

“If you read only one book this year, make it this one. It’s *that* important.”

Rick Warren, #1 New York Times best-selling author, *The Purpose Driven Life*; pastor, Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California

“This book, like the gospel itself, is clarifying, convicting, comforting, and compelling all at the same time. I wholeheartedly invite you to read it, to be overwhelmed by the mercy and majesty of God in the gospel, and then to spend your life making the gospel explicit in every facet of your life and to every corner of the earth!”

David Platt, best-selling author, *Radical*; Senior Pastor, The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, Alabama

“Matt Chandler is one of the best Bible preachers on the earth and one of the godliest men I know. I am thrilled to see this book released. Read it. And buy some extra copies to give away.”

Mark Driscoll, pastor, Mars Hill Church, Seattle; President, the Resurgence and the Acts 29 Church Planting Network

“Too often the gospel fails to take root when it is assumed. The explicit gospel transforms individuals, churches, and nations as the mission of God is carried forward. Matt Chandler has gifted the church with a powerful tool to combat the assumed gospel. *The Explicit Gospel* is a serious threat to the moralistic, therapeutic deism that cripples the lives of so many. I highly recommend this book to both believers and unbelievers alike.”

Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research; contributing editor, *Christianity Today*

“That the gospel is not clearly taught in classic liberalism is disheartening but not surprising. That frequently the gospel is not taught in evangelical congregations is both disquieting and surprising. Evangelicals will not deny the gospel, but they may assume it while talking about everything else—and that is tragic. Matt Chandler issues a robust call to make the gospel an *explicit* and central part of our preaching and takes pains to show what that looks like. Amen and Amen.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Matt Chandler presents the gospel in a way that is balanced, hope-filled, and very, very serious, all the while presented with Matt’s trademark humor. Even more faithful than funny, Matt insults all of us (including himself) in a strangely edifying way, and in a way that I pray will make you treasure Christ even more.”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington DC; President, 9Marks

“*The Explicit Gospel* is a roadmap and wake-up call to our generation to grasp the full, expansive, and true gospel story. Matt is a leading voice, a great expositor of the Scriptures, passionate about Jesus, and serious about the gospel and making God known. When he speaks, I listen, and when he writes, I read. This book reflects the clear and core message of Matt’s life, leadership, and passion for a generation hungry for truth.”

Brad Lomenick, Executive Director, Catalyst

“People who come face-to-face with death make the best evangelists. I have to believe that’s why my friend Matt Chandler is so passionate about a clear, biblical presentation of the gospel. Life is short. Eternity is long. May this book drive you to greater clarity in preaching the life-saving gospel of Jesus Christ.”

James MacDonald, Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel,
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The Explicit Gospel

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the
**Explicit
Gospel**

Matt
Chandler
with Jared Wilson

 **CROSSWAY**
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The Explicit Gospel

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To Lauren

Not a day has gone by that I don't marvel at the gospel's work in you. Jesus's deep love for you, made manifest in both your passion for him and patience with me, is an evidence of God's grace on my life. I am more grateful than I can express to be walking this journey with you.

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Introduction

*The Gospel is the heart of the Bible. Everything in Scripture is either preparation for the Gospel, presentation of the Gospel, or participation in the Gospel.*¹

DAVE HARVEY

My concerns started on a Saturday night at a “Celebration Weekend” several years ago. Our church—The Village—was baptizing a great number of men and women who were publically professing their belief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. As I walked into our small auditorium, I was greeted by a hefty man in his early twenties. He gave me a hug and then proceeded to tell me about a girl he had brought to hear the testimonies. With a bit of nervous glee in his voice he informed me that the girl was a witch, and he hadn’t told her ahead of time where he was bringing her. A smile on his face, he told me she was really angry and he wanted me to know this “just in case something happened.”

I sat down in the front row and with some anxiety prayed that God would give me wisdom if this thing turned into a scene from *Harry Potter: The Unrated Version*. I am a good interpreter of Scripture and a passionate man when it comes to the gospel, but when it comes to spells and curses and the manifestation of demons, I have enough experience to know I don’t know enough and that I need more prayer, study, and discipleship (but that’s another story for a different book).

About this time the screen that obstructs the baptistry was raised, and standing in the water were two women in their early thirties. Karen began to share her testimony.² She told us that for the last fifteen years of her life she had been heavily involved in the occult and witchcraft, and she began to list all the reasons Christ

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was better, more powerful, and more loving than anything or anyone else, especially compared with what she had witnessed and been a part of in the occult. I breathed a sigh of relief and knew God was at work among us. A young man in his early twenties was next. He talked of atheism, alcohol, Buddhism, drugs, and doubt, and then he talked about how through the patience and persistence of a friend, the Holy Spirit had opened his eyes to the truth of life in Christ and forgiveness through his cross.

But the next four baptisms bothered me. One after another, each person stirred the waters and told some variation of the same story: “I grew up in church; we went every Sunday morning and night; we even went to Wednesday prayer, vacation Bible school, and youth camp. If the doors were open, we were there. I was baptized when I was six, seven, or eight, but didn’t understand what the gospel was, and after a while I lost interest in church and Jesus and I started walking in open sin. Someone recently sat me down and explained or invited me to The Village and I heard the gospel for the first time. I was blown away. How did I miss that?” Or they would say, “No one ever taught me that.”

I had heard all this before, but that night was the eve of the birth of our son, Reid. My daughter was three, and it hit me that my kids were going to grow up in the church. That night for the first time I asked the question, “How can you grow up going to church every week and *not* hear the gospel?” I quickly decided that these people had heard the gospel but didn’t have the spiritual ears to *truly* hear it, to receive it.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit wasn’t going to let it go that easily. The question began to haunt me. I decided to have a few conversations and interviews with what we have called the “dechurched” men and women attending The Village. A few of them confirmed that my hunch was correct. They could go back and read journals and sermon notes from when they were teenagers or college students and see that they had indeed heard the gospel. However, what alarmed me most was the number of men and women who

couldn't do that. Their old journals and student Bibles were filled with what Christian Smith in his excellent book *Soul Searching* called "Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."³

The idea behind moral, therapeutic deism is that we are able to earn favor with God and justify ourselves before God by virtue of our behavior. This mode of thinking is religious, even "Christian" in its content, but it's more about self-actualization and self-fulfillment, and it posits a God who does not so much intervene and redeem but basically hangs out behind the scenes, cheering on your you-ness and hoping you pick up the clues he's left to become the best you you can be.

The moralistic, therapeutic deism passing for Christianity in many of the churches these young adults grew up in includes talk about Jesus and about being good and avoiding bad—especially about feeling good about oneself—and God factored into all of that, but the gospel message simply wasn't there. What I found was that for a great many young twentysomethings and thirtysomethings, the gospel had been merely *assumed*, not taught or proclaimed as central. It hadn't been explicit.⁴

Nothing New

This assumption has historical precedent. We can read about it in the pages of Scripture and in chronicles of church history. Consider these words from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For *I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*

Paul is reminding the Christians of the gospel. He's saying, "Don't forget it! You were saved by it, will be sustained by it, and are currently standing in it."

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For some reason—namely, our depravity—we have a tendency to think that the cross saves us from past sin, but after we are saved, we have to take over and clean ourselves up. This sort of thinking is devastating to the soul. We call this the “assumed gospel,” and it flourishes when well-meaning teachers, leaders, and preachers set out to see lives first and foremost conformed to a pattern of behavior (religion) and not transformed by the Holy Spirit’s power (gospel). The apostle Paul saw this bad teaching and practice happen often, and he went on the offensive against it:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the *grace of Christ* and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are *some who* trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:6–9)

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: *Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?* (Gal. 2:20–3:5)

The idolatry that exists in man’s heart always wants to lead him away from his Savior and back to self-reliance no matter how pitiful that self-reliance is or how many times it has betrayed him. Religion is usually the tool the self-righteous man uses to exalt him-

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self. Again, this isn't new; the apostle Paul lays out in Philippians 3:4–9 his religious pedigree and practice as an example of what a man can accomplish with discipline and hard work. In that passage Paul states that all his religious effort, exhaustive checklist of all his accomplishments included, amounts to nothing compared to the surpassing greatness of Christ. He goes a step further and even calls it “rubbish” or “dung.”

Think about that: all your church attendance, all your religious activities, your Sunday school attendance medals, your journals, having a “quiet time,” reading the Scriptures—it's all in vain if you don't have Christ. When you read Paul's texts together, you get a feel for his attack on the Christian, moralistic, therapeutic deism of his day. We are saved, sanctified, and sustained by what Jesus did for us on the cross and through the power of his resurrection. If you add to or subtract from the cross, even if it is to factor in biblically mandated religious practices like prayer and evangelism, you rob God of his glory and Christ of his sufficiency. Romans 8:1 tells us that there is no condemnation for us, not because of all the great stuff we've done but because Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death. My sin in the past: forgiven. My current struggles: covered. My future failures: paid in full all by the marvelous, infinite, matchless grace found in the atoning work of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Gospel?

I have been encouraged and emboldened by the number of cries for gospel-centered ministry occurring in evangelicalism. From books to blogs, conferences to DVDs, there is a call back to what is of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). But I want to spend my time with you trying to make sure that when we use the word *gospel*, we are talking about the same thing. Unfortunately there are, as you have seen referenced in Paul's writings, false gospels. I want to make sure we are all on the same page here—which is to say, God's page—and talking about what *he* is talking about when the gospel is mentioned in the Scriptures.

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The Bible establishes two frames of reference for the same gospel. I call these vantage points the “ground” and the “air,” and in this book we’re going to see how together, they comprise the explicit gospel. In part 1, “The Gospel on the Ground,” we will trace the biblical narrative of God, Man, Christ, Response. Here we will see the power of grace for human transformation. Beginning with God’s needless self-sufficiency and culminating in a sinner’s Spirit-abled response to the good news, we’ll see how the glory of God reigns supreme over every plot point in God’s plan for man. When we consider the gospel from the ground, we see clearly the work of the cross in our lives and the lives of those around us, the capturing and resurrecting of dead hearts. We see the gospel extended in this way when Jesus and his prophets call individuals to repent and believe.

When we get to part 2, “The Gospel in the Air,” we’ll see how the apostle Paul connects human salvation to cosmic restoration in Romans 8:22–23. Here we’ll look at the oft-forgotten meta-narrative of the Bible’s story of redemption. Paul writes:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

If the gospel on the ground is the gospel at the micro level, the gospel in the air is the story at the macro level. Here we find a tour de force story of creation, fall, reconciliation, consummation—a grand display of God’s glory in his overarching purposes of subjecting all things to the supremacy of Christ. As we examine the gospel in the air, we’ll see from the scriptural testimony of Jesus’s atoning work that the gospel is not just personal, but cosmic. When we consider the gospel from the air, the atoning work of Christ culminates and reveals to us the big picture of God’s plan of restoration from the beginning of time to the end of time and the

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redemption of his creation. We may see the gospel extended this way in Jesus's declaration in Revelation 21:5, that he is "making all things new."

We see these two vantage points positioned together in Romans 8:22–23. In this passage we see that the gospel is the fulfillment of the longing of all of fallen creation but also (and chiefly) the fulfillment of the longing of mankind, the only creature made in God's image.

One gospel, two vantage points. Both are necessary in order to begin to glimpse the size and the weight of the good news, the eternity-spanning wonderment of the finished work of Christ. Both are necessary so that we are not reductionistic in how we define what God is up to both in our hearts and in the universe around us. If the gospel is reduced because of our preferences or misunderstandings, we leave ourselves open to heresies and to attacking our brothers-in-arms.

Most of the time, each of us views the same glorious truth from a particular vantage point. It might help to think about how someone walking down a New York City block sees the city versus how someone flying 30,000 feet overhead sees it. Both would say, "This is New York," and both would be right. What a silly argument the two would have if they tried to deny the other the right to talk about and proclaim the greatness of the city.

We'll begin our coverage with the gospel on the ground, because without an understanding of the ground and the pull of spiritual gravity toward it, you just might spin off through the air and into outer space.

PART ONE

The Gospel on the Ground

1

God

The work of God in the cross of Christ strikes us as awe-inspiring only after we have first been awed by the glory of God. Therefore, if we're going to talk about the scope of the cross, we need to first talk about who God is. What is he like? How big is he? How deep and wide is his power? The cross provides our access to relate to God, but we must always relate to him in light of who he is, not just who we think or hope him to be. According to James Stewart, "Behind Calvary is the throne of heaven."¹

If this is true, the deeper we go into God's glory, the deeper we will find ourselves in the precious work of Christ on the cross, and vice versa. Certainly the angels long to look into the gospel of Christ's atoning work (1 Pet. 1:12), because God's glory is in deep, brilliant display there. The great message that we call the gospel begins, then, not with us, or our need, or even the meeting of that need but with the writer of the news and the sender of its heralds: God himself.

We see this need vividly demonstrated in Romans 11 when, in verses 33–36, we find a great primer on the glory of God. The apostle Paul, empowered by the Holy Spirit, writes:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen.

The Gospel on the Ground

Paul is basically quoting a song in this passage, and this particular kind of song is something we call “doxology.” (The word *doxology* comes from two Greek words that together essentially mean “words of glory.”) If you have some church background, you may have sung something called the Doxology—“Praise God from whom all blessings flow”—in your worship services.

Let me tell you why finding the doxology in this place from this author is so interesting. The apostle Paul is not a man given to poetry. This is not the Paul of Peter, Paul, and Mary. This Paul is an unbelievable intellectual who can confuse us. Even the Bible says that Paul is hard to read. If you go to 2 Peter 3:15–16, for instance, Peter says, “I know you’ve been reading the letters of Paul. Good luck with that.” (That’s my paraphrase, of course.) We find all kinds of poetry and songs all over the Bible, the Psalms being the most obvious example, but Paul doesn’t usually roll that way. His writing is frequently ecstatic, given to long sentences and the piling on of phrases, but he’s not really a singsong kind of guy. So how interesting, then, that all of a sudden at the end of the eleventh chapter of Romans, he busts into this song: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”

What is it about the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so epically and intellectually and brilliantly laid out in the letter to the Romans, that would drive Paul to break out in song?

God’s Transcendent Creativity

In the first century, when Paul wrote Romans, worshipers would have quoted this bit of verse in the temple to convey God’s richness and sovereign ownership: “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). This way of framing “riches” made sense in the temple, because temple worshipers came from a society built on farming and ranching.

I was born in Seattle, then I moved to San Francisco, which was followed by a move to Houston. Then God was angry and moved me to Abilene for seven years. I finally ended up in Dallas.

God

Consequently, I'm a city guy. I don't know a lot about farming and agriculture, but here's what I *do* know: the one who owns the cows drives the farming community. You can't plow up your land without them; you can't fertilize without them. So, in agricultural societies, like those of every biblical period, to say, "A thousand hills and all the cattle on them belong to the Lord" is a way to communicate the all-expansive riches of God.

Today, of course, in the metroplex, cows are something we buy to put on property for which we don't want to pay taxes.² So it's possible this kind of language doesn't compute very well with us. Most church folk today don't have the background to really understand the importance of knowing God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. We might throw it on some coffee mugs and T-shirts, but when you come right down to it, Psalm 50:10 is a text modern Christians have to chew on a bit, because we live in a day where we can launch things into space and see light-years away.

Every beast in the forest is his. The cattle on a thousand hills belong to the Lord. This means he owns all the cows. And all the hills. He made them both.

Still, maybe cattle aren't your thing. Vaster still are the riches of God. Deuteronomy 10:14 says this: "Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it." Read that a second time and see if you can hear what it's saying. According to the Scriptures, every sky on every planet in every solar system in every corner of the universe belongs to God. He is the owner and creator of them all and sovereign over them all. Nothing that exists belongs to anyone else other than God. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"³

Assuming we are able to acknowledge this truth, we still must do so on a level deeper than that of mere fact. Here's what I mean: you and I are stymied in our own creativity. We can only create as sub-creators, and even then our best work is merely sub-creation.

The Gospel on the Ground

The human mind is a phenomenal imaginer, and human hands have proven astonishingly skilled. But we are unable to create raw material.

If you're a writer, you can write only as well as you understand language, diction, grammar, and the general art of writing. If you want to paint a picture, you can paint only as well as you have developed your skill, using whatever paints are available to you, in only the colors and combinations that already exist. (Do you see where I'm going with this?) If you want to build a house, you will be fenced in by whatever your credit line is, whatever equipment you can afford, and whatever raw material is already out there. We are great at creating, but our creation is always dependent. Not so with God.

God creates anything he wants and as much of it as he wants, and he does it all out of *nothing*. He doesn't need raw material. He *makes* raw material. God is not limited like you and I are. We are always limited by what's available and always dependent on outside considerations and constraints. When God created the universe, it's not as if the angels walked up to him and said, "Look, God, there are mountains everywhere. There are planets and goats and ostriches and rocks. You've got to get them out of here; we don't have any room to play kickball," so God said, "Well, where can I store this stuff? I know: *the universe*."

Now we're getting nearer to the impulse that caused Paul to sing, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!"

Of his own transcendent and self-sufficient creativity, God said to the heavenly host, "I'm going to create the universe." And of course the heavenly host said, "What's a universe?" And after he filled them in on the new creative space to house new creative works, they said, "That sounds awesome, but what are you going to make it out of?" To that God replied, "I'll make it out of myself saying, 'Universe.'" And the universe was formed. Maybe then he said, "I'm going to make some planets now." And the angels said,

“Planets? What’s a planet?” And God said, “Planet,” and *Poof!*, the planets appeared.

God’s creativity is so rich, so expansive, and so far above us that he simply says, “I want this,” and there it is. This is just the tip of the iceberg of the things of God that are beyond us. You and I are caged in by what we can afford, what we can gather, and what’s already been created. Maybe you’ve heard of scientists creating life in a laboratory, but that will never happen. No scientist has ever been able or will ever be able to stare into an empty petri dish and wish the nothing it holds into something. Whatever it is scientists do, they do with raw materials already created.

There is nothing confining God. His creativity is transcendent because his very being is transcendent. Everything that *is* is his, and he can make more of anything he wants out of nothing at all. There is no human category for this kind of richness. It makes Bill Gates a pauper, Rockefeller a beggar, and one of those island-owning sheiks in the Middle East a hobo. I don’t know what it makes you and me, but it certainly moves us into the perspective of awe that God deserves. Now we get a glimpse of what would move Paul to sing from his soul, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”

God’s Sovereign Knowing

How deep is the wisdom and the knowledge of God? God knows every word in every language in every sentence in every paragraph in every chapter of every book ever written. He knows every fact of history past and future, every bit of truth discovered and undiscovered, and every proof of science known and unknown.

In our age, science and faith have become pitted against each other, like yin and yang, as if there is no overlap, as if we must choose one or the other. The Scriptures don’t present truth that way though. God owns it all and is so high above our brightest minds that they seem brain damaged in comparison. In 1 Corinthians 3:18–23 we read:

The Gospel on the Ground

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

This means that truth is never our enemy, ever. So we should never freak out about people who claim to have discovered truth. If it’s *true* truth, God owns it and has already accounted for it, and while nothing that is true ever contradicts God’s revealed word in the Bible, discovered truth sometimes contradicts the words of Christians. We shouldn’t be afraid of this, because God knew it before anybody else and its discovery is dependent on his sovereignty anyway. The truth is that the truth is *ours*; all truth is our truth because we are of Christ and Christ is of the sovereign God.

Roll this around in your brain a while, because it is more explosive than its simplicity appears: God knows *everything*. He knows everything at the macro level. He knows the temperature at which certain stars burn. He knows the orbital lines of planets. He knows every mountain in every mountain range on this planet and others. He knows the depths of every ocean. He knows it all at the macro level.

But he also knows it all at the micro level. He knows every atom and every molecule. He knows their positions, their locations, their functions. He sees and governs every instance of mitosis, which, in case you’ve been out of school for a while, is one cell becoming two cells. We have a God who knows everything at the macro level, but he also knows everything at the micro level.

In addition to the exhaustive depth of his knowledge is the exhaustive breadth of his knowledge. God is aware of every event that has ever occurred and will ever occur, and he knows com-

God

pletely how each event affects other events that create still more events that roll into other events and so on and so forth *ad infinitum*. From the velocity of every butterfly's flapping wings at every second to the exact amount of magma to the microgram flowing out of every volcano above and under sea level, he spans it all simultaneously and precisely. If a tree falls in the woods when nobody's there, does it make a sound? I don't know. But God does.

He knows it all without any sticky notes or strings on his finger. He is holding all things together, seeing all things and knowing all things, all purely from the reality of his wanting it to be so. This is, at the very least, what it means to be God.

If all of this is true, then why in the world do we, with our nanosecond's worth of existence on the earth, still presume to judge how God operates? Paul's cry, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" holds up (as praiseworthy) the enduring reality of divine mystery. Trying to figure out God is like trying to catch fish in the Pacific Ocean with an inch of dental floss. It is a foolish act predicated on a foolish overestimation of human intellect and ability.

In the 1950s and '60s, rationalism began to erode evangelical scholarship, from academia on down, resulting in a liberal theology that crept into seminaries and churches. As a defensive maneuver, conservatives grabbed hold of the pendulum and swung it all the way over to the right side, wanting to believe they'd got "God" down to a science, his thoughts and ways explainable like mathematics. Romans 11:33 tells us instead that God is incomprehensibly immense, exceedingly expansive, and eternally powerful, and so much so that time and time again our response to many of the things of God ought to be "I don't know." Rather than respond to his incalculable God-ness with our slide rules and flowcharts, we would do better to worship him with reverence and awe. How can God see, know, and do all that he does? I don't know.

In the scope of eternity, our life is a blip. James writes, "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James

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4:14). This crucial truth is at the root of Paul's awestruck confession in Romans 11:33: "How inscrutable his ways!" How could anyone scrutinize God? On what grounds do we find scrutinizing God a legitimate act? Every time we see anything approaching scrutiny of God in the Scriptures, the response of God is a rebuke with the tone of incredulity. As Job is trying to wrap his arms around all that God is doing through the suffering in his life, God says:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding. (Job 38:2-4)

In other words, "Who do you think you are?" This is one of the most stunning examples of God putting a questioner in his place. "You think you're so smart? Were you there when I created the world? No? I didn't think so. Know your place, son." And I love this "dress for action like a man" stuff. It's like God is saying, "Oh, how adorable you are! Now put on a cup, dude, because it's about to be big-boy time."

When Paul proclaims the hard but glorious truths related to predestination in Romans 9, he anticipates concerns from his readers about God's fairness, so he writes: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (Rom. 9:20).

My family once made a trip from Dallas to the San Antonio area for my wife, Lauren's, birthday. On the drive down, my then-four-year-old daughter Audrey piped up from the backseat, "Do you know where you're going?" I felt insulted. Lauren started chuckling. She just laughed, and then she asked, "Well, *do* you?"

I said, "Please, I'm on I-35. You just take it straight down."
Then Audrey announced, "I think you're lost."

God

I said, “I think you’re about to get a spanking.” (I’m just kidding.)

The whole thing was kind of comical. Four-year-old Audrey has gotten lost in the house. She really has. And we don’t have a big house. This is the girl who freaks out if she ends up outside all by herself. This is a girl who has no sense of direction, who has no idea of which way to head to get anywhere, and she’s in the backseat presuming to ask me, “Do you know where you’re going? I think you’re lost.”

I said, “Well, um, you can’t spell your name. So, there’s that.”

Okay, I didn’t say that either. But this is kind of what happens every time we presume to put God under the microscope of our scrutiny, our logic, or our preconceptions of what he should be like or what he should do.

“How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” is God’s way of saying through Paul, “Are you serious? You’re going to scrutinize how I govern? Do you know how small you are? Do you know how inadequate you are to even comprehend your *own* life? You can’t comprehend and figure out your own shortcomings, your own failures, why you’re drawn to sin, and why there are things that master you, yet you’ll scrutinize *me*?” We are the four-year-old in the backseat telling Dad he doesn’t know where he’s going.

God’s sovereign knowing is so beyond our control and knowledge that acting like we’re his GPS or like he’s our personal valet is not just laughable but sinful. In Romans 11:34 God becomes terrifying: “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” The answer is *nobody*.

We find this aspect of God’s sovereignty terrifying. More often than not, we want him to have fairy wings and spread fairy dust and shine like a precious little star, dispensing nothing but good times on everyone, like some kind of hybrid of Tinker Bell and Aladdin’s Genie. But the God of the Bible, this God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, is a pillar of fire and a column of smoke. His

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glory is blinding. It *undoes* people. It takes people out. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

He is wonderful and absolutely terrifying. The god of evangelicism may be tame and tired at times, but the God of the Bible is *mighty*. “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

Now, to some degree, we do have revelation from God, so we do know some of the mind of the Lord. He gave us the Scriptures. He speaks to us in dreams and in visions and in words of knowledge—but in no way that runs contrary to Scripture. The Bible says he speaks to us through creation (Ps. 19:1–2; Rom. 1:20). So God has in some sense revealed himself to you and me, but not so much that we would ever be able to counsel him. He has revealed enough of his character and attributes to save us, or preclude us from excuses for irresponsibility in not being saved, but he has not given us enough information to ever, with even a shred of integrity, second-guess him.

Nobody gets to counsel God. Nobody gets to give God advice. Nobody gets to straighten God’s path. No one.

God’s Perfect Self-Sufficiency

Paul continues in Romans 11:35: “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” If everything is God’s, you have nothing to give him that he doesn’t already own. This means that you cannot put him into your debt. And this means, alternately, that God owes no man anything. Our very existence has been gifted to us by his grace.

While we lament the apparent injustice of pain and suffering, how often do we forget that every good thing in a fallen world is wholly a gift of God’s mercy and grace? We think to question God when bridges fall but not to wonder at his grace that every bridge does not. Every fit of laughter, every delectable morsel of food, and every single smile is the result of his mercy and grace; he owes us none of it.

God

Now let me tell you why this is so terrifying. If this is true, we have nothing with which to negotiate with him, nothing to bargain with. But it has been my experience that most evangelicals believe Christians are in a bargaining position. We carry an insidious prosperity gospel around in our dark, little, entitled hearts. We come to the throne and say, “I’ll do this, and you’ll do that. And if I do this for you, then you’ll do that for me.”

In the end God says, “You keep trying to pay me off with stuff that’s already mine.” Some of us even try to bargain with our lives. But God says, “Please. I’ll take that life if I want it. I’m God.”

We presume upon our service. “I’ll serve you, God!” we say. But he replies, “I’m not served by human hands as though I need anything (Acts 17:25). What are you going to do, give me something to eat? What are you going to do, paint my house? What are you going to give to me, as if I’m lacking?”

The profitable result in these exchanges is the revealing of idolatry and pride within us. We want to live as though the Christian life is a 50/50 project we undertake with God, like faith is some kind of cosmic vending machine. And we’re reinforced in this idolatry by bad preachers, by ministers with no respect for the Scriptures, by talking heads who teach out of emotion instead of texts, who tickle ears with no evident fear of the God who curses bringers of alternative gospels (Gal. 1:8–9). He owes us nothing.

And we have nothing to give to him that he doesn’t already own outright.

The customary response to this, of course, is to ask about the place of following God and serving his cause. There is plenty of call for this in the Bible. But the reality is that all God has to do is reveal himself to you, and you’ll gladly join the mission in service to his kingdom. He doesn’t force the issue; he just has to reveal himself as he is: mighty, wondrous, gracious, loving, and radically saving. No man goes back to saltine crackers when he’s had filet mignon.

And even this truth is further revelation of God’s grace, because

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it shows that he doesn't need us; rather, he *wants* us. When we who call ourselves Christians realize how utterly self-sufficient God is all within himself—the three in one—the gift of Christ to us and for us becomes all the more astonishing. And we will want it this way. Because a God who is ultimately most focused on his own glory will be about the business of restoring us, who are all broken images of him. His glory demands it. So we should be thankful for a self-sufficient God whose self-regard is glorious.

God's Glorious Self-Regard

Paul continues in Romans 11:36, proclaiming, “For from him and through him and to him are all things.” This is an unequivocal declaration that the ultimate origin of everything that exists and *will* exist can be traced back to the hands of God and no further.

Most of us have been told that God created the universe, created all that exists within the universe, and employed the depth of his omnipotence and omniscience to create this because he desired fellowship with man. Have you heard this line of thinking before? It's a very sweet idea, and it would be a great slogan for a Christian motivational poster if it weren't for what the Bible *actually teaches*, which is that this idea is almost blasphemous. Are we to believe that God—in his infinite perfection—was lonely? And that the response to this loneliness was to create a bunch of glory thieves? Is that the infinite God's solution to this hypothetical imbalance in his relational well-being? This is what many of us have been led to believe. And out of our self-regard, we like to picture that a holy, glorious, splendid God—perfect solely within his Trinitarian awesomeness—wanted to be able to stand in a warm-hued living room, romantic music swelling, and look across at us to say, “You complete me.”

No. We were not created as some missing link in God's emotional experience. To think this way makes us the centerpiece of the puzzle of the universe! But we are not that close to center.

There are essentially two ways to view the Scriptures. One way is to view them primarily as a guidebook for our daily living. We

have questions. Surely the Bible is a reliable reference book. So we ask, should we drink alcohol? Well, let's find that in the Bible. We ask, should I go see this movie or not? And we look up some texts about not eating meat sacrificed to idols and end up slightly more confused but feeling religious, at least. Suddenly we've turned the Bible into our Magic 8-Ball. Of course, we don't call it that. We call it things like "the road map to life."

Now, does the Bible contain a wealth of wisdom for practical, daily living? Yes, absolutely. Is it going to specifically answer every question you've got? Not by a long shot. And on top of that, answering our practical questions isn't the point of the Bible.

Maybe that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Maybe you should shave your neck. Or, if you're married, maybe you could ask yourself if the Bible told you to marry your spouse. When you were deciding what job to take or school to attend, did you find "Take that job" or "Go to that school" in the Bible? When I got a call from Highland Village First Baptist Church almost a decade ago asking if I was interested in throwing a résumé together and interviewing to be their pastor, and I was thinking and praying about what to do, I didn't find the answer in the Bible.

If I'm trying to figure out what I should do or where I should go, I can find general principles about wisdom and guidance and worship in the Scriptures, but I can't find "Marry Lauren, take the position at The Village, buy a minivan" in the Scriptures.

Here's my point: what if the Bible isn't about us at all? What if *we* aren't the story of God's revelation?

The Bible definitely issues commands for us to obey and makes demands for our submission. But, in the end, reading the Bible as the Daily Manual for My Life is the deficient way of the two basic ways available to us. We can read it as a reference book about us. Or we can see that the Bible is a book about God. To paraphrase Herbert Lockyer, the Bible is *for* us, but it's not *about* us.⁴

From beginning to end, the Scriptures reveal that the foremost desire of God's heart is not our salvation but rather the glory of his

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own name. God's glory is what drives the universe; it is why everything exists. This world is not present, spinning and sailing in the universe, so that you and I might be saved or lost but so that God might be glorified in his infinite perfections.

This is a revolutionary claim, I know. It jostles our hearts and unsettles us. But that's what we're supposed to do with idols (before they are crushed and melted). We are allergic to the idea that everything exists, including us, not for ourselves but for the glory of God. This is why the Westminster divines began their Confession of Faith with their radical answer to the meaning of life: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." But we may as well say that this is the chief end of *everything*. Still not buying it? According to Scripture:

- For the sake of his name, God did not destroy Israel in the desert (Ezek. 20:5–9).
- God saves men for his name's sake (Ps. 106:8).
- Pharaoh's heart was hardened for the glory of God (Ex. 14:4, 18).
- The beginning of the Israelite monarchy was about the glory of God (1 Sam. 12:19–23).
- Solomon dedicated the temple for the glory of God (1 Kings 8).
- Israel became great and powerful among the nations because God was "making himself a name" (2 Sam. 7:23).
- God did not destroy Israel when it deserved to be destroyed, because he did not want his name blasphemed among the nations (Isa. 48:9–11).
- God decided to destroy the Israelites because they would not lay it in their heart to give glory to his name (Mal. 2:2).
- Jesus's life and ministry was about the glory of God (John 7:18; 17:4).
- The cross of Jesus is about the glory of God (John 12:27–28).
- You and I are saved to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:3–6).
- The Christian life is about the reflection of the glory of God off of our lives into the universe (Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Pet. 4:11).

God

- The second coming is about the consummation of the glory of God (2 Thess. 1:9–10).
- The consummation of all things is that God might be praised (Rev. 21:23).

Are you picking up a theme here?

You might say I'm just prooftexting,⁵ but this is just the tip of the iceberg. It's not for nothing that the Reformers championed *solī Deo gloria* (glory to God alone)—the Bible screams it from every hilltop and rooftop and into every crook and crevice! The glory of God is God's vision and his plan for seeing it fulfilled. Habakkuk 2:14 promises that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” The supremacy of God's glory is everywhere in the Bible because God's plan is for it to be supreme everywhere in the world.

This is the story of the Bible, not you or me. It is God and God alone, God's name and namesake alone. The point of everything is God's glory alone so that to God alone will be the glory. It is God who is deep in riches, God who is deep in wisdom, God who is deep in lovingkindness, and God who is deep in glory. Not us. This is the message of the Bible.

God and God alone stands as supreme. There is no court you could complain to, no appellate court in which to have this reconsidered. In fact, the further into the things of God you press, the clearer this truth becomes. A god on the horizon may be squashed with a squinty eye between your fingertips. The God you press your face against extends to ends you cannot see or fathom. John Piper puts it this way: “The further up you go in the revealed thoughts of God, the clearer you see that God's aim in creating the world was to display the value of his own glory.”⁶

The Roots of Worship

Piper adds, “This aim is no other than the endless, ever-increasing joy of his people in that glory.”⁷ We see this in the Westminster

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Confession as well: “The chief end of man is to glorify God,” yes, but also “to enjoy him forever.”

We can call this enjoyment “worship.” Worship is the attributing of ultimate worth to something. When this ultimate worth is attributed to anyone or anything other than the one, true triune God of the universe, it is idolatry. The root of Christian worship, then, is acknowledging, submitting to, and *enjoying* the supremacy of God’s glory. In all things.

This means, for instance, that God gives us the gift of sex, and it’s a good gift, of course, but he did not give us that gift so that our joy might be complete in the act of sex itself. He gave it so that we might be overwhelmed by the goodness of God to give us such a great gift. Sexuality is not an end in itself, nor is it a means to our glory. It is given to us so that we might worship God. Similarly, God gave us food and wine not so that we could guzzle them down and gorge ourselves or so we *wouldn’t* enjoy them, but rather that we would take a bite of good food or a sip of great wine and enjoy him by way of enjoying them. First Timothy 4:4 tells us, “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”

Worship, when we see it this way, is larger and more encompassing than singing some songs at a church service a couple of times a week. It is the way of life for those entranced by and passionate for the glory of God. We worship God when, while we partake of his good gifts, something occurs in the deepest parts of our soul that forbids glory terminating on the gift itself or on our enjoyment of it but that runs deeper into and extends out to the Giver.

Apart from understanding God and worshiping him in this way, everything becomes superficial. Everything—from dinner to sex to marriage to kids to work to arts and literature—it’s all shallow, all trivial. But when you understand the driving force behind everything, all of a sudden there’s an eternal amount of joy at our disposal, because everything we do is enlightened and enlivened by the endless glory of the eternal God.

God

You don't have to be a religious professional to see evidence that this is true. If I wasn't a pastor and wasn't getting paid to say stuff like this, just purely a student of humanity, I don't believe I could argue with the fact that we all seem to be wired for worship. And I don't think it would be difficult to argue that our worship terminates on the shallow and vacuous.

We have a war going on, and a good portion of the world is in an unbelievable mess of poverty, famine, civic unrest, and violence. And yet if you turn on the news in the United States you will be far more likely to hear about the daily activities of pop stars and actors or how much money an athlete is making and who he's dating than anything meaningful. Surely anyone can see that our worship switch is always set to On, and we're tuned to some ridiculously finite broadcasts. Grown men paint their bodies and surf an incalculable number of websites to follow a sports team—significant emotional energy poured into the physical abilities of children in *a game*. Go to any concert and you'll see people lift their hands spontaneously and clap and close their eyes and be spiritually moved by music. People fish or hike to be in tune with nature. We put posters on our walls, stickers on our cars, ink under our skin, and drugs into our system. We do all of these things and others like them, pouring ourselves automatically and quite naturally into what is decaying. We want to worship something. Worship is an innate response. We are wired for it by God himself.

But something has gone wrong with the wiring.



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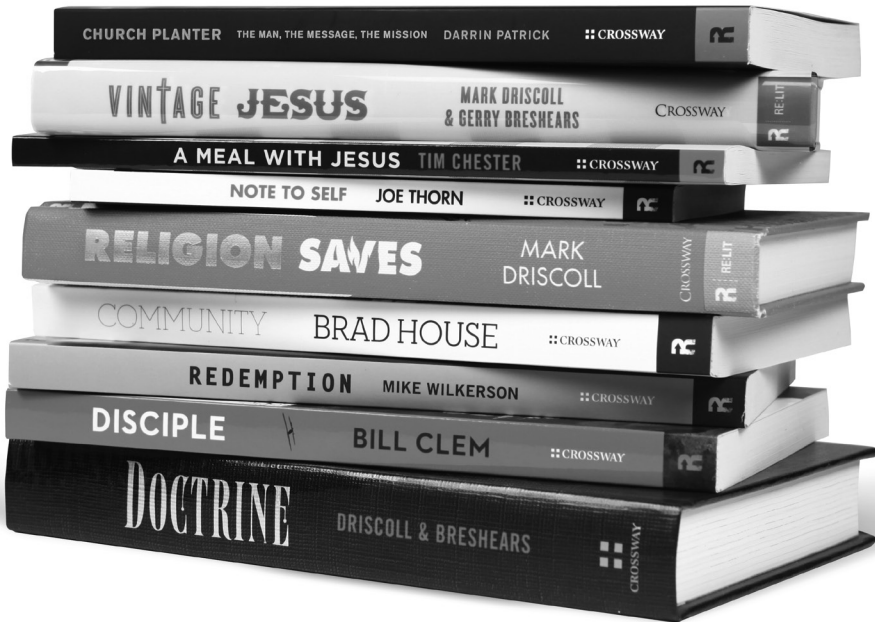
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