

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Thirty-five

November 29, 2020 • Sunday Evening

This is a temporary substitution until we're able to return to having our Sunday evening services. Since this falls on the first Sunday of Advent I thought I would share with you a very simple Advent devotional. This is taken from a very familiar verse. John 3:16 says [16] *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* In Jesus you can have everlasting life, apart from Jesus you will perish under the judgment of God which is an eternal punishment, an eternal perishing, the eternal torments of hell, which is also called the Lake of Fire or gehenna. The blessings of everlasting life will be in the new heavens and the new earth.

I'm looking forward to a series we'll be doing when we return on Sunday nights on what happens when we die. We had already started that series and it was interrupted due to COVID-19 protocols but we'll resume when we can start back on Sunday nights. If you are in Christ you have the promise of everlasting life. If you're not in Christ you have the specter of the unendurable yet eternally endured judgment of God. You don't have to spend eternity in that destination. You can spend eternity with the Lord through the very gift of salvation. How do we have salvation? It is because God has loved the world and gave His Son. I'd like to make another offer to you and then another thought from John 3:16.

Our Advent reading for this 2020 Advent season is by Sinclair Ferguson, titled Love Came Down at Christmas. It is not only a good advent devotional for you and your family but it's also good just to have in your library so that is my offer to you to obtain a copy of that book. It is a wonderful, very readable, small book that is very enjoyable.

The other thought I have from John 3:16 has to do with the smallest word, so. It says 'For God *so* loved the world... *that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*' There was no way for us to be saved but as I have said on many occasions where there was no way God made a way and that way is His Son Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and no man can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The reason you have Jesus through whom you can have forgiveness of sins and a perfect righteousness that is yours from Christ that is imputed to you while your sins is imputed to Him, He paid for your sins on the cross and out of His resurrection you receive His righteousness, so that hell's door is closed and heaven's gate is opened because you are acceptable in the righteousness of Christ. All of that is because God made that way by giving His only Son.

Why did God send His only Son for us in our place for us to have everlasting life? Why did His Son sacrifice Himself on the cross as He endured the eternal judgment of hell for all who put their trust in Jesus so that we could be forgiven and be with Him for all of eternity? There is only one explanation and that is that God loved you. It is an unmerited love and that's why in order to emphasize this unmerited, unsought, unwanted love on our part, the writer of the Scriptures records what we need to know from Jesus – that God so loved us that while we were yet enemies He gave His Son that we could have eternal life (Romans 5:8).

Dr. Ferguson is right that at Christmas we celebrate that God's love has come down, wrapped in the Person of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, who gave Himself for us that we could have everlasting life. God loves us and loosed us from our sins through His Son who came down for us that we would go up to be with Him in a new heavens and a new earth.

Bruce: I have a quick story to share. I'm in St. Petersburg Russia, I don't speak Russian and I'm on a subway which is 300 feet below the ground. I'm listening to a recording of a sermon with headphones and something is said in that sermon and I just say 'Amen' out loud. As soon as I said it a man tries to talk to me. We can't communicate very well but he knew more English than I knew Russian and he says to me "Christian? Christian?" I nodded and said 'Yes' and then he said 'Amen.' He heard me say that word and knew it to be uniquely Christian. That was the end of our conversation but I walked away from that thinking 'the power of that word – Amen.'

Harry: The motivation for that word is acclamation, adoration, affirmation and agreement. In other words, it is so be it forever, I have just heard the truth – read, preached, sung or prayed – now I agree with acclamation, adoration, affirmation and agreement. The consequence is I participate in worship to the glory of God. I encourage those around me and I bear witness to the lost. Though it's interesting how the word Amen in conversations will open up opportunities. Some people hear it in conversation and don't understand why it was used but then that opens up an opportunity to witness. When you affirm truth publically that usually opens up conversations. If they are believers they get encouraged but if they are non-believers they may be inquisitive. So Amen can not only be a helpful instrument in worship to the praise of God but it can also open some doors for evangelism as well as create some affirmation and encouragement for believers who may be struggling.

Bruce: I remember when I was a young preacher and we were visiting a church and I said to the pastor after his sermon 'Your sermon was very impactful' as he responded with 'Amen.' There was a man standing near us who asked us after we turned to walk away 'why did he say 'Amen'?' What he is telling us is that it wasn't because of what he said in his sermon but if it was impactful then he is endorsing the work of the Holy Spirit. It is such a powerful word and I hope it will be more verbalized.

Harry: It seems as though the only time people say Amen during a sermon is when it agrees with them when in reality the Amen is when we agree that the preacher has agreed with God or the song agrees with God's Word or the prayer agrees with God's Word. That is our way to enter into it.

Bruce: Here is a timely question for you given this is the week of Thanksgiving. The question is, is Thanksgiving a uniquely American holiday, does it have a Christian origin and is it replicated all around the world?

Harry: Thanksgiving is uniquely Christian and became uniquely American. It originated out of Christianity, although in 1990 there was a very poor book done in the name of history titled 12 Myths Taught in School about certain historical events in America. It was not hard to debunk the terrible revision of history it brought out whereby someone had interpreted events through today's narrative, instead of bringing events from their narrative into today. One of those is Thanksgiving and it keeps getting republished every year.

The story of Thanksgiving is as follows. They called themselves pilgrims because they were on a journey from England to the Netherlands where they experienced some religious freedom but they wanted it in the context of their own culture they would build when they would

get to “New England.” So they found a way to get to this country in 1620 and the story is how they landed here and went through all the difficulties through the assistance of Indians who had already met white men from Europe earlier. They actually met an Indian chief who knew English and made a trip back to Europe and was already a Christian.

I’m not going to go into all of the story but you had the Plymouth colony and the Jamestown colony. The Plymouth colony united with the Massachusetts Bay colony and out of working with two different Indian tribes they had had a feast to celebrate their survival. They hosted the Indians who basically hosted them by teaching them agriculture, etc., particularly corn and how to plant and harvest it. Then there was a time of giving thanks to God. When they landed the first thing they did on “Plymouth Rock” which the remnant of that rock is still left, they knelt and gave thanks. Later they had a feast of thanksgiving for survival and hosted the Indians.

Washington called upon that and he was our first President who called for on a yearly basis, a time of thanksgiving and thanks to God. So he would call for days of humiliation and fasting. Then he would call for days of thanksgiving and feasting. The stories of the Plymouth colony which back then was spelled Plimouth, had set the pattern and the standard. Most all the presidents would do that. Abraham Lincoln though in 1863 made it a national holiday for multiple reasons and he had just been converted. He actually adopted Washington’s desire for a motto, ‘In God We Trust,’ and wrote in the Gettysburg Address ‘under God’ which later under the testimony of that caused that phrase to be put into our Pledge of Allegiance and our motto to be on our coinage in the late 1950s. Lincoln instituted the fourth Thursday of every November.

It stayed that way as a holiday until Franklin D. Roosevelt by petition of the chambers of commerce moved it to the third Thursday which is where we now celebrate it due to giving people another week to shop for Christmas since people started shopping for Christmas right after Thanksgiving. So that is how we celebrate it today.

Thanksgiving is now replicated in a number of other nations but it started here among Christians. It is a wonderful tool for evangelism because when people know you are having Thanksgiving some will say ‘so who are you giving thanks to?’ Then you can tell them why you give thanks and why thanksgiving is a virtue. This would open up wonderful conversations for evangelism, plus why God has given you a heart of thanksgiving.

Bruce: As I was growing up, we would not be allowed to eat until everyone had expressed something of giving thanks and there would have been unbelievers in extended family members that were present around the table. It is definitely an opportunity for evangelism. It would be interesting to hear from the unbelieving family members for they were grateful and thankful but they just hadn’t figured out who they were grateful and thankful for.

Harry: When I became a Christian we did the same thing except we did our thanks after we ate, praise the Lord, which by the way, made the that time a little longer because it’s usually shorter before because people want to eat. There would always be unsaved family and friends with us during Thanksgiving. Many of us would think about how to give thanks then that would open up a way to share the Gospel. So of course it became an opportunity for that as well.

Bruce: You concluded your Apostles’ Creed series this morning and one of the applications another person took away from your series is they are going to put actual Scriptures to each of the truths from God’s Word that is brought out in that creed to really let that sink in and I think

that is an excellent idea. A question comes from this series you did that peaked some interest in a study of some other creeds so they asked what other creeds do we use in worship in addition to the Apostles' Creed that would be good for the faith?

Harry: A creed is called a creed because it is usually a shortened confession. The two creeds that I recommend that people spend time in is the Apostles' Creed and then one that is really an expansion of the Apostles' Creed which is the Nicene Creed. The Apostles' Creed was really developed to do what Biblical creeds do which is an instrument of worship, discipleship and to protect the purity of doctrine in the church. The Nicene Creed was developed in order to combat eventually a number of heresies, most of which were around the dual nature of Christ that He is 100 percent God and 100 percent Man. The creeds have also been designed to answer the heresies that denied the Trinitarian nature of God – One God who dwells in Three Persons, not three gods. I highly commend the study of the Nicene Creed and we always use this creed in our Advent series.

On top of that I would immediately go to confessions. I commend to you the Old London Confession and catechisms of 1689 written by Baptists and the American counterpart of 1743. If you are of the continental reform persuasion then I would commend the Belgic confession and the Heidelberg catechism. One of my favorite which I would highly commend is The Old Scots confession and its attending catechism questions that were developed by the Church of Scotland that preceded the Westminster Confession of Faith. I would highly encourage people to work their way through the Westminster Confession and the larger and shorter catechisms taken from it. If you go through all these that will probably occupy you the rest of your life.

Bruce: The next question has to do with discerning God's will. I do think the vast majority of God's will is explicitly in Scripture but then there are those unique applications where you have to make a decision which is where people tend to struggle. The question is, how do we discern whether we should accept and embrace something as God's will or determine it's not God's will and He wants us to fight it?

Harry: Great question, so let me begin with Deuteronomy 29:29 which says [29] *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.* From this verse, I divide God's will into two categories and I'm not the only one. That confessions points us in this direction. There is God's revealed will which is made known two ways. One is general revelation of God's revealed will in creation and conscience. Secondly, is special revelation of God's revealed will in Christ, which is the Word Incarnate and the Scripture. Then there is the secret will of God which is only known once it has occurred – we call that history and God's providence. God's providence is the unfolding of secret will.

When I pray, I don't know God's secret will and I don't really try to discern it because I think you end up doing what I call 'Christian tealeaf reading.' Whenever I have a decision I don't try to ascertain some pathway to secret revelation because I believe God has finished revealing His will in His Word. He still reveals His secret will in God's providence but I don't know that until it occurs. For instance, I may have applied for a job and I didn't get it so my job is contentment at that point – I'm content with God's will. I Thessalonians 5:18 says [18] *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* But in God's

revealed will I usually try to make decisions by making decisions through the channel markers of God's revealed will.

When I was making a decision about do I join the Marines, the Air Force, the Navy, or the Army? I began to put Biblical principles together with that. I had the opportunity and challenge about praying to come to Briarwood in 1999 – is it God's will for me to go to Briarwood? I did not get any secret revelation or try to get any. I looked at God's Word and I cannot violate the channel markers of God's Word so I must make my decision within God's Word. I pray. I look at God's Word and bring all the Biblical principles to bear upon this decision of leading this church to go to that church – why would I go to that one and why would I leave this one – were some of the questions I asked. I would work my way through that and apply the Biblical principles to the existential moment of where I am and what's happening.

Next, go get counsel from other people how know God's Word with maturity. Then go back to prayer and ask God for peace in the decision. I believe if I am not violating any principle of God's Word that any decision I make is in God's will. I will later find out God's secret will in terms of what He is going to do with that decision but I just simply try to work from God's revealed will. As I encounter God's secret will as He reveals it in His providence I encounter it with contentment. As God gives His revealed will, I embrace it with infirmity as I try to be found in obedience within God's revealed will.

Bruce: I had a college student ask me one time 'How do I know if it's God's will that I marry the girl I'm dating?' I saw it as a discipleship moment and responded 'how does God reveal His will to you?' As we started talking through it similar to what you just explained, we talked of making sure the peace of God was there after I asked him 'how do you decide with other things in your life?' He said 'What do you mean?' I said 'You chose to come to this university so how did you choose to do that?' He said 'My dad said he would pay for this one and no other.' So I responded 'Ok, how did you choose to become a business major?' He said 'Honestly, there was this really cute girl in line and the next thing I know I was talking with her and registered for classes there and I just like it.' I was thinking man we're having a tough time here. I said 'Let's don't start on how God reveals His will on who you should marry' so we backed up and went through the process you just laid out as we began to identify those channel markers so it was anchored in God's Word. I just saw the fruit of that in his life and he didn't marry that girl he was dating at the time we had this talk. It just shows how we should be discerning God's will on a daily basis and not just wait for the really big issues to come up to figure out what God is secretly trying to tell us.

Harry: That is excellent for when you understand in making decisions from God's revealed will that becomes a discipleship moment for you making the decision and for those discipling you to help you with it and those you would go to for counsel. I've been a pastor now for 40 plus years and I have had that same encounter time and time again over the same issue you were helping that college student with. I would ask them, one, do you have the gift of singleness – they would usually say 'no'. Two, has Christ given you a Christ honoring love for her? Yes. Three, would your parents and her parents bless it? There is another story if they don't on how you handle that. This is how you begin to go through all the Biblical principles. Is she a believer? Are you gifted to lead her in and for Christ? Does she want to complete you? Does she want to come along side of you in submission in Christ? Why do you two want to get married? This becomes a great discipling tool to take Biblical principles related to that decision and begin to walk them

through it and that begins to turn their mind away from a marriage-centered to a God-centered approach to marriage of who, how and why.

Bruce: I remember the first time mentors disagreed with one another but they didn't know it because I went to them in private. For the first time when I put a situation before someone they gave me the same Biblical principles but their applications they would have done differently. It completely undid me because I never had my mentors go in different directions when giving counsel so I said to another man I felt like I was right back where I started. He said 'no you're not for you have been given Biblical principles and your decision is not violating God's Word so you could faithfully go either direction' and that was some of the best counsel I had received.

Harry: You are informed by God's Word and do not violate God's Word and if that's the case in your decision it doesn't matter what kind it is for then God's secret will reveal what He does with that decision that you made according to His revealed will.

Bruce: You mentioned contentment earlier and we have a question about contentment. What is the difference between contentment and complacency? How do we determine to continually seek to improve our situation or be content with what we have?

Harry: Sin will tell you the difference between contentment and complacency. You are never complacent about sin. You are always attempting to kill sin's desires and acts in your life so we are never content with sin. We are content with our call to be obedient to Christ in life and the effects and consequences of that. If out of faithfulness to Christ I lose my job I'm to be content but it doesn't mean I don't go seek another job because Biblically I would be called to do that. As we are called to this whole dynamic to speak the truth in love and how we are to live, then we finally end up with don't covet, be content. Can there be a sinful complacency? Yes. We are never complacent about sin or giving our best to Jesus but we are content in the situation we find ourselves and it's a holy contentment that never embraces a luke warm affection for Christ or a moderate commitment to Christ. A fellow once said to me that we needed more moderate Christians and my response to him was 'no, I think we need some passionate Christians.' So I'm content in the effects of my passionate commitment to Christ that isn't content with less than offering Him my whole self and whole being.

The Bible calls me to love the Lord with all of my heart, soul and mind therefore I'm never content with anything less than that. I am content with what God is doing in my life as I am attempting to grow in grace and where He shows me that I have sin in my life, I'm not content with the sin. I want to kill sin to pursue obedience.

Bruce: This will be our last question for this session. In a recent sermon you referred to the insanity of saying 'no' to Christ however in light of John 6:44 which says [44] *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day*, it seems that those who say 'no' have no choice in the matter for they have not been drawn by the Father, so any thoughts on this?

Harry: I have a lot of thoughts on this. Revelation 22:17 says [17] *The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.* So whosoever will may come, right? God

has opened it up that everyone is a free moral agent, but the Bible tells us that our will is in bondage to sin, therefore unless God's grace overcomes sin then you will freely choose insanity which is to say 'no' to Jesus. So they are still freely choosing to say 'no' and John 6:44 is explaining why everyone doesn't embrace insanity and say 'no' to Jesus. The reason everyone does not say know to Jesus is what we read when Jesus answers Nicodemus in John 3:3; *[3] Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* The new birth is not God's reward for leaving insanity to come to Christ, it's God's work to give you the sanity, the power and desire to come to Christ. You have to be born again because until then you are dead in your sins so your moral agency will freely choose to sin in rebellion against God. That's why it says 'no man **can** come to Jesus unless the Father draws him.'

I want to put this in terms of my third grade teacher. My teacher taught us the Mother May I game. If you said 'may I' you got to come over. If you said 'Can I' then you had to stay where you were. That translated into classroom practice. Teacher can I go to the bathroom? Yes and so I get up to go but then she says 'where are you going?' I say 'to the bathroom' and she says 'no you're not.' She would cease the moment to teach you grammar. When I asked 'can I go' I was asking if I had the ability to go and she said I did have the ability to do, but to leave the room I was to ask permission.

So the Bible tells us we're made in the image of God and we are free moral agents but because of the sin of Adam and we died in Adam, then our free moral agency (our will) is under the bondage of a sin nature, therefore our choice will always be against the Lord unless the Lord intervenes by grace. That's why the text says that whosoever will may come. God has opened the door. Anyone who comes to Him may come, you have permission but people will always choose insanity – no to Jesus – unless the Lord intervenes, but they still choose. The reason they choose is because God calls them and they have made a choice. When you came to Christ you made a choice.

I like the way Calvin puts it – when you walk into the garden of life, you see the word over the trellis – whosoever will may come – and as you go through on the back side of the trellis it says 'I knew you before the foundations of the world' (I predestined you before the foundation of the world). But, in your life you were making choices freely according to the condition of your will. Jesus is saying that no man **can** come to Me unless the Father draws you, but you have permission. Nobody goes into the Kingdom of God to be saved in Christ kicking and screaming, no, the Holy Spirit changes your will. So now you see, now you hear, now you want to come and you not only may come but you can come because the Lord calls you and causes you to be born again.

I love the word draw that is being used in John 6:44. The Father draws us intellectually, emotionally, volitionally and it's the same word used when Jesus meets with the woman at the well. It is the drawing up of the bucket from the well. The woman told Jesus He had no vessel to draw with when He asked for some water. So I'll use this illustration as I go to the well I say to the water 'You may come to me' and the water will do nothing even though I have given it permission for the water is under the bondage of the law of gravity. So the Gospel door has been swung open and Jesus says 'all who would may come to Me' but none will come to Him unless the Father draws them. To get that water out of the well I have to drop the bucket down and draw it up to overcome the law of gravity and so Jesus by the Spirit of God with the Gospel through the prayers and the work of His people through evangelism, overcomes the bondage of

the will and sin and draws us to eternal life, calling us and we're born again. Those who are born again leave insanity and choose to come to Christ.

One of the things that God sometimes uses to bring people from death unto life from being dead in your sins to being born again, are preachers telling you it is insane not to come to Christ and in that day sometimes the Lord gives eyes to see and ears to hear. I never think my invitation will be the power of God for it's the Gospel but the Gospel was made to be given with an invitation. Why will you die? That's insane. Come to Christ for that's life but only Christ can bring us from insanity to sanity so that we will come to Him.

Bruce: That's all the time we have for this session. Our prayer is that the Lord would continue to draw lost souls to Himself and that He would be so gracious to use us. Continue to look for ways to share the Gospel and take advantage of outreach event opportunities to share the love of Christ with others. Please continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and Lord willing, we'll look forward to another session with Harry and Bruce to answer them. May God bless you.