

**The Imperfect Pastor:
Discovering Joy in Our Limitations
Through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus
By Zack Eswine
Discussion Summary
By Mark R. Elliott***

The cover of the book gets to the very heart of the author’s message. It starts with a two-word title: *I’m perfect*. Then using an editor’s red ink, the title is corrected to read *The Imperfect Pastor*. The book is packed with personal illustrations and some pretty good “preaching.” He notes in the introduction that the book is actually “an updated—and shortened—re-write” of his earlier book *Sensing Jesus*.

He breaks the book into four major parts:

- I. The Calling We Pursue
- II. The Temptations We Face
- III. Reshaping Our Inner Life
- IV. Reshaping the Work We Do

In the first two, he describes what he believes pastoring in America has become—and he doesn’t paint a pretty picture. Our own sin nature (we are after all imperfect pastors) fights the image we attempt to portray (I’m a perfect pastor). In the last two parts of the book, he describes a more Biblical model—a picture of what can be. That picture is possible only if we are willing to change our minds on the definition of an effective pastor, and then let God change our hearts and habits.

Part I: The Call We Pursue—Chapter 1: Desire

A. Each chapter begins with a quotation that speaks to the theme of that chapter. *Desire* opens with Bernard of Clairvaux’s statement, “He thinks only of what he wants and he does not ask himself whether he ought to want it.” In this chapter, Zach provides a picture of what the expected, and thus accepted, desires of a pastor’s heart look like in our current culture. He begins by describing an experience he had three years into his first church as senior pastor. He was taking a short break to write an article for a ministry journal, and he described his emotions: “I felt a growing desire to write something of significance for pastors. I wanted it to be exceptional.” He adds, “I had always hoped to change the world.”

However, the realities of day-to-day ministry had him deeply discouraged. He states, “At the time, I did not understand what I now feel compelled to tell you. Pastors are no different from anybody. We too can get ‘lost in our longings.’” He notes two passages that affirm the “desire to pastor” is not all bad:

- “The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (I Timothy 3:1).

- “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly” (I Peter 5:2).

But he quickly acknowledged, “The stale water of celebrity, consumerism, and immediate gratification had infiltrated my drinking water. My pastoral desires had become tainted, and I did not realize it.”

Question: When did you first feel a sense of call to be a pastor or ministry leader? To the best of your ability, describe what you thought being “in the ministry” would look like.

Q: If you have spent a few years in the ministry, what are some key areas where “Your ideas were right?”

Q: If there are key areas where “your ideas were wrong” describe them.

Q: What are your current desires?

B. He states in a section titled *What If You're an Unnamed Mountain* that “In our land, a pastor’s experience and wisdom have little monetary value unless we know his name.” Going back to his early days in ministry, Zack reflects, “It was becoming quite clear to me that if I was to prove successful in ministry, I needed to do something great, and I needed to define something great in terms of how large, famous, and fast I could accomplish it.” He then shares a powerful illustration of Richard Foster’s comment to his son. They were climbing one of the Colorado’s famous fourteeners (one of the state’s fifty-eight 14,000’ peaks). At a rest break Richard told his son:

Nate, see that mountain? It has a stunning ridge. That’s a perfectly good peak. If it stood a few feet higher, you would know its name and want to climb it. As it stands, it’s an unnamed mountain that no one bothers with.

Q: In your current ministry position, do you feel like an unnamed mountain? If so, why?

C. In the next section, he sets before us two very different ministry desires.

- I aspire to serve as a common, ordinary, mundane, normal, routine, average, usual, and humdrum pastor for an unexceptional, commonplace, every day, run-of-the-mill congregation. As a preacher I am unremarkable and middling. OR
- I aspire to serve as an Olympian, uncommon, surpassing, extraordinary, special pastor for a marvelous, remarkable, singular, exceedingly great congregation. As a preacher I am stellar and unforgettable.

In the early years of ministry, Zack assumed his experience would fit the second description. And God did some wonderful things through his faithful service. However, he also noted that twenty plus years later he realized there was a downside to that ministry vision.

Of those attending my ordination to the ministry, one pastor mentor took his own life, and another is no longer in the ministry due to moral misconduct. One elder and one deacon were painfully disciplined, one for raging mistreatment and the other for a devastating affair. Other friendships eventually gave way amid the ugly politics of ministry. And twelve years after my public vow to gospel ministry, my marriage ended.

Q: At this point in your ministry, which of the two ministry desires described above is closest to your experience? Why?

D. Zack then gives us the main points of a more recent conversation he had with a young, enthusiastic, aspiring, soon to be pastor. The young pastor's desire was to "go all out for the ministry. I just want to preach the Word, no matter what happens, as long as I keep saying what God said, He will bless it. I know God has given me purpose." Zack reflects briefly on the fact that the young pastor had also "spoken at length about his difficulty as a husband and father along with a recurring bend within the road of his soul." To try to help the young pastor with perspective, Zack told him, "The ministry involves more than the question of whether our sermons are powerful and we influence crowds of people. Going all out for God means more than going all out for sermons and crowds." He continued, "I'm just trying to say that it seems really important to know what we mean by *the ministry* if we are going to go all out for it. My desire is that what you are going all out for is actually the thing God intends with the definition God gives it."

Q: What does "going all out for the ministry" mean to you?

Q: If you are young in the ministry, what do you hear Zack saying to you?

Q: If you are a seasoned pastor, describe a time when you had a similar conversation with a young aspiring pastor. How did he respond? If it has been a few years, how is he doing in his current ministry setting?

E. In the next section, he tells us about a conversation he had the following week with an up-and-coming planter/pastor of a four year old church already running several hundred. The pastor stated, "The first two years of our explosive growth, I related poorly as a husband and father. I hid in my success as a pastor. I think I used it to avoid my failing ways at home and in my heart." It quickly struck Zack that this "successful planter/pastor" was the epitome of what his young aspiring pastor friend [he just described] wanted to be. Then he noted, "But both men revealed the same struggle—the realization that one can receive accolades for preaching Jesus, yet at the same time know very little about how to follow Jesus in the living rooms of their ordinary lives."

A few months later, Zack's concerns for his young, aspiring pastor friend were realized as he got a note from him during his first week as a new pastor.

I am full of anxiety, mostly about what I do with all this time. I keep asking myself, have I done X-number of dollars of labor for the church today? I am unaccustomed to this free of a day, and it makes me anxious. I get things done better when my schedule is packed and I'm going a million miles an hour. I've known nothing but pressure for years, and now that God is providing space, I want to sabotage it somehow. How can I turn from this and find life?

In this section, Zack is pointing to the need for a pastor to have a daily growing relationship with God, their spouse, their family, and their community out of which ministry can flow. And he is spot on! However, let me add another word of advice to young aspiring pastors. Most men come into the ministry never having been their own boss—in other words someone else always directed the working world in which they lived. In my role of supporting pastors and churches, I have observed a lot of first time pastors. Most of them struggle with learning how to manage their own “work schedule.” Poor self-leadership in our personal spiritual walk and in the day-to-day world of home and work is at the core of many of our struggles and too often our failures as pastors.

Q: How would you describe your current relationship with God, your spouse, your family, and your community?

Q: How well are you protecting each of those areas? If the answer is not well, what is one thing you can begin doing TODAY to make it better?

Q: How well are you managing your time? Do you have a good balance between the personal, marriage, family, community, and work worlds? Describe what this looks like in a typical week. If you're willing, ask your spouse or a mature church leader how they would answer for you.

F. His next section is titled *Desire, Haste, and the “Mattering Things.”* In it he reminds us of what God states are the things that *matter* most to Him: loving God and loving one another. These are the *mattering things* that a ministry is built upon. He then uses a great illustration to describe the impatience of our culture. He recounts a conversation with an exasperated new husband who told him, “I just can't take this; it's too much! Either she deals with this issue, or it's obvious that she doesn't care about this marriage! I'm not going to put up with it anymore!” Then he pointed out that the issue the husband was referring to was six days old. In the conversation the husband had “quoted the Bible and talked in epic terms about what God wants for a marriage and a life. Yet if he had to wait six days to fix this issue in the context of having been married for a total of eighty-nine days, it was obvious to him that God was not in the marriage or that his wife didn't love him.”

He continues the section by describing some of the more serious life issues that we can and do encounter. Then he states, “Haste is no friend to desire. “Whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way” (Prov. 19:2). “Desire greatness, dear pastor! But bend your definition of greatness to the one Jesus gives us. Obscurity and greatness are not opposites.”

Q: As a pastor, what do your priorities and calendar indicate are the “mattering things” in your life?

Q: Is your patience level more like the newly married husband or like Job’s? What would the people who know you best say about your patience level?

Q: What is your current definition of “ministry greatness?”

G. The next section is titled *What Do You Want Jesus to Do for You?* After reading this section, I wrote at the bottom of the page “WOW!!” This section alone is worth the price of the book, and your time to read it. He exegetes Mark 10:35-52—we usually put a break after verse 45. The passage opens with a question from James and John, “Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask you.” Jesus’ response was in the form of a question—if you’ve never noticed it, let me point out that Jesus regularly responded to requests and questions with a question. The one who knew all things, asked questions not so He could know, but so that those inquiring of Him would stop and reflect on their own thoughts and desires. Not a bad model for us to follow in our day-to-day ministry! Zack comes back to make this point later.

Jesus’ question was, “What do you want Me to do for you?” Their response indicated that their “desire” was for a “mattering ministry” in which they were in positions of power and prestige: “Allow us to sit at Your right and at Your left in Your glory.” After He responded to their request (verses 38-40), Jesus had to deal with the indignation of the other disciples who had similar “desires.” His words are pertinent to our current discussion:

You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” Mark 10:42-45.

But instead of stopping at verse 45, Zack pushes on and connects Jesus’ encounter with the poor blind beggar named Bartimaeus with his previous discussions with James and John and then with His disciples. The linking point is that Jesus asked the same question as He responded to Bartimaeus’ plea: “Have mercy on me, Son of David!” That question was “What do you want Me to do for you?” Zack points out that “James and John were in the thick of ministry with Jesus and among Jesus’ prized pupils. Yet this was not enough for them. They wanted better seats. Meanwhile, the poor man asked Jesus only for two things, and the first thing was mercy. The second was sight.”

The section has a few other valuable treasures worth digging up, but I’ll let you mine them yourself.

Q: Do your desires for ministry and life look more like those of James and John or those of Bartimaeus? Give some specific examples.

Part I: The Call We Pursue —Chapter 2: Recovering Our Humanity

A. He uses a quote from Marilynne Robinson to help us see that sometimes our words and our actions don't match: "We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I'd walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried-egg sandwich." In the opening section titled *Advice for a Would-Be Pastor*, Zack begins by sharing a gut-wrenching experience. He was serving as a professor at a seminary when he got word that a longtime pastor and personal mentor had committed suicide. He took his sabbatical time to serve as interim pastor for the church so he could minister to his friend's family and the congregation. He then reflected on a seminary setting with professors and ministry students during that same time where he was asked to share on the topic "What could I say to help a rookie in ministry?"

Out of his own grief, he answered in a somewhat awkward way acknowledging that some would view his response as irreverent—I'll let you read his direct response from the book. But I will include his intent: "I wanted to say that even the greatest theologians or preachers among us are still just ordinary persons needy for grace in Jesus. I was tired of pretending otherwise."

Q: List some individuals you have placed on a pedestal. Did you ever ask yourself, why have I elevated them to a position of honor that elevates them beyond being a fellow servant of God?

Q: How could you honor them and still acknowledge that they were (or are) still sinners saved by grace?

B. He writes in a section titled *First Things First*, "I believe that Christian life and ministry are an apprenticeship with Jesus toward recovering our humanity [what we were before the fall and can be in eternity] and, through His Spirit, helping our neighbors do the same." For us preacher types, he shared what a professor friend would occasionally do in class. "He sometimes has his ministers in training turn individually and face the rest of the class and confess out loud to the rest, 'I am not the Christ.'" This forced them to acknowledge what John the Baptist openly stated about himself in John 1:20 and reiterated in John 3:28. Zack suggests that openly declaring "I am not the Christ" exposes "for all to see that we pastors are merely human and only local." He continues, "I use the words *merely* human and *only* local to differentiate us from Jesus. Jesus is human, but not *merely*. Jesus is local but not *only*."

In my role as an AMS I have supported churches through the transition period between pastors. One of the things I have consistently observed is that churches lose members during that process. I believe a huge part of it is the departing member(s) connected well with the previous pastor, but not

with the church itself—an indictment against the church. I have often wondered if some of it might be because they had placed the previous pastor on a pedestal and had begun to “worship” him instead of Christ—an indictment against the pastor and his followers. That possibility forces me to ask, “How much of that attitude do we as pastors permit, encourage, or even produce?”

Q: If you have been in ministry long enough to experience a transition or two, as you look back, did your former church lose members after you left? Why do YOU think that happened?

Q: In your current ministry setting, how often do you help people distinguish between your role and the role of Jesus the Christ?

C. The balance of the chapter focuses on the aspects of reclaiming our own humanity (because we too are merely human) and realizing that we are called to minister to the people in a specific location (we are only local). He gives two great illustrations of ministering to individuals in his current church whose lives have been limited by disease (a seventy-year old man with diabetes and polio) and birth defects (a middle-aged woman with the mental capacity of a five-year old). After a description of how he provides pastoral care to them, he asks us the following question:

Q: What does it mean for you that ministry is an act of neighbor love and that to love your neighbor will require close physical proximity? Our COVID world has forced us into taking previously unimagined precautions, but ministry still requires a personal touch.

Q: Reflect on your time management this past week, how often were you in close enough proximity to be able to love a neighbor as you love yourself?

D. The creation account in Genesis describes a human existence designed for a loving relationship with God and loving relations with one another that are to be done in a local place. When God completed His creative work, He said it was “very good!” Zack suggests that this forces us to define greatness as follows:

1. God has given you Himself to surrender to and love. This means that to daily orient your life toward a moment-by-moment relationship with God brings glory to Him.
2. God has given you a handful of persons whom you are meant to love. You needn’t become somebody else or constantly look over the shoulders of those people who are right in front of you. Attending to God’s work among the faces, names, and stories whose you are is to do already what God considers significant.
3. God will give you a local place to inhabit and a thing to do there, which means that you get to become attentive to what is there where you are. This means that to dwell knowledgeably and hospitably in the place God gives you is to glorify Him.

He again provides a great processing question:

Q: What do you suppose the work of a pastor entails in light of the above definition of greatness?

- E. Having previously provided a picture of ministry to a man (the one with diabetes and polio) and woman (the one with special needs) in his church, Zack describes Jesus' ministry to a woman and a man in His world. A woman with a questionable reputation came into the house of Simon the Pharisee and began to anoint His feet with perfume and wipe them with her hair. Luke 7:40-47 records the exchange between Jesus and Simon:

“Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “***Do you see this woman?*** I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

He then quickly switches our focus to a man named Levi/Matthew whom Jesus called to become one of His disciples. He points out that Luke's description of Jesus' invitation highlights Matthew's vocation: “a tax collector named Levi” (Luke 5:27). Mark points to Levi's Jewish heritage: “Levi the son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14). While Matthew writes that Jesus “saw a man called Matthew” (Matthew 9:9). And again Zack has great processing questions:

Q: Would you have seen *this* woman as a person of value—one loved by God rather than a woman of ill repute?

Q: Would you have seen *this* man as someone other than a traitor to his nation?

Q: If you are reading this summary, God has called you as a Christian leader. Are you able to see people as people (no matter their circumstances) and yourself as one of them?

- F. The closing section pictures a familiar scenario where a young couple graduates from seminary, moves to their first pastoral setting, only to find themselves in an unfamiliar context without the support of an established relational network. I can't write this without commenting that although this is all too normal, it is not what God intended for a typical pastor—a missionary yes, but not a pastor.

If a local church obediently makes disciples, who make disciples, then when a senior leader retires they already have someone equipped to step into that role. Churches who are failing to fulfill their Biblical command are hoping that some church somewhere has been obedient.

He moves from the picture of a young struggling pastor to a pastor/mentor friend whose ministry involved a two-phase building program, planting new churches, providing counsel to other pastors, and speaking regularly at conferences. He then simply states, “My pastor/mentor took his own life amid everything that we all would call success.” And then he closes by contrasting his first pastorate with all its entrapments with his “first Sunday as a new lead pastor with a second chance.” He stepped into the pulpit that Sunday bare footed “as an act of personal testimony, a silly but tangible reminder that I am not the Christ.”

Q: Is there a time when you have declared your own humanity to those whom God has called you to serve? If not, what prevents you from doing so? What would it look like if you were to do so?

Part I: The Call We Pursue —Chapter 3: Leaving Home

A. This chapter opens with a David Hansen quote: “the pastoral ministry is a pilgrimage through the wilderness.” Although Zack doesn’t go there, it’s hard to read this quote without thinking about the newly “organized” Jewish nation that Moses led out of Egypt. They wandered forty years in the wilderness trying to figure out this new thing called freedom, and out of the hundreds of thousands of adults who crossed the Red Sea only two men walked across the Jordan River. The rate of failure in the ministry, as pointed out earlier, is also high. Zack again opens his heart and life to expose the reality that where ever we are “we’re there.” And where ever that is, we will bring the experiences of our life with us—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

He states it this way: “You and I have learned many things at home, and not all of these things agree with Jesus. What is more, when we leave home for ministry, we take with us, for better and for worse, the things that home taught us.” Using church terminology, he notes, “Each of us carries theologies with a ‘Big T’ and a ‘little t’ into our ministry. ‘The Big T’ things we learned in class with Bible teachers. The ‘little t’ theologies we learned, often without knowing it, outside of and regardless of class. Our problem is this: regardless of what we profess about our theology with a ‘Big T,’ all our little theologies show up at the most unexpected times. For example Jesus taught His pastors in training to love their neighbors, even their enemies. But the first time Samaritans offered offense to Jesus, James and John wanted to kill them in God’s name (Luke 9:54).

Activity: If you’ve never done it, take time to list both the positive and negative lessons your family of origin taught you.

Q: What are you doing to add “Big T” qualities to your positive list?

Q: What are you doing to subtract “Little t” qualities from your negative list?

In the heart of the chapter, he discusses three of his “negative list” qualities he is working to overcome. The first he labels *Men with Fists and Fears*. He describes a confrontation in his first church with a powerful layman. It reminded him of a negative aspect of his stepdad. The second zeros in on an area of temptation for all men: *Women with Bodies*. In that section he describes a counseling session with a woman struggling with an abusive boyfriend, and the moment of clarity a simple statement provided her. It addressed the reality that too often men see women from a sexual perspective while women see men from a position of seeking self-worth. The third area he calls *Race in Conversation*. The racial tensions that have been magnified in recent years are at the core of this area of needed personal growth.

In a section he titled *The Painful Adjustment* he describes an attempt he made as a young, eager, passionate, and yet relationally naïve budding theologian and pastor to address what he saw as the root causes of the negative list items he carried with him into adult life.

I wrote a sixty-page treatise that I called, “Why I’m what some people call ‘a Calvinist.’” I made copies and sent them to my family members in Southern Indiana. What better way to show Jesus’ love to loved ones than by writing, and sending a document they did not expect, to answer questions they were not asking, with a tone that was not warranted, in order to defend an argument that they were not engaged in, and all this by surprise without so much as a conversation?

Then Zack has us ponder Jesus’ family life. When Jesus was twelve, Mary and Joseph had to return to Jerusalem to look for Him. When they finally found Him in the temple, Mary asked, “Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously.” Can you imagine the emotional impact on Mary and in particular on Joseph to Jesus’ somewhat disrespectful response? “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?”

Zack doesn’t mention that on one trip to His hometown, Jesus was not able to perform many signs because of their unbelief, and in fact Jesus declared, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house” (Mark 6:1-6). On another visit to His hometown, Luke tells us that they actually sought to throw Jesus off the cliff because of His blasphemous statements (4:16-8). Is it any wonder that Jesus moved the center of His ministry to Capernaum?

He does discuss the time when Mary and His brothers came to see Him. Someone in the crowd said, “‘Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.’ But He answered them, saying, ‘Who is My mother, or My brothers?’ And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother

and My sister and mother” (Mark 3:32-35). Zack reflects on this experience and writes, “The family must have gone home that day furious or pained. Jesus only confirmed their suspicions. He is out of his mind.”

His final reflections are, “Extended-family perceptions, hometowns, and ministries are a mess—it was this way even for our Lord in the fullness of His humanity. But even here, grace doesn’t quit.” He then closes the chapter with a heartwarming family story of redemption.

Q: How have people in your hometown (neighborhood where you grew up) responded to your call to ministry?

Q: What was your family’s response when you announced your call to ministry?

Q: Are there people who still wonder why you’re doing what you’re doing?

Q: Are there family members you are trying to impress or please by attaining “success?”

Part I: The Call We Pursue—Chapter 4: Invisible

A. A Eugene H. Peterson quote opens this chapter: “The fact is pastors are invisible six days a week... A great deal of our most important work is done behind the scenes.” Zack then challenges us to change our perspective, so we can see just how significant the invisible, behind the scenes work of a pastor is. I suspect that every pastor in America has heard someone say “A pastor only works an hour a week.” The comment refers to the Sunday morning sermon which is the most visible aspect of a pastor’s busy week. What I have observed is that when a pastor elevates his 20-90 minute sermon such that it becomes THE MOST IMPORTANT thing he does, then he reinforces this perception.

Zack then provides a simple, but powerful story of one conversation he had with a young father during a lunchtime connect—one of many ongoing connections he has had with the father and others during the invisible part of his week. He summarized this lunchtime conversation as follows:

- *Mundane*. The moment is barely noticeable and will have no record in history. Two men ate soup and talked for a few minutes.
- *Invisible*. No one else in the congregation saw it or knew about it.
- *Uncontrollable*. The father had asked a question at the previous lunch meeting that he had never been asked before. He had provided the best Biblical answer he knew and the two of them had prayed about the issue. They waited on God and the father reported there had been a very positive response—it could have gone the other way.
- *Unfinished*. They gave thanks with joy for the good news. But they both knew that because the issue related to the need of a child, there would be future issues that would require more Biblical insights, prayer, and Divine intervention in the years ahead—especially the teenage years.

Zack reflects back to his earlier thoughts of what a pastor's role would be:

I thought of a pastor as something akin to an itinerant conference speaker, prophetically originating and preaching vision for large crowds and organizations, so that I can constantly demonstrate that we are not like other churches and I am not like other preachers...so that by the force of my personality, the expertise of my organizational leadership, and the savvy uniqueness of our brand presence, I (I mean we, of course) can build a more notable gospel platform from which I (uh, I mean, we) can rise into greater gospel prominence, and then I (I don't mean we) can leave and move on to bigger and better gospel things for God.

Q: As you ask God's indwelling Spirit to speak truth to your spirit, which of the above descriptions best fits your current goal as a pastor: mundane, invisible, uncontrollable, and unfinished or prophetic, visionary, successful, and upwardly mobile?

- B. In a section he labels *The Fame-Shyness of Jesus*, Zack points to multiple passages in the Gospels where Jesus deflected opportunities for fame, asked those whose lives had been deeply touched to not tell anyone, and sought times to be alone and pray. He asks, "What if Jesus' reason for quieting the talk about Himself was actually born out of living what He taught?"

Permit me just a few sentences to say more than a simple AMEN! Several years ago, God gave me an "aha" moment as I was pondering Jesus' response to some Greeks who were seeking an audience with Him. It was immediately after Jesus' Palm Sunday triumphal entry.

The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, "You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, ***the world has gone after Him!***" Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, ***unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.*** He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. ***If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor*** (John 12:19-26).

[Emphasis added]

My question was, "Why did Jesus ignore the Greeks?" The conclusion I came to was that He actually didn't ignore them, but used their request to point out the restrictions of a y'all come ministry model. In spite of Jesus' consistent efforts to avoid fame, even the Pharisees had come to acknowledge "the whole world has gone after Him!" Jesus had modeled an outwardly focused (sending), relational, accountable, obedience based disciple-making process by equipping and then

sending out the twelve and later the seventy (two). His fame would now make it difficult to sustain that model, and would in time create a “come and see—come and hear” model. A model that would create a restrictive bottleneck in His desire to have the whole world hear “the Gospel” that was about to be proclaimed on the cross and through an empty tomb: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.”

Although Zack doesn’t quote John 12:26, “If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor,” he closes the section with comments that speak to Jesus’ message. “God is the remembered one. But this does not mean we are forgotten—not by Him. Not by a long shot. In fact, being remembered by Him means we no longer fear being forgotten by the world. Living humanly within His remembrance is enough.” It should be, but the flesh makes it hard.

Q: To what extent are you seeking to be remembered in this world rather than striving to be a faithful servant who will be remembered in eternity by God?

- C. He continues to paint a picture of Jesus’ earthly ministry in a section titled *Invisible People, Invisible Prayers*. Zack points out that Jesus spent time connecting with common everyday people and more specifically He interacted with those who had tremendous needs. He then comments, “Even John the Baptist is confused. Jesus’ way of doing a day seems strategically off. ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ John asks in Luke 7:19. Isn’t it strange that a life of loving unknown people in their miseries should cause others of us to wonder if it is time to move on from Jesus?”

Zack points out, “At long last, Jesus begins to engage the well-connected and influential persons of His community. But these conversations are anything but diplomatic. They end with a highly respected lawyer saying to Jesus, ‘Teacher, in saying these things you insult us’ (Luke 11:45). And as for the elite leaders in the community, their response to all this is to lie ‘in wait for Him, to catch Him in something He might say’ (Luke 11:54).

He then closes the section with the exhortation, “Don’t schedule too much time with those who believe themselves to be pillars in the government or the church. Remember that they too are just people. They have their own sins to repent of and their own callings to fulfill. They are not more important than the broken and lost for whom you’re called.”

Q: How balanced are your relational connections between “the broken and lost” and the “pillars of government or church?”

- D. *Attending the Jesus Seminary* is the next section. In it he notes, “Throughout the Gospels we consistently observe Jesus teaching theology in the midst of the psych ward. He sat His apprentices down in the emergency room, as it were. He introduced them to ghastly sights, grieved sounds, and rank aromas of actual human people in their diseases, their wrestling with demons, their disputes,

their poverty, and their loss of spouses. He brought them near to ethnic prejudices, injustices, anxieties, and traumas, not to mention the joys, pleasures, delights, and longings of ordinary human beings. Jesus' disciples learned about God in the context of the bodily life situations that actually exist in the world, the sensory ramifications of an under-the-sun reality."

I would point out that scholars refer to Jesus as the peripatetic teacher as He was a traveling rabbi. That was because He wasn't a rabbi whose students came to learn from him, rather He invited students to go with Him and learn as they served together. The Hebrew word behind our word disciples is "talmidim." A literal translation would be "student teachers." The inference is that theological education should be a lifelong process of learning, living, and telling others what to know and how to live. Christianity in our generation has reverted to the Jewish model of theological education—come and learn. Once you've learned enough, then you can go and teach, or you can choose to just keep on learning.

Q: To what extent are you learning through a Jesus Seminary model of disciple-making?

Q: When was the last time you invited someone to go with you and learn as you serve together?

Q: How well do you balance two important exhortations to your church members "come and hear" and "go and tell?"

E. Zack suggests that our current models for ministry are struggling in a section titled *But This Doesn't Work!* He shared from a conversation he had with "a pastor who serves a large, famous, and praised congregation." The pastor's statement was, "Over the last several weeks I've been working with our staff to identify the currently practiced values of our church." Not what members said they valued, but what their actions reveal they actually value. The pastor shared, "We determined that our church culture values professionalism, excellence, and the Bible. Professionalism is interpreted in such a way that transparency or relational honesty is suspect and a sign of weakness. Excellence means that it is hard to be human. Any mistake is quickly or harshly criticized. Our stance on the Bible, as interpreted through this view of professionalism and excellence, means that Bible information is prized, but not if it exposes or melts us, and not if it is taught without the highest academic standards."

As the pastor continued he stated, "In order for this church to grow in health, it will require a culture change. But that would mean we'd probably lose several hundred people." Zack then reflects that, "No simplistic answer exists here. A counter culture church that is 'organic,' 'edgy,' and 'casual' can just as easily become celebrity measures by which we compare ourselves, judge others, and keep our followings."

Q: How would you describe your current church culture?

Q: If you are a pastor who is concerned about your church's culture, what do you believe the next right step will be for you to get back to a healthy Biblical model?

- F. He closes the chapter by challenging us to *Trust Jesus More Than Appearances*. Zack suggests three values we will have to adopt and then shifts to two reminders that it won't be easy. The values are courage, patience, and grace. The courage to set aside concerns about how others view us or maybe even place our jobs on the line. Patience because the level of change needed doesn't happen overnight. Grace will be required because without Godly wisdom and love it cannot be done.

First, he reminds us that "people criticized, resisted, overlooked, and left Jesus...Doing what will mend others in the gospel will rile and outrage some." And then he reminds us that a crowd reduces for two primary reasons: 1) the manner, ways, and values of Jesus are absent in the life of the leader, or 2) living and teaching the values of Jesus have confronted and confounded the allure of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Q: Describe a time in ministry when you experienced decline. Was it caused by one of the two "primary" reasons he mentions above? There are other reasons for decline, and the most obvious one is a decline in population.

Part II: The Temptations We Face—Chapter 5: Everywhere for All

- A. The quotation for this chapter is from Wendell Berry: "There is a day, when the road neither comes nor goes, and the way is not a way but a place." A one sentence summary of the chapter that speaks to my life experiences would be "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." In the opening section, *Searching for Roots*, Zack admits that his energy and ambition made it hard for him to focus on one thing and one place. The next section gets to the heart, *Advancing by Limitation*. I would describe it as trying to live out Paul's "all things to all men" statement in a way that Paul did not intend. Zack points out, "If we want to use our gifts we are required to take a step. But in whatever direction we place our foot, we necessarily leave every other direction empty for the footsteps of another."

He uses his own calling as a pastor-teacher to illustrate his point. "I may be apostolic, but I'm not an apostle. I'm prophetic, perhaps, but not a prophet. I'm evangelistic but not an evangelist. My vocation, therefore, is not itinerant and mobile like these other three." He asks us what I'm confident he has asked himself hundreds of times:

Q: What will it mean to let go of an itinerant life?

Q: What will it mean to our lives to have a vocation as a pastor of learning how to return to one church and one place? Especially if we have a heart to see the world, and we live in a time of affluence where seeing the world is actually possible.

B. In a section called *Learning the Names of Trees*, Zack uses a personal experience to reflect on Jesus' first thirty years of life as a carpenter's son and then as a carpenter. Jesus grew up in such an insignificant place that Nathaniel asked "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) It was a place where Jesus learned the names and usefulness of trees. Zack noted that for thirty years "Jesus had a world to save, injustice to confront, lepers to touch." And then he asks:

Q: "Isn't greatness for God squandered by years of obscurity?" To what extent do you believe your current ministry context is squandering your abilities?

Q: "What business does a savior have learning the names of trees?" Do you struggle to relate to the day-to-day lives and vocations of those to whom God has called you to ministry?

C. In a section he calls *Climbing Mountains*, Zack contrasts his white-collar aspirations with the blue-collar world of a pastor. As he does, he uses the illustration of George Mallory the mountain climber versus George Mallory the husband, father, and schoolmaster. "When Mallory was once asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, he famously answered, 'Because it is there.'" In case you aren't familiar with Mallory's story, he and his climbing partner Andrew Irvine left their base camp to summit Everest on June 4, 1924. They never returned. For 75 years, Mallory and Irvine's families wondered if they were the first to summit Everest. On May 1, 1999, climbers working on the BBC's "Mallory and Irvine research Expedition" discovered the body of Mallory. From that discovery, they presume that Mallory and Irvine made the summit but fell during their descent. Irvine's body has yet to be found. But beyond wondering if their loved ones had made the summit, family members had to wonder what it would have been like if they had never tried to be the first to summit Everest.

He continues his flow of thought in the following section, *Learning How to Return*, where he uses the story of the Bethlehem shepherds whose lives were forever changed by angels infiltrating the skies right before their eyes. They were told, "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." They immediately left their flock and sought out the new born baby. Zack wonders how anticlimactic it had to have been when they found the baby:

- No stately form that we should know Him.
- There was no halo on His head.
- No trumpets blowing.
- No majestic fanfare, and
- He was born where animals are fed.

And what made matters worse is they simply returned to their role as shepherds. He continues to reflect on the shepherd's experience in the section titled *Same Old, Same Old*. Zack ponders, "Why didn't the shepherds go on the road?" After all, isn't greatness "too worthy a thing to demean by returning to the ordinary of life!" He concludes, "God seems to seriously imply that seeing God's glory, hearing His voice, receiving His good news, and beholding His love was never meant to deliver us from ordinary life and love in a place—it was meant instead to provide the means to preserve us there."

"For the shepherds 'to return' expresses the wisdom of God. We return to the same old, same old, but we are changed and empowered to dwell there relishing what we've witnessed of His grace."

Activity: Describe at least three different times in the past few months when God has permitted you to see His redemptive power at work in the life of someone to whom you have been ministering.

Q: If you kept doing the same old, same old, how many other lives could you see God begin to transform through your humble, faithful service in His name in the next few months?

D. He then contrasts the "returning" of the shepherds with what the Jewish exiles in Babylon were asked to do in Jeremiah 29: *Going Somewhere by Staying Put*. We love to quote Jeremiah 29:11, but we would chafe at living in a similar context. God told the exiles, "I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." The "you" would be their children and grand-children as Jeremiah had earlier shared that they would experience 70 years of captivity (25:11-12 & 29:10).

Although the exiles desired to return to Jerusalem, God promised to be with them where they were. Zack notes, "This means that God will be with them to sustain them and to teach them what it means to walk with Him amid obstacles they'd rather not contend with." He lists several obstacles that sound a lot like ones we face every day.

- Limits
- Ambitions
- Frustrations
- Emotions
- Critical spirit
- Sufferings
- Time and measurements of progress

While faced with these and other challenges, God told them in Jeremiah 29:5-7 to:

Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.

Q: If God has called you to “go somewhere and stay put,” what additional challenges have you encountered?

Q: What are specific things you are doing to live out the words of Jeremiah 29:5-7?

E. He uses a series of probing questions in the section entitled *Exulting in Monotony* to answer his opening question: “How do we return day-by-day to congregations and situations we feel restless to leave?”

Q: How do I return to forgive, or to endure narratives about me among some, when returning to this community is to hurt?

Q: How do I return into boredom when there are things about this place that bore me?

Q: How do I return to what I cannot fix when I am overwhelmed by the thoughts, emotions, and histories that are here?

Q: How do I overcome my own hurts, boredom, and inabilities so I can see beauty, hope, redemption, and purpose in this place?

Part II: The Temptations We Face—Chapter 6: Fix It All

A. The opening quotation reads, “I have seen a man on the bank of the river buried up to his knees in mud, and some men came to give him a hand to help him out, but they pushed him further in up to his neck” (Benedict Ward). The chapter then points to the reality that the way we attempt “to fix things” often times makes things worse.

He describes a heart-wrenching experience where he and two other elders were called to search for a little girl “who had run away again.” They found Lori “on the front porch, curled up in a ball, barefoot and in pajamas, leaning fetal into the aluminum screen door” of her own home. Zack noted that her father’s “tough love” strategy had locked her “out in her tears, and there we stood in ours.” Reflecting back on that experience, he writes, “I scratch and claw to be omnipotent on the porch I try to use strategies other than the gospel to fix all the broken things. All of us do.” In the heart of the chapter, he describes five often used strategies.

Q: Describe one of the most difficult pastoral challenges you have faced. What were things you said or did in an attempt to provide comfort or to resolve the problem?

Q: How effective were your best efforts?

B. He mentions the following strategies that we tend to use that are rarely helpful:

1. *Multipling Words*: Like Job's "friends" we too can add to the pain of another through our avalanche of words as well as our flurry of texts, e-mails, letters, and phone calls. In this section, he adds the story of a ministry coordinator whose multitude of words were ineffective when her husband announced to her that he was not a Christian anymore, their marriage was over, and he never loved her. He said this in the midst of her avalanche of words as he walked out of the house.
2. *Throwing Bible Words About*: This happens when we believe that another is choosing a course of action because he or she simply isn't clear on what is right. No one was more plain, true, reasonable, and clear than Jesus as He taught right and wrong—but they still crucified Him.
3. *Raising Our Voices and Pointing Our Finger*: We tend to talk louder to blind people and to internationals who speak a different language believing that by doing so it will help them hear us better. Instead of saying something in a different way or sharing from a different perspective, we just keep repeating the same thing over and over getting louder with each repetition.
4. *Using Fear and Intimidation*: This is when we begin to yell, threaten, verbally or physically cajole, or when all else fails we revert to the opposite: the silent-treatment. But if "gospel healing" is our goal, then this tactic will always make things worse.
5. *Being Defensive*: He identifies two forms of defensiveness. One comes with tears, pleadings, and strong statements: emotional blasts. Another is our calm record keeping to provide proof, when we need it, that we did the right thing or that you did the wrong thing.

Q: Most of us have used these strategies in the past. Which one is your "go-to?"

Q: Think of a time when you used "your go-to," and it actually worked. As you think about it, was it the rare exception?

C. In a section he calls *The Inconsolable Things* he mentions four general areas in which we will never be able to fix things. By using the word "inconsolable," Zack puts the emphasis on the emotional aspect of each of these areas. Describing them from an intellectual perspective we could say the areas identify things that are "irreconcilable." God created us with both mind and emotion, so almost every area of life can be described from two perspectives. There are also many truths in the Bible that fall into a paradoxical tension, and we are forced to accept as true two concepts that in our rational minds cannot both be true at the same time. His four areas include one or both of these realities:

1. *There are many things we cannot do*. Jesus said there were things that we "cannot" do. We cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). There are times when we cannot bear or are not spiritually ready to hear the truth (John 16:12). The branch cannot bear fruit of itself (John 15:4). We

cannot make one hair white or black (Matt. 5:36). However, Jesus also said, if we had the faith of a mustard seed we could move a mountain and “nothing will be impossible” (Matt. 17:20). Jesus seems to say that in many areas of life “we cannot,” but “God can” and our faith in Him can make a difference. A paradox we all have to acknowledge exists.

2. *We have no power to provide the increase.* If true fruit is to be produced, we have to admit that there is nothing we can do in ministry that does not require God to act (John 15:5). Some can plant, others can water, but only God can give the increase (I Cor. 3:6-7). The old cliché applies here (again a paradox), we must work as if everything depends on us and pray knowing that everything depends on God.
3. *We cannot grant the peace that passes all understanding the way people often want us to provide.* He first refers to John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” And then he illustrates this reality by describing a long-time ministry encounter with a Purple Heart recipient who he met in a retirement home. The man struggled to receive God’s forgiveness for all the things he had done.
4. *We cannot do everything that needs to be done.* We are not omnipotent nor can we be omnipresent. We have to learn that only Jesus can fix everything and that there are some things Jesus leaves unfixed for His glory.

Q: Which of these realities causes you the greatest angst? Why does it bother you so much?

Activity: Make a list of verses that speak directly to the one that bothers you the most. Keep the list with your daily devotional material and review it from time-to-time as a reminder.

- D. In a section called *Our Winsome Harming Zack* points out that we often join a long line of “winsome harmers.” He mentions Job’s friends, the shepherds described in Ezekiel 33, the elder brother in Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son, the religious leaders in Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day that He constantly criticized.

He goes on to mention “heroes of the faith” whose lives were not always what they should have been. He mentions Noah’s drunken debacle but also his courage and faith; Abraham’s faith that encountered selfish fear; Moses murdered, shrank back, and became ill tempered as he also believed and courageously led; David was called a man after God’s own heart but he also committed murder and adultery; Jonah raised his fists at grace; James and John wanted to call down fire to consume those who disregarded Jesus; Paul was a great missionary to the Gentiles but his background was that of persecuting believers; and Peter’s impetuous personality created constant emotional swings.

Q: Describe times when your good intentions turned into tragedy.

Q: What have you learned from those experiences?

- E. In the closing section, Zack returns to the story he used to open the chapter: the runaway girl, Lori, who they found on the front porch of her home. He tells us that he had recently received a letter from one of the elders who had stood with him on that porch those many years ago. As he described the letter's contents he wrote, "I learned that Lori's life had healing in it. What [the elder] described regarding the grace that found her and holds her still, amazed me into tears." He closes the chapter by writing, "As I think back to that porch all I know for sure is this: the match wasn't ours to win. It was His. And He did."

Q: We tend to focus on the negative, the times we didn't see God change a life. Describe a few times when you saw God's grace and it "amazed you into tears."

Part II: The Temptations We Face—Chapter 7: Know It All

- A. He begins this chapter with a quote from Augustine: "Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."

And then Zack quickly shares a situation where an individual's knowledge hadn't helped him love his neighbor. Zack introduced Eric to an elder who had stopped by the church midweek, and said, "Meet Eric, a new Christian. We are meeting for the first time today. I just gave Eric his first Bible." The elder shook the new convert's hand and said hello, and then the elder asked Eric, "What is your opinion of Westminster Larger Catechism Question 109?"

After noting that the Serpent's temptation still whispers to us: 'You will be like God, *knowing...*,'" he closes by reminding us we "were never meant to repent because we didn't know it all. We are to repent because we've tried."

Q: How well do you think you balance "knowing" and "caring?"

Q: Are you willing to ask someone who knows you well, how you balance the two?

- B. In the balance of the chapter, Zack describes various areas in which our knowledge can create problems for us. As I read the opening section he labels *Apprentices*, I thought of a cliché I heard as I was growing up: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." Zack describes this reality well as he shares several snippets including a quote, scripture, and personal example of the negative things that can happen with knowledge gained by the spiritually immature. I'm sure we could all add some

personal examples of young, enthusiastic but immature Christian leaders who made things harder on themselves and others.

He closes the section with a great illustration. “A flashlight shone directly into someone’s eyes makes seeing harder, not easier. A flashlight misused can actually rob us of the light it is meant to provide.”

Q: Think back to a time that someone shared a Biblical “insight” with you in such an arrogant manner that it insulted or even repulsed you. Did the “brightness of his bulb” keep you from hearing?

Q: When have you shone the flashlight of truth into someone’s eyes only to realize, after the fact, that your words or actions had only blinded them to the truth?

C. The next section, *Puffing Up*, describes what happens when our minds are so full of Bible knowledge that we are filled with pride. The childhood cliché I just mentioned is actually part of a longer quote from Albert Einstein: “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. So is a lot. Strange is our situation here upon earth.” As the first section addressed the reality that in our early Christian development we can become “puffed up” by knowing even a few things that others don’t know. This section addresses the reality that we live out another cliché I heard as an adult: “We can become so heavenly minded, that we are of no earthly good.” In our pursuit of knowing, Zack writes, “Our zeal for theological controversy, debate, and discussion to demonstrate our superior intellect or persuasive ability over others puffs us up too (I Tim. 3:6).”

But lest we incorrectly point a finger at our Bible Colleges and seminaries as the root of the problem, let me point out that most of our theological schools require a recommendation from a local church. The reality is that knowledge (information based discipleship) separated from practical life application (information that informs and anticipates life transformation based discipleship) will always lead to problems. Zack points out this problem as he talks us through Luke 11:37-52 throwing in John 5:39 on the way. He notes, “When Jesus gives His ‘Woe!’ to those who misuse the key of knowledge, Jesus highlights the signs we exhibit when knowledge has gone wrong.”

- Our Bible knowledge leaves us illiterate in terms of the interior workings of our souls (Luke 11:37-40).
- The schooling we gain leaves us ignorant of actual love for God (Luke 11:42-44).
- For all our scholarship and erudition we remain unpracticed with neighbor love, humility, wisdom, and the deeds that truly honor God (Luke 11:45-51).
- Jesus tells Bible handlers elsewhere that they know the Bible but not the One to whom the Bible points (John 5:39).

- If we misuse our knowledge, we can actually hinder others from hearing the good news. “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering” (Luke 11:52).

Q: Are you honest enough with yourself to admit that this has been true of you too? Describe the impact of your being “puffed up” with knowledge.

Q: If you have been in ministry for a few years, describe a time when you caught yourself becoming “puffed up.”

Q: Do you have an accountability partner who is willing to tell you when you have become “puffed up?”

D. The third area in which knowledge can trip us up he calls *Knowing in Sorts*. He begins with a cute illustration of trying to explain the crescent moon to his young son Caleb; who having looked out the car window expecting to see a full moon declared, “Broke Daddy!”

He suggests that we too can use our limited child-like knowledge, and declare “Broke Daddy,” as we minister to the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity. Here Zack uses the story of Jesus dining at Simon the Pharisee’s house when a “sinful woman” began to anoint Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36-50). Instead of seeing a broken woman at the point of repentance, Simon saw a seductive woman that should be shunned (Proverbs 7:7-21). Zack summarizes the situation by stating, “This woman is seeking forgiveness right in front of Simon, and he cannot see it. Either he does not have a robust way of sorting out forgiveness [limited theological knowledge on the doctrine of grace] or he does, but is blind to his inability to put it into practice.”

Q: As Paul described it, “We all see through a glass darkly” (I Cor. 13:12). Can you describe a time when your Bible knowledge created a Simon like experience for you? A time when your zeal for righteousness was not matched by the brokenness of your heart for an individual struggling to deal with their sin.

E. The next section is titled *The Purpose of Knowing*, he returns to the Augustine quote that opened the chapter: “Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.” If the increase of our knowledge doesn’t yield an increase in our love for God and our neighbor, then it has no value. Zack shares three questions that he asks himself as he reflects on a Biblical passage to guard his heart against this human tendency.

- What is it about God in this passage that calls for my love for Him?
- What does this passage show me about people and about what love requires of me on their behalf?

- What about the love of God in Jesus gives me hope and provision for my own lack of love?

Q: Do you have a similar set of questions you ask yourself as you read scripture?

Q: If not, what would be the value of developing and using some of your own?

F. In the section labeled *Gracious Time and Time and More Time Again*, he describes Jesus' patience with Peter. Then he asks the following questions:

- How do you handle it when other people get things wrong?
- Does anyone you serve have room to make a mistake?
- What does it mean that as a pastor, you too need the time and time and time again of Jesus' grace?

G. He begins to make application of how little grace we have available for those who make mistakes in the next section: *Impatient Knowledge*. He points out how well Aquila and Priscilla handled the incomplete knowledge of Apollos in Acts 18:24-28. Then he points to how evangelical Christians of today criticize one another for writing or saying something that is viewed as incorrect or inching towards heretical. He closes the section by admitting, "I carried the subtle idea around with me that growing in knowledge will mean that I get to demand less and control more. But Jesus indicates the opposite. The humble know the most and knows it not."

Q: As you read the thoughts of others, do you focus on gleaning new insights about God and humanity or on making sure that the author has perfectly understood and stated Biblical truths exactly like you would have done it?

H. He literally brings his thoughts home in the section titled *The Know-It-All Pastor at Home*. He notes, "Gradually a young seminary student suspects his wife's immaturity because she does not know or act in a certain theological way, even though he himself had never heard of this way until that afternoon in class. A pastor impatiently demands his children to know, believe, and do what it took him twenty-five or forty-five years with Jesus to know, believe, and do. How is it that his own life or mistake making has hardened rather than softened his compassion, when he himself has needed so much grace?"

Q: Have you ever paused to ask your wife if your Bible knowledge is beginning to negatively impact your marriage and family?

I. He concludes the chapter by stating, "*Partial Knowledge* is the name of the street on which each of us must have an address and build our lives (I Cor. 13:12). Therefore, start each day with this admission: regarding every person, bit of creation, and circumstance that I encounter today, I must say God, 'I am in the dark,' and, 'I've been mentored to distort what sits before my eyes.' I must

remember that when I enter the pulpit, stand by a hospital bed, take a walk, or sit in my chair to counsel another, I physically see people and things always as one at dusk.” He then encourages us to pray as Jehoshaphat prayed, “We do not know what to do [Lord], but our eyes are on You” (II Chron. 20:12).

Q: To what extent can “growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52) be negatively impacted by our over emphasis on attaining knowledge?

Part II: The Temptations We Face—Chapter 8: Immediacy

A. In the final chapter of the section on *The Temptations We Face*, Zack again gets very personal as he shares his own pilgrimage. Having discussed our need to be everywhere for everyone, to fix everything for everyone, and to know it all and have all the answers for every situation, he now addresses the challenge of living in a culture that demands that it be done “now!” He begins by quoting Eugene Peterson in a sentence that gets at the heart of what he says in the chapter: “I think the besetting sin of pastors, maybe especially evangelical pastors, is impatience.”

He then shares two realities and a portion of a phone call with a frustrated pastor. First, he reminds us that 80% of new church starts don’t survive past the tenth year. Then he notes, “Eight out of ten pastors spoke once of dreams, God’s work, and difference-making in our generation. But soon after, many returned home bandaged among the wounded.” He then points out that, “Conversely, a few churches not only start well but they grow numerically and fast. After a little while the leadership is exhausted, and the structures that haste required aren’t suitable for caring for people over the long haul. Restructuring and repositioning have to take place or else the burned-out leaders and volunteers of the church will collapse.”

Speaking to an exhausted friend who was showing signs of wear in the third year of a church plant Zack heard, “I can slow down later. If I slow down now, what will happen to the ministry?” Zack’s question to him was, “But if you don’t slow down now, what will happen to the ministry?”

Q: In the daily grind and hectic pace of ministry, when was the last time you stopped to ponder Zack’s question, “But if you don’t slow down now, what will happen to the ministry?”

Q: To that question I would add, “But if you don’t slow down now, what will happen to you, your marriage, and your family?”

B. Over the course of the chapter he describes the early days in his current church and some of the challenges they faced: he was called to serve bi-vocationally to a church whose previous lead pastor was full-time, the church faced the headwinds of the 2009-2010 recession, it had experienced a devastating split prior to his arrival, he was the fourth lead pastor for the church in the past six years,

and he was a single parent of three children (remember earlier he talked about his wife's decision to no longer be a pastor's wife). With that context, he could have written a whole book on the topic of the opening section: *Why People Leave*. He closes the section with a simple prayer they offered up, "Lord, please teach us to follow You into what it looks like to recover this sinking ship."

Q: Have you ever been part of a church that was experiencing multiple challenges? Describe the situation and how leaders handled it.

Q: What do you see as the biggest challenge your church is currently facing?

C. He returns to an expanded version of the Eugene Peterson quote as he opens the section titled *The Attraction of Haste*.

I think the besetting sin of pastors, maybe especially evangelical pastors, is impatience. We have a goal. We have a mission. We're going to save the world. We're going to evangelize everybody, and we're going to do all this good stuff and fill our churches. This is wonderful. All the goals are right. But this is slow, slow work, this soul work, ...and we get impatient and start taking shortcuts.

In this section he suggests five issues that drive us to do things in a hurry.

1. *Haste is part of the air we breathe*. Our culture is always in a hurry. Slow to some of us equals waste or disrespect.
2. *Our particular church's past*. I summarized it above.
3. *We were not far from the "successful" church in town*. "As we measured ourselves by the church down the road we were tempted to believe that we had fallen behind. We started to speed up, measuring ourselves by their calling rather than ours."
4. *Zack was considered to be "the real deal"*. As a "touted leader" the church expected immediate results.
5. *Our heart for the gospel exceeded our skills with the gospel*. He describes the situation as parallel to an overseas missionary who, one year in, wonders what they were ever thinking.

Activity: List some of the things in your current ministry setting that push you to be in a hurry.

D. The section *Our Marathon Need* begins with Hebrews 12:1's admonition, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." He then uses the illustration of a marathon runner "hitting the wall" between the twentieth and twenty-third mile of a run. Instead of stopping, the runner has been trained to anticipate and run through it. Zack points out that "In contrast, when pastors hit walls in their first three years or at year [seven], fourteen or twenty, they wonder if they are called into ministry at all, as if something unique and unexpected is happening to them... What if instead, we

learned to name the walls ahead of time and to talk about the pace required not only to face them but to endure them.”

Q: Before going into ministry, did anyone talk to you about the reality that there would be times when you would “hit the wall?” My experience of mentoring young pastors and planters would indicate that even if you were told, that knowledge didn’t completely prepare you for what happened when you hit the wall. That’s why he wrote the section *We Will Have to Help Each Other*—it’s coming up.

E. The *Patience as a Pastoral Virtue* section opens by quoting an old Christian saying: “Pray for anything except patience.” He points to Paul’s very helpful advice at this point (emphasis added): We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, *be patient with them all*. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone (I Thess. 5:14-15).

He notes, “Whether a person is idle, fainthearted, or in need of help, whether you are admonishing someone or encouraging them, be certain of this; Be patient with them all.”

He then points to some more advice from Paul (emphasis added):

The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, *patiently enduring evil*, correcting his opponents with gentleness (II Tim. 2:24-25).

Before providing the example of an e-mail he received and a description of how it felt like a punch in the gut, Zack writes: “Resisting the illusory desire for immediate defense, immediate remedy, and immediate relief is not easy pastorally.” He again points to the words from Paul (emphasis added):

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, *with complete patience* and teaching (II Tim. 4:2).

And as if Paul’s words were not sufficient for us, he adds a word of exhortation from Jesus:

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and *bear fruit with patience*. (Luke 8:15)

It would appear that if we are going to be fruitful for the Kingdom, then we are going to have to be patient as God shapes us, and then patient AGAIN as He uses us as an instrument in His hands while He slowly shapes others.

Q: What part of “ministry will require patience” is still unclear to you?

Q: How much easier is it for you to accept the intellectual knowledge that patience is required of a pastor than it is to accept the daily fact that you have to actually be patient?

F. The section I alluded to earlier has arrived: *We Will Have to Help Each Other*. One would think that this section wouldn’t be necessary—we all know we can’t do it alone! However, if my years of

mentoring pastors and planters is normal, the vast majority of pastors are trying to do too many things by themselves. He gives two great examples. One, is when a leader graciously and kindly used Nathan's example to tell King David a hard truth. The leader used a simple but clear analogy to help him realize that Zack's own sense of desperation and maybe even depression was negatively impacting his preaching style. The other, is when he shared with the elders his own struggles and sense of "constant vulnerability as a single dad" and then later as he dated and remarried as a pastor in the public eye. Throughout those seasons, his elders kept repeating, "We are with you." He closes the section with two statements: "Patience says to your empty hands, 'God is here.' Patience looks the worst in the face and says, 'God will not leave you.'"

Q: Who is helping you? Yes, God will be at the top of the list, but He can't be the only one on your list.

Q: How geographically close are you to the people on your list? If you don't have some you see face-to-face on a regular basis, get after it and add some to your list—and get started today!

G. I love the conversation he uses to close the chapter. He was having coffee with a local pastor friend who happened to be a New Zealander—he called him a Kiwi. As Zack "began to pile on the self-pity" he "connected dot after dot of discouraging themes." Zack noted that "My Kiwi friend simply listened kindly and quietly as I spiraled down into self-absorption, pain, and complaint." After listening for quite some time his friend asked, "Zack, you know your belief in doing small things slowly over a long while?" Zack nodded, "Yes." Then his friend paused before commenting, "That's going to take some time." After a long pause, Zack began to grin. The truth of his friend's words began to sink in. They both had a good laugh.

The chapter closes with these words. "Patience requires patience. Going a long distance takes more time than speed. Sometimes we need an ordinary friend in an overlooked moment of unanswered hurries to remind us."

Activity: Describe a time when someone lovingly repeated what you said in a way that forced you to stop long enough to think about what you were saying. Too often our "aha moments" don't arrive because we don't stop long enough for someone to respond, or we don't have a friend who loves us enough to tell us the truth or isn't wise enough to respond in a way that we will be able to hear ourselves and laugh.

Part III: Reshaping Our Inner Life—Chapter 9: A New Ambition

A. Having defined some of the issues we face, Zack now turns to suggest ways we should respond. He begins by dealing with the reality that "Every man has a man within him who must die"—Christian Wiman. And opens this chapter with a section he simply calls *Detox*. He states, "When Jesus begins

to rescue us from trying to fit it all, know it all, be everywhere for all as fast and as famously as possible, we find ourselves in a hard spot. We often enter what old-timers called ‘the dark night of the soul.’” He then describes what our efforts look like. He includes the following summary statements: Our dark and growing need to be needed has become more apparent to others than it is to ourselves. We have lost the ability to stay silent while others express their thoughts. We become so used to responding in times of crisis, we don’t know what to do in a time of peace, because we are little acquainted with peace and quiet. The section closes with the challenge that “We first have to return to a God-centered life.”

Q: To what extent do you need to enter a Pastoral Detox Program?

Q: In which area do you struggle the most: to know it all, be it all, be in all places, or do it NOW?

Q: What does God’s word say about that struggle?

- B. The section *Interrupting God* begins with the cute story of the knock-knock joke about the interrupting cow that’s always saying “moo” at the wrong time. He provides a quote from Calvin to point out how often we become interrupting cows: “We do not calmly hear God speaking to us, when we seem to ourselves be very wise, but by our haste interrupt Him when addressing us....And doubtless, no one can be a true disciple of God, except he hears Him in silence.”

He provides a statement that I have used many times, “For many of us, it has been a long while since we’ve heard God in the quiet, knowing that it was His voice and not ours.” It is refreshing to hear that sentiment from others, and in particular to read it on a day when God exhorted me in my daily Bible reading. We were in Exodus 3, and the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses saw the burning bush and it peaked his curiosity, but it wasn’t until he turned aside that God spoke to him. “So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’” I was reminded that God is daily working in my midst, but my haste and my agenda can keep me from turning aside and hearing a fresh word or a needed reminder from Him.

Q: When was the last time you heard God in the quiet and knew that it was His voice and not yours?

- C. In the next section, he emphasizes the reality that the world of the pastor is more than preaching; it also involves listening: *Silences, Not Just Sentences*. He shares, “When I first began pastoral work, the formative texts were ‘Preach the word’ (II Tim. 4:2) and ‘Do the work of an evangelist’ (II Tim. 4:5)....Along the way, a wisdom text has joined these [verses] to inform my daily pastoral work. ‘Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger’ (James 1:19).” He elaborates on the implications of adding this verse: “To be quick to listen means that we do not say the first thing or everything we think (slow to speak), even if we are right, even if

we are preachers or evangelists. Nor do we give immediate voice or vent even to the strongest emotions that pulsate within our chests (slow to anger), no matter how strongly we feel them.”

He continues by pointing out that “Jesus possesses such wisdom. He leads us into an apprenticeship of secondary speaking. We speak as those who have first listened. Ours is not the first word on the scene.” He then quotes John 12:49-50.

For I have not spoken on My own authority, but the Father who sent Me has Himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak...What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told Me.

To further emphasize his point he quotes Bonhoeffer, “‘Silence means nothing other than waiting for God’s Word.’ We are silent early in the morning because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to bed because the last word also belongs to God.” And then Zack closes by stating, “Wise pastors are listening preachers.”

Q: Think back through the last several one-on-one conversations you have had. Who did most of the talking? Did you walk away knowing more about them and what they were thinking than they did from you?

D. In a fairly long section entitled *Ambition for the Quiet* he elaborates on quotes from two familiar authors. He begins with Matthew Henry’s words, “We must study to be quiet...The most of men are ambitious of the honor of great business, and power, and preferment; they covet it, they court it, they compass sea and land to obtain it; but the ambition of a Christian should be carried out towards quietness.”

He then points to words of wisdom from Charles Spurgeon. “Quietude, some men cannot abide, because it reveals their inner poverty.” Take away the crutches we use to hold up our fix-it, know-it, and be-everywhere personas, and the broken legs of our intimacy with God buckle. “Priceless as the gift of utterance may be, the practice of silence in some aspects far excels it.” Spurgeon continues, “I am persuaded that most of us think too much of speech, which after all is but the shell of thought. Quiet contemplation, still worship, unuttered rapture...rob not your heart of the deep sea joys; miss not the far-down life, by forever babbling among the broken shells and foaming surges of the shore.”

In case Matthew Henry and Charles Spurgeon hadn’t gotten our attention, he then states, “We have held on to fixing, knowing, and being everywhere as fast and as famous as we can, like a toddler who can’t go a day without his blankie.”

Q: How often are you able to find at least an hour of quiet time?

Q: Where is your favorite quiet place?

E. In the section *A Pastor's Provocations*, he gives “three pieces of good advice” as we work through our own detox. First, he quotes John Calvin to suggest that “the boundaries of your calling reveal God’s pastoral care for you.” Calvin wrote, “Each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.” Our human tendency—and pastors are no less prone to it than others—is to want to be someone else. And sometimes it’s anyone else, but who God wants us to be. I mentioned Moses’ calling earlier, and it was definitely true for him. In fact, Moses pleaded with God and said, “O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send” (Exodus 4:13).

He quotes John Cassian to address the second piece of advice: “in trying so hard not to miss out, you actually create the thing you fear.” Cassian wrote, “Anything another minister does well becomes an occasion, not for our gratitude to God for the sake of the other minister and the cause of the gospel in our generation, but a reason for us to wring our hands and pressure ourselves because now we too must equal or better what that other minister can do. If we can’t do what everyone else can do all the time, we believe that somehow we are poor ministers. When you try to hold on to gifts that God did not give you, you lose quiet and increase your ‘spiritual turmoil’ as you restlessly desire ‘to take up pursuits different from’ your own. But this disquiet is ‘deadly danger.’ After all, ‘it sometimes happens that what some do quite rightly others mistakenly imitate.’”

The third piece of advice is “smaller is always better than larger unless, and only if, God extrudes us.” He points out that “We lose rest of soul when we believe that bigger is better. The Serpent tempts all of us to believe that some places matter more than others, that some people matter more than others, and that our strategies and gifts rather than God’s wise calling are our answer.”

Q: Which of these three “words of advice” do you need most today—and why?

F. He takes us to Ecclesiastes 9:13-18 to suggest that most of us will be *Forgotten Deliverers*. “There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it, besieged it, and built great snares around it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man” (v 13-15). Zack writes, “But notice what God says about this poor wise man and his overlooked life of victories: ‘The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools’ (v 17).”

He suggests that, “We are mistakenly prone to follow the great ruler in this wisdom story rather than the poor wise man. . . . There is nothing [the poor wise man] can offer us in the world but his testimony of God, the integrity of his way, and the grace in his life. These two differing ways of being, represent two contrasting powers for our trust—the power of [the great ruler] folly versus the power of wisdom found in the humbled presence of the poor man. So, then, is the power of God.”

Q: Who do you prefer to “hang around,” poor wise men or powerful people of influence? Why?

- G. The section titled *Solitude, Hospitable Presence, Wisdom* serves as a summary to his thoughts in this chapter. Regarding solitude he writes, “When we constantly interrupt what God is saying to our hearts, we interrupt solitude.”

Related to Hospitable Presence he writes, “When we constantly interrupt what God is saying to those around us, we interrupt hospitality.” Here he provides an interesting definition for hospitality. It is when we welcome “other human beings just as they are, even when they believe or say, look or smell, other than we want them to. Hospitality graciously transitions us from consuming people to welcoming them without fixing, knowing, and being for them what only God can.”

Related to wisdom, he notes, “When we constantly interrupt God’s timing in the circumstances that we and others face, we interrupt wisdom.”

He closes the short section with a series of zingers. “In all our attempts to do for God without waiting for Him, we’ve lost our quiet heart, our capacity for treating neighbors with hospitable room rather than using them for platform or strategic plan, and we lose our ability to wait with discernment for God’s timing and ways, we’ve grown reactive, consuming others, and hasty and all of this for God. This means that we are likely to mentor others into these qualities as well.”

Q: With humility, read the last paragraph again, but before you do, ask God to show you which “zinger” you need to address today. Which did He say you need to own, confess, and begin to change?

- H. The closing section is very brief, but it carries a word of encouragement by reminding us we are *With Jesus, Alone with the Father*. Zack writes, “Here in the detox, remember your Savior. He knows what it is to be overlooked, emptied, even painfully alone. But He tells us that He is not alone. Even in the desolate place the Father keeps company with Him.” Jesus told His disciples, “Indeed the hour is coming, yes has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (John 16:32). Zack concludes by reminding us, “In the quiet God is heard and the mending begins.”

Q: To what extent can you in this moment of your life and ministry confidently declare, “God, I hear You, and I am willing to stay in detox as long as it takes?”

Part III: Reshaping Our Inner Life—Chapter 10: Beholding God

- A. In this chapter, Zack challenges us at a number of points that hit the very core of our purpose, and if you agree with him, it will profoundly impact the way you relate to God and others. In the opening

section *A Different Purpose*, he describes what too often has become our purpose: “to do large things, famously, as fast as possible so that everyone is mobilized to do great things by fixing everything, knowing it all, and being everywhere for God.” He then suggests that when this becomes our purpose, we are at odds with the goal of studying quiet and becoming a listening preacher among the things that really matter. Here he quotes one of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant passages: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning He awakens; He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught” (50:4). He then elaborates on the passage, “God teaches us in solitude to talk to others as those who have been taught. We talk as those who are listening for God daily. But why does this suffering servant awaken and listen in morning rhythm to God’s initiative? He tells us plainly: ‘That I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.’” As he closes the section he states, “This purpose sounds too small. It is like saying that I want to be a pastor because my great ambition in life is to learn how to help an ordinary person in his or her struggle to locate God....when did it happen that a life purposed to help ordinary people in their ordinary struggles locate God became too small a thing?”

Q: As one who is taught through quiet morning by morning connections with God, how do you respond to Zack’s suggestion that your purpose is “to sustain with a word him who is weary?”

Q: Is that a sufficient enough purpose to occupy your life?

- B. In a short section called *A Different Way to Learn*, he makes his point by using “an ancient story,” and Philip’s confused remark to Jesus’ statement, “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him” (John 14:7). Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.” Jesus responded by stating, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:8-9).

Reflecting on the exchange Zack writes, “It is almost as if Jesus says in response: ‘What other of my words, works, and ways would you need for your learning that I have not already offered you by giving you intimate access to my daily life?’” He closes the section by simply stating, “Listening preachers learn how to behold.” My observations are that our discipleship process is so information oriented that we have lost the concept of walking with someone to learn on a day-to-day basis what it means to know, do, AND to be Christ-like.

Q: Can you describe a relationship you have or have had in which you learned as much or more by simply observing and walking with a more mature believer?

- C. In a section labeled *Learning How to Behold Again*, he defines what he means by *behold*. “To behold is to stop everything for a moment in order to fix our complete attention upon something.

Meditatively, we linger with it so that from the quiet contemplation of it, we can discern God's relation to it and derive from Him the meaning He sees in it...Beholding leads us gradually to say by grace: Now the ears of my ears are awake. Now the eyes of my eyes are opened." His explanation reminds me of the first reality in Henry Blackaby's study *Experiencing God*: God is always at work around you.

Q: When was the last time you paused long enough to "behold" what God was doing in your midst? What did you learn about Him and about yourself?

Activity: If it has been awhile, take a few moments right now to be still and behold Him.

- D. He talks us through what it looks like to meet with someone with a heightened desire to "behold" in the section called *Beholding Changes the Way We Meet with People*. He suggests the following:
- It is Jesus who holds this meeting and all things together—we aren't going to fix things.
 - God was working in both your lives before this meeting and will be after the meeting is over.
 - Since both of the above are true, praying before, during, and after the meeting is important.
 - During the meeting, there are pauses—sometimes awkward ones when we wait and pray rather than fill the air with words.
 - There are plenty of reflective statements: "I've heard you say..."

He closes the section by stating, "As ambassador-discerners, we enter the stories of others and say, 'Slow down. Look here, listen; God is showing you who this person is.' His wise words heard in the quiet [can] deliver you both."

Q: Can you think of a time recently when you listened (beheld) well enough to peer into the soul of another person? How did that change your ability to minister to them?

- E. In the section *Beholding Changes the Way We Pray for Others*, he reminds us of the words of the early apostles as they established the office of a deacon. "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). He states that there was a time when he "thought of this pastoral work of prayer and Word mostly in their visible and public forms." He then confesses, "I didn't realize then that a pastor's vocation with prayer and Word and care is many times invisible, tucked away with Jesus in one-on-one or small-group moments hidden from the eyes of our congregation, attempting to behold God in the individual providences of an ordinary human being."

Q: Zack then describes what deep passionate and compassionate prayer looks like. When was the last time you were on your face in tears interceding for another?

Q: Are you willing to intentionally schedule times to get before God in such a manner?

F. He gets intensely personal in describing his quiet time in the section he calls *Beholding Changes the Way We Meet with God*. With an emphasis on I Peter 5:7 “casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you,” he writes, “I try to wait with no words for a moment in the presence of Him who loves me and sees me in secret.”

Q: Would you use the word “beholding” to describe your regular quiet time with God? Why or why not?

G. In a section called *Imaginary Conversations*, Zack suggests that a *beholding* attitude during our quiet time and prayers will help us minimize the conversations that can flood into our mind and distract us. He asks, “What do we do when we find ourselves constantly talking to a person in imaginary ways rather than talking directly to God about our pain?” I would also add the need to have actual conversations with those people—that is AFTER we have spent an appropriate amount of time talking to God.

Q: Is there a relationship in your life that you need to take to God for a season of clarity?

H. He then uses Jesus’ forty days of fasting, prayer, and being tempted by the devil in the wilderness as a picture of how *Beholding Changes Our Definition of a Quiet Time*. If you are like I am, beholding is hard when we are rushing into the day with a full calendar of appointments and activities. Zack writes, “We learn once again in this quiet time of the desert that we are beloved. From there we return ‘in the power of the Spirit’ to the place we’ve been given.”

Q: When was the last time you actually stepped back from the daily grind to spend a few days of quiet repose before God? Reflect on the last time you did that—how did it help you cope with the challenges of ministry?

I. In the section *Beholding Changes the Way We Go to God’s Word*, he challenges us at three specific points. First, that even if we are the most learned Bible student in our church, we need to come to the Word as a humble, simple hearted, contemplative Christian seeking insights for today. He suggests we all need to be like Mary sitting at Jesus feet rather than Martha who is seeking to meet everyone’s needs (Luke 10:39-42). Then he suggests we are all like the Ethiopian eunuch who declared, “How can I understand unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). My experience is that it is often the quiet reflective introvert who shines a new light onto an old passage. After all, they have been praying and pondering while we have been posturing and pontificating. The third is the obvious one that we too often overlook. To *behold* God’s word is to ask Him directly what He meant by it. But that means we would also have to be quiet and listen for His still small voice.

Q: Describe your devotional Bible reading pattern. Do you come to the Word with a humble seeking heart? Do you regularly take time to read the devotional thoughts of others to glean insights?

When is the last time God’s Spirit spoke to your spirit as you humbly asked God to illuminate a specific passage of scripture?

- J. In the two closing sections, he again gets deeply personal and vulnerable as he shares two stories. In the section *Beholding the Fruit of a Dream*, he describes a season of severe trials when he states, “I had collapsed into a heap of ugly prayer amid a pile of messed tissues on the living room floor. I fell asleep and dreamt.” In the dream, Psalm 138 played a significant role. When he awoke he read it and then noted, “All through that day I held this Scripture like a love letter. I cherished each word.” In the final section *Beholding God in Our Living Rooms*, he shares childhood reflections of his Mamaw; a special time he had with her just before God called her home; and reflections after the funeral as he slowly walked through the bookmarks and notes in her Bible. He closes with his reflections on all those times with his Mamaw, They were “a gift, these small, mostly overlooked moments among the mattering things. A gift, I say because God was there to be found, and He was [found].”

Q: Can you think of a time when God encouraged you through some special experience?

Q: When was the last time you paused to reflect upon simple day-to-day encounters with a parent, family member, or friend and noticed with hindsight God’s powerful presence?

Part III: Reshaping Our Inner Life—Chapter 11: Finding Our Pace

- A. In the opening quotation and closing illustration of this chapter, Zack causes us to reflect back to our *Desire* to be a pastor which was the topic of chapter one: “You asked for burdens to carry—And howled when they were placed on your shoulders. Had you fancied another sort of burden?” Dag Hammarskjold. Our burdens and pace for day-to-day life will be determined by our desire as a pastor. Are we seeking to be the famous pastor of a large church or to be an unnamed mountain seeking to serve our God? He closes the chapter with another story from Nate Foster’s book *Wisdom Chaser, Finding My Father at 14,000 Feet*—it was the source for the unnamed mountain story. Nate is the son of Richard Foster who authored the book *Celebration of Discipline*.

“Nate, I think if we move at a really slow pace we won’t have to stop as often. Here, watch.” My father moved his feet methodically, slow but steady. “Dad, you’re crazy!” I laughed. “We’ll never get there. Look how slow your walking. I could crawl faster. You look ridiculous!”

“Do what you want,” he muttered. “I’m going to walk slowly!” I brushed off my father’s wisdom and raced ahead up the mountain. After about a half hour of hiking up a steep pitch, I noticed that, with all my painful stops, he was keeping up with me. I felt exhausted. Dad didn’t stop even once, and he seemed to be gliding up the mountain.

As is often the case in life, pain made me teachable. That day it was burning lungs and shaky legs....I gave Dad's theory a try and joined his ridiculously slow march. I soon discovered that if I kept going slowly, it was easier not to stop. I couldn't believe it. There on the side of the mountain one of my lifelong quandaries was revealed. The answer was just so simple. Pace yourself. Move slowly. Don't stop.

As a man who literally does time and motion studies to make sure I'm always working as fast and efficiently as I can, this section was particularly challenging. I struggle to "take time to smell the flowers," or "to be still and to know that He is God." The childhood story of the race between the turtle and the rabbit came to my mind. God also reminded me of "the 20 Mile March" concept in Jim Collins' book *Great by Choice*. I'm sure if I took more time to reflect, God would remind me of the hundreds of other times and ways that He has sought to get my attention on the issue of finding a better pace for my life and ministry.

Q: Have your personality or desires kept you from finding a sustainable pace for your life?

Q: How has God attempted to get your attention in the past on the issue of finding a sustainable pace for your ministry life?

B. In the opening section of the chapter, *Burdened For and Burdened From*, he confesses his own anxieties and then notes, "What can surprise is that entering pastoral ministry does not un-anxiety us. The apostle Paul makes this plain: 'Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?' (II Corinthians 11:28-29)

Zack then points out, "Our pastoral work takes us into the burdens that others bear as well as our own. These burdens generally come in two forms: burdens *for* and burdens *from*." He then mentions some of them:

Burdens For:

- Our families
- Our neighbors and churches
- Our fellow ministers

Burdens From:

- Personal sin
- Limits and unanswered prayers
- Our bodies
- Our families
- Church members
- Fellow pastors
- Neighbors

He then closes the section with a great personal illustration. After preaching an impassioned message from Ephesians 4:28 entitled "Let the thief no longer steal," several people walked out into the parking lot to discover that their car had a window broken and personal items stolen. Zack reflected

that sitting in preaching class at seminary he never envisioned “the pastoral care of a listening preacher, holding a broom to clear out busted glass in the rain and with humbled presence, holding a human being in tears.” After pointing out that they found financial help to fix the burgled cars and time to care for the emotional wounds, he states, “We get to see God’s merciful action firsthand and often. But we also can wear down without help, discouraged by the ironies of constant burdens and spiritual battles.”

Q: What are some things that you are currently burdened for?

Q: What are some things that you are currently burdened from?

Activity: Take time right now to lift these burdens to God in prayer asking Him to give you the proper perspective.

- C. The heart of the chapter can best be described as a devotional reflecting on Psalms that speak to the various time segments of the day. It also includes several passages from the Gospels that mention how Jesus worked His daily schedule. The section titles and key points are as follows:
- *Moment by Moment*—Jesus told us to “not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34).
 - *The Four Portions*—picks up on the “evening and morning and at noon” time segments of Psalm 55:17 and the “night watches” of Psalm 63:6 to encourage us to slow down and reflect on the uniqueness of and opportunities within each of those daily time segments.
 - *The Grace of the Morning*—We rise; God’s love is here! We pray; God’s guidance is with us! We hope again and cry out anew; God is overcoming the darkness! We eat the daily bit we have; God has provided! We get to the work before us; God has something to show us! The dawn has come; The tomb is empty!
 - *Noonday Wisdom*—The afternoon is the time of illumination in which our intention to lean on God’s grace is sifted and the true objects of our hope take off their masks. It humbles us into a remembrance that we need His salvation. It teaches us patience and perseverance.
 - *Evening Hospitality*—The morning teaches us to sing. The afternoon teaches us to persevere. The evening teaches us to give thanks to God for the sacred boredom of mundane blessings that we can count.
 - *Solitude and the Night Watches*—Solitude, silence, listening talk, and the humble presence return to us. This is no “quiet time” in general, parsing out abstract truths. Solitude takes up with God the very real leftover emotions and questions from the day.
 - *Dreams in the Night*—He suggests our dreams come from one of three places: they can originate with us, from our enemy the Devil, or are the whisperings of God. Whatever our dreams, we take their thoughts and emotions to God.

- *Our Daily Calendars*—These four segments of each day provide portions of time large enough for our attention and small enough to manage. He then suggests that at each transition point in the day that we pause and look back before rushing forward into the next segment of time.
- *Weekly Portions*—Here he emphasizes our need to take one day in seven as a day of rest. He confesses that when he loses track of Sabbath rest, “I am irritable and worn out for their lack in my life. I’ve noticed that one day of rest won’t provide much rest at all. A sort of detox need returns.” He states, “We strategically rest in order to vigorously keep going. If we don’t, we wind up taking unplanned breaks because we are sick or burned out from overworked schedules.”

Q: What is your most productive time of day? Do you prioritize your work load to make sure you’re attending to the most important items on your agenda during your peak performance time?

Q: Do you practice a regular weekly Sabbath rest? What happens to you when you don’t?

Part IV: Reshaping the Work We Do—Chapter 12: Care for the Sick

A. He discussed what he sees as the problems with our current models for pastoring in Parts I & II. Then in Part III, he pointed to some of the personal changes that will need to take place in light of our current reality. Here in Part IV, he gives specific examples of the kinds of changes that will take place in our work world if we to actually begin to implement his suggestions. Part IV would serve well as practical “how to” lectures in a seminary pastoral care class.

The opening chapter is filled with simple suggestions on how to pray for the sick. It begins with a quote that magnifies the importance of pastoral care: “The visitation of the sick...is of the highest importance...Lessons are learned here that could never be learned in the study”—Charles Bridges.

He starts by telling us, “In the second year of my first pastorate, I began singing songs and leading a weekly Bible study at a local assisted-living facility.” He then reflects on how the experience taught him the value of appropriate touch and having a relationship with someone as we are praying for them.

Q: For those who have ministered in such a setting, what did God teach you about caring for and praying for others?

Q: What hesitations do you have about ministering in such a setting?

B. In the section *The People Who Teach Us*, Zack states, “Touch forms part of our pastoral work,” and then illustrates the value of and appropriate ways to use it. He then tells us about his interactions with Betty—one of the residents of that assisted living facility. He shares that in the early days of his

ministry there touching others was awkward. Over time, he learned how and why it was important. Then he closes the illustration by challenging us that, “Until the gospel rightly changes our use of touch, we are less ready for ministry than we realize, no matter how gifted we are to teach or preach or counsel.

I know that some pastors will give you a hug at the drop of a hat, while others struggle to give you a warm hand shake. I have experienced certain cultures where a hug, and even some where a kiss is expected. Always be sensitive as you step into an unfamiliar ministry setting to take your cues from others and not impose your preferences upon them.

Q: What are your preferences and experiences with touch—some form of physical contact with another person? [Obviously our COVID world has impacted this area.]

C. In the next section, *Jesus and the Touching of the Sick*, he reminds us of times when Jesus touched the sick and even the wounded. He then points out that in our pastoral role Jesus will lead us into many “uncomfortable” situations. He notes that at times, “We the frightened or hardened need Jesus to take us by the hand and guide us toward the sick within our families or congregations or communities.” He also notes, “There are too many people and too much ailment for our two shoulders. But in Jesus a community of shoulders can substantially touch the sick, literally and figuratively.” This requires us to be doing and “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12)

Q: To date, what was the most challenging experience you have had as you were called upon to minister to the sick?

Q: How often do you take someone with you when you visit the sick? What are you doing to equip others to provide care for the sick?

D. A fourth of the chapter is used in a section he calls *Gravesides* to describe pastoral care for a family who has lost a loved one. He describes in detail his first funeral and throws in some great advice that he has gleaned through the years. I have found it interesting that most of the pastors I have asked would rather do a funeral than a wedding, because a funeral provides a greater opportunity for lasting ministry to take place.

Q: Can you recall your first funeral? What were your thoughts and emotions?

Q: Would you rather do a funeral or a wedding and why?

E. He uses the last three sections to describe to provide practical advice on how to live out James 5:14-18:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

- In the *Calling for the Elders to Pray* section, he describes the process he has developed over time.
- In *The Prayer of Faith* section, he gives a good “how to” pastoral care tutorial.
- In the *Confessing and Forgiving* section, he points out that James shifts from praying for the sick (v 15) to asking for confession and then praying (vs 15-16). He picks this theme up in the next chapter, but appropriately includes it in his exegesis of this passage in James.

Q: Do you have a specific process you use when you are called upon to pray for the sick?

Q: Describe your ministry experience the last time you were called upon to pray for the sick.

Part IV: Reshaping the Work We Do—Chapter 13: Care for the Sinner

A. The best way to describe this chapter is that it describes what to do what not to do when practicing church discipline—thus the title *Care for the Sinner*. He bridges the preceding chapter and this one by noting that as he considered his call to be a pastor, if Jesus had asked me what I wanted Him to do for me, “I never would have said, ‘Please teach me what it means to care for the sick and for the sinner with my life. Please enable me to do this in such a way that your love for both is resembled in my ways.’”

Q: As you began to sense God’s calling to pastoral ministry, what did you think would be the most important aspect of that call?

Q: How, if any, has that perception changed over time?

Q: If Jesus asked you today what you wanted Him to do for you, how would you respond?

B. Zack relates how at his oral exam for ministry he gave the “expected” response to the question, “What is the purpose of church discipline.” He said, “It is to uphold the character and teaching of Jesus and to protect the welfare of His flock.” He then shares how a gentle and seasoned pastor caught up to him in the hall and suggested a fuller answer would include a third purpose: “to seek the spiritual welfare of the one who has sinned.”

He then notes that the act of church discipline has to *Start with Ourselves*, because “entering another’s brokenness can expose us.” We all need to heed Paul’s advice, “Keep watch on yourselves, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 7:1). As a pastor, helping your church find the balance between the “hang him high” crowd and the “nothing to see here” crowd will never be easy. Some of us will aggressively express our righteous indignation, some of us will grow passive and do nothing, and some of us will minimize the sin (no matter how serious).

Zack provides another personal example that points out how sin can shade our personal perspective. He wrote, “When my marriage was imploding, and I was scrambling desperately for help, there was one man who repeatedly counseled me that a divorce wasn’t so bad. I later learned that his own marriage was deeply troubled. His counsel, rather than being biblical, was tainted with his own temptations.”

Q: Have you personally ever been involved in a church discipline process? If so, what was the stated purpose and what was the specific process? What was the initial outcome? If it has been a while, what has been the long-term outcome?

Q: If you have never been a part of a church that has formally disciplined a member, why do you believe the church has failed to use this biblically prescribed process?

C. Zack uses two sections (*Relating to the Hardened* and *The Unavoidable Predicament*) to provide a personal illustration and to discuss the process of church discipline when the “accused sinner” denies the sin or resists the process. But before I share his experience and thoughts, let me remind us what Jesus said about how we are to respond to a sinning brother:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Matt 18:15-17)

In my years of working with churches that were working through conflict, I’ve never encountered one that didn’t say they had followed Jesus’ teachings in this passage. The problem usually was that they “might” have followed the letter but they definitely did not follow the “spirit.” Knowing how to do both became Zack’s challenge. He describes the situation he faced: “For nearly two years I tried to meet with a man who gave profane ‘holy kisses.’ We had asked him to stop. Not long after, an affair came to light, and his marriage lay tattered in the darkness.” Zack tried to communicate two messages, “First was the message that we would do everything we could to walk with him and his family through this terrible brokenness....The second message was that in time his continuous

refusal to admit his actions as contrary to the gospel would put his correspondence to Jesus in question and require us to painfully say so.”

As too often is the case, the man denied his sin and accused the church of misusing scripture and of failing to minister to his children. Zack summarized where they were by noting, “When someone refuses to admit wrong, they take the moral high ground, and believe themselves to be more righteous than others.” But ultimately the man’s response forced the church to ask, “What did this mean?” And Zack had to humbly answer, “I don’t know.” That began a search in the Gospels for how Jesus related to Gentiles and tax collectors since the closing part of Jesus’ teaching about dealing with a sinning brother tells us to treat them as such.

Q: How would you describe Jesus’ attitude and interactions with tax collectors and sinners?

- D. But as he searched the Gospels, he also sought insights from other New Testament texts—particularly Paul’s clear teaching in I Corinthians 5. As you read that passage you have to ask yourself, how are we to balance Jesus’ often criticized approach to dealing with sinners and tax collectors with Paul’s admonition to not “keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person” (I Cor. 5:11). More on Paul’s teachings will be in the next section.

From my experience with conflict in the church and from my study of the Word of God, I have concluded that although our personality will drive us to one of the three actions I mentioned in the second paragraph of section B above, and our personal emotions will create pendulum swings, we need to seek a paradoxical balance between grace and truth that is only possible when we are completely yielded to God’s Holy Spirit.

Q: Have you ever confronted an individual with an obvious sin issue who denied it or rationalized it away? What happened?

- E. Zack is also able to relate the story of a situation where someone admits wrongdoing and actively seeks forgiveness and begins to make appropriate changes in a section he calls *Relating to the Softened*. He notes that “when someone is actually changed by grace, it requires us to change, not just them, and we do not like this....Sometimes going to a new place of gospel freedom together is lovely to dream about and frightening to take hold of.”

Zack then takes us to II Corinthians 2:1-11 and 7:8-12 where Paul provides further instructions particularly as it relates to an individual who after being placed under church discipline becomes genuinely repentant. Any church desiring to be biblical in its approach to church discipline must balance the specific insights of the four passages mentioned in this chapter: Matt. 18:15-17, I Cor. 5,

II Cor. 2:1-11, and II Cor. 7:8-12. And add to it Jesus example of perfectly balancing grace and truth—that which John observed and described in John 1:14 and 17:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth....For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Zack concludes that when “one who was caught in sin is actually being changed, the community too must act accordingly.” He adds, “Punishment for the repentant does not go on and on,” but also adds, “Forgiveness will not justify folly or remove all consequences.”

Because of God’s perfect timing, as I was writing this section, I received a text from a pastor’s wife whose husband had had an affair. I had texted her and her husband as we were going to be in their city and wanted to take them out for dinner and catch up on what God was doing in their life. When I first heard about their situation, I was deeply challenged as I sought ways to minister to the church AND to the couple as the husband became repentant and the wife was willing to try to reconcile and restore their marriage and family. As I sought to respond in a biblical manner, I reached out to ministry leaders to seek counsel and guidance. What I heard was, “I can’t help you, because I’ve never seen a couple willing to reconcile. The situations I’ve seen always end in two divorces and a deeply wounded church.”

God helped us as we put together an accountability team with five couples who established a covenant with the couple and met with them over a two-year period. They found Divine healing, grew deeper in love with God and with each other, and then moved out of the community where there were so many painful memories. Over time, God provided a church planting opportunity working with a strong partnering church where another accountable relationship has been formed.

Q: Has God given you the privilege of seeing repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the life of someone who at first was resistant? What did that look like and how did it make you feel?

F. Ultimately, anyone who is involved in church discipline will also have to be able to differentiate between crocodile tears and the weeping of the truly repentant. Zack talks about that issue in the section *Discerning the Sorrows*. He lists three insights regarding “Godly grief” found in II Cor. 7:9-11:

- Godly grief produces genuine repentance that leads to discernable changes.
- Godly grief leads to a fresh acquaintance with God’s grace and a renewed relationship with Him.
- Godly grief never regrets making the right decision—even though at the time it was hard.

By contrast he notes that what might look like Godly grief can actually be sorrow because they got caught and are simply trying to do what they need in order to get everyone off their case and to get

back to normal. What makes it difficult to discern the difference is that genuine change comes in fits and spurts and some days it's one step forward and two steps back. For a more in depth discussion in this area, let me refer you to the book *Restoring the Fallen* co-authored by three couples who served as an accountability team.

Q: Can you describe a time where you felt Godly grief through confession and repentance?

Q: Can you describe a time when you saw Godly grief that was confirmed by time and real changes in the life of the individual?

G. In the section *Where Do We Start*, he points to Paul's teaching in I Cor. 5 and suggests several points to ponder:

- We are not to separate from nor judge non-Christians. How would we be light and salt if we did?
- Paul speaks about "any" transgression. The church tends to have an unstated list of acceptable sins and unacceptable sins. God says sin is sin!
- It is the spiritually mature that are called upon to step into church discipline situations. I have seen many immature individuals become filled with righteous indignation and cause great damage.
- It is not a sin to have a different opinion, teaching style or preference, or personality.
- Not every weakness or struggle arises from sin.
- We all have blind spots that will cause us to struggle relationally particularly with those whose personality is either exactly like ours or is the polar opposite.
- There are some among us who are easily offended.
- What specific sins are we unwilling to forgive?

The chapter closes with the picture of two men confronted by their sin: Peter and Judas. Both sinned terribly. Both wept bitterly. Worldly and Godly grief are put on display and set in contrast. One grieved his wrong, did not choose genuine repentance, and took his own life. The other moved beyond weeping to experience repentance and forgiveness.

Q: Which one of the "points to ponder" is hardest for you to accept? Why?

Part IV: Reshaping the Work We Do—Chapter 14: Local Knowledge

A. Having proactively worked with churches in transition for almost three decades and even publishing a book based on those years of experience for Search Committees (*Pastor Search: Finding God's Man for Your Church*), I can say that this chapter speaks to THE KEY ISSUES that differentiate success and failure as a pastor seeks the right church and as a church seeks the right pastor. He opens the chapter by pointing out the obvious, but often overlooked reality, that like every person

mentioned in the Bible, we too live in a unique time and community that will in time be forgotten. “And yet God gathers up every detail of [our] days with love and interest.” The point he is introducing and then makes a compelling case to prove is that pastors bring with them a unique history that might or might not match the unique history of a particular church. The better the match and the more teachable the pastor and congregation the more effective the ensuing ministry will be.

Q: How well did your unique history prepare you for the unique church you are currently serving?

Q: What are some of the areas where you and/or your church have struggled? To what extent are those areas related to different expectations and visions?

B. In the *Calling* section, he describes the normal process God uses to affirm an individual’s call to serve as a pastor. It usually begins with an “inward desire that ebbed and flowed but didn’t fade. We then set this desire prayerfully before God [over time]... We took steps during that time to test by Scripture in community whether we had the gifts to match this desire. Along the way, those who locally knew us best and those whom we’d attempted to serve told us that they were strengthened in Jesus because of our use of these gifts.” It is a slow process involving a lot of conversations, counsel, and confirmations. He continues, “Yet a strange thing happens to us. Once we become pastors, many of us leave off with this kind of listening... we begin to “react, talk a lot, and constantly present ourselves as individuals with expertise and experiences who already know what is needed... This is no more apparent than when we try to assert our vision and change the culture of a congregation.” He concludes by stating, “This is a problem.”

Q: Describe the process God used to provide you with a clear sense of His calling to serve as a pastor. How much listening and learning from others was involved?

Q: Would you agree with Zack that the processes, patterns, and people used by God to affirm your calling should be similar to His use of processes, patterns, and people in your day-to-day work as a pastor.

Q: Which descriptive words better describe your current leadership process, and why? Words like pray, ask, and listen or react, talk, and inform.

C. In a section he calls *Explorers and Road Builders*, he compares the personal damage that early explorers did to themselves with what a pastor who attempts to assert his vision for a place before he takes time to know and love the place can do to himself. If you are familiar with the contrast between the Amundsen and Scott expeditions to the South Pole, you will see Zack uses a great illustration of what happens when you go with your plan (and even the best and latest technology) without knowing your environment.

He then uses the analogy of early American pioneers and fur trappers who traveled on the game and Indian trails. Their impact on the environment was minimal. Next came the settlers who demanded better and quicker routes, so the road builders brought in dynamite and began to make the valleys high, the mountains low, and the paths straight. He used this analogy to point out that superimposing a vision upon a congregation can do major damage to the existing environment. Don't try to push this analogy and tell me, yes, but the resulting interstate is great. Focus on his point that the environment's historical nature is negatively impacted.

Q: Think of a major change you initiated in your church. Was the final outcome one that affirmed your leadership and calling and strengthen the church? If not, what could you have done differently?

D. In the section *Too Early to Tell*, he describes Rehoboam's response to the people who asked him to lighten their load a bit (I Kings 12). Rehoboam did major damage to himself and to the nation as he failed to listen to the people, rejected wise advice, and accepted poor advice. And it didn't take him long—three days! Zack points out that, "Most of the time, a congregation and pastor are not troubled by one another in terms of their common purpose to see people changed by the gospel. The problem often has more to do with cultural assumptions that both the congregation and we as pastors bring to this common purpose."

Here I'll add some insights from my years of working with churches. Most pastors have heard the term "honeymoon" as it refers to the early days of a new pastor's time at a church. But there are significant variables that impact the length of the honeymoon AND even the existence of one. A deeply broken church that has had "pastor problems" probably wouldn't grant a honeymoon to Jesus. If you're called to a church like that may God grant you patience, thick skin, a listening heart, and a willingness to outlive and out love those unwilling to change. Most churches will grant you a "period of grace" where you start out with a pile of good will chips. But you need to spend the "chips your given" wisely. I have seen pastors who quickly cash in all their chips and find themselves in the red. If the deficit isn't handled, they end up without a church.

Another aspect of time is that when you first arrive you are the preacher—and if the church has had a history of short term pastorates, you can actually be viewed like a supply preacher. Over time, you can earn the stripes of a chaplain—that is if you've been attentive to care for your flock. This might take 2-5 years. If you're patient and compassionately care for the flock, you will become their shepherd/leader and they will hear your voice, you will know them, and they will follow you. (John 10:27) Our problem is we want them to hear and follow before we have earned the title of shepherd.

Q: How well does your culture fit the culture of the church you are pastoring? By culture I mean more than theology. Culture also includes ecclesiology, organization, philosophy of ministry, vision...

Q: How long have you been in your current role? Did you have a honeymoon? Looking back, how wisely did you spend the chips you were given?

Q: Are you currently the preacher, chaplain, or shepherd/leader of your church? Why do you say that?

E. In the section *Humbling Ourselves*, Zack describes something he did that took a TON of courage. He describes what happened after he was in his current pastorate for eighteen months. “People were leaving our congregation in droves for many reasons, and my preaching was one of them. I had three choices. Quit. Do what Rehoboam did, or humble myself into listening for local knowledge.” So, on a Sunday morning (the same week he was leading a conference on preaching in another state), he asked his congregation, “Will you teach me to preach? I need your help.” He humbled himself and established several open houses. He described what happened, “People came and told me all the ways that I could preach better. In my pride I’d cry to God, ‘they’d be rightly offended if I walked into their office having no training or experience in what they do and told them how to do their job better.’” But he patiently listened and learned how to be a better communicator to the people in the place where God had called him.

As I read this, I remember how defensive I got with the feedback I received from my professor and students in preaching class. I couldn’t imagine how someone would feel who was being invited to help other pastors learn how to preach better. Then it dawned on me. In our current model we have preachers telling preachers how to preach. Is anyone else, besides Zack, asking people in their church how we can communicate more effectively? But maybe even more importantly, would we be willing to actually listen and make the changes God affirms are needed?

Q: When was the last time you asked someone to give you feedback on your sermons?

Q: When people comment on one of your sermons, what areas get regularly affirmed? Have you stopped to analyze the areas that are never complemented?

Q: Does your church have a regular review (feed-back) process for staff including the senior pastor?

F. Zack does a good job of putting some meat on the bare-bones of the instructions Paul gave Titus in relation to his work with the church(es) in Crete.

- Get to know local and ordinary persons and begin to disciple those who are gifted to lead. “appoint elders.” Titus 1:5
- Spend time getting to know each local town and seek its welfare in this way. “in every town” Titus 1:5

- Become savvy to local narratives that oppose the gospel. “There are many who...must be silenced” Titus 1:10-11
- Spend time getting to know local families for their pastoral care. “They are upsetting whole families.” Titus 1:11
- Become familiar with the history and literature of the place. “One of the Cretans, a prophet [poet] of their own said” Titus 1:12
- Cultivate a congregational culture that is relational in its ethos. “older men, younger men, older women, younger women.” Titus 2:1

After taking time to write out what kind of things had to happen if Titus were to accomplish all that Paul told him to do, Zack simply notes, “None of this can happen in a day.”

Activity: Take time to prayerfully reflect on each of the areas mentioned above. How well are you doing in each of them?

Activity: Stop and put some flesh on the bones in your current ministry setting. Describe one individual who God has given you the privilege of discipling whose life is definitely being transformed by the gospel. Now, stop and think about the amount of time and number of people who have invested in that one person’s life. None of it happened in a day!

G. To avoid the damage caused by doing ministry at the speed of an Indianapolis 500 race, Zack suggests four specific areas (each forms a section in this chapter).

- *Words and Memories:* Remember that this church’s culture and these people existed before you arrived. They use the same words you do, give meanings to them like you do, but some of the meanings will be different than what your culture assigned. You might have to clarify what you mean for a while and learn what it is they mean. That shouldn’t be viewed as an undo trial, rather it is a normative part of a pastor’s work. In fact, you will never communicate clearly until your definitions are aligned.
- *Local Knowledge of Pastors:* Even if you are the planting pastor of the church, you are probably not the first pastor in a person’s life. When someone has problems with you, particularly in the early days, it can be related to the fact that they are trying to adjust to the other pastor’s absence. That has both positive and negative implications for every member of the church. On the congregational level, the differences in personality and giftedness between you and the previous pastor can create huge issues. Too often a church will subconsciously look for a pastor who has strengths where the previous pastor was weak while they just assume he will have the previous pastor’s strengths. These pendulum swings create a devastating whiplash in the church’s culture.
- *Local Memories of Time:* How many pastors have served this church before you? How long did they serve? Zack reflects on his experience in his current church. Noting that most of his predecessors stayed only three years, he retells a question he was asked in the midst of his third

year. A core member of the church asked, “So, I’m thinking that you’ve been here for about three years now. I don’t mean to pry, but many of us are grateful for you, and we’ve been kind of wondering if you are heading on to somewhere else, or if you are thinking you might take up the cause and join in with us for a while?” Zack said that four years later a lot changed. “Once people knew I as in it with them for a while (and I knew it in reverse), trust deepened. So, did our next season of life and ministry together.”

- *Local Leadership Culture:* Someone was leading the church before you arrived—patriarch, matriarch, or the previous pastor. Like nature, leadership abhors a vacuum and someone will fill the void. Often these lay leaders wielded informal power, and people wait to hear from them before they act. Many are benevolent and have the church’s best interest in mind. Sometimes they are malevolent and people have learned to never disagree because doing so WILL bring conflict.
- *Local Theological Culture:* He points to three areas where churches can differ in their application of important theological truths. Knowing the local culture will help you as you teach and preach to address errors and inadequacies. In like fashion, knowing the culture will help you address fears and concerns in a more effective manner.

The first area he calls “the three movements in the gospel life” as if they were three parts to a great musical composition.

- **Confessing our mess**—sinning and being sinned against
- **Receiving Christ’s love**—being a forgiven and dearly loved child of God through Jesus
- **Walking His paths**—conforming our lives to obediently following Jesus.

He points out that churches can neglect one of the three movements:

- **Some try to confess and walk without receiving.** These people work hard; they frown on grace, joy and rest; and when you talk of grace they get concerned about you.
- **Some try to receive and walk without confessing.** These people stay strong; they frown on appearing needy for forgiveness; they seek perfection, and when you talk about humility, emotions, and being transparent, they get concerned about you.
- **Some are trying to confess and receive without walking.** These people want to relax. They frown on the idea of obeying Biblical commands, and when you talk about life transformation, they get concerned about you.

The second area relates to the three omni-temptations we face as a pastor—and our churches have grown to expect from us:

- **The need to know it all.**
- **The desire to fix it all.**
- **The desire to always be everywhere for everybody.**

The third area relates to the church's evangelism and outreach philosophies. What barriers to the gospel does the congregation unwittingly put up that make it hard for non-Christians to hear, accept, and grow in Jesus?

Q: Can you clearly define your current churches culture in these three specific areas? Take time to think through what changes you need to make in light of these realities.

Activity: Discuss these areas with other pastors. Then take time to further process them personally. Then discuss them with key church leaders. As a leadership team, prayerfully discuss what changes to be made in your church.

H. In the section *Hearing God's Call*, Zack reminds us of two important realizations as we look at entering the culture of a congregation:

- First, we know that ideally a pastor is a change agent in God's hands for the good of a congregation. But a congregation is also a change agent in God's hands for the good of the pastor. In other words, pastor and congregational life are not primarily about one or the other, God preceded both. It's about His Kingdom, not ours.
- Second, God calls us to a congregation when we don't yet have what it needs. We can't help a people until we've been with them for a while, we get to know them, then God can teach us how together we can become what He desires for us. Zack notes, "For some reason, how we handle our painful incapability with Jesus day upon day becomes formative for those who stick it out with us."

Q: If you've served in your current ministry position for a few years, what have YOU learned about yourself and how to be a better pastor?

Q: What have people in your congregation said they have learned from you?

I. In the closing section, *Interview*, Zack reflects back on a specific interview he had with the search committee of his current church and shares his answers to the two BIG questions every committee will ask. The first is, "What is your vision for this church?" He contrasted his answer this time to the one he provided his first church's committee. He gave the committee "a five-point statement that included a prepared diagram that I handed out to everyone. 'It was impressive,' they said." His answer this time was very different. "I don't know. I have a handful of thoughts about what it means to love God and our neighbor and how that impacts what any congregation that follows Jesus will envision. I think Acts 2 offers us a helpful direction for the kinds of ministry that any congregation is meant to pursue. I know some truisms about Saint Louis having lived here for a while, that might prove helpful. But as to how these biblical directives should take shape here in this particular congregation and community, I can't fully answer yet. We would need a lot more time together."

His comments remind me of the number of times I have been asked by a member of a search committee when they called me to provide a reference for a candidate, “Would he be a good fit for our church?” 99.9999% of the time I have been asked that question, I knew nothing about their church. And the question itself forced me to get on one of my many soap boxes, and I provided unsolicited and probably unheeded advice. But Ezekiel 3 and 33 passages force me to warn them that they are not asking the right questions nor seeking the right type of responses from the good questions they do ask.

The second big question he mentions is, “Why should we call you to be our next pastor?” He then provides his answer and the uncomfortable dialogue that it triggered. He said, “I don’t know for sure, I’m not yet certain that you should.” Committee members looked at each other and then back at him. One member smiled and said “I don’t think that’s the way you are supposed to answer.” After a light chuckle, Zack told them he could answer the way he was supposed to by being self-promoting and assuring them of what all God could do through his gifted leadership. To his remarks, one member asked, “And there is a problem with that?”

Zack replied, “Yes. If we can just be honest with one another, we all know that we’ve spent only a few hours together. They’ve been great, but we don’t know each other well. You want a pastor, and I want a job. We are all putting our best foot forward. But one year from now, it won’t matter much what great things we talked about here tonight. By then you will know my weaknesses, wounds and sins, and I will know yours. What will matter is whether we will actually love one another with our strengths and weaknesses, hurts and sins. I don’t know how to do it, but I wish there was a way to get to this harder but truer question.”

I mentioned earlier that I recently published a book to help search committees. At the very heart of the book is a three-step process that if done well, helps a committee and a candidate come to know each other at a much deeper level than the normal search process has done. It was a process that came out of years of working with search committees and candidates and the realization that too often the situation was just like the one Zack just described. Church cultures vary significantly. The culture of pastoral candidates varies significantly. Helping churches and candidates find the best available match is critical. Here’s where I will bring out another of my soap boxes. Churches who have been busy making disciples like Jesus did, can usually find a pastor in the pool of men they have raised up through the years. He will be someone who can better match their culture because he grew up in that church’s culture.

Q: Think about the last time you worked through the calling process. How did you answer the two big questions?

Q: Would it have helped if the church had greater clarity on the qualities and culture they needed in their next pastor and clearly communicated their thoughts to you?

Q: Would it have helped if you had better self-awareness and more clearly communicated who you were to the church?

Part IV: Reshaping the Work We Do—Chapter 15: Leadership

A. With the exception of the closing section, this chapter provides a very detailed description of how the insights Zack has shared in this book have been implemented in the leadership development and decision-making processes of his church. In the *Leading an Elder's Meeting* and *Practicing at Game Speed* sections, he talks us through the agenda of their monthly elders meeting and the rationale for why they do it that way. If you haven't bought the book, let me suggest this chapter is worth the price. I will summarize it, but not provide the detail that you would need to consider and implement this level of change.

They begin each meeting by reading the first statement on their agenda—it is the same every month: “What we do: We shepherd the people of Riverside Church with our prayer, presence, teaching, and planning.” He then reads the next statement: Our decision-making: Emergency Room (immediacy and relief), Board Room (efficiency, quantity, and money) and Shepherding.

Then they read I Peter 5:1-5, which is printed on the page: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you..." Then he asks: "What sticks out to you from this verse tonight?" Then for the next few minutes they share with one another the temptation to use their work as elders in such a way that they might sin as they are called to serve. They then turn their conversation to prayer.

He then reads down through the next section of bullet points.

- A church meeting is not a business meeting. We have a different bottom line.
- Our goal is not, as a norm, to do large things famously as fast as we can.
- No relationship is on the line tonight. We give each other the benefit of the doubt.
- Most of the time hurry will not help us.
- Building relationships and sharing our lives together is part of our agenda and is no waste of time.
- Oftentimes, we differ or disagree as a matter of temperament and perspective and not because one of us is sinning and the other one isn't.
- We are quick to give and to receive forgiveness when we do sin against each other.
- We seek to do our meetings the way elders are meant to do ministry.
- This thing we are doing is about Jesus, not us.

They are now thirty minutes into the meeting. They've shared stories, rehearsed their purpose,

and searched their hearts briefly with God's Word. Next on their agenda they read something related to ministry and then talk about it. "This resource time does two things: It allows us to engage in ongoing mentoring regarding our task. It requires us to slow down, listen to someone else read, and talk together about things that matter in an intensely personal context."

After this sixty-minutes of remembering, story sharing, praying, resource reading, and discussion, they move on to talk about pastoral care of ministries and persons, finances and planning. It isn't that they don't talk about numbers or programs, Rather, these two have to take their place farther back in line, surrounded by a relational context. He notes that "This has taken painful and restless effort—lots of sorry saying, forgiving, second tries, and impatience. Detox and desert make their way in us for a while. Getting stripped of our cravings to quickly fix everything, know it all, and be everywhere all at once alters the habit of our inner life. Culture change takes time.

I have adapted and expanded on his imagery of *Practicing at Game Speed* as it is an excellent analogy [see below] He states, "To practice at game speed is to run, catch, or kick the ball in practice at the same pace the game will require. But what if an elder's game speed requires us to slow down? Why not try to cultivate a way of doing a meeting that practices the speed pastoral work calls for?" Life transformation takes a lifetime! Our own personal walk with God gives testimonies to the slow, painful, and sometimes regressive steps we take every day. Zack writes, "If every time we meet, we do reports and talk numbers for the sake of efficiency and relational guardedness, we end up practicing a way of meeting month upon month, year upon year. Three years into this way of doing a meeting, we've actually created a culture of leadership that relies on quantitative language, impatient pace, and impoverished relational skills. This culture differs dramatically from the actual language pace, and skill that a congregational member will need most of the time from us as shepherds."

Zack confessed, "When we first started doing this, it drove most of us restless. We felt strangely that we were wasting time. Perhaps in comparison to other kinds of business meetings, we were. But this kind of game speed enables us to practice what elders are supposed to become in the first place. This kind of practice also pays off when ER immediacy and relief suddenly storm crisis down into us. And we have to act quickly. We have a better shot at responding rather than reacting, because of the marathon stamina we've been working on."

Q: What is your initial reaction to how Zack has applied the concepts of his book?

Q: How would your leadership need to change to implement a similar process?

B. Expanding on his idea of doing ministry at game speed, I wrote the following for one of my weekly articles:

Let me take his term game speed in a slightly different direction. For those of us who played little league sports, we know that one really good athlete can create a winning team. When we played in high school, we discovered that it took two or three really good athletes to win a state championship. If you played college ball you discovered that those two or three really good athletes needed to be surrounded by other good athletes. By the time someone makes it to the professional sports level, they discover that everyone on the field is a really, really good athlete. At each level the athletic skills and therefore the speed of the game increases.

So, what does “doing ministry at game speed mean?” Let me suggest the following:

- Technology and affluence are blessings that God has placed in our lives that make it easier to get the word of God and the gospel message before every tribe, tongue, nation, and ethnic group in the world. It means game speed has increased, but we need to realize that they cannot replicate the relational aspect of making disciples. Deep disciple-making requires a life-on-life process: “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17). The Bible is filled with “one another” passages that speak to this reality: “Exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13) is just one of them. When we sacrifice relationships for speed the fruit is at best a baby Christian that will end up in an orphanage.
- Spiritual maturity is neither a one-and-done nor a fast process. As such, I would suggest that game speed for spiritual life transformation is a lot like rock polishing: both are painfully slow. Growing up in a geologist’s paradise (the Black Hills), I was surrounded by rocks ripe for polishing. And I remember watching Reverend Barter; he was an old-fashioned Methodist preacher who was also an avid rock hound. He had a rock polisher. If you’ve never seen one, it uses a concrete mixer type of drum, but instead of having a reciprocating motion, it turns 360°. You put in your rough, ugly rocks and add some grit to speed up the process. Then you turn on the polisher. And after only 7 days—with your tumbler running 24 hours a day—you can open it up, and find some beautifully polished rocks. The unfortunate reality is that most of us have harder heads and hearts than a typical rock, so transformation is a life-long process. And even then, there are days when the “ugly rock” side is still visible.
- We need to stop making-disciples using a little-league model where we expect one very mature individual to lead us all to victory. The game speed for spiritual development at the little-league level is painfully slow. And because it has become the preferred model in American Christianity, we’re losing the spiritual battle. What would happen if we began to be more intentional in identifying and equipping others, so that in a few years we could play at the high school level? I have enjoyed watching my grandsons play football. They live in a small Oklahoma community where the school has won multiple state championships and this year’s team is leading their division. The school has done that by developing players beginning in middle-school. Good high school coaches in smaller schools know that they have to develop the players they have, because they can’t recruit them from other schools. My youngest grandson is learning techniques and plays that he will use and run in high school. Consistency and quality coaching (and disciple-

making), over time, will generate opportunities for success.

- The problem with churches “doing spiritual development” in a college or pro model is that both levels rely on recruiting talent that someone else has developed. That works when a player (pastor/leader) comes in who was developed under a similar coaching style and philosophy, but with the diversity that exists in American Christianity that is a challenge. Because most churches recruit their next pastor from another church instead of being able to look within their own church, I have personally prioritized working with search committees. I encourage them to use a process that helps them better understand themselves and their needs. Having done that, they can then more clearly communicate with candidates who they are and the unique qualities that they will need in their next pastor so he can succeed. But in the process, I also challenge them to do a better job of developing leaders so that when their new pastor retires in thirty or forty years, they will have developed men within their culture who are willing and capable of filling his shoes.

Q: What additional ideas, analogies, and applications come to your mind from the phrase, “Doing ministry at game speed?”

C. In the *Training New Leaders* section, he describes their elders training process. He notes, “Every pastoral context differs. Each of us finds our ways and methods with the Lord where we are. But perhaps there is something here that might prove helpful to you. This is how we train elders now:

- A candidate for elder meets with me once a month for three months.
- First meeting answers the question, “What is an elder?” The second meeting is on the question “What is love and the fruit of the Spirit?” The third answers “What is the culture of our particular church?”
- Homework conversations follow each session. After the first two sessions the candidate talks to their wife or, if they are not married, closest friend for feedback on areas of strength and areas where they need more work. After the third session they are to discuss the assumptions they have about the church. Zack does specifically ask a candidate, “What would you change about our church if you could?” He states, “If the candidate answers, ‘I would change nothing; it is perfect’ it might be a strong indication that he is not ready. Or if the candidate has a list of things he would change and in particular some that would be at odds with the stated purpose and culture of the church, he is probably not a good fit. They also have candidates read through theological standards for the church writing down questions they have. Prior to a more formal interview, Zack or a current elder has an informal discussion over coffee or lunch with the candidate to discuss what they have discovered about themselves.
- A formal interview with two elders and two deacons occurs in the fourth month.
- There are two paths following the interview: the candidate can be asked to wait for further spiritual development or to move into a formal six-month apprenticeship.

Q: What does your leadership development process look like?

Q: What area(s) have you found helpful that Zack and his church should consider?

Q: What area(s) is his church using that might be helpful for you?

D. In the *Decision Making* section, Zack lays out three primary questions that should be addressed and then describes principles they use as they answer them.

- **Is This the right Thing?** He suggests that sometimes our culture identifies right and wrong by using a proof text rather than solid exegesis. Here he uses the issue of where the pastor’s parking spot should be as an example. Some will say, as a servant he shouldn’t have a preferred spot. Others will demand a choice spot because honor belongs to those who lead. He concludes, “In the end, however gospel ministry is stalled, leadership is divided, relationships are strained, and families leave because Christians disagreed about a parking space in the name of standing for truth in their generation.”

He also relates a conversation he had with a church planter who was seeking his advice as it relates to how they could remodel an older church building they had just purchased after being in a rented facility for twelve years. As they began to walk through the building his young friend asked him, “What would your dreams be for this building?” Zack’s response ignited a conversation that went much deeper than a building renovation. He told the young pastor, “I delegate most of the dreaming.” And for almost three pages, he tells us how they went back and forth with the young man struggling to comprehend how Zack could delegate such important decisions as the color of the walls and carpets. It is a conversation worth reading.

- **What Is the Right Way to Do This?** Here he states, “We can also do the right thing in the wrong way...Holding the right position in the argument never justifies betraying the character of Jesus.” He then describes some positions we take that fall short. “Know-it-alls will almost always identify negative reactions to their decisions as the cost of standing for the truth and suffering for the Lord.” Here I always point to the story in John of the woman caught in adultery. The Jewish leaders were “right the wrong way” and Jesus called them on it. He continues, “Sometimes weak men use this appeal to gentleness and kindness to justify their passivity.” In that story in John, Jesus didn’t ignore their prodding, but simply stated, “He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone” (John 8:7). Zack continues, “Conversely, others, in the name of leading strongly, resist postures of gentleness and kindness.” John 1:14 identifies Jesus as One who was “full of grace and truth.”
- **Is This the Right Time?** Here he writes, “A know-it-all or fix-it-all makes a decision and expects immediate obedience, blind to the time she herself has needed to learn, and blind to the patience being extended to her in her many other mistakes and disobediences.”

Q: Which decision making question is giving you problems today?

- E. He closes the chapter with a section he calls *The Inner Ring*. Zack writes, “Along with decision making, I have found what C. S. Lewis called *the Inner Ring* to be the most difficult challenge to leadership. It tempts us to let go of ‘friends whom you really loved and who might have lasted a lifetime, in order to court the friendship of those who appear more important.’” I would call it the celebrity attraction. It comes with the assumption that to be around people with power and prominence means we will enjoy the same benefits.

The *inner ring* challenge can lead us to excuse a leader who is causing damage to others. The wisdom of being slow to judge another’s weaknesses morphs into the folly of making excuses for them. A common response I’ve observed after a “compromised” leader moves on is that NOW everyone has a story they’re willing to tell of the damage that he did. They never mention the fact that they were silent while all the damage was being done. Zack concludes, “Because of each one’s desire to remain accepted in the *inner ring* each will be tempted either to remain consistently silent or to join in.”

Q: Have you experienced the pain that trying to be in the *inner ring* with a compromised leader can bring?

Q: Do you know someone who is currently “in trouble” because they are in the midst of an unhealthy *inner ring*?

Part IV: Reshaping the Work We Do—Chapter 16: Romantic Realism

- A. In the closing chapter, he points to all that God can do through the mundane and monotonous daily life of an average human being. In the opening section, *Widows and Farmers*, he admits “that the call of prophet and king sounds nobler than widow and farmer. After all, prophet and king signify grand positions for heroic moments in a generation.” He mentions some of the great judges that led the Israelites through difficult days when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). But then he turns to the book of Ruth and mentions two unlikely heroes who lived in the midst of the great judges: a widow named Naomi and a farmer named Boaz. He pointed out how both were “heroes who never received the limelight of their generation.” How they had moments that were heavenly, but they didn’t receive the complete joys of heaven—Naomi’s husband wasn’t delivered from death. God’s deliverance sometimes is as simple as providing food to sustain life in the midst of a drought. He points out that heroic moments always have as their aim the recovery of the ordinary. “The true act of heroism in Jesus on the cross and the emptying of the tomb is so that His people can return to the grace of doing life with God in a place, with love for our neighbors, and the freedom to enjoy God in the work, play, rest, and love that He gives us there.”

Activity: List some of the ordinary people who have been a significant part of your spiritual journey.

- B. In the section he calls *Romanticism and Resignation*, he describes these two as the options most often pursued. However, in the end, he points us to a better way—romantic realism. Romanticism, he says, will cause burn out as “we restlessly move ourselves from one grand moment to the next. What’s worse is that “we regularly push others into the same whirlwind.” For some of us, it’s not burnout but resignation. “We too cannot find God in the ordinary, and we have long given up on anything extraordinary being given by God or accomplished through us” Like Naomi, whose name means “pleasant one,” life can be so unpleasant that we begin to call ourselves Mara which means “bitter.” (Ruth 1:20)

He writes, “Jesus calls us to a romantic realism... We are realistic about the fact that heroic moments are not the normal way that God daily visits His people. And yet we still believe that God is doing something larger than we can presently see.” He returns to the story of Ruth to point out that in the eternal plan of God it wasn’t Gideon, Deborah, or Samson whose names appear in the genealogy of the Messiah, it was “Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king” (Matt. 1:5-6). He suggests that you stop wearing yourself out trying to do and be more than the under-shepherd to a local group of people in a local place seeking to develop local knowledge as you strive to make disciples for His Kingdom. “The great work to be done is right in front of you with the persons and places that His providence has granted you.”

Q: Are you prone to lean more towards Romanticism or Resignation? How has that path worked out for you?

Q: What was your response to his challenge to become a Romantic Realist? Can you accept and celebrate a life ministry as he describes it?

- C. In the section *Word and Sacrament*, he describes how we can minimize both, but the grace and power of God can still break through. Paul talks about a time when he was speaking in a local place to local people and God showed up: “Not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (I Thess. 1:5). Mere words from the mouth of a humble servant can be made powerful by Him: “When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (I Thess. 2:13).

In a similar fashion, a small wafer and a sip of juice taken in remembrance of Jesus “proclaims the Lord’s death” (I Cor. 11:26). A romantic realist finds meaning and is willing to establish a long rhythm of life in a local place for the sake of local people. By faith words become more than ink or oration and partaking of unleavened bread and juice become more than a symbolic act yet less than the physical body and blood. His Word does not return void, and His sacrifice can never be denied.

Q: Can you describe a time when you have been deeply and eternally impacted by the Word of God—written or spoken?

Q: Can you describe a time when partaking of the Lord's Supper brought you spiritual strength?

- D. You should not be surprised that the closing section of the book, *Homecoming*, is filled with personal reflections. Throughout the book, Zack has opened his heart and his life to us—a transparency most of us pastors are not willing to pursue. In fact the day I wrote this section, I received news that a pastor friend of mine was going through deeply challenging emotional and physical afflictions. Knowing that he is an extremely private individual, I wondered how much would it help if he were willing to let brothers in Christ help him bear his burden? (Galatians 6:2-5)

Zack returns to stories of his Mamaw and Papaw and reflections on the memorial service for each of them. He then closes the book with this statement: “What I’m trying to say is that life and ministry are an apprenticeship in Jesus in which, by His grace, He recovers our humanity, and for His glory He enables others to do the same.”

Q: How transparent are you with your people? Is your transparency healthy or inappropriate?

Q: Are you willing to prayerfully take the insights and challenges Zack has shared under consideration?

Q: What would be the next right step be for you? Who do you have to hold you accountable?

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