

THE OVERWHELMING WEIGHT OF GOD, PART 9: TREASURING

Matthew 13:44; 1 Timothy 6:9-16 (NASB)

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The event we call the Triumphal Entry was a pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus and in the history of the nation Israel. Centuries of prophecies had foretold the coming of Israel's Messiah and this specific event, as recorded, for example, in the book of Zechariah: "**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! /Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! /Behold, your king is coming to you; /He is just and endowed with salvation, /Humble, and mounted on a donkey, /Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey**" (Zechariah 9:9). And in exactly this fashion Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the people acclaimed him their Messiah, shouting hosannas and strewing branches in his path.

This moment had come after his entire earthly ministry was nearly finished. Everything he had to say and do was substantially before the eyes and ears of the people. Just prior to this he had performed one of his greatest miracles. Lazarus, Jesus' close friend, had fallen ill and died. Mary and Martha had completed the funeral traditions of Israel which featured a burial within twenty-four hours. Jesus was nowhere near when it happened, and when he finally arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb for days. Jesus wept with his friends--and then to the shock of all, he said: "Lazarus, come forth!" And he did! This dramatic demonstration of divine power could not be faked by any of the many other false messiahs of the time. This sign miracle swelled the crowd which shouted loud hosannas as Jesus rode into his city, the holy city of Jerusalem, on the foal of a donkey.

And yet we have good reason to wonder about the spiritual status of the people in this crowd. What did they really understand about their own Messiah? How much of Jesus' teaching had they comprehended? Were they rejoicing in the true Christ, or a cultural concept of a coming king who would deliver them from the oppression by their Roman occupiers? And how much true commitment of heart had each of them made to Christ? Another mob in Jerusalem would gather in a few days to shout something different: "Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!" It is hard to believe that at least some of the same people were not in both crowds. And by the time the crucifixion was over, the acclaiming multitude was reduced to 120 followers who were willing to gather and pray in his name.

HOW TO RECEIVE THE KING

Fortunately, the Lord Jesus himself gave the world many clear explanations of what true reception of his kingly rule would mean. The following mini-parable, which is very significant in my own life, is one example: "**The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field**" (Matthew 13:44). The crowd at the Triumphal Entry represented themselves as receiving their king. Make no mistake about the point of this parable: the "**kingdom of heaven**" is God's rule over our lives, which includes all of the benefits of citizenship under his government. This is not an explanation of how we can all feel OK about ourselves in spite of the screaming foulness of our sins so we can go on running our own lives.

Three different parts of our inward, non-physical nature are revealed here, and God wants them

all. The first is the mind. The man walking in the field comes upon a treasure, and the first impact it has on his inward nature is to break upon his mind. There was no one there to say: "Don't you understand what you have found?" He seems to have come to an intellectual understanding of the value of this treasure right away. This is the first and necessary component of treasuring. We cannot begin to treasure anything if we do not comprehend its value.

And we are all dunderheads. As a young man, I did not have a true comprehension of the value of many things. For example, I did not see the preciousness of animal life, and I did not see the immense value of family. I learned these later on as the Lord transformed my mind with his revelation. It is well for us to start by admitting that we are all dunderheads about something. Nobody with a fallen mind begins life with an understanding of the value of things as God has given them to us.

Furthermore, the fallenness of the human mind is fatal. The sinful human brain can look directly at the precious things of God for a lifetime and fail to see the value of them. That raises an important theological and practical question: How does anyone ever recognize the true value of God and the things of God? Whether you lean toward Calvinist or Arminian views, the answer is the same. God's prevenient grace must operate on our behalf to open our minds. Our false belief about our capacities is that we can judge the value of all things rightly. The word of God says that we cannot do so unless God grants his grace, as Paul quoted Psalm 14 in Romans 3:11: "**THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD...**" (caps in orig.). But never fear—God wants people to discover the treasure!

The second part of treasuring the overwhelming value of the kingdom of heaven is that our hearts rejoice in it. This is a response which fits the discovery we have just made with our minds. There is no chance for a joyful response if our minds don't understand. But once the mind gets it, the heart leaps with joy.

Rejoicing is not only a response, it is one of the most critical enduring decisions of the Christian life. In what do you and I take our joys? Whatever good things may have been in the life of the man in the parable, those joys were all immediately superseded by the joy of discovering the kingdom of heaven.

How do I know that this man moved from the emotion of joy into an act of the will? We can tell by the evidence of his behavior. He sells everything he owns to buy this field and make the treasure his own. His mind grasped the value, his heart concurred, and then his will put action to his mind and heart.

We must assume that this was not an unscrupulous thing to do in that time and place. There were no banks or vaults available to people, so money and other treasures were customarily concealed in some way. In our own day, the law of the sea provides for the right of salvage. Treasure lost at sea, in general, can be legally claimed by the people who go to the trouble of finding it and getting it off the sea bottom. In the same way, the man who buys the field with the treasure likely did so in accord with a similar set of laws regarding the recovery of lost treasure on land.

C. S. Lewis pointed out a crucial understanding of treasuring the value of God in his *Reflections on the Psalms*: "...All enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players

praising their favorite game, [and so on.] ...Men spontaneously praise whatever they value. ...I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed" (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1958, pp.93-95).

In the same way our delight in God—our treasuring of the value of his person—is not complete until it is expressed, until we sell out our human treasures and buy into the divine treasures. That is a work of the human will in concert with the mind and heart, and moves from the invisible and inward self to the outward self which can be observed in space and time. If you treasure God, you will not be the only one who knows. There are many ways to display that treasuring in practical terms, but they all, when boiled down, say the same thing: *God—not his blessings, but God himself—is the most valuable thing I have in my life.*

TREASURING THE WRONG THING

Every fallen human being is born, lives, and dies treasuring the wrong things. David Wells, in *No Place for Truth*, writes, "...Every person has objects and interests that are for them matters of 'ultimate concern.' They are the focus of our need to transcend ourselves and they are the means of doing so. They are surrogates for God. And the modern world has become, for so many, a matter of ultimacy. All moderns are, in this sense, believers. Their world gives them their values and horizons, their life and sustenance, and they look for nothing outside of or beyond what modernity provides. They live by it, and in the end, they die by it" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, p. 285).

This has been the character of sin long before the advent of modernity. As Paul wrote to Timothy: "**But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs**" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The love of money is merely one example of an earthly thing which is granted ultimacy in many lives, and which ministers death rather than life.

By contrast, those who treasure God have fixed themselves not on a temporary, earthly thing, but on a treasure which is above and out of time. They are all about eternal things, even while they live. Their horizons extend beyond the door of death where they face not the ultimate loss, but the ultimate gain because death holds out the prospect of uniting with the One they treasure above all things.

WHAT TREASURING GOD LOOKS LIKE

Paul continues in the same passage in 1 Timothy to display what treasuring God looks like. As C. S. Lewis and John Piper have argued, treasuring God for his own sake is, in fact what Paul was talking about when he issued the challenge: "**Fight the good fight of faith...**" (1 Timothy 6:12). The inward delight and outward praise of God is how we know that we have treasured God above all other things. There is no faith without this treasuring, and it must involve mind, heart, and will.

Paul describes the role of the mind in treasuring God in v. 20: "**O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is**

falsely called "knowledge "-- (1 Timothy 6:20). The body of redemptive truth—the gospel, as broadly conceived—is what Timothy is to guard. This is the content of our faith, the body of truths which explain to us what God is like, what he is doing in the world, and what he wants from us. This revelation is found predominantly in the word of God, the Bible, with only a small portion revealed in creation. Unless the truth of God's word becomes implanted in our minds, nothing we feel or do can be true. They will always be defective and insufficient.

The devil knows this, and is always attacking the truth of God upon which so much rests. Timothy is warned that receiving and embracing divine truth always involves discretion and vigilance--discretion to avoid empty talk which turns us from the purity of truth, and vigilance to identify and root out any areas of false thinking about God.

As the mind becomes enlightened with the immense value of God, the heart begins to rejoice. Paul did so naturally, for example, beginning in verse 15: "**He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen**" (1 Timothy 6:15-16). As Paul is reminded by his own exhortation to Timothy he cannot stop himself from sliding into an outburst of glorification of God in his perfections.

Let me give you a diagnostic tool for testing whether your mind is enlightened and your heart is set upon God. Ask yourself: Can I do the same, in my own way? Can I shut my Bible, walk out into the grass, and bubble over with rejoicing at the specific attributes of the Lord?

Paul described the Lord as "**the blessed and only Sovereign,**" the unique ultimate deity who is happy about being God. This same God is "**the King of kings and Lord of lords,**" who both outranks and overpowers every earthly ruler. He "**alone possesses immortality,**" which is not only the quality of deathlessness, but a comprehensive look at the self-existence of God. Everything he needs for existence, including love, he has within himself.

Furthermore, this God "**dwells in unapproachable light.**" That light is the burning, blinding shine of his nature and attributes, and is so powerful on every level that no one can see God and live. If you and I avert our eyes from the brightness of the sun, we must know that there is no way to shut our eyes from the glory of the Lord if he chooses to reveal it. Fortunately, he veils his radiance so that we do not die. Related to this is God's nature as unscannable by the human eye for "**no man has seen or can see [Him].**"

Finally, Paul concludes this impromptu doxology with an ascription of surpassing worth: "**To Him be honor and eternal dominion!**" This is not a statement that among the high things and people of life God is worthy of some honor and some rule. This is a statement that ultimate honor and rule belong to God alone.

That's what treasuring the value of God in our hearts looks like. We can only treasure what we know. But even then, we must set our hearts upon him and him alone as the only God.

Then come the acts of the will which are seen as treasuring behaviors: "**But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and**

gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time—" (1 Timothy 6:11-15).

The first behavior is to demote all lesser things below God where they belong and be sure to completely abandon every unworthy thing. Then we adopt a life-long pursuit of the things of God. This list is probably a group example of the figure of speech called *synecdoche*. Paul uses a few specifics to point to the entire list of things we do as acts of treasuring God for his own sake including the pursuit of "**righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.**"

We take hold of eternal life as an act of the will and we confess our faith. We choose to fulfill the commission God has given us and every commandment of our Lord Jesus. All these things are the appropriate applications of human will to the overwhelming weight of God's value.

We are now in position to understand why the celebrants at the Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem were prepared to abandon him. Their minds were enlightened by partial truth about Messiah to the extent that their rabbis taught them. They knew about Christ's earthly ministry. But there was also in their minds a terrible admixture of midrash, legend, rabbinical opinion, and desperate hope. So they did rejoice, for a time—they valued Messiah for a moment.

But when you rejoice in God with a skewed and incomplete understanding, your joy is not true and neither is it infused with the energy of the God who delights to glorify himself. The mistaken hope of deliverance of Israel from Roman domination tainted this joy. It was not strictly rejoicing in the value of God, and therefore was subject to sudden failure as in fact happened for most of the celebrants. The majority fell away in a matter of hours. Some got caught up in the other mob which shouted for Christ's crucifixion.

Is there any way in which we are like them—glad for a Messiah as long as we get what we want? That is not what it means to have a king, in fact, the King of Kings. For the One who dwells in unapproachable light we must soak our minds in the truth of his word, we must set our joy upon him in his glory, and we must sell out—which means dispensing with every pretender to ultimacy in our lives. We hold nothing back. We give mind, heart, and will.

There were no doubt some true believers in the crowd who cast branches before the Lord and shouted Hosanna! They responded to the true overwhelming value of Messiah in his person. May we be like them.

So fight the good fight of the faith to rejoice above all things in the incomparable Christ. Tune out the raucous cacophony of voices insisting you grant ultimacy to any earthly thing. Sell out for the kingdom of heaven, not earth. And do not stop until Christ comes to gather us to himself, for he is the object of our desire. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

[clip from *The Visual Bible: The Gospel of John*, 2003, 1:43:14-1:44:50, Triumphal Entry from John.avi, 1:36 min.]