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THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

LUKE 1-5

John MacArthur

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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Luke's Prologue (Luke 1:1–4)

1

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.
(1:1–4)

The world is full of stories. Some are compelling, others are moving, many are impactful, and a few are even capable of profoundly changing how people think and live. Many such stories have come and gone throughout history, from the legends of the ancient world, the myths of past civilizations, the fanciful stories surrounding the pantheon of Greek gods, to the classics of literature from Aesop's fables to Beowulf to Shakespeare to modern writers. But there is one enduring and true story that stands above all the rest: the life of Jesus Christ. It is, as the title of a mid-twentieth-century Hollywood retelling of His life proclaimed, "The Greatest Story Ever Told."

This is the compelling and glorious story of how God purposed

in eternity past to save lost sinners from eternal hell. His gracious, loving plan was to send His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all who put their faith in Him. Jesus, as Paul wrote to the Romans, was “delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:25). John wrote concerning Him, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). It was only because “God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” that He could “demonstrate His righteousness” (Rom. 3:25) and both “be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (v.26). Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), the gospel message of salvation from sin and judgment in Christ alone completely transcends the limitations of culture and time and definitively determines every person’s eternal destiny (cf. John 3:36; 8:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Accordingly, the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments is the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 19:10). Just before His ascension He told the disciples, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). It is the “Scriptures” (the Old Testament), Jesus declared to the hostile Jewish leaders, “that testify about Me” (John 5:39). The New Testament Epistles unpack all the theological riches of salvation in Christ, while the book of Revelation chronicles Christ’s second coming in glory (cf. Matt. 24:30).

But of all the books of the Old and New Testaments, the Gospels most clearly focus on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Luke is the longest, and most thorough and complete of the four (Luke covers approximately forty pages, Matthew thirty-seven, Mark twenty-three, and John twenty-nine). Including the book of Acts, Luke’s accurate, inerrant, comprehensive narrative of the life of Jesus and its impact spans more than sixty years. It begins with the birth of His forerunner, John the Baptist, and concludes with the apostle Paul’s first imprisonment and ministry of the gospel in Rome. Altogether, Luke’s writings make up more than one fourth of the New Testament. (For a further discussion of Luke’s writings, see the Introduction to Acts in *Acts 1–12*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 1–6.)

But despite his major role in chronicling the history and spread of the good news of salvation, Luke remains virtually unknown. Nowhere in his inspired writings does he refer to himself by name—not even in Acts, where he was one of Paul’s traveling companions. In keeping with Luke’s humble anonymity, the rest of the New Testament mentions his name only three times (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). He was content to remain in the background and allow the majesty of Christ, who pervades his writ-

ing, to be the focus. Luke's accurately recorded history and theology establish his readers' understanding of the Lord's life and ministry.

The four verses that constitute the prologue to Luke's gospel are one long sentence, crafted in the polished style of a Greek literary classic. (The remainder of the gospel was written in the *koinē* Greek used in common, everyday speech, as were the other New Testament books.) Such prologues, explaining the writer's sources, purpose, and approach, were common in the scholarly writings of the Greco-Roman world (including those by such noted historians as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Josephus). Luke's prologue thus marks his gospel as a serious literary and historical work, commanding the respect of even the most sophisticated, well-educated Gentile readers.

Despite his anonymity four elements of the evangelist's identity appear implicitly and explicitly in the prologue. Luke is revealed as a physician and historian, and as a theologian and pastor.

LUKE THE PHYSICIAN AND HISTORIAN

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, (1:1–3a)

The phrase **it seemed fitting for me as well** contains this gospel's only reference to its author. As noted in the introduction to this volume, the early church unanimously identified Luke as the author of the gospel that bears his name; there was never any other suggestion concerning its authorship.

All that is known about Luke's life before he became one of Paul's partners in spreading the gospel is that he was a physician. In Colossians 4:14 Paul referred to his dear friend as "Luke, the beloved physician." Since verses 10 and 11 of that chapter identify Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus as the only ones among this list of Paul's fellow workers who were "from the circumcision" (i.e., Jewish), it is reasonable to conclude that the people Paul refers to in verses 12–17, including Luke (v. 14), were Gentiles. (For further evidence that Luke was a Gentile, see the introduction to Luke in this volume.)

Being a physician in the ancient world did not carry the dignity that such a profession does today. Howard C. Kee gives a helpful historical perspective:

An obvious question is: did most of the Roman populace share the exalted view of the medical art propounded by its chief practitioners, and particularly by Galen [a second-century A.D. Roman doctor]? Galen is caustic in his denunciation of the money-seeking, routine-bound quacks who “enter the sickroom, bleed the patient, lay on a plaster, and give an enema.” Both from the epigrams and from non-medical writers of the second century [A.D.] it is evident that the medical profession was regarded as being characteristically greedy and fond of public display. Plutarch, in *The Flatters*, mocks the smooth bedside manner of the day. Dio Chrysostom describes the efforts of physicians to drum up trade by public lecture-presentations, intended to dazzle hearers and attract patients:

This sort of recitation . . . is kind of a spectacle or parade . . . like the exhibition of the so-called physicians, who seat themselves conspicuously before us and give us a detailed account of the union of joints, the combination and juxtaposition of bones, and other topics of that sort, such as pores and respirations, and excretions. And the crowd is all agape with admiration and more enchanted than a swarm of children.

In his fine survey, *Roman Medicine*, John Scarborough notes that there were two different classes of physicians serving two different groups of patients. The aristocrats had physicians as servants or as private employees in their own establishments, or had access to them despite their high fees and lofty reputations. There were also many illiterate doctors, quacks, charlatans; exploiters of a gullible and needy public. He remarks that, “The intellectuality of Galen fails to pierce the growing gloom of an age gradually turning from rational answers posed by the Greek heritage of questioning to the mystical, all-encompassing solutions of religion.” By the second half of the second century, there were many wonder-workers and rhetoricians, of whom Lucian draws satirical sketches in *Alexander the False Prophet and The Passing of Peregrinus*. . . . Although we cannot generalize from Lucian’s satirical remarks about the healing profession—in both its medical and its mystical aspects—we can safely conclude that [it] was [not] beyond criticism or universally esteemed in the later second century.

In the New Testament there are only seven occurrences of the word *hiatros*, and in only one of these is there a positive estimate of the physician. In Mt. 9:12 (=Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:31) there is a proverbial expression about the physician’s role being to care for the ailing, rather than the well. This is offered in the synoptics as justification for Jesus’ attention to the sick, the unclean and the outcasts. In Mk. 5:26 (=Lk. 8:43), . . . the physicians have taken money from the woman with the menstrual flow but have not cured her ailment. Another proverbial expression in Lk. 4:23, “Physician, heal yourself!”, is a challenge to the one who points out problems that he must cure them. In Col. 4:14, Luke is identified as

“the beloved physician,” with no indication of the nature of the medical role he may have performed. (*Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* [London: Cambridge, 1986], 63–65)

At the very outset of his gospel Luke acknowledged that **many** others had already **undertaken to compile an account of** the life of Jesus. He did not specifically identify any of these early sources, which have all been lost. The only ones still extant that Luke may have consulted are the inspired gospels of Matthew and Mark, which probably were written before he penned his gospel (although Luke's omission of the material in an important section of Mark [6:45–8:26] suggests that he may not have seen Mark's gospel before he wrote). Whether or not Luke saw their gospels, he had personal contact with both Mark and Matthew, since Mark and Luke both traveled with Paul (cf. Philem. 24), and Luke could have visited Matthew in Jerusalem during Paul's two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (Acts 24:27). During that same period, Luke could have interviewed those in the Jerusalem church who had known the Lord, including the apostles and His mother, Mary. In addition, Luke had access to many others who had followed Jesus during His lifetime (such as the seventy [Luke 10:1–12], the women who ministered to Him [cf. Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3; 23:49, 55], the 120 believers who gathered in Jerusalem following Christ's ascension [Acts 1:15], and the 500 who gathered in Galilee [1 Cor. 15:6]). They would have vividly remembered the things that Jesus did and said, and Luke could have interviewed them, or possibly read their writings.

Luke's goal was not to produce just another biography of Jesus, though that would have been a noble end in itself. Far more than that, he understood that the gospel is the story of what God accomplishes through Jesus Christ in the lives of sinners. The verb translated **accomplished** (*peplērophorēmenōn*) is an intensive compound word that indicates the complete fulfillment of something, in this case the redemptive plan of God. Luke's gospel, like the other three canonical gospels, emphasizes the theme of divine accomplishment. It chronicles how God accomplished salvation for His people (cf. Matt. 1:21; Luke 19:10) through the redemptive work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospels do not relate the story of a misunderstood ethical teacher, a failed social revolutionary, a model of selfless humility, or even a heroic martyr; they reveal the Savior who is God incarnate, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

It is important to note that Luke was not critical of those who had **undertaken** (a term often used in connection with literary endeavors) **to compile an account** (a phrase often used to refer to historical writing) of Jesus' life and ministry. He did not pen his gospel as a corrective

to those accounts, but because God prompted him to write a comprehensive narrative of the life of Christ and the spread of His salvation gospel.

Luke's reason for referring to his sources was twofold. First, it establishes his history as a legitimate, reliable account. He was a careful historian who used credible methods of research and writing, and based his content on the firsthand accounts of eyewitnesses. Second, Luke's use of those sources places his gospel squarely in the orthodox tradition. His volume was not a bizarre, different, heretical gospel. Luke's account was consistent with the teaching of the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42) and with those of eyewitnesses and especially the other Spirit-inspired gospel writers (cf. John 20:30-31; 21:24-25).

In writing his gospel Luke utilized the source material **handed down to him by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses**. These same men (one definite article in the Greek text modifies both groups) later became **servants** (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-9; 4:1; 2 Cor. 3:6) **of the word** (a synonym for the gospel [cf. 5:1; 8:11-13, 15; Acts 6:4; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36; 11:1, 19; 13:5, 7, 44; 14:25; 15:7; 16:6, 32; 17:11; 18:5; 19:10]). They observed Jesus' ministry firsthand and used that knowledge to faithfully preach the gospel. God preserved and transmitted the truth through them until He inspired four specific writers to record it in the New Testament. **Eyewitnesses** were the most significant sources who **handed down** (a technical term denoting the passing on of authoritative truth) the true information upon which Luke's account was based. That Luke was not an eyewitness himself makes it evident that he was not an apostle, since one qualification of apostleship was to have witnessed the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21-22; cf. Luke 24:45-48; John 20:19-29; 1 Cor. 9:1; 1 John 1:1-3). Like Mark, he was not himself one of their number, but was a companion of some of the apostles (most notably Paul).

Since Luke had access to this wealth of firsthand, eyewitness testimony, it was **fitting** ("good," "proper") for him to write his account. The phrase **having investigated everything carefully from the beginning** ("having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first" [NKJV]) further marks Luke as an accomplished and accurate historian. His careful and thorough research gave him a precise understanding of Jesus Christ's life and ministry. As a result, he was uniquely qualified to write this gospel narrative under the Spirit's inspiration.

Luke's acknowledgement of his use of source material must not be misconstrued as a disclaimer of divine inspiration for his gospel. The process of inspiration never bypassed or overrode the personalities, life experiences, vocabularies, or writing styles of the Bible's human authors; their unique traits are indelibly stamped on all the books of Scripture. The Spirit used Luke's knowledge, gave him additional information, guided

his selection of material, and controlled every word so that he wrote exactly what God wanted written (cf. 1 Cor. 2:12-13; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Therefore, his original account is infallibly and inerrantly true.

LUKE THE THEOLOGIAN AND PASTOR

to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (1:3b-4)

A good theologian is analytical, logical, and systematic. His goal is to persuade people to understand and accept doctrinal truth by means of a thoughtful, logical, progressive, consistent, persuasive explanation. Luke revealed himself to be a master theologian by writing his account **in consecutive order**. The New American Standard's rendering implies that Luke's gospel will be strictly chronological from beginning to end. Certainly it is generally chronological, starting with the birth of Christ, His circumcision and boyhood, moving on to His baptism and public ministry, and culminating with the cross and resurrection. (See the outline of Luke in the introduction in this volume.) There were instances, however, in which Luke arranged his material thematically to illustrate or expound a particular theological point (e.g., Luke's record of John the Baptist's arrest, 3:15-20). So Luke's narrative exhibits a basic chronological flow, but not to the exclusion of thematic, doctrinal discussion, in which he uses material out of chronological sequence.

So the phrase **in consecutive order** is better understood as a reference to the logical, systematic nature of Luke's writing. The New King James Version's translation of this phrase, "an orderly account," captures the essence of Luke's purpose in writing. His goal was to persuade; to lead his readers to believe the gospel by means of his carefully researched, logical, systematic presentation of the truth concerning God's saving purpose in Christ.

The first vital theological truth Luke wanted his readers to understand is God's sovereignty in history. He viewed God's sovereign plan of redemption, which unfolded through the life and work of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:22-24), as of supreme importance. It was to die as a substitute for the sins of His people that He came into the world (19:10; cf. 9:22-23; 17:25; 18:31-34; 24:25, 26, 44). Second, Luke saw the significance of the universal sweep of redemption. He understood that salvation was available to everyone, not just the Jews (cf. Acts 10:34-48; 14:24-27; 15:12-19). Luke wanted to make it clear that the wonderful reality of God's saving purpose included Gentiles (e.g., Luke 7:1-10; 14:15-23). He himself was a

Gentile and he wrote to Theophilus, also a Gentile (Acts 1:1). In fact, Luke viewed the gospel not only as being for all ethnic groups, including Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, but also for all categories of individuals within those groups, including women (even prostitutes), outcasts (including lepers), those possessed by demons, even tax collectors (cf. 7:36–50; 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31; 17:11–19; 19:1–10). Luke’s emphasis on the gospel’s universal appeal can be seen in his genealogy of Jesus. Unlike Matthew, who began his genealogy with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, Luke traces Christ’s genealogy all the way back to Adam, the father of the entire human race.

Though the main doctrinal emphasis in his gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ, Luke did not neglect other important realities. Luke not only revealed God’s sovereign control over history, but also described His tender, compassionate concern for lost sinners (cf. the parables in chapter 15). The doctrine of salvation is critical in Luke’s gospel (his is the gospel that refers most specifically to the doctrine of justification, 18:14; cf. 7:36–50; 15:11–32; 19:1–10). In fact, the cross is the focus of more than half of his gospel, from 9:53 to the end of chapter 23. Luke also focused more on the ministry of the Holy Spirit than the other gospel writers, and recorded the Lord’s teaching on His second coming. In addition, Luke the theologian addressed several areas of practical theology, such as worship, forgiveness, mercy, thanksgiving, and prayer. Profiles of discipleship are presented.

Finally, Luke’s prologue reveals his pastor’s heart. He addressed this massive work to a single individual, a man whom he called **most excellent Theophilus**. No personal details are known about him, but the title **most excellent** suggests that he was likely from the upper level of society. (Luke uses the same phrase in the book of Acts to designate the governors Felix and Festus [23:26; 24:3; 26:25].)

Theophilus had already **been taught** certain **things** about Jesus. But some of that teaching had been unclear or incomplete and Luke wanted him to **know the exact truth**. The word translated **exact** means “reliable,” “certain,” or “accurate.” Luke presented to Theophilus and all others who would read his account a precise, accurate, and complete understanding of the gospel and the life of Christ. Whether Theophilus was an interested unbeliever or a new believer is not known. In either case, Luke’s intensive research and detailed writing reveals the immensity of his pastor’s heart. He cared enough about Theophilus’s soul that he made this Spirit-empowered effort to bring that one man to a more precise, accurate knowledge of the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. (For other New Testament examples of that kind of concern, see Acts 18:26; 19:1–5.)

In the remarkable providence of God, the Holy Spirit ensured

that the book Luke wrote initially to one man would be disseminated around the world. The beloved physician, historian, theologian, and pastor had the privilege of becoming the instrument God used for the salvation and edification of millions throughout history (cf. 24:44–53).

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LUKE 6-10

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Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–11)

1

Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain. But some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And Jesus answering them said, “Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?” And He was saying to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” After looking around at them all, He said to him, “Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was restored. But they

themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus. (6:1-11)

The initial reaction to the Lord Jesus Christ was generally positive. Speaking of His early ministry in Galilee, Luke noted that when “He began teaching in their synagogues [He] was praised by all” (4:15). The Lord was so popular that when He “left [Capernaum] and went to a secluded place ... the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them” (4:42). After Jesus healed a leper, “the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses” (5:15). In the aftermath of His healing of a paralytic, the people “were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (5:26). Even the religious leaders were unable to restrain their curiosity at first (5:17).

But curiosity eventually turned to hostility, which by the time the events in the sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel occurred was escalating severely. The religious leaders had come to view Jesus as the most dangerous man in Israel, the biggest threat to their religious power and prestige. Their fears were well-founded. Jesus was the most powerful teacher the world had ever seen or ever will see, and He was assaulting their ritualism, legalism, and prideful hypocrisy. Even worse, while attacking them, the Lord was associating with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other riffraff of society. When Jesus showed concern about their sins, since He came “to call ... sinners to repentance” (5:32), some of them responded with repentance and faith. But when He confronted the Pharisees and scribes, because they were the leaders of the religious establishment and the proud, unrepentant purveyors of the damning lie that God was pleased by self-righteousness, legalism, and ritualism, they found the Lord’s discrediting of them to be intolerable and infuriating. They also found His choosing of common men instead of members of the religious elite as His apostles insulting.

The Lord did not escalate the conflict by being insensitive or ungracious, but by His uncompromising proclamation of the truth. The truth of God is the most important thing in the world (cf. Prov. 23:23). It is the message of sin, forgiveness, salvation, and the hope of eternal life. All the truth must be proclaimed no matter what the effects are, whether people embrace it, or are offended by it; whether they accept it and are saved, or reject it, and are eternally lost. There is no common ground between the truth and error.

Jesus spoke the truth in every situation, not under compulsion or against His will, but by His deliberate choice. By doing so, He exposed

error both to those who taught it, and to anyone else who might have been attracted to it. The Lord never minced words when dealing with either false religion, or the wicked false teachers who purvey it (cf. Matt. 7:15–20; 23:1–36). His bold preaching of the gospel, which was incompatible with the Jewish religion of His day (Luke 5:36–39), forced people to choose between the gospel of grace and the works-righteousness system of contemporary Judaism.

At the heart of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and scribes was the Sabbath. Much of their self-righteous attempt to earn salvation by good works focused on keeping the Sabbath regulations. Because its observance was the mainstay or anchor of first-century Judaism, the Sabbath inevitably became a major point of contention between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. In this section of his gospel, Luke records two incidents in which Jesus boldly confronted their false view of the Sabbath, and established Himself as Lord over the Sabbath. The first incident took place in the grainfields; the second in a synagogue.

IN THE GRAINFIELDS

Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?" And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (6:1–5)

The **Sabbath** was originally given by God in the Mosaic law (not before) to be a day of rest (the Hebrew word translated "Sabbath" comes from a verb that means, "to cease," "to desist," or, "to rest" [cf. Gen. 2:2]), refreshment, and worship for His people (Ex. 20:8–11). But by the first century, it had accumulated an enormous number of extrabiblical restrictions and regulations, so much so that it had become the most oppressive and burdensome day of the week.

The Talmud devotes twenty-four chapters to Sabbath regulations, describing in painfully exhaustive detail what was and was not permitted to be done. The result was a ridiculously complex system of external behavior restraints—so much so that one rabbi spent two and a half years studying just one of the twenty-four chapters.

For example, traveling more than 3,000 feet from home was forbidden. But if one had placed food at the 3,000 foot point before the Sabbath, that point would then be considered a home, since there was food there, and allow another 3,000 feet of travel. Similarly, a piece of wood or a rope placed across the end of a narrow street or alley constituted a doorway. That could then be considered the front door of one's house, and permit the 3,000 feet of travel to begin there.

There were also regulations about carrying items. Something lifted up in a public place could only be set down in a private place, and vice versa. An object tossed into the air could be caught with the same hand, but if it was caught with the other hand, it would be a Sabbath violation. If a person had reached out to pick up food when the Sabbath began, the food had to be dropped; to bring the arm back while holding the food would be to carry a burden on the Sabbath. It was forbidden to carry anything heavier than a dried fig (though something weighing half as much could be carried two times). A tailor could not carry his needle, a scribe his pen, or a student his books. Only enough ink to write two letters (of the alphabet) could be carried. A letter could not be sent, not even with a non-Jew. Clothes could not be examined or shaken out before being put on because an insect might be killed in the process, which would be work. No fire could be lit, or put out. Cold water could be poured into warm water, but not warm into cold. An egg could not be cooked, not even by placing it in hot sand during the summer. Nothing could be sold or bought. Bathing was forbidden, lest water be spilled on the floor and wash it. Moving a chair was not allowed, since it might make a rut in a dirt floor, which was too much like plowing. Women were forbidden to look in a mirror, since if they saw a white hair, they might be tempted to pull it out.

Other forbidden things included sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, grinding, kneading, baking, shearing, washing, beating, dyeing, or spinning wool, tying or untying a knot, catching, killing, or skinning a deer, salting its meat, or preparing its skin. (For a detailed discussion of the rabbinic Sabbath restrictions, see Alfred Ederheim, "The Ordinances and Law of the Sabbath as Laid Down in the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud," Appendix XVII in, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:777-87.)

It was to people crushed by the unbearable burden (Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46; Acts 15:10) of manmade, legalistic regulations that the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

This particular Sabbath found the Lord and His disciples **passing**

through some grainfields. *Sporimos* (**grainfields**) literally means, “sown fields”; the crop being grown in these particular fields was probably either wheat or barley. Since the grain was ripe enough to eat, it was probably spring or summer. As they walked along the paths between the rows of grain, the **disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain.** To do so was not wrong in itself; travelers were permitted by the Mosaic law to pick grain from their neighbors’ fields to satisfy their hunger (though not, of course, to harvest it): “When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain” (Deut. 23:25).

But to do so on the Sabbath was a violation, not of the Mosaic law, but of the rabbinic restrictions described above. Specifically, the disciples were guilty in the eyes of the **Pharisees** of reaping (picking the grain), threshing (rubbing the husks together to separate them from the grain), and winnowing (throwing the husks away), and thus preparing food. The self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath were quick to pounce on the blatant violation of their silly regulations. **“Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”** they demanded. Although they addressed their question to the entire group, the Pharisees’ rebuke was directed primarily at Jesus, since His disciples were surely following His teaching and example. They viewed the incident as a direct attack on their whole religious system to which, as noted earlier, the Sabbath was central. Obviously, their presence in the grainfields indicates the constant scrutiny to which the religious leaders subjected Jesus, as they dogged His steps looking for an excuse to condemn Him.

Assuming responsibility for His disciples’ actions, Jesus responded with a mildly sarcastic rebuke of the Pharisees’ ignorance. They, of course, knew the history He was about to relate, but had ignored its true significance. As He frequently did (cf. 5:23; 10:26; 20:3-4, 24) **Jesus** answered their question with one of His own: **“Have you not even read (cf. Matt. 19:4; 21:42; 22:31; Mark 12:10) what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?”**

The incident the Lord referred to is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Fleeing Saul’s relentless pursuit of him, David came to Nob, about a mile north of Jerusalem. David **was hungry**, as were **those who were with him**. Seeking food, they **entered the house of God** (the tabernacle), and asked Ahimelech the priest for five loaves of bread. The tabernacle, of course, was not a bakery, and the only bread available there was the **consecrated bread**. Also called the “bread of the Presence” (Ex. 25:30),

it consisted of twelve loaves, placed each Sabbath on the golden table in the Holy Place. After the bread was replaced with fresh loaves, it could be eaten, but only by the priests (Lev. 24:9). Ahimelech was willing to give some of the consecrated bread to David and his men, on the condition that “the young men [had] kept themselves from women” (1 Sam. 21:4) (i.e., were ceremonially clean). After David assured him that they had done so, Ahimelech gave them the bread and they ate it.

The point of the account, which was lost on the Pharisees, was that mercy, compassion, and human need were more important than rigid adherence to even biblical ritual and ceremony. Mark 2:27 records that Jesus also said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath,” while Matthew records His rebuke, “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (12:7). If a human priest could permit David to violate part of God’s ceremonial law (perhaps even on a Sabbath, since the old bread being replaced had not yet been eaten by the priests), how much more could the Son of God allow His disciples to violate unbiblical human traditions?

Then Jesus stunned and outraged the Pharisees by declaring, **“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”** As such, He alone had the right to decide what behavior was appropriate on the Sabbath; He is the interpreter of God’s will, law, and word. Since the Sabbath was established by God (Ex. 20:8-11), He, the Son of God, had authority over it. Thus, by claiming authority over a divinely instituted ordinance, Jesus was claiming full equality with God. Compare John 5:9-17, where our Lord was again confronted over His Sabbath activity and replied, “My Father is working ... and I Myself am working” (v. 17). Here again He clearly declared His equality with God, as evidenced by His sovereignty over the Sabbath.

IN A SYNAGOGUE

On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” After looking around at them all, He said to him, “Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was

restored. But they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus. (6:6–11)

On another Sabbath, Jesus again confronted the Pharisees over the issue of the Sabbath. Luke does not specify when this incident took place, or the location of the **synagogue** (possibly Capernaum). However Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place it immediately after the incident in the grainfields, which suggests it happened soon afterward, perhaps on the next Sabbath. In keeping with the priority of His ministry, Jesus **was teaching** (cf. 4:14–15, 31, 44; 5:15, 17). The content of His message was not recorded, but He would have been preaching the gospel (3:18; 4:18; 7:22; 20:1; Mark 1:14)—the good news that the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed could be freed from their sin and the heavy burden of a false, damning, legalistic religion (4:18–21).

In the synagogue on that particular Sabbath **was a man . . . whose right hand** (only Luke, with his careful attention to medical detail, notes that it was his right hand) **was withered**; that is, atrophied due to paralysis. This man was the main object of Jesus' attention, and his healing was another assault on the Pharisees' restrictions for the Sabbath.

As always, the **scribes and the Pharisees** were there, hoping to find something for which they could condemn the Lord. As always, these zealous legalists **were watching** Jesus **closely. Watching closely** translates a form of the Greek verb *paratēreō*, which means, “to observe carefully,” “to be on the lookout,” or “to pay heed to.” Often, as it does here, the word takes on a sinister tone, and could be translated, “to lurk,” “to watch for an opportunity,” or “to lie in wait” (cf. 14:1; 20:20; Mark 3:2). The scribes and Pharisees were by no means neutral observers, but rather spies.

Specifically, they were watching Jesus **to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him.** Ironically, these self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath system did not want to stop Jesus from breaking their Sabbath rules; they actually wanted Him to perform a healing, so they would have cause to indict Him. Christ's performing a healing would thus best suit their heinous hatred. Interestingly, never throughout His entire ministry did they doubt His ability to heal (cf. 5:17–26), which proved His ability to forgive sin (5:24). Yet the convoluted reasoning in their sinful, prideful, obstinate hearts was that if Jesus did heal, the consequence would be that they could charge Him with breaking the Sabbath.

Needless to say, ministering to a sick person was by no means a violation of the Old Testament regulations concerning the Sabbath (cf. Matt. 12:7). The rabbis, however, had decreed that no one, whether a physician, friend, or family member, could treat a sick person on the Sabbath.

To do so, they taught, would be work and hence a violation of the Sabbath. The only two exceptions they allowed were cases when a person might otherwise die before the Sabbath ended, or a pregnant woman who gave birth on the Sabbath. Other than those two situations, showing compassion and mercy to a suffering person made one a blaspheming lawbreaker.

As He had earlier done (5:22) and would later do (11:17), Jesus in His omniscience **knew what they were thinking**. The Lord was fully aware of their vicious, hateful thoughts toward Him; that they were waiting for Him to heal so they could accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath. Ignoring their legalistic, merciless regulations and intentions, Jesus **said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”** He was the perfect candidate to help the Lord stage His assault on their twisted view of the Sabbath. His condition was clearly not life threatening, so there was no possible justification under the death exception for helping him.

The crippled man **got up and came forward** and stood before the synagogue audience. It was a dramatic moment, as the people waited to see what Jesus was going to do. Addressing the scribes and Pharisees, who no doubt had front-row seats (11:43; 20:46; Matt. 23:6; Mark 12:39), Jesus asked the self-proclaimed experts on the law a pointed question. **“I ask you,”** He demanded, **“is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?”** As was often the case, the Lord’s question impaled His opponents on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, answering that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath would officially authorize Jesus to heal the man. They could not then indict Him for breaking the Sabbath. On the other hand, answering that it was not lawful to do good would reveal their wicked, merciless hearts. That would tear down their veneer of self-righteousness and piety and expose them as the hypocrites they were.

The scribes and Pharisees knew the correct answer to Jesus’ question, which the book of Isaiah records. In two passages in Isaiah God indicted Israel for their superficial, shallow, false religion—the very issue Jesus was addressing:

“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I

will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (1:11–17)

Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, “Here I am.” If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell. If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (58:6–14)

As those two passages indicate, God rejected religious ritual divorced from compassion, mercy, and doing good. The Sabbath above all days was a day to express goodness; to show mercy and kindness to the needy. But the rabbinic restrictions had so strangled the Sabbath as to render such kindness forbidden.

The real issue was not the healing of the crippled man; Jesus was not concerned primarily with their attitude toward him, or whether it was right to do good to him. The deeper question was who was honoring God: Jesus, who wanted to show mercy to a needy individual, or the scribes and Pharisees, who wanted only to destroy Jesus? Sabbath observance was as they defined it—a litmus test of faithfulness to God. Paradoxically, these religious errorists scrupulously observed the minutiae of their Sabbath laws while at the same time plotting to murder the Lord of the Sabbath. As David Gooding observes,

The religious mind is a curious thing. It is not necessarily interested in common morality; still less in relieving human misery and affliction. It is interested in keeping rules; particularly the rules which spring from its own cherished interpretations of Scripture or tradition; and to these interpretations it will attribute the inflexible authority of God himself. Let God incarnate, contrary to its interpretations, interpose with a miracle of divine goodness to relieve human misery, then instead of revising its interpretations it will plan to stop such miracles happening again. (*According to Luke* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 116)

There was a long pause while the Lord waited for a reply. But the scribes and Pharisees, shocked into silence, said nothing. Finally, **after looking around at them all** “with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5), Jesus **said to** the crippled man, **“Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was restored.** Jesus deliberately broke their Sabbath restrictions.

After witnessing this astonishing creative miracle, one would expect the next verse to read, “And the scribes and Pharisees believed.” Such was not the case, however. Instead, **they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus** to destroy Him (Matt. 12:14). *Anoia* (**rage**) literally means, “folly,” or “foolishness.” It denotes in this context an irrational rage; they were out of their minds with fury at Jesus’ direct assault on their hypocritical religion. Their reaction reflects the blindness and obstinacy of heart of those deeply involved in false religion. Amazingly, the Pharisees even enlisted the help of their bitter enemies the Herodians (Jews loyal to the Herodians) in their search for a way to eliminate Jesus (Mark 3:6). Such an alliance was highly unusual, since about the only thing the two parties had in common was their hatred of Jesus.

The Pharisees’ irrational hatred of and fury toward Jesus was motivated by self-preserving fear. The Lord was striking monumental blows at the very heart of their religious system. Here, long before Passion Week, the religious leaders were already plotting Jesus’ death. Their hatred would drive their continued opposition to Christ until they finally succeeded in having Him arrested and executed.

These two incidents bring out the stark contrast between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. It is the contrast between the representative of God’s truth, and the representatives of false religion; between divine truth and human tradition; between profound knowledge and madness; between goodness and wickedness; between compassion and cruelty; between open honesty and hidden deception; between divine power and human impotence; between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Yet God’s grace can penetrate even the most hardened heart. Not

all of the Pharisees permanently rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 15:5 notes that there were “some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed.” One of those believing Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus, became the great apostle Paul. The self-proclaimed foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), he was called by the risen Lord to preach the gospel throughout the Roman world.

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY
LUKE 11-17

John MacArthur

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Jesus' Pattern for Every Prayer—Part 1: Teach Us to Pray (Luke 11:1–2a)

1

It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.” And He said to them, “When you pray, say:” (11:1–2a)

On the importance of prayer in the Christian life, the notable Puritan pastor Thomas Brooks wrote,

The power of religion and godliness lives, thrives, or dies, as closet [private] prayer lives, thrives, or dies. Godliness never rises to a higher pitch than when men keep closest to their closets.

Private prayer is that privy [secret] key of heaven that unlocks all the treasures of glory to the soul. The best riches and the sweetest mercies God usually gives to his people when they are in their closets upon their knees ... the graces of the saints are enlivened, and cherished, and strengthened by the sweet secret influences which their souls fall under when they are in their closet-communion with God. (*The Secret Key to Heaven* [Reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006], xiv, 44)

Prayer is more than merely an occasional duty; it is a way of life. The New Testament commands believers to “keep watching and praying” (Matt. 26:41); “that at all times they ought to pray” (Luke 18:1); to be “devoted to prayer” (Rom. 12:12); to “pray at all times” (Eph. 6:18); to “devote [themselves] to prayer” (Col. 4:2); to “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [their] requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6); and to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).

Old Testament saints believed that God heard their prayers. In Psalm 65:2 David addressed God as “You who hear prayer,” while Solomon wrote that God “hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29). Not only does He hear the prayers of His people, He also delights in hearing them (Prov. 15:8). But those prayers must be from a pure heart (Job 16:17; Ps. 17:1; Prov. 28:9), because God will not hear the prayers of those who harbor sin in their heart (Ps. 66:18; Isa. 1:15), and must also reflect trust in Him (1 Chron. 5:20).

The Old Testament records, for example, the prayers of Abraham for Abimelech (Gen. 20:7, 17), Isaac for Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Moses for Israel after the people rebelled against God in the wilderness (Num. 14:13–19), Hannah for a son (1 Sam. 1:10–12), David in response to the promise of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:18–29), Solomon at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:22–53), Elijah for the resurrection of a widow’s son (1 Kings 17:21), Elisha for the resurrection of a Shunnamite woman’s son (2 Kings 4:33), Hezekiah in response to an Assyrian invasion (2 Kings 19:15–19), and for healing (2 Kings 20:2–3), David and Manasseh for personal forgiveness (Ps. 51; 2 Chron. 33:11–13), Jonah for personal deliverance (Jon. 2:1–9), and Ezra (Ezra 9:5–15), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4–11), and Daniel (Dan. 9:1–19) for forgiveness and deliverance for the nation of Israel.

The New Testament records the prayers of Anna (Luke 2:37), the apostles (Acts 1:14; 6:6 [cf. 6:4]), the early church (Acts 1:24; 2:42; 4:23–31; 12:5, 12; 13:3), Peter and John (Acts 8:14–15), Peter (Acts 9:40; 11:5), Paul (Acts 9:11; 16:25 [with Silas]; 20:36; 21:5; 28:8; Rom. 1:10; 10:1; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; Eph. 1:16–23; 3:14–21; Phil. 1:4, 9–11; Col. 1:3, 9–12; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:3; Philem. 4), and John (3 John 2).

But the supreme example of prayer in all of Scripture is drawn from the Lord Jesus Christ. Prayer permeated our Lord’s earthly ministry from beginning to end. He prayed at His baptism (Luke 3:21), during His

first preaching tour (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), before choosing the Twelve (Luke 6:12–13), before feeding the five thousand (Matt. 14:19), after feeding the five thousand (Matt. 14:23), before feeding the four thousand (Matt. 15:36), before Peter's confession of Him as the Christ (Luke 9:18), at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28–29), for some children who had been brought to Him (Matt. 19:13), after the return of the seventy (Luke 10:21), before raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41–42), as He faced the reality of the cross (John 12:28), at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26–27), for Peter (Luke 22:31–32), in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–44), from the cross (Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:34, 46), with the disciples He encountered on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30), at the ascension (Luke 24:50–51) and, supremely, in His high priestly prayer in John 17. It comes as no surprise, then, that this passage finds **Jesus . . . praying in a certain unnamed place** somewhere in Judea.

Luke's account of this model prayer is an abbreviated version of the one recorded by Matthew (6:9–13), though the two prayers were given on different occasions. The one in Matthew's gospel was in Galilee; the one recorded by Luke occurred several months later in Judea. Undoubtedly both prayers reflect teaching repeated frequently by Jesus to His followers throughout His earthly ministry. For the sake of completeness, the elements noted by Matthew but omitted by Luke will be included in the exposition of this prayer in the chapters that follow.

This prayer is Jesus' vehicle for teaching the disciples (and all believers) the essential structure and required features of prayer. The elements in His prayer emphasize the overarching reason for prayer, as will be seen. This overview may be divided into two sections: the disciples' request that Jesus teach them to pray, and the Lord's response.

THE DISCIPLES' REQUEST

after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.” (11:1b)

While Jesus frequently sought solitude when He prayed (cf. 5:16; Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35), on this occasion some of His disciples were

present. When the Lord had **finished** praying **one of His disciples**, no doubt speaking for the rest, **said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”** Given both the Old Testament’s emphasis on prayer and their familiarity with it, this request seems somewhat surprising. But it reflects the sad reality that at that time in their history, tradition and ceremony had replaced the knowledge of Scripture so that true prayer had largely been lost to the Jewish people. The disciples’ request for instruction in prayer also reveals that what they had come to be familiar with regarding prayer was not what God wanted. The prayer they heard Jesus pray was radically different from the traditional, customary prayers they were used to in their synagogues from the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis.

Jesus noted that contrast in Matthew 6, where He indicted the phony, hypocritical religion of the scribes and Pharisees. “When you pray,” He warned His hearers, “you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full” (v.5). Those prayers were focused on putting on a show of piety for the people who were watching, not on honoring and glorifying God. Instead of showy, ostentatious, public prayers, Jesus instructed His followers, “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (v.6). Many Jewish prayers were marked by the ritualistic, meaningless, empty, vain repetition that characterized pagan prayers. But Jesus declared, “When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (v.7).

That **John** the Baptist had **also taught his disciples** to pray (cf. Luke 5:33) also prompted the Lord’s disciples to ask Him to teach them. They were acquainted with John’s disciples (cf. 7:18–24), and wanted the same kind of instruction from Jesus that John had given his followers. It is reasonable to assume that since John was not a part of the religious establishment, he had maintained a pure, uncorrupted approach to prayer in keeping with that of Old Testament saints.

THE LORD'S RESPONSE

And He said to them, "When you pray, say:" (2b)

The disciples had not requested that Jesus teach them a prayer to recite, but how to pray. He responded by giving them a prayer that, while it is recited and even sung, is not intended for merely that. Having warned against meaningless repetition in prayer (Matt. 6:7), Jesus would hardly have given His followers a prayer to recite mechanically. Nor is there any record in the New Testament of anyone subsequently reciting this prayer. Far from being merely another ritual prayer, it is a skeleton or framework for all prayer. As such, it is of great practical value, as the Puritan pastor and theologian Thomas Watson noted:

There is a double benefit arising from framing our petitions suitably to this prayer. 1. Hereby error in prayer is prevented. It is not easy to write wrong after this copy; we cannot easily err when we have our pattern before us. 2. Hereby mercies requested are obtained; for the apostle assures us that God will hear us when we pray "according to his will." 1 John v. 14. And sure we pray according to his will when we pray according to the pattern he has set us. (*Body of Divinity* [Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 400–401)

This prayer reflects the elements of prayer found in the Old Testament. There was a sense in which God was unapproachable, symbolized by the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, and the prohibition against touching Mt. Sinai when God appeared (Ex. 19:12). Yet while the people could not enter directly into God's presence, they were invited to approach Him in prayer. "In my distress" David said, "I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears" (Ps. 18:6). In Psalm 145:18 he added, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." In Psalm 50:15 God invited His people to "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me," and in 91:15 He promised, "He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him."

Prayers in the Old Testament were characterized by several elements. First, they were marked by adoration, love, and praise, as the passion of the heart flowed out from the lips (Pss. 7:17; 22:23, 26; 34:1).

Second, they reflected an attitude of gratefulness and thanksgiving for God's blessings and provision (Pss. 9:1; 30:4; 33:2; 50:14, 23; Isa. 12:1; Dan. 2:23; Jon. 2:9), Third, they recognized God's holiness (Ps. 22:3), acknowledging His transcendent glory. Fourth, they manifested a heartfelt desire to obey God (Ps. 119:5, 8, 17, 34, 88, 134), which resulted in confession of sin (Ps. 51) when there was disobedience. Fifth, instead of focusing exclusively on the needs of individuals, Old Testament prayers also expressed the needs of the nation as a whole (Ex. 33:13, 16; Deut. 26:15). Sixth, prayer in the Old Testament also involved perseverance, such as that exemplified by Moses, who interceded on behalf of the people for forty days after the incident of the golden calf (Deut. 9:18, 25). Finally, prayers were offered in humility (2 Chron. 7:14; Ezra 8:21; Ps. 10:17). Those same elements are in view in Jesus' prayer, as He reestablished the divine pattern that had largely been lost in Israel.

This rich, multifaceted template may be approached in several ways. It unfolds the various relationships between the believer and God: Father and child ("Our Father"), Holy One and worshiper ("hallowed be Your name"), Ruler and subject ("Your kingdom come"), Master and servant ("Your will be done"), Savior and sinner ("forgive us our debts"), and Guide and pilgrim ("do not lead us into temptation"). It also defines the proper attitudes for prayer: unselfishness ("our"), intimacy ("Father"), reverence ("hallowed be Your name"), loyalty ("Your kingdom come"), submissiveness ("Your will be done"), dependence ("give us this day our daily bread"), penitence ("forgive us our debts"), humility ("do not lead us into temptation"), and confident, triumphant joy ("Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever").

Focusing on God's glory, Jesus ignored non-essential elements such as the posture of prayer. Scripture records people praying in every conceivable position: standing (Gen. 24:12–14; 1 Sam. 1:26), sitting (Judg. 21:2–3; 2 Sam. 7:18; 1 Kings 19:4), kneeling (1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; Dan. 6:10), bowing (Ex. 34:8–9), lying face down (Ezek. 9:8; Matt. 26:39), with uplifted hands (Ps. 28:2; 1 Tim. 2:8), looking up (John 11:41; 17:1), and looking down (Luke 18:13).

Nor is there any particular location that prayers must be offered, though Jesus did suggest a private place (Matt. 6:6) rather than a pretentious public display. Still, the men of Judah prayed in the midst of battle

(2 Chron. 13:14); Elijah prayed in a cave (1 Kings 19:9–10); Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–44), in the wilderness (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), on a mountain, (Luke 6:12), and on the cross (Luke 23:33–34); the early church prayed in a house (Acts 1:14,24; 12:12); Peter prayed on a housetop (Acts 10:9); Paul and Silas prayed in jail (Acts 16:25); Paul prayed on a beach (Acts 21:5) and in the temple (Acts 22:17); Hezekiah prayed in bed (Isa. 38:2); and Jonah prayed in the stomach of a fish (Jon. 2:1–9).

Nor did Jesus specify any particular time to pray. Scripture records people praying in the early morning before dawn (Mark 1:35), in the morning after sunrise (Pss. 5:3; 88:13), three times a day (Dan. 6:10 [morning, noon, and evening; Ps. 55:17]), at noon (Acts 10:9), in the afternoon (Acts 3:1), in the evening (1 Kings 18:36), during the night (Pss. 4:4; Luke 6:12), at midnight (Acts 16:25), all day long (Ps. 86:3), and day and night (Neh. 1:6; Luke 2:37; 1 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:5); in short, believers are to pray at all times (Luke 18:1; Eph. 6:18), continually (Acts 1:14), and unceasingly (1 Thess. 5:17).

The Lord also did not mandate one particular attitude for prayer. On the one hand, some approached God with an attitude of sadness, grief, even despair. Daniel prayed wearing sackcloth, a manifestation of sorrow (Dan. 9:3); a repentant tax collector beat his breast, a sign of remorse, while praying (Luke 18:13); Hannah “wept bitterly” as she prayed (1 Sam. 1:9–11), as did David (Ps. 39:12); appalled by Israel’s defeat at Ai following Achan’s sin, Joshua and the elders of Israel put dust on their heads and tore their clothes when they sought the Lord in prayer (Josh. 7:6–7); after the devastating catastrophes that hit him “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped” (Job 1:20); Moses (Deut. 9:18–19), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4), Anna (Luke 2:37), the leaders of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1–3), and Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23) fasted and prayed; Jesus, “in the days of His flesh, . . . offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety” (Heb. 5:7; cf. Luke 22:44); David exhorted the people, “Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us” (Ps. 62:8).

On the other hand, prayer can be offered with an attitude of joy. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he was “always offering prayer with joy

in my every prayer for you all” (Phil. 1:4); 1 Samuel 2:1 records that “Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord, my mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation’”; David declared, “My mouth offers praises with joyful lips” (Ps. 63:5; cf. 71:23; 84:2; 92:4); Psalm 66:1 exhorts, “Shout joyfully to God, all the earth”; in Psalm 95:1–2 the psalmist exhorted, “O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms” (cf. 98:4–6; 100:1–2).

The petitions in the first half of this model for prayer focus on God’s glory, those in the second half on man’s need. Yet in reality the entire prayer is God-centered, since He glorifies Himself by providing for man’s needs. Prayer arises from the Word of God (cf. Dan. 9:2–3) and has as its ultimate goal the glory of God. It is not an attempt to change the will of God, still less does it attempt to manipulate Him to gain one’s greedy, selfish desires, as the “Health and Wealth” movement falsely teaches. True prayer puts God in His rightful place of sovereign authority and willingly, joyfully subordinates itself to His purposes. As Thomas Brooks noted, “Such prayers never reach the ear of God, nor delight the heart of God, nor shall ever be lodged in the bosom of God, that are not directed to the glory of God” (*Secret Key*, 235). Everything in Christ’s model prayer is in reality a rehearsal of what God has affirmed to be true, concerning both His person and His promises. Prayer seeks God’s glory and aligns itself with the promises He has made in Scripture.

All of the petitions affirm the supremacy of God. “Father” acknowledges Him as the source of all blessing; “hallowed be Your name” as sacred; “Your kingdom come” as sovereign; “Your will be done” as superior; “give us each day our daily bread” as supporter; “forgive us our sins” as savior, and “lead us not into temptation” as shelter.

This opening section of chapter 11 focuses on the importance of prayer. Verses 1–4 contain the Lord’s instruction on prayer, verses 5–8 reveal God’s eagerness to hear prayer, verses 9–10 teach the certainty that God will answer prayer, and verses 11–13 express God’s desire to give the best to those who pray. All of those rich truths will be the subject of the next several chapters of this volume.

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY
LUKE 18-24

John MacArthur

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Persistent Prayer for the Lord's Return (Luke 18:1–8)

1

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”(18:1–8)

The Bible teaches both by precept and example that prayer encompasses many different matters. For example, the Old Testament

records numerous prayers for people and their needs. Abraham prayed that God would make Ishmael his heir (Gen. 17:18), for God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23-32), and for Him to heal Abimelech and his household (Gen. 20:7, 17). David prayed for the recovery of his infant son (2 Sam. 12:16), and for Solomon as he assumed the throne (1 Chron. 29:19). Elijah prayed that the Lord would raise a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:20-21), and Elisha did the same for the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:33). Job prayed for God to forgive his friends (Job 42:8-10). Moses prayed that God would spare Aaron (Deut. 9:20), heal Miriam (Num. 12:13), and lift the plagues from the Egyptians (Ex. 8:12-13, 30-31; 9:33; 10:18-19).

The Old Testament also records prayer offered for the nation of Israel as a whole, by David (2 Sam. 24:17; Ps. 25:22), Daniel (Dan. 9:3-19), Ezekiel (Ezek. 9:8), Ezra (Ezra 9:5-15), Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:14-19), Joshua (Josh. 7:6-9), Moses (Ex. 32:11-13, 31-32; 34:9; Num. 11:1-2; 14:13-19; 21:7; Deut. 9:26-29), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4-11), Samuel (1 Sam. 7:5-9; 12:23), Solomon (1 Kings 8:22-54), and the people of Israel (Ex. 2:23; 14:10; Judg. 3:9; 1 Sam. 12:10; Neh. 9:27).

People in the Old Testament also brought their personal requests to God. Abraham prayed for God to give him a son as his heir (Gen. 15:2-3); his servant prayed that God would make his mission to find a wife for Isaac a success (Gen. 24:12); Jacob prayed that God would deliver him from Esau (Gen. 32:9-12); Moses prayed that he would find favor in God's sight (Ex. 33:12-13) and that God would reveal His glory to him (v. 18); Hannah prayed for a son (1 Sam. 1:10-11, 27); David prayed for help and deliverance from affliction (Pss. 18:6; 22:19; 69:1, 13, 29), as did the sons of Korah (Ps. 88:1-2); Hezekiah prayed that God would spare his life (2 Kings 20:2-3); and Jonah prayed that God would deliver him from drowning (Jonah 2:2-10). David (Pss. 25:18; 32:5; 51), Daniel (Dan. 9:20), and Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:11-13) prayed for God to forgive their sins.

The New Testament also records prayers for the needs of individuals. Jesus prayed for His disciples (John 17), for Peter's faith (Luke 22:32), for God to forgive those who crucified Him for what they had done (Luke 23:34), and for children who were brought to Him (Matt. 19:13); Paul prayed for Philemon (Philem. 4-6), Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3), Publius's father (Acts 28:8), and the salvation of Israel (Rom. 10:1); Philemon

prayed for Paul's release from imprisonment (Philem. 22); the early church prayed for Peter's release from prison (Acts 12:5); Peter prayed that God would raise Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:40); John prayed for Gaius's health (3 John 1-2); the various churches that Paul ministered to prayed for him (Acts 13:3; Rom. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1), and he prayed for them (Rom. 1:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; Eph. 1:16-21; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:3-4, 9; Col. 1:3, 9; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11-12). Epaphras prayed for the Colossian church; Peter and John prayed that the Samaritans would be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-15).

In addition, Scripture commands prayer for civil rulers (1 Tim. 2:2), all believers (Eph. 6:18), and lost sinners in general (1 Tim. 2:1)—even those who persecute believers (Matt. 5:44).

But an often overlooked element of prayer is prayer for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which the apostle John pled for in Revelation 22:20 and a prayer all believers should pray (v. 17). It is such prayer that is the theme of our Lord's parable, which may be examined under four headings: the illustration, the intention, the interpretation, and the inquisition.

THE ILLUSTRATION

“In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” (18:2-5)

The setting for the Lord's illustration is a **certain** fictitious **city**. Though the story is invented, the situation Jesus described was an all too familiar one to those listening, who had much experience with needy widows (Luke took a particular interest in widows [Luke 2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 20:47; 21:2-4; Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41]) and with unjust judges.

The Lord characterized this **judge** as one **who did not fear**

God and did not respect man. That description was used in ancient literature to describe the most wicked and rebellious people, who had no regard for what God commanded or people expected. This man was ultimately and consummately immoral. He was not moved by reverence or worship, or by compassion or sympathy. He had no interest in the first commandment, to love God, or the second commandment, to love his neighbor. Not only was he wicked, but he was also comfortable with his corruption, as his boast in verse 4, **“I do not fear God nor respect man,”** reveals. His confession is consistent with his reputation. Here was the most immoral kind of man in the most important position of moral responsibility; a judge whose disregard for God and man had far-reaching implications for all who came before his bench.

The court over which he presided was not a religious court, but a civil one. He did not rule on the significant matters of the Old Testament law and the religious traditions, but on the application of the law to the affairs of everyday life (cf. Matt. 5:25; Luke 12:14). Nonetheless, he had a very serious duty before God to uphold the law with justice and demonstrate sympathy and compassion with wisdom. After appointing judges in the cities of Judah, King Jehoshaphat charged them,

“Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord who is with you when you render judgment. Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe.” (2 Chron. 19:6-7)

But despite their sobering responsibility before God, judges were often corrupt. Through the prophet Amos, God indicted Israel’s judges:

They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks with integrity. Therefore because you impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them, though you have built houses of well-hewn stone, yet you will not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine. For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great, you who distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate. Therefore at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, and establish

justice in the gate! Perhaps the Lord God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:10-15)

Alfred Edersheim wrote concerning Israel's corrupt judges, "Jewish wit designated them, by a play on words, as *Dayyaney Gezeloth*—Robber Judges, instead of their real title of *Dayyaney Gezeroth* (Judges of Prohibitions, or else of Punishments). . . . The Talmud . . . accuses them of ignorance, arbitrariness, and covetousness, so that for a dish of meat they would pervert justice" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:287).

Entrepō (**respect**) means "to be put to shame." Middle Eastern culture then as now was a shame and honor based culture. People sought to do what would bring them public honor, and avoid at all costs doing anything that would bring them public shame. Good social behavior was encouraged by appealing to a person's shame, much as the contemporary expression, "Shame on you!" does. Thus, the point of the expression **did not respect man** is that this judge was not ashamed before people. He had no shame; he could not be put to shame. Because he had no reverence for God and could never do anything that would cause him to feel shame in his behavior toward people, he was impervious to any appeal to justice or righteousness. No one could move him to do what was right.

Into his court came a **widow** from **that city**. She had been seriously defrauded by someone and as a result she was destitute. Because of that **she kept coming to him, saying, "Give me legal protection from my opponent."** Her persistence indicates that her financial situation was desperate and she needed what was rightfully hers. Further, her destitution extended beyond financial matters. She was not only bereft of material resources, but evidently there was no man in her life to look after her in the absence of her husband. Courts were the province of men, and women came there only when there was no man available to plead their case. This widow represents those who are alone, destitute, powerless, helpless, unloved, uncared for, and desperate.

The Old Testament taught that widows were to be treated with justice and mercy. Exodus 22:22 prohibited afflicting a widow (cf. Isa. 1:23; Jer. 7:6; 22:3), while Deuteronomy 24:17 commanded that they be

treated fairly. In Isaiah 1:17 God instructed His people to “plead for [lit., “contend for,” or “fight for”] the widow,” while Deuteronomy 10:18 says that God “executes justice for . . . the widow” (cf. Pss. 68:5; 146:9; Prov. 15:25) and Deuteronomy 27:19 warns, “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.” Eliphaz, one of Job’s would-be counselors, insulted Job by falsely accusing him of having “sent widows away empty” (Job 22:9), while Job denounced the wicked as those who “take the widow’s ox for a pledge” (Job 24:3; cf. 24:21). Based on the teaching of the Old Testament, the fictitious judge was obligated to do something to help this widow, if not on a legal basis (though she apparently had the law on her side, since she requested **legal protection from her opponent**), then purely on the basis of mercy. He, however, was utterly indifferent, unsympathetic, and without compassion toward her.

Her desperate need made the widow relentless and determined in her pursuit of the justice due her, so **she kept coming to** the judge, probably on an almost daily basis, demanding that he **give her legal protection from her opponent**. She insisted that he recognize the validity of her complaint and render a just verdict in her favor. Initially, **he was unwilling** to help her, but eventually her persistence wore down his resistance. Exasperated by her constant requests **he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”** He affirmed, as noted above, his utter disdain for both God and men, thus disclaiming any noble motive for what he was about to do. He decided to give **this widow the legal protection** that she requested solely because she bothered him. Her **continually coming** to him was more than he could handle and threatened to **wear him out**. *Hupopiazō* (**wear out**) literally means “to strike in the face,” “to treat roughly,” or “to beat black and blue.” Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 9:27 to speak of the severe self-discipline he imposed on himself. The widow was figuratively beating up the judge. Though women were powerless in that male-dominated culture, they were respected and honored. Because of that, they could get away with behavior that would not be tolerated in a man. The trouble and annoyance she caused him was relentless, and it was not going to stop until he acquiesced. In the end, the powerful and seemingly impervious judge

was worn down by the persistence of the weak, helpless widow. He decided to give her the **legal protection** (from the verb *ekdikeō*; “to vindicate,” or “execute justice”) that she asked for.

THE INTENTION

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, (18:1)

Before He related this **parable**, Luke gave its point. The Lord **was telling** His followers (17:22) **that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart**. This fictional story continues His discourse on the second coming that began in 17:22. Jesus' point is that believers are to continually **pray and not to lose heart** as they wait for His return.

The Lord knew that there would be a long (by human reckoning, not God's; cf. 2 Peter 3:8) interval between His first and second comings, so far lasting for two millennia. During that time Christ has been continually dishonored and denied His rightful place. The Word of God has been unappreciated, assaulted, and denied. Christians have faced rejection, hostility, persecution, and martyrdom at the hands of Satan and the evil world system. It is only natural that they should long for the Lord Jesus Christ to return and judge the ungodly, destroy sin, end the reign of Satan, and set up His earthly kingdom. But until the second coming, Christians must not **lose heart** (give up, become weary, or lose courage) and stop praying (cf. 21:36). This verse is not a call to unceasing prayer in general (cf. Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17). As noted above, the context (see also v. 8) indicates that the prayer in view is specifically for Christ's return (cf. 11:2; Matt. 6:10; Rev. 6:9–10). In fact, such prayer is part of the means of bringing about the second coming, since prayer is a means God uses to accomplish His work.

The doctrine of the second coming brings comfort, promotes holy living, and spurs evangelism. It has implications on how believers view everything they own, how they live their lives, and how they pray. Prevailing, persistent prayer for the Lord's return drives the heart to leave the things of this passing world and to love Christ's appearing (2 Tim. 4:8; cf.

Titus 2:13). That should be a defining characteristic of every Christian's life.

THE INTERPRETATION

the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. (18:6–8a)

The phrase **the Lord said** introduces Christ's explanation of this story in the context of His return. He began by contrasting the **unrighteous** (dishonest, corrupt, unjust) fictional **judge** with the true God, who is holy, just, and righteous. The judge was cruelly indifferent to the widow's plight. Yet in the end, worn down by her persistent determination to force the justice due her, he finally gave in and did the right thing, albeit for purely selfish motives.

In an argument contrasting the lesser with the greater, Jesus asked, **“Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?”** The elect, like the widow, are helpless, and at the mercy of God as their judge. But the corrupt, wicked judge was not at all like God. Yet even though he was indifferent to the demands of justice and mercy he finally, reluctantly, and for his own selfish interest, did what was right for a person for whom he had no feelings. How much more will God, who loves His own perfectly, do what is right for them, whom He chose from “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), when they **cry to Him day and night** because they “long to see one of the days of the Son of Man” (17:22; cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 6:10)? He is the one, in contrast to the unrighteous judge, “who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:23); who has said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Rom. 12:19); and whose “judgments are true and righteous” (Rev. 19:2). Unlike the uncaring, merciless judge, God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” toward His people (Ps. 103:8).

The phrase **delay long over them** might better be translated “be patient over them.” The long interval between the first and second

comings of Christ is a period in which God is exercising patience on behalf of His own. **Delay long** translates a form of the verb *makrothumeō* from *makros*, which in terms of time means “far distant,” or “remote,” and *thumos*, which refers to anger or wrath. *Makrothumeō* here indicates that God has delayed for a long time His eschatological wrath in order to extend His mercy in gathering the elect. “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness,” wrote Peter, “but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9; cf. Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 Peter 3:20). God is bringing salvation to His elect; His patience is for their redemption (2 Peter 3:15). Once all the elect have been gathered, He will both satisfy His justice and glorify them. When God does vindicate His elect He will do so suddenly and quickly, as the Lord’s rhetorical question, **Will He delay long over them?** indicates.

THE INQUISITION

However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? (18:8b)

Jesus concluded this section by asking this pensive question. When He returns, will He find anyone faithfully praying in eagerness for the second coming? Any who have loved His appearing? Who cry out, “Maranatha” (“come Lord”) (1 Cor. 16:22)?

Some think that eschatology, the doctrine of the last things, is mere sensationalistic speculation with little practical value. But as the Lord’s teaching in this passage indicates, nothing could be further from the truth. Paul’s dealings with the infant church at Thessalonica further emphasizes the importance and practical value of teaching on the end times. The apostle’s two epistles to them reveal that in the brief time he spent with them (cf. Acts 17:1–2), he taught them an amazingly comprehensive eschatology (2 Thess. 2:5).

In the salutation to his first epistle Paul praised the Thessalonians for their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), which is “to wait for His Son from heaven” (v. 10). In 2:12 he exhorted them to “walk in

a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory,” while in verse 19 he referred to “the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming.” Paul prayed that God would “establish [their] hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (3:13). In chapter 4 Paul gave them a detailed description of the rapture (vv. 13–18), while in chapter 5 the apostle reminded them of what he had taught them regarding the Day of the Lord and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 1–11, 23).

In his second epistle to that Thessalonian congregation, Paul continued his detailed instruction regarding eschatology. In chapter 1 he described God’s judgment and the coming of the kingdom (vv. 5–10), and the eternal punishment of the wicked (v. 9). In the second chapter he gave them detailed teaching on the rise of Antichrist, the return of Christ, and the coming of the Day of the Lord.

The extensive eschatological teaching Paul gave this young church reveals that such doctrine is critical, foundational, and highly useful to living a godly life (2 Peter 3:11, 14; 1 John 3:1–3). Knowing the end of the story encourages Christians to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [their] toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

True Christians live in hope, waiting expectantly for the promise of Christ’s return to be fulfilled. To that end they pray for His glory and honor to be revealed. Such prayer is life changing.