

Numbers 6:22-27

“Blessed”

Growing up, our pastor concluded every worship service the same way. Following the invitation, he would make a few comments and conclude by reciting, from memory, Numbers 6:22-27. No doubt we’ve all seen framed artwork featuring this poetic blessing which, some scholars believe, may have been the oldest poem recorded in Scripture.

This priestly blessing has been traced to a significant archaeological find. Known as the Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls, they are the earliest physical evidence of Scripture predating the Dead Sea Scrolls by several centuries (7th century BC). This was during the ministries of Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah and the reign of King Josiah in Judah.

But what does the word “blessing” mean? In the south, few words have had a richer application. “Bless your heart,” for example, has about 1,000 meanings. It could be good, bad, sympathetic, or a word of condemnation. It is equally rich in Scripture. Compare, for example, Genesis 1:22 (the first use of the word), Genesis 12:2, and Psalm 103:1.

What does it mean to be “blessed?” Due to the rich meaning of the word, scholars have searched for another word to help grasp its full meaning. These include, “happy,” “joy,” “prosper,” or even “flourishing.” These words, though helpful, fail to fully catch its full. Part of the problem is that “blessed” is a single English for multiple Hebrew words. So, if we want to be blessed, we had better pause and explore what it is we’re actually seeking. Otherwise, how will we find it?

First, **Blessed are the Redeemed**. The first Hebrew word describes vertical, covenantal favor. It is used primarily in the first books of the Bible where God establishes Israel as his covenantal people (see Genesis 12:2). Israel was blessed, not because they were righteous, but because they were loved with an eternal, binding love. God chose them through Abraham, redeemed them through Moses, cleansed them through the Priests, established them through Joshua, protected them through David, prospered them through Solomon, pursued them through the prophets, rescued them through Nehemiah, and saved them through Jesus.

As God’s chosen people, they were, by grace, blessed. This relationship was initiated, secured, and protected by God himself. All the saints had to do was receive the blessed grace of God by faith. It sounds simple, but most people rob themselves of God’s covenantal favor by refusing to receive his grace by faith. When we walk by faith and are saved by grace, we are, then, blessed. Notice, this is a matter of definition, not feelings or circumstances. By faith, we are sons and daughters of God the Father. We are, therefore, blessed.

Secondly, **Blessed are the Wise**. Being “blessed” is not just a matter of faith, (that is, a vertical relationship), but is also a matter of wisdom, (that is, a horizontal relationship). The first meaning regards our faith while the second regards our choices and behavior. In other words, the Wise are blessed. Think about it, a man can be blessed due to his redemption, but due to foolish decisions and poor virtue, he may suffer the consequences of his foolishness.

While the first usage dominates the narrative portion of the Old Testament, this latter usage dominates the Psalms and Proverbs (see Psalm 1:1-2, for example). The Blessed man or woman is one who enjoys the benefits of virtue and wisdom. This should be common sense. Much of human suffering is human caused. A life lived apart from self-control, humility, patience, sacrificial love, selflessness, and faith is often riddled with conflict, vice, and suffering. Keep burning bridges and see if it produces joy. Keep fighting for entitlements and see if it produces personal gratification. Stay angry, refuse to forgive, and complain constantly and see where it ends. The Wise enjoys a more fulfilling and happy life.

This requires a significant commitment to godliness, overcoming temptation and sin, and gleanings from the Wise in order to experience another level of blessedness. Therefore, if we want to be blessed, our focus needs to change. We should focus less on our careers, wealth, entertainment, politics, or self-help nonsense. Likewise, we should focus less on our wants, desires, and pain. Instead, let us prioritize virtue and wisdom. This will take work, but the benefits are incredible.

Finally, **Blessed are the Blessers**. The redeemed and the wise, full of the blessings of God, will be a blessing to God and to others (see Psalm 104:1, 134:1-2, 135:19-20; 1 Chronicles 20:20; Nehemiah 9:5 for starters). The idea is that those who experience the blessings of God respond by returning to him the gift of blessing. God’s blessings are overwhelming and, by faith, our cups run over. We, the Blessed, become a blessing. The blessed bless.

This is done primarily in two ways. The first is WORSHIP. Worship requires us to look beyond ourselves, our desires, our accomplishments, and our problems and toward the Lord. Worship reorients how we think and what we care about. A foolish life of selfishness will be anything but blessed, but one that is directed toward the Lord will experience the blessings of God. Worship keeps the Lord at the center of our lives. The chief end of man is to glorify God. The secret to being blessed is to bless the Lord.

The second is SERVICE. Scripture commands we love the Lord with our entire being and then love our neighbor as ourselves. Nothing secures a life of misery more than selfishness. Against our natural inclinations, a life dedicated to the wellbeing of others produces blessing and joy. In your service of the Lord, don’t forget your neighbor.

Shortly after sharing a parable without explaining its meaning, the crowd was confused. Jesus later clarified to his disciples that there are some who will hear him but not listen. They will see him but not perceive who he really was. But the Disciples of Jesus are not this way. They are blessed. “Blessed are your eyes,” Jesus stated, “for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Matthew 13:16). Find blessing in knowing you are his. That comes by faith. Be blessed by walking in virtue and wisdom. Be a blessing via worship and service.

Exodus 33:18-23

“Glory” (Part 1)

Moses’s request for God to unveil his glory is an audacious one. Either Moses is the greatest man of faith who has ever lived, or the greatest fool. “Glory” is a word we use often in modern English. For example, the American flag, nicknamed by Captain William Driver in 1824, is often called “Old Glory.” Some may have Morning Glory flowers growing at their house right now. Others talk about going out in a “blaze of glory” meaning a final triumph. This is not what the Bible means by the word (compare its usage in Isaiah 6:3; 1 Samuel 4:21; Job 19:9; Proverbs 16:31).

First, the **Exegesis** of the passage. There is more going on here than a mere request. He is seeking assurance from the Lord that his presence will remain with Israel (see verses 15-16). Moses understands that what sets Israel apart is not racial, ancestral, financial (they had been slaves), or even geographical (they had no land). It is relational. God dwells among his people. God has entered into a covenant with his people. Moses had already experienced some of God’s glory – the Burning Bush (Exodus 3), the cloud of glory (Exodus 24), and others. Despite this, Moses knows he has yet come close to exhausting God’s glory. He wants more. That is what makes this request so audacious. Moses sought a personal encounter with the God of glory. And at that moment, the best he could get was veiled by the shadow or a cleft rock. What was Moses hoping to see? We can’t know without exploring what the Bible means by “glory.”

Here, we must speak of the **Essence** of glory. Human language is inadequate for us to capture the essence of God. “Glory” might be as close as we can get. There are three ways “Glory” strikes at the essence of God. The first is *Heaviness*. The word for glory is often translated “weight” or “heavy.” The Priest Eli was elderly and “heavy” when he fell to his death (1 Samuel 4:18). Likewise, Absalom’s hair was long and “heavy.” In both instances, the writer used the same word translated “glory” in Exodus 33.

Other examples are helpful here. Pharaoh’s heart is “hardened” when confronted by Moses (Exodus 8:32). The word literally means “hard,” and is the same word translated “glory” elsewhere. Consider also Moses holding his arms up interceding on behalf of Israel while fighting the Amalekites. When his arms became wearisome (i.e., heavy), Aaron and Hur held his arms up (Exodus 17:12). Likewise, a person of extreme wealth is “heavy” in money & possessions. Abraham is said to be very “rich” (or “heavy”) in livestock, silver, and gold (Genesis 13:2).

Thus when we think of God’s glory, a helpful word, would be “splendor,” and “majesty.” It describes God’s overwhelming presence and essence. To stand in the presence of God is to be under the weight of that presence. What makes kings “heavy” is the splendor of his kingdom and his palace (see Matthew 4:8).

Glory also carries with it connotations of *Honor*. We often use “glory” in in this sense. A soldier may seek glory in battle as will an athlete or an actor seeking fame. This man-centered use of “glory” is found in the Bible. Joseph wanted his brothers to announce “all my honor in Egypt” to their father (Genesis 45:13). David died “at a good age, full of days, riches, and honor” (1 Chronicles 29:28). Throughout Scripture, God acts for the sake of his glory, honor, reputation, and praise.

In the Exodus story, God liberated the Hebrews for his glory. The plagues were directed at the weak gods of the Egyptians who worshiped the sun (so God turned it out) and the Nile River (so God turned it to blood). The point of the Exodus was not just to liberate the ancient Hebrews, but for the nations to know of God’s glory, honor, and praise. Isaiah makes this clear when he stated, “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (Isaiah 43:7). We, therefore, were not created because God was bored, but for his exclusive glory. Consider the “weight” that come with that. We exist, not for ourselves, but to bring glory, honor, and praise to the God of the universe. This is our purpose.

The final meaning of glory as it relates to the essence of God is *Brightness*. In Revelation, we discover the New Jerusalem will lack a sun and moon because “the glory of God gives it light” (Revelation 21:23, see also Ezekiel 1:28). By “bright” we don’t think of headlights on a rural street. We think of the noon sun coming out of a dark theater. God’s “glory” is overwhelming – brighter than the sun and beyond human imagination. God’s “essence” is so overwhelming, Moses is forced to hide in the shadow of a rock. Maybe another word is helpful here: beautiful (radiant beauty), majesty, or awe.

Moses made a request he could not, as a mere mortal, have fulfilled. We are different. Throughout Scripture, God’s glory is always veiled. At this moment on the mountain, Moses is forced to hide in the cleft of a rock (vs. 21-22). Earlier, Moses detailed the significance of the thick veil in the tabernacle designed to separated the divine from the human (Exodus 26:31). When Moses finally descended from the mountain, he wore a veil because his face reflected the glory of God (Exodus 34:33).

All of this changes at the coming of Christ. At the incarnation of God, God’s glory was manifested among his people. When his was laid in a manger, a group of shepherds watching their sheep at night witness the veil of creation withdrawn by an angelic choir who sang, “glory to the Lord in the highest!” (Luke 2:9). John lays the theological foundation of this truth when he states that “the Word became flesh and dwelt (literally, “tabernacled”) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Moses requested to see God’s glory and was hidden in the cleft of the rock, but, in Christ, God’s glory is manifested (see Hebrews 1:1-3a). No wonder the veil in the Temple was torn upon his death. If it is the glory of God we are seeking, we need not look farther than Christ who is, according to Paul, the clefted rock Moses hid in (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Psalm 19:1

“Glory” (Part 2)

Earth sits in a Goldilocks Zone. Most are familiar with the story of Goldilocks finding baby bear’s porridge and bed “just right.” So is our place in the universe. For example, gravity is so strictly constrained that if we had a tape measure and spanned the entire known universe and varied the force of gravity by 1 inch we would not have a universe that could support itself or life. Likewise, our galaxy is the right size, the right shape, the right distance from other galaxies, and we are at the right position in the spiral arm of that galaxy. Our solar star is the right size, with the right composition, with the right mass, with the right level of heat, and the right distance for us to live. Even our earth is the right size just the right terrestrial depth of our crust of our planet to allow for the tectonic movement of plates just the right atmospheric conditions we happen to have a moon of the right size that is not so overbearing that it stops the rotation of Earth but allows the kinds of Seasons we see in our planet the kind of Tides we see in our planet all of this is. This is why atheists like Richard Dawkins are forced to admit that the Fine-Tuning argument for God is a strong one for theists. Design implies a Designer.

But that is not enough. Design demands a response. Previously, we explored how glory addresses the **Essence** of God. Now we are prepared to explore the **Expression** of that glory. One of the beautiful aspects of God’s majesty is not only that it is intrinsic, but it is also extrinsic. That is to say, God *is* glorious (intrinsic) and God *shares* his glory (extrinsic).

God expresses his glory, first of all, in *Creation*. Have you ever wondered why our ever-expanding cosmos is so big? It isn’t because of extra-terrestrials. It isn’t because we might need another earth to escape too. God created to both demonstrate and to reflect his glory. This is evident in Psalm 19:1 where David declares that creation itself (“the heavens”) “declare the glory of God.” Similarly, Isaiah claims that God created all of humanity “for my glory” (Isaiah 43:7). Creation is the tapestry of the greatest artist. The beauty of creation reflects the glory of God.

God also reveals his glory in *Salvation*. God does not save sinners because he has to, but because the salvation of sinners brings him glory. God saves in order to be glorified. Jesus illustrates this in a series of parables in Luke 15. Each parable concludes with the expression of joy in heaven over the salvation of sinners (see Luke 15:7, 10). The angels do not celebrate the sinner, but the Savior (see also Psalm 21:5; Romans 9:22-23).

A third way God reveals his glory is through the *sanctification* of believers. God doesn’t merely save, he also transforms sinners. This is a means of glory. The growth of a believer reflects our glorious God (see John 15:8). Sanctification is nothing less than the redeemed sinner dedicating their lives to the glory of God. From the words we speak to the actions we take, every desire we have, every

relationship we build, and every good we pursue. The sanctified believer is one that has crucified self-glorification in order to seek the glory of their Savior.

Finally, we must explore the **Experience** of glory. If God is not only glorious in his being, but shares his glory with his creation, then our response to God's glory must be to return it. How do we do that? The first is through *Worship*. Worship is ascribing to God what he already is. It is the experience of the finite creature acknowledging and extolling glory to the God of glory. This is why the first commandment is so important. Idolatry is to glorify what is not glorious. It is the chief of sins.

We can also experience glory by our *Walk*. When our walk does not match our worship, we sin. If the focus of our worship is the resurrected Savior, then so should our lives. We should glorify God in all that we do. Paul makes this clear when he wrote, "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31, see also 1 Peter 3:10-11). Our lives should be God-focused, not self-focused. We should seek God's glory and not our own. This is contrary to the American creed. Calvin is right when he stated, "We never truly glory in God until we have utterly discarded our own glory."

Glory is, without a doubt, one of the richest words in Scripture. We draw us to consider who God is and, as a result, who we are. The God of all majesty paints the stars of the sky and draws us to himself. Even so, he is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

Isaiah 6:1-8

“Holy”

For Thanksgiving 2008, my wife and I agreed to host both our families. The problem was the timing. Our firstborn arrived six weeks prior, followed by a major move to west Kentucky while I was a full-time student launching a new ministry. It was a hectic and crazy time for us to unpack and prepare a home for two families to enjoy a major holiday. Given all we had on our proverbial plate, we selected a room to be the location for all the stuff that we had yet unpacked. Thus, when family did arrive, we showed off our new nursery, the dining room, and the rest all while hoping no one noticed the closed bedroom door.

Whether it's our homes or our lives, we all try our best to give the illusion that we are spotless and pure. But it is all a mirage. Holiness is a word we often use in Christian circles without clearly defining it. As a result, we often distort it with religious rhetoric that is nothing more than the appearance of righteousness, when in reality, it is much more.

Let's start with **The Word**. “Holy” is not a word we use outside of religious context unless, of course, you are Robin in the 1960's Adam West Batman. He, rather famously, would begin many sentences with the word – “Holy this, Batman!” or “Holy that, Commissioner Gordon!” But what does it mean? First, the word carries the idea of *Separation*. The verb literally means “to separate” or “to cut off.” This makes it clear that God is Holy Other. He is not one of us. He is separate from us. This aspect of holiness is demonstrated in the Law and the Temple. Much of it is defined by what is clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, inside and outside, sacred and secular, holy and unholy. The High Priest, for example, would isolate himself for a week before entering the Holy of Holies whereby he would undergo a series of washings and would wear pure, white robes. However, it would be inaccurate to retranslate “Holy” with “Separate.” The Seraphim are not singing, “Separate, separate, separate is the Lord of hosts.”

Secondly, “holy” carries the idea of *Uniqueness*. As the “Separate One,” God is unique in the cosmos (see Exodus 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:2). The uniqueness of God, expressed in his holiness, is often applied to objects. Only priests could wear an Ephod. Only the priests could enter certain areas of the Temple. Certain objects were excluded for Temple worship. God, in other words, is the “Holy Other.” He is unlike us fully and completely pure and glorious.

Finally, “holy” carries the idea of *Purity*. What separates God from his fallen creation is his absolute purity. He is holy without spot or blemish (see Habakkuk 1:13). We take this for granted. The gods of the ancient world were not pure. They were not holy. They were engaged in the same wicked acts as their worshipers from murder to violence to fornication to abandonment to revenge (Job 34:12).

But knowing what the word means is only half the equation. We must also care about **The Works** of holiness. Isaiah is confronted with God's holy essence, and he responds in three ways. The first is fear (vs. 1, 4-7). The passage opens by informing the reader that "King Uzziah died." Uzziah became king at age 16 and served for over 50 years as one of the greatest Kings of Judah. He increased the military and grew Israel's economy. The death of Uzziah meant the death of an era and during this time, the Assyrians were marching toward Israel conquering everything in their path. There were plenty of reasons to be afraid. But then Isaiah meets YHWH himself! Isaiah does not belong here! The ancient Hebrews understood that God was so unique and pure that no man could stand in his presence and still live! The Lord is described as "sitting upon a throne" and "high and lifted up." Both are expressions of power and might. He is above everything and exercises unlimited power.

Isaiah's response is one of fear. "Woe," is to bring a curse upon oneself. Isaiah, after seeing God in His glory and majesty, is frightened. He is unclean, unholy, and does not belong here! This is why we try to dilute holiness. We don't want to be confronted with our wickedness. There can be no hope and no redemption apart from such an encounter.

The second reaction is *Worship* (vs. 2-3). Isaiah is struck by God's presence and the ongoing worship service. He first highlights the choir of Seraphim with six wings. Each pair of wings had a particular function – with two wings they covered their face (even the face of divine beings can't behold the awesomeness of God), with two they covered their feet (lest they corrupt holy ground), and with two they flew. Their song is recorded in verse three beginning with the thrice repeated "holy, holy, holy." Ancient Hebrew emphasized through repetition. It was rare for a word to be repeated three times. This is holiness to the highest.

This is why boring worship is a theological crisis. It's amazing how standing on the edge of the grand canyon or staring into the abyss of space can overwhelm us to the point we wish time would stop, but the thought of standing before a holy God as boring says a lot about us. The Seraphim are not burdened with singing the praises of God, they have the best job in heaven. Poor worship reflects the heart of worshiper, not the One being worshiped! The problem is not the style of worship or when the songs were written or what instruments are utilized. What matters in worship is the heart of the worshiper. Understand that even the Seraphim, the Cherubim, the angels, and the divine counsel are unworthy to stand in his presence. How much more so us? The first sign that we do not know, appreciate, or love God as He is, is that our worship becomes stale and dry.

Finally, holiness is associated with *Redemption* (vs. 6-8). Despite the distance created by God's nature who is gloriously holy, he is not so separate and distant he is unwilling nor unable to draw humanity to himself. The reunion of the divine with the human is not the result of God lowering himself, but by purifying us. This is the theological basis of God's redeeming love and mercy. Salvation is not an entitlement; it is an undeserved gift tied exclusively to God's holy love. The holy God saves sinners for holiness. Salvation is not a 2nd chance nor is it God sweeping our sin under the proverbial rug, it is the holy God washing, restoring, and remaking the sinner to conform to his holy image.

In verses 5-7, Isaiah is purified by one of the Seraphim. This is an act of cleansing, redemption, and restoration. This is grace. Isaiah has done nothing to deserve this. He can only receive it. One of the beautiful aspects of Scripture is how the unholy is made holy. The reason the High Priest couldn't wear cotton when he entered the Holy of Holies is because cotton attracts dirt. This is true in general. Boys who bathe get dirty. Dirt doesn't get clean by bathed boys. However, when God

shows up, he is so pure and holy, he is not stained or made unclean. What he touches becomes holy (see Matthew 8:1-4).

In CS Lewis's Narnia Chronicles, the Pevensie kids have an interesting response to first hearing that Aslan is a mighty lion. "Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion," said Mr. Beaver. "Ooh," said Susan. 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.' 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver, 'Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'

Psalm 32:1-11

“Sin”

Most of the words we have explored are occasionally used in the modern world. For example, “Blessed” dominates southern culture (“bless your heart!”) and “glory” is associated with success and praise. But what about “sin?” For the longest time, theological talk of “sin” had been replaced with therapeutic talk of “self-esteem,” even among Christians. This transition from what is true to what I feel fits well in our modern therapeutic culture. Despite such efforts, Christianity requires a serious discussion on what sin is and how it can be remedied. But first, we need to know what the Bible means by that term.

Let us begin with the **Report** – that is, the meaning of the word itself. Few words are so essential to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and of grace than the concept of sin. Without a full understanding of sin, we cannot understand the mission of Jesus, the purpose of the resurrection, the Christian life, spiritual warfare, or even our neighbors. It is not surprising, then, that the Bible uses a rich vocabulary along with multiple literary devices in order to help us understand the depth of depravity.

Cornelius Plantinga wrote:

The Bible presents sin by way of major concepts, principally lawlessness and faithlessness, expressed in an array of images: sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it—both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to divine restoration of that harmony. Above all, sin disrupts and resists the vital human relation to God.

As such, Scripture offers three dominate words for the single concept of “sin.” The first is *Failure*. The word means “to miss the goal.” The Benjaminites, for example, were so accurate in war that when they slung a stone, not a hair would be missed (Judges 20:16, see Proverbs 19:2 for another example). Sin, then, is the failure to fulfill a goal. But what is that goal? Loyal love of God and neighbor.

Secondly, the Bible uses the word *Iniquity*. Although “iniquity” is a good translation, it may not be the most useful given it is a word rarely used anymore. Translations often choose words like “wickedness,” “guilt,” or the generic, “sin.” At its core, this Hebrew word means “to bend” or “to make crooked.” For example, Psalm 38:6 laments, “I am utterly bowed down and prostrate” in

mourning (see also Lamentations 3:9b). This became a fitting metaphor to describe what sin is. Sin, then, is a perversion. It is crooked, distorted, and bent (see Jeremiah 3:21; Job 33:27).

Thirdly, the Bible uses the word *Transgression* which can also be translated as “rebellion” or even “trespass,” “treachery,” and “falsehood.” Combined, describes violating the trust of others. It is the betrayal of a relationship. For example, nations who enter into an agreement with each other are at peace until one party violates that treaty (see 2 Kings 1:1; see also Genesis 31:36). To “transgress,” then, is to violate trust in a relationship with someone else. This, of course, is a common theme throughout Scripture. Israel repeatedly transgressed against the Lord by worshiping and serving other gods. The prophets repeatedly condemn their treachery and call on them to repent.

Secondly, we must explore **The Range** of sin. Every little boy loves throwing rocks in a lake. The bigger, the better. It is even better when rocks are thrown in a quiet, still pond. Watching the ripple effects of the rock is particularly mesmerizing. That is how sin works.

First, *Sin is Theological*. In his Psalm of repentance following his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, David shockingly claims, “against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4) David is not suggesting he was innocent against either Uriah or Bathsheba, but that sin, at its core, is theological. Sin is cosmic rebellion whereby the sinner seeks to dethrone God. All sin stems from idolatry.

Secondly, *Sin is Personal*. The best evidence of the personal nature of sin is how often we try to justify our actions, mistakes, and sins by blame shifting, gaslighting, or by deluding our behavior and its effects. When Adam and Eve sinned, they began to blame one another. This pattern continues today.

Personal sin fits two categories. The first are Sins of Commission. This is usually what we think of sin – doing what we shouldn’t. Much of the law addresses the temptation toward commission sins – don’t speed, don’t steal, pay your taxes, etc. The other category are Sins of Omission. While sins of commission are often blatant and deliberate, sins of omission are often subtle and sneaky. Sins of Omission are when we fail to do things we ought to do. This is where indifference, cowardice, and apathy come into play. Sure, maybe I’m not guilty of adultery (commission), but failure to love my spouse in a God-honoring way (omission) is still wrong.

Thirdly, *Sin is Relational*. Following their rebellion, Adam and Eve are separated from each other and begin to blame one another. Likewise, the jealousy of Saul led him to seek the death of David. Rachel and Leah competed for Jacob’s affection. Judas betrayed Jesus leading to his arrest and execution. We cannot privatize our sin. Bitterness doesn’t stay in the heart. Unforgiveness fails to love. Hate doesn’t heal.

Fourthly, *Sin is Social*. Because sin violates peace both inwardly and outwardly, it will inevitably manifest itself in society. History is replete with countless examples of broken, idolatrous societies violating justice, truth, and goodness. This explains the justification of racism, discrimination, unjust courts, corrupt policies, social violence, victimizing the poor, etc. A “bent” society is a corrupt one and the innocent are always its victims.

Finally, *Sin is Lethal*. Adultery kills marriages, unforgiveness ruins relationships, greed destroys businesses, and covetousness and pride hardens the heart. Sin is more than a small mistake that can

easily be swept under the proverbial rug with no damage, it is a cancer that, left unaddressed, will metastasize and kill.

We must now explore **The Redeemer**. The Bible does not shy away from diagnosing humanity as cursed under the power and effects of sin. Sin cultivates guilts in the heart of the sinner. Guilt is the legal condemnation of sin. Maybe you think you can escape this guilt because you're a good person. Yet such "faith" doesn't work in human court. Judges care only about our guilt. The guilty must be punished no matter how good they may actually be. It is scary to stand before a judge knowing he has the power to punish as he seems fit and as justice and the law requires. How much more so does guilt before God? Our good works, religious upbringing, etc. aren't enough. You may even try to blame shift, gaslight, or ignore your sin.

This is why we need a redeemer – one who takes our sin and shame upon himself and sets us free. Being the case, an honest look in the mirror wherein we face our own depravity draws us to great appreciation of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished. He saved us! Yes, us! Despite our filthiness and rebellion, Christ redeems sinners.

Matthew 4:17

“Repentance”

Although it is an oversimplification, but one could argue the Protestant Reformation was launched due to a faulty translation in the Latin Vulgate. Translated by Jerome in the 4th century, the Vulgate translated Matthew 4:17 as “do penance” instead of “repentance.” This laid the foundation for the medieval Catholic system. Eventually, Martin Luther was confronted with the theological and pastoral challenge of indulgences which led to his posting of the infamous 95 Theses. The first theses summarized the issue well, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

But what does that mean? There can be no doubt that repentance lies at the center of Scripture and even of the gospel (see for example, Mark 6:12; Luke 5:32, 13:3; Acts 3:19). Knowing what the term means is critical to applying it to our lives.

First, let us explore **The Definition** of repentance. Combining both the Hebrew and Greek words often translated “repent,” it is clear the word means both “to change your mind” and to “turn back.” In the New Testament, the word is always in the same context. It is a command for sinners to choose to abandon their sin in favor of faith in Christ.

Its meaning can be summarized in two ways. First, we are exhorted to *Turn Away*. Repeatedly, the prophets and the apostles call on sinners to turn away from their sin. This requires sorrow over sin and an understanding of what sin is and the damage it does to others and our relationship with God. Imagine driving down the road. It is impossible to arrive at your destination if you are going in the wrong direction. In that situation, we need to turn around. That is repentance.

Repentance is more than turning away, it is also a *Turning Toward*. To return to the previous metaphor, it is no more progressive if you turn off the road onto another wrong road. It isn’t enough to turn around; we must also move toward where we ought to go. Repeatedly, Jesus calls on sinners to repent by following him (see Matthew 9:9, 16:24). Perhaps the best example of how repentance is a turning from and a turning toward, consider the rich, young ruler. After claiming to have kept the commandments, Jesus demanded he surrender his idolatry and “come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). The man refused unwilling to turn away and to turn toward Christ.

This leads to **The Distinction**. With a basic understanding of the meaning of “repent” it seems best to distinguish between what it is and what it is often confused to be. First, let us explore what repentance is *not*. First, repentance is not prayer or other religious duties/rituals. A contrite heart mended by God saves. Religion can be a poor substitute for repentance. Often, it is used to avoid repentance through mere ritualism, tradition, and duties. It is possible to practice one’s faith without addressing our sin. We must, instead, repent.

Secondly, repentance is not sorrow. Feelings of regret are a component of repentance, but not enough. It is easy to regret our decisions but regret alone are insufficient to move us away from sin and toward Christ. I often regret overeating and vow to never do it again immediately after Thanksgiving dinner. It only takes a few hours before my regret proves insufficient to change my behavior.

Finally, repentance is not perfection but, rather, the beginning of our transformation. Scripture is refreshingly open how the people of God struggle. Paul, for example, lamented his wicked flesh. The things he wants to do he doesn't, and the things he doesn't want to do he does.

With that said, what, then, is repentance? First, repentance is the absence of defiance. Too often we confuse repentance with the absence of struggle, when in reality, it is the absence of defiance. Every parent has that kid who will look you in the eye while you are telling them not to push the button and push it anyways. At its core, repentance is accepting that Jesus is Lord of everything no matter what. He is in the right. Repentance is the surrender of personal sovereignty. We seek his will, his way, and we seek to grow in his wisdom. Remember, repentance is not perfection. We will struggle and fail, but what matters is what we do when we struggle and fail.

Secondly, repentance is the presence of Spirit-led transformation. While speaking to pastors, Alister Begg would often say, "young pastors overestimate what they can accomplish in a year and underestimate what they can accomplish in ten." The same is true with sanctification. We all want to break the addiction now! We all want to change now! We all want to heal now! We all want the pain to go away now! We all want our marriage to be better now! Gospel repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he transforms us from the inside out. Some may experience immediate benefits whereas most will require boring, daily spiritual disciplines.

This leads, finally, to **The Discipline**. Repentance requires *A Change in Attitude*. Scripture constantly exhorts a transformed mind (see, for example, Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 4:8). Repentance leads to us viewing ourselves, our God, and our world differently. We no longer linger on our past sins, mistakes, or shame but, instead focus on Jesus Christ and his finished work.

Secondly, repentance requires *A Change in Action*. The story goes that during a heated battle, one of the soldiers under Alexander the Great became so paralyzed with fear that he fled the battle scene. When the battle concluded, he was brought to the tent of Alexander the Great himself. The Emperor asked the young man, "Son, what is your name?" the soldier replied, "My name is Alexander." The Emperor responded, "Well son, you either change your conduct or change your name." So it is with us.

There's an old story of a farmer who noticed a lamb and a pig escaped his farm. He looked everywhere to no avail, finally deciding to return to bed. He awoke at first light to the sound of a bleating lamb. He followed the sound of the constant cries to a bog where he found both his missing lamb and pig wallowing in the mire. The pig was enjoying himself, but not the lamb. She was trying with all her might to escape but couldn't. Her only hope for freedom was to cry for help. So, it is with repentance. If we want to finally escape the mess of sin in our lives, all we can do is cry for help. The good news is that the Lord will answer and he will rescue us.

Titus 2:11-13

“Grace”

He was born to a pious mother who read the Bible to him every day. She died when he was only 7 leaving him to the care of his sea-captain father who was much less religious. From ages 11-17, he would join his father on long sea trips where he got himself in a lot of trouble. By 17, he had become a common sailor living a harsh life. He eventually became the captain of a slave-trading ship, called *Greyhound*, where his debauchery and mockery of religion hit its peak. On May 10, 1748, while sailing back to England, the *Greyhound* encountered a vicious storm that nearly killed him. At that moment of hopelessness, the man surrendered his life of debauchery of sin abandoning the slave trade and becoming a minister. He is best known for his connection with the anti-slavery politician William Wilberforce and a hymn he wrote. The man's name was John Newton, and the hymn was “Amazing Grace.” Grace, however, cannot be amazing unless we know what grace is.

Grace is still a commonly used word even outside of a religious context. Google offers seven uses for the word including simple elegance (“she moved through the water with effortless grace”), a short prayer of thanks before a meal, goodwill (“at least he has the grace to admit his debt to her”), and even used to address a duke, duchess, or archbishop (“His Grace, the Duke of Cornwall”). But what does the Bible mean by the word?

Let us begin with **Grace Explained**. In English, to be “gracious” means to show kindness or favor even when not required. We can be gracious with our time, resources, patience, etc. Scripture does something similar, but often in the context of status. When someone of higher status shows favor upon someone of lower status, they are showing grace. For example, Potiphar promoted Joseph from the lowest status of slavery to be his “chief of staff” (Genesis 39:4). Likewise, Boaz, a wealthy landowner, saw Ruth, the impoverished widow and immigrant, and graciously invited her to harvest crops from his field (Ruth 2:10).

Status, then, is an important part of what the Bible means by grace. It is a generous gift from one not obligated given to one not entitled to it. For someone to consistently show favor towards people of lower status is to be “full of grace.” Without a doubt, the most “gracious” person in this context is God himself. In fact, one Hebrew word, often translated as “gracious,” is used exclusively of God (see Exodus 34:6; Psalm 116:5).

The beauty of the narrative of Scripture is that the being of highest status, God himself, generously shows favor to humans of significant lower status. The divine to the human. The infinite to the finite. The immortal to the mortal. The holy to the unclean. This is the constant refrain of Scripture. Repeatedly, humans make a mess of everything and, yet God is persistently gracious. Even more, he doesn't wait until we become worthy of his favor. He shows favor, out of an abundance of divine love, while we are still a mess. In fact, the Exodus 34 scene where God's character is most clearly deniated is given in the context of human wickedness. Moses has returned atop the mountain to get another copy of the Ten Commandments but also to save his people. The Israelites were just found worshipping an Egyptian god – a god that held them in slavery! But instead of destroying them, God forgives them and shepherds them through the wilderness. God is gracious.

This leads to **Grace Effected**. Grace is not an abstract idea, but an efficacious work of God. Grace accomplishes the work of God in the lives of his people for his glory. The first work is *Salvation* (see Titus 2:11). Grace is the saving work of God, by which he saves sinners out of an abundance of divine love. Grace is a divine gift unmerited and undeserved. It must not be confused with a wage earned or an entitlement gained (Romans 3:23-24, 11:5-6; Ephesians 2:8-9). Remember that grace is a gift from the higher to the lower. Even though God is the one wronged, he extends to us saving grace (Ephesians 1:7).

Secondly, *Sanctification* (see Titus 2:12). Grace is the source of salvation and of sanctification. The Christian life is not about duty, but delight. Having been given the gift of God's immeasurable love, we are to be a grateful people who walk in humility and love. Grace saves. Grace sustains. Grace sanctifies (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Thirdly, grace *Secures* (see Titus 2:13). God that saved us is, as we've seen, the same God who, by his grace, is saving us (i.e., sanctification). He is also the God who will save us. Our future is secure in Christ by his grace (1 Peter 5:10).

The fourth efficacious work of grace is *Service*. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul explores various spiritual gifts in the church (including service, teaching, exhortation, and mercy). Paul argues that these gifts are given for the good of others. It is a humbling reminder that God graciously has blessed us with certain talents, abilities, and opportunities. Being the case, we ought to serve others with it.

Finally, grace helps us persevere in *Suffering*. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, Paul laments his thorn in the flesh which he called "a messenger of Satan to harass" him. Scholars debate what the metaphorical thorn was, but clearly it was a source of discomfort, frustration, weakness, and limitation to him. Perhaps it was poor eyesight, malaria, or some other condition. Regardless, it weakened and limited him and what he wanted to do. Paul confessed to frequently asking God to relieve him of his suffering, but through it all, he found that God's grace was sufficient. Even while he was weak, Christ was stronger still. The only thing that will help us persevere through suffering is the grace of God.

John Newton died in 1807. He chose the inscription on his grave, "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy." In the funeral sermon for Newton, his friend Richard Cecil quoted Newton as once saying, "Whatever I may doubt on other points, I cannot doubt whether there has been a certain gracious transaction between God and my soul."

Acts 2:42-47

“Fellowship”

One of the most ironic aspects of the digital age is how we are both more connected than ever and lonelier than ever. Our kids mention that a teacher said they’re going to make their students step out of their comfort zone. I jokingly asked, “does that mean they’re going to make the students learn to make eye contact?” Since the Pandemic of 2020, Americans have drastically shifted from Tables to Takeaway. That is, to say, Americans are choosing to eat alone at home more than in public. In 2023, 74% of all restaurant traffic came from “off premises” customers which is up 61% before COVID. Eating with family or friends has declined in this same period by 30%. In fact, even customers dining in are doing so alone at an increase rate of 29%.

This is where the Christian idea of fellowship speaks directly to our overconnected, lonely culture. Let’s begin with **The Meaning**. The word means “partnership, sharing in common, or communion” (see Luke 5:10). It carries with it the idea of partnership in agreement of purpose.

We must begin with its theological meaning. It is worth noting that the Trinity itself has enjoyed eternal fellowship within the Godhead. Scripture hints at this repeatedly (see, for example, Matthew 11:27, 1 Corinthians 2:11; John 5:19-20, 17:26). Salvation, then, is the story of how our Triune God draws us into fellowship with him. Scripture is the story of Alienation and Reconciliation. The gospel draws us back into fellowship with God (Colossians 1:21-22). The New Testament frequently speaks of being drawn back into fellowship with our Triune God (1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 John 1:3). All of this lies as the theological foundation for the biblical exhortation for us to be in fellowship with one another. If the gospel reconciles us with God, it ought to do the same with one another. That is the key to fellowship.

This leads to **The Message** of fellowship. Two aspects are critical to healthy, gospel fellowship. The first is the concept of *Community*. This should be an obvious point, but fellowship is inherently communal. The most powerful idol of our society is The Self. Nothing matters more than The Self. The gospel does not allow that. We are saved as individuals, yes, but we are saved into a community of believers. This is why claims that we can be good Christians from the comfort of our couch is a lie.

Scripture is clear we both need each other. One frequent way it makes this point is through the subtle use of “one another.” A full list goes beyond our study but consider some of the highlights. We are told to love one another (John 13:34-35; Romans 12:10a, 13:8; 1 Peter 4:8 for starters), forgive one another (Colossians 3:13b), comfort one another (2 Corinthians 13:11a), pray for one another (James 5:16b), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18, 5:11a; Hebrews 10:25), and serve one another (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10). These positive commands are critical to healthy fellowship. Community can only function when we love, serve, and encourage one another.

The New Testament also uses “one another” language to warn us against what harms fellowship. For example, we are told not to speak against one another (James 4:11, 5:9) and not to provoke one another (Galatians 5:26a). Obviously more could be listed, but the point is made. Behavior shapes the health of a community. If we spend more time encouraging than criticizing, fellowship becomes sweet and the benefit of a community will be experienced.

The second aspect of biblical fellowship is *Faith*. Any community, whether secular or religious, must be fastened together by some common cause, purpose, or identity. There must be something that binds a community. Throughout history, nations were bound by racial and ethnic identity as well as a common national myth. It was not until the rise of America that such sources of identity could be successfully called into question. What unites America traditionally is the idea of America, not the ethnicity of Americans.

The same is true for Christian fellowship. What unites us is the gospel of Jesus – not race, ethnicity, gender, politics, or any other manmade boundaries. On Christmas of 1914, German and British soldiers, hiding in the trenches, ceased firing upon each other to celebrate Christmas. They came together across No Man's Land, and sang Christmas carols like "Silent Night," played soccer, and even exchanged gifts.

What binds us is faith. This means that contending for the faith from theological pollution is a priority of believers. Scripture is littered with countless warnings against false teachings which must be rejected. Without the gospel, there can be no Christian fellowship. Amos rightly asked, "can two walk together unless they are agreed?" Notice in Acts 2, the scene depicting the practices of the first church is preceded by Peter's sermons at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41) climaxing in Peter's exhortation that all would repent and believe the gospel (Acts 2:37-38). This is the binding glue of Christian fellowship.

Therefore, our fellowship is with Christ and citizens of his Kingdom, not the world. We don't have anything in common with them. John writes, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:6-7).

We don't know much about Enoch other than the two facts we are given in a single verse. He walked with God, we are told, and he did not die "for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). The idea of "walking with God" was not new even by the fifth chapter of Genesis. It is taken from the story of Adam and Eve who enjoyed such fellowship with the Lord in the Garden (see Genesis 3:8). Perhaps a better translation is that both Adam and Enoch "walked in close fellowship with God" (see the NLT translation of Genesis 5:24). At the end of the day, that ought to be our highest aim. We will walk with others in close fellowship when we walk with God in close fellowship. Let us aim for that.