

UNLEASHING GOD'S TRUTH, ONE VERSE AT A TIME

DYNAMIC RESOURCES

*"There are no
unimportant
places or people"*

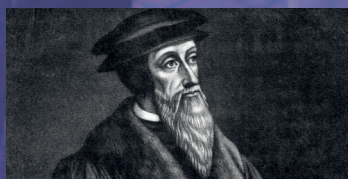
JOHN MACARTHUR

WHAT IS THE
DOCTRINE OF ELECTION?



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WHO WAS JOHN CALVIN &
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Good News: The Gospel of Jesus Christ

John MacArthur

Everything the Bible has to say about the gospel is simply an exposition of its central message: Jesus Christ lived and died to save sinners. The gospel is about Him, and it answers Jesus' key question: "Who do you say that I am?" It is good news. In *Good News: The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, John MacArthur examines the Bible's revelation of Christ and encourages Christians with the vast implications of all that Christ accomplished for them. This is a book to rekindle love and awe for the Saviour.

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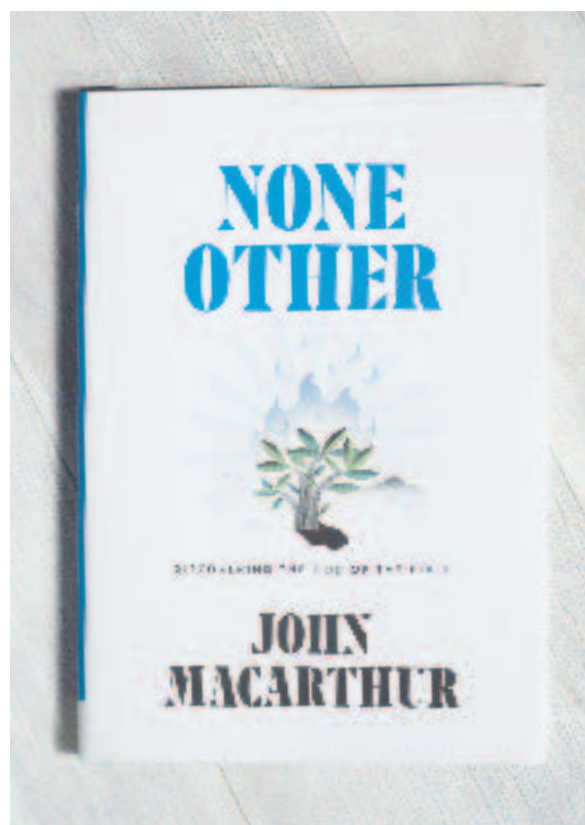
None Other: Discovering the God of the Bible

John MacArthur

The Bible's teaching on God's love, holiness, and sovereignty is often met with questions about human responsibility, suffering, and evil. If God is in control of everything, can we make free choices? If God is good and all-powerful, how can we account for natural disasters and moral atrocities? Answers to these questions are often filled with technical jargon and personal assumptions that don't take into account the full scope of biblical truth. In *None Other: Discovering the God of the Bible*, John MacArthur shows that the best way to discover the one true God is not through philosophical discourse but through a careful study of Scripture--the primary place where God has chosen to reveal Himself.

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MINISTRY UPDATE FROM GTY EUROPE DIRECTOR, D PAUL MITCHELL

John MacArthur made the statement that forms the title of this report back in 2016 in response to a question asked by some Christians living in the Faroe Islands who tune in to our daily radio broadcasts. They needed some help but were concerned that the Faroe Islands were too remote and their group too small for an international ministry like Grace to You to send someone to partner with them in a Bible teaching conference.

Now, we don't like to make a big thing about it, but in addition to our daily radio broadcasts and multi-media ministry we do undertake several field assignments each year in response to specific invitations from individual churches and groups of pastors seeking the help of Grace to You with Bible teaching, preaching, pastoral training and literature translation.

Romania

At Easter this year I was invited to preach in several Baptist churches in Romania and during my visit it was agreed that in October GTY Europe would organise and underwrite the costs of 6 conferences for church leaders.

I remember being at a meeting in an obscure village with several key Baptist leaders to discuss a proposed conference when I noticed that one of them had tears running down his face. Almost overcome with emotion, he turned to me and said, "We have always wanted such a conference for our pastors, but when



ON THE ROAD IN ROMANIA WITH GTY



PREACHING IN PALERMO

we wrote to some international ministries for help we either didn't receive a reply or we were told they were too busy. But here you are, coming to us and freely offering the resources of GTY, this is like a dream come true, it's the answer to our prayers."

Many Romanian Baptist pastors have the responsibility for several congregations (I personally know of pastors who care for 5 or 6 churches) and are paid perhaps 3,000 - 4,000 Euros per annum, which is not a great deal even by Romanian standards. The willingness of these men to serve Christ and the cause of His Kingdom under circumstances most pastors in Western Europe would balk at is truly humbling.

A new generation

We are increasingly receiving requests from a new generation of pastors for help in understanding exactly what the Bible teaches concerning Christ's plan for His church, and how that plan is to be implemented in practice on a local level. In an attempt to respond to some of these requests I will be leading a team comprised of former seminarians from the Master's Seminary who will be teaching on the theme: *How Christ Builds His Church*. One of the conferences will be held just across the Romanian border in Serbia and another will be held in Transylvania for the Hungarian speaking churches.



REFUGEE MINISTRY IN SICILY



PRAYING WITH REFUGEES

Sicily

During the last 2 years GTY has been providing multiple free copies of Fundamentals of the Faith and the MacArthur Study Bible to our friends at Voice of Hope (Germany) in their ministry amongst refugees in Sicily. Voice of Hope evangelist, Brother Daniel (a former refugee from Sierra Leone's brutal civil war), has been visiting over 40 refugee camps in order to preach the gospel and to teach the Fundamentals of the Faith course. The magnitude of Daniel's ministry is further exacerbated by the remote locations of many of the camps and by the frustration that he has not been granted the necessary documentation to obtain an Italian driving license.

During my recent visit to Sicily I accompanied Brother Daniel to several refugee camps and was able to preach the gospel to groups comprised mostly of young

men from various African countries. After I finished preaching Brother Daniel encouraged the men to ask me questions about the Bible and what it teaches concerning the Christian life, some of the questions I was asked were quite serious and really put me on the spot! Many of the refugees are Muslims and it was a joy to meet at least one who had embraced Christ as Saviour as a result of participating in a Fundamentals of the Faith course.

Another week of gospel preaching amongst the refugee camps is scheduled for early 2019, so please join with us in praying that the Lord will prepare hearts and minds to receive His precious word.

Faroe Islands

As I conclude this brief update I guess you might be thinking, “Well, thanks for news on the ministry in Romania and Sicily, it’s very interesting. But what about the Faroe Islands, were you able to help the GTY listeners that live there?”

Lord willing, by the time you get to read this we will have made our second ministry visit to those remote and rain-swept islands located in the North Atlantic between Scotland and Iceland, thereby making good on John MacArthur’s assertion that as far as the church of Jesus Christ is concerned, “There are no unimportant places or people.”



PAUL MITCHELL AND THE BROTHERS FROM THE FAROE ISLANDS





What is the Doctrine of Election?

By John MacArthur

The idea that God does what He wants, and that what He does is true and right because He does it, is foundational to the understanding of everything in Scripture, including the doctrine of election.

In the broad sense, election refers to the fact that God chooses (or elects) to do everything that He does in whatever way He best sees fit. When He acts, He does so only because He willfully and independently chooses to act. According to His own nature, predetermined plan, and good pleasure, He decides to do whatever He desires, without pressure or constraint from any outside influence.

The Bible makes this point repeatedly. In the very act of creation, God created precisely what He wanted to create in the way He wanted to create it (cf. Genesis 1:31). And ever since the creation, He has sovereignly prescribed or permitted everything in human history,

in order that He might accomplish the redemptive plan which He had previously designed (cf. Isaiah 25:1; 46:10; 55:11; Romans 9:17; Ephesians 3:8–11).

In the Old Testament, He chose a nation for Himself. Out of all the nations in the world, He selected Israel (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2; Psalm 105:43; 135:4). He chose them, not because they were better or more desirable than any other people, but simply because He decided to choose them. In the words of Richard Wolf, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” It may not have rhymed as well, but the same would have been true of any other people God might have selected. God chooses whomever He chooses, for reasons that are wholly His.

The nation of Israel was not the only recipient in Scripture of God’s electing choice. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is called Christ, “My Chosen



One” (Luke 9:35). The holy angels also are “chosen angels” (1 Timothy 5:21). And New Testament believers are those who were “chosen of God” (Colossians 3:12; cf. 1 Cor. 1:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9; 5:13; Revelation 17:14), meaning that the church is a community of those who were chosen, or “elect” (Ephesians 1:4).

When Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose Me but I chose you” (John 15:16), He was underscoring this very truth. And the New Testament reiterates it in passage after passage. Acts 13:48 describes salvation in these words, “As many as have been appointed to eternal life believed.” Ephesians 1:4–6 notes that, God “chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds his readers that he knew God’s choice of them (1 Thessalonians 1:4), and that he was thankful for them “because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). The Word of God is clear: believers are those whom God chose for salvation from before the beginning.

Even the foreknowledge to which Peter refers should not be confused with simple foresight as some would teach—contending that God, in eternity past, looked down the halls of history to see who would respond to His call and then elected the redeemed on the basis of their response. Such an explanation makes God’s decision subject to man’s decision, and gives man a level of sovereignty that belongs only to God. It makes God the One who is passively chosen, rather than the One who actively chooses. And it also misunderstands the way in which Peter uses the term “foreknowledge.” In 1 Peter 1:20 the apostle uses the verb form of

that very word, *prognosis* in the Greek, to refer to Christ. In that case, the concept of “foreknowledge” certainly includes the idea of a deliberate choice. It is reasonable, then, to conclude that the same is true when Peter applies *prognosis* to believers in other places (cf. 1 Peter 1:2).

The ninth chapter of Romans also reiterates the elective purposes of God. There, in reference to His saving love for Jacob (and Jacob’s descendants) as opposed to Esau (and Esau’s lineage), God’s electing prerogative is clearly displayed. God chose Jacob over Esau, not on the basis of anything Jacob or Esau had done, but according to His own free and uninfluenced sovereign purpose. To those who might protest, “That is unfair!” Paul simply responds by asking, “Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” (v. 20).

Many more Scriptures could be added to this survey. Yet as straightforward as the Word of God is, people continually have difficulty accepting the doctrine of election. The reason, again, is that they allow their preconceived notions of how God should act (based on a human definition of fairness) to override the truth of His sovereignty as laid out in the Scriptures.

Frankly, the only reason to believe in election is because it is found explicitly in God’s Word. No man and no committee of men originated this doctrine. It is like the doctrine of eternal punishment, in that it conflicts with the dictates of the carnal mind. It is repugnant to the sentiments of the unregenerate heart. And like the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the miraculous birth of our Saviour, the truth of election, because it has been revealed by God, must be embraced with simple and unquestioning faith. If you have a Bible and you believe it, you have no other option but to accept what it teaches.

The Word of God presents God as the controller and disposer of all creatures (Daniel 4:35; Isaiah 45:7; Lamentations 3:38), the Most High (Psalm 47:2; 83:18), the ruler of heaven and earth (Genesis 14:19; Isaiah 37:16), the One against whom none can stand (2 Chronicles 20:6; Job 41:10; Isaiah 43:13). He is the Almighty who works all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11; cf. Isaiah 14:27; Revelation 19:6), and the heavenly Potter who shapes men according to His own good pleasure (Romans 9:18–22). In short, He is the decider and determiner of every man’s destiny, and the controller of every detail in each individual’s life (Proverbs 16:9; 19:21; 21:1; cf. Exodus 3:21–22; 14:8; Ezra 1:1; Daniel 1:9; James 4:15)—which is really just another way of saying, “He is God.”



Who was

John Calvin and why does he matter?

By Emmie Fischbacher Williams

There are many great men and women in Church history and without doubt one of the greatest of them is John Calvin; scholar, theologian, reformer and pastor. Not only did Calvin have a hugely profound impact upon the medieval church in Europe during his own life time but he continues to impact the world-wide church today as a new generation of pastors and serious students of scripture discover his books.

John Calvin had a heart fixed so determinedly on God's word and God's glory that we cannot afford to remain in ignorance of his extraordinary example which should create a similar burning desire within our own hearts for the glory of God by our obedience to the word of God.

EARLY YEARS

John Calvin was born in Noyon on July 10, 1509. The world he entered, though still steeped in its medieval ways, was beginning to change politically, economically and intellectually. These changes had

not quite yet reached the small city of Noyon, situated some sixty miles north-east of Paris, and the message and spirit of the Reformation would not reach Calvin for another twenty years.

Calvin was a talented and highly intelligent child and, in the early 1520s, whilst still a boy he was sent by his father to study at the University of Paris with the intention that he should prepare for the Roman Catholic priesthood. However, his father later changed his mind and decided that his son should become a lawyer so John was sent to study law at the University of Orleans and at the University of Bourges, where he also studied Greek literature.

By 1533, surrounded by fellow scholars studying the works of Luther and the Reformation, he says "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame... Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with intense desire to make progress."

At the time of Calvin's conversion there was increasing hostility directed towards the Reforming movement in France. One Sunday morning in 1534, the 'Affair of the Placards' (or the Affair of the Posters), sparked the beginning of Calvin's life of exile. Posters were hung across France expressing the need for Church reform including one placed outside the bedroom window of King Francis. Uproar ensued and many reformers, including Calvin, fled France to avoid being arrested.

Calvin was on the move for the next couple of years but in 1535 he settled for some time in Basel, Switzerland. While he was there he dedicated himself to writing the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. A relatively small book, Calvin wrote simply of the Law and the Gospel, the knowledge of sin and salvation, justification by faith alone, prayer and the meaning of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. The book caused a widespread reaction with Calvin being recognised as a very gifted theologian amongst the Protestant communities but attracting increasing hostility from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

**"THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE
OF GOD CORRESPONDS TO
WHAT FAITH DISCOVERS
IN THE WRITTEN WORD"**

JOHN CALVIN

Calvin decided that he needed a permanent place to settle outside of France and chose the German speaking city of Strasbourg, on the border of France and Germany. He enjoyed the solitude of his literary studies and greatly desired to further the Reformation through his scholarship rather than by the public preaching of the Gospel. He set out from France through an indirect route via Paris and then to Geneva where he planned to stay one night before continuing on his journey. God, however, had important plans for him in Geneva and he would remain there for almost two years before finally reaching Strasbourg.

In 1535, Geneva's government declared the city's support for the Reformation and Roman Catholicism was outlawed. This declaration had occurred only a few months before Calvin arrived in the city. One of the Protestant leaders, William Farel, who Calvin

said "burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel", heard of Calvin's arrival in the city and went to him to plead for his help in reforming the church. After much resistance, Calvin was finally persuaded, believing that God had laid upon him this responsibility. Never again would he work in what he called the "tranquillity of studies".

**"MEN DO NOT
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JOHN CALVIN

Initially, Calvin resisted accepting the office of minister, feeling inadequate for the position and naturally shy, preferring to be hidden from public view. However, within four months he was preaching, laying great emphasis upon the need for saving faith and authentic confession and repentance of sin, evidenced by personal holiness. Some of Geneva's citizens were vehemently opposed to Calvin's faithful preaching of God's word and would heckle him whilst he was in the pulpit, discharge guns outside his house whilst he was sleeping, and even set their dogs upon him as he walked through the streets.

Things came to a head on Easter Sunday 1538 over the matter of unrepentant sinners partaking of the Lord's Supper. Calvin and Farel believed that the scriptures clearly taught that the Lord's Supper was only for Believers and not for those who, whilst claiming to be Christians, lived in a manner that contradicted that claim. The council's rapid response was to banish both ministers from the city. After less than 2 years as pastor, Calvin was again faced with fleeing his home, not knowing what God had planned for him.

After his failed efforts of Geneva, Calvin decided to go to Strasbourg as he'd originally intended. Upon arrival he was quickly invited to be pastor of the French congregation consisting of some 500 refugees.

The invitation came from Martin Bucer, the leading minister in Strasbourg and well-known reformer. Rather reticent after the difficulties in Geneva, Calvin took up the post, regularly preaching four times a week and, on top of all this, still found time to continue his studies and writing.

It was while in Strasbourg that he met a young widow, Idelette de Bure, and in August 1540 they were married. Calvin's friends were more concerned for his health and the need for a wife to care for him than the need for romance but, nevertheless, sincere love and affection did follow and perhaps more deeply than many modern-day relationships.

Calvin continued with his pastoral work and joined Bucer in his efforts to unite the divided church. A desire that lay heavy on the heart of every reformer. The church was divided into three camps; Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed. Calvin was involved in various conferences where unity was sought, but to little avail. Even when others were tempted to compromise and use more ambiguous language in order to gain unity, Calvin rejected such tactics saying "...if we could be content with only half a Christ we might easily come to understand one another". For Calvin, Christ always came first and unity would always be sought, but only based on truth.

By the age of only thirty-two, Calvin had become widely respected throughout Europe for his skills as a theologian and as a spokesman for the Reformed faith. While in Strasbourg, he revised his Institutes and also wrote his first commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. As so much of the debate around the Reformation centred on those particular texts, it opened, as he said, "the understanding of the whole scripture".

While Calvin was in Strasbourg, the situation in Geneva had been getting worse with entreaties from the Roman Catholic Church to return to its fold. In September 1540, the city council, in need of a strong

leader, voted for Calvin to be invited back, to which he very reluctantly agreed after much persuasion from his friend, Farel.

LATER YEARS

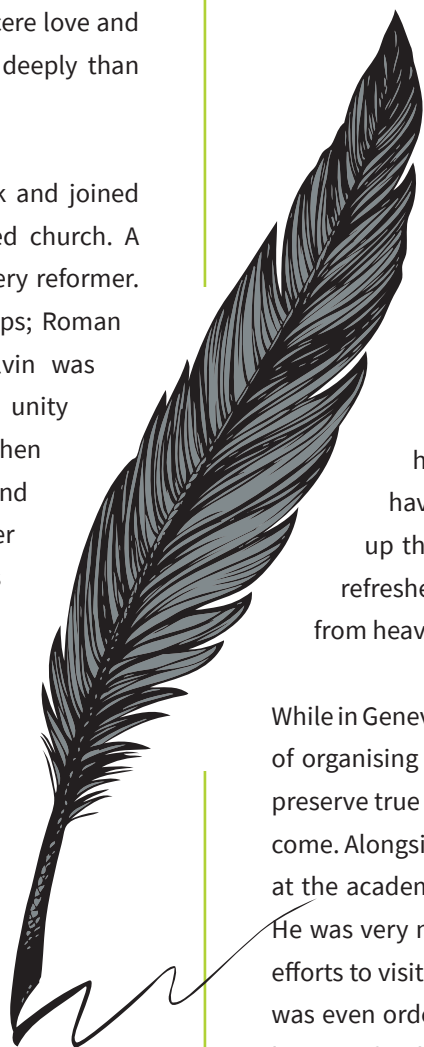
One year after his return to Geneva, his first son was born only to die two weeks later. This was a great blow to Calvin and Idelette, who never fully recovered.

They subsequently had 2 more children but sadly, both died in childbirth. Then on March 29, 1549, Idelette died of what was most likely tuberculosis. It was a bitter loss to Calvin which he expressed in a letter to a friend saying, "I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life". He wrote that the Lord was his constant source of aid, saying, "May he (the Lord Jesus) support me also under this heavy affliction, which would certainly have overcome me, had not he, who raises up the prostrate, strengthens the weak, and refreshes the weary, stretched forth his hand from heaven to me."

While in Geneva, Calvin wrote a catechism with the aim of organising the church in such a way that it would preserve true reformed Christianity for generations to come. Alongside preaching, a lot of his time was spent at the academy of Geneva teaching future ministers. He was very much a real pastor and made particular efforts to visit the sick. During the Bubonic plague, he was even ordered by the city council not to continue his visits for the sake of his own health.

The final edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion was completed in 1559 and he describes what drove him to write; "But lo! While I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France.... It appeared to me, that unless I opposed to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery."

Calvin suffered from poor health for most of his life and he died at the age of fifty-four. He left instructions



that he was to be buried in an unmarked grave in a secret location in Geneva, wanting to prevent any pilgrimages being made there. W. Robert Godfrey rightly says, “he had lived to make Christians, not Calvinists.”

WHY DOES HE MATTER?

John Calvin lived in difficult and traumatic times, in the wake of centuries of spiritual darkness. For so long, the Bible itself was a closed book, except for those who had a high level of scholarly expertise. His study of the law made him a unique theologian in his approach to studying the scriptures and he was determined to follow God’s word to the letter. Alongside hundreds of his sermons which were taken down and published, Calvin also produced, on average, more than one commentary per year on a book of the Bible. He was extremely skilled as an interpreter and apparently, when preaching, used no notes but merely spoke directly from the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible.

“GOD INVITES ALL INDISCRIMINATELY TO SALVATION THROUGH THE GOSPEL”

JOHN CALVIN

During his ministry, Calvin maintained a vast amount of correspondence with friends, acquaintances, churches and even strangers. He worked far beyond what he could physically manage and with no regard for his health. He worked night and day with scarcely a break. In a letter to a friend, Calvin says, “Apart from the sermons and the lectures, there is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise I am almost ashamed to live thus useless.” In that month, he would have preached a mere twenty sermons and twelve lectures.

He endured continuous ill health including migraines, colic, spitting of blood, gout and excruciating kidney stones. On top of these sufferings were the threats to

his own life from those who opposed his teachings. Such trials only highlight the constancy of his faith in carrying out the ministry to which God had called him.

The standards of worship were of the utmost importance and, above all, he wanted Biblical simplicity and to remove any unnecessary ceremonies that were purely of human invention.

“NO WORSHIP PLEASES GOD EXCEPT WHAT HE SANCTIFIES.”

JOHN CALVIN

At the time the medieval norm for music within worship, in wealthy churches at least, would have included choirs and musical instruments. Calvin eliminated these and simplified the use of music by introducing congregational singing, unaccompanied. Perhaps to our modern ears this sounds a little strict but, at the time, musical instruments and complex hymnody were all part of the corruption brought in by the Roman Catholic Church.

On many matters Calvin remained a medieval man and so some of his writing has been criticised over the years as too critical and negative. However, it is worth noting that Calvin’s writing and the language he used was very similar to most writers of that era and the times in which he lived would have most certainly influenced his views and choices.

If we look at the lack of scriptural clarity in our current day and the dwindling reliance upon God’s word in many churches, it has sadly only resulted in much confusion and minimal teaching. In contrast, Calvin still offers an amazingly clear, instructive and highly relevant approach to understanding and applying the inspired scriptures.

Perhaps what is most connected with the name of John Calvin is what is known as the ‘Five Points of Calvinism’ and especially the doctrine of predestination and election. Calvin did not arrange the five points as we have them today but he did hold



unswervingly to the wholly biblical position that God has foreordained His chosen people for salvation before the beginning of time and that there is nothing within man which can contribute to his salvation. He also preached justification by faith alone, referring to it as the “first and keenest subject of controversy” between the reformers and Rome who taught that paying one’s way into Heaven, alongside good works, was the only way to salvation. If the knowledge of justification by faith alone was taken away, Calvin said, “the glory of Christ is extinguished”.

There is, however, more to reformed theology and Calvinism than the ‘Five Points’. In fact, the chapter that Calvin dedicates to prayer in his Institutes is longer than that of pre-destination, which gives us an insight into how he stresses the essential elements of true religion above all things.

In 1538, the Italian Cardinal Sadolet wrote to the leaders of Geneva trying to win them back to the Catholic Church after they had turned to reformed teachings. Calvin wrote his response to Sadolet within six days and it spread his name as a reformer

across Europe. His response is important because it reveals the root of his argument with Rome. It was not merely of justification by faith alone or rejection of transubstantiation or the authority of the Pope. All those were crucial issues for Calvin but, at the root of it all, the fundamental matter was that of the centrality and supremacy of the glory of God. Calvin aimed to “set before man, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God.”

Maybe one might ask the question why so many books and sermons are dedicated to Christians who lived so long ago. Surely, in our present day, such strict views on Christianity have little place in our lives? In fact, it is quite the opposite. Calvin opened the door to a new and exceptional understanding of the scriptures, enabling believers in both his own day and now in ours to have a beautiful clarity concerning what the word of God teaches and reveals. Calvin’s style of writing, preaching and worship may have been very different to what many of us are used to today and perhaps some would quietly label such men as puritanical but purity was in fact their chief aim. His example is so valuable because when we compare our own godliness with such men, can we say that we wear the breastplate of righteousness as they did?

**“GOD’S GLORY
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INSEPARABLY
UNITED”**

JOHN CALVIN

Whatever the particular battles we face in our day, let us summon our courage and stand as uncompromisingly as Calvin did in his day. Let us rely solely on God’s word before anyone or anything else. Let our chief aim be that Jesus Christ be forever glorified, not just in the worship of our lips, but in our hearts and in our unquestioning obedience to His inerrant, infallible, and wholly sufficient word.

The top half of the page features a photograph of three crosses on a hill, silhouetted against a sunset sky with soft orange and yellow clouds. The crosses are arranged in a slight arc from left to right. Below the image, the title 'THE THEOLOGY OF THE THIEF' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE THIEF

By Cameron Buettel

Many theologians can wax eloquent about doctrinal fine points, but can't explain simply how a person can have his or her sins forgiven. They may be proficient in Hebrew and Greek, able to decipher the timing of Daniel's seventieth week, and even know all the minutia of Second Temple Judaism. But the clarity and simplicity of the gospel message eludes them—it's lost in a sea of caveats and qualifiers. We should never complicate a message that's meant to be clear and accessible to all people. The repentant thief, who spoke with Jesus while the two hung side by side at Calvary, provides a powerful biblical example of uncomplicated excellence in the theology of salvation. His brief conversation with Jesus reveals that the thief, though a criminal, was a theologian of the highest order when it came to matters of first importance. He clearly understood the essentials of theology, anthropology, eschatology, Christology, and soteriology.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE THIEF

Celebrated scholars have spent thousands of pages muddling what the thief plainly enunciated in three short sentences: One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:39–43). This penitent criminal presents us with a basic but powerful systematic theology. His words give us a synopsis of fundamental gospel truth.

(Proverb 20:6, KJV). Like the thief, true Christians would sooner humble themselves than protest their innocence. We should go to the seminary we find in Luke 23:39–43, emulate the thief, and agree with God about 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

Eschatology concerns the study of the end times. Its scope includes Christ's return, the rapture, the millennium, future judgment, and God's eternal kingdom. Those are all broad and important issues. But there's also an intensely personal aspect to our eschatological views and that concerns the only two possible eternal destinations for every person who has ever existed.

"Where will I go when I die?" That is the most crucial question any person can ask. It's the one facet of our eschatology that we can't afford to get wrong. And yet too many people ignore that question, and instead become preoccupied with preserving this present earthly life—in spite of its inevitable demise.

Jesus was the consummate theologian on heaven and hell—almost all of our biblical knowledge on these subjects comes directly from His lips. Although He spent His life moving relentlessly toward the cross, He kept the emphasis of His ministry squarely on eternal judgment, and He warned His disciples accordingly. Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him 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.

This convicted criminal suffered the most grueling and agonizing physical death possible. Crucifixion was Rome's supreme instrument of capital punishment.

There was no more painful way to die—the word "excruciating" is derived from crucifixion.

Yet 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 "railed" at Christ—of an even greater danger. "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" (Luke 23:40). John MacArthur elaborates:

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 element of Christian eschatology. He knew he was deservedly headed for hell and Christ was headed for His glorious kingdom (Luke 23:42), so he turned to the suffering Savior 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 have studied systematic theology or evangelistic methodology. Once again the thief provides us with the answers, identifying five critical aspects of Christology in Luke 23:41–42.

First, he acknowledged Christ's righteousness. The thief knew he deserved crucifixion. But he was just as convinced about the innocence of the One hanging next to him, declaring, "This man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41)

The apostle Paul recognized the necessity of Christ's sinlessness to His being 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 Corinthians 5:21).

Second, the thief appealed to Christ exclusively. It should not escape our notice that the thief never pled for mercy from the powers visibly exercised around him. He made no appeal to the Romans for exoneration,

nor to the Jews for 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). He grouped every other religion into one doomed category; and consequently, His claim of exclusivity is offensive to many. But the thief, in his most desperate hour, knew that the only hope was his only hope.

Third, he requested Christ's forgiveness. The thief was not confused about his most desperate need. John MacArthur points out that the thief's appeal for Jesus to remember him was synonymous with a cry for pardon.

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 petition to Christ. Instead, he expressed what his true and ultimate need was—forgiveness.

Fourth, the thief recognized Christ's authority. Implicit in his plea for forgiveness was his recognition of Christ's authority to grant that forgiveness—and eternal life. He knew who the real king was at Calvary, ascribing God's kingdom to "your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). "He believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. He acknowledged that the Lord would one day establish His kingdom, which was promised in the covenants God made with Abraham and David."

Finally, the thief anticipated Christ's resurrection. The gospel narratives don't shy away from exposing the unbelief of Christ's disciples. Everyone but John fled at Jesus' arrest and despaired of His death—even though Jesus had 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 resurrection when it was yet still future—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. "Since no one survived crucifixion, he understood that Jesus would have to rise from the dead to [establish His 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—there are eternal consequences for getting the gospel wrong (Galatians 1:8–9).

And the thief's words illustrate the quality of his soteriology. It's clear that he understood the need for repentance from his sin and faith in Christ. In fact, perhaps no one in all of Scripture better illustrates the truth of Ephesians 2:8–9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

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 to live to accumulate merit. All he could do was appeal to the Savior in faith. And Jesus responded in grace, pouring out undeserved favor on the wicked criminal at His side.

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 "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 (Ezekiel 36:25–27). And that transformed heart was plainly evident as the thief abandoned the blasphemy he had earlier participated in (Matthew 27:44) and petitioned the Savior for grace.

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

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—as sinners—to eternal damnation at any moment. We shouldn't marvel at His wrath, but rather His grace should astound us.

Additionally, the sudden transformation of the thief is also shocking. 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 (Ephesians 2:1) and makes them a new and living creature (2 Corinthians 5:17).

He 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. . . . 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 come to that knowledge through an act of His saving grace.

People who spend their lives exploring theological obscurities often end up distracting from or ignoring the vital truths the thief understood and clearly communicated. By confusing or corrupting the gospel, these teachers 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 precision.



Who were the Magi?

By John MacArthur

Few biblical stories are as well known, yet so clouded by myth and tradition, as that of the magi, or wise men, mentioned by Matthew. During the Middle Ages legend developed that they were kings, that they were three in number, and that their names were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior. Because they were thought to represent the three sons of Noah, one of them is often pictured as an Ethiopian. A twelfth-century bishop of Cologne even claimed to have found their skulls.

The only legitimate facts we know about these particular magi are the few given by Matthew in the first twelve verses of chapter 2. We are not told their number, their names, their means of transportation to Palestine, or the specific country or countries from which they came. The fact that they came from the east would have been assumed by most people in New Testament times, because the magi were primarily known as the priestly-political class of the Parthians—who lived to the east of Palestine.

The magi first appear in history in the seventh century B.C. as a tribe within the Median nation in eastern Mesopotamia. Many historians consider them to have been Semites, which if so, made them—with the

Jews and Arabs—descendants of Noah's son Shem. It may also be that, like Abraham, the magi came from ancient Ur in Chaldea. The name magi soon came to be associated solely with the hereditary priesthood within that tribe. The magi became skilled in astronomy and astrology (which, in that day, were closely associated) and had a sacrificial system that somewhat resembled the one God gave to Israel through Moses. They were involved in various occult practices, including sorcery, and were especially noted for their ability to interpret dreams. It is from their name that our words magic and magician are derived.

A principle element of magian worship was fire, and on their primary altar burned a perpetual flame, which they claimed descended from heaven. The magi were monotheistic, believing in the existence of only one god. Because of their monotheism, it was easy for the magi to adapt to the teaching of the sixth-century B.C. Persian religious leader named Zoroaster, who believed in a single god, Ahura Mazda, and a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Darius the Great established Zoroastrianism as the state religion

of Persia.

Because of their combined knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, their religious and political influence continued to grow until they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Medo-Persian and subsequently the Babylonian empire. It is not strange, therefore, that they often were referred to as “wise men.” It may be that “the law of the Medes and Persians” (see Dan. 6:8, 12, 15; Esther 1:19) was founded on the teachings of these magi. Historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi and then being approved and crowned by them, and that this group also largely controlled judicial appointments (cf. Esther 1:13). Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag, chief of the Babylonian magi, was with Nebuchadnezzar when he attacked and conquered Judah (Jer. 39:3).

We learn from the book of Daniel that the magi were among the highest-ranking officials in Babylon. Because the Lord gave Daniel the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream—which none of the other court seers was able to do—Daniel was appointed as “ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:48). Because of his great wisdom and because he had successfully pleaded for the lives of the wise men who had failed to interpret the king’s dream (Dan. 2:24), Daniel came to be highly regarded among the magi. The plot against Daniel that caused him to be thrown into the lions’ den was fomented by the jealous satraps and the other commissioners, not the magi (Dan. 6:4–9).

Because of Daniel’s high position and great respect among them, it seems certain that the magi learned much from that prophet about the one true God, the

God of Israel, and about His will and plans for His people through the coming glorious King. Because many Jews remained in Babylon after the Exile and intermarried with the people of the east, it is likely that Jewish messianic influence remained strong in that region even until New Testament times.

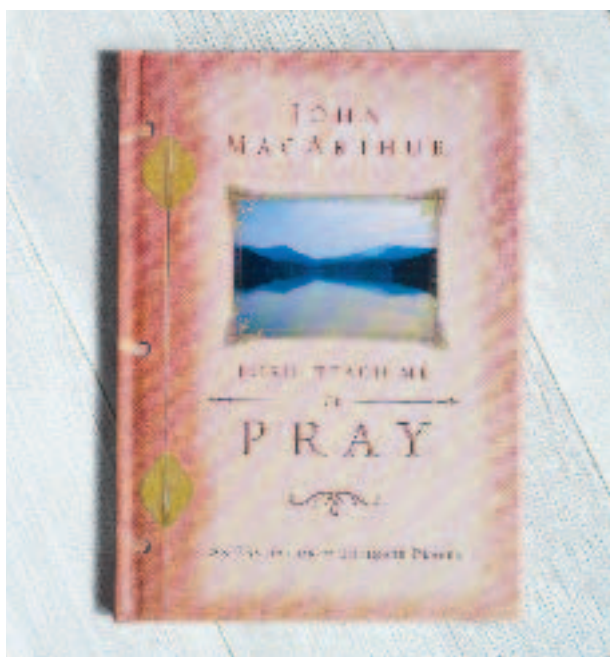
During both the Greek and Roman empires the magi’s power and influence continued in the eastern provinces, particularly in Parthia. As mentioned above, it was the Parthians that Herod, on behalf of Rome, drove out of Palestine between 39 and 37 B.C., when his kingship of Judea began. Some magi—many of them probably outcasts or false practitioners—lived in various parts of the Roman Empire, including Palestine. Among them was Simon of Samaria (Acts 8:9), whom tradition and history have come to refer to as Simon Magus because of his “practicing magic” (Greek, *mageuo*, derived from the Babylonian *magus*, singular of *magi*). The Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus was also a sorcerer, or “magician” (Greek, *magos*). These magicians were despised by both Romans and Jews. Philo, a first-century B.C. Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, called them vipers and scorpions. The magi from the east (the word literally means “from the rising” of the sun, and refers to the orient) who came to see Jesus were of a completely different sort. Not only were they true magi, but they surely had been strongly influenced by Judaism, quite possibly even by some of the prophetic writings, especially that of Daniel. They appear to be among the many God-fearing Gentiles who lived at the time of Christ, a number of whom—such as Cornelius and Lydia (Acts 10:1–2; 16:14)—are mentioned in the New Testament.

The above is an excerpt from The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on Matthew 2 .



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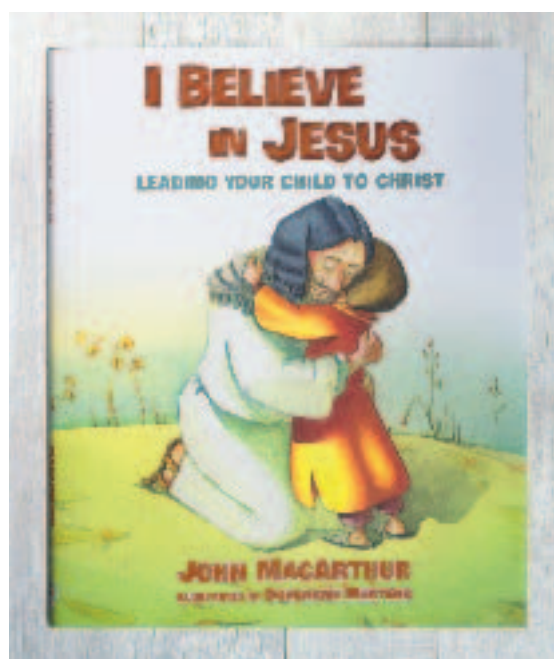
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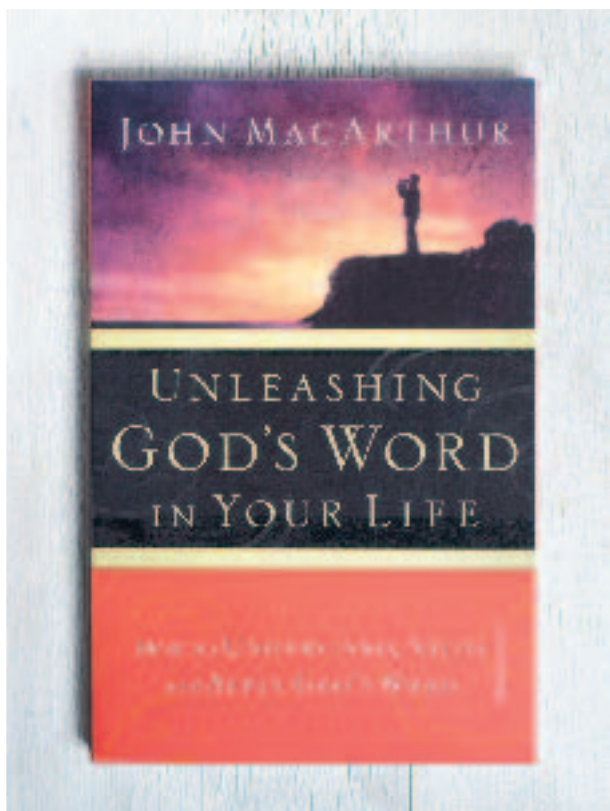
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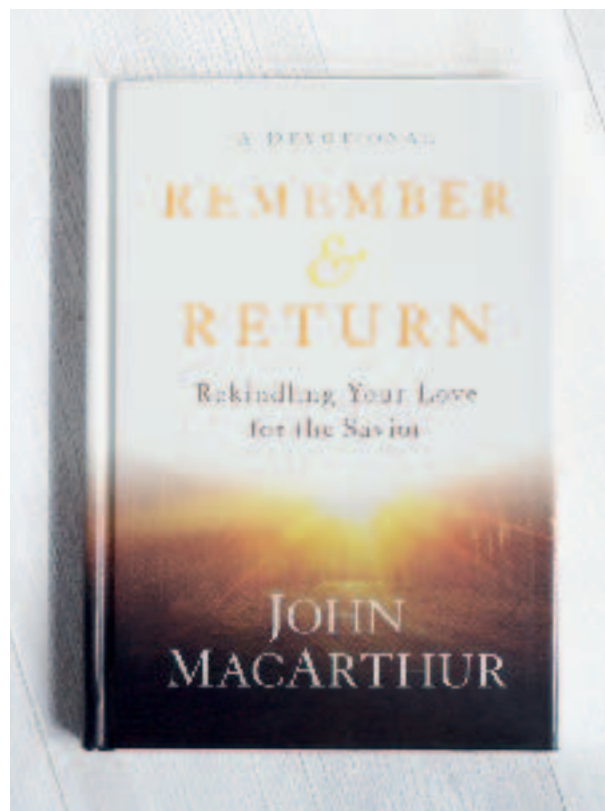
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