Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Practical Concerns in the Local Church: An Interview with John MacArthur
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: GTY135

PHIL: Well, John, I love to do this. We've done it a few times.

JOHN: We have.

PHIL: I've been collecting questions from people who are here at the Truth Matters Conference, pretty much through the conference. And I've tried to organize them in a topical kind of format. Some of these are practical questions, some of them are biblical questions. And for the most part they reflect exactly the kinds of questions we typically get from listeners at Grace To You. And the most common question we get, of course, at Grace To You is…where can I find a church in my area that's like Grace Church? And our standard answer is, "There aren't any and you can't have John MacArthur."

But the questions that follow up with that typically have to do with problems in churches and struggles that people have in their home church. Grace To You has always bent over backwards to be supportive of local churches. We recognize there are churches that have problems and sometimes severe problems.

With that in mind, I want to read Hebrews 13:17 which is a familiar text that says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them for they're keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning for that would be of no advantage to you." So there's a command there to be obedient to the leaders of the church. And yet we know that there are churches where leaders are abusive and take advantage of what they think is God-given authority and actually abuse the sheep.

What are the biblical parameters for this?

JOHN: Well, that opens up a wide discussion. First, I need to say this, and this is the bottom line, no preacher by virtue of his calling has any authority. I possess absolutely no authority by virtue of my calling over anybody, any time. I don't have a right to rule people. I don't have a right to rule the leadership of the church. I don't have any right to make decisions about everything. The only authority that I possess, it's not academic because I'm better trained, it's not because of my calling to preach and teach. It's not because I'm called the senior pastor. The only authority I have at all in the church is the delegated authority that comes through the Word of God. The only time I can ever speak

authoritatively about anything is when I speak the Word of God. I don't have authority to say, "You become this…you do this…you go over here…you do this, paint this room green, buy this property, whatever." And I've never exercised authority in those ways. I don't have authority over people's lives. God has authority over the life of His church. That authority is basically from His Word and by His Spirit. I'm simply the instrument to tell people what the Word says and what it means. So that is the only authority that I have.

When a pastor gets beyond biblical authority, he has abused his position. To tell people how to live and what to do, who to marry, to control their lives, to dominate their life, tell them how much money to give, that is an abuse of the role of the pastor who is merely a shepherd that delegate authority under the Great Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the application of Hebrews 13:17 applies to those who are faithful. If you go back to the book of Jeremiah, even God excoriated the shepherds who misled Israel, right? False shepherds, false prophets. And all through Scripture, everybody has been warned in every generation of history in the revelation of God, there has always been a warning about false teachers, false shepherds. Of course it reaches an apex in the New Testament, in the gospels when Jesus says to the people of Israel in the Passion Week, "Don't follow them. Do not follow them."

The Apostles of the New Testament pick up the same thing. Perhaps the most definitive passage would be 2 Peter…or Jude where we are very, very seriously warned about following false leaders, false teachers. How do you judge the true? You judge them by their fidelity to the Word of God, both in what they say and how they live.

There are two ways to be a heretic. You can be a doctrinal heretic and you can be a moral heretic. So you're to follow those who are true to the faith.

So the assumption in Hebrews 13 is that this congregation of Hebrew believers have legitimate, honest, faithful shepherds and they need to follow those shepherds. You need to flee false shepherds. You know to flee abusive shepherds.

PHIL: Now there are movements in the church today, and I use the plural because there are several like this that cite this text and others, and in otherwise sound churches where under the name, under the guise of discipleship, the elders of the church, or the pastor of the church exercises a sort of control over the minutia of a person's life, where they want to have access to your checkbook to see how you're spending your money.

JOHN: Yeah, sure.

PHIL: And that sort of accountability you would see as over the top.

JOHN: Completely. Jesus said, you know, He made this very clear, we're not like the Gentiles. We don't lord it over people, right? Those are His very words. We don't…We don't act like the Gentiles. We don't lord it over people. We're the servant of everybody.

To understand the role of a pastor or an elder in the church is to understand that your responsibility is to serve. First of all, you serve God by His truth. Another simple but foundational truth is Christ is the head of the church, not me. Christ is the head of the church. Through the years, you know this. I have preached messages in various environments on Christ the head of the church, and somebody might say, "Well everybody knows that." Well, no they don't…no they don't.

That doctrine…that great truth of Christ the head of the church has sailed down to this generation on a sea of blood. People died, they were martyred trying to uphold Christ as the head of the church. They were massacred for affirming Christ as the head of the church in England, Scotland, lots of other places in the world. And it is still true that Christ is the head of the church.

How does He rule in His church? He rules in His church by speaking to His church. How does He speak to His church, through His Word. How do they know what His Word says? Through the servant that He has put in that place. "I am a servant of the Lord," first of all. Secondly, "I'm a servant of the people." I don't find anything in the Scripture with regard to lording it over people except serious warnings…very serious warnings against that.

PHIL: How does someone know when it's time to leave a church and I'll add to that by saying that question was prompted by someone who wanted to know…should I continue to stay in a church that has a woman as a pastor?

JOHN: Well, that church has no pastor. (Applause) "I permit not a woman to take authority over man, to lead, to preach, to teach." There's no pastor there. So…look, how long do you stay in a church…first of all, don't be in a big hurry to change churches. I don't like that. I don't like church hopping all the time, going here, going there, jump in here, jump in there. You need to be a part of a community of people that you become intimately acquainted with, that you're personally involved with, that you minister to, minister with love and are loved by and you use your gifts and you fulfill the one-anothers and you're not going to find a perfect church, you're not going to find a perfect pastor. And I understand there's a downside to the ubiquitous nature of people like me because it's…you know, people like you tend to compare your pastor to me and that's…I don't like that, I don't feel comfortable with that because pastors are my favorite people in the world. They need your support. They need your love. They need your help. They need your encouragement. So find a place and land there. You're not perfect, that place isn't perfect, he's not perfect, I'm not perfect. Find a place where you can serve and use your gifts.

You say, “What kind of a place? A place where the Word of God is honored and Christ is exalted. Okay? The Word of God is honored, Christ is exalted. And that can come in a lot of different packages. And where the leaders are trustworthy and stay there. Don’t leave because you got ticked off at a meeting. Don’t leave because somebody made a decision that made you mad. Don’t leave because you didn’t like the fact that they put somebody in this responsibility and it should have been you, or somebody you wanted. Don’t let it get petty.

I would just encourage you that if you were living in the New Testament time, let’s assume you might have been living when the New Testament was written. And let’s say you lived in Ephesus. You had one church, the church at Ephesus, right? That was it. If you lived in Laodicea, you had one church. If you lived in Laodicea you were in a difficult situation because you were in a church that Christ would spew out of His mouth. If you lived in Ephesus, you were in a church that had left its first love. If you were in Sardis, you were in a church that was virtually dead. You didn’t have an option. And throughout those seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, the Lord always says, “Blessed are those who have not soiled their garments.”

There may be situations where it’s the best you have, it’s all you have. That’s been true throughout history. That’s true today in many parts of the world. You either go to the church or you don’t go to church. And that’s not an option. And I always like to give people advice too. Don’t look…just because you have a pastor that’s doing things that you really don’t like and he’s driving you crazy and he’s disappointing you and he doesn’t handle the Word of God, don’t pack up and leave. Stay long enough to see if he leaves first. Because so many times people pull out, start another church, and the guy leaves. And now you’ve got two churches when if people were more patient to let the Lord do His work over a period of time, it might have taken care of itself.

So just be very judicious. But if the Word of God is not honored, and not rightly proclaimed, if Christ is not exalted, if the leadership is not trustworthy, find another place. You’re not obligated there.

PHIL: Now you said you…it’s really not an option not to go to church, or you…

JOHN: Well you don’t go to church, you are the church. You take the church to the place. But it’s not…Hebrews tells us, “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is.” Don’t be like the people who don’t go. Go to church. Go there. Go there because you love the Word, you love the truth, you love the people of God, whoever loves God loves the people of God, John says.

PHIL: So you don’t approve if people stay home and watch the Streaming Video from Grace Church.

JOHN: If you're sick, or if it comes on at a time when you're at home, you need to be in the church. You can't exist in isolation. God never intended that for you. Find a group of people that you can love and serve and minister to and be a part of it, and be faithful and be loyal. And if you have a pastor that's disappointing everybody, pray that the Lord will get him out of there. You know, pray him out.

But you know what happens in churches like that, pastors often will come into a church and disappoint so many people, they drive the good people out of the church. And then, of course, they get disillusioned cause it's not going the way they want it to go. They're not seeing success. And the next guy comes in and he's not any better, and there's not anybody there to make him any better because all the good people have already left and it's just a downward spiral. So don't be in a big hurry to leave unless you know that the Word of God is being compromised either in the teaching, or in the living of the leadership.

PHIL: The Word of God being compromised is subjective, because you already said there are picky things. There are…

JOHN: Yeah, yeah, I don't mean subjective, I don't mean it's his style or his technique, I mean you're not being taught the Word of God accurately. He is not faithful to what I call the drive train of the gospel. Look, he may have a different view of the fall of angels, he may have a different view of baptism, he may have a different view of eschatology. And that might be the best shot you've got. That might be the best church there is there. But what the questions that need to be asked are, is he faithful to the core of the gospel? Which is a Triune God, deity of Christ, deity of the Holy Spirit, deity of God the Father, the virgin birth, the sinless life of Christ, substitutionary atonement, literal resurrection, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That's what I call the drivetrain. If those things are right, you might have to tolerate some of the other things that aren't nearly as absolutely critical as those are.

PHIL: Now what if your pastor affirms all of those things, at least gives lip service to it, but she's a woman who believes…

JOHN: Well that…I mean, that isn't even a discussion…there's no discussion there because the Bible couldn't be more clear on that. "I permit not a woman to teach, to take authority over man." That's end of case. That's…look, there are 66 books…you know this, don't you, Phil?

PHIL: I do. You want me to bail you out?

JOHN: No, no. Look 66 books written in the Bible, how many of them are written by a woman? None…none. Esther wasn't written by a woman, neither was Ruth. Twelve Apostles, none of them was a woman. There's no woman in the Old Testament that had an ongoing prophetic ministry. No Apostle was a woman. No close follower of an Apostle was a woman. The seventy weren't women.

No elder can be a woman because an elder has to be a one-woman man and the head of his own household. I mean, it's an open and shut case.

PHIL: So in your view that's a serious enough to…

JOHN: That is a very serious…yeah, because there's no pastor there. This is a false pastor.

PHIL: Now, not to press, but I have a similar…

JOHN: You know, there's water here, I can get rid of you.

PHIL: I have a similar question from someone who goes to a church that has a pastor is a man and all of that, but the adult Sunday-School teacher is a woman.

JOHN: No, no. A great host, the Old Testament says of the women who publish the good news. I love the fact that Aquila and Priscilla instructed Apollos more perfectly in the Way. I think women can give biblical counsel, they can give biblical instruction. They can speak to men about the truth. They can do that in an informal setting, in home settings, and all kinds of social constructs. But when it comes to the formal life of the church, the teaching responsibility by divine design is to be in the hands of men.

Look, I'm not a chauvinist about that, that's just what Scripture says. And it backs it up by the utter absence of women in those roles in any way in Scripture's history.

PHIL: What are your thoughts about contemplative prayer and the whole spiritual development movement, you know the Dallas…?

JOHN: That's just a lot of bunk.

PHIL: All right, so

JOHN: You know, it is. It's just…look, it's sort of a contemplating your navel, intuitive spirituality, digging deep into find your spiritual core and your spiritual center which is nonsense, but they throw Bible words at it, words like Jesus, God, Holy Spirit.

PHIL: There's also even a dangerous aspect of mysticism there…

JOHN: Oh it is mysticism. The assumption is that spiritual truth is somewhere inside of you and that is not true. Spiritual truth is outside of you, it is external to you. It is in a book, outside of you. It is not in you. You can contemplate yourself all you want, you can go sit on a rock in the middle of nowhere and think and you will find in you no source of divine revelation whatsoever because divine revelation

is external to you, it's external to every human being, it's in a book that God wrote. And when you put the book down and start looking into your own brain, all you're going to do is be led down a black hole.

So…but everybody's into spiritual formation. I was looking at a church website the other day and it proclaims itself to be an evangelistic church and an orthodox church, happened to be a Presbyterian church. And the whole website was about spiritual formation. And one of the things that they were offering was dance class in order that you can learn to get in the rhythm of the Holy Spirit. I mean, that's just…that's what J.I. Packer called zany. I mean, that's just crazy stuff. But that's what happens when you start trying to poke around inside of yourself for spiritual truth when it's all contained in one book and that book is external to you, and the spiritual truth resides in that book, if you never lived, or if you never had a thought…it's the external truth that we must understand because there's nothing inside until that truth gets in our minds. And then you can go into your mind and draw out biblical truth. But if you're trying to look deeper than what's in your brain, which is what this is about. I don't get it, you know me, I'm about as mystical as a rock. But I don't even know what they're doing and I don't know what they come up with but all of that mystic stuff, Dallas Willard and others like him, confuse people because they use the name of Jesus and they talk about God and they use Bible verses.

PHIL: With that as a background, let me read you this question, it comes from someone signed, "Worried Mother." "My 13-year-old son is at a Christian school which will be implementing the disciplines based on Richard Foster and Dallas Willard's teaching. Is it dangerous for my son to be exposed to teaching, even if we deconstruct these lessons at home?"

JOHN: Well I think if you're good enough at deconstructing him at home, it can be a teaching opportunity for you. I don't know what your other options are. I understand the value of Christian education. I also understand the confusion among Christian leaders who pick up this kind of stuff and just pass it on as if it were valid. But, you know, the responsibility to raise your child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord belongs to you, right? It's yours. You can send them to public school, but there you're probably going to have to deconstruct a whole lot of other stuff if you send them to the public school. So you've got to decide what you want to deconstruct.

This is a grief to me because it's just embedded itself in Christian colleges and in churches and all kinds of Christian organizations, Christian schools. I see it popping up, and the best way to understand it is kind of what we said earlier, it assumes that somehow spiritual truth can be found within you intuitively. Whatever form it takes, that's what it is.

PHIL: Before we move too far away from the question about woman, here's another question. This is the last one, I promise. I'm just giving you the ones that came in here.

JOHN: No, I know, you're not responsible for any of this stuff.

PHIL: I'll read you the question. I've heard that you have an office of deaconess at Grace Community Church. I also believe there's a biblical principle that holds that a woman should not be in a position of spiritual authority over a man. So how do you explain how the office of deaconess functions? Are deaconesses exercising their office over only women? It seems like a bit of a tightrope to me, so I would just like to understand better how it works.

JOHN: In the first place, we don't…it's not an office…it's not an office. It's not a position. We simply recognize that some women serve in remarkable and wonderful ways in the life of the church. Like Phoebe in Romans 16 who was a woman who was called a deacon. You can take the "ess" off it. There are women in the New Testament…the word "deacon" means servant. We have hundreds of women here who are servants of the church. They don't have authority over anybody. They don't meet, they don't make decisions, they don't have committees. They don't have councils. They aren't given problems to solve. They serve.

We have men who are deacons, they don't meet as a group, they don't have authority, they don't have power. They don't vote on anything. In that sense…when you're talking about an office, you're talking about some kind of official identification, office official, same root word. So we recognize in this church that the Apostle Paul said there will be in the church elders, right? And the distinction of elders is that they are skilled teachers. There will also be highly qualified men who will serve the church…who will serve the church. In Acts 6 they waited on tables, right? They fed the widows. They can be men, they can be women. In the New Testament there are some of them men, some of them were women. They are the servants of the church.

And I think it's important to identify them as such. It's not as if they've been elevated to a decision-making office in the church. But on the other hand, everybody who serves in the church makes the decisions necessary to the effectiveness of their service. You have to evaluate a situation, find a need, meet a need, pull together whatever has to happen.

Look, you've been here now for four days maybe now, were you served by people around here? Those people are the deacons and the deaconesses of the life of this church. They don't bear the authority that the elders would bear in this church. They carry the burden of service in this church. They are the life of this church. They are the joy of this church. They are the love expressed in this church. They're the examples in this church to all the others who see their level of service.

PHIL: One of the big debates that's sort of out there today is about the propriety or impropriety of multi-site churches where they'll use video to broadcast the pastor's message to various locations in a community. And now even all around the United States. What are your thoughts about multi-site

churches where one pastor teaches a group of churches by video?

JOHN: I don't think there's any place in the life of the church for a flat screen pastor, I really don't. Look, if you're going to be a pastor, what is required of you if you're going to be a pastor? You go to 1 Timothy 3, you go to Titus 1, and it lays it out. Your life has to be above reproach. You have to have proven that you're the leader of your family. You have to be hospitable. You have to be not given to anger. It gives you all those qualifications. How do you know anything about a flat-screen face three miles away from where you are? What kind of shepherding is that? What kind of pastor is that? That's no pastor at all. That is not a pastor.

I've heard those kind of discussions. I've heard those debates. And I think it's a sad day when people are being taught by someone about whom they know absolutely nothing. Now you can read a book by somebody you don't know. You can listen to a radio program by somebody you don't know. You can listen to a tape and all of that. But when you talk about the shepherd of your soul, this is somebody that has to be a part of your life, that you trust and you know and you're in a community of people that have learned to love him and trust him and know his family. I think it's a tragic thing. I think if you drove me to a kind of bottom line here, and you've been known to do that, I would say…I'm so glad for the revival for Reformed Theology. I'm so glad that there are lots of people that are getting in on Reformed Theology and talking about imputed righteousness and talking about justification. I'm really glad for all of that. I'm glad for a grasping of Reformed soteriology.

But, it is a terribly incomplete movement because they have such an abysmal understanding of ecclesiology, they don't understand the church. Many of these mega places with these flat-screened kind of hi-tech rock concert places are anything but a church. They're a repeated event. They're typically a repeated youth event. It doesn't have anything to do with the church. They're not multi-generational. They don't care for people from the cradle to the grave. They're not pouring themselves into the lives of people, shepherding people. They're talking about how much broader they can get rather than how much deeper they can get. How many more people can they touch superficially, not how many people can they touch personally and deeply. That's not pastoring…that is not pastoring.

I'm deeply concerned about the sad state of ecclesiology. And I will just tell you, talking to our friend Al Mohler about this and he said, there are about four or five of these kinds of things that are very successful and all the rest of them are real small, sort of unsuccessful efforts at repeating this. That is not a biblical model for being a pastor. People need to be shepherded by the man that God puts into their life as their shepherd wherever they are and it doesn't need to me living here, doing it somewhere else in America.

PHIL: You've also expressed concern, especially lately, the past two or three years, about these growing sort of personality cults that are wrapped around some of these men and, you know, the idea if you're not a rock star pastor, then you haven't really attained whatever. Talk about that.

JOHN: First of all, you've been worshiping with us, right? For four days. What you experience in the way we worship here would have been exactly what you would have experienced if you had been here twenty years ago…or thirty years ago. You heard me preach. What you heard me say today and the last three days, you could have heard me do the very same thing thirty-five years ago. We pay absolutely no attention to the pop culture, we couldn't care less. We don't care what they're doing. (applause) It's irrelevant. We have a fixed point of reference, the Word of God. And I don't want to link arms with the culture. I want to link arms with the history of the church. I want to quote the great theologians. I want to sing the great hymns that generations of believers have sung and the reason we're still singing them is because they were so good. I want to link arms with the past. I want people to know that we're some…we're a part of something that is multi…multi-national, multi-generational and multi-millennial. It goes back several thousand years. I don't want people to think we just invented this.

I can tell you everything I need to know about a guy who says he's a pastor by how much he gives honor to the work of Christ through faithful men through the history of the church and how much he wants to be among them and not an invention of his own. It's just a problem.

I mean, look around at Grace Church, we've been taking in people, we often say this, I don't know, what 75-80 new members a month for years and years and years and we think about 85 percent of them are thirties and under and have been for at least ten years. You know what? The Lord is reaching those people in a church that pays no attention to pop culture. We don't drink beer openly, publicly. We're not trying to play with the culture. We don't want people to walk in here and say, "Wow, this is cool. This feels comfortable to me. It's like a nightclub."

We want people to talk in here and say, "What in the world is this? I've never experienced anything like this anywhere in my life." We don't want the world to come in, we want heaven to come down. (applause).

PHIL: That's good. (laughter) Now…I'm going to write that down before I forget it.

On the other hand, because of your longevity and influence…

JOHN: What did you mean by that? (laughter)

PHIL: I mean, you've been here for 43 years.

JOHN: Oh, okay.

PHIL: Which is almost unheard of in our culture, and that's a shame, but it's true. And you've got this vast influence on the radio and all. Some would say, you know, you have a kind of celebrity status of

your own. Does that make you uncomfortable? What are your thoughts about that?

JOHN: Look, I…I just want to be a teacher. I just want to be a preacher and teacher of the truth. I don't want anything other than that. I do understand, as I mentioned to you, we were talking a little bit about Romans, that people understand what Isaiah meant when he said, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news." I understand…I understand that we all love whoever brought us the truth, whoever brought us the gospel, whoever taught us the gospel. You know, you heard Monica say that I had a special place in her life because God used me to bring the truth. That's really not me. That's not about me. That's really about the truth. I'm just the delivery guy. I'm just kind of the waiter, the Lord cooks the meal. So I don't really, you know, I'm happy to be called "John." I don't want any more than that. I don't know how to answer that question. It's a little….it's a little embarrassing, you know.

PHIL: Yeah, that will answer the question…yeah.

JOHN: People are so kind to me and I'm not quite sure I get it all. I'm not sure I quite understand it all, how you view me because I'm just trying to be a teacher. And when I came to Grace Church many years ago, people would say to me, "Tell us how to preach. Tell us how you preach." You know, I couldn't even do that. Some of you remember Fred Barshaw, he would always say, "Don't ask him, he doesn't know why he does what he does." And I don't really know. I don't know…if it's interesting to you, I don't understand why it is. I don't really know. There's not a technique. I don't work on it. Somebody asked me one time if I practiced my sermons in front of a mirror. Are you kidding?

So, I just do what I do and the Lord has done what He has done and I will tell you this, that if anybody is surprised at what the Lord has done, they're not as surprised as I am because I remember my son Mark one day sat down on the bed with me and he said, "Dad," he said, "you know, I don't understand you." He was a teenager.

I said, "Really, what is it?"

He said, "You know, when you get in the pulpit and preach, you are really something, but the rest of the time, you're not really very special at all." He was absolutely dead serious.

PHIL: A lot of us have noticed that about you. (laughter)

JOHN: I don't know. So, I just…I just want to be faithful to do what God's given me to do and I'm thankful for the strength to endure. You know, I've been healthy, just a few incidents through the years. And I love what I do. I love it as much now as I ever have. And I'm just very thankful to be able to do it.

I think the key to this thing, you know, I've said this many times to you, I was concerned from the very beginning about the depth of my ministry, and I said if I take care of the depth of my ministry, I can leave the breadth of it to God. You know, if it's something He can use, then He'll take it where He wants it to go. So I've never done anything to take it anywhere. I don't do anything with tapes, or CDs or downloads or…I don't do that. I don't go places and set up events for myself. I just stay here all these years here in this pulpit week after week after week. And I think there's something about that, that puts honesty into your life because the people in this church aren't under any illusions. They know me. They know my wife. They know my kids. They know my grandkids. They know my family. I'm not a celebrity to them. I'm just their shepherd with strengths and weaknesses. They all know and understand that. And they see me for who I am and I need that.

I think it's a dangerous thing to go on the road and begin to believe your press clippings. I think you need the accountability of a congregation, leadership and men around you that care for you and love you, and speak into your life. And that's been the genius of being here is having friends like you and you tell me things frequently that I don't particularly care to hear. (laughter) But you always do it kindly.

PHIL: I try to be kind.

JOHN: You are. You're a true friend.

PHIL: All right. Let's change subjects.

JOHN: By the way, well before…I can tell you, the best part of ministry is the friendships. And we have all these people…how long have you been here?

PHIL: Nearly 30 years.

JOHN: Thirty years. These are deep friendships. I mean, we love each other around here and it permeates through the congregation as well. And that's the joy of ministry. And we don't live with some kind of illusions that we're something special. We all have gifts. We all do what we do. And God takes it where He wants to take it.

PHIL: Right. Let's do change subjects. What is your perspective on the belief that the Holy Spirit leads us by nudging us or whispering to us or giving us dreams, things like that?

JOHN: Well, I think the Holy Spirit does lead us but there is no way to perceive that that's happening. Right?

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: I don't have a red light that goes on on my head and it goes around and around and around when the Holy Spirit's leading. I don't know when the Holy Spirit's leading. I don't know when I'm just following my impulses or my desires or whatever. I have no mechanism to know that. But in retrospect I see that. And I categorize that in the providences of God.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: I just put that in the providence…my life is just one amazing act of divine providence after another, after another, after another, after another, after another, every single day of my life unfolds in ways that are so well planned by the divine mind that I…I'm in, you know, a sort of exhilaration day after day after day over what happens in my life. So I don't know when the Spirit is leading at the time. The Spirit is leading…I can say, "You know, I think I ought to go preach over there." I do that every day, you know. Friday they brought like, I don't know, a big list of people who want me to come and speak and what did I do? Did I, you know, begin to go into some kind of mantra and say, "Ohm…." And see if I can induce the Holy Spirit to know what to do? No. I just look at it and say, "Well, I can't do that. I don't think I can do that. That wouldn't be a priority. Maybe I should do that.

And you know what happens if I just am open and want to do God's will, it's amazing how in retrospect I can look back and say, "Wow, it was absolutely critical that I be there because look what happened when I got there, and this happened and that led to this, and this led to that." That's how my whole life has unfolded. So there's no mechanism that we possess that tells us at the moment when the Holy Spirit is leading us and in some supernatural way. But that in retrospect we will be able to discern by the providences of God that unfold.

PHIL: Yeah, that's a great distinction to make. I think the first time I ever heard you preach, the message you did was your message on how to know the will of God. And you basically said, look, line up with Scripture, I'm giving you the really short version, line up with Scripture and then do what you want to do, as long as you're being obedient to what God has clearly commanded, He'll lead you through providence. And I think the mistake a lot of Charismatics make is looking for special revelation when God doesn't lead us by giving us new special revelation. He leads us by providence, but He's just as active in leading us.

JOHN: How different would my life be if you weren't in it? It would be dramatically different. It would be profoundly different.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: Grace To You wouldn’t be what it is. The books that I write that you edit wouldn’t be what they are.

PHIL: And my life would be profoundly different.

JOHN: The clarity of theology that we hammer out together and yet how, from a human standpoint, serendipitous was the fact that we met.

PHIL: Exactly.

JOHN: Right?

PHIL: Well in fact, I almost did…

JOHN: And the fact that you put me in a motel in the dead winter in Chicago, a motel with no heat and I had to take a carpet off the floor to put on the bed to stay warm all night.

PHIL: Yeah…yeah. And then I also I booked you into a lousy accommodation in Indio once, too.

JOHN: Thank you very much, on my anniversary.

PHIL: That’s right…

JOHN: With my wife.

PHIL: It was your thirtieth anniversary, no less, wasn’t it?

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: And…I almost…you talk about how serendipitous it was, I almost didn’t come to hear you the first time. You were…

JOHN: No, no, I know that story.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Yeah, I was speaking at Moody, he was on the Moody Press, and he made a crack to somebody…”I’m not going to go hear some lame-brain talk about the will of God, everybody that comes to Moody talks about the will of God.”

And then he had this eye on this…wait…never heard of me. Then he had his eye on this girl named Darlene and she comes up to him and says, “Oh, Philip, would you like to come to chapel and hear John MacArthur?”

“Oh yes…yes.” (applause) Right?

PHIL: That is exactly what happened. I never heard of him, and he’s John MacArthur Jr., a fifth generation preacher. And I said, “You know, somebody should tell Junior that everybody who speaks at Moody talks about God’s will for your life.”

JOHN: Oh man. And then, you know, we hit it off and then you worked on the book on the family and then we drove to Minneapolis, remember that eight-hour drive and we became friends. And I invited you here and now my whole life is like that. God has surrounded me with people like that. You know, just constantly. I’m not really interested in mystical stuff. I don’t expect the Holy Spirit to give me special impulses or special revelations.

PHIL: Yeah, I have a similar question from someone who is asking about Bible study and this applies there as well. What is the balance between the Holy Spirit’s illumination and our need to study a passage with commentaries and teachers, and things like that?

JOHN: Well the Holy Spirit never illuminates anything to me that I don’t understand. You’ve got to understand it before the illumination kicks in. There is a certain illumination that’s salvific, in other words, being regenerated, is in itself the source of illumination. When I pick up the Bible and I read God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, man, redemption, blah, blah, blah…I get it. Right. So there’s a generic kind of illumination in revelation.

And you could leave it at that level. You could go to the milk of the Word and say, “Okay, I’ve been illuminated on the milk of the Word, I get it, I understand the simple things of Scripture, you know, as many as received Him, became the sons of God.” And so forth. I can read that and understand it. I can read other things and understand them. But for me to dig down and to enjoy the full illuminating possibilities of the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, I have to dig deep into the Scripture. It’s what I…it’s what I grasp that He illuminates. It’s what I understand that He illuminates. So yes, there’s a sense in which I am illuminated enough to understand Scripture at its basic level, the milk level, as Paul would call it. But to get the meat level, I’ve got to dig down in it.

And you just experienced that this week, right? You know, going through a passage and I’m saying things you haven’t thought about with regard to that passage, right? But now all of a sudden when I say it the way I say it, you say, “Wow, I understand that. I get it. The light goes on, I get it.” That’s because you’re being illuminated which means the life-giving Spirit is awakening you to the reality of that truth that you now understand in a fresh way.

PHIL: And sometimes a teacher like you is one of the instruments the Spirit uses to illuminate us.

JOHN: Yeah, it can be a book, it can be a, you know, listening to someone speak. Sure. I mean, the Lord has given teachers to His church for that.

PHIL: I don't want to go overtime. Do we have time for one more question?

JOHN: Okay.

PHIL: This is a good one and something that's never occurred to me and it's right up your alley. Philippians 4:6 says, "Be anxious for nothing." When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He was sweating blood in anticipation of His death. What was the difference between the sinful anxiety of fear and what Jesus was feeling?

JOHN: All the difference in the world. He didn't have any sinful anxiety. His were purely holy anxieties. What else would you expect Him to do? The infinitely holy One, the eternally holy One about to be made sin. Rather than that being an illustration of Jesus being tempted by sin, that is the absolute opposite of that.

People say, "Well when Jesus said, 'Father, let this cup pass from Me?' didn't that show a weakness? Wasn't He succumbing to temptation?" Quite the contrary. If He hadn't said that, we might question His holiness. Do you get that? If He didn't say that, we'd wonder if He was as holy as He is. What else would you expect Him to say? This is horrific, this is incomprehensible to Him. He is giving us an insight by that reaction in the Garden, sweating great drops of blood, as it were, to the fact that sin was so repulsive to Him that His anxieties were anxieties over His own holiness, the very opposite of ours.

PHIL: All right, one more question I have to answer…ask, rather, and you have to answer. When you left for the summer, you said you were going to go away, think about what you're going to preach next. What are you going to preach next, now that you're finished with the New Testament?

JOHN: You know, it just kind of got away from me and I came up with so many things, I'm still trying to narrow them down. But I've been asked by a lot of people to do the Old Testament. So I'm working on a series in the Old Testament, obviously I can't go through the whole Old Testament. So…but I can do this. I'm going to call it "A Road to Emmaus Series." On the road to Emmaus it says that Jesus beginning at Moses, that's the Law and the Prophets, that's the Prophets and the holy writings that's all the rest of the Old Testament. Those are the three categories of the Old Testament. Spoke to them of the things concerning Himself.

So where did He go in the Old Testament? Where did Jesus go on the road to Emmaus to speak to them from the Law, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings about Himself?

Well if you look at the Old Testament and you start to look for all the places that Christ appears in the Old Testament, you pretty well can do a mountain peak through the whole Old Testament. So that's what I'm going to do. And do you know where Christ first appears in the Old Testament? Genesis 1:1, and then Genesis 3:15. He is the seed that bruises the serpent's head. And then He is the seed promised to Abraham in Genesis 12. And so we're going to do those kind of peaks.

I also think I would like to maybe finish the book of Genesis, do some character studies there. I want to do some messages on eternal punishment because I think that's called into question today. We've been talking about redoing the series on the family, given that we have a generation of people who desperately need to understand that teaching and there are a few other things on my mind as we go. But just the idea of going through the Old Testament in a Christological fashion could occupy a number of years. I've got sheets and sheets of…

PHIL: Yeah, it sounds like you've got enough to keep you busy for another 43 years. (applause).

JOHN: That's not going to happen. You know, one of the good things in this, you know, the Lord did allow me to finish the New Testament and I now am really closing in on the finishing of the commentary series. So I'm working on Luke volume 3, there will be four volumes in Luke, and then Mark will either be one or two. So, you know, after all these many, many years, and you were in on the beginning of that. You remember…I forget what year that was.

PHIL: That was 1981, and that was the first time I met you face-to-face. What I described earlier was the first time I heard you speak. But I went to a meeting with you and I think about seven editors at Moody Press.

JOHN: I remember that meeting.

PHIL: That was the day and I thought if I have a chance at the break or afterwards, I'm going to suggest to you that you do a book on Lordship Salvation. And you said, "I already plan to and I'm going to title it, The Gospel According to Jesus. And our relationship took off from there. So…

JOHN: And in case you didn't know, Phil is really the one who drives and directs Grace To You. So you owe a great debt to him for his ministry. (applause)

PHIL: Close us in prayer.

JOHN: No, you…I've prayed a lot this morning.

PHIL: Okay. Let's pray.

Lord, we're so grateful for this week, filled with so many blessings, so many reminders of your grace and goodness and so many good things from Your Word. We pray, Lord, as we go from here that each of us would take with us what we've learned and put it to work for Your glory and for the glory of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

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