

# The Glory of God and the Gospel-Centered Church

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I'm going to talk about the glory of God and the gospel-centered church. Ephesians chapter 3, verse 21, "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." I hope something about that verse grabs you. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever. Amen. Now God gets glory in many ways but the preeminent way and the foundational way and the enduring way is through Christ and his church forever and ever, the text says. Well, just to amplify it a little more look at Ephesians 1 and looks at verses 12 and 13, Paul as you know in Ephesians 1 is outlining the glories of our redemption through Christ and he summarizes all of it by saying, 1:11, "Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory." So Paul says, "At the end of this sovereign God and the mighty and the magnificent work of redemption is that God would get glory."

My first point in this message would be: the cosmic conflict for glory. There is a cosmic conflict for glory. God is consumed with his glory because if God were to glory anything less than God, God would be sinning. God by who he is, can only marvel over things that are in keeping with the perfections of his own nature. So God is about himself being seen and glorified but Satan and the enemies of God are all about the glory of God, they're all about diminishing, distorting, deluding, defaming if not removing the glory of God. There is a cosmic conflict for glory.

Now, for us in the church when we preach the gospel and God saves men and God is building his church, this brings God glory. God has ordained these function in this order and anything and everything else that we may do as a church is secondary and must be subsequent to being gospel-centered and the gospel is central because his glory is paramount. You have to get that. The gospel is the main thing because his glory is everything. Vine says the word, "glory" here in Ephesians has the idea of giving an opinion or making an estimation and when you put glory with God in the Bible it's always about a high and good opinion. The idea is that a healthy gospel church calls this one to have an accurate, good, correct view of God. We have the right estimate of God when we see God in the gospel and in a gospel-healthy church. In Ephesians chapter 3:8, Paul talks about the unfathomable riches of Christ. "To me the very least of the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." It's the

idea that in Christ are the attributes of God and the characteristics of God that are too glorious and too beautiful to fully take in; they're beyond full comprehension. They are unfathomable. The scholars tell us that the word "unfathomable" means untrackable. Our mental and emotional constitution is incapable of taking in the glories and wonders of God; we just can't track it all the way down.

You know, I like to deer hunt and I have been known a few times to shoot a deer that you have to track a long ways. And I have been known to be tracking that deer and just not have the ability to find it, just have to quit until one of my buddies who is a much better deer hunter and much better at tracking comes along and he begins to look in the leaves and over the twigs and the logs and he can say, "This is where he went." And he is able to track it but I was unable. That's the idea here: Christ is the untrackable Christ. He is so great and so glorious, we as humans can't get our arms, the arms in our mind, the arms in our mind in comprehension around the beauties and wonders and wisdoms of God in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 3:10, Paul talks about the manifold wisdom of God. Look at it there, "So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church." That is an interesting statement. You can't track him, you can't comprehend him, he is too magnificent and big but he's starting to be made known to men through the church and that is through the gospel the church preaches.

So, this God is now being made known, where? Through the church. So where do you think the enemy that hates God's glory is going to work the hardest? Where God is made known the most. Where God is seen most clearly. The Christ who is God, who in his full sense is unknowable, is now being truly known through the church. The gospel is preached by the church, God saves men, God builds his church and in the totality of that, God is bringing glory to himself. Now, God is infinite so in one sense we will never know God completely however, we can know him truly through the church, the gospel work in and through the church. The church's central, foundational, essential ministry is the gospel. You see, the church is a telescope so that we can get a true and clear understanding of who God truly is. Paul talks about the manifold wisdom of God. The church is the theater that projects the truth and the true image of God. Ephesians 3:10, he says, "He is made manifold through the church". The word "through" there has the idea of a conduit. I just picture a pipe through which flows out the truth about who God is. The church is therefore God's telescope; it is God's theater; it is God's pipe to flow out the truth so that God might be seen and known and glorified.

So, if God is seen truly, accurately through the church and her gospel ministry, then why is it so hard to find sound gospel churches? Why is it so hard to build sound gospel churches? Well, I submit to you it's because the chief purpose and central ploy of God's enemies is and always has been the replacing or at least the marring of the glory of God.

Go to Isaiah, if you will, right quick, Isaiah chapter 14. Isaiah 14:12-14 as we have this historical prophesy about the fall of Babylon and Babylon's king. Of course, Babylon and Babylon's king, they're the enemy of Israel but more than that is portrayed here. This is a typology of Satan and his kingdom and his hatred of things of God and the people of God and the person of God particularly. Isaiah 14:12-14, he says here in verse 12, "How you

have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations!" Now, I'm convinced that just as David is a type of Christ, so these pagan kings who are the enemies of Israel are a type of Satan. Babylon is a type of Satan's kingdom and the king of Babylon is a type of Satan. It pictures Satan. These ancient kings hated Israel and why was that? Did they all just decide, "Hey, we're going to pick on Israel?" No, it's because Israel was to be an image of God and God's glory in the earth and they wanted to replace God's glory with their own or at least they wanted to diminish and distort God's true image and God's glory.

So this a prophetic statement here about how Satan tries to be in the place of God and usurp the glory of God. In verse 12, what does he call him? The star of the morning, the sun of the dawn. That's talking about Babylon's king but wait a minute, Revelations 22:16 says that's the title for Christ, he is the bright and morning star. But that Satan's ploy, "I want to be the Chris., I want to be the one to get the glory. I want to be seen." It's always been his ploy. In verse 13, this same prophetic typology, if you will says, "But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north.'" This is a prophetic word about the antichrist, that satanic superman, who plans to set himself up before the people as God. That is what he's saying here, "I will sit in the mount of assembly." 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and 4 speak to this, "Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness," that's the antichrist, "is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes," and notice what he does, "and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat," that's what Isaiah was saying, "in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." That's always been Satan's ploy. Here the antichrist, the satanic superman, desires to set himself up even on the throne of heaven in blasphemous, marring, and replacing of God and his glory.

Now, what's the application for us? Well, the application for us in the church today is that I'm not so sure we don't miss the satanic mission in the world today and I think sometimes we miss it because we over-emphasize Satan's role and the moral evils of the day and we de-emphasize Satan's diligent work in the professing church today. Now, certainly in an ultimate sense, Satan is behind all the moral evils in society: adultery and murders and thefts and robberies and child abuse and hatred and war; all of these things ultimately he's behind. But I am convinced that man and his depravity can pretty well pull all of those off by himself. Before God judged the earth in Genesis chapter 6, he said he looked down there and he saw that man's heart was only evil continually. Ephesians speaks about how we lived in the lust of our flesh, desiring in the desires of the flesh so much so that even our nature cries for God's wrath. I don't know exactly how all this falls, but I believe that Satan and his demons are not so interested in that part of the work. But I am convinced Satan with all of his ingenuity, with all of his intelligence, and with all of his might is attacking the church of God to replace or at least diminish the glory of God in the church and he is so crafty and subtle and creative in his work.

Go back to the New Testament, go to 1 Timothy if you will, chapter 4, look at verse 1, Paul writing to Timothy, now Timothy has the oversight of a lot of these churches. He's

going to be appointing elders and Paul is going to tell him something he needs to understand. So Paul says that the Spirit explicitly says, "That in the latter times," that doesn't mean the last days even though theologians might differ on that, I believe it means right now. We're in the last, I'll use the word in a more general sense, dispensation of what God is doing in the universe. These are the latter times. "In the latter times some will fall away from the faith paying attention to deceitful spirits and the doctrines of demons." The doctrines. Now, do you think Satan is going to put up tent meetings and put out placards out front and say, "This is satanic worship and we're teaching the doctrines of demons." No, he's going to clothe himself like an angel of light and get into the church and he is going to teach in the church with some Christian garb on the outside veneer his doctrines.

James talks about that wisdom that is not from above heavenly but that wisdom that is from below, its earthly and, natural and demonic, James says. James 3:15. Look at verse 3 of 1 Timothy 4, he gives some characteristics of these doctrines of demons and lo and behold, we see it again. "Men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared by those who believe and know the truth." Now, what is he saying? He's saying one of the primary characteristics of this demonic doctrine is men who would come in and bring their ordinances and their rules and their legalisms and add them on to Jesus. I'm not saying that's all that's involved but Paul in this case talking to Timothy says, "That's one of the primary things to be aware of." Legalistic religion parading as true Christianity. The apostle Paul talking to the Galatians saw them moving from a pure and true gospel and he says in Galatians 1:6-7, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel. Which is really not another, although there are some who are disturbing you who want to distort the gospel of Christ." Satan's ploy is to destrt, devalue. We see this so often today de-emphasize the gospel. It's not central in the church today. Satan knows that when the gospel is diminished or in some cases completely derailed in the church's ministries, God's glories is diminished or derailed. He hates God and he works to rob God of his glory and when the church is weakened and the gospel is not pure and the doctrine is not straight, then God's theater of the church has no true image to project. God's telescope has no solid object to focus upon. God's pipe has no flow of truth coming through it. God is not seen for who God truly is because he has purposed to reveal himself truly through his church.

That's why Paul's strongest condemnation is against those who would pollute and diminish and in effect work to supplant the true gospel of Jesus Christ. He says in Galatians 1:8-9, "That if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you he is to be c cursed. Considered that which is set aside for wrath and condemnation." I don't think that there is a stronger condemnation anywhere than that. All that is Satan's ploy. We must remember that the church in one sense is a place of respite. It's a place of security. It is a place of rest for the saints of God. But I have seen too many pastors today be unbalanced here. They seem to tell you that your church isn't always a sweet place and a happy place and a loving place, then you define one that is. That is a lie from hell. The church is a place of respite, it is a place of rest, it is a place of security but it is also a war zone. It is also a battlefield because the

enemies of God who hate God and hate God's glory work feverishly in the church to distort, to dilute, to devalue, to derail the true gospel and therefore the glory of God.

I thought about my, in a couple of three weeks, my 30 years here at Grace Life Church and it is so true that there are the most wonderful, wonderful memories of love and of blessing and peace and rest and security. And there are those memories of war and battle and strife and pain and suffering. We sang a song earlier about the church finally being at rest, that day is coming. Now, let me say something to you: as the church matures, you have good men in your church and their wives and they're discerning and they begin to knock down the enemy before he can get started. Amen? And you don't have to go through the mess you went through in the early years. We'll talk about that more in just a moment. I just want you to know there is a cosmic conflict about the glory of God going on.

Number two, the gospel dye permeates the entire garment. The gospel dye permeates the entire garment. Folks used to dye clothes, they don't do that much anymore but the picture here is that the gospel is a dye that it didn't just come in and touch part of the garment of the church, it's to permeate the whole church. We are in the church dealing with the gospel not like one would deal with marbles in a bag, that the gospel is one of our marbles. No, it's a dye that permeates the whole fabric. I think there is error in thinking in the church today that the gospel is one of the important things that we do and we preach it, we share it and we get men out of hell and into heaven and then the church looks to other helps for family life and other helps for parenting skills and other helps for how to deal with the difficulties of life and the challenges and how to have a happy life. But that's not right. The gospel is central to all the ministries of the church. The gospel dye saturates all of a true church. It's not just one of the marbles in the bag, it's the dye that affects the whole fabric. Take marriage for example, you give me a husband who has been under gospel preaching, preaching in the power of the Spirit and that husband begins to understand the great doctrines of depravity and the guilt that he has before a holy God and that holy justice ought to crush him and he is humbled under that gospel preaching and he hears the great preaching of Christ and the unsearchable riches of Christ and that Christ is taking his place and Christ is all wise to become the perfect Savior for his soul and if he gets to treasure Christ and love Christ and join Christ, he is humbled and broken over his sins. He treasures Jesus Christ. He is a new humble man and a much better husband. A better husband because he has learned to be gospel humbled and walk in the humility of a man who knows the gospel. He is a better husband than if he went to twelve how-to seminars on how to be a good husband because the gospel dye permeates the totality of church life. You give me a wife who has been broken under the weight of her sin and her guilt and her lostness and the vileness of her character before a holy God but she's also embraced the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ to know that he foreknew her and he predestined her and he died for her. He sent the Spirit to regenerate her. He lives in her. He is sanctifying her. He is taking her to glory and she is so deeply in love with Christ. But she is humbled over what she is but glories in what Christ has made her. That woman walking in that gospel humility is a much better wife. Better than if she went to twelve seminars, learning just the how to's of being a good wife.

Now be in balance, the how-to's aren't bad but listen to me: if you get the how-to's without true regeneration you get a Pharisee . And we've got a bunch of them. You give me a mom and a dad, some parents, who are raising kids who have been broken under gospel preaching, they've been humbled over all that Christ has done for them. They see themselves as woefully inadequate. They see themselves as only sinners saved by grace. They can look at their precious children when they blow it and say, "Sweetheart, I was wrong when I raised my voice. Daddy is a sinner and he needs a Savior too." I'm telling you those kinds of parents make much better parents than parents who have been to twelve how-to seminars on how to be a good parent even though there is a good place for that too now. Are you getting me yet? The gospel is the dye that permeates the whole fabric of the church.

In Hosea 11:10, we have the statement of the Lord as a lion that roars and the Bible says, "They will walk after the Lord and he will roar like a lion. Indeed he will roar." Now that's twice talking about this roaring, "And his sons will come trembling from the west." Now, there is an immediate historical fulfillment and that is the restoring of Israel back from their captivity and their rebellion but there is a farther and deeper fulfillment of Christ being the lion of the tribe of Judah who comes back to reclaim his own. But notice the picture: he comes roaring. I believe that pictures what the gospel does to those who are truly the children of God. I don't know about you but have you ever been around an adult male lion when he roars? It subdues you, it humbles you. These guys don't come running back to the Lord cocked full of themselves with pride and assurance about their worth and their merit. They come back with confidence and they come back though with a humility. "Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus said. They come back with that kind of Spirit knowing they are fully welcome, knowing they are fully his but there is a different countenance, there is a different hard attitude, there is a different composure about their spirit because the gospel's had an effect in their lives. And we need to be gospel-centered because the gospel is the dye that permeates the entire fabric of the church and not look to anything else to change men's hearts because, friend, it's not the external forms and rules that change the heart, it is the gospel that changes the heart. Spurgeon said, "If God is not going to save him with the gospel, he's not going to save him with anything else." You might say, "Well, it's not working. We're not growing fast enough and we're not big enough." Well fine, just abandon yourself to the gospel and say, "Whatever God does is fine with me." I'm not going to be able to miss because if you are God's and he does the saving, if you build the mess he will make you tear it back down. Been there, done that.

III. A healthy church is the soul of an effectual gospel. A healthy church is the soul of an effectual gospel. Effectual meaning it accomplishes that which it sets out to perform, it's effective. Go to Acts chapter 5 if you would with me. Acts, chapter 5. You know we have the revival of Pentecost, thousands are being saved, tens of thousands are being saved, hundreds of thousands are being saved. I don't know the exact chronology at this point but it is a one time revival never to be repeated again. Glorious things are happening. Notice what it says, Acts 5:14, "And all the more believers in the Lord," Luke just has to add on to that, "multitudes of men and women," he's not satisfied with that, "are constantly added to their number. All the more, multitudes constantly added." I'd say that's a great revival, that's a great evangelistic crusade. People are just getting saved and

saved and saved. 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 says, Paul writing to the church at Corinth, "You are our letter, written in our hearts," here's the phrase, "known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." Paul said, If you want to know about my gospel and what it is and what it does, look at the people who are under my gospel. They're my letter known and read of all men. If people want to know and understand the truth and the power of the gospel, they should look at the people in the church who have been affected by that gospel. The point is: this gospel changes people from the inside out and the new life should flow from the new birth.

Let me say some things that need to be healthy in the church if the church is going to be fertile soil for an effective gospel, a gospel that works, a gospel that changes people, a gospel that's powerful. First of all, the preaching of the word in the power of the Spirit must be there. I'm not talking about using the Bible in messages, I'm talking about preaching the word of God. No church can be healthy without the pulpit being healthy. So I would say to the brother's and sister's out there planting churches and revitalizing churches: nail it down in your hearts whatever else we get right let's get the pulpit right.

Genuine conversion in the church, we've got to get away from the easy believism and the quick fixes and the hoop jumps and look for the genuine evidences of biblically mandated conversion where God changes people and they are really different. The repentance of sin is there, the burden over lostness is clear, they are trusting and treasuring and relying on Christ and it's obvious. In early Baptist life in America one of the leading influences perhaps, the leading influence was the Charleston Baptist Association and they said this in one of their ancient documents, "None are fit members of a gospel church without first having experienced an entire change of nature." Wow. The Charleston Baptist Association in fact says, "We're looking for a total changed life and then you can be a member."

Number three, not only preaching the word, genuine conversion but doctrinal integrity. There should be a statement of faith that outlines the essential doctrines of the church. The day of mushy theological positions and non-definable conclusions about what we believe and say, "Well, if you just love Jesus, that is enough." That's not right. The church is the pillar and support of truth, the Bible says. I think that would mean that we need to know what the truth is if we are going to be the pillar and support of it.

Accountability in the church. It ought to be that when you join the church, you're always loving now, always with humility, but there ought to be accountability. There ought to be accountability for doctrine. If someone preaches in a pulpit or teaches in a class something that is not sound doctrine, the elders should hold them accountable. Not with harshness, sometimes lovingly shepherd them to the truth but there ought to be accountability. There ought to be accountability for attendance in the church. We've been doing this for many many years, this idea of ten million or so Southern Baptist who never come to church, that's an atrocious thing to send those people out into the world to say they know our Christ. The sanctification of life, just living a holy and pure life, never in perfection but open and outward sins should be dealt with. Stewardship, there should be

some accountability for stewardship within the church of our time, our talent and our resources. Discipline in the church and I'm talking about specifically corrective discipline. Listen, how can we proclaim without any credibility that our gospel transforms men from sin-loving, Satan-following, self-indulgent sinners when we have active members who as a pattern of our life are openly sin-loving, Satan-following, self-indulgent sinners? Is that hard? The church needs some discipline in it. Christ-centered worship, Christ-honoring doctrinally sound singing infused with spiritual passion and done with the best musical excellence we can do ought to be a part of church life.

You see, our doctrine is experiential doctrine. It needs to be more than what we yell about. It needs to be realized in the body of Christ. If these and other biblical truths are not being established experiential in the church, then we are failing to be a gospel church and we hinder the gospel we preach. There is a misguided and unbalanced notion that if we can get the pulpit right, we can basically neglect other things, other areas of reformation. The reformation of our ecclesiology or our methods, we just kind of let that go if the pulpit is right. But friend, that is not true. It's both, it's both, getting the pulpit right and neglecting the implementation of a biblical methodology is the height of hypocrisy. Your church is proclaiming one thing and glaringly your people live something different. Preaching is not an end. Preaching is not an end. A healthy church, one that rightfully glorifies God, is the end of what we are about. A healthy church that brings glory to God is the end. Do you know how I can prove that? I'm almost certain there will be no preaching in heaven. There will be no preaching. Do you know any verse or anywhere that suggests that me and Brother David and, Brother Bruce are going to preach in heaven? No, but the church will be in heaven and will be glorifying God in heaven forever and ever.

Today there seems to be even in good reformed circles an idea of a tokenism that if we get the pulpit right, we can just do a token of changes in the ecclesiology of the church and that is okay, just some cosmetic things. I thought of the term "rhino" the other day. I know that's a political term today but I call it: Reformed In Name Only. The reformation may be held in the pulpit but it is not having much of an affect in the body. In the message of the church, there must be reformation but there also must be reformation in the methods of the church. If a methodology is not being reformed then the pulpit is but rhetoric. A revived reforming church proves the legitimacy of the pulpit. Preaching the gospel is a means of reforming individuals and reforming churches.

Now, I've set you up. I had you look at Acts 5:14, look at it again, "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number." I like verse 14. Amen? Don't you like the idea of all the more people believing on Christ? Multitudes believing on Christ? Constantly being added into the church by baptism? More and more are believing on Christ. But now look at verses 1-10, I will not read it all. Ananias and Sapphira come in and you know the story. Ananias and Sapphira find out that they can get a lot of esteem and glory and praise on themselves if they will lie and deceive about how much they are bringing to the offering. You know, they are pooling their funds at this point in time to help the poor people and make sure everybody is taken care of. So Ananias and Sapphira in the flesh want glory to themselves in the



church and they're doing this deceptive thing to get it. And God kills them. When is the last time you saw God kill somebody on Sunday morning? It had an effect in this church. It purified the church. Look if you will down at verse 11, "And great fear came over the whole church." I guess so. That word "fear" means that generally the effect of this disciplining work of God caused people to focus more purely and truly on God. They weren't veering off in their affections and their thinking, they got more focused on God. They thought, "You know what? I think I'll come to church this Sunday night. I don't think I'll miss Wednesday night this week." There was a purification in the church.

Notice if you will verse 12, "At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico." That big area outside of Solomon's temple, that portico area. They were all in unity there, they were all in one accord. The unification of the church. Is there anything any better than a church united in the truth and in the Spirit? Well, we see this is purification, unification. Notice in verse 13, "But none of the rest dared to associate with them." None of the rest dared associated with them. At this time, historians tell us that there was likely thousands and thousands and thousands of people who are not yet Christians and who are not yet part of the church but they were meeting and fellowshiping and hearing the apostles preach and just learning about what was going on but when this happened, that group separated off. Have you come to realize that when God moves, your numbers may decline? First, sanctification. God sort of cleaned his people up and set them apart from those worldly ones who were not yet converted. They didn't associate with them anymore.

Look at the last part of verse 13, "However the people held them in high esteem," that's the admiration for the church. The people said, "We're not going to join with them but I tell you what, they are genuine and I respect them." Now, I'd hope that it's true and I do believe that it is true that Grace Life Church of the Shoals today has more admiration from people who disagree with us than we did twenty years ago. I hope they would say, "We wouldn't join them and we don't agree with them but we do respect them. They are consistent in what they believe and teach."

Then you get to verse 14, the one we looked at first. The multiplication of the church. But here's the point: you don't get to verse 14 without coming through verses 1-13. We want verse 14 but you have to go through 1-13 to get to 14. That working of God, the genuineness, the purity, the gospel reality being lived out in the church. Listen, caused 14 to happen. All the more believers in the Lord constantly added to their number. The effectual work of the gospel was aided by the pure fertile, spiritual soul of the local church. The word, the gospel will not go forth effectually in real power unless the head, that is Christ and the person of the Spirit, goes with it. And the head, Christ, will not go forth in effectual power without the body. Christ didn't say, "I'm going to the write gospel on the mountain side. I'm going to write it in the stars. I'm going to send celestial bees to hover in the heaven." He said, "My church will be my method." God's word goes out with the power of God's head, Jesus Christ and God's head brings his power through the body of the church. That's why the church must strive to be fertile soil for gospel seed to bear fruit for the glory of God. You see, the purity of the church affects the power of the

gospel because God has ordained it to be this way. If the church is not living the gospel, it is not effectively proclaiming the gospel for the church is the soil in which the gospel seed is planted and grows. If the soil of the church is weak, the gospel is weakened and the result is: God is not seen in the church as who he is and ought to be seen and God is robbed of his glory.

I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, "Have you seen my church? Do you know what I face in trying to reform my church? Do you know how difficult it is?" Yes, I think I do, I think I understand it and that's why we have IV. Twenty years to breakthrough is what I call it. Twenty years to breakthrough. Now twenty is an arbitrary number. It may take you thirty, it may take you 8. I don't know and I say this tongue in cheek because I constantly say at our church plants and our partners that have a twenty year vision, have a twenty year vision, have a twenty year vision. This isn't easy work.

Galatians 4:19 and we're about through, Galatians 4:19 turn there with me if you will. Galatians 4:19, Paul says to the church at Galatia, a church that had false teaching getting into it, a church that had some seemingly prominent members embracing some false doctrine and distorting the gospel and really turning to another gospel and Paul says, "Here's what I am doing, functioning as the pastor of the church at this time. My children with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you." Now the word "labor" there, ladies, is the phrase for childbirth. A. T. Robertson, the Greek scholar says, "This is a powerful picture of pain." Paul said, "I'm in the painful throes of labor like a woman and how she feels when she is giving birth until I see Christ formed in you as a church." Pastor, it will be no different for us. If we want to have true churches that glorify God, it will be like having babies every week. You'll get pregnant about once a month and there will be some labor and toil and pain and difficulty. That is why I say twenty years to breakthrough.

It's a lot like Abraham when God told him, "Abraham take your son, your one and only unique son, Isaac, take him up on the mountain side and I want you to sacrifice him up there." Now, we are not told everything that happened in Abraham's mind and in Abraham's heart but there must have been some toilsome, painful labor going on in his heart, walking up that mountain with his son. The Bible tells us that Isaac on one occasion looked at his dad and said, "Dad, we've got some stuff to sacrifice. We've got wood and you've got the knife but where is the lamb?" Abraham said, "Well, God will provide for himself the lamb." I don't know that Abraham knew all that that meant but I do know this: he kept going and he kept working and he kept laboring through and he kept marching and he kept hiking believing God, Now that is the key, believing God, doing it God's way, trusting what God said. He didn't become pragmatic. He didn't bring in the logic and reason of man. He said, "This is what God said to do. I'm doing God's work, God's way. I'm going to trust and I am going to keep marching. Fear is there. I am going through the fear. Discouragement is there, I am going through the discouragement. Opposition is there because everything in me is opposing this as a human and as a father but I am going up there." And when he got to the top of the mountain and put his son on that altar and raised that dagger up toward heaven God said, "Stop, here is a ram caught in the thicket." Pastor, you've got to stay faithful until you see the ram. So many of you

get halfway up the mountain and three fourths of the way up the mountain and you stop and you quit and you bail out and you get into tokenism and you get into capitulation and compromise and you do what everybody else is doing and you never see God's ram. You never see how big he is and how great he is and how faithful he is and how fully he will provide. Stay the course, keep marching on, stand on the truth. God's got a ram for you on the other side.

John MacArthur was being interviewed not long ago and I think he had been pastoring in his church pushing 40 years at the time and John MacArthur said, "I finally know what a mature church looks like." Wait a minute John, finally? Finally? What about your five and ten and fifteen and twenty and twenty five and thirty and thirty five? John said, "I've just finally found my ram. I see now what the body of Christ is really supposed to be." He didn't mean in perfection. I think I am tasting some of that at Grace Life Shoals. I think we are finally enjoying the kind of love and maturity and joy in Christ that God meant for us to have. I think we have struggled at that heel and we hadn't arrived, don't misunderstand me but I think we might be seeing the hindquarters of the ram. It's like a bell curve, you know how a bell curve works and that's where many of you are, you're on that bell curve. Now some of you are just getting started and some of you are actually in a hole at the base of a bell curve. That's the way you feel and you have to keep obeying God and preaching the truth and implementing truth in your methodology and you've got to keep repenting where you blow it as a pastor, humbling yourself before the people and say, "Hey, I blew it here. Will you all forgive me? Let's try again." And you keep going up that bell curve, and you keep going up that bell curve and you keep going up that bell curve and when you get right at the top, all of a sudden gravity starts helping you a little bit. Praise the Lord. You know what that point is right there at the top when gravity starts helping you and it's not quite as hard? That is 20 years, that is 20 years. Because there is a time when you go from striving, Paul's word here for the Galatians, laboring, to build a healthy church. There is a time when you go from laboring to build a healthy church to shepherding a mature church. Did you hear that? I don't want to speculate but I guess I will, there aren't two percent maybe, two percent of evangelical pastors that ever get to the place where they have the unbelievable, fulfilling joy and blessing of shepherding a mature church. Why don't you be one of them? Why don't you prove it can be done for the glory of God?

Now, listen to me: every church is always growing, every church is always learning, every church is always repenting and every church is always reforming. We certainly are, however, there is a time when the pastors are no longer in the painful toil of birthing a church, they pass over to the refreshing service of shepherding a mature flock. Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 16:18, where he talks about Stephanus and Fortunatus and somebody else, I forgot, how they were refreshing to him. And some of you think, "My pastorate is warfare and it's difficult and it's painful." It's going to be until you get up there where the ram is. Twenty years to breakthrough. Vine in his work on the Greek language says, "The word 'glory' has the idea of God being seen for who God truly is and God is most truly seen for who God truly is when his church is gospel-centered and gospel healthy."

So, it's not about pastors getting to an easy place, it's about when the church can gain some consistency and maturity, God begins to be seen in and through that church for who he truly is. A love gets in that church that's of God and the people say, "That is God's love." They see him for who he truly is. They begin to understand the wisdom of God and putting all this together the way he has and you marvel over the manifold wisdom of God. God is being seen for who he truly is. You walk in maturity so that you are not divisive and devouring one another but there is love and forgiveness and you say, "Oh, that's the way God's grace really is," and God gets the glory because he is finally in his church being seen more for who he truly is. I just want to tell you, if that is not your motivation for pastoring, you need to repent and decide today, "My motivation is that God, you'll be glorified in this church," and that will hold you for a month, for a year, for five years or fifteen or twenty five or fifty because the glory of God is worth it. There are pleasures, pleasures, joys, blessings unspeakable in the pastorate if we'll stay the course for the glory of God. Ephesians 3:21, "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. To all generations forever and ever. Amen."

Let's stand together.