

# A Sermon from Downstairs

M. W. Bassford, 6-9-13

As most of you are aware, I keep my office at the church building during the week. As most of you are also aware, I have enough nervous energy to power Manhattan. If I'm trying to think something through, I can't do it sitting still. I have to be up and moving. I spend a lot of time during the week walking laps in the parking lot or the auditorium, or even pacing up and down in the downstairs hallway. If something changes in one of those places, I'm going to notice.

One of the most recent changes downstairs came from a project Tami Meyer did with the elementary class. She had them paint posters containing their favorite Bible verses and then had them explain on an index card the reasons why they chose each verse. She hung up the posters and explanations in the hallway, and the next day, I stopped in my paces to and fro to read them. I haven't asked Tami, so I don't know whether this was by happenstance or design, but it so happens that the six verses the students selected, along with their explanations, do a pretty systematic job of exploring some key Biblical concepts—systematic enough, in fact, that I realized I could combine those passages into a single sermon. I'm not one to let a good outline go to waste, so this morning we're going to consider a sermon from downstairs.

## God

The first logical category that presented itself to me concerns the nature of God. Our exploration of this topic begins with **MALLORY'S VERSE**, which is Revelation 1:8. Concerning this verse, Mallory wrote, "I picked this verse because it means that God is the beginning and the end (Alpha and Omega). He is with us from Genesis to Malachi to Revelation to heaven to forever. It also means that He is everything to us and everything." In this, I see two main points. First, Mallory correctly explains the meaning of the verse. We know that all things on earth are fated to come to an end. One day, even the earth itself will be destroyed. However, that isn't true of God. He is present from the first verse of Scripture to the last, from the eternity before the foundation of the world all the way through time to the eternity after the world's destruction. The passage of years has no dominion over Him. Instead, He designed and controls it.

If this is so, if indeed God is eternal, then He is also inescapable. People today like to insist that the Bible is an outdated relic that doesn't have anything useful to say to modern man. However, if the Bible is the word of an eternal God, that cannot be. He existed long before our lives began, He will be with us through every day of those lives, and after our lives are over, He will judge us for the things we did in the body. The result is, as Mallory says, that God is everything to us. If we can't escape Him, then we'd better not try. Only the God-centered life can be a wise life.

This point is echoed by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12:13. God is so significant that our lives cannot help but be about Him. Our responsibilities to Him outweigh our responsibilities to everything and everyone else combined. God has priority because God is prior. We live in a society that rejoices in egalitarianism. The average American is animated by the conviction that he is just as good as anybody, that a king is nothing more than a man in a bathrobe and a funny hat. That may be true with respect to other men, but it cannot be true with respect to God. He isn't King because somebody stuck a crown on his head. He is King because kingliness is essential to His nature. He is ruler of heaven and earth, no one can dethrone Him, and when we rebel against Him, that has about as much effect as driving a car into the side of a mountain. The mountain will continue on; the car, not so much. When we defy Him, we can only ruin ourselves.

The second verse addressing God was **JACK'S VERSE**. He chose Genesis 1:1. About it, he said, "I chose Genesis 1:1 because it shows that God created the earth, not some evil person." This too is an interesting point with all kinds of implications. When the Bible says that God created the earth and everything that it contains, it necessarily excludes all other possibilities. We aren't here because some demon decided to stick us here to mess with us. Even though Jack is a few years off yet from high-school biology, it is equally correct to say that we aren't here because of the interaction of random physical forces. Mankind isn't an accident; the earth itself isn't an accident. Instead, we are the handiwork of our Creator, and because we know that He is good, that tells us something too about His creation. Our world has been broken and marred by sin, but even the worst evil that mankind can muster cannot entirely erase its goodness. Even in the most difficult times of our lives, we can still survey the beauty and the glory of God's handiwork, we can still savor the many blessings with which He has provided us, and we can still rejoice in Him.

This leads us to another conclusion, one that Paul reaches in Romans 8:28. This is a greatly misapplied verse. Very often, people prefer to read this passage in a micro sense. They reason that if God causes all things to work together for good, then that means that everything in their lives must end up being good. They say things like, "Well, if God causes everything to work together for good, and I'm praying for Grandma, who's in the hospital, then Grandma's going to get better, right?" Well, no. That's not what Paul meant, and we can see that by studying his own life. The Scripture tells us about many things that Paul experienced that were not good. He was poor, he was persecuted, and he was ultimately killed for his faith in Christ. And yet, Paul still says that all things work together for good.

We resolve this apparent difficulty by recognizing that Paul is speaking in a macro sense, not a micro sense. He's talking about the big picture of our lives, not each tiny detail. God is good, and He is guiding our lives toward the

ultimate good—eternity in heaven with Him. However, His goodness does not mean that He’s going to spare us every pain along the way. Why should He? Let me give you an example: I am Zoë’s earthly father. One of the great goals of my life is to raise her to be a well-adjusted, godly person who will be able to lead a successful life. However, I do not seek to make every second of her life as pain-free as possible. When she’s walking down the sidewalk, I don’t scurry along in front of her, brushing obstacles out of her path so that she never trips and skins her knee. Indeed, there are times when I actively apply pain to her disobedient backside. Why? Because I believe that failure and pain teach her important lessons that she will not learn otherwise, and unless she does experience that adversity, she cannot become the person I want her to be. Now, if I’m wise enough to see that about Zoë, isn’t our Father wise enough to see that about us?

## Jesus and Faith

The next major grouping of the verses on the wall concerns Jesus and faith. As often happens during the middle portion of our study, we’ll use this to prepare for the Lord’s Supper. Within this heading, the first passage we come to is **OWEN’S VERSE**. It was John 3:16. Here’s what Owen had to say about it: “I chose John 3:16 because it lets you know that God loves us so much that He gave up His one and only Son.” As has been the case throughout these, Owen’s words take me in a different direction in understanding this verse than I usually go. Typically, when I cite John 3:16, I’m citing it for one reason only—I’m having a kitchen-table study with somebody, and I want to establish that belief is necessary for salvation. If I’m feeling frisky, I may even throw in the comment that this highlights one of the problems with infant baptism, because infants can’t believe. Both of those things are true. Indeed, both of them are important. However, they concern the what of the verse rather than the why, which is Owen’s focus. The only reason why my belief in Jesus is more relevant than my belief in my belief in Abraham Lincoln is that God loves me. If God didn’t love me enough to send His Son to earth, not only to live, but to die so that I could have eternal life, then Jesus is merely another historical figure. Christianity is about faith in Jesus, it is true, but underlying all of that is the bedrock of God’s love.

From this, we would do well to consider the comment that John makes in 1 John 4:11. The love of God in sending Jesus to be the propitiation of our sins isn’t merely a blessing. It is also a definition and an example. For those of us who are parents, which would be harder, to give our own lives for some person or cause, or to send one of our children to give his life? I don’t know about the rest of you, but I would happily offer my own life in the place of Zoë or Marky’s, if by my sacrifice, they could be spared. That’s not what God did. He sent His only Son to earth and watched as that Son suffered and died. That amount of love for us is incomprehensible, and yet it tells us what the measure of our love for one another should be. If God loved my brother enough to give His Son for Him, how could I possibly deny my brother anything? And yet we get mad, or we get apathetic, and we forget the value that God has placed on each one.

We see a similar theme in **JILL’S VERSE**, Luke 1:20. Jill explained her reasoning in this way: “I like Luke 1:20 because it teaches you that if you don’t believe God’s word, you will be punished, and if you do believe God’s word, you will not be punished.” This was probably the most unusual verse that any of the elementary students chose, and yet I think that Jill was exactly right in the application she made from it. There are two aspects to her explanation that are worth discussing. First, it points out that even though God does love us, that doesn’t mean that we can do whatever we want and expect Him to like it. Instead, those who displease Him can expect to be punished. Second, what determines whether we will be punished or not depends on whether we believe God’s word or not. As Paul points out in Romans 4, this has always been true. Under the old covenant as well as the new covenant, all the way back to the very beginning, God’s people have always been justified by their faith in Him. Zacharias, by contrast, was punished for his unbelief, even in a comparatively small thing. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we can say, “I believe in Jesus”, and then go back to doing what we want. A faith that doesn’t act in accordance with its profession of belief isn’t genuine faith at all. As the Hebrews writer observes in Hebrews 11, faith means both that we believe in God and that we diligently seek Him.

However, if we have this faith, we have every reason to lead lives that are lives of hope. Paul highlights the connection between the two in Romans 5:1-2. This highlights the certainty that is at the heart of genuine Christianity as opposed to its perversions. A Calvinist can never truly know whether he is among the elect because he knows people who lived and thought just like him who went off the spiritual rails. Our charismatic friends can never be sure, as Josh likes to say, that the still small voice inside them was God and not a bad burrito. We, on the other hand—we can be sure. No one else knows whether we truly believe in Jesus or not, but we do. No one else knows whether we are living faithful lives, but we do. If we know that both of those things are true of us, we can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, not because we are perfect, but because God has promised His grace to all who fulfill those conditions. What’s more, even though our righteousness today guarantees nothing about our righteousness tomorrow, whether we are righteous tomorrow is completely within our control. All of us can choose to live godly lives. For that matter, all of us can choose to study the word, assemble with the saints, and do all the other things that God promises will increase our faith. Because of God’s great gift of His Son, salvation is within reach for every one of us, and that is a wonderful thing!

Before the Lord’s Supper, then, these things should direct our meditations in two main paths. First of all, we must be humbly thankful for the great love shown by God and Jesus. If they had merely left us to our own devices, which

they had every right to do, we could have no hope of heaven at all. However, they loved us so much that they chose to be merciful toward us, even when the cost of mercy was so terrible. For that, we owe them everything.

Second, let's examine ourselves to ask what we're doing with this opportunity, the best opportunity that mankind has ever been given. Are we using it to express our gratitude and our love to God in return? Are we reaching out and taking hold of this astonishing gift that He has offered us? Or are we allowing the devil to distract us from the prize of eternal life with all kinds of nasty little sins and pleasures that aren't any good for us anyway? If that's the decision we're making, the greatness of God's offered gift will only highlight the tragedy of our failure. Let's ponder this as we partake.

### **Discipleship and Heaven**

The last portion of our sermon from downstairs examines the subjects of discipleship and heaven. This begins with **AIDAN'S VERSE**. He chose Philippians 4:13. He explained, "I picked that verse because it means that when I do right for Jesus, He strengthens me." What's interesting about Aidan's comment is that it's a tighter reading of the passage than I often encounter. This is a verse that people love, so they will often apply it in areas where it doesn't really fit. I've known runners, for instance, who repeat it over and over to themselves during the last leg of their run so that they can keep going and not collapse into a quivering heap. Now, I don't think that's false doctrine or anything, but I'm pretty sure that when Paul wrote these words, he wasn't thinking about a 5K. Instead, he was focusing on the times in his service to God when he was forced to endure deprivation, and how Christ gave him the strength to get through those hard times. Jesus doesn't promise us help in getting that promotion at work or graduating at the top of our class, but He does promise us the strength we need to follow Him, and that's the point that Aidan has homed in on. We need to make sure that we are reading this text in context if we want to understand what it truly means for us.

This principle, that God will sustain us when we seek Him, has some massive implications. Paul spells them out in Romans 8:35-37. In our walk with God, it is certain that we are going to encounter some trials. Some of those trials are more nuisances than dangers, but others are literally soul-crushing. Our brethren 2000 years ago risked their lives simply by saying "Jesus is Lord". If any Christians back then were looking for an excuse to fall away, that was practically an engraved invitation. However, Paul assures us that no trial will be enough to separate us from the love of God if we don't want to go. If we are determined to remain faithful, God will give us the strength we need to bear up under any trial imaginable, even things that seem impossible to us. For instance, I've known several married couples who learned from God's word that they didn't have a right to be married to each other and, even though they loved each other, chose to separate and live apart because that was what it took to remain faithful to God. I've known brethren with homosexual inclinations who elected to remain celibate all their lives rather than enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. In those instances, we're tempted to condone sin in others because righteousness seems so impossible, but we must remember that nothing is impossible with God. Nothing can separate us from His love unless we choose to turn our backs on Him.

The logical conclusion of God's invincible love for us appears in **COLIN'S VERSE**. It is John 14:1. I get the feeling that Colin wanted to quote the whole context, but he ran out of room. Here's what he had to say: "I chose this verse because it tells us Jesus will come again someday to get us and bring us to heaven." Colin's words here are nothing less than the cornerstone of our faith. We do what we do because we rely on Jesus' promise of eternal life with Him. Without that, if indeed there is no God, no Christ, and no afterlife, Christianity is pointless. Sure, a life lived in accordance with God's word offers some benefits here, but with no eternity, even the righteous life is a meaningless life. Sure, we followed the rules for our threescore and ten, but then we're just as dead as the adulterer or the drunk. If this is truly our belief, that earthly life is hopeless and meaningless, logically we should follow Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 9 and live with madness in our hearts. The only thing that stands between us and this life of giddy despair is the resurrection of our Lord and His promise that we too shall be raised to go home with Him. Our hope of heaven is what makes Christianity worth it.

As all of this should make clear, eternal life is a powerful concept with some massive implications. Paul spells out some of those implications in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11. There is a huge "therefore" attached to the conclusion that we will live with Jesus if we are faithful. Just as on the one hand there's no reason to be a Christian without hope of heaven, if we do have that hope, we have EVERY reason to be disciples of Jesus. Suddenly, the most important thing about our lives changes dramatically. Any rewards that this life might offer pale in comparison to the reward of heaven. Who cares how much I have to suffer here to please God if an eternity of joy with Him will be the result? Even if I spend my lifespan in continual misery, which almost no Christian is required to do, heaven will still be worth it. Once we accept the premise of heaven, then, we are driven to the conclusion that all that matters is whether we and everyone else do what is required to get there. I don't have to know anything about you to know that the best thing I can do for you is to urge you on to heaven. For you to live in any other way makes absolutely no sense.