ELLIOT CLARK

MISSION AFFIRMED

RECOVERING THE MISSIONARY MOTIVATION OF PAUL

"Clark calls missionaries and the churches that support them to faithful ministry that looks to God's approval and to the reward God gives. We are so quick to live for the praise of people instead of the praise of God. Clark also corrects the idea that Paul invariably planted churches and then moved quickly on to the next field. Instead, we see that Paul continued to labor and work with churches so that they were established in truth. I would love to see every missionary and every church sending and supporting missionaries (which should be all churches!) read this book."

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"*Mission Affirmed* is immensely practical, challenging, accessible, and hopeful. It is a call to be more thoroughly and thoughtfully biblical about why we do the things we do in missions. All of us—whether pastors or church members, goers or senders—could all benefit from this insightful book."

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood*; coeditor, *Joyfully Spreading the Word*

"The greatest dangers facing the church are internal, but they're not always obvious. In *Mission Affirmed*, Elliot Clark reminds us of an unnoticed, even celebrated, danger undermining our mission—the lure of selfish motivations and worldly means to accomplish the Great Commission. Instead, Clark argues, we must embrace Paul's eschatological motivation. Paul's longing to be approved by God on the last day fueled his missionary desire and guided his missiological methods. By recovering Paul's motivation for missions, we, too, will long to please the God who has already accepted us in Christ by his grace, and we will eschew the praise of others. Churches, pastors, Christians, missionaries, sending agencies—we all need this vital reminder."

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Mission Affirmed

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Mission Affirmed

Recovering the Missionary Motivation of Paul

Elliot Clark

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To the honor of my missionary heroes,
whose good and faithful service
produces thanksgiving in me
to the glory of God


Rome
SPAIN
MACEDONIA
Philippi
Berea
Thessalonica
GREECE
Aegean Sea
Athens
Corinth
Cenchreae
ACHAIA
CRETE
0 100 200 300 400 mi
0 200 400 600 km


Troas
ASIA
GALATIA
Ephesus
PISIDIA
Miletus
LYCAONIA
Tarsus
CILICIA
Antioch
SYRIA
CYPRUS
Mediterranean Sea
Damascus
NABATEA
JUDEA
Jerusalem
ARABIA

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More Than Mission Accomplished

Troas

FROM THE DISTANT HORIZON, ships trace into the turquoise harbor like bees on blue sky returning to their hive. They come to Troas from across the Mediterranean Basin and funnel northward, following the Aegean to this, the westernmost tip of Asia. From here, not far across the watery divide, stands Greece and the heart of the Roman Empire. Troas is a place where East meets the sea, and where the sea opens westward to opportunity. This port city is the perfect launchpad for European expedition.

So it was for Paul, for it was here where the apostle, during his second missionary journey, first received a vision summoning him to Macedonia (Acts 16:6–10), a call for help that propelled the gospel into Europe, all the way to the glorious cities of Athens and Corinth. That seminal moment, "the Macedonian Call," has since become metaphorical for the task of Christian missions and archetypal of Paul's ambition as a pioneer evangelist.

Perhaps that missionary compulsion led Paul back to Troas on his third journey. After spending nearly three years in Asia Minor's

Ephesus working at his trade, teaching daily in the hall of Tyrannus, and ministering in private homes, Paul was ready to move on. He desired to return and visit the believers in Macedonia and Greece, retracing his steps—as was his custom. His excursion would again begin in Troas.

In a letter to the Corinthian church, Paul tells the story of that second visit to Troas. "A door was opened for me in the Lord" (2 Cor. 2:12)—Paul's way of saying that the power of God's Spirit was on display as people heard and believed the gospel (Acts 14:27). Here again, this metaphor is one Christians still employ today. Missionaries, following Paul's example, long and pray for such an occasion, for a door to be opened to declare the message of Christ (Col. 4:3).

Striking, though, is what Paul recounts next. That moment—when the Holy Spirit was at work and the gospel was bearing fruit—Paul left.

As my teenaged son would say, "Wait, what?" What could lead Paul, the pioneer missionary with a driving passion to reach the unreached, to walk away from an open door? What was it that, while not incredibly urgent, became for Paul more important?

From his letter to the Corinthians, we discover that Paul had apparently come to Troas with multiple intentions. Among them, he wanted to preach the gospel. But Troas was a rendezvous point. Paul was there waiting for his colleague, Titus, likely due any day onboard a ship from Corinth.[1] And Paul was concerned about the news he would bring. Had the Corinthian church received Paul's message and his messenger? How did they

1 For a summary of the events preceding the composition of 2 Corinthians, see David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 26–30.

respond to the apostle's stinging rebuke? Was their relationship intact or in ruins?

Perhaps every so often Paul would venture out onto the docks or ascend the craggy cliffs overlooking Troas's harbor and spy for the latest ship arriving from the West. As time wore on and Titus didn't show, Paul says he became unsettled. Despite the incredible opportunity for witness before him, anxiety grew within him (2 Cor. 2:12–13). He was disturbed to the point of abandoning Troas—again, for a second time.

Evangelization of the World in Our Lifetime

As early as 1900, at the turn of the last century, John R. Mott put to page what had already become the rallying cry of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions: "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation."[2] As a burgeoning Protestant organization made up of ambitious young people from Western nations such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland, these students saw the urgent global need and unprecedented opportunity to take the gospel to the whole world in their lifetimes. They believed it could be done.

Looking back on these youthful forebears from an optimistic era, we might be tempted to snicker at such audacity. With the clarity of hindsight, we can now see how that vision was destined for failure. In fact, we could note that the glowing enthusiasm of many Protestants in that day didn't materialize into global evangelization but, instead, faded in the shadows of world wars.

Yet from the darkness of World War II a new generation of missionaries and strategists emerged that once again roused the church

2 John R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1900).

to consider her role in the world and the possibility of reaching the uttermost parts of the earth. Perhaps the foremost proponent of this vision was Ralph Winter, professor at the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary, who, along with Donald McGavran, inspired a new generation of Christian ambassadors and simultaneously raised the stakes for the church's mission. At Lausanne I in 1974, the First International Congress on World Evangelization, Winter brought the world's "hidden peoples" into view, broadening the Great Commission call to reach all nations—previously understood as geopolitical nation states—by unveiling the lostness of ethnolinguistic people groups. The insight and writing of McGavran and Winter infused missions with a fresh urgency while inspiring a renewed optimism. Once those people groups had been located, the task would become definable and therefore attainable.[3]

Today, we're still riding the wave of that transformative vision. In subsequent decades, countless ministries and organizations have made it their ambition to identify, classify, and reach the unreached. With scientific precision we've now determined the scope of our mission, and we're increasingly motivated by the possibility of its accomplishment. The missions community is once again buoyed by the hope of "finishing the task." Like John Mott and the Student Volunteer Movement of that bygone era, many today are convinced that we'll see the completion of the missionary mandate within our lifetimes. It's all within reach.[4]

3 For example: "In the 1970s, the Lord began to open the eyes of many to the fact that the irreducible, essential mission task of a breakthrough in every people group was also a completable task." See Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge," Joshua Project website, accessed April 10, 2020, joshuaproject.net/assets/media/articles/finishing-the-task.pdf, 539.

4 Others have questioned this perspective, and a growing number of missiologists and mission agencies are rethinking the way we designate people groups. See Peter T. Lee and James

But what does this have to do with Paul leaving Troas?

Many Christians assume a narrative of the apostle's ministry: that his singular ambition was to preach the gospel to those who hadn't heard, in lands yet unreached.[5] In extreme cases, Paul can be presented as not much more than a one-dimensional character from a mass market paperback. According to this reading, all he cared about was the next city, the next people group, the final frontier. To be fair, the book of Acts can contribute somewhat to this assumption, as Luke's story races along with Paul scurrying from one location to the next. And when we read Paul's letter to the church in Rome—a city he had yet to visit—we find him already talking about the next destination, Spain.

But Troas—and Paul's tenuous and tear-filled relationship with the church at Corinth—presents another dimension. Paul's ministry was motivated by more than the pioneer advance of the gospel.[6] The anxiety he felt about Corinth was common to his experience with multiple churches (2 Cor. 11:28). He was constantly concerned with issues of ecclesial unity, moral purity, theological accuracy, and leadership development. Paul's goal wasn't just to preach the gospel but to teach the whole counsel of God and present everyone mature in Christ (Acts 20:27; Col. 1:28). Paul was a goer and, sometimes when possible, a stayer. He also devoted significant time to his tentmaking vocation and, when necessary, defended his

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Sung-Hwan Park, "Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical Reevaluation of Unreached People Groups," *Missiology: An International Review* 46, no. 3 (2018): 212–25.

5 Paul's stated ambition "to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named" (Rom. 15:20) doesn't preclude the reality that he had multiple aims in his apostolic ministry.

6 Dean Gilliland acknowledges that "the work for spiritual conversion had prior claim on Paul's life," yet there are many aspects of his holistic ministry that the Bible describes in ways "so matter-of-fact that it would be easy to miss" the various features of Paul's mission. See Dean S. Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 65.

personal reputation (Acts 18:1–3; cf. 20:33–35). In the last years of his ministry, he even invested much effort and relational capital to provide for the poor believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8:1–9:15; Rom. 15:25–32), not just to raise support for his mission to the remote boundaries of the Mediterranean.

Perhaps most overlooked of all, Paul was motivated by the approval of God. As he mentions repeatedly in his Corinthian correspondence, his driving ambition—one of many—was to receive, on the last day, God's commendation (1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:9–10; 10:18). This pursuit of God's praise, while of critical importance, also led Paul to seek the affirmation of others, including his church plants. If they moved on from the apostle and his teaching, Paul was concerned for their position before Christ. If other teachers emerged who didn't build appropriately on the foundation Paul laid, he knew it spelled disaster. And it was this concern—an issue Titus was bringing word about—that pulled Paul away from a wide-open door for evangelism. So, whatever we might assume about Paul's priorities in mission and his zealous ambition for reaching the unreached, we must also take his anxious departure from Troas into account. In a sense, it was a kind of reverse Macedonian call.

Missions in an Age of Two-Day Delivery and Disposable Culture

I'll never forget the phone call that changed my view of missions forever. Our family was living in one of the most unreached pockets of one of the most unreached nations in the world. When we'd first moved to the Central Asian city that we called home, the nearest church was five hours away. You could jump in a car and drive for hundreds of miles in any direction, passing innumerable towns and villages, knowing that every single person you saw was

Muslim. Not only were the people not Christian, but they'd likely never heard a clear explanation of the gospel—and they had little prospect of hearing it anytime soon.

As I would travel throughout this region, I was always struck by the vastness of its lostness, a reality tauntingly echoed by the rambling, windswept mountains across the endless, treeless steppe. The land was barren, sun-scorched, and thirsty for the gospel. The indescribable need led us to plant our family there.

But here I was, on the phone with my colleague and supervisor, letting him know we'd decided to move on. I could list all the reasons I gave him, but they're not essential to this telling. What's important to know is that we felt compelled by circumstance and by God's Spirit to leave.

In our relatively short time in that city, God had blessed. Some had come to faith. Some were baptized. We had a small congregation gathering regularly for worship—a church in embryonic form. While our leaving wouldn't necessarily terminate the life of that body, I knew it would severely threaten its viability. A few of the believers had already moved elsewhere for university or to follow work opportunities. Among those who stayed, we were facing internal strife and division, due in part to fears of police infiltration—from within our small group. This had shaken the confidence of all, but especially the newest believers whose faith was fragile. We also sensed that the government would soon deny residency to the few other missionaries on our team. Our labor of love was in real jeopardy.

As I communicated this situation and our decision to leave, my supervisor's response was measured but caring. I'm grateful for his understanding, because the reasons for our departure were personal and painful. We didn't want to leave; we felt we had to. And he sought to comfort us in our difficult choice. But then, at

a pivotal point in the conversation, he shared something that, in my grief, was no consolation. It lingers with me to this day: "I've been in this country for a long time," he reflected, "but I've never really seen a church planted and sustained long-term without the involvement of a strong national partner."

His words hit a nerve. Years earlier we'd left another city within the same country to come to this more remote region. At the time, we felt compelled to move. The sheer numbers called us. Statistically, this was the least-reached place we could find on the map. But beyond personal calculations, our organization's leadership was urging us to push eastward and northward into a territory unengaged by other missionaries. No one else was going. Would we answer the call?

But there was one problem: no local believer was ready or willing to come with us. In fact, whenever we shared our vision to go to this unreached and religiously conservative region, most of the national believers cautioned against it. "It's dangerous there; are you sure?" "We'd never consider going there." "Why wouldn't you just stay here and help us?"

What is a missionary to do in such a situation? How would you respond? At the time, I was convinced that the courageous and faithful response—what a pioneer missionary like Paul would do—was to go. The urgent need of the hour was for someone to storm the gates of hell, with or without an accompanying army. Waiting wasn't an option. What if we could never convince a national to join our team? Should we just delay our mission indefinitely?

Perhaps it goes without saying, but Americans don't do well with delays. We live in an age of two-day delivery, when you can receive just about any essential (or nonessential) item at your doorstep

within forty-eight hours. If you're ordering milk or cookies, it might only be a matter of minutes. Western Christians also come from a more task-driven and time-conscious culture. Relationships and partnerships, while valued, aren't primary. Maybe most significant of all, few of us operate with a long-term vision. Prudence and patience are social virtues of the past. Our consumeristic culture has given rise to throwaway culture. We value novelty and immediacy more than durability.

This phenomenon might be most obvious in modern architecture. What we build today is gone tomorrow. We don't construct edifices that remain and survive. Gone are the days of cathedrals and castles. Instead, we erect shopping malls and shanties that, within our lifetime, will flatten by wind or by wrecking ball. The same could be said of Christian missions. It would be foolish to assume that our prevailing cultural atmosphere doesn't in some way influence the way we envision overseas ministry.

In missions, we recruit missionaries with urgency, not toward longevity. We tend to go fast, or we don't go at all. We invest untold material and personnel resources to help others in the short term but do so in ways that often hurt them in the long run. We start countless programs and projects, only to watch many fizzle out and die. While our missionary mantra of late has been "Work yourself out of a job," one has to wonder if a more appropriate goal would be, "Build something that lasts."

"Mission Accomplished": The Infamous Words of Western Confidence

In spring 2003, thirty miles off the coast of California on waters gently rippled like gray slate, the crew aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* were making final preparations for the arrival of the sitting

American president. The sun's light diffused through a skin of high clouds over the calm Pacific. Halfway around the world it wasn't nearly as serene. The United States was engaged in an intense conflict with the country of Iraq—for exactly six weeks.

I remember sitting in front of the television that March watching the "shock and awe" campaign designed to swiftly bring Saddam Hussein to his knees and eliminate the supposed threat of WMDs. As we watched the fighting unfold from the comfort of our couches, many Americans were relieved to see that the initial surge of the U.S.-led coalition was overwhelmingly successful. In a matter of days, the mission objectives of our allies were being accomplished. By May 1, President George W. Bush was prepared to make a statement to the nation about the state of the war, and he chose the deck of the *Lincoln* as a symbolic stage for his historic address.

But that speech soon became one of the most infamous and ironic moments of recent American history. In it, President Bush declared that major operations in Iraq had ended and the United States, along with her allies, had prevailed. While his words did offer some cautions about the difficult road ahead, the pomp and circumstance of the event conveyed a mood of triumphalism. Americans with a sense of the past couldn't help but equate it with Douglas MacArthur's postwar victory speech aboard the USS *Missouri*. However, as we know, the U.S. involvement in Iraq—including significant escalation in the region with the subsequent advent of ISIS—has continued to this day, making a mockery of American overconfidence in her Mideast campaign. Emblematic of that naïve self-assuredness is the massive banner that was draped astride the *Lincoln* in preparation for the president's arrival, emblazoned with the words: "Mission Accomplished."

If there's one thing history should teach us, it's that commitments to speed and blind self-confidence rarely combine to produce appreciable results. But one of the curious dynamics of Western culture is the odd marriage of these competing characteristics. On the one hand, we like to live in the moment; we prefer to do things fast. On the other, we seem to have incredible confidence in ourselves and the staying power of our efforts. In my experience, these characteristics also shape much of our missionary enterprise.

My concern, and one reason for writing this book, is that we're living at a time in global missions today when the gospel and faithful ministry are threatened by the tyranny of the urgent. We're driven by a vision of "Mission Accomplished." To that end, we've often sacrificed the important for the immediate, the best for the most pressing. Over the last few decades, as our focus has been on reaching the unreached and finishing the task, we've increasingly prioritized rapid reproduction, with a programmatic and results-driven focus that looks more like Western capitalism and business franchising than genuine Christlike servanthood and faithful stewardship.[7]

Democratization of Missions

We live in a day of what could be called the democratization of missions. Everyone is a missionary, and everything we do is mission. As the world continues to shrink, our opportunities keep expanding. But in such a situation, how do we prioritize our limited resources? How does a church know whom to support or where to go? And how can we determine if what we're doing is faithful to Christ's gospel and our mandate?

7 See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 124–28.

It's not enough to just *do something*. In this hour, one temptation for the church is to respond to the urgent global need by simply trying our best while aiming at the nebulous goal of God's glory. Even if we don't know whether we're effecting change or doing lasting good, we might at least find solace with the impossibility of our task, the nobility of our intentions, and the sovereignty of our God. When our efforts collapse and no legacy survives, we might surrender to the words of the psalmist, "Unless the LORD builds the house, / those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1).

Don't misunderstand me. The need for building is undoubtedly urgent; the task before us is truly unfinished. So I resonate with voices that call for immediate action. I also appreciate the emphasis on glorifying God and an accompanying God-centered confidence that totally depends on him for success. But there's a wrong way to rest in God's sovereignty while taking great risk. If we steward Christ's gospel and the church's resources yet end up with nothing to show for it, God is not honored. Nor will we be.

Jesus taught that the honorific commendation "Well done, good and faithful servant" is reserved for those who spend wisely, who produce a return on God's investment (Matt. 25:14–30). Paul says much the same, though using the metaphor of construction. Only those who build with the right materials can expect a recompense for their labor: "If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss" (1 Cor. 3:14–15).

In 1 Corinthians, as in many places throughout the Corinthian correspondence, Paul reveals how God's judgment was a controlling influence over his mission—as it should be over all our missions. What matters on the last day is God's approval of our work and the

lasting value of our efforts.[8] Of course, Paul wasn't talking about the structural integrity or legacy of a brick-and-mortar structure in Kampala or Chattanooga. He was suggesting that our reward as ministers of the gospel is directly tied to the quality of our labors. Shoddy work will not be praised.

Today, I'm deeply concerned that much of evangelical Christian missions is a straw house built on a sandy shore. Some of the stories that I'll share throughout this book will reveal as much. From my years living in Asia to my current travels around the globe, what I find are missionaries and ministries with the unbiblical view that, when it comes to missions, any effort is commendable. Equally troubling, many assume that the all-important goal of reaching the lost validates our use of almost any means.

My purpose in this book isn't to criticize or unhelpfully shame; rather, I'm compelled to recount these stories and raise the caution flag—perhaps we need to slow down if danger is around the bend. I also want to call us to another goal, a different end. At such a time as this, we don't necessarily need more impassioned pleas about opportunity and urgency. While those are important, I'm convinced that what we desperately need are voices of discernment, calls for wise investment, and plans for better building.

This book will not answer all our missiological questions, but it will seek to reframe the discussion and reshape our desires by reconsidering the life of Paul. As we observe a more well-textured

8 As D. A. Carson writes, "Paul understands that what ultimately matters is whether or not we gain the Lord's approval . . . what matters most in God's universe is what God thinks of us, whether we are approved by him." See D. A. Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10–13* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 103.

portrait of the apostle and his ministry, we'll find that he often describes the goal of his life in terms of seeking God's approval. The quest for God's praise is what guided Paul's missionary ambition and directed his missionary method.

God's Approval: The End That Guides Our Means

Books about missions tend to focus on either means or ends. Even though they discuss both, inevitably their content is tilted in one direction or the other. Some explore the great purposes of our calling, such as the salvation of the lost, the blessing of God for all nations, and the worship of God from all peoples. Other resources examine missionary methods, such as cross-cultural communication, ministries of mercy, evangelism and discipleship, urban strategies, and church planting—to name only a few.

There is also a formidable tradition of Christian literature that considers the person and ministry of the apostle Paul. Those resources tend to look at his life as exemplary, presenting Paul as the model missionary. As such, they investigate his theology and motivation as well as his strategy and method. The assumption in many cases is that Paul's ambition and approach are at least somewhat normative for Christian missions today.[9]

But what I've found is that we rarely reflect at length on one of the explicit and often repeated goals of Paul: his desire for God's affirmation.[10] Subsequently, we've rarely considered how this over-

9 This assumption has been challenged in recent years. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). On the validity and necessity of following Paul, see Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962). Contra Bosch, see also Peter J. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 83–107.

10 As one example, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Paul the Missionary," in *Paul's Missionary Methods*, eds. Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 33.

arching motivation for honor and recognition on the last day had a significant role to play in guiding Paul's missionary approach.

Paul expresses this goal in numerous ways, whether attaining commendation (1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 10:18) or avoiding disqualification (1 Cor. 9:27), seeking a reward (1 Cor. 3:14; 9:17) or a weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17), having reason to boast in his sacrifice (1 Cor. 9:15), and even expecting others to boast of him before Christ (2 Cor. 1:14). Whenever we see Paul talk this way, we also find him discussing how his keen awareness of the final judgment was a kind of internal compass that consistently led him in the appropriate direction—on practical issues such as contextualization, partnerships, and giving. As we wrestle with the question of how to do missions like Paul, we'll understand how often we ignore one of the key components to his wisdom and effectiveness.[11]

Of course, as soon as we talk about pleasing God, earning a reward, and receiving God's praise, we're entering murky waters that many evangelicals would rather avoid. We're theologically committed to justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Any mention of meritorious labor sounds like works-righteousness that inevitably leads to arrogance—which we know doesn't result in our justification (Luke 18:9–14). We're also committed to living for God's glory alone. We cross the seas with the gospel because God deserves the praise of all nations.[12] Therefore,

11 As David Bosch quotes from Paul Minear: "One aim of missiology is a more adequate understanding of the apostolic task of the Church. One aim of exegetical theology is a more adequate understanding of the mind of the biblical writer. When, therefore, the exegete deals with the apostle Paul, and when missiology accepts Paul's apostolic work as normative for the continuing mission of the Church, then these two aims coalesce." See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 170.

12 This was the thrust of John Piper's influential book, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993).

doing missions in view of one day receiving honor from God seems sacrilegious. Such self-seeking is antithetical to the altruistic motives which we assume are superior.[13]

But we evangelicals also base our faith on Scripture alone. And here is where the biblical witness reveals some of our theological and cultural blind spots. For one, Paul was deeply influenced by the theological concept of divine judgment and reward—including qualitative levels of each—just as Jesus taught. In Luke's Gospel alone there are over forty promises of reward or warnings of judgment based on an individual's works. Specifically related to money, Jesus promised a great reward in the kingdom for those who do good and lend to their enemies (Luke 6:35). He promised "moneybags" in heaven for those who give to the needy on earth (Luke 12:33). And he promised a repayment at the resurrection for hospitality toward the poor (Luke 14:14). A central component of Jesus's ethical teaching included motivating his disciples through the opportunity for future rewards.

Paul also lived in a culture that esteemed honor and despised shame. In Corinth, and throughout the Greco-Roman world, many everyday decisions revolved around the pursuit of reputation and reward.[14] But rather than outright reject such self-interest as sinful, Paul redirects it. Like Jesus before him, he calls us to seek glory from God rather than from others (John 5:44). In fact, this motivation exerted significant influence over Paul's missionary ethos, knowing

13 For an example of this assumption and the preference for altruism in missions, see David Joannes, *The Mind of a Missionary* (Prescott, AZ: Within Reach Global, 2018).

14 "Corinth was a city where public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form. The Corinthian people thus lived with an honor-shame cultural orientation. . . . In such a culture a person's sense of worth is based on recognition by others of one's accomplishments." See Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

that greater glory was reserved for those who suffered well, humbly served, and faithfully stewarded the gospel.

As a young person, I was always fascinated by Paul. At some point during my time studying missions at a small Bible college, the letter of 2 Corinthians captured my attention and imagination. Like no other book in the Bible, this epistle was a window into the passionate—and often anguished—heart of the apostle. It showed what moved him. In it, I saw Paul talking in ways that were extremely personal and vulnerable. As much as he expounded God's glory and the history of redemption, he pleaded with his friends and beloved partners. Here wasn't dispassionate theological reflection or even purely altruistic motivation. Instead, 2 Corinthians showed me a missionary fully invested, what a real person looks like doing real ministry. In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks candidly. His missionary heart is exposed for all to see (2 Cor. 6:11).

Not surprisingly, then, the first chance I had to preach in a church, I turned to 2 Corinthians, to what had become one of my favorite passages in the Bible:

> Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? (2 Cor. 12:14–15)

The few people who heard that sermon over twenty years ago surely have no recollection of what I said, but it's possible they remember my conviction. Whatever was lost in depth and nuance was made up for in passion. I was compelled by the example of Paul, and I did my level best to communicate it to my hearers. I did so

by describing Paul's understanding of Christian ministry—genuine Christlike servanthood—based on these two short verses. Like many aspiring preachers, I organized it into three basic points. The ministry of Paul, I argued, was marked by responsibility, sacrifice, and vulnerability.

That last point gripped me. At the time, I had little experiential knowledge of ministry. The rigors and relational pressures of a pastor or missionary had yet to touch me. Yet I couldn't help but be captivated by the vision of a servant of Christ who would willingly—*and gladly*—give his life for others. Not only that, but he would allow their ongoing needs and struggles to drain him personally, to distract him from what he most desired. Paul was willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of the gospel, to spend and be spent for the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:15). *They* were the reason he left Troas.

The distressing decision to abandon that open door reveals Paul's utmost care for the Corinthians. As he took pains to demonstrate, Paul wasn't just some peddler of the gospel looking for a buck, for converts to his cause, or for more participants in a pyramid scheme stretching across the known world. Paul was deeply and personally concerned for the Corinthians themselves, for their eternal souls. His willingness to change plans didn't betray an unreliable fickleness. Just the opposite. It showed his utter dependability as a father who would do anything for his wayward and weak children.

Today, long after that first sermon, Paul is still my missionary hero. And 2 Corinthians still fascinates and perplexes me. Why would someone who ultimately cares about God's opinion and approval seem to care so much about the approval and opinion of the Corinthians? Why does someone who boasts only in God and his gospel seem to boast in himself and what God has done through

him? How is it that faithfulness is the true measure of a steward, yet Paul suggests that his ministry is also validated by its fruitfulness?

These are only a few of my questions. In a way, this book is an excuse for me to think more deeply about them, to reflect on Paul's complex life and ministry, and to meditate on his transparent yet enigmatic correspondence with the Corinthians. But more than my personal musings, I pray this book will serve us all as we consider both the means and ends of our mission. I want us to explore together what faithful gospel ministry looks like when God's approval guides our ambition.

1

Seeking God's Approval

Corinth

SURROUNDED BY HIS railing accusers in the heart of the city's bustling forum, the apostle Paul stood before the Corinthian tribunal, at the imperial judgment seat of Gallio. Paul's crime, according to his Jewish plaintiffs, was that he was persuading others to worship God in ways that contradicted the law of Moses. As the Jewish leaders made their opening arguments before Gallio, Paul prepared his own statement. He would be forced to make a plea to the proconsul of Achaia without the luxury of an attorney.

However, in a strange irony, Paul must have felt a tinge of relief for the opportunity to have his day in court rather than face mob justice. On his first missionary journey, he encountered unruly masses who incited violence against him from Pisidia to Lycaonia. On his second journey, following the call to Macedonia, Paul was beaten and jailed in Philippi. Undeterred, he traveled to Thessalonica and entered the synagogue, reasoning from the Scriptures that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer. Apparently, suffering was also necessary for

Paul, because the Jews there roused a rabble that "set the city in an uproar" (Acts 17:5), eventually chasing him all the way to Berea.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that when Paul eventually made his way to Corinth, he came "in weakness and in fear and much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). He no doubt still bore the scars, physical and emotional, from multiple beatings. That Paul went straight to the Corinthian synagogue doesn't betray a rugged confidence or bravado as much as an inner compulsion to make Christ known wherever he went.

Still, Paul had to wonder on arrival in Corinth if this would be another abbreviated stop. But as he began to preach Christ crucified—and again face opposition—the Lord appeared to him with a promise of comfort and hope: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:9–10). Instead of fear, Paul was to take courage and continue. Instead of running, he was to remain in Corinth. For the first time in nearly five years, he would put down roots in one place.

But then came his date in court.

Among all the thoughts flooding Paul's mind as he stood before Gallio, he must have rehearsed those reassuring words of Jesus. He recalled that no harm would befall him. But he also remembered that he couldn't stay silent. He was there to bear witness to Christ. However, before Paul could open his lips and make a defense for the hope of Israel—just as he was about to speak—Gallio rendered his verdict. As an internal dispute among Jews about innocuous terminology and their religious practice, his court wouldn't accept the complaint (Acts 18:12–15). Gallio threw out the case.

Whatever relief Paul experienced at that moment was, for him, relatively fleeting and insignificant. Acquittal or condemnation in

the eyes of any human court weren't his ultimate concern, because he knew he would one day stand before a far greater Judge, one who would bring everything to light (1 Cor. 4:3–5). Therefore, Paul spent his life, as it were, preparing a statement for the heavenly tribunal. He made it his ambition to receive, on that day, God's commendation.

Avoiding Disqualification

On November 24, 1746, writing from Elizabethtown, New Jersey, missionary David Brainerd penned a letter to his younger brother, Israel, who at the time was a student at Yale. "Dear brother, let me entreat you to keep *eternity* in your view," he urged, "and behave yourself as becomes one that must shortly 'give an account of all things done in the body.'"[1]

At the age of twenty-eight, Brainerd was still well aware of the temptations of youth and university life. He also likely knew his own time was short. Earlier that month he had retired to the house of his friend Jonathan Dickinson. Brainerd's health was deteriorating. He couldn't continue his mission to the Native Americans in New Jersey. Within a few months, he would travel to Massachusetts to be cared for in the home of Jonathan Edwards. Within the year, he would be dead.

As Brainerd composed his counsel to Israel, he echoed Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church. Specifically, he referenced a passage with much hope for those enduring physical hardship, whose "outer self is wasting away" like a tent in tatters. As Paul writes, "We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with

1 *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 437–38.

hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1). The hope for Paul the missionary was, as also for Brainerd, that his seemingly endless affliction and suffering would be, one day, "swallowed up by life" (2 Cor. 5:4).

But Paul's overwhelming hope in the resurrection didn't entirely eliminate his fears. Paul was still anxious to receive God's approval on the last day, knowing that he would give an account for everything done "in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10). In fact, this concern fueled in Paul a self-awareness and God-consciousness that guided every step of his ambassadorial ministry. Specifically, as he sought to call others to be reconciled to God, he made it his aim—his ambition—to please God (2 Cor. 5:9).[2] Why? Because he knew that everything he did, whether for good or for ill, would one day be adjudicated at the bar of God. He knew that all people must stand before the judgment seat—not of Gallio, but of Christ.[3] Because of this, on account of the fear of the Lord, Paul spent his life trying to persuade others (2 Cor. 5:10–11).

This awareness was also evident in Paul's missionary method. In a section of 1 Corinthians that highlights how he sought "by all means"[4] to win as many people as possible, we must not miss Paul's complementary concern:

> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete

2 Paul's goal of pleasing God was also his expectation for those he reached (Eph. 5:10; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:1).

3 The Greek word *bema* translated in 2 Cor. 5:10 as the "judgment seat" of Christ, is the same used for Gallio's tribunal.

4 Such accommodation can only be "in things indifferent, that are otherwise in our choice" and must not include engaging "in things that the Lord has prohibited." See John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 306.

> exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24–27)

Do you see it there in Paul's words? He was concerned for his own disqualification. For Paul, preaching to others without an eye to God's approval would be like running without a sense of direction. It's like entering a race and kicking into the starting blocks without knowledge of the finish line. It's like participating in the Olympic Games and not realizing there are rules and referees. It would be no different, no more useful, than a boxer swinging at air. Aimless.

As Paul made it his ambition to make Christ known among the nations—to reason with them about the coming judgment through the authorized Son of God[5]—he did so cognizant of his own future day before the *bema*. He was aware of his position in the dock. And Paul didn't arrogantly assume that his ministry was sure to receive God's affirmation just because he did it in God's name. As Jesus said, even mighty works accomplished for his sake don't guarantee our acceptance (Matt. 7:21–23). Paul knew that disapproval, even ultimate disqualification, was a real possibility.[6]

5 Acts 17:31; 24:25.

6 Don Howell doesn't take Paul's fear of "disqualification" as reason to call into question his assurance of salvation. "Paul is referring not to his final salvation (perhaps implied in AV: 'castaway'), but to the testing of his apostleship. He fears, through the lack of rigorous self-discipline, forfeiting the divine approval through failure to fulfill his apostolic commission as faithful steward of the gospel to the Gentiles." See Don N. Howell Jr., "Paul's Theology of Suffering," in *Paul's Missionary Methods*, eds. Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 103. For a contrasting position that understands final salvation to be in view, see Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove,

This should rouse us from any slumbering self-confidence and raise the stakes for our missionary calling. Pursuing the salvation of the lost and reaching the unreached aren't enough to please God, even if those efforts are well-intentioned and carried out with utmost zeal. We must do so in an appropriate manner. Christ's ambassadors must strive to be approved by God and avoid unnecessary shame (2 Tim. 2:15).

But what leads to God's approval and acceptance? If some of God's workers receive a reward while others suffer loss (1 Cor. 3:14–15), what does that reward look like? And how do we reconcile the hope of glory with the potential for disapproval? We must reckon with the possibility that the offering of our missionary lives to God could, in the end, be unacceptable to him.

Wrong Kind of Acceptance

Shame was a real concern the moment Paul stepped foot into Achaia. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city with a reputation for Roman decadence and Greek sophistry. One powerful cultural dynamic directly related to Paul's mission was the practice of ascribing honor to traveling teachers, orators, and sophist philosophers. The more eloquent the rhetorician, the more he could expect his tribe to increase. Not only that, but skilled speakers received financial remuneration from a loyal and growing audience.[7]

IL: IVP, 2001). I believe 1 Cor. 9:24–27 operates as a hinge in Paul's argument, and the danger he will develop in the subsequent chapter certainly has to do with apostasy (1 Cor. 10:1–12). Importantly, neither interpretation allows us to minimize Paul's sobriety before his Judge.

7 See D. A. Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10–13* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 33. See also Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

But, of course, Paul didn't stride into town as a polished and charismatic figure poised to launch a global movement. He came disgraced by fresh beatings. This meant that the cultural expectations of Corinth could easily work against him. His physical appearance and observable weakness would be a barrier to the gospel's acceptance.

Or would they? What if, instead, Paul could leverage his rhetorical ability to win a hearing? What if he could get the Corinthians to respond positively to his persuasive preaching? He would then be able to make use of any pseudocelebrity status to win more people. Perhaps he could also take advantage of their willingness to financially subsidize his teaching, propelling him to new fields and greater fruit.

We must pause and acknowledge the genuine conundrum here for Paul. He had been on the run for much of his ministry, persecuted in nearly every place. Rejection and affliction became the norm wherever he went. But not only for Paul. We know that in many cities the believers who associated with him were also inundated with suffering. When he stayed around, it usually spelled trouble. And when Paul left town, the trouble didn't always leave with him. From Antioch to Ephesus to Athens, anyone considering Paul's gospel wouldn't just be confronted with the message of a shamefully crucified Jewish Messiah. They would be counting the cost of believing a bruised and bloodied apostle.

But what if Paul could change that? What if he could take advantage of the cultural milieu of Greek sophistry and present a more, well, *sophisticated* message? What if he could leverage his rhetorical skills to create a following, or at least gain an audience?

On a couple occasions I have had the opportunity to travel to an East Asian city where our ministry provides training to church leaders. During one of those trips, I met with an American

missionary acquaintance who stopped by the guesthouse where I was staying. As we settled into the spartan space, he shared with me some of the concerns among his teammates, friends, and colleagues living in a country where you can't easily operate as a missionary. Some worked in secular fields. Some chose to secretly gather. Some shied away from overt evangelism. Many struggled to integrate identity, occupation, and ministry in their daily life. It all sounded familiar.

But then he happily volunteered the solution he had discovered. With the help of some locals, he was operating a non-governmental organization (NGO) that worked on community development projects throughout the region. He was grateful to report how this platform supplied him with legitimacy, served the needs of struggling communities, and provided access for the gospel in unreached areas. It sounded perfect. Villages were gladly opening their doors to the work of his NGO, which ultimately opened the door for the gospel. "It's amazing," he added, "the opportunities you have for evangelism when you bring $50,000 worth of investment into a local community."

I was suddenly bewildered. Perhaps he sensed the surprise and confusion on my face, because he went on to explain further.

Recently, he'd had the opportunity to meet with a municipal official in a remote region, someone he assumed would otherwise never hear the gospel or at least never have an interest in listening to it. But since this missionary's NGO was investing heavily in his village, the official was more than happy to give him his undivided attention. Just imagine what could happen, this missionary suggested, if the leader of that unengaged and unreached community would come to Christ.

When we think of the challenges that missionaries face, we often think of persecution. We envision the places they go where the price

of following Jesus is the primary reason many hesitate to embrace Christ. Of course, such people and places exist. But there's another, perhaps more sinister—and perhaps more pervasive—challenge that Western missionaries face when they take the gospel to new regions. It's the connection of Christianity to prosperity, status, and glory. The great difficulty for workers in such fields isn't only the fear of loss that makes people reject the gospel; it's also the hope of gain that makes them willing to accept it.[8]

Seeking Honor from God Alone

I'm not sure missionaries are always aware of the trap of seeking others' approval, especially when it feels good to have them accept your message and when it appears strategic to reach a broader community.[9] But when we read Paul's Corinthian correspondence, we discover that he was extremely careful while working in a culture eager to turn the gospel into an opportunity for upward mobility.

From his first day in Corinth, Paul self-consciously refused to preach in a manner that would draw attention to his eloquence and acumen as he highlighted Christ's ignominious crucifixion (1 Cor. 2:1–2; cf. 1:17).[10] He intentionally avoided baptizing most converts, not wanting to convey that he was calling followers to himself (1 Cor. 1:13–16). Paul also refused to accept money from those who embraced his message in order to make it abundantly

8 In some mission fields, the fear of suffering and the hope of prosperity can coexist, creating a challenging environment for ministry.

9 This approach is pervasive in the Western church and easily exported by her missionaries.

10 It's not entirely clear if Paul limited himself in the full exercise of his rhetorical abilities as a matter of strategy or if his speaking abilities were also in some way inferior to his knowledge and writing skills (2 Cor. 11:6). In either case, Paul recognized God's purpose at work in him, as it was in Moses who was "slow of speech" (Ex. 4:10), such that the surpassing power would belong to God and not him (2 Cor. 4:7) and God's strength would be perfected in his weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

clear that God's grace wasn't a commodity to be acquired or a status to be earned (1 Cor. 9:11–14; cf. 2 Cor. 11:7–9). In fact, we have reason to understand that Paul's trembling and weak entrance into Corinth wasn't merely the result of constant suffering but was part of a strategic approach—*so that* their belief in his message would be owing to the power of God and not his persuasive persona (1 Cor. 2:2–5). Paul wanted to be certain that those who received Christ's gospel did so because of the compelling work of the Spirit through the unadorned preaching of God's word.[11] Nothing else.

While Paul could have spun a message that would appeal to the Corinthians' desires and avoid personal suffering, he didn't do so. Why? Because Paul's pursuit of God's approval ruled out the goal of human praise. The two were mutually exclusive. Paul believed that if he, through his preaching, sought the affirmation of others, it could mean rejection from God. He would no longer be the servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4).

Now, I doubt most missionaries consider praise from people as cracking the top ten dangers in their ministry. Instead, we're generally concerned with risks more obvious and ominous, such as the lack of access to quality medical care, slumping financial support, difficulty maintaining residency, limited educational resources, challenges working with national partners, and disunity among expat workers. All of those—not to mention the possibilities of persecution, disease, political unrest, and natural disasters—combine to fill our minds with what truly threatens our ministry.

But if we granted, for a moment, that receiving God's affirmation is of critical concern and one of the highest motivations for our mission, then wouldn't we consider the antithetical desire for

11 See Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020), 109.

others' approval to be a potential snare for Christian ministers? If the greatest missionary of all time repeatedly found this temptation so hazardous, shouldn't we be alert to its perils?

My concern is that many missionaries today, oblivious to this threat, may be caught unawares when it comes to trying to please others. In many cases, we're in danger of tweaking the gospel to make it more appealing, of tampering with God's word to make it more acceptable. We're in danger of connecting Christ to opportunities for money and employment, to offers of goods and services. We're in danger of promoting belief that doesn't come with a cost, of encouraging a Christ-following that doesn't expect an others-leaving. We're in danger of forfeiting our witness and losing personal integrity for the sake of a business platform, governmental recognition, and long-term presence. We're in danger of confusing Christian service with a comfortable career, of presenting Christianity as the pain-free path of professional missionaries.

These problems and more result from seeking approval from others instead of from God. For Paul, this is the issue that ultimately differentiated him from false apostles.[12] And not just in Corinth. It was the defining characteristic that separated Paul's mission from that of many others. False teachers, he observed, were anxious to please people. They were greedy for selfish gain (Phil. 3:17–19). They were eager to take advantage of their followers. They consistently wanted to make a good showing and avoid suffering (Gal. 6:12). They were glory grabbers.

But—and this is terribly important—the gospel doesn't oppose our pursuit of glory altogether. Instead, Jesus tells us to seek approval, glory, and reward, but to do so from God alone (John 5:44).

12 "The crux of the division between Paul and his opponents is the question 'Whose approval do we seek?'" See Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*, 103.

In fact, this is one way Paul described what it looks like to be a Christian: to "seek for glory and honor and immortality" on the day of judgment (Rom. 2:6–11, 16).[13] People of such faith are justified and will receive praise from God (Rom. 2:29). They are those who have been chosen by the Father and sanctified by the Spirit in order to obtain glory and honor with the Son (2 Thess. 2:14; cf. 1 Pet. 1:7). This is, as Paul taught the Corinthians, the mysterious wisdom "which God decreed before the ages *for our glory*" (1 Cor. 2:7). God doesn't reject our desire for approval; he redirects it.

What makes Christians different isn't that they never seek glory, but that they seek it from God alone—because he's the one who made our hearts with a glory-sized hole in the beginning.[14]

Weight of Glory

Perhaps the most well-known sermon of C. S. Lewis is "The Weight of Glory," delivered to the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford on June 8, 1942. Its title comes from Paul's stunning estimation to the Corinthians that our "light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17). What's perhaps lesser known, however, is how Lewis defines such glory.

His talk opens with a word about unselfishness and self-denial. Lewis suggests that many moderns miss how Jesus motivated us to self-sacrifice *through* our desires. If we somehow think that the highest Christian or missionary virtues are altruistic and unselfish, then, Lewis says, we're borrowing more from Kant and the Stoics than from the Scriptures. Our problem isn't desire itself; it's that our

13 Te-Li Lau argues that Paul sought to construct "an alternate [divine] court of opinion" that "relativizes and undermines" the pursuit of human honor and shame. See Lau, *Defending Shame*, 131–35.

14 For an introduction to this topic, see JR Vassar, *Glory Hunger: God, the Gospel, and Our Quest for Something More* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

desires are too weak. He famously illustrates this with the image of an ignorant child contentedly making mud pies in the slums because he's unaware of the opportunity to enjoy sandcastles at the sea.

Intentionally or not, Lewis's illustration reveals another problem. It isn't simply that our desires are tepid. It's that we don't always know what we should want. We're blissfully unaware of what could bring us infinite joy. For Lewis, the source of such joy is glory—though not exactly the kind of glory that he first imagined.

> When I began to look into this matter I was shocked to find such different Christians as Milton, Johnson, and Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures—fame with God, approval or (I might say) "appreciation" by God. And then, when I had thought it over, I saw that this view was scriptural; nothing can eliminate from the parable of the divine *accolade*, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." With that, a good deal of what I had been thinking all my life fell down like a house of cards. I suddenly remembered that no one can enter heaven except as a child; and nothing is so obvious in a child—not in a conceited child, but in a good child—as its great and undisguised pleasure in being praised. Not only in a child, either, but even in a dog or a horse. Apparently what I had mistaken for humility had, all these years, prevented me from understanding what is in fact the humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures—nay, the specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure of beast before men, of child before its father, a pupil before his teacher, a creature before its Creator.[15]

15 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 36–37.

Lewis had come to understand that glory "means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things."[16] This is the glory that we seek: not just giving praise *to* God but receiving praise *from* God. Such honor is tangible, relatable, and desirable. But so often when we talk of glory, or hear it taught, the concept sounds impersonal, unattainable, and irrelevant. To many of us, the joys of heaven are ethereal and the glory of God esoteric. As a result, the Bible's many promises about glory feel disconnected from our greatest desires. But listen to Lewis's logic: our innermost longings point to a world where those desires can be fulfilled. Our hunger for praise from others is a hunger satiated by God himself.

The earthly approval of a boss that lightens our load; the affirmation of a teacher that brightens our day; the recognition of a proud father and the praise of a delighted spouse: these are all shafts of light directing our eye to the fullness of glory that awaits in heaven. Perhaps most shockingly of all, this hope of glory transforms entirely the Christian's perspective of the judgment seat, turning it from a place of dread and shame to a place of honor and rejoicing!

> It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any

16 Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 41. Lewis outlines five biblical categories of heavenly reward: (1) to be with God, (2) to be like God, (3) to have glory, (4) to feast, and (5) to rule. While he doesn't explore this, each category relates in some way to the concept of glory. For example, (1) honor comes by being closely associated with the King (Job 36:7; 1 Sam. 2:8). (2) Glory is part of what it means to be made like God (1 Cor. 11:7) in his radiance and beauty (Matt. 13:43; Dan. 12:3). (3) To possess glory includes receiving honor and praise from God (Rom. 2:7; 1 Pet. 1:7). (4) Immense honor is communicated in the idea of feasting with the King at his table (Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 14:7–11). (5) Ruling at his side in dominion over creation communicates restored honor for humanity (Ps. 8; 1 Cor. 6:3).

> of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.[17]

According to Lewis, we shouldn't shrink in shame at the thought of standing before God. Instead, we should press toward the finish line with anticipation—with the hope of hearing his commendation and receiving the prize. On that day, our God-given desire for approval, acceptance, and affirmation will finally be attained, supplied by God himself.

But the question remains: Is equal affirmation and glory guaranteed to every Christian? Or are there varying rewards in the kingdom?

Differing Weights, Varying Rewards

Thus far we've explored how one of the great ambitions for Paul the missionary was receiving God's affirmation. I've suggested that this pursuit of God's praise motivated his ministry and guided his approach—also directing him away from the approval of others. However, there is one final component necessary to turn this engine into the driving force behind our missionary efforts: *as we seek God's commendation, we can expect varying degrees of reward and differing weights of glory*.

17 Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 38–39. D. A. Carson adds, "How wonderful! The King of the universe, the Sovereign who has endured our endless rebellion and sought us out at the cost of his Son's death, climaxes our redemption by praising us!" See D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 101.

Of all that I'm saying in this chapter, this may run most counter to our thinking.[18] It might feel unjust that God would grant more honor to some than others. Or perhaps we're concerned that different levels of honor would inevitably lead to division, comparison, and envy. Or maybe we're inclined to think a motivation for personal glory turns missionaries into heartless mercenaries. What about serving to the glory of God?

Before we can attempt to answer those concerns, we should address the more fundamental question, Does the Bible teach varying degrees of reward for the saints? Here, I offer as an answer a brief sketch.[19]

First, we could appeal to the character of God, specifically his impartial justice. Jesus suggests there will be varying degrees of punishment for individuals based on their situation, understanding, and exposure to the truth (Matt. 10:15; 11:20–24). He also indicates that the wicked will be judged in different ways based on their intentions and actions, as well as their influence over others to sin (Matt. 5:22; 12:36–37; 18:5–7; 23:13).[20] This demonstrates that God is impartial and equitable, repaying the wrongdoer according to wrongs done. But if this is the case, we might assume he would repay the labors of believers similarly, commensurate with their work.[21] It would seemingly be unjust to reward all

18 Some scholars reject the idea of varying rewards in the kingdom. For an example, see Craig L. Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," *JETS* 35/2 (June 1992): 159–72. However, while Blomberg opposes any distinctions for believers that persist throughout eternity, he concedes varying measures of reward or shame at the day of judgment based on texts like 1 Cor. 3:11–15 and 1 John 2:28.

19 This summary is primarily based on Matthew's Gospel, though I will develop this theme from the Corinthian correspondence in subsequent chapters.

20 See also Luke 12:47–48; Rom. 2:5; Heb. 10:29; Rev. 18:6–7.

21 Col. 3:22–25 seems to make this logical connection. Slaves should obey their masters, knowing that God rewards righteousness just as he pays back the wrongdoer. Eph. 6:6–8 makes this

believers equally when some have served more diligently and suffered more nobly.[22]

Second, we could argue from the comparative and superlative language Jesus employs to emphasize our reward. Jesus says that those who suffer should rejoice because they can expect a reward that is great (Matt. 5:11–12). Jesus teaches that, in the kingdom, the humble will be the greatest (Matt. 18:1–4). He also encourages faithful service by saying the last will be first (Matt. 19:30; 20:16).[23] When asked to reserve the highest seats of honor for two disciples, Jesus doesn't reject such a distinction but asserts that those positions are prepared by the Father alone (Matt. 20:20–23).

Third, we could reference the principle of sowing and reaping: the harvest gathered corresponds to labor given. In the parable of talents, those who faithfully invested received a return proportionate to their investment (Matt. 25:14–30). Jesus also promises other rewards that directly connect to our service. The one who receives a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; the one who receives a righteous person, their reward, and so forth (Matt. 10:41). Furthermore, this teaching implies that the righteous person and the prophet respectively have a reward unique to their work. Last, in this same passage, Jesus says that the person who gives a cup of cold water to one of his disciples will by no means lose his reward (Matt. 10:42; cf. Prov. 19:17).

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very claim, promising eschatological reward for the good each one does. See Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 151–52.

22 Some argue against this from Matt. 20:1–16. However, that parable warns against comparison among disciples by focusing on the generosity of the Master. See also 1 Cor. 3:8; Heb. 6:10; 1 Pet. 1:17.

23 Some suggest that when the last are first and the first last, we are all equal. But in that reading, the logical force of Jesus's statement vanishes. If all rewards are the same, how do they encourage exceptional sacrifice or service?

"But this could not be true," reasons Jonathan Edwards, "if a person should have no greater reward for doing many good works than if he did a few." In fact, Edwards's sermon on Romans 2:10 argues at length that Christians can and should expect varying experiences of joy and honor from God at judgment day:

> There are different degrees of happiness and glory in heaven. As there are degrees among the angels, *viz.* thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers; so there are degrees among the saints. . . . The glory of the saints above will be in some proportion to their eminency in holiness and good works here. Christ will reward all according to their works. He that gained ten pounds was made ruler over ten cities, and he that gained five pounds over five cities (Luke 19:17; 2 Cor. 9:6). "He that soweth sparingly, shall reap sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully." And the apostle Paul tells us that, as one star differs from another star in glory, so also it shall be in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:41).[24]

While Edwards clearly affirms a distinction in rewards for believers, he's also keen to show that such differences don't necessitate envy or discontentment. All rewards will result in our shared happiness and praise of God. Furthermore, just as the Spirit dispenses different gifts to the church now, it shouldn't surprise us—or make us question his justice—if God should bestow different levels of glory and authority in the kingdom. Should some receive greater honor, we will all rejoice with them (1 Cor. 12:26).

24 Edwards, *Works*, 902. (Scripture references are updated to comport with citation style.)

But that still leaves us with a crucial question: how does this relate to the Christian's ultimate purpose of doing all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31)? And doesn't this promise of reward turn Christian missions into a mercenary affair? For an answer, it's helpful to return to Lewis. He insists that an act becomes mercenary only when the reward has no *natural connection* with it, such as when a man marries a woman only for her money. But herein lies the beauty of understanding how God's glory is, and has been since creation, *naturally connected* to our glory.

When God formed the world, he made us, male and female, in his image and likeness to demonstrate his glory as representative rulers commissioned to fill the earth (Gen. 1:26–28). Even though this crown of honor for mankind (Ps. 8:5) was tarnished by sin, God's gracious purpose was to restore a clear reflection of his image in humanity. This happened supremely in one man, Jesus Christ, who perfectly revealed God's glory (John 1:14–18; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1–4). But redemption remains incomplete until creation is finally liberated from corruption and God's image bearers are fully restored to honor (Rom. 8:18–21). At that time, God's original plan will be realized when his glory fills the earth as his glorified children reign upon it (Num. 14:21; Hab. 2:14).[25] This is what creation groans for even now (Rom. 8:22).

Since the beginning, God has inextricably linked his glory to his people. Therefore, when God's children are glorified and restored to honor, it in no way diminishes his glory but instead increases

25 According to Constantine Campbell, the new creation will be "the arena for the glory of the children of God," as the coheirs of Christ reign with him and have God's glory revealed in them such that they "shine throughout the created realm alongside the glory of Christ." See Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 217, 258. See also Robert A. Peterson, "Pictures of Heaven," in *Heaven*, eds. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 179–84.

it. Just as Jesus was exalted and given a name above every name, redounding ultimately to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:5–11), so too, the apostle Paul could expect that any honor he received for his service would translate into greater glory to Christ (Phil. 1:20–26; cf. 2 Thess. 1:10–12).

This, then, is the *natural connection* that removes the threat of a mercenary spirit in our missionary ambition. We pursue praise *from* God in order to render greater praise *to* God. We seek a crown of glory from him that we might joyfully return it at his feet (Rev. 4:4, 10).

Paul's Crown of Boasting

But now we must return to Corinth. For it's there that we see how this perspective of reward and glory steered Paul's missionary method.

Specifically, Paul understood that the Corinthians' reception of his gospel didn't result just in their rescue and God's glory but also in his validation. Paul—the confident apostle who didn't consult with the influential Jerusalem leaders, the one whose appointment and approval was from God alone—felt confirmed in his life's work through the visible, tangible result of the Corinthians' faith. They were, of all things, the seal of his apostleship and his "letter of recommendation" (1 Cor. 9:1–2; 2 Cor. 3:1–3). In a way, Paul's ministry was substantiated by its fruitfulness in Corinth.[26]

But this observable fruit from his Corinthian ministry was more than just a psychological comfort for Paul. His earnest desire was that, on the last day, the Corinthians would boast before the Lord of their apostle, just as he would of them (2 Cor. 1:14; cf. 5:12; 9:3).

26 The statement "In ministry, success is measured by faithfulness" doesn't fully or helpfully capture this aspect of Paul's self-assessment. But success is also not measured by mere fruitfulness. Paul could judge according to fruit because he had conducted his ministry faithfully and wisely.

Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says much the same: "What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy" (1 Thess. 2:19–20; cf. Phil. 4:1). Those whom Paul reached for Christ throughout his missionary life became, for him, a cause for glorious rejoicing.

But wait a minute! Isn't such boasting antithetical to the purposes of God? God's design to magnify his own glory—even his plan to eliminate human boasting—seems contradictory to Paul's pursuit of glory and his plan to boast at the judgment seat of Christ. However, we should recognize that while Paul does expect to joyfully boast one day, it's not in anything he's accomplished; he will boast only in what Christ has done through him.[27] All of Paul's boasting is ultimately a boasting "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31).

However—and particularly important for our study—Paul didn't expect to boast in those who merely believed. Nor did he confidently check the box when a city was "reached" or when a church was established. Instead, Paul connected his boasting to the strength, stability, and long-term viability of a congregation. In the case of Corinth, that boast was at risk. This troubled assembly, first with its arrogant divisions and immoral practice, then with its doubting of their apostle and his gospel, called into question his ability to rejoice over them at the coming of Christ.

This is why Paul includes in the description of his apostolic ministry the goal of "winning" the weak—of reaching those already reached (1 Cor. 9:22).[28] Paul is willing to do whatever is necessary to win the Corinthians *completely*, so that they will be prepared

27 Rom. 15:17; 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 2:8; Eph. 3:7.

28 In the context of 1 Cor. 8–9, Paul is specifically addressing an issue related to weak Christians. This is also evident in Paul's appeal to "you" (the Corinthian church) to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).

for the final day.[29] According to Lesslie Newbigin, Paul doesn't define ministry success in terms of conversions or even the rapid numerical growth of his churches. His "primary concern is with their faithfulness, with the integrity of their witness."[30] Paul's great missionary aim is to develop everyone within his spiritual care to full maturity (Col. 1:28–29).[31]

This desire—Paul's goal of presenting everyone mature in Christ—draws on the metaphor of a priestly offering. Paul's service to Christ isn't just the sacrifice of his own life to the glory of God and in order to reach others (Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6). He also wants, in the fruit of his missionary labors, a pleasing and acceptable offering to bring before the Lord on the last day. According to his letter to the Romans, Paul's apostolic calling is "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the high priestly service of the gospel of God." His purpose in this is "that the offering of the Gentiles may be *acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit*" (Rom. 15:16; cf. 1:5). When this happens, in Paul's words, he has "*reason to be proud of my work* for God" (Rom. 15:17).

This is a striking revelation from, of all places, Romans 15. In the paradigmatic passage on Paul's great ambition to reach the unreached (Rom. 15:20), we see that he is concerned with more than just new frontiers. Paul desires to rejoice in what Christ has accomplished through him (Rom. 15:18). And what makes his priestly offering acceptable is that those in his influence are living

29 "Nothing short of this will fulfil Paul's ambitions for them." See Peter J. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 95.

30 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 125–26.

31 "Paul energetically labored not to gain large numbers of converts but to present each person mature in Christ." See Don Howell, as quoted by David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 154.

in a manner worthy of the gospel, mature in Christ, sanctified by the Spirit, and obedient in faith. Paul's ability to boast on the last day is connected to the fruit of his labors. According to F. F. Bruce, "When the time came, he was sure that the Lord's adjudication would depend on the quality of his converts."[32]

Years ago, while still living in Central Asia, I was introduced to a man in my city who was somewhat interested in Christianity. He had previously come into contact with a church five hours away. Before our family moved to the region, this church had sent representatives on occasion to meet with him and others who had questions about the Bible. Now that I lived in his hometown, I had taken some responsibility in following up with him.

One day, he asked if we could talk, so I set up a meeting at my friend's office in the evening. The man arrived distraught. He was in a rough spot: out of work, addicted to sin, hopeless. As he exposed his heartache, I tried to encourage him with the good news of Jesus. When he expressed fear about possible persecution, I carefully asked him to count the cost. That night, after much discussion, he cried out to God in tears for mercy and deliverance.

Then, just as we were about to leave the office, he asked if I could help him buy a twenty-dollar one-way bus ticket to get him to the church five hours away. He wanted to share with them what God had done for him. Since they were having a Bible conference that week, it seemed like perfect timing. I gladly handed him the cash and sent him on his way. A few days afterward, though, I heard word from the church. "Please don't do that again," they cautioned. "It sends all the wrong signals." Perhaps not surprisingly, I never heard from the man again.

32 F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word, 1982), 56.

What that simple experience demonstrates is that Western missionaries must be extremely careful about connecting the gospel to people's aspirations for a better life. Whether it's pocket cash, a job, or a large investment into community development, we cannot afford to confuse the gospel of Jesus with Western power, influence, status, and prosperity. It's like dumping excess fertilizer on a sprouting lawn in the spring. It might quickly green, but by summer it's burnt brown.

The goal of missions isn't quick gains but lasting results. We must constantly remind ourselves of this, because, like Paul, we want to have an acceptable offering to present before God on the last day.

Heavenly Tribunal

Perhaps it goes without saying in a book on missions, but all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Jesus. That includes the authority to send and to save. It also includes the prerogative to judge[33]—not just the wicked and the sinner, but the works of each of us, his servants. The risen Christ has full jurisdiction throughout the cosmos, and he will preside one day in judgment over all creation. At that time, he will render to each person according to his or her deeds.

Even as Paul was fully confident of his acceptance before God through faith in Jesus, every step of his apostolic ministry was directed by the vision of one day standing before the heavenly tribunal. However, I'm convinced that Paul didn't do so filled with anxiety and dread. His thoughts about approaching the bench—Christ's *bema* seat—weren't consumed by fear. He wasn't anticipat-

33 Matt. 16:27; John 5:22, 27.

ing shame, failure, and ultimate disqualification (2 Tim. 4:6–8). He was preparing for glory.

But that confidence was directly connected to the way Paul had conducted his ministry. If he had cut corners or worked for people's praise, it would have resulted in shame and loss. This means that we too, as missionaries, should carefully consider every aspect of our ministries. Not all sacrifices receive God's acceptance. Divine commendation is not the birthright of every missionary. As Paul writes, "It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends" (2 Cor. 10:18). One day, all that we have ever done will be brought to light. At that time, good and faithful servants will receive their praise from God (1 Cor. 4:5).