

No series, Bazaar recap, Choate's leaving
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More Hard Questions

Some of you will remember I asked on Facebook a few weeks back what you'd like to hear preached about. Now this may not have been a good idea. Sermons are there to proclaim the gospel, to announce a coming kingdom. We have a time for question and answer—it's Sunday School, Circles, all the Groups at our church (do sign up for one if you're not now in one today by the way). That said, one of our church's deeply held values is that we¹ *ask hard questions*—if we're not doing that, we're not being ourselves as a congregation. So we'll ask some hard questions this morning.

The scripture I'm about to read comes from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. Remember CS Lewis' adage, it is a shame that the Lord, who gave St. Paul so many gifts, neglected to give him the gift of clarity. Paul talks here about the troubles we face. Bodies that break down. Love that dies. He adds the troubles of being a Christian. We have to love our enemies, even, or especially, when they don't deserve it. And Paul insists that the glory is worth the pain. Glory is heavy, he says, like a weight. I've changed one part of the translation.² Contemporary ones say we have a treasure in clay jars. Not very poetic. Traditional ones call them earthen vessels. These two earthen vessels are thousands of years old from Jerusalem. The point is we're pieces of pottery, humble, but we carry a light in us that fires the sun and the stars. At my and Jaylynn's wedding, my close friend with cerebral palsy read these words. He limped with a cane in one hand and a friend's arm under another up to the pulpit and read about these 'light and momentary troubles' that are passing away. And he showed us what he meant with his body. That's what a disciple does—we show Jesus through our frail bodies. I asked another disabled friend once what his disability will be like in glory. Healed? Not there? He said no--it'll be the most beautiful thing about me. Hear this word.

6 It is the God who said, "let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that it may be clear that this extraordinarily power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11 For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you. 13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. 15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. 16. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. 17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an external weight of glory that is beyond all measure, 18 because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

The rabbis tell a story about a student asking a teacher when it is dawn. Is it when you can see well enough to tell a sheep from a dog? No, the rabbi said. Is it when it is light enough to tell one kind of tree from

¹ On screen plz

² http://www.ancientresource.com/images/biblical/holyland_pottery/holyland-pot-861208.jpg

another? No. It is when you can see the face of a stranger and recognize in it the face of a brother or sister. Until then, no matter how light it is out, it is still very dark.

The wonderful questions y'all asked me can be divided into three.³ One, who is God. Two, who are we. And three, what's going on? I hope as I answer these, we remember something important. God is a mystery, not a puzzle. A puzzle is something you figure out and you're done, like a Rubik's Cube or crossword. A mystery is something that the more you know about it, the more you don't know. A mystery is like the face of someone you love. Or a great work of art. We keep coming back because there is always more depth there, and it makes us more human to wonder about it.⁴ God is a mystery, not a puzzle. As soon as we think we've figured out God, we're in trouble. As soon as we think we've figured another person out, we're in trouble. Because then we can use them, manipulate them. And then things are very dark indeed.

⁵One, who is God. Your questions didn't exactly put it that way. You asked things like this, how do we pray in times of turmoil? How do we trust God, and leave our worries to God? How do we focus on God when we're pulled a million different ways? It makes sense why you asked about trust and worry. The world is a dark place. ISIS terrorists acting barbarically in Syria and Iraq. The loss of Anna Smith from our campus. And then the worry in our lives over those we love, jobs, whether everything will turn out right. We *want* to trust God, but it's hard to trust God, and we are afraid.

The bible knows we worry. And the bible argues we should not.⁶ "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Jesus asks. In fact, science shows, worrying runs the other direction--worrying shortens lives. But we worry because we love. And we fear something will happen to those whom we love. It interests me that our questions all have to do with trust and worry and not with love. God doesn't just want us to trust him. God wants us to love him, since he's loved us from before we were born until eternity runs out. That's the best reason not to worry.

One early Christian leader, asked about the emperor of Rome who was persecuting the church, said this, "He's just a passing mist." Really? The guy with the soldiers? Sure enough, the Roman empire, strongest the world had ever seen, has been gone a millennium and a half now, the church, whose existence then was very much in doubt, is doing just fine thank you. Where the church is persecuted *now*, in the Middle East, the same is true, even as evil looks strong at the moment. Evil is a passing mist, an absurdity, it doesn't make sense, never try to explain it. Evil is uninteresting. I remember preaching this line a few years back, that good is what's fascinating, evil is dull and boring, and a teenager under my nose right here shook his head and mouthed "no." And I thought, ok, I'm getting somewhere here. You can go one of two ways here. You can make evil your primary interest, as our media does, or you can make God your primary interest and leave evil unexplored. Let's choose the latter, shall we?

⁷How do we not worry? I don't know, I'm no good at this. I do know this. God is terribly patient. Unbelievably patient. If it were me in charge I'd have killed all the bad guys right off. Problem is then there'd be no one left. God took millennia to show himself to Israel, in Jesus, God is taking millennia to make the world right. This is the time of God's patience. Those who sin, however terribly, are taking advantage of the time of God's patience to do harm. Here's maybe why we don't worry. Because nothing we can do can make God love us one ounce less. Nothing we can do can undo God's promise of resurrection. God will make all

³ One, two, and three on screen plz

⁴ Next sentence on screen

⁵ I. Who is God?

⁶ On screen plz

⁷ Question on screen

things right. When a friend died too young, another friend said this: if there is any consolation, it is that a life like his will bring about a resurrection far more glorious.

⁸Who are we, point two. We are terribly temporary creatures.⁹ “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord stands forever” scripture says, and we’re like grass, a flower. One of you shared with me a yearbook from my alma mater, Davidson, from 1914, a century ago. The men, all men, are so young, babies. And now they’re all gone, if alive the youngest would be 118. Our life here is a breath. When Billy Graham was once asked what surprises him most about his 95 years of life he answered in a second, “its brevity.” How fast it went. We’re not here long y’all. Live well. Laugh a lot. Pray and worship. Life is too short not to love God and live well. In college my InterVarsity chapter printed shirts that read “Life is short, pray hard.” A beloved elder of the school named Chalmers Davidson, descendent of the founder, who was nearly 90 at the time, told me “that’s true. Problem is you don’t realize it till you hit 85.”

If our life is short so is our vision. When I think of how short life is I want to be a better friend, a better husband, a better dad, a better pastor.¹⁰ GK Chesterton said “any marriage is more interesting than any romance.” Feelings come and go, we fall in love with other people romantically all the time. Who cares? Keep your promises. We discover who we are by looking back at the promises we kept and saying eh, cool, that’s who I am. I have watched friends walk over one another for professional reasons. And it sickens me. Whatever else life brings I pray to be a decent friend above everything. Even if unemployed.

Who are we?

One of you said of us that it’s important we realize we each have light in us. We are made in the image of God. We are reflections of the most high, brighter than a million suns. CS Lewis said it this way¹¹

Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—[we are on our way to becoming either] immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

. . . Another had a one word answer for what to preach on: sin. So very important. We are images of God *and* we are sinners who crucify Christ and one another all the time. A third of you had a third one-word suggestion: *reconciliation* (I got one sentence on each of these). Preach on reconciliation. God is knitting back together the rips we make in creation all the time. That’s what’s going on right now. We’re stuck between those two poles. The great light within us. And the great darkness with which we act. A friend of mine was seeing a spiritual director. She complained, “She keeps saying ‘look at the light within you!’ And she doesn’t get it. I’ m such a sinner.” Both are true of all of us. Of all of us. And of everyone we see our whole lives. We are terrible sinners, and beautiful images of the most high, at the same time. The great quote on this,¹² “Be kind, everyone you see is fighting a mighty battle.”

One of you asked, how do we go about serving and loving our neighbors who are most unlike us. Who are most annoying, if I can put it that way. Francis of Assisi, great medieval saint, would call others in his order who bothered him “Brother fly.” “Sister mosquito.” They were annoying. *And* he loved all of them. Birds and insects would come and sit and listen to him preach (and so it was a weird sort of compliment). The bible

⁸ II. Who are we?

⁹ On screen

¹⁰ Quote on screen plz

¹¹ Quote on screen plz

¹² Quote on screen plz

speaks of those who annoy us most as “the lesser brother,” “the lesser sister,” “the least of these.” And God put them right there to bother you. He did! Thanks God. And to make you holy. To teach you to forgive.¹³

Community is the place where the person you most hate is always there right beside you. The church is always a headache because God only has sinners to work with. And the Holy Spirit makes sure they’re right there in your pew so you can learn grace and forgiveness. And here’s the thing—the person who bothers you most might be the one on the pillow beside you, or in the mirror in the morning. When I see people in serial marriages, or changing jobs all the time, I want to say this thing but I’m too nice, hey man, you’re taking yourself with you, into that new marriage, that new job. The real darkness is in each of our hearts. But that’s really hard to face. So we blame other people—the spouse, the friend, the job. This is why some people lash out at the church—it’s an easy target, and lets us ourselves off the hook. Changing the externals in our lives never changes our hearts. The real place for us to work on is in here. Becoming like Jesus. And that’s the mightiest battle any of us will ever face. Ever (and the only one that truly matters).

One of you asked a question about me. Perfect, my favorite topic! Me. I actually try not to talk about myself in preaching. Lots of bad sermons are just the preacher foisting our stuff on y’all, we should just work all that out in therapy. I had a conversion at a Baptist camp when I was 16. Before that my parents were good people, not against religion, but not interested. After that all I wanted to do was follow Jesus. It’s all I still want to do. I went from non-chalant about God to serious about God. I went back to my high school and told everyone I could about Jesus. Burnt some bridges and embarrassed myself a little. I still wish I had the zeal, just not the foolishness. In college I led fellowship groups and found my way to a Methodist church, where the good preaching was. And I listened because the pastor was smart, well-educated, and seemed to care about me. I’ve spent my life trying to combine evangelical zeal and the life of the mind and the heart. But I’m not a church lifer. Lots of churchiness I just don’t get. Carnations on Mother’s Day and stuff. I’m only interested in church because I’m interested in Jesus, not the reverse. And my job is to pray for you. When I think of some of the hurt you’ve faced lately I have no words. I just hold you up before God and cry inside, sometimes outside. And I wish I could make it right. I know who can. Jesus on his cross. He just takes his time about it sometimes. My job is to say “*hurry up God.*” Which is another way of saying my job is to pray for and with you.

¹⁴What time is it? Lots of us are worried about world events, local events, events in our homes, we wonder how to pray. Again I don’t know. I do know this. We are facing nothing unique. Nothing. I was reading a book on the crusades lately. It tries to explain how all Christendom took to arms to march 3000 miles away and attack Muslims (google maps says that walk would take 900 hours). The book explained it this way—in medieval Europe people lived short hard lives. And they were afraid. You had Arab raiders in the south of Europe. Viking raiders in the north. Magyar raiders in the east. Anytime your village was raided that meant everything burned, taken, women and children stolen. And the people who were supposed to protect you showed up to collect taxes but were scarce when you needed their help.¹⁵ Hurt people hurt people, as Rick Warren. Any fool could raise an army in such circumstances. Hermann Goering, Hitler’s #2, said this

¹⁶Of course the people don’t want war . . . [but] the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger.

I worry when I see the level of fear in our culture. Martin Niemoller, a German pastor who resisted the Nazis, when he first met Hitler was asked what he thought. He said “Mr. Hitler is a terribly frightened man.”

¹³ Next sentence on screen plz

¹⁴ III. What time is it?

¹⁵ On screen

¹⁶ Goering quote on screen

Is it any wonder the bible's primary command is "be not afraid?" The greatest saints have had hope in the darkest despair and they insist that we do the same. The future includes the kingdom of God. Wrong made right. The poor blessed. All reconciled. Sin banished. Jesus ruling. It will come whether we help or not, try to stop it or not, care or not, pray or not. But we can spend our lives in the best way possible by pitching in. And God will be glad to have our help.

This is why we should pepper our lives with prayer. I mentioned last week that the Jews have a prayer for a natural wonder and it's this,¹⁷ pray it with me, "blessed art thou, o Lord God, king of the universe, for thou hast done great things on earth and in heaven." Pray that when you see a waterfall, a sunset, or another human being, all marvels of God's hand.¹⁸ Our biggest Methodist Church, Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, sells these little shower prayer tags that amaze me. Pray this, and suddenly a shower is a reminder of baptism (you can pick one of these up for \$1 on your way out of church today). My favorite movie, *Glory*, about the Civil War, has a scene in which black union soldiers are told the Confederacy will hang them if they're captured. Matthew Broderick, their colonel, tells them they can leave with no punishment. The next day he emerges from his tent to see the whole battalion, not one has left. And he whispers,¹⁹ "glory, halleluiah." I confess I say that when things go really really well. When they don't we pray "Come Lord Jesus." Whatever time it is, we can pepper out lives with prayer.

I'm done with your questions, here's one back at ya, the ultimate hard question. Jesus asks it of us. Who do you say that I am? The answer is our lives. Not just with our trust, difficult as that is. But with our love. For God, and for neighbor. Amen.

¹⁷ On screen plz

¹⁸ Photo on screen

¹⁹ On screen plz