

A Q&A on Israel and More

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Nathaniel Pringle. So good to have you here this evening for our second installment of a Q&A interview. It's such an encouragement that Truth Community Church is filled with people who love the Lord and who are serious minded about the things of the Lord as, again, has been evidenced by the excellent questions that we've received. Last week, our focus was primarily on issues of ministry, philosophy that define our church and this week, we have the opportunity to focus on theological issues and some other pastoral issues, and we're looking forward to that. We had such a good response that we can't answer all the questions, but we've worked to put together what is a representative cross section this evening.

And as we start, I'm going to read a passage from Ephesians 4 that, again, just captures the heart of what we're trying to do as we, as Don and I, minister along with Dane and Andrew as your elders in building us up as a body in maturity in Christ. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul says, "he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." So we're looking forward to that aspect this evening and Don, if you would come up and join me, I'm really glad you made it here this evening and we're just going to jump right in to some pretty intense stuff, if that's okay.

Don Green. Yeah, but before we do, whoever was responsible for choosing the Martin Luther hymn to sing tonight was right on top of things, this being the 506th anniversary of the start of the Reformation when he nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg door, protesting against the abuses of the Catholic Church and, you know, what a privilege to be able to discuss theology on a night like this.

Nathaniel. Yes, definitely. So theology. Israel. Israel is a nation that's been in the news a lot recently and we've received a number of questions about Israel and so can you just give us some biblical perspective on Israel?

Don. Well yeah, I think first of all to discuss Israel in a biblical way would be multiple multiple messages and when I get into my series on Revelation I may just do that and take a few messages to address Israel from a biblical perspective over an extended period of time. What I'm going to say here this evening is greatly oversimplified, but it's just enough to give a little bit of perspective in the short time that we have here, and I want to kind of balance this around three different points. First of all, to talk about the current military situation in Israel. The modern nation of Israel has an absolute right and responsibility to protect itself from those who would destroy it. Genesis 9:6 says that if man sheds blood, by man his blood shall be shed, and in Romans 13, it speaks about how the government bears the sword in order to bring judgment on those who do evil. And so it is lawful for their government to wage this war that they're currently undertaking against Hamas and against those that wage that unprovoked attack on civilians. God sent his people to war in the Old Testament and so they have every right to do this, and I regret that Woodrow Wilson was ever president of the United States, and he kind of compromised national sovereignty for the sake of wanting to have a collective world rule and that's undermined our perspective on national sovereignty. But biblically speaking, I stand with Israel and its unfettered right to self-defense. The truth of the matter is, and I was never in the military like some of my friends were, but even biblically war is grievous. Innocent people suffer and die. If you go back to my message on Psalm 137 by the rivers of Babylon, I go through some of the biblical history where they talk about the wombs of pregnant women being ripped open, babies' heads being dashed open. I mean, we're seeing that played out in the recent news of the past month or so. And so war is never going to be easy, it's never going to be pretty, it's going to be ugly, and innocent people are going to suffer, innocent people are going to die, and that comes with the territory of war. But when wicked people attack a sovereign nation, they must be neutralized and so Israel is completely within their bounds to do whatever they think is necessary to protect their citizens.

Nathaniel. And that's a broader principle not just applies to Israel....

Don. Of course.

Nathaniel. ...if I'm understanding what you're saying.

Don. Yes, exactly. This would be true of any nation and so Israel has the national right to protect itself and that's, I think, is kind of the starting point in looking at these things that are happening in the news today. They have a right to protect themselves and Hamas has sworn to their destruction and so what are they supposed to do? If anything, they've been too restrained, not that I'm a political commentator on these things. But they've been so restrained that, you know, it's allowed Hamas the opportunity to attack them and so now they say they're going to destroy them, you know, and that's their prerogative. And so we need to see the current military situation as something that they are exercising a national right to self-defense, which is perfectly appropriate.

Now having said that, to pivot from the current military situation to the current spiritual situation in Israel, and I know this is where you get, no matter what you say about Israel spiritually, you're going to get criticized by somebody from all kinds of different theological perspectives. But you know, in terms of Israel as a nation today before God, we should not confuse their human right of self-defense, we should not confuse that with their biblical position before God as they stand right now as a nation. Right now, the nation of Israel is under judgment of God because they have rejected Christ as their Messiah. And Jesus wept over Jerusalem in Matthew 23, Luke 19 said, "I would have gathered you up, but you would not have it," and so they rejected Christ, they crucified him with the help of the Romans in the overall plan of God, and they maintain that rejection of Christ to this day and as a result, they are not under the protection of God. They are unbelieving people without the protection of God to rely upon and so it's a very sad, grievous situation. Paul speaks in Romans about how he's grieved for his kinsmen who are his according to the flesh but whatever zeal they had for God in the first century was not according to knowledge, and nothing has changed since then. And so we should not look at the modern-day nation of Israel as being the inheritors of the promises of God in a way that I'm going to clarify with my third point in just a moment. But as long as the Jews as a people continue to reject the Messiah, they reject Jesus Christ as their Messiah, I just want to be abundantly clear about what we're saying here, as long as they continue in that, they are going to continue to feel chastisement and difficulty and, you know, in Deuteronomy 28, you see all the curses that God lays upon the Jews when they reject him, and they're going to experience that. And so we need to have that in mind and not confuse the nature of believing Israel with the nature of the unbelieving nation today. And so the current military situation, it's righteous for them to pursue it. Their current spiritual situation, they're under judgment because they've rejected their own Messiah.

Nathaniel. Yep. And just along those lines, even there's a Jewish population here in Cincinnati, and when there's opportunities to talk to them, I've been able to talk to a few over the years, and it is like talking to a New Testament Pharisee when you present Christ. There's an immediate rejection of him as the Messiah to this day.

Don. Yes, and God has a remnant of believing Jews. Steve Kreloff comes to mind, our pastor friend in Clearwater, Florida, a believing Jew, a converted Jew, perhaps even better to state it that way, and so there are individual believing Jews that shows that God has not abandoned the Jews completely, but as a nation, there's a reason for their suffering.

Now, that brings me to my third point. I said that we should not confuse their right as a nation to self-defense, we shouldn't confuse that with their biblical position before God, and as I understand Scripture, going further, we shouldn't confuse that present state of judgment as an absolute and final judgment from God for all time. You know, there are many Christians who think that, you know, Israel, you know, there's nothing left for Israel. I don't believe that that's the biblical case. God promised in Zechariah 12:10 that there would be a future time where he would pour out his Holy Spirit upon them in the last day, and they would look on him whom they pierced with a spirit of repentance. And that day is still future to us and there is a coming day, and again, this is greatly

oversimplified, where they will at last, there will be a future generation of the Jews who do receive the Messiah, who do repent, and when that happens, Christ will take the throne of David on earth, he will reign over the nations in a time of peace and prosperity that's known as the millennium, and in this way, God will keep his promises to his people. He made promises to Abraham. He made promises to David that there would be a throne upon which his son would sit, reigning from Jerusalem. He made promises in the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 that he would give them new life, a new heart to respond to him, God would write his law on their hearts. And that's still future. And even though there are many, many Bible teachers who say that that's been transferred over to the church, what God said to Israel, they gave that up when they rejected the Messiah and so all those blessings have been transferred to the church and it's being fulfilled in the church in a spiritual way. Well, I respect some of the men that teach that, but that's not what I believe that Scripture teaches. You know, if you're going to say that the promises that God made to Israel in the Old Testament, that they would have a land, that they would have their own king, and that they would experience spiritual blessings of new life and forgiveness, and the land being an important aspect of it, if you say that all of that has been annulled, that Israel forfeited all of that, and now it's being fulfilled in the church in a spiritual way with spiritual blessings, that stretches the word fulfillment beyond any recognition, because the promise is not being fulfilled on the terms in which it was originally given, and it's not being fulfilled to the people to whom the promise was originally made. In what way is that a fulfillment? That's just a cancellation and something new being taking place. And so you can't look at those promises and say that that's a fulfillment if it's not being fulfilled in the same way to the people who received the promises. Again, Genesis 12, 2 Samuel 7, Jeremiah 31, and other texts that go along with that.

And so you just can't say that the church has replaced Israel and make coherent sense of the Old or the New Testament in my judgment, and since everybody brought their Bibles, I just want to point you to a passage in Ezekiel 37 as well, and you could go through almost every one of the minor prophets and find the themes of restoration stated. I think the people that deny a future to Israel, national Israel, they neglect the minor prophets. You have to overlook the minor prophets. But looking to Ezekiel, I just want to read chapter 37, beginning in verse 21 and just listen to the nature of who God is speaking to, he's speaking to Israel, and the nature of the fulfillment that he promises in the future. This is after the exiles, after the judgments from Assyrian Babylon in 722 and 586. These things are being said after that. And so we read beginning in verse 15, "The word of the LORD came to me." Well, let's skip down to verse 21 just for the sake of time. "Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land." The people of Israel coming to their own land, "And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But," unconditional promise, "I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David," which is a looking prophetic statement of Christ, "My

servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever." Forever is a term that can mean a very long time, not necessarily referring to eternity. "I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."

And there's all kinds of passages like that in the Old Testament where God promises a future restoration where they will live in the land under a king who's descended from David. Now that has not happened since the coming of Christ, the first coming of Christ. So it's still future to us and to say that God would reverse these promises because of their apostasy, even though he chose them, is to utterly jeopardize everything that we believe as Calvinists about Christian salvation. If God can reverse the election of Israel because of their sin, then you don't want to go there because he could reverse our election as Christians for our sin if that was consistent with his justice, and it's not. And so the character of God, the fidelity of God to his covenants, to his promises, is all wrapped up in this, and even though there are men who I respect, who disagree with what's being said, I think Scripture's as plain as day on this, and that's what we hold to, and it's what we teach.

Nathaniel. And it would seem to me, just on a practical level, that to have to change the interpretation of what we just read here in Ezekiel and other Old Testament passages, you know, you come to Romans 9 through 11, which is there to comfort believers, you know, Paul is writing that to show us the assurance of salvation that we have in Christ, but, you know, if you've twisted the meaning of the Scripture here, then you'd think, "Well, what does he actually mean, you know, when you come to Romans?" So there's an underlying, interpretational approach.

Don. Yeah, and the interpretational approach is that you can read the New Testament and reinterpret the Old in light of the New, and I don't agree with that approach. I believe you take the Old Testament on its terms and interpret the New Testament consistently with that as a progress and an advance on the existing revelation, not a change and a reinterpretation of it. And that's a pretty big interpretive point.

Nathaniel. Yes, huge.

Don. Yeah. So, current military situation, they can do whatever they want to defend themselves, biblically speaking. Current spiritual situation, they're a nation under judgment because they've rejected their Messiah. Future spiritual situation, God promises that he'll one day pour out his Spirit, change their hearts, give them a new heart, they'll repent, they'll mourn over having crucified the Messiah, and they'll recite the things stated in Isaiah 53 as an expression of their repentance, and then not only will Gentiles be

gathered in, but the Jews will be gathered in, and God will be greatly glorified for his grace on the Gentiles, his grace on the Jews, and there will be a time of great peace and prosperity on the world as Christ reigns over his people.

Nathaniel. So a pro tip, take what he just said in the last two minutes there, play that on repeat, and then watch the news. All right, then you're ready to see and interpret things rightly in the way of Scripture. Thank you. That is so helpful for us in these days. Are you ready for dispensationalism?

Don. Yes.

Nathaniel. All right. So and this, you know, goes right into what we were talking about goes right into the discussion of are you a dispensationalist based on what you've just expressed about Israel, and, you know, can you just help us understand that term, that position and how we should think about that?

Don. For all that I just said, for those of you that are informed on issues, you'll recognize that to say that there is a future for Israel and that Christ will return before the millennium is established, is to recognize that you're speaking about last things from what has traditionally been called a dispensational perspective. Okay, fair enough. But I do not, with all of that said, I do not apply the term dispensationalist to myself. I don't like the term. I think it confuses things rather than helps bring clarity for this reason. Let me say this, if you use the term dispensational or dispensationalist strictly and only to distinguish between Israel and the church and to indicate that the church has not replaced Israel in God's program, that's one thing and I can live with that, but the problem with dispensationalism and dispensationalist theology over the past hundred years and more is that there is so much bad theology, so much destructive teaching that has flown under the dispensational flag that I can't begin to possibly use that term to describe myself without creating all kinds of confusion. For example, dispensationalists, classic dispensationalists have been known to say that the Sermon on the Mount is only for the future millennium, that has nothing to do with today. C. I. Scofield said such things, among others. There have been dispensationalists that have distinguished, said there's a difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. There have been dispensationalists that at least, whether they intended to or not, created the impression that they were saying there were two ways of salvation, law in the Old Testament, grace in the New Testament. More recently, and this just gets my blood pressure up, and at my age, Nathaniel, my blood pressure should not go up. I need to watch against these things. There are dispensationalists that have taught in salvation, Charles Ryrie, Zane Hodges, and men of their ilk, that you can receive Christ as Savior without receiving him as Lord, or along with that, that repentance from sin is not necessary for salvation. You know, and they call that a work and this is all coming from dispensational teachers. You add to that that there are classic dispensationalists, there are progressive dispensationalists, and the term is just so, there is just so much baggage associated with the term dispensationalism and dispensationalist that you would need a mile long freight train to carry all of the baggage that that term represents. And so I don't apply the term to myself, I rather prefer to use the term when it comes to doctrine of the last things, eschatology, call myself a futuristic

premillennialist. That's specific. It limits it to eschatology. And the futuristic says there's a future for Israel. Premillennial says that Christ will return before the millennium happens. Millennial says we believe in a 1,000 year reign of Christ on the earth. I like that term. I can live with that term because it's specific and descriptive but to just casually use the term dispensationalist, that would associate me with men whose teaching I utterly repudiate. And so I just prefer to set the term aside because it creates more confusion. And look, the point of being a teacher of God's word is you're supposed to bring clarity to things. If you're using terms that create confusion, then you need to abandon them and speak in different terms.

Nathaniel. Yeah, it's a term that requires as much negative definition as anything with the list that you gave of all of the errors that are connected with the banner of that term.

Don. Yeah, that's right and so I have dispensational friends who would be disappointed that I just said the things that I said, but the ones that understand would at least understand why I'm hesitant to use it. John MacArthur in his book, "The Gospel According to the Apostles," it was originally called "Faith Works," he says dispensational simply means that there's a distinction between the church and Israel. Then he goes on to say that there are certain mongrel, I can't remember exactly how he said it, I should have brought it with me, but there are certain mongrel breeds of dispensationalism that ought to die, and he'd be happy to lead the funeral if they did. And that's kind of where I'm at.

Nathaniel. Yeah. And that was actually the culture I was educated in, was with that dispensational mindset that would eliminate Lordship, salvation, and the the ramifications of that kind of thinking are just disastrous for people, just to think, I can say a prayer and I'm saved and then continue to live how I want until whatever happens and I submit to the Lord.

Don. Totally. You know, one of the things that, one of the questions that came in was how eschatology affects ecclesiology. This is one of the ways. If you have a bad definition of dispensationalism and take it beyond eschatology and get into these things of no Lordship salvation, then you undermine church discipline, you give people a false definition of salvation, and you condition people to think that they can live any way they want without it having any interpretive bearing upon whether they are a Christian or not. That's disastrous. And really the root problem is in that kind of thinking, in the no Lordship thinking, is there's an utter lack of understanding and teaching and explanation of the doctrine of regeneration. When God saves someone, he makes them new. There is a new birth and there is a new heart that is given so that new life and spiritual life and obedience flow naturally and inevitably from the new life, and if you ignore regeneration and just reduce it to, you know, saying a prayer as so many people do, and then, you know, you baptize them immediately and call them Christians for the rest of eternity, you know, you're just really making a mess of things and putting souls in danger, and, you know, I'm not willing to have any of that associated with my ministry. That's why I can't use the term dispensational, but I'll use futuristic premillennialist and people who understand some of the doctrines of eschatology will know what I'm saying.

Nathaniel. And that's why these discussions even are so important to help develop the importance of these terms that people hear occasionally and the importance of doctrines that are connected with them, which goes right back to Ephesians 4 of we're building up one another in love so that we can be mature in Christ and not shaken about with false teaching and, you know, sometimes you have to dive in to these things to create stability, to cultivate a sound foundation.

Don. Yeah, otherwise, if you don't at some point, otherwise you're leaving your flock vulnerable to wolves who would prey upon them, saying plausible things, not recognizing the implications of what's being said, and being led away from the truth. And it's a responsibility of a biblical shepherd, a biblical pastor, to build fences around the flock, in order to keep the wolves out and keep the sheep safe within and you can't just teach positive doctrine in affirmations, you have to make denials and say, "We teach this, we do not teach that." You have to do both, and that's Titus 1. You have to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict. Positive and negative. And the fact that that brings incoming fire when you start to do it, it comes with the territory.

Nathaniel. Yeah, absolutely. We could stay on this one a long time.

Don. Or we could move on.

Nathaniel. Or we could move on. You want to move on? Yeah. Let's move on.

Don. I'm sure my phone's already blowing up with people wanting to challenge my teaching.

Nathaniel. Hopefully this one will lower your blood pressure a little bit, and this was a wonderful question and just, you know, it's one of the joyful parts of shepherding. Someone asked if we have specific tips or advice on how to do a more thorough Bible study and then also how to approach especially hard to understand passages.

Don. Yeah, why don't you knock that one out of the park?

Nathaniel. Okay. I might get to first base, but, you know, you can come alongside me here. Well, you know, the Bible study question is a great question and, you know, where do I start? And obviously, reading the Bible, you want to be reading the Bible through and through every year if possible but, you know, beyond that, what are some ways that you can approach your Bible study? And, you know, there's a number of answers, but I'm just going to focus on one. One of the easiest ways to start is by taking a small book of the Bible, one of the epistles, for instance, and committing to a month of reading through that book just over and over and over. You know, it could be even on a daily basis, you know, three chapters or so, and then recording the themes that you see as you read through that, looking for different patterns that arise and you'll just be amazed at what you glean as a believer who loves the Lord reading God's word from that repetitive exposure to his word. And so that's just, that's a very simple way to start and, you know, if you wanted to add on to that, purchasing a commentary for that book. And, you know,

both of us would be happy to help if you needed recommendations for good commentaries, that would be helpful to dig in in that way. But just reading through Scripture, reading through a book, acquainting yourself with the whole message of an entire book of Scripture, is a wonderful way to see Scripture, not just in a particular verse, but in the whole context of what that author is saying. And one of my favorite, when I started doing this years ago at the recommendation of my pastor at the time, I went to 1 Peter. 1 Peter is packed with references to Christ in those five chapters and I'd never seen that before, but just going through 1 Peter over and over and seeing how enthralled Peter was with the person of Christ, it was one of those periods of notable growth in my understanding from that one epistle. And so just an example of how that approach can be very helpful.

Don. Can I just interject here?

Nathaniel. Yes, please do.

Don. Just what you're saying is at the most basic level is that it's important for every professing Christian to be reading the Bible for themselves. We need to read the Bible for ourselves to understand it and not just rely on our teachers. God gives us teachers and that's a good thing, but we need to be, every Christian needs to be reading the Bible for themselves. That's presupposed in what you're saying there.

Nathaniel. Absolutely. And the joy of that is then as we come to church, as we've been studying, reading, and then we hear the preaching, so often what we hear resonates with what we've been studying and vice versa.

Don. Totally.

Nathaniel. You're equipping yourself.

Don. That's right, the work of the Holy Spirit. Even if the pastor is preaching on something completely different than what you're reading in Scripture for yourselves, the Spirit has a way of making a connection, and that becomes electrifyingly, if I can make up an adverb, electrifyingly encouraging to see, "Oh, he didn't even mention what I was reading, but I see the connection there." And when people start to grow cold and get discontent, quite often, I'm never this confrontational, maybe I should be, but quite often I think that that element's probably lacking; the symptom is shown in discontent with the local church, but what actually is happening is that there is an unfaithfulness and an inconsistency privately that is taking root in the heart, turning what had been a spiritual heart into levels of carnality and discontent flows from that. I've completely broken your train of thought, and I apologize for that but you were saying things that prompted other things in my mind.

Nathaniel. I don't know if you broke it, but it went a different direction here, just with the idea of what the Spirit of God does as we come with hearts full of the word of God and there's, you know, a spiritual igniting that takes place. And I heard an analogy, I can't remember where it was, but someone said that you can't expect the Spirit of God to ignite when there's nothing there. You're not talking about the word of God.

Don. Yeah, you're not putting any fuel, you're not putting any wood on the heart, you know, then what's he going to light up? And another aspect to build on what you said with the reading of Scripture is not just the reading of it in a mechanical way, but a prayerful reading of it as we come to Scripture saying, "God, I ask you to use your Spirit to help me understand and to illuminate. I come," that it's a spiritual act that we're engaging when we read the Bible. And Jesus said in different places, that God the Father answers our prayers like a human father answers the prayers of, or not the prayers, but requests from his children. It says, if you as an evil father know, will give bread to your child when he asks for something to eat and not a stone, if an earthly father would never give a snake when the child has asked for a fish, then understand that God in an infinitely more great way will answer well and give you good things in response to the things that you ask. Well, if he wants us to understand his word, and he does, and the Spirit of God indwells us, and he does, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in part is to help us understand the word of God, and it is, then we should be asking as we go to the word of God, just in a humble, simple way, "God, I ask for the help of the Holy Spirit as I read what I'm about to read and I pray that you would use your Spirit to open my mind to understand." It acknowledges our inability to understand the Bible by ourselves. That's a good prayer. That's a gift that God delights to give but sometimes we don't have because we don't ask.

Nathaniel. Yeah, it's a prayer of we're approaching his word, his objective written revelation, and asking for him to do a spiritual work in us as we are approaching what he has revealed.

Don. It's an act of worship to read the word of God.

Nathaniel. Amen. That's right.

Don. And so we need the Spirit to enable our worship.

Nathaniel. And that, you know, that goes into the second part of the question, too, about what about when we come across those more difficult passages? You know, 1 Peter has a few of them, for instance. You know, how do we approach...

Don. Yeah, he does. Baptism now saves you.

Nathaniel. Yeah, yeah.

Don. I whispered that one because I didn't want to bring that whole point into...

Nathaniel. And Peter said Paul wrote hard stuff in 2 Peter 3. There are hard passages in Scripture.

Don. Even for the apostles, that's encouraging.

Nathaniel. Yeah, what is it? 2 Peter 3:16 is a very encouraging reference there. So when we approach those, it's not necessarily, I've got to figure this out. I want to know what it means, but there's an act of worship even in trying to think through that. But there are some practical ways to approach it also.

Don. Yeah, there are a couple of things that I would say, and I don't want to sound like a Homer in what I'm about to say, having come from John MacArthur's ministry, but it's very, very true, everybody should own a MacArthur Study Bible and when you come to difficult passages that you don't understand, it's a good thing, it's not a shameful thing, it's not a sign of weakness. Go to a man who's been teaching the Bible for over 60 years now, beyond his ministry at Grace Community Church and what does he have to say about it and you will find help. And you look at other study Bibles that are written by different men, they have to kind of play it kind of general but John MacArthur will give you help on difficult passages in the study Bible. And there's a, Grace to You has a free, I think it's free now, study Bible app that you can get on your phone and you can read your Bible and if you come to something difficult, you can pull up those notes and get understanding. I do that on a regular basis just to help make sure that my mind's going in the right direction. And so the Lord has given the church a great resource there, a convenient, concise, comprehensive reference that every Christian would benefit from and so I highly recommend that resource, and there's lots of other helpful tools in there as well. But, you know, reading repeatedly for the sake of context, reading prayerfully for the help of the Spirit, using an established, respected resource to help you. You know, you can go a very long way with just those few little things without having to learn Greek, without having to learn Hebrew, without having to go to seminary. You know, a basic understanding, fundamental understanding of all the Scripture is within the grasp of a sincere Christian.

Nathaniel. And, you know, just one of the things that difficult passages can do is shake you thinking, have I missed a key doctrine, you know, because of the way something is worded in a particular passage? And so just as a point of comfort and encouragement, one of the principles when we come across those passages is the analogy of Scripture, that Scripture is harmonious and Scripture explains Scripture, and you're not going to come across one verse that undoes the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Don. Because all Scripture comes from the same Spirit.

Nathaniel. Exactly.

Don. And so he is self-internally consistent with what he revealed, even if it's not immediately apparent to us on a first reading.

Nathaniel. And that's why it's so important to expose ourselves also to the whole of Scripture and to the context.

Don. Yeah, do you think there's anything to be said also in this context about being faithful in your attendance at the local church where the word's being preached?

Nathaniel. Yes, definitely. Definitely. You want me to expand on that a little bit?

Don. Talk about a leading question, all right? Yeah, why don't you expand on that and why that would be an important aspect of it, even if it doesn't seem to be directly related to a difficult passage that you're studying.

Nathaniel. Well, the preaching of the word, from those that are appointed by God to shepherd the flock that is among you is what Peter tells the elders in 1 Peter 5, and the consistency of sitting under the word of God from those who are given the responsibility to shepherd your soul, it constructs a way of thinking about Scripture in your own mind. There's a way that you approach Scripture and as that way of thinking is constructed in your mind, it gives you great clarity as you go to Scripture yourself. It informs the way that you go to Scripture.

You know, one of the things, this is something I came across several years ago in Sinclair Ferguson's book, "The Whole Christ," I don't usually remember page numbers, but I actually remember the page number where I found this. It's page 50 and footnote 25 in "The Whole Christ." He made a very astute statement concerning the age that we live in and the importance of giving primacy to the preaching that comes from the pulpit that you're under as a member at your local church. He raised the question about the availability of so many sermons from so many people online. In his very gracious way, he said this is beneficial, but he said there are two things that you need to be very careful about when you listen to podcasts, when you go to YouTube, wherever you go for that teaching. The first you need to be aware of is the emphasis. Is the emphasis of the teaching different from what you're getting at your church? And there's far-reaching implications of that, and even to the theological perspective, the futuristic millennialist versus a different position than that. That would be one example of differing positions. And realizing, too, that the men that we listen to online are often speaking to their congregations with the specific needs in mind that that congregation has.

Don. If they're even pastors at all. I mean, there's a lot of self-appointed teachers out there that you know, that haven't been recognized by another church, you know, they just send themselves out into teaching and, man, that's...

Nathaniel. A slick YouTube video.

Don. That's thin ice to be skating on.

Nathaniel. That's right.

Don. If you're being influenced by men like that, that don't have a regular teaching ministry and they're just self-appointed in that, they're not teaching in the context of God's means of a local church, then you're skating on thin ice waiting for it to crack under you, fall through the ice and then have trouble getting out.

Nathaniel. It's very easy to get people worked up without substance.

Don. That's right.

Nathaniel. And so that warning by Ferguson is so apropos.

Don. And there's a guy, and Sinclair Ferguson is an illustration of what we're talking about. He's taught in the local church. He's been a teacher in the local church for decades. I don't know what he's doing now. I'm not acquainted with him. So those are the guys to listen to. We don't need to keep going on this. Get my blood pressure up.

Nathaniel. The other point that he makes is just what listening to many men does to your own affections for the word preached and for the preacher at your own church. Are you listening to other people and then comparing, "Well, you know, my pastor doesn't preach like that, or I like the way this guy preaches the word," and your affections for the preaching of the word, your affections for your teacher, are being undermined by the multiplicity of sources that you're exposing yourself to. And those are important and wise, very wise warnings and, you know, Don wouldn't say this, so I'm going to say it, we have a gifted Bible teacher and we need to cultivate our love for what he says because we know he studies the word. We know he loves us. And that's what we need to be cultivating as we think about where we give our primary attention to when it comes to the preaching of the word and, you know, circling back to where the question came from, as you bring yourself, your mind, your thinking, your affections under the authority that God has placed over you, the shepherd that's appointed to shepherd the flock that he's over, then the Lord honors obedience to the Lord. You're obeying the Lord in that. It's not looking at a man. It's looking at what God has said. God has put this authority in my life. This is where I need to focus my attention and my affections. And then as you develop your own study in the word, the Lord will bless your loyalty to the word of God as it's preached at your local church. There's so many benefits that come with obeying God, right? I mean, duh. God loves you. He didn't tell you these things to make life miserable. He's told us these things in his word because he's our heavenly Father and he's appointed the church for our good out of his love for us. So I could go on on that.

Don. Well said. We probably should move along.

Nathaniel. We will. We will. And we'll move on to a kind of thorny issue in Scripture. This was an excellent question that comes up as people read the Old Testament, and I'm just going to read the question as it was stated. "Why was polygamy seemingly overlooked in the Old Testament? Was godly living looked upon differently at that time?"

Don. It is a great question, and if you know the New Testament and you know, you look back at the Old Testament and see this, it does seem to be, there seems to be a level of incongruity. The thing that I would say, just on a very simple level, and this is a key principle of biblical interpretation that transcends the issue of polygamy, is that especially when you're reading the Old Testament, you need to remember that what Scripture describes is not necessarily what Scripture prescribes or what Scripture approves. It tells us what happens, but it doesn't necessarily mean that God approved of what happened. So with polygamy, you start with the fact that God stated his plan for marriage clearly in Genesis 2, a man, singular, will leave his father and mother and joined to his wife. Singular, one man, one woman. Polygamy comes in after the fall. That's an important point. You see it for the first time in Genesis 4 with Lamech. How do you pronounce that? You're the Hebrew scholar here. Lamech in Genesis 4, and this is right after Cain had killed Abel, and so you realize that things are disintegrating and spiraling down. And I heard a teacher recently that said, sometimes the Bible frustrates us, sometimes the Bible is frustrating because it doesn't state clearly things that we would like it to state clearly about. We would like it to say that this man committed polygamy and that was wrong of that man to do it. It doesn't. It leaves those judgments to the broader context of Scripture. Genesis 2, Jesus affirmed Genesis, one man, one woman marriage in Matthew 19. Proverbs 5 warns against the adulterous woman, Ephesians 5 talks about Christ and the church and the husband and wife, clearly a one-to-one correspondence, not polygamy. And so you have the whole context of the Bible teaching you that polygamy is not God's plan, it is not what God approves.

And then you've got a context for understanding, well, why did God allow it then? Why do we see it described so many times? Well, there's a couple of ways that we can look at that starting and remembering that the fact that Bible describes it does not indicate that the Bible approves it. That's really crucial. You can see the judgment rather than giving us a didactic statement, this was bad. Scripture shows the consequences of what happened. For example, with Solomon. Solomon had all of the blessing of God, all of the wisdom of God, and yet he gave himself to hundreds of women. What was the outcome of that? It ruined his life. The kingdom split after that. God did not honor that, and so we see that the polygamy was not a good thing. In the broader ancient culture, kings practiced polygamy on a regular basis, not just in Israel, but in broader basis. Polygamy would be practiced as a means of insurance to make sure that they had an heir to the throne. The throne would be passed through the genealogy to be passed to a son. They wanted to have a lot of sons in case there was war, in case there was disease. They wanted to make sure that there was a son left to perpetuate the throne and so there was a context like that but ultimately, I think, perhaps the fallback position that we can see, Jesus talked about how God permitted divorce as an accommodation to the hardness of men's hearts. He said that in Matthew 19:8. And in the fallen nature of the world, the fallen nature of the culture, the lusts of men and all of that, I think that if we realize that God permitted polygamy, he didn't approve it, but he permitted polygamy as an accommodation to his people in the culture at that time, then we're probably getting pretty close to the heart of things with a parallel to something that Jesus said. But to wrap it up and to bring it full circle, I would say this. If you look in the mirror, these questions sometimes get a different kind of perspective. Every one of us could look in the mirror

and say, "Why does God bless me when I sin? Not when I sin, but despite my sin?" You know, we all stumble in many ways, and yet God blesses us. Why does he do that? It's because he's a gracious God who pours out blessing on us that we don't deserve in Christ. And so we could ask the same question, we may not be guilty of polygamy, but we're guilty of our own sins and then we see, "Oh, this is indicating grace, not approval.

Nathaniel. Amen. And that's obviously not an excuse to keep sinning, right? What Paul says at the end of Romans 5, where sin abounded, grace abounded more, and then he right away says, but that doesn't mean you keep on sinning.

Don. Yeah. Yeah, we presuppose that we hate sin and we want to eliminate it from our lives if we can.

Nathaniel. Which the question did as well, why would God seem to tolerate what he hates? And that, you know, what a great illustration of taking and understanding the importance of all of Scripture to deal with something that's thorny in our minds sometimes when we come across it in Scripture.

Another great question just about pastoral matters and thinking about things that Scripture teach, obviously satanic power is real. Evil is real. We're told about that multiple times in Scripture. We're told we're in a spiritual warfare, what Paul says in Ephesians 6, for instance. You know, this was a great question that has come out of, that's probably generated by so many years of false teaching about dealing with demons in general and broadly in the church and the question is, "Is it biblical to deal with evil by reading Scripture or praying in specific physical locations where someone might claim to feel intense demonic presence?"

Don. So you go to a room and you feel demons or whatever that means, and can you drive them away by reading a verse of Scripture? I'm simplifying and all of that. Now look, I can speak candidly what I really feel about this, what I really think about this, because the person who submitted that question, who's a very dear saint, made clear that they were not practicing this, they had encountered someone else talking about it, and therefore they just want clarification. They're not asking for approval of something they're doing. It's very important to set up what I want to say about that. So you walk into a room, you walk into your, you know, your family room, you feel a demon, and you drive them out by reading Scripture. It's kind of the basic idea. I'm not being too pejorative in presenting it.

Nathaniel. It happens.

Don. People believe this.

Nathaniel. They do.

Don. Now, what do I think of that in light of Scripture? That has to be the most ridiculous, superstitious practice I have heard of in the past five years. That is totally,

totally ridiculous to think that you can read a Bible verse and make a demon go away. It is a feelings-based approach to truth, which we've been trying desperately for the past year to get people away from subjective assessments of things as being a basis for truth and into biblical thinking and having a true Christian mind. You know, you can't feel demons. You don't know that a demon is there just because you feel it, number one, and secondly, secondly, Scripture teaches us how to deal with demonic influence. It's very specific about it, and it's very detailed in Ephesians 6. It talks about the armor of God and appropriating the righteousness of Christ and appropriating prayer and a right understanding of Scripture, and on it goes, and shodding your feet with the gospel of peace. If we could just make demons go away by running into a room and quoting John 3:16, it would be a whole lot simpler. But the idea that there's just this geographic location where a demon is just being really dirty in his thoughts and the emanation of his presence, is just a completely wrong view of what the satanic realm does. The satanic realm practices and works out world systems of evil through false philosophies and through false ways of thinking. Satan is the ruler of this world and it says in 1 John 5:20, and so the reason I get so animated about this is that, and my blood pressure gets up, that's never good, is that it just reduces it to something so so cartoonish to the neglect of where the real threat is in the philosophies that dominate the thinking of our age. And those philosophies that dominate the thinking of our age require a systematic, sustained, biblical, theological refutation so that we have a biblical mind, and to reduce it all to this kind of superstitious practice is to miss what the whole issue is. And so, you know, to the extent that any of you have been exposed to that, thought about it, just dismiss it out of hand, go to Ephesians 6, listen to my sermons on Ephesians 6, and realize that the demonic battle is something far, far above in the heavenly places rather than something that takes place under your kitchen sink when the pipe is leaking. I mean, for crying out loud, let's read the Bible.

Nathaniel. That's right.

Don. I'm sorry, did you say something?

Nathaniel. I was trying to lower your blood pressure.

Don. Yeah, you need to.

Nathaniel. But, you know, Scripture records failures. The apostles failed after the transfiguration. The sons of Sceva failed in the face of a demon in Acts 19. And when you look at those failures, essentially they were failing to embrace the whole of who Christ was. They were using incantations, they were doing it in his name, but they had rejected truth or had not fully embraced the doctrine of who Christ was.

Don. Yeah, you know, we, you know, there was that, you know, the episode in Acts that, you know, we, you know, they wanted to cast out demons in the name of Jesus and in the name of Paul and they said, demons said, "Jesus, we know, and Paul, we know, but who are you?" And then the demons beat them up. You know, they were, and that's exactly, that's exactly, that's exactly the thing.

Nathaniel. Yeah, it's not an incantations.

Don. And I get animated about it because these kinds of things make people vulnerable to false teaching and to being misled and that's why I get animated is because I don't want people to be misled. I want them to be rooted in the truth and solid and unafraid.

Nathaniel. It sounds good, but the devil clothes himself like an angel of light.

Don. There you go.

Nathaniel. And the responsibility is to reveal that.

Don. Yeah, the greater danger is that the devil comes to you as an angel of light, not as an oppressive feeling when something overcooked on the stove.

Nathaniel. Yep, that's right. Another question.

Don. Yeah, we'll get to more serious pastoral matters here. We're running out of time again.

Nathaniel. Okay. So just a couple last questions that are very, that are pastoral, that are important. Very simple question, "How do I live joyously in a fallen, joyless world?"

Don. Yeah, that's, that's kind of the million dollar question, isn't it, in some ways about Christian living. And, you know, we all know the difficulties of living in a world that's been cursed by God. There's illness, there's death, there's sorrow. We encounter people that are sorrowful, we read about the wicked things that wicked people do, and we feel, and especially those with tender hearts, feel an empathy for those that have been affected by it, and you start thinking about that and it does weigh you down. How do you get out of the spiral when that's kind of sucking you into the sorrow of it all? I would say a couple of things. First of all, we need to be realistic about the nature of the world in which we live. The world is desperately fallen. You know, since Adam fell and was kicked out of the garden, you know, the world has been encompassed by evil, by wars, rumors of war, you know, natural cataclysms, spiritual cataclysms, you know, through one man sin, death entered into the world, and there's going to be sorrow with that. And, you know, there's a lot of places that I could go and probably should, but just one verse for tonight is John 16:33. Jesus said, "In this world you have tribulation, but take heart, I've overcome the world." And so Jesus tells us to recognize the reality that we live in a fallen world, that it's going to cause pressure and difficulty and sorrow and tears for us, and he recognizes and acknowledges that. He says, "But in the midst of that, you can look at that realistically, but in the midst of it, remember something transcendent, remember something greater than the world, remember me." And so take heart and recognize that Christ has overcome the world. Christ entered into this world. Christ took the sin of men onto himself, bore the punishment, went into the grave, this is all subsequent to him saying that in John 16, but came out of the grave, resurrected in glory, and that Christ is

sovereign over sin, Christ is sovereign over deaths, Christ is sovereign over eternity, and to realize that somehow, somehow Christ is going to overrule all of this, and the outcome for those that are in Christ is going to be joyful, it's going to be content, there's not going to be any questions about the goodness or the righteousness of God in the end. And everybody should love what it says in Revelation 21, I believe, verse 4, every tear is going to be wiped away. It's as though there will be a personal taking of the thumb of God, I'm speaking very metaphorically here, and just pressing that against our cheek, wiping away the tears, putting his hand on our cheek, and saying, "Look at the victory all around you, it's okay, enter into my kingdom, enter into the joy of your Master." And so we live not by, we find our joy not by what is happening around us, but we look forward to the future joy and the triumph of Christ and we import that back, we retrofit our lives and our perspective by the outcome and let that shape the way that we view it. And then, and we can find joy, we can find joy there. You know, Paul said in Philippians 3, our citizenship is in heaven, from which we wait. You know, it's not here yet, but we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our body into conformity with the body of his glory, by the power that he has to subject all things to himself. 1 John 3:2. We will be like him because we will see him as he is. And that, all of that, you know, when you know these truths, when you believe these truths, when you rest all of your, Peter said, fix your hope completely on the joy to be revealed to you, you know, our joy is found by fixing our hope on what lies ahead, and that filters through the sorrow that we feel very legitimately in this fallen world.

Nathaniel. As you were talking 2 Timothy 2:8 and following came to mind where Paul just simply tells Timothy, remember Jesus Christ.

Don. There you go.

Nathaniel. And then he says, I'm in chains, but the word of God is not bound.

Don. Yeah. Remember Jesus Christ crucified while the Lord loved me and gave himself up for me. Remember Jesus Christ resurrected. He's sovereign over death. He's sovereign over sin. Remember Jesus Christ glorified. Remember Jesus Christ coming back. Remember Jesus Christ interceding for you at the right hand of God, even now, and the Spirit with groanings too deep for words. And in Christ, as we explore who Christ is, explore his love, his mercy, his kindness to us, that he knows us and that he invites those who are weary and heavy-laden to come and he'll give rest to his soul, well, we come to him by appropriating and by knowing him in his offices, prophet, priest, and king, knowing him in his person, fully God, fully man, sympathetic helper, knowing him in his future work and in Christ, we find one, we find the one and only who can untangle all of these things in our heart, give us peace, give us rest, and enable us to look realistically at the world, not in despair, but with a sense of joy in the assured final triumph of Christ and his love for my soul by which he will never allow anyone to pluck me from his hand. I can find joy in that, even though I can't find joy horizontally in the world around me.

Nathaniel. That's right. Amen. And I'll just move on to the last question because this...

Don. They kind of build on each other, don't they?

Nathaniel. They do. They build on it very much so. We know those truths, but there are times that were overwhelmed by despair, discouragement, etc. and this last question asks something important, "Would you consider a professing Christian struggling with spiritual depression a true Christian?" Let's put it in the context of a member of Truth Community Church. If a member of Truth Community Church came to me and said, "I'm dealing with what they call depression, I'm very discouraged." The last thing that I'm going to do with a member of Truth Community Church is to say, "Well, I wonder if you're even a Christian at all." That's the last thing that a pastor is going to do with someone that's been embraced in the fellowship. The simplicity of what I'm about to say may surprise some people, but number one, no, I'm not going to start at the point of questioning their salvation. Not at all, because Scripture is filled with too many examples of people that were discouraged and despaired that were true believers. You look at the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. He's being chased by Jezebel and he feels all alone and he cries out to the Lord and he wants to die. You look at the psalmist in Psalm 42, "Why are you in despair, O my soul?" You look at Psalm 73 and the psalmist says, "I was like a beast before you as I looked on the prosperity of the wicked." And you could multiply these examples endlessly. And so Scripture teaches us and shows us, teaches us to expect that believers are going to have difficulties. That's why we need a sympathetic Savior. You know, that's why the book of Hebrews says in chapter 4, let's just look at Hebrews 4 to find help.

Nathaniel. We need grace and mercy.

Don. Yeah. I want to get the exact language correct and not just do a poor paraphrase in the moment. Scripture says that, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Christ is a sympathetic Savior. In our worst discouragement, our worst grief, our most prolonged chronic times of darkness in our souls, Christ is with us to help us, to care for us, to sustain us, to bring them out of, to bring us out of it. And, you know, that's the whole point of the book I wrote, "Trusting God in Trying Times." It's the point that is repeated repeatedly in Martyn Lloyd-Jones', "Spiritual Depression." You know, and so we should not think in these binary black and white terms of, you know, Christian means you're joyful. If you're depressed, it means you're not a Christian. It could be as simple as, you know, when did you last get some good rest? You know, are you sure you're getting the nutrition and the rest you need? Because those things can affect it just like it did in Elijah. And so if someone came to me like that, we're going to have a very sympathetic pastoral discussion, looking at these things, looking at Scripture, and saying, you know, there's a path to restore joy. Let's not give up hope. Let's not ask questions that need not to be asked. But let's look to Christ and find in him the answers to the sorrows of your heart.

Nathaniel. Amen. He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

Don. Indeed he was and in part he went through that so that he could be a sympathetic helper, a sympathetic Savior to us. And so rather than withdrawing in fear, we draw closer to him saying, "You know what this is like. You wept on this earth. You wept over Jerusalem. You wept at the grave of Lazarus. Lord, you know what it's like to have a broken heart. And so how often the conflict, went to my Savior and breathed out my woe," one of the hymn writers say. "What a friend we have in Jesus," I think. And so we just need to realize that our Lord loves us. That's why he gave himself up for us. Our Lord loves us. That's why he keeps us. Our Lord loves us. That's why he's coming back. He's gone away to prepare a place for us, and he wants us to be with him. And so we can go to Christ with these sorrows, confident that he cares, casting all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you, 1 Peter 5, and when we have the right view of Christ, then we can know how we can approach him in our sorrows.

Nathaniel. Amen. What a fitting way to end our time tonight, and would you lead us to the throne of grace in a closing prayer?

Don. I'd be glad to. Thank you.

Father, we thank you that in your word we have everything that is necessary for life and godliness, that which would instruct us, correct us, and sanctify us. Father, we ask for the help of your Holy Spirit in all of these things. And for those that are with us, Father, perhaps hearing some of these things for the first time, perhaps, you know, new to Christ, new to the Bible, Father, would you draw them to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? For Christians that are with us, perhaps that have struggled with sorrow, with discouragement, Lord, you know I know what that's like. I pray that the comfort that you've brought to my heart over the years, you would give even more abundantly to those that are under the sound of my voice, that are struggling themselves. And for those that are standing, those that are joyful, may we give thanks to God from whom all blessings flow. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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