

JUNE 2018

MY BELIEF IN THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

BY JESSICA HONG

In November 2015, my mother, who had no history of smoking, drinking alcohol or even coffee, was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. We were told there was no cure. She had six months to live at best. After her initial diagnosis people from all walks of her life came to comfort her and most of the time, they were really sweet. But, like Job's friends, there were a few who also tried to explain why she got sick. "Are there unrepentant sins that Connie can think of? Can she think of something she did in the past and perhaps, that is why she is getting punished?" Twice a woman told my mom

she was demon-possessed. Thankfully, these comments did not affect my mother, due to her knowledge of the Bible and faith in God.

For the sixteen months my mother was battling cancer, I had a crisis of faith. From my studies of scripture, especially the Book of Job, the reader is never told why God allowed suffering and tragedy to happen to the people who were in pain. We are invited to read about their doubts, prayers, their journey and the results of their deepening faith, but we are not told the "why." However, I could not help but ask *why*.

It was not until about three months after my mother's death when God settled the "why" question for me.

As I thought about why I kept asking *why*, I uncovered a basic presupposition that lay deep within my heart beneath the accumulated theological knowledge. The "why" question presupposes either:

A one-to-one (1:1) relationship:

You did something bad = that's why suffering is happening to you now.

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MIS-USING THE BIBLE

BY TIM KELLER

*This is an excerpt from the book I am working on, **The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy**. It convicted me and I thought it might be helpful to others.*

When Jonah begins to berate God, he quotes God's own words back to him.

They are from Exodus 34:6-7, where God reveals himself to Moses and says he is "compassionate and gracious" and that he "forgives wickedness." As Jacques Ellul points out "Jonah sets God against God ... all to justify himself." [i] He reads the Bible selectively, ignoring the latter part of Exodus 34:7 that

speaks of God not "clearing the guilty." He does so in order to create a simplistic picture of God who simply forgives and loves everyone without judgment on evil. Then, quoting the Bible, he uses the sacred text to justify his inordinate indignation, anger, and bitterness.

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A GENTLE INTERRUPTION FOR EVERYDAY WORK

BY MICHELLE CHOI

We can only see ourselves in the context of what we experience, and sometimes interruptions shift our understanding of life. I took the Faith & Work Intensive during a two-year period of personal growth and discovery, when God was working to upend my desires, thoughts and beliefs to love, forgive, and wait. I was involved in different ministries in the city, but lacked a sense of ministry at work.

The Intensive surrounded me with a cohort of accountable friends who cared about my day-to-day work and spiritual life, and prayed for me regardless of failure or success. The weekly devotionals, prayer groups, and theological coursework not only elevated my spiritual discipline but also transformed my heart in a way only God could do to eradicate years of lazy and selfish habits.

I encountered struggles in my career and everyday cir-

cumstances such as picking up double workloads and managing an underperforming team while dealing with the end of a serious relationship, to which I normally would have responded with anger, disconnection, and complaints. Given the context of the journey, I prayed for discernment and practiced glorifying God even in my reactions.

Practicing gratitude through unhappy times became a rhythm. The circumstances forced me to dig deeper as to why achievements made up a large part of my core identity, occupying my pride more than my identity in Christ.

The framework of the intensive — the prayer and reading discipline along with transformational exercises — allowed me to rectify again and again what it meant to follow Jesus. The internal process organically turned outward, and my perspective of work changed

from contributing in order to increase ROI and revenue to finding meaning in the work that allows effective information to be shared with people ... all of which God cares about.

For those of you who have considered this course, but may have hesitations, I'd encourage you to jump in. As long as you commit to being open, willing, and present with the other members of your cohort, you'll experience the richness and fullness of the gospel for renewing everyday work.

The 12-week Faith & Work Intensive is part of Redeemer's Formation programming and hosted by the Center for Faith & Work. Work is one of the primary areas of calling where we are sent as those transformed by Christ to be about the renewing work of God in the world. The next intensive will be held in the Fall of 2018. More details at faithandwork.com.

REDEEMER REPORT

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Hunter College Auditorium
E. 69th St.
(btw Park & Lexington)
Services: 10:30 a.m.
and 5 p.m.

W83rd Ministry Center
150 W. 83rd St.
(btw Columbus & Amsterdam)
Services: 9:30 & 11:30 a.m.
and 5 and 7 p.m.

West Side Church Plant:
NY Society for Ethical Culture
2 W. 64th St.
(at Central Park West)
Service: 10:30 a.m.

Salvation Army Auditorium
120 W. 14th St.
(btw 6th & 7th Aves.)
Services: 9:30 a.m.
and 5 p.m.

THE GRACE OF GOD IN VOLUNTEERING AS A FAMILY

BY MARGARET KRAMER

Margaret Kramer, a member at Redeemer West Side, shares how serving her homeless neighbors alongside her family has given her a deeper understanding of God's grace.

When I moved to New York City in 1995, my husband, who I was dating at the time, and I spent our Saturdays volunteering at a homeless ministry. It was truly one of our favorite things to do together during our dating years.

Then marriage and children came, and while we wanted to continue serving with a homeless ministry, it was very difficult to find an organization that allowed our children to take part. About four years ago, a friend invited me to serve with her as a volunteer at the Sunday community dinner at All Angels' Church. That evening was so encouraging, and I was surprised to find our children could participate.

To be honest, the first year was challenging. Many Sunday nights we were exhausted from a busy weekend and would rather have just hunkered down at home. There was often grumbling. I wasn't sure why God was asking me and my family into this commitment at this time, but I trusted in the words of 2 John 1:6, "And this

is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands." Jesus gave up everything for me and for my family. We could give one Sunday evening a month to love and serve our neighbors in need.

As I grew in the knowledge of God's love for me and my family, He allowed us to be persistent and consistent in serving others, and we began looking forward to serving instead of feeling like it was a burden.

So, for the past four years my husband, Dan, and I have had the opportunity to serve monthly alongside our three sons, Adam, Eli, and Daniel, along with friends from our Community Group. In the process, God has changed the way we viewed those we were serving. These brothers and sisters are no longer the "homeless people" we simply serve dinner to once a month — they are our neighbors!

After that first year, we had built relationships with the men and women we served, and we knew each other by name. Pat always told a good, clean joke. Harry would make us smile each week with something witty to say to the boys. Fernando liked to talk sports with Adam and Eli. Shea just needed the gentle, patient spirit of

Daniel to help serve her dinner.

One day recently, Adam and Eli ran into Pat and stopped to ask him why they hadn't seen him at All Angels' recently. He openly shared with them what had been going on in his life, and they prayed with him on the street. On another occasion, Daniel and I ran into Julio on his way to an AA meeting. We were able to buy dinner for him and hear about his day.

Over the past year, God has reminded me through Ephesians 2:6 that I am seated with Christ. The work is done! I have a seat at his table ... along with those he placed in my life to love. It is no longer a burden to serve on Sundays — it is a part of our family life that has brought us closer together. God has used volunteering at All Angels' to show me his grace.

Our family doesn't deserve to be on the serving side of the table, but because we are, we have been encouraged to know these neighbors in tangible ways and for all eternity.

Learn more about Hope for New York and how you can get involved loving and serving your neighbors in need through our 50 non-profit affiliate partners at hfny.org/volunteer.

CELEBRATING A YEAR OF EQUIPPING FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In September 2017, our family of Redeemer churches introduced Formation, a new initiative to help deepen our spiritual discipleship as people called to Christ, strengthened in community, and sent into the city. Formation aimed to equip congregants with practices and pathways to live out their callings as disciples of Christ.

From research done by the Barna Group with Redeemer congregants in 2016 and 2017, we identified gaps between congregants' knowledge of practices and actual day-to-day practices. We sought to equip and support people in practices that form a stronger gospel identity including things like sabbath rest, devotion (scripture reading and prayer) and accountability.

Here are some examples of how congregants are being equipped through the Formation initiative:

- New online learning paths on topics like Bible reading and rest were created to encourage congregants' spiritual growth. By working through pathways composed of curated sermons, articles, Bible studies and other resources, individuals are more deeply rooted in a gospel identity and better equipped to live out their callings.

- New classes were offered at all three churches to equip people to live out their callings in their neighborhoods and relationships: Power, Privilege and Difference (neighborhood calling), and Relationships: a Mess Worth Making (relationships calling). One student from the Relationships class learned that *"My calling is to be an ambassador of Christ, to reflect his love so that those may not know Him will be encouraged to know Him and for those who are Christians to want to know Him even more."*

Downtown also began piloting MarriageWorks for married couples. One participant said the most helpful aspect of the class was learning that *"Marriage as a mission is the only thing that separates Christian marriages from others, and that makes marriage sustainable."*

- Mentoring and accountability groups launched to help people wrestle with life issues in a more intimate environment. For example, the West Side began a mentoring initiative in January to foster relationships of accountability across ages and stages.
- A new e-devotional, including a version for families, was introduced to help build a daily practice of prayer

and Scripture reading.

The devotional includes Old and New Testament passages and guided prayers. About 2,600 people currently receive this twice-daily devotional through email. One subscriber said of the devotional, *"I think it gives great direction, allows you to read a little or a lot of scripture and I like the fact that I know others in the Redeemer community are reading and praying through the same content, which gives a sense of togetherness."*

- Three marquee events were designed to bring together all Redeemer churches and ministries to focus on formation, practices, and callings, with teaching from Tim Keller and other guest speakers. At the Gospel Identity Conference in November, we learned how a Christian identity could be understood, embodied, and galvanized to serve those around us. One attendee said the most valuable part of the conference was *"Being reminded once again that I am set free by the gospel not just from sin and death but from the unfruitful and needless striving to achieve self worth, value and salvation by my own works."*

In the February Public Faith Conference, we explored how to share our faith with those
(Continued on page 7)

CAPE TOWN: A WATER CRISIS

BY LOUIS SCHEEPERS

Cape Town, South Africa is a place where God's and man's creations meet in a spectacular way. Oceans surround the city, and a majestic mountain creates the perfect photo backdrop. But in the last few years, the green mountains have turned brown as the city's fresh water supply has dropped.

Since 2015 Cape Town and its surrounding area have experienced the worst drought in over a century. As rainfall decreased, dam levels slowly started falling. The demand for water increased significantly as the population grew from 2.4 million in 1995 to an estimated 4.3 million in 2018.

Earlier this year the government began urging residents to live on less than 50 liters of water per day (the average washing machine uses four times that amount per cycle). This is in an effort to avoid the dreaded "Day Zero," when all water supply will be cut off and the 4+ million residents will have to queue for water at 200 water points across the area.

What has been amazing to me is how residents have responded to the crisis. I wondered if it would cause riots and violence; but so far there has been an amazing comradery in our city as we seek practical ways to conserve water.



Cape Town, South Africa

People keep buckets in their showers to catch water to reuse when flushing toilets. Everyone is working together to avoid Day Zero.

In March approximately 130,000 people gathered in an area called Mitchells Plain to pray for revival and rain. As everyone prayed, rain started falling and continued to fall throughout the week. Although it was a light rain, even large news agencies reported about this miracle.

If Day Zero comes, I do not know how a city of this size will respond. Will people help each other or trample each other? I hope we will not find out! I pray that despite grave weather predictions, God will continue to send rain to fill our dams. However, my biggest prayer is that he will fill the empty spiritual dams in people's lives, that people will seek God in this crisis and that Cape Town will turn to God, who is capable of doing much more than we can ask or imagine.

In the fall of 2015, Louis and Yolandi attended the City to City International Intensive in NYC. They planted Pro Deo Church in Cape Town in February 2017. Please join them in praying that God will send rain, that he will use Pro Deo Church to demonstrate his love and that many people will come to know him through this crisis.

This article was originally published in the City to City Snapshot.

Or

Sum total of bad life = suffering(s) relationship:

You have committed several/ or a lot of sins, that is why you are suffering now or why you have had multiple tragedies.

Much to my surprise, I realized that this line of thinking is the just flip side of the prosperity gospel that orthodox Christians regard as unbiblical. My ten years in ministry plus my theological training would have completely agreed that the promises of the “prosperity gospel” (health and wealth) are not the Christian gospel. If you have a big enough faith, positive thinking, and you donate money, then you can expect that God will make you healthy and wealthy, they say.

Of course, as an orthodox Christian it is easy to dismiss this false gospel. But, as I reflected on my presupposition above, I realized that what I believed in was actually much closer to the prosperity gospel than I would have liked to admit. What I realized was that my functional understanding of the Christian faith was actually the negative aspect of the prosperity gospel.

Health and wealth? It was easy to dismiss. I did not expect the positive aspects of the prosperity gospel (or at least I knew I wasn't supposed to.) However, my wrestling with God about why he would take my mother revealed that I subconsciously believed that if I was a *strong* Christian (whatever that means) it would, at least, prevent tragedy/or suffering. In other words, trying to be a faithful Christian in order to *prevent* suffering is actually a belief in the prosperity gospel. When this dawned on me, I understood why I had a crisis of faith.

With my mother getting sick and her eventual death, my true feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about God were unearthed. Suffering does that — it brings out what you truly think in the deep recesses of your heart. With my seminary degree plus my time in ministry, I think I allowed myself to believe that I was a “strong” Christian even though secretly, I have always known that my theological knowledge outpaced my personal relationship with Christ. Prior to my mother's death, I would never have admitted that this was true; but, thankfully, suffering entered my millennial world and I was able to see just how “strong” my faith

was. Or better yet, what it was made of, instead of *who* it was placed on.

Earlier, I wrote that God settled the “why” question for me. Like Job and many saints before and around me, I still don't know *why* God allowed what he did. But in my mourning, God revealed to me the warped gospel operating in my heart. Rather than feeling shame, I felt gratitude. I felt grateful that God helped me to see my false view of him and how he deals with us. I felt grateful that I could repent. I felt grateful that I realized this now rather than later in life. I felt grateful that he still let me serve the church and not cause great detriment to others with my functional belief. I felt grateful that he still loves me and has loved me all these years despite misunderstanding him.

It was through repentance and gratitude that my heart was quieted and the “why” question settled for me.

Jessica Hong was on the East side CG team from 2012-2017. She held the position of CG director from 2014-17. She is currently working on her MBA at University of Southern California and hopes to return to ministry when that is completed.

What Jonah is doing is a great danger for religious people, even the most devout Christians. “It is not enough to adduce biblical arguments... All this may denote opposition to God. It may even be a way of disobeying him.”[ii] Ellul goes on to give examples. One is the historian who “dissects Scripture to set it against Scripture” in a way that undermines the Bible’s authority so we don’t have to obey it. Another is “the simple Christian who opens his Bible to find himself justified ... against non-Christians or Christians who do not hold the same views, arguments which show how far superior my position is to that of others.”

Whenever we read the Bible in order to say, “Aha! I’m right!” whenever we read it to feel righteous and wise in our own eyes, we are using the Bible to make ourselves into fools

or worse, since the Bible says that the mark of evil fools is to be “wise in one’s own eyes” (e.g. Proverbs 12:15).

In other words, if we feel more righteous as we read the Bible, we are misreading it, we are missing its central message. We are only reading and using the Bible rightly when it humbles us, critiques us, and encourages us with God’s love and grace despite our flaws.

“For what [the Bible] teaches us about ourselves is all to the effect that we are not righteous, that we have no means of justifying ourselves, that we have ... no right to condemn others and be in the right against them, and that ... only a gracious act of God ... can save us. That is what Scripture teaches us, and if we stick to this, reading the Bible is useful and healthy and brings forth

fruit in us.”[iii]

But, Ellul concludes, if we use the Bible to puff up our own egos with our correctness and righteousness, and to denounce all others, then studying the Scripture “becomes a source of death and Satan’s work.”[iv] The one other example we have of anyone quoting and twisting the Bible to resist God is when Satan does it against Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). And indeed, Jonah’s use of the Bible does not bring him joy, but rather takes him to the brink of despair. He asks God to take away his life.

[i] Jacque Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, p. 74.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Ibid, p.75.

[iv] Ibid.

God has placed in our lives with thoughtfulness, gentleness and respect. We concluded the series in April, with the Faith & Work Conference. Plenary sessions and over 20 “glimpses of glory” throughout NYC were centered around work, culture and Sabbath. Over 2,000 people attended these conferences or joined via Livestream.

Please join us in celebrating all God has done and pray as we develop the 2018-2019 ministry year to grow deeper in practices, community and callings. We would love to hear about your questions and experiences at formation@redeemer.com.



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