

These days, Jesus is often portrayed as a pacifist, a philanthropist, or a docile teacher. He strikes a plastic - and sometimes pathetic - pose in the minds of many. Some prefer the meek and mild Jesus who heals the sick, calms fears, and speaks of peace and goodwill. These things do represent a portion of the Messiah. But tragically, too many have never been exposed to the rest of him. They have never seen a full 360-degree view of the Saviour. His boldness in the face of confrontation and why that matters. Until now.

Abridged from his classic bestseller, The Jesus You Can’t Ignore, Jesus Unleashed takes a revealing walk through the gospel records. Like an investigative journalist on a mission, author and teacher John MacArthur shows you a remarkable and compelling picture of Jesus unleashed.
My maternal Grandmother used to say: “There’s no need to be afraid of the dark, the dark can’t hurt you.” She lived in a rural location surrounded by fields, and with no street lighting; a walk down a very dark tree-lined country lane was required to reach the bus stop where my mother and I, together with my little sister, would need to wait on a winter’s evening for a double-decker to take us to the next village where we lived. My grandmother’s saying must have made an impact upon me because from a young age it enabled me, together with a couple of my most trusted friends, to explore exciting places at a time of day when everyone else was doing what we considered to be boring things, i.e., watching the news or soap operas on their black and white television sets. There were no computer games or internet, so we made our own fun, which included exploring the countryside that surrounded our village.

Were we fearful?
Not really!

The prospects of an exciting adventure on a moonlit winter’s evening motivated us to leave the cozy security of our homes for the chill of the outdoors. We were all members of farming families and our familiarity with the countryside and with handling livestock imbued us with a sense of confidence that we had authority over the darkness, not the darkness over us. Of course, nowadays in our risk averse and health and safety culture, such adventures would never pass a mandatory risk assessment by any youth organisation. It’s quite perverse that as society has increasingly coddled children and prevented them from participating in the mostly healthy and injury free activities that we enjoyed, they are permitted, or even encouraged, to spend many hours each week in the “safety” of their bedrooms playing increasingly violent video games and being exposed to all manner of wickedness on the internet.

Sadly, apprehension of the unfamiliar, aversion to any risk, and especially fear of people, results in many Christians doing little for King Jesus and the enlargement of His Kingdom on this earth. Jesus addressed this matter of fearful inactivity in his Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In this parable the Master entrusted one of his slaves with just one talent (which in fact represented a considerable sum of money), but unlike his fellow slaves, he didn’t present his master with any profit on his return home after a very long journey, instead he made an accusation against his master in a disingenuous attempt to excuse his disobedience.

‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ (ESV verses 24 & 25)

The master was angry with him, not just because he hadn’t made a profit, but because he had recklessly put his master’s property in a place where it would be devalued, or worse still, stolen, and because he did absolutely nothing with his time and personal abilities for the duration of his master’s absence. Like
the other two slaves, the wicked one had identified himself as belonging to his master, but his inactivity and irresponsibility proved that his identification with his master was superficial and false. What point is Jesus making in this parable?

Well, it's this:

Even a Christian with limited knowledge of Scripture, limited personal talents, and limited opportunities for service, is still obligated to use what little they do have for the increase of Christ’s kingdom. Even if you can’t personally go to serve on the mission field, you can still financially support and pray for those who do. When you partner with GTY Europe you become an important and contributing member of a team that is fully engaged in the Master's business, and in this report you can read about a few of the very many projects in which that team is involved.

Grace Reaches Out to Romania

It was a great joy to return to Romania during 2022 after the lifting of all COVID 19 travel restrictions. The 6-year project to translate and re-voice 600 of John MacArthur’s most important sermons into Romanian has progressed with an impressive commitment to accuracy by our team of translators (all of whom are young pastors), and several linguistic editors based in Arad, where we have a GTY Europe recording studio. After each sermon is translated, Pastor Ilie Bledea re-preaches it into Romanian and it’s then passed over to our sound engineer, Stefan, and script editor Ruxandra in Bucharest, to produce a half-hour radio programme in a format similar to our English language broadcasts. In Romania the programmes are hosted by Pastor Dani Scurt under the title of Har prin Cuvant (Grace though the Word) and can be heard in Romania and the Romanian diaspora on internet radio. The sermons are also uploaded to YouTube and can be found by searching for “Har prin Cuvant”.

We are also assisting the Hungarian Baptist churches in Romania by providing the financial support necessary to translate and publish books and booklets by John MacArthur into the Hungarian language.

MacArthur Study Bible in Romanian

Whilst in Romania, I met with the team at Faclia Publishing House in Oradea to discuss progress on the translation of the MacArthur Study Bible, which GTY Europe is funding through the generosity of our ministry partners. Not only is the project on schedule, but they have produced excellent charts, timelines, and maps for inclusion within the Bible. The project should be ready for publication and printing by the end of 2023, and we anticipate having the first hardcopies in our hands by January 2024. It’s our hope to present a free copy to Romanian church leaders throughout the country and in Romanian speaking Moldova.

We want to significantly impact the churches with this amazing resource, which is unique in Romanian church history, and to that end we are praying for more ministry partners to join us in this exciting adventure of faith in Romania and Moldova, two of the poorest countries in Europe.

Poland

In partnership with a group of trusted church leaders, we have translated most of the titles within the popular GTY Spotlight on Scripture series of booklets and distributed thousands of free copies at pastoral conferences. This has been very well received by church leaders, who now have some powerful Bible-teaching resources to place into the hands of the members of their congregations. We are also adding Polish language subtitles to many of John MacArthur’s sermons for uploading to YouTube.
The above letter was received from a church in Bulgaria that has been fundamentally transformed after the pastor's adult son, who is fluent in English, started searching the internet for preaching that would help him understand what the Bible taught concerning the healing and prophecies that characterise most churches in Bulgaria today. He was deeply concerned to have been present when so-called pastors prayed over sick Christians and they were not healed, or they pronounced prophecies that never came to pass, whilst at the same time the "pastors" got financially richer at the expense of the poor and gullible. In the Lord's providence he "stumbled" across Grace to You on YouTube and began watching every video featuring John MacArthur's verse-by-verse Bible teaching that was posted there. Soon he told his father about what he had discovered, and they began to watch the videos together, the son simultaneously translating for his father, who couldn't speak English.

After a while the father became convinced of the truth he was being taught by John MacArthur, and so he too began to preach sermons from God's word, which were not very well received by most of the congregation, who just wanted healings, prophecies, and words of knowledge. Many people left the church, but the Lord was at work and those who remained found they were growing in their understanding of the Bible and realised they needed to align their lives with it. The church leadership contacted the GTY Europe office for some form of help, never actually expecting we would be prepared to go to Bulgaria and organise a Bible teaching conference and preach in the churches – which we did!

It was so encouraging to witness first-hand how this small church of about 30 members had not only formed an independent Bible-based church, but had also planted a new church about an hour's drive away in a Gypsy community, where I was privileged to preach. We were given a wonderfully warm welcome by all the brothers and sisters in Christ and the brothers played and sang some of the most beautiful and reverent worship songs I had ever heard. If the Lord wills, we intend to return to Bulgaria again in 2023.
The Balkans

For at least the last five years we have been seeking the Lord’s guidance about expanding the reach of the ministry into the Balkans, because of the many emails we receive from listeners to our broadcasts asking for help in finding a church which faithfully teaches God’s word. It appears that the Lord is now leading us to provide real tangible support to pastors and churches in North Macedonia and Albania, in addition to Bulgaria and Serbia. During 2023 we intend to be in the Balkans to collaborate with local pastors in organising Bible teaching conferences and to undertake Gospel preaching in churches at several locations. This region of Europe still suffers from political instability and ethnic tensions and is in desperate need of faithful preaching and accurate exposition of God’s word.

Ashford Office

The staff continue to mail-out thousands of free resources each year to those responding to our radio broadcasts and answer innumerable emails from people seeking help in understanding God’s word, particularly as it pertains to their circumstances, which are often very challenging.

We are thankful to all of you who have given so sacrificially to this ministry during the past year, and we hope you have been encouraged by reading this brief report, because without your partnership there would be no ministry to report on.

Yours by God’s grace and in Christ’s love,

Paul

Director GTY Europe

If you share Grace to You’s commitment to divine truth, to the church, and to biblical ministry, and you are able to give, I encourage you to do so. You will be making a positive, profound difference in people’s spiritual health and growth by helping sustain our efforts throughout Europe. Know that we’ll receive your support with gratitude and a serious commitment to using it wisely for kingdom purposes. I’m honored to serve with you as we continue our joyful, wholehearted work of “Unleashing God’s Truth, One Verse at a Time.”

John MacArthur
Pastor-Teacher
Marriage As It Was Meant to Be

By John MacArthur

Our entertainment-saturated society helps feed all sorts of illusions about reality. The fantasy of the perfect romantic and sexual relationship, the perfect lifestyle, and the perfect body all prove unattainable because the reality never lives up to the expectation.

The worst fallout comes in the marriage relationship. When two people can’t live up to each other’s expectations, they’ll look for their fantasized satisfaction in the next relationship, the next experience, the next excitement. But that path leads only to self-destruction and emptiness.

Marriage is the capstone of the family, the building block of human civilization. A society that does not honour and protect marriage undermines its very existence. Why? Because one of God’s designs for marriage is to show the next generation how a husband and wife demonstrate reciprocal, sacrificial love toward each other.

But when husbands and wives forsake that love, their marriage fails to be what God intended. When marriage fails, the whole family falls apart; when the family fails, the whole society suffers. And stories of societal suffering fill the headlines every day.

Now, more than ever before, is the time for Christians to declare and put on display what the Bible declares: God’s standard for marriage and the family is the only standard that can produce meaning, happiness, and fulfilment.

Divine Directives for Wives

One of the most explicit passages of Scripture that outlines God’s standard for marriage is Ephesians 5:22-33. Wives often bear the brunt of that section, but the majority of the passage deals with the husband’s attitude toward and responsibilities for his wife. Nonetheless, here’s the wife’s responsibility before the Lord:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Saviour of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:22-24).

Submission in no way implies a difference in essence or worth; it does refer, however, to a willing submission of oneself. Wives,
submission is to be your voluntary response to God’s will—it’s a willingness to give up your rights to other believers in general and ordained authority in particular, in this case your own husband.

Husbands aren’t to treat their wives like slaves, barking commands at them; they are to treat their wives as equals, assuming their God-given responsibility of caring, protecting, and providing for them.

Likewise, wives fulfil their God-given responsibility when they submit willingly to their own husbands. That reflects not only the depth of intimacy and vitality in their relationship, but also the sense of ownership a wife has for her husband.

Keep in mind that the wife’s submission requires intelligent participation: "Mere listless, thoughtless subjection is not desirable if ever possible. The quick wit, the clear moral discernment, the fine instincts of a wife make of her a counsellor whose influence is invaluable and almost unbounded" (Charles R. Erdman, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966], 103).

Elisabeth Elliot, writing on "The Essence of Femininity," offers a fitting summary of God’s ideal for wives:

Unlike Eve, whose response to God was calculating and self-serving, the virgin Mary’s answer holds no hesitation about risks or losses or the interruption of her own plans. It is an utter and unconditional self-giving: "I am the Lord’s servant . . . May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). This is what I understand to be the essence of femininity. It means surrender.

Think of a bride. She surrenders her independence, her name, her destiny, her will, herself to the bridegroom in marriage . . . The gentle and quiet spirit of which Peter speaks, calling it "of great worth in God’s sight" (1 Peter 3:4), is the true femininity, which found its epitome in Mary (John Piper, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991], 398, 532, emphasis added).

**Divine Directives for Husbands**

After giving the divine guidelines for the wife’s submission, Paul devotes the next nine verses of Ephesians 5 to explain the husband’s duty to submit to his wife through his love for her: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25). The Lord’s pattern of love for His church is the husband’s pattern of love for his wife, and it is manifest in four ways.

**Sacrificial Love**

Christ loved the church by giving "Himself up for her." The husband who loves his wife as Christ loves His church will give up everything he has for his wife, including his life if necessary.

Most of you husbands would give verbal assent to that—literally dying for your wife is such a remote possibility for most of you. But I would speculate that it is much more difficult to make lesser, but actual sacrifices for her.

Husbands, when you put aside your own likes, desires, opinions, preferences, and welfare to please your wife and meet her needs, then you are truly
dying to self to live for your wife. And that is what Christ's love demands.

**Purifying Love**

Christ loved the church sacrificially with this goal in mind:

*That He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless* (Ephesians 5:26-27).

Love wants only the best for the one it loves, and it cannot bear for a loved one to be corrupted or misled by anything evil or harmful. If you really love your wife, you'll do everything in your power to maintain her holiness, virtue, and purity every day you live.

That obviously means doing nothing to defile her. Don't expose her to or let her indulge in anything that would bring impurity into her life. Don't tempt her to sin by, say, inducing an argument out of her on a subject you know is sensitive to her. Love always seeks to purify.

**Caring Love**

Another aspect of divine love is this:

*Husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church* (Ephesians 5:28-29).

The word translated “cherishes” literally means “to warm with body heat”—it is used to describe a bird sitting on her nest (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:6). Husbands, you are to provide a secure, warm, safe haven for your wife.

When your wife needs strength, give her strength. When she needs encouragement, give it to her. Whatever she needs, you are obligated to supply as best you can. God chose you to provide for and protect her, to nourish and cherish her, and to do so “as Christ also does the church.”

**Unbreakable Love**

For a husband to love his wife as Christ loves His church he must love her with an unbreakable love. In this direct quotation from Genesis 2:24, Paul emphasizes the permanence as well as the unity of marriage: *“For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh”* (Ephesians 5:31). And God’s standard for marriage still hasn’t changed.

Husbands, your union with your wife is permanent. When you got married, you had to leave, cleave, and become one with your wife—never go back on that. Let your wife rest in the security of knowing that you belong to her, for life.

Just as the body of Christ is indivisible, God’s ideal for marriage is that it be indivisible. As Christ is one with His church, you husbands are one with your wives.

Paul goes on to say, *“This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church”* (Ephesians 5:32). Why is submission as well as sacrificial, purifying, and caring love so strongly emphasized in Scripture? Because the sacredness of the church is wed to the sacredness of marriage.

Christian, your marriage is a testimony to the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. Your marriage will either tell the truth about that relationship, or it will tell a lie.

What is your marriage saying to the watching world? If you’ll walk in the power of the Spirit, yield to His Word, and be mutually submissive, you can know that God will bless you abundantly and glorify His Son through your marriage.

This article was adapted from Different By Design by John MacArthur
The Bible is God’s revelation of Himself to you. No matter how much teaching and preaching you listen to, there’s no substitute for studying it for yourself. If you want to begin (or continue!) a habit of daily Bible reading, The MacArthur Daily Bible can be an invaluable tool. For each day of the year, it gives you a portion from the Old Testament, from Psalms and Proverbs, and from the New Testament—along with background information and insights from John MacArthur. It’s all in canonical order; in each day’s readings, you’ll pick up where you left off the day before. And if you consistently complete the daily selections, you will read through the entire Bible in a year.

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John MacArthur

People imagine that heaven will be a paradise designed only to indulge their earthly appetites. Others harbour a cynical suspicion that heaven will be unbearably monotonous—a bland, boring place with no true pleasure or enjoyment. But what will it really be like? And do you need to know before you get there?

In The Truth About Heaven, John MacArthur answers those questions and more, examining the nature of death for believers in Christ, exposing unbiblical doctrines like purgatory and ‘soul sleep’ and helping you lay hold of the profound encouragement the Bible gives us about heaven. Human language falls short of communicating the full glory of the future awaiting those who love God. But His Word tells you everything you need to know today about the magnificent reality of heaven.

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John MacArthur

We are living in bizarre times. The world is caught in the grip of fear—fears over deadly diseases, financial ruin, unchecked violence, government overreach, and political upheaval. The news is dominated by chaos and confusion, and we seem to be careening from one emergency to the next. How do we make sense of this world and its rampant corruption? Is there any hope for restraining the chaos around us? How should God’s people respond? In Chaos, Corruption, and the Christian Response, John MacArthur examines the biblical answers to those questions, diving deeply into what Scripture says about man’s sin, its disastrous effects, and the solution found only in God.

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ON “SOCIAL JUSTICE” AND THE GOSPEL
John MacArthur

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. In this booklet, John MacArthur digs into the modern fascination with “social justice” and how the church should respond to this issue. Important, biblical truth for you, your family, and your local fellowship—On “Social Justice” and the Gospel.

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John MacArthur

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“True salvation produces a heart that voluntarily responds to the ever-awakening reality of Christ’s lordship. Because we are sinful creatures, we can never respond as obediently as we should. But if we are true believers, we will not fall back into the cold, hard-hearted, determined unbelief and rebellion of our former state.” (John MacArthur)

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My name is Toni Urumov, I live in Macedonia and serve in the Baptist Church “Radosna Vest” in Strumica, which is doctrinally a Reformed-Baptist church. I’ve been married to my wife Dubravka for nine years and we have three boys: Timothy, Gabriel and Antonio.

I’m a graduate of the Word of Life Bible Institute in Hungary and the Baptist Theological School in Novi Sad, Serbia. I ministered as a Baptist pastor in Serbia for four years, but last year we moved back to Macedonia to serve in a new church plant.

A friend planted the Baptist church in Strumica three years ago and by God’s grace a lot of people immediately started attending (which is a nice problem to have). My friend asked if I could help him so, after a lot of time praying and considering God’s direction, we made the move.

One of the main reasons that made us consider moving back to Macedonia is the sad spiritual condition of our country. Out of a population of 2 million, we have less than 1% born again believers. There is a dire lack of faithful Bible believing churches and little in the way of sound doctrine. There is virtually no expository preaching and few trained pastors, mainly because we don’t have good Bible schools or proper theological seminaries. We are in desperate need of sound theological books translated into Macedonian that will be of great benefit to pastors and congregations.

When we moved to Macedonia, God graciously gave me several ways to serve Him in our church, mainly through teaching, preaching and discipleship. I preach regularly in our church and teach at Bible studies. We have Bible study groups for both men and women and we use some of the wonderful resources from Grace To You, which help us to better understand God’s word.

By God’s grace we have seen spiritual growth in our church. People are growing in their knowledge of the Word, they are increasingly being shaped by the Gospel, and they are more eager to serve and apply Biblical truth in their lives. As a relatively new church we are still in the process of establishing membership and a team of elders.

We have also been led by the Lord to plant another church in Josifovo, a town that is 18 miles away from Strumica. Strategically it’s a very good place to plant a church because there are a lot of villages surrounding the town, and it’s close to the border with Greece and Bulgaria. We already have a group of people attending the services and we regularly visit and teach them God’s word.

We are thankful for the financial support we are receiving from Grace to You Europe. My wife and I have benefited a lot from John MacArthur’s online sermons and books, and we long to have them translated into our language so that many more Macedonian people can benefit as well. We also want to open a Bible school and buy a church building, currently we are renting a small place, which is expensive, but by God’s grace and provision we hope to have our own building one day.

Please pray for my country, and through your partnership with Grace to You Europe, “Come over to Macedonia and help us”.

The Man from Macedonia
By Toni Urumov

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Please pray for my country, and through your partnership with Grace to You Europe, “Come over to Macedonia and help us”. 
Sexual immorality runs amok in our culture today. Temptations to depart from God’s sure path of blessing in the realm of sexuality are epidemic. The anonymity of the Internet and wireless technology has allowed people to pursue sexual immorality more than ever before. Today, pornographic images and movies can be viewed with ease, sexually explicit music is common, and extramarital sexual activity is seen by many as normal. Perhaps more than at any other time, promiscuity both in thought and deed is accepted and condoned.

However, in sharp contrast to the trend of the world, God calls His people to be pure (1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Ephesians 5:3–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7). They are to shine as lights of personal holiness and moral virtue for His glory (Matthew 5:13–16). The Lord designed sex as a wonderful expression of love between a husband and wife (Hebrews 13:4), but those who use sex selfishly and apart from the Lord’s design will experience untold heartache and personal ruin.

The Consequences of Sexual Sin

Christians are certainly not immune to temptations to lust and sexual sin. The consequences of repeated failure in this area are devastating, and a believer who sins sexually brings shame to the name of the Lord. A child of God must seek to reflect his Father’s true character (1 Peter 1:14–19). Impurity in thoughts and actions is diametrically opposed to the purpose of God for salvation—to bring Him greater glory. The following are but a few examples of the far-reaching, destructive consequences of sexual sin.

A man who is unfaithful to his wife cannot serve as an elder in the church because the Lord intends him to be a model of godliness in all areas (1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Peter 5:3). The most important qualification for a man who desires eldership is his being above reproach. His reputation and example both within and outside the church must be exemplary (1 Timothy 3:2, 7). The importance of sexual purity among these
qualifications is seen by its placement at the top of the list (1 Timothy 3:2). A man’s opportunity for service in the church can be permanently removed because of the lasting reproach of his sexual sin.

Sexual sin also causes intense personal pain. Proverbs repeatedly warns of the far-reaching and agonizing consequences of sexual immorality:

- Death (Proverbs 2:19; 7:22–27)
- Loss of wealth (Proverbs 5:10)
- Enduring regret (Proverbs 5:11–14)
- Entrapment (Proverbs 5:22)
- Painful punishment (Proverbs 6:27–29)
- Shame and destruction (Proverbs 6:32–35)

Within marriage, sexual immorality will also destroy trust between husband and wife and defile the sanctity of their own sexual intimacy.

Forgiveness and Hope

If you have already sinned sexually or are currently struggling with the temptation to lust, take heart! The Lord is always ready to forgive and cleanse those who turn to Him in confession and repentance (1 John 1:9), but understand that lasting holiness in your life will become a reality only as you faithfully pursue it according to the principles of God’s Word.

The Lord promises, “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6), but you must be a willing and eager partner in His work of sanctification.

The follower of Christ must recognize there is divine help and hope for victory over the strong passions and evil desires associated with sexual sin. Scripture tells you there are powerful resources from God that enable you to conquer sin and live a life of purity (Philippians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:2–4). The mighty working of the Holy Spirit in your heart will enable you to faithfully pursue holiness.

The Gradual Process of Sanctification

Your heart is the first and most important battleground in conquering lust and sexual sin. Victory over sexual immorality begins with a new heart. Scripture tells us one of the ways we know if a person is truly a child of God is by looking at the pattern of his life. First John 2:3–5 says, “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him.” This doesn’t mean a child of God never sins, but it surely does mean a saved person will not continue in an unbroken pattern of sin. To do that would be unnatural for a child of God.

Many people become frustrated in their struggle to overcome sexual sin because they never seem to achieve lasting purity. Has that been your experience? Part of the reason you may not overcome sexual sin as quickly as desired is your misunderstanding about the location of the battle. The physical manifestation of sexual sin is simply the outworking of what has already been going on in the heart for some time. The focus of your struggle must be internal first and foremost.

The Holy Spirit immediately and permanently indwells each person He regenerates. Romans 8:9–10 is written to those who are saved: “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.” Ephesians 4:22–24 instructs you “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life.
and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

From where does the power come to reject sinful habits and to imitate the righteousness and holiness of God? Listen to the liberating truth taught in Romans 6:3–7: “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.”

As a Christian, you have been given both the responsibility and the power to stop sinning. You are able to do that because you have been spiritually joined to Jesus in His death on the cross and in His resurrection from the dead. If you are genuinely saved, you have new and pure life by which you can please God. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is recreating you into His likeness (Colossians 2:9–14). God has worked a miraculous transformation in your heart, and now He wants you to draw on the spiritual resources He gives you as you pursue holiness (see Romans 6:12–23; 2 Timothy 2:22; Psalm 19:7–14; 119:9–11).

Fighting against sin and temptation, as well as pursuing greater obedience to God’s Word, is a process that happens gradually, day-by-day. The temptation to succumb to your struggle with sin—even sexual sin—is not unusual for the believer. The apostle Paul writes of his struggle with sin in Romans 7:14–25, speaking of it as “bondage to sin” (Romans 7:14). While your fight against sin is constant and difficult, it is a battle you can win if you humbly rely on the resources the Lord gives you—meditation on Scripture, devotion to prayer, and fellowship in a biblical church. Experiencing and rejoicing in the gradual defeat of sin depends upon faithfully nurturing your heart toward purity.

A believer’s struggle with sin is like getting rid of weeds from a garden. If you keep cutting the weeds off at the ground level, they will keep growing and coming back. If you want to remove the weeds permanently, you must kill them below the surface of the ground—at the root level. That is how it works with sin. You must see your sinful tendencies as dead remnants of your past life that must be rooted out, as Colossians 3:5 teaches: “Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.” If you try to stop sinning merely in an external way—not dealing with the root problem at the heart level—you will not develop long-term holiness. As the great Puritan preacher John Owens wrote, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

The key to consistent purity in your life is developing definite, tangible patterns of faithfulness in holiness (Galatians 5:16). It is when you begin to curtail patterns of prayer, diligent Bible study, and the pursuit of an intimate relationship with God, that you will be far more vulnerable to lustful temptation. Could it be that a season of sexual sin is the direct result of becoming lax in your pursuit of the Lord, especially after the remorse of the previous sin has begun to wear off?

You will grow in personal holiness in direct proportion to your intake of God’s Word and your commitment to prayer. In John 14:15 Jesus says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Let your fight against sexual sin be the overflow of the love and devotion you have for your Lord and Savior.
Biblical Resources for Overcoming Sexual Sin

In Ephesians 6:10–17 you learn of the powerful weapons the Lord Jesus has given you for your fight against sin. The “sword of the Spirit,” the Word of God, is the greatest weapon for your fight against the devil (Ephesians 6:17). In Psalm 119:9–11 we read, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. With all my heart I have sought You. Do not let me wander from Your commandments. Your word I have treasured in my heart that I may not sin against You.”

In addition to filling your heart with the Word of God, you must actively flee every temptation that seeks to threaten your purity. In 2 Timothy 2:21–22, Paul commands Timothy to continually flee sinful desires. It is utterly foolish to take the issue of sexual sin lightly or to overestimate your ability to resist temptation. Just as Joseph fled the daily seduction of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:6–12), you too must avoid those times, places, and situations in which you know sexual temptation will arise.

In addition to reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible on a regular basis, please listen to John MacArthur’s sermon, “Aggressively Attacking the Sin in Our Lives.” It contains pertinent Bible teaching about overcoming habitual sins like sexual immorality.

Finally, to grow spiritually and to overcome temptation, you must regularly and actively participate in the ministries of a biblically grounded local church. The Lord has designed our spiritual growth to be carried out through the loving, mutually edifying ministry of a church committed to expository preaching and regular accountability (Ephesians 4:11–16; Hebrews 10:23–25). When you are pursuing temptation and self-gratification, your thoughts and efforts are consumed with selfishness. But taking initiative to serve others on your own or through the ministries of the church takes your attention off yourself. You must strive to develop the habit of loving and serving others instead of yourself. As you do this, you will become more like Jesus.

Conclusion

Sexual fulfilment expressed within a Christian marriage is a wonderful gift from God. The Lord has designed sexuality as a way to express love by a husband and wife, but when it is used selfishly and outside the bounds of His design, it will produce untold heartache. If you are a true Christian and have sinned sexually, please know the Lord has forgiven you on the basis of Christ’s work on the cross. If you confess your sins and pursue righteousness, He is faithful to cleanse you from sin and give you a renewed desire to please Him. The Lord makes the following promise to all those who bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honour, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God. . . . For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but God who gives His Holy Spirit to you” (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5, 7–8). May the Lord empower you to have increasing victory over sexual sin for His glory and for your good.
I was born into a loving British missionary family in Auckland, New Zealand. My parents had recently concluded a period of service in Australia and were in the process of preparing to move to the Cook Islands in the South Pacific, where my father was to teach at Takamoa Bible College. This is where my first memories begin, idyllic white beaches, azure blue water, coconut trees, and sugarcane.

Eventually we had to leave our island idyl and return to the U.K. I recall our family arriving in Exeter on a dreary rainy evening - there couldn’t have been a starker contrast to the South Pacific. After a period of living in London we settled in Witney, Oxfordshire, where I would spend the next 18 years of my life.

The Lord saved me at the age of 14 whilst attending a Christian camp in Devon, and not long afterwards I was baptised in my home church in Witney. From that time on, I became more involved in the church and was received into membership when I was 18.

In the four years between my baptism and becoming a member I had lots of growing to do. Perhaps like many Christian young people I drifted spiritually, I was committed to church and the youth group, but at school, while being happy to identify as a Christian, I was not living a God-honouring life. I have no doubt that the Lord protected me from many pitfalls and mistakes that I could have made during that time. Thankfully He steered me towards certain positive friendships which kept me playing sport, rather than other less wholesome activities.

Another part of the Lord’s protection of me was the example and influence of my parents which, although I didn’t realise it at the time, was fundamental in guiding me and forming both my moral and theological outlook. One of the significant events in my teenage years was a trip to China with my parents. We stayed in Hong Kong and visited Xian and Xinning. Within the first day of being in Hong Kong I had fallen in love with the place, and by the end of our visit I was determined to return. After my A-levels I was able to go to Hong Kong for a gap year and worked as a youth intern in St Andrew’s Church Kowloon and as a teaching assistant at International Christian School (ICS).

That year in Hong Kong was seminal for me and for the future direction of my life. It was a year of mistakes, frustrations, and disappointments, but also a year of awakening. I realised that I was not being as serious about the Lordship of Christ over my life as I needed to be. I recognised mistakes that I had made and wanted to move forward in a way that would bring glory to God and me closer to Him. It was during this time that I began to recognise some
aspects of the gifting the Lord had given me and how to use it; I began to develop a deeper love for His word and a desire to teach it.

Reluctantly, after the year in Hong Kong I returned to the U.K to commence studies for a degree in Sport and Exercise Sciences. In the second year of my studies the Lord presented me with the opportunity to coach at a Christian basketball camp, and it was here that He gave me the greatest blessing in my life to date; I met Rachel, who is now my wife. We were married in December 2008, and I would go on to work in the field of sports science for a few years until I joined an organisation which worked with teenagers who had been excluded, or were at risk of being excluded, from mainstream education.

Whilst I was happy in my job and was able to share my faith with those I worked with, the desire to return to Hong Kong was constantly on my mind, I specifically wanted to teach at the school where I had been an intern during my gap year. However, I needed more qualifications so, during the first year of our marriage, we moved to Southampton so that I could complete a Post-Graduate Certificate of Education, after which I taught in the UK until the Lord finally granted an answer to my prayers and, together with Rachel, I returned to Hong Kong as a PE teacher at ICS in August 2011.

We lived in Hong Kong for 7 years and it was during this time that I discovered the preaching ministry of Dr John MacArthur. His clear exposition of scripture, devotion to the text, passion, surety, and infectious love for God’s word began to impact me, to the extent that I regularly listened to 2 or more of his sermons each day. It was during this time that my love for reading grew and my relationship with the Lord deepened. We also joined Ambassador International Church, which was another turning point in my life.

During this time my desire to be in full time ministry increased and I investigated the training offered at The Master's Seminary, but when I considered the financial costs that would be incurred in moving to California, and my reluctance to leave Hong Kong I, in my weakness and lack of faith, discounted the idea. I felt the Lord had shut the door on the idea of full-time ministry, but I was still burdened for our students at ICS, where I had the freedom to disciple and preach the gospel, so I poured myself into that, alongside serving as an elder at ICS.

During our 7 years in Hong Kong, the Lord blessed Rachel and me with 3 children, Seth (9), Caleb (8) and Lydia (4), these little ones have brought us much joy, laughter, fun and love over the years and we are very grateful to be their parents. They constantly challenge us, but they also spur us on in our relationship with the Lord, our desire to see them ‘grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour’ is something that has focused our prayer life, our devotional life, our sanctification and so much more.

The Lord still has much work to do in me, but the desire to be a loving and devoted husband, and as good an example to my children as my parents were to me, is something that constantly has a sanctifying effect; never have I desired holiness as much as I do today, to enable me to model Christlikeness to
my family.

For reasons that are far too convoluted to explain here, the Lord led us to leave Hong Kong and return to the U.K in June of 2018. This was particularly hard as I had thought the move to Hong Kong might be permanent; however, the Lord had other things in mind. It was this move back to the UK that finally opened the door I had been waiting for: full time ministry. My parents had relocated to Gloucester during the years we were in Hong Kong and the church they were attending was looking for a youth worker. It became clear that this was what the Lord had in mind for us, so in October 2018 I began as the full-time youth worker for Abbey Church.

It was during the summer of 2019 that I attended the Summer Institute at Grace Life Church London, where one of my brothers is a member. It was a phenomenal conference, full of wonderful teaching and much encouragement; more significantly, it was here that I met the Director of the Grace to You ministry in Europe, Paul Mitchell and his wife Diana. At the time I had no idea how pivotal this conference would be for me and for the future of my family. As I got to know the Mitchells over the course of the conference, I was able to share my desire to be properly trained for the ministry and Paul connected me with The Master’s Academy International (TMAI). In the following year I began studying with Hermeneia, through Grace Life London. I took their whole Bible Survey class, which was fantastic. This was a precursor to starting the Master of Divinity Program (M.Div) through the European Bible Training Centre in Berlin, which is part of TMAI and a sister ministry to The Master’s Seminary (TMS).

I was able to study on a part-time basis with TMAI whilst still working for Abbey Church, but in May 2021, by the grace of God and the support of TMAI and GTY Europe, the opportunity came for me to move to Los Angeles to complete my M.Div at The Master’s Seminary. I had wanted to attend TMS for many years but allowed doubts and concerns, such as finance and logistics, to get in the way, but the Lord used those years to prepare me for exactly this opportunity.

Someone might ask:

Why go all the way to California?

Why not stay and train in the UK?

It’s such a lot of money and hassle moving the family, is it all worth it, is it necessary?

Here is my answer:

I know lots of men who have trained in various seminaries and Bible colleges all over the world, I hear stories of weak theology, lack-lustre preaching, training with token nods to the term ‘expository’, a minimisation of the original languages, an abandonment of the historical, grammatical, hermeneutic and capitulation to the world’s ideologies. I saw none of those things in the men I knew who had studied at TMS.

Now, is TMS the only seminary in the world that has faithful men? No!

Is TMS the only seminary in the world that teaches some of the aspects I have described? No!

But I believe that TMS is the best place to train for the pastorate. And, as many have said before: Would you want a doctor treating you for a life-threatening illness who was not the best at what he does? Of course not!

To lay a solid foundation for many years of effective pastoral ministry I need to get the best training I can, in order to be able to minister in the best way that I can to the souls which the Lord entrusts to my care. I don’t want to train somewhere that will not prepare me for the rigours and trials of a lifetime of ministry. I want to be able to give my all to the people that I pastor and to know exactly how to do it. During the months I have been at TMS I have been humbled, challenged, informed, equipped, and blessed. I can see what the Lord does here with men and their
families. I can see his refining process under the watchful, tender, pastoral eyes of the TMS faculty and Grace Community Church family.

What other seminaries have professors who are both consummate academicians and full-time pastors?

TMS professors don’t just care for the quality of my education, but for the state of my soul. They care for my family and challenge me to not allow the demands of study to become an excuse to be a poor husband and father.


There are faults because no one is perfect. There are many days when one feels overwhelmed by the weight of study and feelings of inadequacy. Learning comes through investing hours and hours in the classroom, attending lectures, reading in the library, and writing essays.

Is it worth it? Yes, it is! Why?

Because it’s crucial that every scripturally qualified man entering pastoral ministry has the best training possible. Just as a trainee medical doctor demands the best training possible so he can cure diseases and save lives, so must a physician of souls. This necessity for the best training possible is encapsulated in the TMS mission statement:

“We Train Men Because Lives Depend On It”

The imperishable souls of men and women depend upon the Holy Spirit’s empowering of faithful pastors who will courageously preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with scriptural precision, so that it may please the Lord to save them to eternal life and not condemn them to eternal death. And Christ’s sheep need the sensitive and compassionate care of skilful under-shepherds who will watch over their eternal souls by regularly feeding them the truth of God’s word, constantly modelling obedience to God’s word, knowing that they will be required to give an account for their ministry on the day the Chief Shepherd gathers His people to Himself.

Churches everywhere, especially in the U.K and Europe, are in desperate need of such pastors – Pray that the Lord of the Church will raise up and equip many such men in this generation!

Ben Bradford is studying at TMS with the support of a GTY Europe Scholarship. It’s his intention to return to the U.K at the completion of his studies to enter church-based pastoral ministry and to train other men to teach God’s word. Ben will be in the U.K during the summer of 2023, so please contact the GTY Europe office if you would like to invite him to preach at your church.
Theologian

For many in the church, that’s an intimidating term applied only to spiritually elite believers. It’s an achieved status—earned only through years of seminary, writing, and other ivory-tower exploits.

But that is not a biblical distinction. The truth is, everyone is a theologian.

In simple terms, theology is what we believe about God. And in that sense, everyone has a particular theological perspective. Practically speaking, even atheists are theologians.

The real question then is not who is or isn’t a theologian, but what is the quality of a given person’s theology? Is it biblically based and doctrinally sound? Or is it a carelessly constructed hash of worldly wisdom and pseudo-scriptural ideas? Perhaps even more tragic are those who fight for precision on peripheral theological issues while confusing and corrupting the essentials.

We must not make the mistake of assuming we can spot good theologians by their clerical garb or credentials. We have to measure them by their fidelity to the gospel—because if they’re wrong about the gospel, they might as well be wrong about everything.

In Luke 23 we observe an encounter between Christ and a truly great theologian. His brief, four-verse cameo succinctly communicates a tremendous wealth of doctrinal truth. In fact, widely celebrated scholars have spent thousands of pages muddling what this man clearly enunciated in three short sentences.

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:39–43)

The thief on the cross presents us with a basic but powerful systematic theology. His words give us a synopsis of essential gospel truth—revealing his excellent theology, anthropology (doctrine of man),...
eschatology (doctrine of the future), Christology (doctrine of Christ), and soteriology (doctrine of salvation).

The Theology of the Thief

The first essential truth the repentant thief (from now on referred to as “the thief”) understood was that God should be feared. In fact, his first recorded words are a stern rebuke to the unrepentant thief: “Do you not even fear God?” (Luke 23:40). John MacArthur points out that this sudden outburst represented a startling change, considering both thieves had earlier hurled insults at Christ in unison (Matt. 27:44).

It is characteristic for the unregenerate to have no fear of God (Romans 3:18). But the conviction wrought by the power of the Spirit of God produces a holy fear of divine judgment. Convicted sinners cry out like the repentant tax collector in Luke 18:13, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” True salvation is not from material poverty or poor self-esteem, but from God's wrath, justice, and judgment.

The words of the thief stand in stark contrast to the blasphemous utterances coming from everyone else around him. The unrepentant thief, the Jewish rulers, and the Roman soldiers all scornfully mocked Christ. Their behavior showed no fear of God whatsoever—if anything, they gleefully vented their unbelief.

The Jewish “rulers were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One’” (Luke 23:35). The Roman “soldiers also mocked Him . . . saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” (vv.36–37). The unrepentant thief “was hurling abuse at Him, saying, ‘Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!’” (v.39).

Their taunting statements eerily echo Satan: “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread” (4:3); “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here” (v.9).

Those disparate people shared one thing in common: They refused to acknowledge the deity of Christ. They would only worship God on their terms, according to the evidence they demanded. They stood in judgment over who God is and how He reveals Himself. In essence, they established themselves as sovereign over the Lord and Creator of the universe.

In a situation where all the visible power belonged to those on the ground—religious leaders, political rulers, and Roman soldiers—the thief made his appeal to the man hanging beside him: “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” (Luke 23:42). Surrounded by sneering human authorities, the thief recognized who was really in charge, and cried out to the King of Kings.

What we initially see in the thief's cry of repentance and faith is a healthy, reverential fear of God. It's the starting point of all good theology, and it set him on a path that culminated with his humble willingness to beg for forgiveness and salvation. His right view of God led him to, among other things, a right view of himself and his sin.

The Anthropology of the Thief

The anthropology—that is, the doctrine of man—displayed by the repentant thief on the cross stands in sharp contrast to the default perspective of fallen humanity. We've already seen that the thief had excellent theology—he feared God. And his basic grasp of God's holiness produced a sound and sober assessment of his own undeniable guilt.

Don't assume that the thief was some petty criminal. It's important to remember that Christ's cross was originally intended for Barabbas—a violent insurrectionist and murderer (vv.18–24). In all likelihood, the thieves on either side of Jesus were utterly wicked men.

Yet amazingly, one of them was willing to humble himself and concede the judicial fairness of his punishment: “We indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds” (v.41). The fact that he believed crucifixion was the just punishment for his crimes means he must have understood how evil his sins were.
That is the bad news sinners must accept before they can recognize the good news of the gospel. They must acknowledge their need for a Savior. And they must understand the immense cost of their crimes.

Natural men refuse to accept God’s verdict—they reject the evidence put forth in their prosecution by His Word. Sinners want nothing to do with their guilt, preferring to cling to delusions of personal goodness. Such false notions keep their self-esteem and sense of respectability intact. The whole world resonates with a fraudulent cry of innocence. As Solomon lamented, “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight” (Prov. 16:2). “Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness” (20:6, KJV).

The contrition and confession modeled by the thief is an extremely rare commodity in our therapeutic culture of victimhood. We should go to the seminary we find in Luke 23:39–43, emulate the thief, and agree with God and what He says concerning our condition. The thief reminds us that it’s never too late to confess our sins.

**The Eschatology of the Thief**

Although Jesus spent His life marching relentlessly toward the cross, He kept the emphasis of His ministry squarely on eternal judgment and warned His disciples accordingly:

*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!* (Luke 12:4–5)

That’s one of the most important eschatological statements in all of Scripture. Jesus tells us what our greatest fear should be. And the thief on the cross is a forceful advocate of that view—his words speak powerfully to those whose primary fear is the end of this temporal life.

The thief suffered the most grueling and agonizing physical death possible. Crucifixion was Rome’s supreme instrument of capital punishment, and a powerful motivational threat for their enemies and subjects. For people in the first century, there was no more dreadful death than crucifixion (you’d struggle to top it today). The word “excruciating” actually comes from the Latin word excruciatus, meaning “out of the cross.”

It is staggering to think that in the midst of such unspeakable agony, the thief was filled with dread for something else. He still had the presence of mind to warn the other thief—who was “hurling abuse” at Christ—of an even greater danger. “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” (23:40). In the face of impending death and eternal judgment, the thief rightly understood that blasphemy was the epitome of foolishness. John MacArthur explains:

He realized that the torment he was enduring for breaking the law was insignificant compared to what he could expect for his sin from the divine Judge. He was afraid, not of those who were destroying his body, but of God, who would destroy both his body and his soul in hell.

The thief had mastered the most critical essential of Christian eschatology. He knew he was deservedly headed for hell, and Christ was headed for His glorious kingdom (v.42). The thief was acutely aware of his very real and imminent danger. He didn’t plead with the earthly powers at Calvary—the Jewish leaders or the Roman government. He turned to the suffering Christ and made one final, desperate plea.

**The Christology of the Thief**

We cannot know everything about Christ. But we can know everything we need to know in order to receive His mercy and inherit eternal life. And for that, we don’t need to study systematic theology or evangelistic methodology. The answers come from Christ’s brief exchange with a criminal in the gospel of Luke.

Five critical aspects of the thief’s Christology are revealed in Luke 23:41–42.
1. THE THIEF DECLARED CHRIST’S RIGHTEOUSNESS
The thief described his slow torturous death as justice (v.41). But concerning the Man on the cross next to him, the thief declared that “this man has done nothing wrong.” Christ’s perfect righteousness shone into the dark recesses of a man whose life was marked by wickedness. John MacArthur comments:

The final evidence of the repentant thief’s divinely transformed heart was his belief in Jesus Christ. The story of his transformation moves from an assessment of his sinful condition to an assessment of the Savior’s character. When he said of Him, “This man has done nothing wrong,” he was confessing not merely the Lord’s innocence of any crime, but also His sinlessness.

The apostle Paul recognized the necessity of Christ’s sinlessness in order for Him to be our sin-bearing substitute: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

2. THE THIEF APPEALED TO CHRIST EXCLUSIVELY
Recall that the thief never made his plea for mercy to the visible powers around him. He made no appeal to the Romans for exoneration, nor to the Jews for spiritual absolution. Mustering what little remained of his strength and consciousness, the thief made his only appeal to the crucified Savior.

The exclusivity of Christ is a central tenet of the Christian faith. Jesus made it clear that He is the way—not a way—to heaven (John 14:6). The apostles continued that message as they established the early church, stating that “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Christ grouped every other religion into one doomed category, and consequently, His exclusive claims are offensive to many. But the thief, in his most desperate hour, knew Jesus was his only hope.

3. THE THIEF REQUESTED CHRIST’S FORGIVENESS
The thief was not confused about his most desperate need. John MacArthur points out that the thief’s request for Jesus to remember him was synonymous with a cry for pardon.

He then addressed Jesus directly as the Savior and humbly asked Him, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” This was nothing less than a plea for the forgiveness apart from which no one will enter God’s kingdom. He based his request on Christ’s prayer that God would forgive those who crucified Him, which gave him hope that he too might receive forgiveness. He expressed belief that Jesus is the Savior, since he would not have asked for entrance to the kingdom unless he believed Jesus was willing and able to provide it. His was the plea of a broken, penitent, unworthy sinner for grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

The thief’s subjective feelings and painful circumstances were not the focus of his plea to Christ. Instead, he knew what his true and ultimate need was—for forgiveness.

4. THE THIEF RECOGNIZED CHRIST’S AUTHORITY
Implicit in the thief’s plea was his recognition of Christ’s authority to grant forgiveness and eternal life.

The thief also knew who the real King was at Calvary, since he ascribed God’s kingdom to Christ as “Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

5. THE THIEF ANTICIPATED CHRIST’S RESURRECTION
The gospel narratives don’t shy away from exposing the unbelief of Christ’s closest disciples. All of them, barring John, fled at His arrest and despaired at His death—even though Jesus taught them repeatedly that He would rise from the dead. There is only one character in the gospel narratives who demonstrates authentic belief in Christ’s coming resurrection—and that’s the thief.

Even the casual reader of Scripture can’t help but be amazed at the thief’s preoccupation with eternal matters. Rather than be overwhelmed with the doom of a Roman cross, he was able to unmistakably articulate his confidence that Christ would soon rise from the dead. Moreover, as John MacArthur explains, he based his own hope of personal resurrection on the reality of Christ’s coming resurrection.

Since no one survived crucifixion, he understood that Jesus would have to rise from the dead to do that. He probably knew that Jesus had power over death, since the news of His raising of Lazarus had spread throughout Jerusalem. He no doubt was aware that Daniel 12:2 promised that the saints would be raised and given a place of glory in the kingdom. His request was that Jesus would raise him and grant him entrance to that kingdom.

Through the pain of crucifixion, the thief was still able to declare Christ’s righteousness, appeal to Him exclusively, petition His forgiveness, recognize His authority, and anticipate His future resurrection. In all, the thief spoke six words about Christ and nine words to Christ. Those two brief statements reveal a man with an outstanding grasp of Christology.

There is a profound simplicity to the thief’s faith in the Savior. And it is a glorious benchmark for every sinner who approaches Christ in repentance and faith.

The Soteriology of the Thief

John MacArthur refers to soteriology—the doctrine...
of salvation—as “the pinnacle of Christian theology.” That’s understandable, considering that our eternal destiny hinges on the correctness of our soteriology. And the thief’s stellar theology—his right view of God, his right view of himself, his right fear of judgment, and his right recognition of Christ as the one true Savior—extended to a right understanding of salvation.

In fact, there is no clearer picture in Scripture of salvation coming to someone by grace through faith apart from works.

The thief knew better than anyone that he had absolutely nothing meritorious to offer Christ. He had already confessed the justice of the punishment he was enduring. He saw no inherent goodness in himself. And even if he believed in a system of works righteousness, he had no life left in which to accumulate merit. All he could do was appeal to the Savior in faith. And Jesus responded in grace, pouring out unmerited favor toward the wicked criminal at His side. What could be more gracious than granting a hell-bound wretch full citizenship in God’s heavenly kingdom?

The thief embodied the glorious soteriological truths we find in Ephesians 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Furthermore, the thief’s faith was a repentant faith. There is good reason why the thief who turned to Christ is widely known as the “repentant thief” or the “penitent thief.” Verses 40 and 41 clearly reveal a man who acknowledged and despised his guilt. He was a man who willingly confessed his sin, just as all believers are urged to do (1 John 1:9).

Obviously, the thief never had the chance to physically demonstrate his repentance by living a changed life. But we know that a changed life is the result—not the cause—of a changed heart (Ezek. 36:25–27). And that transformed heart was plainly evident as the thief abandoned the blasphemy he had earlier participated in (Matt. 27:44) and pled with Jesus for mercy.

Christ’s response is both staggering and thrilling for all who come to Him in genuine repentance and faith. As John MacArthur explains,

The Lord’s reply was astonishing. He prefaced it with the word “truly,” because what He was about to say was hard to believe. That a cursed criminal, whom the Jews would view as unredeemable, would be promised entrance to God’s kingdom was an outrageous affront to their sensibilities.

The promise that this redeemed sinner would be with Jesus in heaven that very day invalidates the Roman Catholic teaching regarding purgatory. It also eliminates any system of works-righteousness, since the penitent thief had neither the time nor the opportunity to perform enough good deeds to merit salvation.

The wonderful promise that he would be with Jesus in “Paradise” (heaven; 2 Corinthians 12:2; cf. Revelation 2:7; Revelation 22:2, 14) speaks of his full reconciliation to God. He would not merely see Jesus from afar, he would be with Him. His restoration would be full and complete.

The grace of God should shock us because God would be perfectly good and just to consign everyone to eternal damnation at any moment. We shouldn’t marvel at His wrath; it’s His grace that should astound us.

The Transformation of the Thief

So why did someone so debauched suddenly come to his spiritual senses? It is because God graciously and sovereignly regenerates people who were once dead in sin (Eph. 2:1) and makes them a new and living creature (2 Cor. 5:17).

The thief had initially joined the others in reviling and blaspheming Christ. But then God opened his heart to the truth and miraculously, powerfully, sovereignly, instantly granted him faith and eternal life. The people, the rulers, the Romans, even his fellow thief did not understand what was truly happening at Calvary, but this man suddenly perceived the truth clearly. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he was rescued from spiritual darkness and death and given light and life. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, he perceived the truth through a divine miracle in his soul.

When we consider the superb theology of the thief, we must remember that it was initially imparted to him by God. And that’s true of all good theology. Those who truly know God came to that knowledge through an act of His saving grace.

And that brings us back to where this article began, with revered and celebrated theologians who can’t enunciate the fundamentals of the Christian faith with clarity and simplicity. People who spend their lives exploring theological obscurities often end up obfuscating or ignoring the vital truths the thief understood and clearly communicated. Through their corrupting and confusing of the gospel, they invalidate their spiritual credentials and prove the uselessness of academic clout apart from a redeemed heart. And when such scholars are wrong about the fundamentals of the gospel, they might as well be wrong about everything else.

For those reasons, the theology of the thief provides the basic building blocks for all good theology. May God grant us the grace to understand His truth with similar accuracy and precision.
A recent article in The Times of London revealed the results of a survey which asked people to rate what they perceived as the most boring professions and the most boring hobbies. The results were very interesting: During the week “Phoebe” (a composite person) is a Tax Consultant, dividing up her day with smoking breaks. On Sundays after church she likes to go bird watching.

In the survey, the profession of Pastor came about in the middle between the most boring and most exciting of jobs, Data Entry Clerk being the most boring and Artist being the least boring.

The most boring hobby was “Sleeping a lot”, and sadly, “Going to church” was rated the second most boring (although attending church should never be considered a hobby). Unsurprisingly, in this generation which demands constant sensory stimulation, the most exciting hobby was Video Gaming.

The results of the survey got me thinking:

Why is it that people would consider the ministry of a pastor to be boring, or attending church one of the most boring things a person could do, apart from sleeping?

Of course, as any pastor would observe as he looks out on his congregation, certain people have the amazing ability on a Sunday morning to simultaneously engage in two of the most boring hobbies. Whilst the preacher may not have any control over how much time his congregation spend in the land of Nod during Saturday night, he does have a responsibility to ensure that his preaching doesn’t cause his people to catch up on their lack of sleep during his sermon.

The human author of Psalm 84 (of course, the actual author was the Holy Spirit) was not a man who had a boring job, and no one would have accused him of wasting his time in pursuing a boring and pointless hobby. No, he was a man filled with passion for God and zeal for service in God’s house.

The man who wrote Psalm 84 was a divinely gifted musician, he was a Levite, and he served in the Temple at Jerusalem. We know from the title of the psalm that he was a member of a particular family within the tribe of Levi that had been allocated specific duties in the Temple. The most musically gifted members of this Levitical family performed their duties in public view before the thousands of pilgrims who visited the Temple. Theirs was an especially important and prestigious role in the worship of God; their music and singing would have made a big impression upon the pilgrims, many of whom would have travelled for weeks to get there. No doubt, the pilgrims sang some of the divinely inspired psalms and songs they had heard in the Temple as an encouragement to keep on walking during their long and arduous journeys home.

Not all Levites had great musical ability, and besides, some belonged to a particular division that was
assigned a quite different role, with little in the way of glamour or prestige. They were the Doorkeepers, the men who opened the temple gates each day at the crack of dawn. They worked security during the day, as thousands of noisy pilgrims poured into the temple precincts, and then at the end of the day they closed the gates and stood watch during the night. (Psalm 134:1)

No glamour or prestige in that job and little public recognition, because after-all, no one was around at dawn or during the night to appreciate their work.

But interestingly, although a very gifted musician composed Psalm 84, it isn’t a psalm for musicians – it’s a psalm for doorkeepers!

It’s certainly not a psalm for rich and famous celebrities – it’s a psalm for the humble and under-appreciated no-names. Maybe it’s for you reading this article, or perhaps for the pastor who lives in an obscure village or town where he faithfully serves a small congregation and receives little or no public recognition.

If you have read John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, you will know it’s an allegory, a story with two meanings. Throughout the book Bunyan uses an extended metaphor: Life is a journey. The story is about Christian’s journey through this world, with all its trials and tribulations, on the way to the Celestial City, by which he means Heaven.

Anyone familiar with Pilgrim’s Progress would realise it has many similarities with Psalm 84, which is an expression of the pilgrim’s yearning to get closer to God, and it uses metaphors to describe some of the great hardships that must be experienced on the way up to the holy city of Jerusalem.

In verse 6 of Psalm 84 we read of the Valley of Baka; “Baka” means a place of weeping. The Valley of Baka was an arid place on the way up to Jerusalem, but the aridity was relieved during certain seasons by refreshing rain, and in the valley the heart of the weary pilgrim was refreshed by the thought of what awaited him when he entered the temple.

Pilgrims normally travelled together in groups for mutual companionship, encouragement, and protection. That reminds us of our need for each other as we pass through this world. Family and friends are very important, but for the Christian, Christ’s church is where His people should find authentic fellowship, genuine friendship, the faithful preaching of the Gospel, careful verse by verse teaching of the Word, and compassionate pastoral care; we should never willingly neglect these means of grace, but prioritise attendance each Lord’s Day. (Hebrews 10:25)

In verse 3 the psalmist reveals that he must have personally spent time in the temple, because he observed certain small, but important details: he noticed that sparrows and swallows nested in the temple eaves. In fact, he seems to be a bit envious that such an insignificant bird as the little drab sparrow could do what he couldn’t do: make a home in the temple.

Unlike the sparrows, the Levites only stayed in the temple for a short period of time; after their annual week of service, they had to return to their homes, which could be many miles away, which is something they have in common with swallows. Swallows are migratory birds; they spend the winter in sub-Saharan Africa and return to Europe in the Spring when the weather gets warmer. Just like the Levites the swallows come and go, but the little sparrows remain throughout the entire year.

In verse 10, this highly gifted musician makes an astonishing confession; He says that he would rather serve as one of the unappreciated temple doorkeepers than to have all the things the wicked crave: Fame, fortune, celebrity status, the very things that characterise those who have no time for God in this present generation. And of course, those who have no time for God in time, will certainly have no place with Him in eternity.

The psalmist knew something that most people today try to avoid thinking about: That this life is a
pilgrimage, and no matter what we may achieve or what we may accumulate in this world, it doesn’t impress God or earn us enough Brownie points to enter heaven. The psalmist understood what the Bible repeatedly teaches: We are completely dependent on God’s grace – and nothing else!

I was reflecting on this psalm recently as I was preparing to take the funeral for Mike, a very dear friend and brother in Christ who was an exceptionally gifted musician, composer, and pastor (and someone who loved Psalm 84), and it made me realise something: Whilst this may not be a psalm for musicians, it isn’t just a psalm for doorkeepers either, it’s a psalm for bird watchers (which Mike was). It’s for those who are so desirous of being close to God that they would be happy and eternally content to live in a small hole under the eaves of God’s temple, rather than have a grand palace in this passing world, which was certainly true of Mike, one of the most content and non-acquisitive men I have ever known.

My friend Mike and the psalmist both had something in common: They understood from God’s word, personal experience, and the observation of human life in general, that a day in God’s courts is incomparably better than a thousand elsewhere. That is why a true Christian would rather be a mere doorkeeper in the house of God than have the uncertain and temporary pleasures of fame and fortune. A true worshipper of God rightly disdains the petty lifestyles of narcissistic celebrities and the inane trinkets they crave. God’s people know that the inconsequential lives of these egotistical God-haters will ultimately end in God’s judgement, with everything being stripped away, leaving them eternally bankrupt.

So, what can we as Christians learn from Psalm 84? Well, being a pastor should never be a boring job. After all, what could be more exciting and rewarding than studying God’s word and teaching it to others? And don’t ever feel envious about those who live without any fear of God, because what they have now is all they will ever have, and even that won’t last very long. Are you feeling small, insignificant, and undervalued? Then take some time out to watch birds and learn to contemplate God’s glory, because that is what you will be joyfully doing throughout the whole of eternity. In heaven you will never be bored, only constantly amazed that God’s grace was extended to such an unimportant, unworthy, and undeserving sinner.

Psalm 84

For the director of music. According to gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

1 How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!
2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
3 Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, LORD Almighty, my King and my God.
4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.
5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
6 As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
7 They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.
8 Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob.
9 Look on our shield, O God; look with favour on your anointed one.
10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favour and honour; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.
12 LORD Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

(New King James translation)
MISSION STATEMENT

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“For the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13)

ONE OF OUR PRINCIPAL TASKS IS TO PROTECT BELIEVERS FROM BEING...

“tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Eph 4: 14)

We accept the God-given responsibility of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) and strive for the growth of the church and the glory of the Lord, rather than the praise and honour of men.

Our role is not to supplant the local church’s ministry, but to support it by providing additional resources to those hungering for the truth of God’s word. Media ministries can never substitute for involvement in a biblical church, group Bible study, or interaction with a teacher. Yet we sense the need for more in-depth resources, evidenced by the many Christians and Christian leaders worldwide who depend on our ministry to supplement their own study. Our desire is that God be glorified through Grace to You’s radio broadcasts, CDs, DVDs, MP3s and publications. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of this ministry, and we desire to perform our work as unto Him, to reflect Him to all those we encounter, and to operate not in our strength but through His power (Philippians 4:13).