

**FIX
YOUR EYES
ON JESUS:
STAYING
CHRIST-CENTERED
IN A WORLD FULL OF
DISTRACTIONS**

DANIEL ADDO

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WORLD FULL OF DISTRACTIONS

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*This book is dedicated to Dr. LaDonna Osborn. You have been an inspiration to me for as long as I can remember. Your life and your words have shaped and encouraged me at crucial points in my life.
Thank you for living, writing, preaching, and loving!*

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INTRODUCTION

The book you are about to read is based on a sermon I preached at International Gospel Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma, on Sunday the 12th of June 2022. The sermon was called “*Remember Jesus Christ*” – three important words taken from Paul’s exhortation to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:8, which was my main text that morning.

After the worship service, Dr. LaDonna Osborn, who was in attendance that day said to me, “You should turn this sermon into a book.” This was not the first time she had suggested turning my sermon into a book, but on this day, I sensed that she was on to something. Not too long after she made this suggestion, one of the deacons in the church said, “I wish people in other churches could hear this.” Putting both comments together, I felt that God was telling me that the message I preached that day was for more than my local church. So as soon as I got home that day, I began transforming my sermon notes into this book.

The overwhelming passion that birthed this book is the same one that propelled me to preach the sermon in the first place: It is a passion to see God’s people fixing their eyes on the beauty of Jesus Christ. I have a burning desire to proclaim the excellency of Christ so that His people will continually be overwhelmed by His glorious beauty. I know that for some readers, speaking of the “beauty of Christ” seems extremely weird. Some of you may wonder if I am not just using overly romantic and flowery language to describe Jesus. You may be tempted to drop this book right now, fearing that you’re about to encounter nothing but sentimental mushiness. Fear not!

While I would like to claim that I am the first to speak of God’s beauty, I am only following in the footsteps of the Psalmist who said: *One thing I ask*

from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple (Psalm 27:4). David expressed his overwhelming passion to stare at God's beauty.

But in what way is God beautiful? If we cannot see Him physically, and if Jesus was described as having "nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2), how then can we speak of the beauty of the Lord? The key to answering this question is in how Peter describes beauty. Peter said,

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of *your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit*, which is of great worth in God's sight
(1 Peter 3:3-4).

Seeing the way Peter describes beauty helps us understand how the psalmist could speak of the beauty of the Lord. Peter said that true beauty is not merely outward, but inward. He speaks of the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. The word *spirit* has the sense of a person's character or attributes. Therefore, according to Peter, true beauty is not a matter of what one looks like physically, but who a person is in their character. So, when I speak about Jesus' beauty, I am not talking about anything physical. I have in mind the beauty of His character and attributes. The beauty of Jesus is seen in the portraits of His person that have been captured for us in the gospels. It is there that we see the beauty of His love, compassion, generosity, grace, justice, boldness, wisdom, power, hilarity, goodness, gentleness, patience, sacrifice, humanity, and divinity.

As we linger over what the gospels (and indeed all the scriptures) tell us about Christ, we are drawn to His person and captured by His attributes. We are moved to worship Him, emulate Him, talk about Him, and glorify Him in all things. I believe that our primary task as Christians is to keep our attention on Jesus Christ. This is the task underneath all the other things we are called to do. It is the fuel that drives missions, holiness, and love for others. To see Jesus is to be transformed into His image (2 Corinthians

3:18). So, we will never be transformed into the kind of people God has called us to be if we don't keep our attention on Jesus. This explains David's earnest desire to gaze, not merely glance, at the beauty of the Lord (Psalm 27:4). It also explains Paul's prayer that our spiritual eyes would be enlightened to know God more and understand His calling for us (Ephesians 1:17-18).

So, to state my goal in this book again, I want to make it clear that I have no other agenda than to help you see Jesus Christ and His transcendent beauty. The chapter in this book that most fulfills this goal is *Chapter 4, Refocusing on Christ*. It is in this chapter that I herald the glories of Christ's person, work, and character. But the other chapters are just as important. In chapter 1, I remind the reader of the important task of focusing on Jesus Christ. In chapters 2 and 3, I deal with the subtle distractions that often take our eyes off Jesus Christ. In the final chapter, I discuss the spiritual cost of looking away from Jesus Christ. All these chapters have the common goal of calling us to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ.

As you read, I pray you will sense the urgency of this book and how important it is for us all to obey Hebrews 12:1-2: And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith**. Amen!

Daniel Addo

CHAPTER 1: REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST?

One of the spiritual disciplines I have committed to over the past 6 years is reading through the whole bible in a year. I have found this discipline helpful for keeping the overall storyline of the Bible fresh in my mind and making sure that I don't only read my favorite Bible books. I want to make sure that I read the more tasking books like Leviticus and not just the easier ones like Mark. And so, with the help of a daily reading plan, I have made my trek through the 66 books of God's word - sometimes walking through them with great stride and at other times limping to the end of the day's reading. Either way, whether striding or limping, I have, by God's grace, read through the Bible yearly.

As I have made my way through the scriptures these past 6 years, one book that has consistently stood out to me is Paul's second epistle to his spiritual son, Timothy (what we now know as the book of Second Timothy). You might be wondering why this book has gripped my attention. Perhaps, you might say, "Aren't there more exciting books in the Bible like Exodus or Ruth? Why Second Timothy?" Well, I'm glad you asked! Second Timothy has stood out to me because, of all the authors in scripture, Paul is my favorite. And out of all the letters of Paul, Second Timothy humanizes him in a way that his other letters don't.

Anyone who has read Romans or Galatians knows that Paul is an intellectually sound man. The way he argues from the Old Testament and develops his thoughts with profound sentences shows that he had a brilliant mind. However, what is not always as clear in these books is that Paul also

had emotions. It is easy to read much of his writing and imagine him to be a man who leaned heavily on his left brain (believed to be responsible for logic) but virtually had no right brain (believed to be responsible for emotions and feelings). However, Second Timothy puts that theory to rest. It reveals a man who is as emotional as he is logical.

In Second Timothy we find Paul reminiscing on how Timothy cried when they were separated from each other and longing to be reunited with his beloved spiritual son (1:4). We find Paul desiring companionship as he urges Timothy to hurry up and come to him because only “Luke is with me” (4:11). And you can almost see Paul wiping a tear from his eyes as he says, “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me....” (4:15). What emerges as one reads Second Timothy is a picture of Paul that is more human, more relatable, needier, and more emotional than his other letters. This is what makes this book so special to me - I feel Paul.

Paul’s Last Words

But there is another, more important reason why Second Timothy has gripped my heart over the years. It is because, according to bible scholars, Second Timothy was the last letter Paul wrote before he died. At the time he wrote this letter, he was an older man, sitting in a Roman prison, sensing that his death was near. As he said in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (ESV):

I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

When Paul speaks of the time of his departure above, he is talking about his death. He used the same word “depart” to refer to his death in Philippians 1:23 when he said, “My desire is ***to depart and be with Christ***, for that is far better.” So, it is evident that as Paul wrote Second Timothy, he could sense that the time for his death was around the corner. He was already beginning to feel eternity coming close. All that lay ahead of him now was not further ministry, but a crown - his eternal reward for faithful service to

the Kingdom of God. His race was over, his fight had been won, and the curtain was closing on him. Death was near!

I don't know about you but the fact that Second Timothy was Paul's last letter gives it a special place in my heart. I think of it as his last will and testament - a summary of the things he thought were important for Timothy (and indeed you and I) to know. I like to refer to this book as a dying father's important last words to his spiritual son.

What people say before they die reveals what they think is important. That is why history has preserved the last written and spoken words of some of its most famous figures. For instance, it has been reported that the [last words of Leonardo DaVinci](#), the famous artist of the Renaissance era were, "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have." You can see in these words DaVinci's love for art and his consciousness that it be done with a level of excellence befitting God and mankind. You can tell by reading those words what the man lived for. It is no different with Paul's words in 2 Timothy. They reflect the apostle's heart and tell us what was important to him. Because they are the final written words we have from this great man, I think we ought to pay special attention to every single command he leaves Timothy.

An Important Exhortation

Death was near for Paul, but he still made time to write and encourage Timothy. As Peter wrote his second epistle in view of his impending death (2 Peter 1:14-15) so Paul wrote Second Timothy. He knew that even though he would soon be gone, Timothy would need instructions for the future. Here was a true spiritual father! Unlike Hezekiah (Isaiah 39:5- 8) Paul was not content to die and leave the future in jeopardy. He wanted to make sure Timothy and the church would be strong after his departure.

As you read Second Timothy, you will be able to see that the future of the church was heavy on Paul's mind. He gave Timothy instructions for propagating (2 Timothy 2:1-2) and protecting (2 Tim 4:1-5) the future of the faith. He left Timothy with powerful and easy-to-remember exhortations

that have helped pastors and ministers throughout history. Instructions like these:

2 Timothy 1:6 - Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you ...

2 Timothy 1:8 - Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord ...but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God

2 Timothy 1:13 - Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 1:14 - By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit [teaching] entrusted to you.

Very famously Paul said in **2 Timothy 4:2** - Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

These are just a small sample of the instructions Paul left Timothy, and they are so powerful! Each of them deserves careful consideration and much meditation. Can you imagine how much more effective our churches would be if we took these words to heart? Paul left us with a treasure trove of theology and instructions that we must not ignore.

I love all of Second Timothy for its clear instructions and important exhortations for life and ministry. But, out of all the exhortations that Paul wrote in this last letter, there is one that has always fascinated and captivated me. It is the one found in chapter 2 and verse 8. Paul said to Timothy: ***Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel...*** (2 Timothy 2:8, ESV).

I still remember the first time this text hit me a few years ago. I was a seminary student reading Second Timothy in my dorm when it jumped out of my iPad screen. It was as though I could hear someone screaming those words to me. Particularly, on that day, it was the first three words from this verse that stuck out the most: **Remember Jesus Christ**.

I found this exhortation intriguing and yet perplexing. Remember Jesus Christ? I wanted so much to keep on reading so I could check the

completion box on my bible app, but I could not. I sensed that the Holy Spirit had much to teach me from this verse, so I decided to pause and linger on it. My lingering over this verse birthed a very perplexing question - a question that burned in my heart and demanded an answer.

Remember Jesus Christ?

The question that was burning on my heart that day was this: Of all the instructions Paul gave, why did he have to remind Timothy to remember Jesus Christ? This perplexed me a lot! Remember Jesus Christ?

I mean, if Timothy was a new believer who had just come to faith, then I would understand the need for this command. A new believer may need such basic instruction to remember Jesus Christ, but surely not a seasoned minister like Timothy! I thought to myself, “A man like Timothy should not be insulted with such a basic reminder.”

By the time Paul wrote this letter, Timothy had already led churches, ordained leaders, traveled the world for missions, and witnessed great miracles (See 1 Timothy 1-2, Acts 16:1-5, Acts 20:1-12). He was a close associate of Paul and one of his most trusted allies (Philippians 2:19-20). Paul trusted him so much that he left him to oversee the churches in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1). Surely a man with these credentials shouldn't need to be told to remember Jesus Christ. So, why would Paul give Timothy this instruction?

As I thought more about this question that day, I soon realized that the answer was simple: Paul reminded Timothy to remember Jesus Christ because one of the subtle temptations that can happen in the Christian life is that **Jesus Christ, who should be the center of all we do and think, can quickly be moved to the sidelines as other things take His place in our lives.** This is true even for a seasoned minister like Timothy!

Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, Savior, and Lord can stop being in the spotlight in our lives and can be relegated to the background. Jesus Christ can be *assumed* rather than *enthroned* in our lives. We can often be like Mary and Joseph, who traveled a whole day assuming that Jesus was with them, while they had left him behind in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-46). Jesus Christ can take

the back seat in our minds as other things become front and center. We can lose sight of His grace, majesty, and splendor and become fixated on other less important pursuits. This is why Paul told Timothy to remember Jesus Christ. In the original Greek, Paul said, “Keep on remembering Jesus Christ.” This is a present continuous command to never forget Jesus Christ. Because as human beings we are prone to wander and forget, Paul reminded Timothy (and you and I) to keep on remembering Jesus Christ.

Do you realize that Paul would not tell Timothy to remember Jesus Christ if it was not somehow possible to forget Him? In the hustle and bustle of life, as we pursue jobs, work, and family, and even in the busy and important work of ministry, we can remove Jesus from the center of our lives as we focus on other things - sometimes even good things!

Focus on Jesus Christ

When Paul said “Remember Jesus Christ” I don’t think he envisaged that Timothy could completely forget about Jesus Christ. It is not as though Paul thought that if someone asked Timothy if he knew Jesus Christ, he would say, “I don’t know Him.” Paul is not so much talking about Timothy’s memory as he is talking about his focus. In this text, the word “remember” has the sense of being mindful of something or concentrating on something. Therefore, when Paul says to remember Jesus Christ, he is calling Timothy to keep his focus on Jesus Christ and to center his life and ministry on Him. This is why the Holman Christian Study Bible translates the first part of 2 Timothy 2:8 like this: ***Keep your attention on Jesus Christ*** The Contemporary English Version is very similar when it says: ***Keep your mind on Jesus Christ....*** And as usual, Eugene Peterson is so vivid when he translates 2 Timothy 2:8 in the Message Version like this - ***Fix this picture firmly in your mind: Jesus, descended from the line of David, raised from the dead. It's what you've heard from me all along.***

All three translations help to highlight Paul’s major point. He wants Timothy to focus on Jesus Christ. The primary exhortation here is to remain Christ-centered. To keep Christ and His gospel as the lens through which we view and do all things. To be Christ-centered is to be gospel-centered; that is, to live one’s life with reference to the gospel story. The gospel is the

good news about Christ's incarnation, life, death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-5). Paul is teaching us in this text that this good news is not just a historical event that happened to Jesus Christ over 2000 years ago, rather, it is also our good news. It is the good news that should shape our lives as we think about marriage, ministry, suffering, and love. Paul is calling us to find our story within the bigger story of the gospel - to build our lives on Christ and all He has done for us. He wants us not to treat Christ like the background music that plays unnoticed on an elevator, but to attune our ears to Him like a music student studying Mozart.

If you asked me to paraphrase 2 Timothy 2:8, I would do it like this: ***Be keeping Jesus Christ central in your life. Focus on the fact that He rose from the dead and descended from the line of David. This is the gospel story.*** We must not remove our gaze from Christ and the gospel, but like an archer's eyes are fixed on the target, Christ is to be our bullseye.

Again, as I have already said, Paul's major exhortation in 2 Timothy 2:8 is to focus on Jesus Christ and the gospel. And just in case you forgot, he was writing this to a minister of the gospel. Why? Because we all need a reminder to stay Christ-centered and gospel-centered in a world full of distractions and lies.

The writer of Hebrews, writing to believers and not sinners, had many similar exhortations in his epistle. The people to whom he wrote were tempted to return to Judaism and abandon Christ because of their severe persecution. So, all through his epistle, the writer kept calling them to refocus on Jesus Christ. He said:

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, ***fix your thoughts on Jesus***, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest (Hebrews 3:1, NIV).

Again, towards the end of his epistle, he said:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ***fixing our eyes on Jesus***, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he

endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV)

So, what are we to make of all this? If Paul reminded a seasoned minister to focus on Jesus Christ, and the writer of Hebrews reminded believers to do the same, then we also need this reminder. If it were not possible for us to lose our focus on Christ, we would not have so many scriptural exhortations calling us away from this great danger. But because it is always a present threat, we need to pay careful attention to this instruction. Or as the writer of Hebrews put it: We must **pay the most careful attention**, therefore, to what we have heard [the message of the gospel], so that **we do not drift away** (Hebrews 2:1, NIV). He leaves us with only two options: Pay attention or drift away. There is no middle point between these two options – we either have our eyes fixed on Jesus and the gospel or we are drifting away.

Therefore, whether you are a minister or a new Christian, whether you have been walking with Christ for a long time or are just starting your journey, the word of the Lord to you is this: Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ. As we will see in the next chapter, the distractions that remove our eyes from Christ are so many and so subtle that we cannot survive without the urgent reminder to fix our eyes on Him.

CHAPTER 2: DISPLACING JESUS CHRIST

In the last chapter, we established that we all need Paul's urgent reminder to "Remember Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 2:8). We learned that when Paul called Timothy to remember Jesus Christ, he was calling him to keep Christ central in his life and ministry. We concluded by acknowledging that there are so many subtle distractions that attempt to remove our eyes from Christ and refocus them on other less important things - even good things that fall short of the best thing, which is Christ Himself.

In this chapter, we are going to explore some of the distractions that are ever-present threats to maintaining our Christ-focus. We will do this by looking at threats that individuals face and then in the next chapter, at the threats that churches face. My aim is to expose these threats to the light of God's word so we can begin our journey toward refocusing on Jesus Christ.

Individual Threats

If I asked you to write down some of the things that are currently distracting you from Christ, I am almost sure that you will write down things like social media, phone screen time, and probably, Netflix. [The statistics](#) about how much time we as a human race spend scrolling social media and watching movies on our devices are alarming. More and more we are finding out how addictive these smartphones are and how they are affecting our ability to focus and do deep work. So, you might expect that social media would be number one on my list of individual distractions from

Christ. But as far as I am concerned, things like social media and Netflix are low-hanging fruit.

I do not mean to say that social media is not a great distraction worth conquering. What I am saying is that social media distraction is often the fruit of a deeper, more subtle, root problem that is easy to miss. To change the metaphor, social media overuse is often a symptom of a much more serious disease. For instance, our addiction to social media may hide a deeper desire for attention or an idolatrous craving for validation. Similarly, we may use social media to numb ourselves from uncomfortable emotions and insulate ourselves from the hard work of real-life relationships. Therefore, to go after social media is to pluck a few fruits while leaving the subtle, root-issues untouched.

The type of distractions I have in mind are the more subtle and acceptable ones that are easy to miss and therefore more dangerous. Anyone can run from a raging fire, but because carbon monoxide is odorless, tasteless, and colorless, it kills people without them even knowing. I want to deal with some of the carbon-monoxide gases that may be killing your Christ-focus. What is about to follow is not an exhaustive list of all the subtle things that distract us from Christ. I am only going to deal with three major things that displace Jesus Christ in an individual's life.

Theology

First, displacing Jesus Christ can happen in an individual's life when theology becomes more central than Him. You might be confused at this point. You're probably saying to yourself, "Isn't theology the study of God?" Yes, it is! But even though theology is supposed to be the study of God, it can very quickly become a god in itself. How do I know this? Because I have seen it happen in my own life.

I remember a time in my life when I was more interested in what some great theologian had said about Jesus Christ than in Jesus Christ Himself. I was always talking about Calvin, Luther, and Augustine to the point that these dead men became more important in my eyes than the risen Christ. I was animated by big theological concepts like justification, sanctification, glorification, and all the other fancy theological concepts. But somehow,

amid all these big words, I forgot about Jesus Christ. He was no longer central in my life; He was no longer my heart's treasure. Christ became like a distant childhood friend to whom I hadn't spoken in a long time. The study of old books had become more important to me than the One who died for my sins.

I am sure you can appreciate how subtle this must have been for me. It is so easy to convince yourself that you love Jesus Christ when you're always reading Christian literature. But, in my case, all the books I was reading and the big theological concepts I was studying, were disconnected from the person of Christ. For instance, rather than celebrating that God had declared me righteous through the death of Jesus Christ, I was content to understand the difference between the catholic view of justification and the Protestant view. As important as it may be to know that difference, knowing it did not lead me to worship and adore Jesus Christ.

So, even though I was learning a lot, it was the kind of knowledge that puffs up and bullies others, not the humbling knowledge of being in the presence of Jesus Christ (Compare 1 Corinthians 8:1 with Revelation 1:17-18). I became a theology thug - always ready to argue my position and prove that I had read more books than the average Christian. The proof that Christ had been displaced by theology was in the pudding of my pride and arrogance. My head was big, but my heart was small and loveless because knowledge had puffed me up (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Here is a warning for those of us who preach, study wide, and do theology: We must be careful that theology leads us to Jesus, and not away from Him. After all, Paul speaks of some who are always learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:7). There is always a danger that we can become more interested in knowledge itself, than in knowing Christ and being transformed by Him. We can be more infatuated by what we know than the God who knew us before the foundations of this world.

I think it is important to say that theology itself is not the problem. It is when theology is disconnected from Christ that it becomes a problem. When we find ourselves being more excited by concepts than the Person of Jesus Christ, we know we are in trouble. When ideas intrigue us more than our relationship with Christ, we know He has been displaced. When we lose

a sense of His reality and are more excited about reading new books than prayer, we know there is an issue. When we bully and divide other believers over secondary theological differences, we know we are in trouble (See 1 Corinthians 8:9-13).

As we study theology, we must remember that Jesus Christ is not a concept to be learned but a Person to be known. He is to be loved, enjoyed, listened to, and spoken to in prayer. He is not merely to be dissected and analyzed like a specimen in a lab. All our study of the Bible, commentaries, dictionaries, and resources must have this one goal - to bring us into deeper delight, love, and obedience to Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:10-14, John 5:39-40). This is the purpose of all true study! Deep study is meant to lead to deep worship. Or to put it differently (for theology nerds like me): The goal of theology is doxology!

Paul, the apostle, serves as a perfect example of how to allow theology to bring us to Jesus. In Ephesians 1, he speaks of weighty doctrines like election, predestination, adoption, redemption, and consummation. But he does all this in the context of prayer. Paul teaches us to pray about what we study. He shows us that it is not enough to know what justification means but to also say, "I praise you Father for justifying me and declaring me righteous through the death of Your Son. Thank You for giving me His perfect record." When our study has thus led us to pray, we prove that God is not just a concept, but a real Person.

Religion

Another subtle way that Jesus Christ can be displaced in an individual's life is through empty religion. I have always found Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:5 to be alarming. Paul speaks of those who ***have the appearance of godliness but deny its power***. In other words, on the outside, they seem pious and religious. They seem respectable, and dutiful, and may even look holy, but Paul says it is only external. Speaking of these same people, Paul says they are "heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:2-3). What this means

is that a person can be religious while also being heartless, proud, brutal, and reckless!

How can this be? Paul is clear: **they have the appearance of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5)**. True godliness requires power - a power that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. But devoid of this power, people can still play church. Religion is a powerful counterfeit for a true relationship with Jesus Christ. As surely as a good actor can make you believe the part he's playing, empty religion can look like a real relationship with Christ. The big problem is that whereas true faith in Jesus works from the inside out, religion is focused on external activity without internal reality. (See Matthew 23:25-28).

Here is how religion works: A person may come to church, do their devotions, and keep all the rules diligently, but they do these things just so they can say, "I have done it!" In other words, rather than responding to Jesus through our obedience and doing our devotions to engage with Him, we can turn these activities into burdensome chores (See Isaiah 43:22-24, ESV). They become things we perform out of duty and ritual with no reference to Jesus at all. We forget that the purpose of religious activities like bible study and prayer is knowing Jesus and communicating with Him, and so we mindlessly do these activities just to get them out of the way - just to say, "I did it, I performed my duty!"

I have learned through my own experience and the experience of other Christians that there is a sense in which we can use religious activities to avoid Jesus. It happens when we treat Him like a nagging boss whose trouble we can avoid if we just do our tasks for the day. Children know that most times if they can just do their chores, then their parents will leave them alone. So, the child cleans his room and makes his bed, not because he loves his mom or delights in her, but simply because he wants her to leave him alone to enjoy his Xbox all day. This is the way many Christians do religious activities. They think, "If I just give Jesus what He wants, then he'll leave me alone. So, I'll pray in the morning and do my devotions and give him 2 hours on Sunday, so that he won't bother me the rest of my time." It is very possible to read the bible just to get Jesus off your back rather than to get His word into your heart. Rather than viewing Jesus as a lover to be enjoyed, religion views Him as a taskmaster to be appeased.

This is the religious mindset: It focuses on external activities and neglects true relationship with Jesus.

This religious mindset is the reason why people can be constant in church and dutiful in spiritual disciplines and still live hellish lives. It is the reason why the unbelieving Pharisees were fastidious in prayer and always in the temple but still oppressed widows (Mark 12:40). Their religion was only skin deep; they were concerned about ceremonial washings, traditions, and rituals, but it was devoid of true love for God and people (Matthew 15:1-6). According to Jesus, “They worship with their lips but their hearts are far away” (Matthew 15:8). In other words, their worship was external and outward, but devoid of true love for God. Their hearts remained untouched and unchanged because religion without Christ is powerless!

The Subtleties Of Religion

Religion is so subtle because even though it does all the right things, it does them for the wrong reasons. It prays to be seen by others, gives to be praised by others, and fasts to be known as disciplined (Matthew 23:5-7, Matthew 6:1-4). Like the elder brother of the prodigal son, religion can obey to control God. It says, “God, I have been good and kept all the rules, so you owe me a good life” (See Luke 15:29). Religion is transactional, not relational. It attempts to put God in a person’s debt. It is our human attempt to control God through our moral effort. Furthermore, religion feeds our human pride because it deceives us into placing ultimate confidence in our activities and our ability to do them, rather than in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us (Philippians 3:1-10, Luke 18:9-14). Indeed, religion is a powerful counterfeit for a true relationship with Jesus. It subtly displaces Christ.

The gospel, on the other hand, is all about a relationship with Jesus. It tells us that Jesus Christ has done everything required for us to be accepted by God (Romans 3:20-24). But one might ask, “If it is true that Jesus has done everything required for our acceptance, then why pray, give, or study scripture? It’s simple: we do all these things not to earn God’s attention but to thank Him for His love displayed for us on Christ’s cross (1 John 4:10-11,19). We study the bible to know more about the One who saved us. We

pray to engage Jesus Christ and allow Him to change us daily. We stop trying to avoid Him like a horrible boss and quit viewing our religious activities as chores; rather, we long to be with Him, praying without ceasing and meditating on Him throughout the day (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We know we can offer Him nothing of saving value, so we give Him everything as a thank you for His everlasting love. This is the gospel mindset.

Symptoms Of A Religious Mindset

How can a person know if religion has displaced Christ in their lives? I'll give you three signs:

1. Your practice of religious activities is not challenging or changing you. In other words, you have the appearance of godliness, but it is devoid of power. It is simply external and outward, but no inner transformation (see 2 Timothy 3:1-5). Sinful habit patterns remain unchallenged and unaddressed by your faith in God (James 2:14-17).

2. Religious activities are an end in themselves, not a means of engaging Jesus. In other words, prayer has become about prayer itself rather than talking to Jesus, and bible study is about bible study rather than hearing from Jesus, and coming to church is about coming to the church rather than meeting with Jesus. You have a complete-the-chores approach to religious activities (See John 5:39).

3. You have relegated Jesus to the religious parts of your life but keep him out of other areas. In other words, you think Jesus is for Sunday morning at church but not Tuesday evening at a work dinner. You do not bring Him into your entire life and pursuits. You merely seek to appease Him with religious activities while living the rest of your life as you please (See Romans 12:1-2). But if you are a Christian, Jesus is not the religious part of your life; He is your life (Col 3:4). Everything we do, we do *Coram Deo* – a Latin phrase that means “in the presence of God.” We cannot live with the mindset that says, “What happens at church, stays at church.” No, what happens at church on Sunday is meant to shape the rest of our lives and center us on Jesus.

Again, Paul serves as a perfect example of how to make sure our religious activities don't displace Christ. In Philippians 3:1-14, he curated an impressive list of all the religious advantages he had acquired throughout his life (verses 5-6). But then as he reflected on his list (including circumcision, diligent study and obedience to the law, and religious zeal), he concluded that none of these things could save him from the condemnation of hell (verses 7-8). More than that, he referred to the things on his list as dung! Paul reminded himself that only the righteousness of Jesus, given as a gift to those who trust in Him, can save anyone (verse 9). Based on this, Paul made it his goal to know Christ (v.10) – that is to experience His power and join Him in a life of sacrifice for others. Paul was not doing this to earn God's favor, but because, in his words, "Christ Jesus took hold of me" (verse 12). In other words, all that Paul did was his response to the One who saved and called him by grace. A constant reflection on the grace of the gospel will keep us from empty religion and keep our hearts warm towards Jesus.

Idols

The third threat to an individual's Christ-focus is the reality of idols. Your idol is anything apart from Christ upon which you are building your security, finding tranquillity, and basing your identity. In the ancient world, idols were literal images that people worshipped, believing them to provide fertility, success, security, and prosperity. Modern people often look at such ancient expressions of worship and conclude that they are barbaric and beneath them. However, we are not always aware that idol worship happens in the 21st century. We worship the ancient idols in a more sophisticated way.

What do I mean? Well, you may not have an idol of Aphrodite (the ancient Greek goddess of love) under your bed. But if love and romance are the things that make you feel like somebody - the things that give you a sense of value and worth - then you just might have made love and romance idols in your life. You probably don't bow to the statue of Baal (the ancient Canaanite god of fertility) but if you are obsessed with money, prosperity, and success, then you might be worshipping Baal without a statue.

This is the line of thinking that allowed Paul to say these words to the Colossian church: *greed...is idolatry (3:5, NIV)*. Paul was writing to Christians who had repudiated physical idol worship, but he wanted them to know that a person could still practice idolatry without bowing to a physical idol. When he says greed is idolatry, he means that a person can so build their life on material possessions that it becomes their god. Such a person will always be thinking about, chasing, and fixating on material possessions. They will feel secure when they have money and will be devastated (not just sad) if they lose it. Their whole lives will be centered on getting things, even to the neglect of family, rest, and integrity. They will take the devotion that belongs to Christ and place it on money. In one word, they *worship* money.

Paul equated greed with idolatry in Colossi, but he could have picked so many other things. As John Calvin once said, “The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.” In other words, we are always attaching our hearts to something other than God to give us significance, value, and worth. Many times, we do this not necessarily with bad things, but with good things. As Tim Keller has said, “An idol is a good thing that we turn into a God-thing.”

For some people, their idol is beauty and youth – both good things! But when beauty and youth become God-things, countless hours are spent in the gym toning up and countless dollars spent on products meant to keep them looking young. The time and money that are to be devoted to God and others become excessively spent on appearance. For a person with a beauty idol, a passing mention of their weight makes them not just sad, but irate. We always get furious when anyone messes with our idols (Acts 19:23-31). Other people have made an idol out of comfort and so refuse to pick up their cross and follow Jesus in the path of sacrifice and persecution. Such people always run away from difficulty and make decisions based on what’s comfortable, instead of what is honorable and right. A person with a comfort idol will hardly ever choose to be inconvenienced for others and will therefore miss opportunities to show love.

One thing we must realize is this: Our idols are not harmless; they always take our attention from Jesus and are spiritually malignant. As Jesus Himself said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one

and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24). It is either love for Jesus will trump idolatry or idolatry will trump love for Jesus. We cannot love Jesus and our idols.

The subtle thing about idolatry is that we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are serving Jesus, while we are merely using Jesus to get our idols. We can come to Jesus not because we have seen His inherent worth and beauty, but because we want Him to give us other things. It is like a man who marries a rich heiress, not out of love for her but with hopes of getting his hands on her dad’s money. This is how many people approach Jesus. They want what Jesus can do for them without really wanting Him. They make Him the means to getting the things they really want in life. They pray that He would wield His awesome power towards giving them all their selfish desires (James 4:2-3) but have no desire to know Him in truth. Jesus becomes nothing more than Aladdin’s genie in the bottle - a super powerful being that exists to meet my needs and make me comfortable. So, while the scriptures present Christ as the pearl of great price which, when a man finds it, he sells all he owns to get it, we can often make Christ nothing more than the means of getting other things (Matthew 13:45-46). Rather than Jesus being our heart's treasure we use Him to get the things we truly treasure like fame, wealth, power, success, and romance.

This is one of the problems with the so-called “prosperity gospel.” In a bid to correct the extremes of the poverty gospel, which equated poverty with spiritual maturity, the prosperity gospel has now gone to the extreme of promising wealth and prosperity to those who put their faith in Jesus. The result is that countless souls have come to Christ, not for the power of His saving work but the hope of material prosperity. Many of such converts have since deconstructed their faith and walked away from Jesus because, after a while of asking Genie-Jesus for stuff and not getting it, they have concluded that Christianity is a lie. Unprepared for the reality of suffering in the Christian life, they are shocked when family members die or when life gets hard. When suffering robs them of life’s goodies, it erodes their faith in the process. The real problem is they never came for Jesus, they came for His goodies. They have not rejected the true Christ but a distorted view of Him. Genie Jesus is not the true Jesus!

Now, don't get me wrong! I am not saying that Jesus doesn't answer prayer or delight to give us good gifts (See Matthew 7:7-11). Jesus does give us good gifts when we ask and generously provides for our needs. It is not wrong for those who are in a relationship with Jesus to ask Him for things. If God is truly our Father, then it's all right to ask Him for the things we need. Yet, there is a huge difference between asking God for things and using God to get stuff. In the first instance, I have a no-strings-attached relationship with Jesus because He is my treasure. If He doesn't give me what I want when I want it, I can trust Him because I know He has a plan and loves me. I am satisfied in Him, and my joy is not in the stuff He gives. In the second instance, there are multiple strings attached, so I will worship Jesus only if the goodies abound. He is not my treasure; the stuff He can give me are my true delight. This is the difference between asking and using Jesus.

When Christ is my treasure then my joy is in Him; whether I have all the money or fame I desire is inconsequential to my joy and value. Because Christ is my treasure, my life is always secure no matter what happens to my reputation or bank account. These things may fluctuate and are subject to change, but nothing can separate me from Christ's love... and because of this, I am always secure (Romans 8:35-39). When Christ is my treasure, the acquisition of possessions makes me grateful without making me proud, and their loss makes me sad without completely devastating me. When we make Christ our treasure, we receive the freedom to enjoy His good gifts without them exerting undue control over our lives (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19). Christ frees us to have money without it having us and to enjoy success without it puffing us up – this is true freedom!

So, just to be extra clear, let me say this again: Jesus is generous and benevolent and loves to give good things in response to our prayer. However, the greatest gift on offer is the gift of Himself. The truth is, our lives would be miserable if Christ gave us all the things we want, without giving us Himself. Nothing in this world can ever satisfy the deep longing of the human soul and our hearts will be restless if Christ does not satisfy us with His love (Psalm 90:14). Jesus Christ is the all-satisfying fountain of living water that brings us true fulfillment.

The Bread Of Life

There was one time in scripture when Jesus miraculously provided bread for a crowd of Jewish people by the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1-15). The next day, after eating their fill of bread, the people chased after Jesus (John 6:24). The NIV says that they “went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.” Externally, their search for Jesus seemed admirable. They seemed like people who were hungry for Him and who wanted to be with Him. Yet when they found Jesus, He had this to say to them:

“I tell you the truth, you want to be with me *because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. But don't be so concerned about perishable things like food.* Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of his approval” (John 6:26-27, NLT).

According to Jesus, they chased after Him not to be with Him, but to get some more bread! If these people had truly understood the miraculous signs Jesus was performing, including the miracle of multiplying bread, they would have come to Him for Him! They would have recognized that He was the long-awaited Savior and Messiah, not merely a guy who can give them free lunch. But because all they wanted was bread, they missed the reality that their God was standing right in front of them in human flesh!

Jesus counseled these people not to work for bread that perishes; that is, bread that will end in the sewers. He told them to work for the bread that will last to eternity; that is the bread that provides eternal salvation, satisfaction, and nourishment. After He described this eternal bread, the people requested of Jesus, “Sir, give us this bread always” (John 6:34). Thinking that Jesus would point them elsewhere to get this eternal bread, they were shocked when He said: **“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35).**

Jesus, Himself is the bread of life that lasts unto eternity. He is the one who provides true forgiveness, peace, joy, love, security, and hope. He does not merely give us the bread of life, but He is the bread of life. To come to Him by faith is to find in Him everything we will ever need in life. Riches may

fade and beauty is fleeting, but a heart nourished on Jesus will be forever satisfied. Jesus is our true treasure!

The Symptom Of Idolatry

How can a person know if their idols have displaced Jesus Christ? I'll give you just one test.

If your prayers sound just like a reading of your Amazon shopping cart, then Christ may just be your genie. Do your prayers mix adoration with supplication? Do you admire Jesus for who He is in Himself and for His attributes? Is there praise and thanksgiving in your prayer life? Or is your prayer simply, "Give me this or that?" Do you skip "hallowed be your name" and go straight to "give us this day"? Do you tend to pray only when you're in trouble or need something? If your answer is yes, then you may be using Jesus just to get stuff. A prayer life that consists only of our needs may reveal a heart that treasures things above Christ.

You will know that Christ is your treasure when you can pray with the psalmist:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psalms 73:25-26).

May it be so Lord, Jesus. May it be so!

The Cure For Idolatry

I know of no other cure for our idolatry than prayer. Prayer is feasting on God's love and filling our hearts with a sense of His presence. By faith, we enjoy *union* with Jesus once and for all, but through prayer, we enjoy a deep and abiding *communion* with Him that fills us. The reason we chase idols in the first place is that we are trying to fill the void in our souls with created things that promise satisfaction. But if in prayer we fill our souls with God's love, we find that we are not as needy. Filled with the love of the Giver, we place His gifts in their proper place. Satisfied by His Bread,

we can nibble on life's goods without becoming addicted to them. The following prayer by Appleton is a good place to begin displacing idols from your heart:

O God, I know that if I do not love You with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul and with all my strength, I shall love something else with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. Grant that putting You first in all my lovings I may be liberated from all lesser loves and loyalties, and have You as my first love, my chief good and my final joy.

The Father loves to answer such prayers!

CHAPTER 3: DISPLACING JESUS IN HIS CHURCH

In the last chapter, we saw three subtle things that displace Jesus in an individual's life including theology, religion, and idols. I am sure that there are so many other things we could have explored. But those three will have to suffice for this book. I encourage you to consider other things that may be displacing Jesus in your life. I recommend Tim Keller's book, *Counterfeit Gods* because it has helped me identify my idols and return my hope of satisfaction to Christ alone.

In this chapter, we are going to explore some things that displace Jesus in His Church. Just like with individual threats to maintaining Christ-focus, we will keep our list to just three things: Charismatic Leaders, Charismatic gifts, and a Distorted Message.

Charismatic Leaders

Perhaps nothing poses more threats to a church's Christ-focus like a charismatic leader who becomes idolized. A shift has taken place in our churches over the past few decades – this shift has been happening for many years now but with social media and increasing influence from our celebrity-crazed culture, it has risen to new levels. What is the shift I am talking about? It is a shift in how we view the role of pastors and leaders within the church.

In scripture, the metaphor used to describe pastors and leaders is that of a shepherd (John 21:15-17, 1 Peter 5:1-4). This was one of Jesus' favorite

ways of talking about leaders. However, today, pastors function more like CEOs and celebrities than shepherds. The predominant ministry framework in our culture today has been heavily influenced by celebrity culture. The result is that whereas Christ called pastors to be shepherds to the sheep, we (and I speak as a pastor myself) can often view ourselves more as celebrities to our fans. We can become so concerned about loyalty to our vision, our brand, and our ministry, that we forget that the church does not belong to us (Acts 20:28).

This brings me to another metaphor scripture uses for church leaders. It refers to us (again I speak as a pastor myself) as the best man of the Bridegroom, Christ (John 3:29). On my wedding day, I would have been appalled if my best man spent the day trying to outdo me and gain the attention of my bride. His job on that day was to make me prominent and stay in the background. But in our churches today, there is such a desire for the loyalty of Christ's bride coming from the pulpit that it can only be described as spiritual adultery. The personal, intimate picture of a shepherd who cares for the sheep has been replaced by the unreachable celebrity whom no one can touch (See Matthew 19:13-15).

As I said earlier, this is not necessarily a new phenomenon. It goes back as far as bible times. It was one of the major issues that Paul had to deal with in Corinth. Members of the Corinthian church were so infatuated with the various charismatic leaders that came to their church, and so they began to form factions around these leaders. Paul said, "Each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:12). In other words, rather than identifying with Christ the Redeemer, there were those who had come to see themselves as "Paulites" – they were the exclusive and loyal followers of Paul. Others were "Cephasites" - those who were ardent fans of Peter. Still others followed Apollos and magnified Him as the sole voice of Christ in the church. The situation in Corinth shows us that many times, church leaders are not necessarily responsible for being idolized. Followers can sometimes be so blessed by a pastor's ministry that they elevate him to a position of greatness that borders on idolatry.

Paul was exasperated by the situation in Corinth and had to ask them some hard questions: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you

baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Corinthians 1:13). It is instructive that when asking these questions, Paul used his name. He was saying, “Those of you following me in an unhealthy, idolatrous way seem to have forgotten that I didn’t suffer and die for your sins. I am not the Bridegroom!”

3 Diagnostic Questions

The three questions Paul asked above, help us know when we are idolizing a certain leader or when we are being idolized as leaders:

First, he asked, “**Is Christ divided?**” In other words, do you find yourself unduly dividing from other genuine Christians because they do not share your admiration for a particular pastor or leader? Do you see members of other churches as fellow believers even though they are not from your denomination? Can you listen to other preachers apart from your pastor and benefit from them? Or is there just one pastor whom you believe to be the only true teacher? As a pastor, do you tell the people under your care to exclusively listen to you? Do you present your church as the only true church? Can you affirm what God is doing in other churches and denominations? Unduly dividing from other believers out of loyalty to a pastor signals idolatry!

Second, Paul asked, “**Was Paul crucified for you?**” In other words, is Paul your Savior? Have you assigned Savior-like status to your pastor or teacher? I have met Christians in Nigeria who pray to the God of their pastor. I want to suggest that this is idolatry. The only One who grants us access to God is Jesus Christ and it is in His name alone that we pray. Yes, I know that Elisha in his frustration said, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” (2 Kings 2:14) But this is a *descriptive* verse about what one man said in a crisis and not an *instructive* verse about how to pray. The New Testament instructs us to pray in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14, 16:23-26). I feel the need to ask like Paul: Was your pastor crucified for you? Is he the Son of God and your mediator before God? No, for there is only one mediator between God and humanity – Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). Any thought that God hears your prayers or smiles on you with special favor because you are identified with a particular pastor or ministry, is idolatry.

God hears and loves us because we are united with His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Every tradition has its heroes. My reformed friends have great respect for John Piper, John MacArthur, and Tim Keller. My more charismatic friends venerate people like Kenneth Hagin Sr, T.L Osborn, and Oral Roberts. There is nothing wrong with honoring the gifts that God has given to the church. But we must be careful not to cross the line from honor to idolatry. We can sneer at Catholics who pray to Mary all we want, but we Protestants also have our idolatrous tendencies – they are just more insidious than blatantly praying to Mary. This is what we all must remember: Worship belongs to Christ alone! If you ever find yourself talking more about your church, pastor, or teacher than about Jesus, you may have an idolatry problem.

Third, Paul asked, **“Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”** To understand this, we need to know that baptism was a way of defining one’s identity. When a person got baptized in the name of Christ, they were saying that they publicly identified with Him and His death, burial, and resurrection. To be baptized in the name of Christ is to be united with Him and define oneself with reference to Him. It is to say, “I am one with Christ and what is true of Him is true of me.” It is like wearing a badge with the words “I belong to Christ” on it.

When Paul asked if the Corinthians were baptized in his name, he was showing us that it is possible to gain our sense of identity from our pastors. We come to feel that we are somebody because our pastor or church is successful. Rather than identifying with the work of Christ, we identify more with the work of our charismatic leader, such that if our church is growing, we feel valuable. On the other hand, we find it hard to be part of smaller, “less-successful” churches because they do not make us feel valuable. We can become so baptized in the name of a leader that we find our sense of importance through our relationship with the said leader, rather than in Christ alone. This is why revelations of the secret sins of leaders in recent times have shaken the faith of many. Rather than trusting the spotless Christ alone, we have become hero worshippers. This is always a recipe for disaster.

Paul wants us to find identity in Christ alone and not in any charismatic leader. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with following a charismatic, godly, and exemplary leader in the church. But as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” In other words, Christ remains the goal and ultimate example for our faith, not our charismatic leaders. We must not displace the Bridegroom!

Can you fathom that your leader is a sinner saved by grace like everyone else? Can you believe that your pastor is not more valuable than you in God’s eyes even though he or she has functional authority over you in the church? Can you fathom that he or she may be wrong about certain beliefs and may still be working through sinful patterns in his or her life? Can you fathom that your leader needs your prayers just as much as you need his? These questions may seem silly to some, but they are necessary. We need to see Christian leaders correctly so we can get them off the pedestal that belongs to Christ alone. This, incidentally, brings more freedom to leaders in the church. Being placed on a pedestal does not allow leaders to be vulnerable and honest when they need help. Many leaders have had to play superhero for so long that they are burning out and running on empty. Until we remember that they are only humans, we will set our leaders up for failure.

I am aware that in some settings, leaders have the opposite problem, which is a lack of honor and respect from their congregants. This is as much a terrible sin as the sin of idolizing leaders. Let us heed the exhortation of Paul: ***We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).*** The bible calls us to honor our leaders, but not idolize them.

Another thing to note is that the issues I have discussed in this section are not exclusive to big and “successful” churches or pastors. It has become popular in our day to take digs at megachurches as though they are inherently evil. But the kind of idolatry I am describing can occur in small churches too. It is not so much the size of the church as it is its culture and the motive of its leaders.

Guarding Against Idolatry

So, how can we guard against the idolatry of leaders or against being idolized as leaders? John the Baptist is so helpful in this regard. When some people came to tell him that Jesus' ministry was surpassing his, John said the following:

*You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' **The bride belongs to the bridegroom.** The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. **He must become greater; I must become less.**' (John 3:28-30)*

Leaders must learn how to say "I am not the Messiah" in their preaching, disposition, and the culture they create around themselves. Preaching must be thoroughly Christ-Centered and have the great reformation goal of bringing glory to God. Leaders should also keep a pulse on the church culture to ensure that admiration hasn't turned to idolatry. It is inevitable in a church that some will tend towards idolatry, but if the general culture does not promote it, such behaviors die down (See 1 Corinthians 3:1-7). As a leader, vulnerability about your humanity and weaknesses always helps people remember you are just like them; we must beware of presenting ourselves as super-human or as existing above the struggles of life (See Acts 14:8-15, 2 Corinthians 12:6-10). Furthermore, celebrating the Big-C Church and not just your church, fosters unity in the body of Christ and helps your church members identify with God's work in other places.

If you are a member of a church, use the three diagnostic questions Paul asked in 1 Corinthians 1:13 (discussed above) to test yourself. If you see idolatrous tendencies in your heart, ask God to help you return your gaze to His Son, Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God loves to answer this prayer!

Charismatic Gifts

Charismatic leaders pose a threat to Christ-focus in every denomination and tribe within the church. But the next distraction we are about to discuss is

probably a threat only among people in my tribe - those who are from Pentecostal/charismatic and continuationist denominations.

There are those within the body of Christ who believe that the miraculous and revelatory gifts of the Spirit like prophesy, tongues, and healings ceased to be in operation after the completion of the canon of scripture or the death of the last apostle. We call these kinds of Christians, *Cessationists*. They do not actively seek miracles or healings and do not believe that God speaks to people today outside scripture. They are cessationists because they believe the miraculous and revelatory gifts have ceased.

On the other hand, are *Continuationists*, who believe that all the gifts of the Spirit continue to be in operation today. Such Christians actively seek miracles, signs, and wonders. It is not uncommon to hear such believers saying, "God told me this or that." While continuationists admit that spiritual gifts like teaching and administration have continued since apostolic times, they also believe that the more revelatory and miraculous gifts have never ceased throughout church history.

I am going to come clean and say that based on my reading of scripture, I see no proof for the cessationist position. In other words, I believe that God continues to heal, speak, and perform mighty miracles in our day. I love my charismatic and continuationist brothers and sisters, and I enjoy the way we take Paul seriously when he calls us to earnestly desire spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31 and 14:1). I love knowing that when I am sick, I have devoted brothers and sisters who actively believe for my healing and pray boldly for it. I love receiving personal encouraging words that are just right for my situation, and I enjoy speaking in tongues during my prayer time. I love being charismatic!

Yet even as there is much to admire within the charismatic church, there is a subtle danger that I have observed within my tribe: **We tend to shift our emphasis from Jesus Christ Himself to the gifts of the Spirit as an end in themselves.** It should be obvious at this point that I am not against the practice of the gifts. What I am against is their elevation to a place where they outshine and displace Jesus Christ and the gospel. Miraculous signs and wonders are supposed to confirm the message of Christ, not replace it. (Hebrews 2:1-4, Acts 14:3, Matthew 12:38-41).

There can often be a lopsided emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit that makes them the ultimate pursuit while neglecting holiness, character transformation, and a disciplined walk with Jesus. I have met too many charismatic believers who have no time for careful Bible study but are constantly going on and on about a prophetic word they received years ago. I have observed a subtle anti-intellectualism that disguises itself as spirituality. Many refuse to study and do careful theology but thrive on experiences, sensations, and subjective feelings. As a result, many are gullible to lying spirits, false doctrines, and false prophets who claim to speak for the Lord. Too many in charismatic settings are caught up in sinful habits which they ignore because they are convinced, by their ability to see visions and dreams, that their souls are healthy. In other words, too many in my tribe judge their spiritual maturity by giftedness rather than character. We have made spiritual gifts the sole measure of maturity and spiritual reality.

I think we charismatics need a reminder about what the Spirit's primary assignment is. When introducing the Spirit to His disciples, Jesus said:

John 15:26

“When the Advocate [Spirit] comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

John 16:13-14

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

So, twice, in a short period, we see Jesus saying that the primary ministry of the Spirit is to testify about Him and glorify Him! Therefore, the Spirit's work in the Church is to keep Christ the star - to keep Him central in our eyes and keep Him our focus. In other words, the way to know that the Spirit of God is alive in a church is that Jesus remains the focus. Dane Ortlund states it clearly in his book, *Deeper*: ***“The third person [of the Trinity] puts the second person in the foreground. The Spirit's animating***

impulse is not a raw, faceless power in the life of the Christian. The Spirit ignites our contemplation of Jesus Christ.”

But as I have already said, there can be a lopsided emphasis on the Spirit that focuses on the gifts above Jesus Himself. This is what happened in the church in Corinth - they became more gifts centered than Christ-centered. And because the gifts were an end in themselves, they caused competition and strife in Corinth. This is because whenever we remove Jesus Christ from the center, gifts become an occasion for pride and status, rather than service and unity (1 Corinthians 12:7, 12-21). Without a focus on Jesus Christ, the gifts lose their true purpose.

Charismatic Pride

One of the ways that an unhealthy focus on the gifts of the Spirit manifests itself is through what I like to call *Charismatic Pride*. It is the attitude that says, “Those who don’t have ecstatic visions, manifestations, and dreams are not truly Christians or are sub-Christian.” I have had conversations with some Pentecostals who say things like, “A person who does not speak in tongues does not have the Spirit of God.” Wow! What a statement. The reality is that everyone who has put their faith in Jesus has received His Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

We must beware of making our ecstatic experiences the measure of authentic spirituality. This was the attitude of the false teachers in Colossae. Paul had to warn this church:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the *worship of angels disqualify you*. Such a person also goes into great detail about *what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind*. They have lost connection with the head [Christ], from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow (Col 2:18-19).

These false teachers were bullying the believers in Colossae because they hadn’t seen angelic visions and dreams. They disqualified them and said they hadn’t come to fullness because they weren’t having ecstatic spiritual encounters. They said, “Yes, you’re in Christ. But you’re incomplete if you

haven't gotten our secret knowledge which grants you access to supernatural visions and dreams." Paul wanted to clear this up and he did it in the strongest terms possible:

*For in Christ all the **fullness** of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to **fullness**. He is the head over every power and authority. Colossians 2:9-10*

Notice the repetition of the word "fullness". Paul wanted to make it clear that when a person puts their faith in Christ they have come into spiritual completion! Christ is all in all! The English Standard Version translates Colossians 2:10 like this: ***You have been filled in him [Christ]***. The Greek word for filled is ***Pleroo*** and it means to fill to the top so that nothing is wanting. Being in Christ by faith - not seeing angels or having ecstatic visions- is the measure of spiritual fullness.

I am not suggesting that there is no room for Christian growth. There is! However, growth and maturity are about going deeper into Christ – that is, growing in our understanding and application of His work for us and our responsibility to Him. Growth is not measured by how many angels we have seen or how many visions we have received. Listen to Paul again:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, **continue to live your lives in him**, rooted and built up **in him**, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world **rather than on Christ** (Colossians 2:6-8).

Paul couldn't be clearer. When a person is in Christ, they have come to spiritual fullness. Maturity is defined as continuing to live in Christ and to be built up in Him. While seeing angels and having visions of Old Testament Prophets may be great, our focus in all things is to be Christ. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, Christ is greater than angels (Hebrews 1:3-14) and all the Old Testament prophets (Hebrews 3:1-6). Therefore, to make Christians feel inferior in their faith because they haven't seen angels or had encounters with prophet Isaiah in heaven is to elevate experiences above Christ.

My fellow charismatics, even as we long for people to experience the genuine supernatural power of God, let us beware that we don't do it with a prideful attitude or in a way that discounts their genuine faith in Christ. In our great appreciation for the supernatural, let us not make an idol of it. Beware of saying things like, "Those Presbyterians are just cold and lifeless. They don't speak in tongues." If Christ lives in anyone, they are alive to God!

Paul And The Third Heaven

Am I saying that there is something wrong with having visions and dreams? Is there a problem with having supernatural encounters or seeking them? Not necessarily. Paul, himself, recounted an experience he had when he was caught up in the third heaven. So, he obviously was not against supernatural encounters. But guess what didn't happen after his supernatural experience: Paul didn't start a new movement called "The Third Heavens Assembly" where all the time was devoted to talking about visions and dreams. Rather, he said that the things he saw were inexpressible and that he was not permitted to talk about them (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Although Paul went to the third heaven, his message remained Christ and Christ alone.

In the same letter where he reluctantly spoke about his third heaven vision, Paul said:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised **you to one husband, to Christ**, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow **be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ**. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:2-4)

Paul's message always remained Christ and Him crucified. If we find that our preaching and teaching have strayed from this focus, then we are in trouble. It is the great healing evangelist T.L. Osborn that said, "The way we

judge all true manifestations of the Spirit is that they point to Jesus.” May we heed these words in our day. Amen.

A Distorted Message

The third way that Christ is displaced in His church is through a distorted message. The primary message of the church is the gospel. Remember the text with which we began this book in chapter 1? It was 2 Timothy 2:8, which says: Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. ***This is my gospel.*** As we pointed out earlier, to remember Jesus Christ means to keep Him central and to do this we must keep the gospel message central. To be Christ-centered is to be gospel-centered since the gospel is a retelling of His story!

You might be asking, “What makes up the gospel?” I’m so glad you asked. Paul gives us a short version of the gospel in 2 Timothy 2:8: Christ was descended from David and raised from the dead. I like to think of this as the gospel in two phrases. However, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives a much longer description of what the gospel is:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: **that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve** (1 Corinthians 15:1-5).*

If ever we were in doubt about what the gospel is, a combination of 2 Timothy 2:8 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-5 lays it all out: **The gospel is the story about Christ’s incarnation and miraculous birth (descended from David), His sinless life, His substitutionary death for our sins, His burial for one night, His powerful resurrection, His multiple appearances after His resurrection (which verify that He is alive), and His ascension to the Father’s right hand (from where He intercedes for us until His return).**

As you can see, the gospel is all about Christ. This is why I said that to be Christ-centered is to be gospel-centered. The word gospel means good news; it is the good news about the powerful work of Christ that saves sinners and secures them in God's eternal care. This gospel is not just the message that saves sinners initially, but as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:2, it is a message that we must hold firm throughout our lives. This explains why Paul felt it necessary to remind the Corinthians about the gospel (15:1). Though they were already saved, Paul preached the gospel to them again. Interestingly, this is not something he did only in Corinth. Writing to believers in Rome whom he had never met, Paul said: "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. *That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome*" (Romans 1:14-15).

The question on my mind is this: Why would Paul want to keep on preaching the gospel to people who are already Christians? The answer is simple: Paul and the other apostles did not think of the gospel as an entry-level course to Christianity; they thought of it as the primary message of the faith from which we never graduate. In other words, the gospel is not just for evangelistic settings, it is for Sunday morning worship and Wednesday evening Bible study. Christians, and not just nonbelievers, need the gospel. Dane Ortlund puts it very colorfully: "We need to realize that the gospel is not only the door into the Christian life but also the living room of the Christian life" (Deeper). Again, he says, "The gospel is not a hotel to pass through but a home to live in."

This might come as a shock to some because we think that we only needed to hear the gospel once. We think that once we have believed, we must move on to other deeper things. That is partly true. There are other things to be learned in the life of faith. However, we never move from the gospel as we learn other things. Instead, the gospel becomes the lens through which we process new information. True maturity in the Christian faith is deepening our roots in Christ and the gospel. Paul says it like this:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, **so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith**, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to

the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:6-8)

Paul warns that we never move from Christ and the gospel. As we received Christ initially by grace through faith, we are called to continue walking in Him in that same way. We are to be rooted and established in “*the faith*”. In scripture, whenever the definite article “the” is placed before “faith”, it is referring to the gospel or the message about Christ that the apostles preached (See Jude 3 - “contend for **the faith** that was once for all delivered to the saints”). Therefore, when Paul tells us to be rooted in the faith, he is calling us as Christians to sink deeper and deeper into the gospel. I don’t know much about agriculture, but I know that trees don’t grow if they are not rooted. It’s the same with Christians; if we are not rooted in the faith (the gospel) we will not grow. Therefore, even when he was talking to Christians, Paul continued to preach the gospel. The gospel message is the soil in which Christians thrive and grow.

What does all this mean? It’s simple: The gospel is the primary message of the church. The good news about Christ is our message. It is not just the initial message for sinners, but the sustaining message for saints. We continually need to be reminded of this great story about Christ and our salvation. Secure in the love of His cross, the power of His resurrection, and the comfort of His present intercession, we are empowered to keep on following Christ.

The gospel is our primary message - not purpose, politics, self-help, social justice, patriotism, or any other good thing we could devote ourselves to. It is Christ and Him crucified that we must preach (1 Corinthians 2:2). Many important issues come up in our culture – abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism. But even as we address these issues, we never uproot from the gospel. The gospel is our primary message and the lens through which we address cultural issues.

What has happened in many churches, especially in the West, is that they have moved away from the gospel and its Christ-focus. Sermons in churches are comparable to TedTalks because they focus on topics that any smart and articulate pagan can preach. Preachers are almost interchangeable with Steve Harvey or Tony Robbins because they focus on self-help tips

and tricks, sometimes even promoting new-age ideas. This is tragic because the foundation of self-help is opposed to the gospel. Self-help is based on the belief that humans can help themselves. The gospel says that we can't help ourselves and we need the salvation Christ gives and the power of the Spirit. Sadly, in our bid to be relevant and culturally engaged we have imported idols into God's church. We must return to the message of the gospel that heralds the glories of Christ.

Are You Saying We Should Never Talk About Anything Else In The Church?

I can almost hear the revolt coming for me, "*Are you saying we can never talk about any other topic in the church apart from the gospel? Shouldn't we learn about marriage, money, purpose, etc. in church?*" I can understand why questions like these may come up and I think they are important. Given this, let me clarify what I am saying.

I am not saying that it is wrong for us to ever talk about purpose, money, or marriage in the church. Paul did! In Ephesians 5:21-33, he wrote a lengthy treatise on marriage. So, again, I'm not saying we can never talk about purpose or money matters. Being gospel-centered does not mean ignoring the burning day-to-day issues of life. What I am saying though is this: When we talk about money or marriage, we must do it from a gospel perspective. The gospel is the lens through which we view all life. Our treatment of marriage, success, or money must be filtered through the message of Christ. When we do this, we will not deal with money in the same way the world does. If we are Christians, then the life and message of Christ must shape all we do.

When Paul wrote about marriage in Ephesians 5, how did he do it? He did it like this: Husbands, love your wives, *as Christ loved the church* and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25). Paul was not content merely to give nice tips and tricks (helpful as those may be). He knew that Christ was the foundation for a good marriage. What is even more striking is that because Paul saw marriage through the lens of Christ, he promoted a view of marriage that was so different from the culture around him. In Paul's day, women were deemed to be inferior to men, and so the thought of a man

serving his wife was alien. Yet, Paul called Christian men to lay their lives down for their wives. Where did he get such a wild idea? Looking at the gospel and seeing the true Bridegroom's treatment of His bride - this is what completely altered Paul's vision for Christian marriages. Any non-Christian can offer counsel about buying flowers or developing common interests in marriage, but only the gospel will transform husbands into the kind of people who willingly lay down their lives for their wives. The gospel reshapes our hearts through the good news of God's love for us.

Similarly, when Paul was calling the church in Corinth to be generous, how did he do it? Like this: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9)*. He was talking about generosity, but the gospel was not far from his thoughts. He went back to Christ's incarnation - when He temporarily gave up the glories and privileges of heaven (and so became poor) for our sakes (that is, so that we could become rich through our relationship with Him and our eternal future in glory). Paul's point was this: Don't be afraid to give up your money for others since Christ has given up so much for you and promised you so much. Paul could have just said, "Give, because it is a good practice." He could have just spoken about the general benefits of philanthropy. But he went back to the message of the gospel because he knew that seeing how much Christ gave up for us will change our hearts and make us generous. That's why, even though he was talking about money, he did not go far from Christ. God's generous gift of Jesus creates generous people.

Again, in Galatians 2, when Peter and Barnabas were dividing from the Gentile believers and perpetuating Jewish superiority, how did Paul correct them? Like this: But when I saw that their **conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel**, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (v.14). Paul corrected them by returning to the gospel - the good news that equalizes all people (regardless of their race, tribe, or gender) as sinners in need of Christ's atonement. Paul didn't just say, "Racial superiority is bad." As true as that statement is, he went back to the gospel. He reminded Peter that Christ died and opened the door for people from every nation to come to God through faith alone, and not through any special diet, ceremonies, ancestry, or rituals. Paul corrected Peter's racism,

not by fixating on racism itself, but by exposing how the gospel ought to change how we view others.

I could go on and on, showing you many places where the apostles return to the gospel when dealing with various topics. But from the short sample above, we can see that Paul could hardly tackle any topic of importance without referencing the gospel. He was thoroughly Christ-centered and gospel-centered. The pattern of the New Testament is not to ignore important questions and issues of daily life, but to answer them through the lens of the gospel. Christ-centeredness is seeing the world through the lens of Christ's work and believing that what He has done touches every aspect of human life. In other words, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a message, it is a worldview.

How We Distort Our Message

Our message is not distorted because we talk about various issues but because we sometimes **major on minors** by fixating on some issue or topic *to the abandonment of the gospel*. What I mean is this: When you go to some churches, you get the sense that the major message is politics and patriotism. Sermons often center more on what is going on in the White House, rather than what happened at Calvary. Sadly, there is no gospel in some churches. Whole sermon series go on and on without the refreshingly good news about Christ's life, death, burial, and resurrection. These gospel truths are often assumed and ignored, while minor issues take center stage.

A church without a steady dose of the gospel is just a social gathering. If there is no proclamation of Jesus, why even gather? When our worship services fixate unduly on politics or the current hot-burning cultural issue, we have distorted the message by shifting our focus.

Recently, I was in a conversation with a lady who was concerned that her pastor wasn't saying more about politics. She felt that because of the political upheavals in America, he needed to say more. It wasn't that he wasn't saying anything, but in her view, he wasn't saying enough. I gently reminded her that her pastor's primary task is to point all people, regardless of their political affiliations, to Jesus Christ. When the pulpit becomes the

place for pushing one political agenda or the other, we are losing focus. While Christians should be involved in politics, we must remember what the Church exists for: **To take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:19-20)**. So, there might be nothing wrong with talking about politics, but if we do this and forget the gospel, if we become issues-centered rather than gospel-centered, we have lost our focus. If we abandon the gospel, we cease to be a church!

So, the first way we distort our message is by majoring in minors – that is by removing the gospel from its central position. But we can also distort the message by disconnecting the gospel from how we think of and talk about various cultural issues. As we have seen already, whether he was talking about marriage, generosity, or racism, Paul brought Christ and the gospel to bear. Our message will be distorted if we view the gospel as a topic, rather than a lens. Every sermon must be peppered with Christ and His redemptive work. Because the gospel is the good news that Jesus is the Risen King of the world, His life and redemptive work have ramifications for all of life. Jesus is not just the Lord of the sacred, but the secular too. Therefore, when we address so-called secular issues, we must bring the good news of Christ to bear.

It might be great to ask yourself these questions: How does the gospel shape my view of social justice? How does the message of Christ shape my vision of ministry and work? How does the good news about redemption impact how I counsel people struggling with depression? We must think things through and be gospel-focused if we are to be Christ-centered.

Another way our message gets distorted is through our mishandling of the Old Testament. Sometimes we treat the Old Testament like a book about basic morality. So, for instance, when we come to the story of Joseph, we may focus on *how to have integrity* or *how to rise in prominence*. But this focus betrays that we have not understood the purpose of the Old Testament. The Old Testament, like the New, is about Jesus. The gospel does not begin in Matthew with the arrival of Christ, but in Genesis with the promise about Christ (See Genesis 3:15). When God said that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head, He was promising a human redeemer who would come and defeat Satan and restore humanity and the

world to order. God was talking about Jesus Christ right at the beginning of the Bible.

All that happened in the Old Testament was the progressive fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 3:15. God called Abraham and birthed a nation (Israel) out of him from which the promised Redeemer would come (See Matthew 1:1-16). God established David's monarchy and promised that one of his royal descendants would fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15 by establishing God's kingdom on earth (2 Samuel 7:11-13). This is why in 2 Timothy 2:8 (our major text in this book), Paul thought it was important to say that Christ "descended from David." He wanted to make it clear that Christ was the fulfillment of all the promises God made in the Old Testament. Christ is the offspring of Abraham who brings God's blessing to all nations (Genesis 22:18). He is the Son of David who fully establishes God's kingdom of justice on earth (Psalm 45:6-7).

What does all this mean for us? It means, as I have already said, that the Old Testament is as much about Christ as the New. When we read and preach the Old Testament, our focus should be the same as when we read the New. We should be looking for God's redemption, grace, salvation, and victory through Christ. When we see David the shepherd boy defeating Goliath on behalf of Israel, we should see Christ our chosen representative defeating Satan (1 Samuel 17, Colossians 2:15). When we see Joseph's rejection and humiliation leading to promotion and salvation for the people of God, we should see Christ's rejection and humiliation on the cross, which led to His exaltation (resurrection) and brought salvation to the people of God (Genesis 45:4-7, Luke 9:22). When we see Esther putting herself at risk to save God's people, we should see Christ who put Himself at risk to save us at just the right time (Esther 4:9-14, Galatians 4:4-5, Romans 5:6-8).

Now, it is true that we can learn courage from Esther and faith from David. We can also learn integrity from Joseph. There is nothing wrong with learning the moral lessons that are there for us in these stories (1 Corinthians 10:11, Romans 15:4). But if this is the only way we read the Old Testament, we will be missing a vital part of the story of the Bible. We are not supposed to only read the Old Testament for the moral of the story, but for the gospel in the story (See 2 Corinthians 3:14-15).

We must remember this: The heroes of the Old Testament are not merely examples for us to follow, they were mini redeemers of Israel that anticipated the Great Redeemer of the world. God sent Prophets, Kings, Judges, and Priests to preserve Israel until Christ came to fulfill all that these offices pointed to. Therefore, wherever we see any figure in the Old Testament providing salvation from oppressive enemies, speaking God's word, or offering sacrifice on behalf of God's people, we are seeing a type of Christ – a dim reflection of the light that Christ would bring to the world (Read the book of Hebrews).

The whole Bible in all its parts is meant to communicate the truth of salvation and redemption through Christ. So, even when we are reading Leviticus, we can preach about the blood of the Lamb of God that made the Old Testament sacrifices obsolete (Hebrews 10:1-14). When we come to Joshua, we can revel in the Greater Joshua (Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua) who brought us into a greater rest, by defeating our greater enemies - Satan, sin, and death (Hebrews 4:8-11).

Jesus Himself, on the road to Emmaus, had this to say about the Old Testament:

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe **all that the [Old Testament] prophets have spoken!** Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself** (Luke 24:25-27).

Again, Jesus speaking about the Old Testament said in Luke 24:44: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: *Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.*”

So, how can we make sure we are not “slow of heart” to believe the Old Testament? How can we make sure that we are handling the Old Testament correctly? By realizing that from Genesis to Malachi, the whole of the Old Testament, is about Jesus Christ. When we preach the Old Testament, we should be preaching Christ! We should not merely preach how-to-sermons, but Christ-centered sermons.

Spurgeon's Example

I want to end this section with a story I heard about Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the 19th century. It is reported that on the pulpit at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, where he was the pastor, Spurgeon posted the words of John 12:21. John 12:21 is the place in scripture where some Greeks came to Phillip and said, **“Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”** Spurgeon had this scripture posted on the pulpit to remind himself of his job: *To help people see Jesus.*

I think this is instructive for all pastors, prophets, and teachers. All we do must be for this one goal: That every eye would be open to see, savor, and delight in Jesus. This is the goal of faithful ministry.

Concluding Words

I am almost certain that something I have said in this chapter has offended someone. I assure you that I do not write as the perfect one who delights in pointing out the errors of everyone else. I confess that I sometimes crave too much attention from Christ's bride. I confess that I have derogatorily called cessationists “cold and wooden.” I confess that sometimes I think the gospel is too basic and I'm tempted to find something “newer” and “more exciting” to say. I am not writing as the perfect one. My aim is not to offend anyone but to call us all to fix our eyes on Jesus. If any of the topics I discussed in this chapter offends you, perhaps the offense is an indication that I have ruffled one of your idols. This calls for self-examination and repentance. I assure you that I have no agenda or vendetta - I am a servant of Christ.

CHAPTER 4: REFOCUSING ON CHRIST

In the last two chapters, we looked at the subtle distractions that threaten our Christ-focus. We saw that it is so easy to think we are wholeheartedly serving Jesus Christ, while other things truly have our attention. We have seen how theology, religion, and our idols can become counterfeit gods that replace Jesus Christ. We also saw how charismatic leaders, an over-emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, and a distorted message can distract a church from focusing on Christ.

As helpful as it is to know the things that distract us from Christ, we must tackle a much deeper issue if we are to be truly helped. We need to answer this very important question: **Why are we so easily distracted from Christ?** Until we answer this question, we will keep on being distracted. Knowing what distracts us does not necessarily keep us from being distracted. However, diagnosing the root cause of our distraction will help us begin the journey of refocusing on Christ.

So, why do we find it so easy to displace Jesus Christ? It's because we so often forget how beautiful and glorious Christ is. We forget the splendor of His person, the power of His work, and the greatness of His promises. To refocus on Jesus Christ, we must ask the Holy Spirit to help us see Him afresh. I am not talking about seeing Christ with our physical eyes, but with the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:18). I am talking about an inner sight and a deep appreciation of His powerful love that goes beyond mere intellect (Ephesians 3:16-19). To behold Christ in this way is to love Him, and the more we behold Him, the more we will love Him. If we see the

glory of Jesus Christ, we will be captivated by Him because He is irresistible! In this chapter, I hope to help you see the loveliness of Jesus in a way that magnetizes your heart to him.

Solomon And The Queen Of Sheba

When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she was mesmerized by his wisdom, excellence, and authority. This queen, who had been around royalty all her life and had seen the finer things of life, met a man who dazzled her. She had heard reports about Solomon's wisdom but wanted to experience him for herself. Upon meeting him and talking with him, she could not help but say:

*“Indeed, not even half was told me; **in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard.** How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!” (1 Kings 10:7-8).*

If Solomon (who is but a very dim reflection of Jesus Christ) could garner such a reaction from the Queen of Sheba, how much more the One who is “greater than Solomon” (Luke 11:31). You may have heard about Jesus Christ, but the more you know Him, the more you will find yourself saying like the Queen, “Not even half was told me...”

Solomon was the **son of David** who ruled God's people **with wisdom** and built a **physical temple** for God's name. Despite his great feats, he was just a man with as many flaws as the rest of us - and definitely more wives than the rest of us! In comparison, Jesus Christ is the **greater Son of David**, who rules over God's eternal kingdom with **greater wisdom** and has built a **spiritual temple** for God's name- a temple made up of people in whom God dwells (Acts 7:47-48, 1 Peter 2:4-5, Ephesians 2:19-22). Because Christ's temple is not physical, it can never be destroyed (unlike Solomon's) and will last for eternity.

If the Queen of Sheba could meet Jesus Christ and examine His accomplishments, what do you think she would say to this Greater Son of

David? How much do you think she would gush at the loveliness of His character and the impressiveness of His work? Would she not say, ***“In wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your people must be!”***? I think she would say this and more.

Staring at Jesus

Let us take some time to look at this Jesus - the holy, compassionate, and divine Son of God. His disciples asked a question in Matthew 8:27 (KJV), “What manner of man is this?” By looking at some of the titles and deeds ascribed to Him in scripture we will attempt to answer their question.

So, who is this Jesus? **He is the bread of life that satisfies the soul’s hunger (John 6:35) and the spring of living water that quenches our heart’s thirst (John 4:13-14).** Before we come to Christ, our souls are as hungry as an orphan who hasn’t eaten in months. Before Christ, our hearts pant with a deep thirst like a man who has been stuck in the desert for years. The salvation Jesus gives is the true nourishment that the human heart needs. There is no satisfaction for humanity outside Christ (Jeremiah 2:13). We may think that making more money or climbing up the corporate ladder will fulfill us, but these things often leave us feeling empty, parched, and restless. The pleasure they bring often lasts for a short period and leaves us wanting more and more. Only when a soul has tasted the approval of God and His gift of acceptance can it truly rest. God’s approval comes through Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:28-30). When we "eat and drink" Jesus by placing our faith in Him, we receive His eternal and ever-satisfying life which fulfills us deeply (John 6:53-58, John 10:10). Jesus is our true satisfaction.

Who is this Jesus? **He is the good shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11).** While other shepherds (leaders or rulers) see their sheep as a commodity to be used and sold for their gain, Jesus is the good shepherd who gives up His life for His sheep’s gain (Ezekiel 34:1-4, John 10:12-13). Here is a sacrificial love that scarcely makes sense to us (Luke 15:3-7). Of Him, it can be truly said, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing” (Psalm 23:1).

Who is this Jesus? **He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)**. He is the way that must be followed to find God, the truth that must be believed to know God, and the life that must be received to be alive to God. Indeed, no one can know the true God without Jesus Christ. Creation may reveal something of God's nature, but Christ reveals God in His fullness. To know Christ is to know God.

Christ is the vine without whom we can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

Without this Jesus, we would be spiritually dead and impotent, unable to do anything of true, spiritual value. We'd be as useless as an unplugged TV. Indeed, separation from Him is separation from true life and fruitfulness. As surely as no branch has life by itself, no human being can experience eternal life outside Jesus Christ.

Christ is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26). Those who believe in Him will never die! Yes, their bodies may be put in the ground for decades untold, but as surely as Jesus rose from the grave they also will rise again (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Jews in Jesus' day thought of resurrection as an event that would happen at the end of history. Jesus revealed Himself to be "***The Resurrection***" breaking into the middle of history (John 11:24-25). In Jesus Christ, the life of the age-to-come has invaded our broken world, defeating death, futility, and hopelessness. The new creation has begun in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Christ is the Eternal Word who made all things and without whom nothing was made (John 1:1-3). For, as Paul says in Colossians 1:16, all things were made by Him, through Him, and for Him. So, there is not one thing that exists in our world today that was not created *by Jesus, through Jesus, and for Jesus Christ*. Whether "*things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him*" (Col 1:16, NIV). The next time you admire a beautiful sunset, know that you are admiring a dim reflection of the beauty of its Maker, Jesus Christ. The next time you quake at the sound of thunder, recognize that it is incomparable to the power of Jesus Christ, its Maker. The next time your eyes well up at beautiful poetry, recognize that Christ is the Originator of all that is lovely and comely in this world – including poetry.

What is more? Christ did not just create this world, spin it, and then stand back to see what might happen. No, *it is in Him that all things hold together* (Colossians 1:17); that is to say, He is right now sustaining the universe by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). What this means is that our whole universe will disintegrate into a mass of nothingness and confusion if Christ were to doze off and lose control for even one second. But thankfully, as the scriptures tell us, “He does not sleep nor slumber” (Psalms 121:4). Even as the world may seem chaotic and out of whack, Christ is providentially guiding and sustaining it, and He will bring it to the glorious end he has promised (Revelation 21:1-4). **Christ is the sustainer of the universe.**

Paul described Christ as the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Elsewhere Paul tells us that God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). Imagine a light so bright that even a nanosecond glimpse of it would blind you instantly. This is the brightness of God’s glory and holiness. This is why the scriptures say, no one can see God and live (Exodus 33:20). Yet, the most amazing thing has happened in Jesus Christ: The God who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one can see and live, has approached us, veiling His glory in human flesh so we can see and know Him. This is what it means for Christ to be the image of the invisible God. John reflected on this truth when he said, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). The invisible God has made Himself visible in Christ. Again, John said, “*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known*” (John 1:18). In Christ humanity has been granted access to see God. **He is the image of the invisible God.**

Who is this Jesus? My father, Bishop Fred Addo often says while preaching:

In the **J** - He is our **Justifier**

In the **E**- He is our **Example**

In the **S** - He is our **Saviour**

In the **U** - He **Unites** us with God

and in the final **S** - He is the **Solution** to all our human problems.

When we say **He is our justifier**, we mean that because He died for us God has declared us guiltless and free of every charge against us (Romans 3:21-26). **He is our example** because He is the true Adam (human); He lived out God's original intention for humanity without sin or compromise (Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:20-49). **Christ is our Saviour**; He has rescued us from the grip of sin, hell, and Satan by His death and resurrection (Ephesians 2:1-8). All our favorite superheroes pale in comparison to this Saviour. **Christ unites us with God**, thereby bringing us into the eternal dance that the Father, Spirit, and Son have shared for all eternity. Before creation, the Holy Trinity enjoyed a sweet relationship of love within themselves (John 17:15). Creation was the overflow of that divine love—God wanted humans to enjoy the same love that He enjoyed within His plurality. Yet in our pride and rebellion, we scorned this invitation and rejected His offer of love by siding with Satan (Genesis 3). Despite our rejection, Christ came and died the death we deserved so that He will “bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18) - that is, bring us back into the eternal love of the Trinity. Now, through Him, we are united with God forever. **Christ is the solution to all of humanity's problems**; He has already solved our greatest problem by taking the wrath of God which we deserved for our sins upon Himself (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Because of this great sacrifice, we can join Paul to say, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

Who is this Jesus? **He is our Prophet, Priest, and King**. As our *Prophet*, He speaks God's final and decisive word to us (Hebrews 1:1-2). As our *Priest*, He offered the final sacrifice for our sins to God (Hebrews 1:3). As our *King*, He rules over God's people with righteousness and justice (Jeremiah 23:5).

He is our Temple, Sacrifice, and Mediator. As our *Temple*, He is the place where we meet God (John 2:19-22, John 1:14 reads he tabernacled or “templed” among us in Greek). As our *Sacrifice*, He gives Himself to die in our place once and for all (John 1:29, 1 Cor 5:7). As our *Mediator*, He stands in heaven as our spotless representative (Hebrews 7:25, 8:1-6, 1 Timothy 2:5-6).

He is our Redeemer, Purifier, and Friend. As our *Redeemer*, He has bought us out of slavery to sin and made us His own (Ephesians 1:7, Romans 6:6, 1 Corinthians 6:20). As our *Purifier*, He cleanses our conscience from the guilt of our wicked ways (Titus 2:11-14, Hebrews 9:14). As our *Friend*, He opens His heart to us as He tells us the secrets of His kingdom (John 15:15). Through Him, we know God's once-hidden plan for the cosmos (Ephesians 1:9-10).

He is our Lover, Brother, and Bridegroom. As our *Lover*, He woos us to himself with everlasting promises that He will never break (Jeremiah 31:3). As our *Brother*, He rejoices when we come home - prodigal as we are! He is not ashamed to join the party for His rebellious siblings (Luke 15:25-28, Hebrews 2:11). As our *Bridegroom*, he cares for us with a passion that does not fade with years (Ephesians 5:25-30). He has prepared an eternal feast for his bride - a royal wedding that would make Buckingham Palace blush (Rev 19:6-9).

Who is this Jesus? **He is the seed of the woman who crushes the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). He is the offspring of Abraham who blesses all nations (Genesis 12:1-3, 22:17-18). He is the Seed of David who reigns over all nations forever (2 Samuel 7:11-16).** All the promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Him. The Old Testament was a period of anticipating His arrival. God made so many promises that could not be fulfilled by anyone else but Christ. None of Adam's children defeated Satan apart from Christ. None of Abraham's offspring spread God's light to the nations like Christ. None of David's sons ruled with justice and righteousness over God's eternal Kingdom like Christ. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the One the prophets spoke about.

Who is this Jesus? **He is the one who came in a manger (Luke 2:12,16), lived a spotless life (Hebrews 7:26), died on a cross for your sins (1 Peter 2:24), was buried in a grave for one night (1 Corinthians 15:4), got up by the power of God's Spirit, and lives forevermore! (1 Corinthians 15:4, 1 Corinthians 6:14, Romans 6:9-10).** He is the one who destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light (2 Timothy 1:10)!

Who is this Jesus? **He is God in human flesh; Creator come down to show us divine love!** The One who existed in the form of God before the foundations of this world did not think of His equality with God as something to be held on to tightly. Instead, He willingly stripped Himself of the privileges of divinity by becoming a human being. And even as a human being, He did not live in palaces and ride chariots. Instead, He took the form of a servant, washing feet, touching children, and hanging with the lowlifes. What more? Though He was the Prince of life, He made Himself obedient to death. And not just any kind of death, but death on a Roman Cross – the most shameful, heinous, and excruciating way to die (Philippians 2:5-8).

But why? Why would He do such a thing? Out of some sick desire for pain and suffering? No, not at all. He did it because He loved us. For God so loved the world that He gave His beloved Son, Jesus Christ so that whoever believes in Him will not suffer eternal death but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Jesus Christ died the death that we deserved for our sins and bore the eternal penalty for our guilt. He did not die because He was a sinner, but because He was our substitute. He revealed in the clearest way possible that God loves us. While we were rebelling and running away from Him, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us to demonstrate God's heart towards us (Romans 5:8).

So, who is this Jesus? **He is the manifestation of God's deep love for humanity!** Many great men have lived, but none lived like Jesus. Many great people have died, but none rose like Jesus. Many have loved, but none loves affectionately like Jesus. Many have made great sacrifices, but none surpasses the sacrifice of Jesus. His love is unmatched, His compassion unphased, and His affection unsurpassed.

He is beautiful, wonderful, powerful, holy, matchless, and the only one who can truly be described as awesome! Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World.

There Is More To See!

We have only scratched a small surface of the wonder of Jesus. There is so much more we could say to describe His true worth! And indeed, we will

spend eternity admiring this great Saviour. My vocabulary is not rich enough and my intellect is not high enough to fully describe the beauty of Jesus. But I hope that through these feeble words of mine you have seen something of the majesty of the One who makes angels sing (Luke 2:13-14, 1 Peter 1:10-12).

You may put this book down and return to your life as usual, but the Queen of Sheba would look at you with great wonder (Luke 11:31). She would find it hard to understand how anyone could see Jesus Christ and walk away unimpressed. She would wonder how anyone could hear about Him and not inquire to know more. She would rebuke our idolatrous hearts and our wandering eyes. She would call us to join her as she shouts, “***Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard.***”

As Christians, we take our eyes off Jesus because we think we have seen all that there is to see of Him. We are like children who mistake the kiddie pool for the ocean. With our little toes dipped into the pool in the backyard, we boast. “I have been in the Atlantic.” Our hearts get a little glimpse of Christ’s beauty as we study the Bible or pray, and then we become smug as though we have seen His full radiance. Part of our problem is that we have minimized His glory and are satisfied with little glimpses of Him. We do not fathom that there is more to Christ than our present knowledge of Him.

The attitude of the undistracted is the attitude of Paul. He said:

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:10-14).

Paul said these words not as a new Christian, but as a Christian minister. Unlike us, he didn’t think he had arrived or seen all of Christ. Paul

remained hungry for more of Christ. He used words like “press on” and “straining” to communicate His passion. He refused to rest on the laurels of His past and kept His eyes on the goal of knowing Christ.

What was responsible for this kind of desire to know Christ? Paul tells us in the same Philippians 3: *I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord* (verse 8). In other words, Paul’s passion can be explained by the fact that he had seen the supreme worth and excellency of Jesus Christ. It is because he knew the worth of Jesus Christ (Phil 3:8) that he wanted to know Him more (Phil 3:10-14)! So, we learn from Paul that knowing Jesus makes us want to know Him more. If we ever find ourselves smug about how much we know Jesus, it proves we have not truly known Him as we ought. Those who truly know His surpassing worth are not smug, they are hungry. Peter says it like this: Like newborn babies, **crave pure spiritual milk**, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, **now that you have tasted that the Lord is good (1 Peter 2:2-3)**. To paraphrase Peter, I would say, “If you have tasted the goodness of God, it would create a craving for Him.” We tend to think that those who know Jesus Christ deeply are content, but Peter says that if you truly taste His goodness, it’ll make you crave more.

I am contending that we are distracted from Jesus Christ because we are satisfied with a little teaspoon of His goodness. We haven’t looked at Him long enough to say, “**He is surpassingly worthy and everything else is loss when compared to Him.**” The more we invest ourselves in seeking Jesus, the more we will find ourselves seeking Him. Or to put it differently, if we keep our eyes on Jesus long enough, we will find that we never want to take them off Him. A short glance at His glory in the scriptures, followed by long stares at everything else, will not do. Just like fine art, you must look at Jesus long enough to appreciate His true beauty.

No matter where you are in your walk with God, recognize that there is always more to see of Christ. If you find yourself bored and distracted by many things, it may mean you have not looked at Jesus enough. Look and look again – return to the stories in the gospels, the teaching of the epistles, and the imagery of Revelation. Look at the promises about Him in the Old Testament, think about His power displayed in His miracles, and laugh at His wit and wisdom. When you have seen something beautiful in the bible,

remind yourself that there is more still. Pray and ask God to help you see Him clearer. Ask Him to open your heart's eyes to see His glory and beauty. Then you will find that nothing else is as interesting and captivating as Jesus – not mere theology, religion, or our idols.

Pray this prayer with Paul:

I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in **knowing him personally**, your eyes **focused and clear**, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength! (Ephesians 1:17-19, Message Version).

CHAPTER 5: THE COST OF LOOKING AWAY FROM JESUS CHRIST

In this final chapter, I want to make one simple point: Looking away from Jesus Christ is not harmless. Fixing our eyes on Jesus Christ is not optional to the Christian life, it is vital. It is so vital that a whole bible book – the book of Hebrews – was written to call Christians to refocus their spiritual eyes on Jesus Christ. To fail to stay Christ-centered yields detrimental spiritual results.

2 Timothy 2:8 in context

Going back to 2 Timothy 2:8, where Paul told Timothy to remember (or focus on) Jesus Christ, we find that this command was not given without a purpose. Rather, Paul gave this exhortation to encourage Timothy to endure the persecution that comes with preaching Christ. The picture we get of Timothy in this letter is of a fearful young man who was beginning to shrink back from his calling because of the persecution and suffering that it was attracting. Therefore, Paul said the following to him:

2 Timothy 1:7-8 - The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid [or afraid], but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.

*2 Timothy 1:11-12 - And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. **That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame**, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.*

*2 Timothy 2:3-4 - **Join with me in suffering**, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.*

From these three scriptures, we see a consistent theme. Paul was saying to Timothy, **“Don’t shrink back. Don’t be afraid, Tim. Don’t be ashamed. Join with me in suffering.”** We can deduce that Timothy was shaken by the violent way the Roman empire was cracking down on Christians. He was beginning to draw back from his assignment and may have been ashamed to bear the reproach of Christ (Hebrews 11:26). He was afraid to suffer and possibly die for the gospel. It is in this context that Paul wrote 2 Timothy 2:8 – “Remember Jesus Christ...” So far in this book, we have only looked at verse 8, but let’s look at what comes afterward for more context:

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

2 Timothy 2:8-10

By seeing 2 Timothy 2:8 in its surrounding context, we get a greater understanding of why Paul told Timothy to remember Jesus Christ.

Right after saying, **“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David...”**

Paul then said, **“This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.”**

Then Paul added that for this gospel, he was willing to **endure everything so that God’s people would obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus.**

Paul's point seems to be this – **The gospel of Jesus Christ is so glorious that it demands our lives and our all.** He was saying to Timothy: You know that I am suffering for this good news about Jesus' incarnation and resurrection. The suffering is so bad that I am chained like a criminal. But it is worth it, and I am willing to endure anything for this gospel because it is the only message that offers salvation to people. Paul also highlighted the fact that Jesus **was raised from the dead**, to remind Timothy that if he died while spreading the gospel, he would be raised with Christ (2 Timothy 2:11-12).

Now it should be clear why Paul said, "Remember Jesus Christ." He was saying this to motivate Timothy to endure suffering for the gospel. Paul's remedy to Timothy's fear was, "Remember Jesus Christ and the gospel." He was making the point that what Jesus did in His life, death, and resurrection is so amazing that no suffering is too much to get it out to others. He was also reminding Timothy that Christ's resurrection should quiet his fear of death.

Paul made it clear that Timothy's fear stemmed from taking his eyes off Jesus. By saying, "Remember Jesus Christ..." he suggests that if Timothy had kept his focus on Jesus, he would not shrink back from His assignment. If we keep our eyes on Jesus and what He accomplished in His death and resurrection, it will put fire for evangelism and missions in our hearts, no matter the cost. We will see Jesus dying for the world and rising from the dead, and our sacrifices would seem like nothing in comparison to the salvation He brings to the lost. We would know that because we are united with Him, death will not defeat us as it didn't defeat Him. Paul diagnosed that underneath Timothy's timidity was a lack of focus on Jesus Christ and the gospel. He was shrinking back because He had forgotten the sacrifice of Jesus and its implications for his life and the world.

For Timothy, the cost of looking away from Jesus was timidity and fear in his ministry. The big question for us is this: **What is our lack of focus on Jesus Christ costing us?** How many of our spiritual struggles stem from forgetting Jesus Christ? You will be surprised how much we forfeit by losing our focus on Jesus. You will also be amazed when you realize how much we can gain by focusing on Christ and the gospel.

What we gain by looking at Jesus

Below I have curated a list of common spiritual challenges and how remembering Jesus Christ enables us to rise above them:

1. Do you often feel that God does not love you? Remember Jesus who died to prove God's love for you (Romans 5:8).
2. Do you often feel that God cannot forgive you? Remember Jesus paid for all your sins on the cross (Ephesians 1:7).
3. Do you often feel like you have no hope in life? Remember Jesus rose from the grave to give you hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 1 Corinthians 15:17-19).
4. Do you often fear death? Remember Jesus defeated death in His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).
5. Do you often feel lonely? Remember Jesus said, I am with you till the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).
6. Do you struggle with loving others? Remember Jesus Christ loved you when you didn't deserve it (Titus 3:3-8).
7. Do you struggle with sin? Remember Jesus died to destroy sin and conquer its power (Romans 6:1-7)
8. Does envy grip your heart? Remember that Jesus promises that you will reign with Him in an eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:27-29, Romans 8:16-17).
9. Are you weighed down by the injustices in our world? Remember Jesus promises to set things right when He returns (2 Peter 3:13, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).
10. Have you been rejected by friends? Remember Jesus Christ was also rejected by people. Yet He was approved by God and

precious to the Father (1 Peter 2:4-7).

These are just ten examples of the gains we enjoy by meditating on the work of Jesus and its implications for our lives. I could say so much more about our fears and anxieties, but this much should be clear: Looking away from Jesus Christ is *not* harmless. To tweak the words of the popular hymn, “*What a friend we have in Jesus*”:

O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not *fix our spiritual eyes on Jesus*.

We suffer more loss from Satan, the world, and our flesh because we do not fix our gaze on Jesus Christ. The battle against our souls will be raging until the day we die, and there are times when we fall badly on the battlefield, but there is a sure victory for those who keep their eyes on Jesus – the captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10). There is peace, joy, and satisfaction in this world for those who keep their eyes on Jesus. I encourage you to think about your life and the areas where you struggle spiritually. Bring those areas and submit them to the story of Jesus Christ. Do the work of thinking about how His work ought to change your life. Faith in Christ is not just mental assent, it is life transformation. But this transformation doesn't happen without careful thought and prayer (2 Peter 3:1-2, Romans 12:1-2, 1 Peter 1:13).

Returning The Gaze

Throughout this book, I have called on you to focus on and remember Jesus Christ. I have shown you some of the things that may be distracting you from Him, and I have given you a remedy for dealing with this distraction. My emphasis throughout has mostly been on what you must do to refocus your eyes on Jesus. It's mostly been about you!

All this can leave you thinking that your relationship with Jesus is primarily a matter of what you do. For some readers, focusing on Jesus may seem like yet another thing to do – another command they need to add to the long list of good Christian practices. I can imagine that some of my readers may feel defeated, and maybe even guilty, for how much they have not fixed their

eyes on Jesus. This book may leave you gazing at yourself – that is, constantly gauging how well you are looking at Jesus.

But that would be the wrong way to read and apply this book. This is not a book meant to induce more self-focus; rather, it is ultimately aimed at helping you look at God - the God who has never taken His eyes off you. I am not calling you to look at Jesus so that He can find you worthy enough to receive a glance from Him. No, I am calling you to look at the One who has always had His eyes fixed on you. As the scriptures say:

He will not let your foot slip—
he who *watches over you* will not slumber;
indeed, *he who watches over* Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The *Lord watches over you*—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
Psalm 121:3-6

Fixing your eyes on Jesus is not just another rule you have to obey; it is a response. The God who **saw you** and loved you before the foundation of this world, purposed in His grace to send His Son to die for your sins (2 Timothy 1:9-10, Jeremiah 1:5, Ephesians 1:4). Jesus, the Son, came willingly to die, even though **He saw** the depths of your depravity and sin (Romans 5:8). On the cross, He took all your mess ups, hang-ups, and failures upon Himself, drinking up all of God's judgment which you deserved (Jeremiah 25:15-16, Matthew 20:22, Luke 22:42). He has now clothed you in His perfect righteousness such that when **He looks at you, He sees** a reflection of His perfection (Isaiah 61:10, Colossians 1:22, Romans 8:1). You are righteous in Christ – justified once and for all through His perfect sacrifice – despite your continuing failures (Hebrews 10:14). You are loved and cherished by the Father who does not get bored or distracted from His good purposes for your life (Romans 8:28-30).

While your love for Him ebbs and flows, His love for you never wavers (Jeremiah 31:3). While your eyes struggle to give Him a sustained look, His eyes never miss a thing. Indeed, not even a sparrow falls without His

knowledge, and you are more valuable to Him than sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31). While we forget Him and all He has done for us, God is not unjust to forget our work and labor for His kingdom (Hebrews 6:10).

So, again, I am not calling you to look at Jesus so that you can earn His attention. No, I am calling you to look at the One who has never stopped giving you attention. I am calling you to return the gaze of the Eternal lover whose eyes burn with a fiery love for you. When I call you to fix your eyes on Jesus, I am calling you to respond to Him – to return the gaze.

It is instinctive for us as human beings to look at those who are looking at us. Babies do this without having been taught or coached. God created us to respond, not just to one another, but also to Him. Return the gaze. Look at your God. He's never stopped looking at you. This is my prayer for you:

*May you look and see such beauty in the face of Jesus Christ
that you never look away again.*

Amen.

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BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

[Power To Forgive: How The Gospel Frees Us From Bitterness](#)

Pain, heartbreak, and disappointment. If you've been alive for longer than five minutes, then you've likely experienced this sad trio at some point, or probably, many points over the course of your life. We all respond differently to these experiences. For some of us pain, heartbreak, and disappointment make us so angry we burn inside with rage. For others, the feelings are not so fiery and manifest as a quiet- dare I say- polite resentment that gnaws in the stomach as you try to smile away the pain. Bitterness is knocking at some of our doors, while it pitches a tent and sets up camp in the hearts of others. The pain of abandonment lives right at the surface of our beings as our souls ache for justice.

Many of us know that forgiveness is the balm for the wounds of our hearts, but knowing is sometimes a lot easier than doing. And In most cases, forgiveness is something that is much easier said than done. This is because, if we are to be honest, forgiveness is hard! Many have described feeling powerless in the face of bitterness, totally unable to defeat it even as it erodes their capacity for love and trust. Though we know about the goodness of forgiveness we still find ourselves unable to grant it. This leaves us with the question: Where is the power to forgive?

In this book, Daniel Addo writes that the answer is simple: The power to forgive is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the message about how God sent His Son to die for those who had rebelled against Him so that they would be in an eternal relationship with Him. Daniel believes that by meditating and thinking deeply about this beautiful message, our

hearts can receive the power to let go of our most difficult pains and forgive our most heinous offenders. What Jesus did for us is so powerful and captivating that it frees us from bitterness, enabling us to forgive, and propelling us towards reconciliation where possible.

In this book you will learn:

What forgiveness is

What forgiveness is not

The relationship between God's justice and forgiveness

The disciplines that make forgiveness easy

How the story of Jesus Christ helps us forgive others

And so much more.