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Perspective

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Perspective is a monthly journal with articles and book reviews. It is part of the “equipping” ministry of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, where we exist to KNOW, EQUIP, and SEND one another for the worship and glory of God.

SERMON SCHEDULE

October 5

Green with Envy

Daniel 6:1-28

October 12

A Tale of Two Kings

Daniel 7:1-8:27

October 19

A Message From God

Jeremiah 42

Guest Preacher: Jim Wood

October 26

The Final Chapter

Daniel 9:1-12:13

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FIGHTER VERSE

Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

For a full list of past sermons,
visit www.mvbchurch.org.

Proverbs 19:11 (ESV)

How Should We Then Pray?

Aaron Menikoff

“I’M PRAYING FOR YOU.”

“I’LL PRAY FOR THAT.”

“MY PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU.”

Christians throw statements like this out all the time, don’t they? The most cynical among us might wonder, “Is he really praying for me?” And yet, whatever the quality of someone’s follow-through, he tells us he’s praying because he believes prayer matters. It’s effective. J.I. Packer got it precisely right, “If you are a Christian, you pray; and the recognition of God’s sovereignty is the basis of your prayers.”¹ Convinced that God is powerful and in control, believers go to him in prayer, entrusting the nuts and bolts of their daily lives into his omnipotent hands.

But do we talk about prayer more than we actually pray? That’s the chink in the armor of our sanctification that I’d like you to think about for a moment. I’m convinced a lot of us talk and read about prayer much more than we pray. It shouldn’t be this way. I don’t want to induce you to pray by making you feel bad for not praying (it wouldn’t work—not for long, anyway). Instead, I’d like you to reflect for a few moments on the life of Jesus. I’m hopeful that his example and ultimately his sacrifice will motivate you to be more faithful in prayer.

In Luke 6:12 we encounter something extraordinary. Jesus prayed: “In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.”

It appears that Jesus was praying for wisdom to know whom to select as his twelve apostles. This is a reasonable conclusion. The first thing Jesus does after praying is gather together his disciples and choose the twelve (Luke 6:13-14). Not only that, in Matthew’s account, before settling on his apostles, Jesus exhorted the disciples to pray. And notice what he told them to pray for: “The

harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37). Given that Jesus told his disciples to pray for workers, it seems likely that Jesus was praying for workers, too, specifically, the workers who would be his apostles.

If prayer is simply talking to God, it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus prayed. In John 11:41 we see Jesus thanking his Father for hearing him. In Mark 14:36 we find Jesus praying for a way out of the cross. Clearly it was Jesus’ custom to pray. But this raises an interesting question: why did Jesus pray?

The answer is found in the fact that Jesus is both God and man. As the eternal Son of God, Jesus prayed out of his divinity—serving as a display of communion with his Father (John 10:30). Being one with the Father, there is no reason to be surprised that the Son communicated with the Father. In that sense, Jesus’ prayer life is rooted in his divinity. But not only that, Jesus prayed out of his humanity as well—serving as a model for us of what dependence on the Father looks like. This opens a door into some fascinating questions: Did Jesus know which disciples would be his apostles before he prayed to the Father? Did Jesus need to pray in order to make the right decision? Suffice it to say that the implications of the incarnation are too numerous and deep for our small minds to grasp. But this much is clear, Jesus lived a life of trust in and dependence on his Father to lead him—including leading him to the twelve men preordained by God to represent Jesus on earth.

Regardless of why Jesus prayed, there is much to learn from his example. I’ll focus on just five lessons.

First, prayer is necessary.

We are never too busy to pray. Most of us, much of the time, feel as if we are too busy to pray. We have to sleep,

after all. We have to work. We have to take care of the kids. We have to have some down time, don't we? And when all those things we have to do are done, there is hardly any time for prayer! At least that's what we tell ourselves. And yet, the truth is that we need prayer as surely as we need sleep and food and rest. Each of us relies on God, and we demonstrate this reliance by praying. Jesus had the weight of the world on his shoulders, and yet he prayed. How much more should we?

Second, prayer demands solitude.

It is striking in Luke 6:12 that Jesus got away from the crowd in order to pray. He sought a place of quiet. There is no command in Scripture to pray in solitude, and yet we should take to heart the model of our Savior. We should make it a personal discipline to unplug from the world before we speak to the One who made the world. I'm reminded of Susanna Wesley who had no place of escape from her numerous children. She found solitude in the corner of the kitchen with her apron pulled over her head to allow her just a few moments to think and pray.

Third, prayer will often be strenuous.

On that mountainside Jesus continued to pray all night. He once rebuked his disciples for failing to stay awake and pray (Mark 14:37). Because he is fully man Jesus felt the need to sleep and rest. Yet he believed it was more important for him to stay alert and pray. What makes us think that our prayer life should be easy? Persistence ought to be the hallmark of every believer's prayers. We are to plead with God faithfully, fervently, and passionately (see Luke 18:1-18).

Fourth, prayer has a purpose.

Jesus had real work to do. Apostles must be chosen. These apostles would go on to preach and write the words the Spirit would use to build the church (Eph. 2:20). Jesus had a church to establish, and so he prayed. When we pray, we ought to know what needs to be accomplished. I like the well-worn acronym, A.C.T.S. We pray to adore the Father because he is worthy of all adoration. We pray to confess our sin because we are to be aware, daily, of our need for forgiveness. We pray to thank God because an attitude of thanksgiving is a mark of every true believer. Finally, we pray supplication,

asking God to provide because we know he cares about what we need. This is what it looks like for us to pray with a purpose.

Fifth, prayer is effective.

Having stayed up all night talking to his heavenly Father, Jesus was ready to pick twelve men to serve him on earth. Jesus prayed, the Father answered, and Jesus chose the twelve. Perhaps it's not a stretch to say that in Luke 6:12 we see something of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Jesus prayed because he knew no decision is outside the will of the Lord. But having prayed, Jesus acted. He stepped out and selected the men he believed best suited to do the work he needed. And so it is with us. We pray, because we know that God is sovereign. And then we act, trusting that God will guide our steps (see James 5:13-18).

In these five ways, Jesus is a tremendous model for us in prayer. But we must be careful not to see Jesus only as our example in prayer. Graeme Goldsworthy warns us that to see Jesus merely as an example may be counterproductive. Seeing how spectacularly well Jesus prayed may be demoralizing for some of us, reminding us of the many ways we fall short. Though I'm convinced we must hold Jesus out as a model to follow, if he is only a model we will surely fail. Though prayer is a discipline we must improve on for the Lord, it is also, as Goldsworthy argued, "the fruit of what Christ has done for us."²

In short, the path to better prayer is not fundamentally praying because Jesus prayed, but praying because Jesus died and rose again. It is through this death and resurrection that we find more than an example, we find a Savior who bore the wrath of God that we deserved, took the debt of sin that we accrued, and declared us righteous. That is grace. And having received such plentiful grace, we pray. Note merely because Jesus prayed, but because Jesus died to give us hearts that long to pray.

So, as you look to the life and ministry of Jesus, by all means be encouraged to pray better. But do remember that the basis of prayer is not your desire to pray more! If you are a Christian, the basis of prayer is the fact that through Jesus' atoning death and resurrection you have adopted as a son or daughter into the family of God. This will change your view of prayer. I love how Goldsworthy put it:

How we view that relationship will determine, in turn, how we come to God in prayer and with what confidence. Prayer will never again be a sentimental excursion or an instinctive hitting of the panic button. Nor will it be the presumption of an innate right to demand God's attention. Rather it will be the expression of our entry into God's heavenly sanctuary, which has been procured for us by our Great High Priest.³

We need more than lessons to pray better. We need the gospel. So let us go back to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:19-23) where we find an inexhaustible source of power to pray.

--Aaron Menikoff

¹J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (IVP, 1961), 11.

²Graeme Goldsworthy, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God* (IVP, 2003), 13.

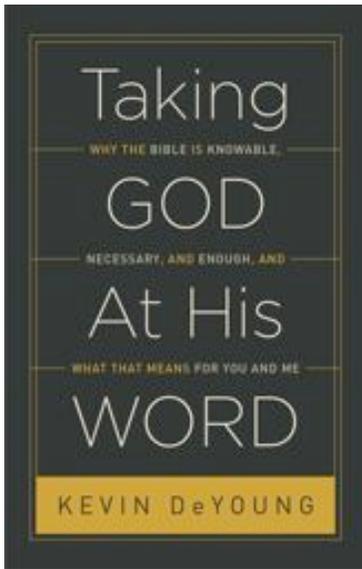
³Ibid., 51

Editors Note: This article can also be found on www.Christianity.com

Book Review

Taking God At His Word: Why the Bible is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me

by Kevin DeYoung
Reviewed by Jeffrey Timmons



A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, A FRIEND OF MINE ANGRILY ASKED, “WHY DO YOU BELIEVE THE BIBLE!?”

It’s an ancient religious book for a small group of people in the backwoods of the Middle East that has absolutely no bearing on life in the modern world any more than any other massively outdated ancient book.” Ashamedly, I was too stunned, taken aback, and unprepared to answer. I wish Kevin DeYoung’s helpful book *Taking God at His Word* had been fresh on my mind so that I would have been better equipped to say, simply, what the Bible says about itself.

In eight brief chapters, DeYoung argues that the Bible is to be loved and delighted in because it is trustworthy, sufficient, understandable, authoritative, necessary, and all about Jesus (22-23).

DeYoung begins the book with a love poem. This is not your average love poem for a significant other. Rather it is a glorious look into the psalmist’s mediation on Scripture from Psalm 119. DeYoung surveys the psalm for ways the psalmist delights in the word of God. He loves the Bible because it says what is true, demands what is right, and provides what is good (17-18). In turn, this causes the psalmist’s heart to delight, desire, and depend on the word of God (19-20). That leads the psalmist to mull Scripture over continually in his mind, sing it, speak it to others, and dig deeper into it. DeYoung’s desire is for those who already love the word to shout “Amen!” because of God’s goodness in giving us his word. For those who do not love the word, his goal

and prayer is for them to have an unquenchable desire to know God through his word like the psalmist.

After giving the reader a glimpse into the psalmist’s soul, who was overwhelmed at the sheer majesty of God’s word, DeYoung faces the impending question: It is great the psalmist can find incredible joy in God’s word, but is it trustworthy? Or, like my friend wanted to know, why do I believe it? DeYoung addresses this important issue by reminding us of Peter’s words to first century churches that wanted a visible manifestation. They assumed that a visible sign would be sufficient cause for them to persevere (2 Peter 2). Yet, Peter recounts that he was an eyewitness of Jesus’ glory at his transfiguration and that they did not need a marvelous vision of the glorified Christ because they have something “more sure” – the divine word of God (27), which is inerrant (38) and perfectly sufficient to bring about faith in Christ and a holy life.

Having established Scripture’s trustworthiness, DeYoung explains its other attributes: sufficiency, clarity, authority, and necessity.

How is it that we can truly know God? Is the Bible enough; is it sufficient? Do we need special, direct communication with God today outside of the Bible? DeYoung demonstrates that the sufficiency of Scripture is tied to the sufficiency of God’s final and climactic revelation – his Son! He shows from Hebrews 1 how Jesus is God’s ultimate revelation and that the Old Testament bore witness to him. He then demonstrates how tradition can never be of greater importance than Scripture and that communion with God and hearing his voice come from reading the written word (52, 55).

But can the Bible actually be understood, or is everything open to interpretation? DeYoung argues that

the Bible can be clearly understood and that interpretation is not subject to each individual interpretation (57-58). Jesus certainly says as much when he repeatedly asks his questioners, “Have you not read?” implying that they were responsible to and should have understood the Bible (64). Even though not all passages are equally clear, what is necessary for salvation is plainly made known to all (58). To believe otherwise is to question the very character of God. An omniscient, talking God is indeed able to and did make himself known in an understandable manner through human language (68-70).

What’s authoritative: Scripture, tradition, reason, or experience (76-77)? DeYoung commends the standard the Bereans used in Acts 17 by testing everything Paul taught them with Scripture. The reason is because “to trust completely in the Bible is to trust in the character and assurances of God more than we trust in our own ability to reason and explain” (82).

Lastly, the Bible is necessary because it is impossible to know God unless he first tells us about himself (88). The Bible does just that. That’s what the Bible is – A revelation of God himself! Furthermore, only through Scripture can we understand the world as it truly is and come to know and love God as we truly ought (91).

DeYoung concludes by showing Jesus’ own views on Scripture, “His mission was to fulfill Scripture, and his teaching always upheld Scripture. He never disrespected, never disregarded, never disagreed with a single text of Scripture...He believed the Bible was all true, all edifying, all important, and all about him. He believed absolutely that the Bible was from God and was absolutely free from error. What Scripture says, God says; and what God said was recorded infallibly in Scripture” (109).

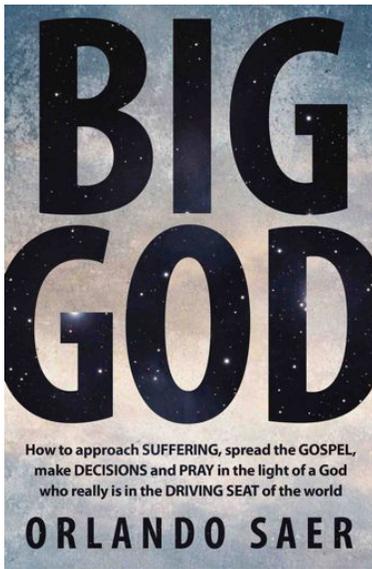
DeYoung then exhorts the reader, if Christian, to not depart from the way of the truth. He says to remember those from whom you learned the gospel (114). Consider their lives, their faithful love, and their message. Timothy learned the gospel from his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois. He saw how their lives testified to its truth. Praise God for the heritage you have from those who taught you Scripture! It is an incredible gift to be cherished from the Lord!

In conclusion, this is a great book to remind or teach you what the Bible has to say about itself. It is a very clear, practical, and biblical overview of the doctrine of Scripture. To those interested in a more comprehensive treatment, see his list of thirty resources at the end.

Book Review

Big God: How to Approach Suffering, Spread the Gospel, Make Decisions, and Pray in the Light of a God Who Really is in the Driving Seat of the World

by Orlando Saer
Reviewed by Matt Merker



HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD? Is he big enough to handle epidemics of disease in Africa and cries of injustice in Missouri at the same time? Is he in full

control of trials and tragedies, or does he merely permit them? If God governs every molecule in the universe, then why aren't your prayers always answered?

Orlando Saer, pastor of Christ Church Southampton in England, fears that such questions cause God to “shrink” in our minds. The shift is often subconscious. Confronted with the painful realities of life in a fallen world and the mysteries of how free will intersects with divine power, we subtly adjust our understanding of God himself. Maybe God only intervenes in unusual situations, we think. Perhaps he's renounced his control of the world and leaves most things up to human decision.

In *Big God: How to Approach Suffering, Spread the Gospel, Make Decisions, and Pray in the Light of a God Who Really Is in the Driving Seat of the World*, Saer tears off this “shrunken God” thinking and showcases the God of the Bible as the God who truly is in control—of everything. Saer aims in this brief volume not just to prove that God's full authority over the universe is scriptural; he takes it one step further and demonstrates that God's powerful leadership is good. When challenged by life's thorniest questions, we shouldn't reduce God but rather run to him for the comfort and hope we need.

I'll highlight a couple of *Big God's* strengths as a primer exploring how God's foreknowledge and power interact with human decisions. In case you're short on time,

though, I'll frontload my conclusion so you can know what I think: Get this book and read it! Pastors, order it by the case and hand it out to those who have questions about the role of God's control in suffering, evangelism, prayer, and decisionmaking. In a way, Saer's effort is a modern take on J. I. Packer's 1961 classic *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. I pray it'll have as wide a reception as that book so that a new generation of believers may cling to the God who wisely rules and reigns over all.

Guide for the Perplexed

The doctrine of providence—God's control over and interaction with the affairs of his world, including human decisions—can feel bewildering especially to those studying it for the first time. The most eager Christian student may find her head spinning as she shuffles through a crowded room of intimidating “-isms,” baffled by jargon with six syllables. What's worse, the questions raised by this doctrine can be unsettling: Is cancer really God's will for my life? Why does God command us to evangelize if he will certainly save his elect?

The first strength of *Big God* is that Saer manages to address these hard questions with fresh, accessible language without sacrificing depth of content. Take the topic of God's will, for instance. Scripture often speaks about God's will in terms of what he desires from his people: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3), and so on. Saer terms this God's “ideal-will.” It reflects his standards for us. Yet the Bible also indicates that the Lord has a more ultimate “will” for the way things will turn out, which Saer calls God's “plan-will.” This will can't be thwarted. It includes how God accomplishes ultimate good through evil human actions (Gen. 50:20) and wields wicked powers to accomplish his purposes, as

in the exile of Israel (Isa. 10:5ff) and, most supremely, in the death of Christ (Acts 4:27–28). Any faithful doctrine of God must integrate these two biblical streams of understanding God’s will—and Saer does so masterfully, with engaging case studies and a plethora of scriptural examples.

Of course, Saer’s discussion of these matters is entry-level. He doesn’t put on his boxing gloves and engage in scholarly debate. This approach may be disappointing to some readers, but it’s precisely what makes *Big God* so helpful: he articulates the classic Reformed position on God’s sovereignty without using in-the-know terms like “Reformed.” His fresh language and insistence on letting Scripture do the talking render his contribution to discussions of God’s will and human freedom all the more valuable.¹

Theology and Real Life

The second aspect that should commend this book to readers is the way Saer relates the doctrine of providence to life on the ground as a follower of Jesus. C. S. Lewis once observed that he found doctrinal books more devotionally rich than so-called devotional ones. *Big God*, though introductory-level, confirms this insight. Wrestling with the intersection of God’s will and human freedom may stretch the muscles, but it stretches them so they can lift the weights of real life in a fallen world while joyfully trusting a sovereign God. Much of the second half of the book unpacks its central claim: “God works out his good and wise plans in and through normal human thought processes and behavior. The fact that God plans and works doesn’t mean we don’t have to. It means quite the opposite” (54–55). Saer applies this assertion to evangelism, prayer, and decision-making, with fruitful results. Our choices and actions are real, and they matter—so much so that God ordains to use them for his eternal purposes.

Perhaps the most useful—and challenging—application Saer identifies comes in the third chapter, “Unshrinking God in Suffering.” While it can seem convenient to think the existence of pain and sin must mean that God has in some way surrendered his control over the universe, Scripture does not let us do so. The sovereign Lord is ultimately responsible for both “well-being” and “calamity” (Isa. 45:7), though he “neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.”

How does this discussion comfort the hurting child of God? Saer wisely reminds us that Scripture tutors us not only in God’s power and control, but also in his revealed purposes for suffering. We may not know, this side of eternity, why the Lord ordains each particular trial. But we can rest assured that he uses suffering to purify his children, to wake up a world in danger of judgment, and ultimately to win honor for Christ. In suffering, we turn not to a feeble deity hiding behind the curtains, embarrassed of how his image-bearers have let him down. We turn to the Author of history, infinitely wise, who says: “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” (Isa. 46:10). This God is powerful enough to console us in the valley of the shadow of death.

Saer is right. It may be challenging to fit the “big” God of Scripture into our preconceived human boxes. But he is the God who is there. He is the God whose Son tasted unfathomable pain in our place, so that our suffering will have a certain end.

This Big God is our only hope.

¹For what it’s worth, here are a couple of suggestions for those who want to learn the bigger theological words and grapple with some of the arguments that Saer only covers briefly: John Piper’s essay, “Are There Two Wills in God?” and John Frame’s chapter on “Human Responsibility and Freedom” in *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 119–159.

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*Editor’s Note: This review comes from *The Gospel Coalition* and has been unaltered.*

This review can be found at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/big-god>

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