

Exploring the Idol of Security

by

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to explore the ways in which modern Christians, specifically in America, seek security and safety to an idolatrous extent. This paper will seek to examine, over the course of three chapters, precedents set by the early church, systematic theology, and the Biblical narrative, to understand how Christians are called to put God before self. Throughout, the paper will also point out ways in which we fall short of such an ideal, while addressing the deep seated nature of humanity's longing for security and speak to the fact that true security can only be found in Christ.

The final two chapters will address real world examples that are culturally and currently relevant to both individuals and society regarding the choices we make about our security, and whether or not those choices are thoughtfully pursuing the building up of God's kingdom.

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# CHAPTER 1

## **Introduction: Our Natural Desire for Peace and Security**

*"Aslan is a lion - the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you"<sup>1</sup>.*

A particular issue that rears its head many times in a historical look at Scripture, is man's desire for safety and security. Throughout Scripture, we see the effects of individuals and communities not relying on God for meeting their needs, and the effects are not good. While being safe is a natural, good desire, it becomes problematic when it runs counter to the will of God or inhibits His kingdom being expressed here in the world.

Security is a wide ranging concept which includes topics such as politics, economics, religion, personal safety, immigration, foreign policy, finance, and much more. Many of these concerns overlap, and some are even interdependent. Security is a complex, non-linear, subject-matter. Pinning down just how pursuing security can lead to idolatry is difficult, not because it happens so little, but because it happens so much. Since Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve hid from God, mankind has attempted to safeguard itself against the effects of the fall, often not by running to God, but by hiding away from Him. We hide still, behind our bank accounts, guns, government policies, relationships, and anything else that will give us the feeling of control in our given circumstances.

Ultimately, the driving principle behind seeking out security is a good, God-given, desire for peace within the spheres in which we operate. Peace, not in the sense of the absence of conflict (though often we settle for absence of conflict), but in the peace referenced in the

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<sup>1</sup>C.S. Lewis, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* ( New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 80.

biblical term of “shalom”: The Hebrew word used to commonly depict a person being uninjured and safe, whole and sound. Shalom between man and God, between man and the world, and internally, between man’s own mind, body, and soul, is a picture of creation flourishing. Because of the fallenness of the world, there is an absence of this wholeness or integration, or flourishing, and people seek a path back to this shalom, attempting to seek security by whatever means they can. There is an appropriate, God-given thirst for security, but the places we go to quench that thirst is often misaligned with God’s kingdom efforts. Wherever we take our ultimate refuge or find our ultimate security, there we find our god. Taking ultimate refuge in anything but the Lord, can never lead to shalom, because in looking for our highest state of security outside of him we will always be dis-integrating our relationship with God by falling short of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3).

Scripture, Christian History, Reformed Christian theological doctrines, and the current state of affairs within much of the Christian church in America all point to the reality that if given a choice between a life marked by the pursuit of safety and comfort or a life marked by riskily following the will of God, ultimate security comes from the latter. Yet again and again, mankind chooses poorly. We stuff our bellies, our bank accounts, our social media feeds, our guns, and our government policies full of whatever helps stave off the pangs of one of mankind's greatest enemies: fear. We fear that there won’t be enough to eat tomorrow. We fear that there won’t be enough money to keep up with the Jones’. We fear that loneliness will overtake us. We fear for our safety and our very lives, and we fear each other. Our insecurities seem to know no bounds. When our insecurities and fear are left unchecked, no matter what we do to try to address the problem outside of resting in the Lord, we end up failing.

Henri Nouwen, a priest, writer, theologian, and professor utilizes a fictional story which cuts to the heart of the dangers of making security an idol in a way which feels eerily familiar to the current state of affairs in America. *The Parable of the Fearful Hoarders*:

Once there was a group of people who surveyed the resources of the world and said to each other: “How can we be sure that we have enough in hard times? We want to survive whatever happens. Let us start collecting food and knowledge so that we are safe and secure when a crisis occurs.”

So they started hoarding, so much and so eagerly that other people protested and said, “You have much more than you need, while we don’t have enough to survive. Give us part of your wealth!” But the fearful hoarders said: “No, no, we need to keep this in case of an emergency, in case things go bad for us too, in case our lives are threatened.” But the others said, “We are dying now; please give us food and materials and knowledge to survive. We can’t wait, we need it now!”

Then the fearful hoarders became even more fearful, since they became afraid that the poor and hungry would attack them. So they said to one another: “Let us build walls around our wealth so that no stranger can take it from us.” They started erecting walls so high that they could not even see anymore whether there were enemies outside the walls or not!

As their fear increased they told each other: “Our enemies have become so numerous that they may be able to tear down our walls. Our walls are not strong enough to keep them away. We need to put explosives and barbed wire on top of the walls so that nobody will dare to even come close to us. But instead of feeling safe and secure behind their armed walls they found themselves trapped in the prison they had built with their own fear”<sup>2</sup>.

It was fear and the desire for security which drove the people to turn their backs on those in need and imprison themselves behind their own armed walls. It was not fear of the Lord, nor desire for his refuge, but fear of the stranger and desire for self-preservation.

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 73-74 -This modern day parable is accredited to Nouwen from a Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Breakfast, though he uses similar texts in other writings of his.

And why shouldn't we fear? We live in a cursed land, fallen and broken, so distant from the paradise that God meant us for originally. If we feel like strangers in a strange land, it is because we indeed are. As exiles, what could be wrong with a healthy dose of fear and a desire for security? Fear and security are intimately linked. We fear when we do not feel secure. As feelings of security increase, feelings of fear should decrease, and vice versa. Nouwen continues, (after the writing of that parable referenced above) to make the point that "fear engenders fear... it never gives birth to love", and the same could be said of security. The more earthly security we have, the more security we want. We seek anything to drive away that fear – anything to protect what is *ours*. However, over and over again in scripture we are called to "fear the Lord"<sup>3</sup>, or we are reminded of the blessings that come with "the fear of the Lord". That fear is a natural and healthy way for us to interact and relate to God. When we fear God in the appropriate way, we actually *find security*. Resting in God provides for us a truer form of security than we could ever find from walls or weapons<sup>4</sup>. It is when our fear overtakes our trust in God, and when our fear blocks the exile from heading home, and when our fear overwhelms us to the point that we are willing to rest our ultimate security in something that is not ultimately able to comfort us or protect us, then both our fear and our security have been misplaced, and made into idols.

The purpose of this study is to examine the idol of security. In other words, to explore the places and circumstances in our lives where we position security higher on our list of priorities than God himself. By searching scripture, surveying church history, and viewing security

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<sup>3</sup>John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspect of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1957), 229 - "The fear of God is the soul of godliness. The emphasis of Scripture in both the Old Testament and the New requires no less significant a proposition. Whether it be in the form, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9: 10; Psalm 111: 10) or 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge' (Proverbs 1: 7), we are advised that what the Scripture regards as knowledge or wisdom takes its inception from the apprehension and emotion which the fear of God connotes."

<sup>4</sup>Psalm 127:1 actually tells us that those things are pointless without the Lord

through the theological lens of several key Reformed concepts, it is this author's hope to challenge points in our "Christian" American culture where we idolize our security, as well as to encourage and affirm points in that same culture that will enable us to more fully pursue the kingdom of God.

Through the following chapters, we will survey:

1. Biblical examples of personal narratives and how the people within those narratives succeeded or failed at making God their priority in regards to security within their various circumstances. We will also examine various narratives describing those who have placed their ultimate security in the Lord in their diverse situations. We will observe those who are somehow 'at risk', and look at examples of those that have placed their faith in finding security outside of the Lord.
2. Church History, and how the kingdom of God has often flourished when Christians put God at the forefront of their lives, eschewing personal comfort or safety while attempting to love both their neighbor and their God.
3. A theological examination, regarding our basis for and the implications of, finding ultimate security in the Trinitarian God found in the Bible.

The scope and breadth of this thesis prevents an exhaustive examination of the subject matter; however, through consideration of key narrative passages, historical examples, and Reformed theological doctrines, it is possible to see an emerging pattern to guide us in guarding against the danger of idolizing security.

Examining the previously listed topics, viewing them through a lens which acknowledges God as the true source of our security, will allow for a framework in which to build an honest

assessment of our modern day grasp of what it means to be secure, as well as how to pursue true security, which is to say, Christ alone. This will be accomplished in an integrative chapter. The integrative chapter will also glean from the biblical, historical, and theological chapters in order to pursue specific topics that the modern American Christian will face and to provide guidance toward keeping Christ as the central focus of our lives, so that we find our ultimate security nowhere else.

Because security is such a broad topic, for the sake of this thesis I will particularly be concerned with a sub-topic that falls within the major topic of security, and that is: personal safety. Specifically, I am limiting my discussion to two levels of instances where mankind is grasping for this particular type of security:

1. **The micro level:** This level is concerned with individuals pursuing and relying on personal safety for themselves or their families by means of their own intervention.

Examples of this include individuals owning guns to protect themselves. People avoiding the sick to avoid getting sick themselves. A family moving into a gated community in order to protect themselves from other people. These examples are personal or family decisions made in order to protect self or family. This will be the primary focus of the arguments made and examples used.

2. **The macro level:** This level is concerned with communities and nation states relying on policy to secure safety for the inhabitants. These are the decisions that get made from ten thousand feet up. Examples include immigration, refugee policies, and gun policies – each can all be a means of pursuing cultural safety on a macro level. A person's health and safety can be influenced by these things, but in less direct ways than issues on the

micro level. The macro level will not be focused upon, but is noteworthy enough to be included, as there is overlap with the micro level.

To be clear, none of the examples used above – in order to better understand the micro and macro levels – are inherently good or bad. There is wisdom on both sides of the debate on each of the listed examples. However, by looking at the security mentality of most modern Americans culture – at the individual (micro) and policy (macro) spheres of influence – including both the day to day decisions by ordinary citizens, as well as the policies enacted in order to attempt to ensure the safety of our citizens, we begin to see a pattern of self-preservation which demonstrates an idolization of security. This thesis will examine both macro and micro levels through the grid of a multi-faceted theological, historical, and Scripturally-driven Christian framework, intending to show that there is a current cultural trend (though by no means unique, in essence, to modern-day America) toward an idolatry of security and personal safety. This thesis endeavors to raise theological, historical, and Scriptural, questions on the above stated topics, not in order to condemn them, but in order to reorient, guide, and sharpen our both understanding and our implementation of security in our own lives and in the life of the world.

## CHAPTER 2

### Church History Chapter

Our exploration begins with church history. Looking at historical snapshots of how our brothers and sisters in Christ from bygone eras have handled themselves amidst danger and adversity will begin to give us insight into our own cultural climate. It will also allow us to discern where patterns and repetition of themes throughout history can help guide our modern perceptions of kingdom building in light of the modern issues we face regarding the issue of security. This chapter will also include a section on the current church, which is simply “church history in the making.”

#### The Early Church

Christianity’s beginnings were beyond humble from a traditional historical standpoint. According to Historian Michael Licona in his book *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*: “After Jesus’ death, the disciples endured persecution, and a number of them experienced martyrdom. The strength of their conviction indicates that they were not just claiming Jesus had appeared to them after rising from the dead. They really believed it. They willingly endangered themselves by publicly proclaiming the risen Christ”<sup>5</sup>. While we do not have proof that all the apostles died as martyrs, at the very least there is evidence to support that many of them did so. They were eschewing personal safety for the Gospel. There was no great political, financial, or personal security to be gained by identifying themselves as Christians. From Emperor Nero (64 A.D.) to Emperor Constantine (313 A.D.), early Christians were the targets of persecutions – occasionally, unspeakable cruelty. Nero blamed Christians for the great fire that destroyed a large portion of Rome in 64 A.D. and the

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<sup>5</sup> Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 366

historian, Tacitus, wrote that for believers, “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired”<sup>6</sup>.

In the large gap between Nero and Constantine there were various periods of tolerance and persecution where Christianity was legally condemned<sup>7</sup>. Throughout this time period, Christians were not afforded legal protection and it was dependent on whichever Emperor was in charge how vigorously (and harshly) Christians would be persecuted. If there was a time that Christians were beginning to feel secure (despite being officially illegal), that security dissipated in 250. While Christian persecution was substantial, before this time, it had largely been localized. According to Williston Walker in his book, *A History of the Christian Church*, the edict of 250 “initiated the first universal and systematic persecution of Christianity”. He goes on to describe the situation that Christians at this time found themselves in:

The Decian persecution was by far the worst trial that the church as a whole had undergone-- the more severe because it had principle and determination behind it. The aim was not primarily to take life, though there were numerous and cruel martyrdoms, but rather to compel Christians by torture, imprisonment, or fear to sacrifice to the old gods. Bishops Fabian of Rome and Babylas of Antioch die as martyrs. Origen and hosts of others were tortured. The number of these ‘confessors’ was very great. So, also, was the number of ‘lapsed’-- that is, of those who, through fear and torture, sacrificed, burned incense, or procured certificates from friendly or venal officials that they had duly worshipped in the form prescribed by the state... [in] 258 [Valerian, a friend of Decian and now ruler of Rome] Christian assemblies were forbidden; Christian churches and cemeteries confiscated; bishops, priests, and deacons ordered to be executed, and lay Christians in high places disgraced, banished, and their goods held forfeited... It was a fearful period of trial, lasting, with intermissions indeed, from 250-259<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Plubius Cornelius Tacitus, , *Complete Works of Tacitus: The Annals*, Alfred John Church (New York: The Modern Library, 1942) bk 15, chap 44

<sup>7</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (Miami: HardPress Publishing, 2013), 84

<sup>8</sup> Walker *A History of the Christian Church*, 86-87

For nearly 200 years in the Roman Empire, Christians were under threat of persecution, based on the whims of whichever ruler decided to enforce the illegality of their existence. To be a Christian in this era was to risk personal safety, and those feelings of security that every man longs for. Yet, somehow, as Williston puts it, “The church had come out of the struggle stronger than ever before”. The early church was built on risk, or more appropriately, on trust in the Lord. Of course, there is an argument to be made that in any given situation, whether life and limb are on the line, whether or not there be any greater risk than going against the will of God. Through persecution, and secret meetings, Christianity grew, seemingly against all odds.

Safety, while a good and important endeavor in the life of believers, was not prioritized over living out one’s faith in the midst of persecution. It was not made into an idol. Writing in this paradigm runs the risk of a reversed version of chronological snobbery – romanticizing the past in a way that makes it seem like Christians in the early church never put fear and security before faith. Of course, this isn’t true. Many of those persecuted ‘lapsed’, that is, they gave into the torture and coercion pressuring them to denounce God. However, even those who may have seemed to put their own safety and well-being before God often returned afterwards seeking readmittance to the church<sup>9</sup>. Thus putting their lives and well-being back in jeopardy. Knowing that torture and death could be on the horizon, depending on the whims of the ruler, and yet still being willing to call oneself a Christian, is an incredible testimony to the security these men and women of the early church must have found in God Almighty.

During this era of persecution in the life of early church, there was another aspect noted regarding Christians, one which has somewhat faded since that time, namely, the Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 86: “Many of the lapsed, when the persecution was over, returned to seek in bitter penitence readmission to the church.”

attitude toward war and bloodshed. There appears to have been an aversion to military service and warfare among early Christians, primarily due to a distaste for spilling blood. Bainton's

*Early Christianity* goes into greater detail:

Long after the Church had come to condone Christian participation in warfare he who killed in battle had still to do penance before being received again to communion. This objection to bloodshed was based on a feeling for the incompatibility of love and killing. All the Church Fathers stressed that Christians take literally the command to love their enemies... Certain differences of emphasis among the Fathers are apparent. The pacifism of Marcion was ascetic... The pacifism of Tertullian was eschatological and legalistic... The pacifism of Origen more pragmatic... [in any case] military service was allowed but warfare rejected... A Christian might be a soldier provided he did not kill<sup>10</sup>.

While this may seem like a tenuous connection to the idea that security has since become an idol, the point is that in the early church, a time of both persecution and significant growth of the church, the sentiment of pacifism (for various reasons) held the day. This does not seem to be the current sentiment of a large swathe of Christians in current day America, preferring just wars and lethal defense instead of pacifism.

### **The Reformation**

There is simply no denying the impact that Martin Luther has had on our western understanding of theology and Scripture. Luther often gets credit for single handedly starting the Reformation! Obviously, there were complex and intricate mechanisms at work in order to drive forward the movement of this world changing time in history, but Luther certainly added his own special flair. When Luther stood at the Diet of Worms, was presented with his writings, and asked whether he would recant from what he had said within them, he was faced with an incredible choice: Will he choose God, or will he choose safety? Recanting, amidst the considerable backlash that he was facing, offered him a path to a life of uneventful, relative

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<sup>10</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Early Christianity* (Malabar: R.E. Krieger Pub. Co., 1984), 53-54

comfort. To not recant was supposed to be a death sentence, the death sentence of a heretic. In order for Luther to say, “Here I stand”<sup>11</sup>, he had to be ready to die.

Luther acknowledged that his conscience was “captive to the word of God” and he recognized that “[he could not] and [would] not recant anything, for to go against *conscience* is neither right nor safe”<sup>12</sup>. The jump from going against *conscience* to going against the word of God is a bit of a leap, and yet, based on Luther’s conviction he seemed to be saying that it was neither right nor safe to go against the word of God. It was in Luther’s opinion, more *right* and more *safe* for him to pursue what he perceived as God’s truth rather than to pursue taking the path of personal safety. Because Luther understood where his true security lay, he was able to lay his personal safety on the line. Some things that are important to note, lest we run the risk of succumbing to relativism<sup>13</sup>:

1. Luther was not simply a layman claiming his conscience. He was a seventeen-year veteran monk, and his ‘conscience’ was tied to a powerful intellect which meditated often on the Scriptural tenets of man’s faith and God’s righteousness.

2. Luther’s thoughts, and the truth he sought to defend, while claiming his *conscience*, have been highly discussed, dissected, and determined well within the boundaries of Reformed Christian thought. All that to say, that the leap between conscience and God’s truth in this case is likely small.

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<sup>11</sup> Whether Luther ever actually said the words, “Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.” Is a debated topic. The transcripts of the Diet nor eyewitness accounts conclude that Luther said this. Despite this, Luther is still well known for the quote being attributed to him.

<sup>12</sup> Translation is from H.C. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford Press University, 1967), 285

<sup>13</sup> In this particular case, relativism would be the idea that truth and morality exist in relation only to our consciences as opposed to having an absolute.

Had Luther in this moment shirked from his call to proclaim God's truth, even in the face of being labeled a heretic, while facing the possibility of death, he would have been putting his own security in place of God. He would have in that moment, broken the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 3:20). Luther would have put a god of his own making, one of security and of self-protection, before the Lord Almighty. In Tim Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods*, he introduces the concept of the idol by writing, "Most people know you can make a god out of money. Most know you can make a god out of sex. However, anything in life can serve as an idol, a God-alternative, a counterfeit god"<sup>14</sup>. By this definition, had Luther revered his personal safety over God, he would have created an idol for himself.

Luther was by no means the only reformer to make these decisions, but perhaps the most prominent. A major change between the early church and the reformation, in regards to security, is that in the early church persecution came primarily by way of the state, i.e., outside of the church. During the reformation, the Catholic church was a major player in state affairs, and so instead of persecution from the outside, early reformers were viewed as outsiders and were persecuted from those within the church, in the name of defending Scripture.

### **The Current Church**

Humanity is humanity, and we see similar sins and idols crop up throughout history. However, on a whole, when looking at the Church from a big picture perspective and comparing the early church to modern day Protestant and evangelical America, the former had much more growth, while the latter has much more comfort. Persecution for the early church looked like life and limb on the line. That sort of persecution *still* happens in our world<sup>15</sup>, but often what passes

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xvi

<sup>15</sup> *Lord, have mercy.*

for persecution of Christians in modern America, is contempt for which cakes we are willing to bake<sup>16</sup>, to whom we are willing to issue marriage certificates<sup>17</sup>, and whether or not our college professors agree with us about the existence of God<sup>18</sup>. These topics are no doubt important and worthy of discussion. There are moments when Christians are called to take stands on modern day ethical issues. However, the difference between the persecutions of the early church and ‘persecutions’ of the modern day church in America are night and day in contrast. There are convictions being tread on in one case, there is a choice between life and death/torture in the other.

Whether fortunately or unfortunately (time will tell), Christianity in America – viewed from the macro level – has become highly entwined with politics. In seeking to secure and protect ‘Christian values’ in America, the Christian Right<sup>19</sup> seems to have become much like those people from Nouwen’s fearful hoarded parable. They seek and seek and seek security through policy and power, while living within one of the most affluent cultures in history. At the same time, this Christian sub-group often claims persecution on its efforts. On the one hand, the church seems to be thriving in this period of history, while on the other hand, many on the Christian Right would admit to, or at least fear, losing ground on moral issues in society.

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<sup>16</sup> Christian bakery owner Jack Phillips won a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case in June 2018 over his refusal to make a wedding cake for a gay couple based on his religious convictions

<sup>17</sup> Citing personal religious objections to same-sex *marriage*, Kim Davis began denying *marriage licenses* to all couples to avoid issuing them to same-sex couples. ... Davis continued to defy the court order by refusing to issue marriage licenses "under God's authority"; she was ultimately jailed for contempt of court.

<sup>18</sup> *God's Not Dead*, a Christian film from 2014 whose protagonist risks failing a college course for refusing to disavow his faith.

<sup>19</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2018), 623-626 - The Christian Right was a “forceful reaction... against the social revolution of the 1960s. It’s dominant theme was nostalgia for some previous time in history- some quasi mythical past - in which America was a (white) Christian Nation.” The Christian Right is no longer a forceful movement, but has eroded into simply a faction within the republican party.

Within the overarching confines of what we would identify as “Christians in America”, even within the confines of the Christian Right sub-group, there is further categorization necessary. One such category is that of the modern American evangelical<sup>20</sup>. In Christian Smith’s book, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, he analyzes one of the most thriving sub-categories of modern Christianity. In it, he points out the following:

American evangelicalism enjoys a religious vitality- measured sociologically- that surpasses every other major Christian tradition in the country. Whether gauged by belief orthodoxy, salience of faith, robustness of belief, church attendance, participation in social and religious mission, or membership recruitment and retention, the conclusion is the same: American evangelicalism is thriving<sup>21</sup>.

At first blush, this sounds like fantastic news. From a historical context, the church has gone from a small, persecuted, minority in the Roman empire, which grew majorly dominant in European culture and went through a Reformation which helped its spread to Northern America, and by all appearances, a current expression of that same historically rooted church is thriving today. It sounds like good news and also sounds like it has very little to do with the issue of the idol of security. However, Smith goes on to make the point that part of this thriving is due to what he labels ‘subcultural identity theory’ which states, basically, that religions in modern pluralistic society can seem to flourish if they position themselves in such a way that their moral orientation provides meaning and belonging to their supporters, and that this moral orientation

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<sup>20</sup> “Evangelicalism is a Protestant movement that affirms the authority of the Bible, Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, the need for a personal commitment to Christ, and the need for all believers to participate actively in religious mission”- as defined by Lydia Bean in *Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4

<sup>21</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 120

subsequently offers a collective identity<sup>22</sup>. He then uses this theory to examine evangelicalism's 'conspicuous vitality'<sup>23</sup>:

Distinction, engagement, and conflict vis-à-vis outsiders constitutes a crucial element of what we might call the 'cultural DNA' of American evangelicalism. The evangelical tradition's entire history, theology, and self-identity presupposes and reflects strong cultural boundaries with non-evangelicals; a zealous burden to convert and transform the world outside of itself; and a keen perception of external threats and crises seen as menacing what it views to be true, good, and valuable<sup>24</sup>.

In essence, Smith regards the thriving of Evangelicalism to be due in large part to a determined effort for evangelical discussion attempting to harbor themes of crisis, conflict, and threat, in a hunkered down "us versus them" mentality. This mentality propagates the perception of crisis among evangelicals, "[serving] to invigorate and mobilize evangelical vitality." Evangelicalism seems to feed on anxiety and calamity in order to remain nourished and active.

If true, this is a problem. What Smith points out through this chapter is not a Christianity known for its love, compassion, and reckless service, but one that is known for its bunker mentality. The vitality that Smith points out does not seem to come from individuals putting themselves in spaces where there is risk – risk that God will use to glorify himself, but rather putting themselves in spaces where they "glorify" God by fighting tooth and nail to maintain boundaries. In other words, in this season of history, the most vital sub-group of Christianity is not breaking down walls in the way Jesus did, but hoisting them up the way the Pharisees did. Have they traded in their ultimate security in the Lord to stand atop a cultural soap box? Is this the best way to submit to, obey, and ultimately glorify God?

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 120- though this theory is further detailed and examined in Chapter 4.

<sup>23</sup> A term Smith uses to describe the state of American Evangelicalism

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 121

Are evangelicals drawing hard lines between “Christians” and “the world”? Smith writes: “distinction from ‘the world’ weaves in and through all evangelical talk”<sup>25</sup>. Well that it should, as Christians are called to be in the world but not of the world<sup>26</sup>. In that way it certainly makes sense that evangelical discourse maintains distinction from the world. However, in following the incarnational example of Christ, we are not called to be bunkered. We are not the metaphorical machine gunner sitting inside the wall firing off verbal bullets of morality, no matter the veracity of such verbal bullets, in order to stay safe inside our wall. Rather, we are called to be the medic, running out amidst the chaos and fighting. We are in the war. There is no doubt that a battle rages around us, but we are not, as Christian men and women, called to be bringers of death. We are in the world, but not of it.

The current state of the evangelical church in America and the sense of embattlement that seems to lead to its vitality is echoed by other writers as well. Lydia Bean in her book *Politics of Evangelical Identity* writes in regards to cultural conflict:

Christian nationalism and ‘moral issues’ [are used] to rally the faithful for religious goals: evangelism, community service, lay leadership... [even while avoiding] explicitly political talk, they enforced an implicit consensus that voting Republican on “moral issues” was an essential part of evangelical identity... [drawing] symbolic boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘liberals’ with a great deal of slippage between the religious and political meanings of the label”<sup>27</sup> in regards to justifying resentment towards out groups, not reinforced by congregation, instead “individuals had actively sought out media sources, parachurch ministries, and experiences that would reinforce their fears and resentments”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 125

<sup>26</sup> John 15:19, John 17:14, John 18:36, Romans 12:2, Colossians 3:2

<sup>27</sup> Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*, 63

<sup>28</sup> Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*, 224

The reinforcement of our fears and resentments is similarly a reinforcement that we need to be protected, and if we are not seeking and finding that protection in God, then those reinforced fears and resentments take us away from the scriptural idea that perfect love casts out fear.<sup>29</sup>

According to a 2018 article in *The Atlantic*, global Christianity was dominated by North America, Europe, and Australia a century ago, but the trend has shifted so that now, the faith is growing more quickly in regions like sub-Saharan Africa<sup>30</sup>. The article presented the idea that this trend is in part due to the fact that of the sixty two million Americans under the umbrella designation of “evangelical”, there are deep fractures between Christians ranging from political, to racial, to theological. While such an observation is no doubt true, could it also be that part of the reason for an aging, fading, less winsome faith in these more developed nations is that with greater levels of peace, affluence, and security, we offer fewer spaces for people to see God at work? Can our modernized, seemingly secure lifestyles lead to a spiritual emptiness that robs us of opportunities for kingdom building in meaningful ways? Dortehe Sölle, a German liberation theologian, in an article discussing (and titled) *Life in All its Fullness*, presents a scathing critique of the emptiness our developed countries can fall into when not cautious of where we are finding our security:

Life in all its fullness is an impossibility when one is forced to live in absolute poverty. But even in the wealthy first world there is very little fulfilled life to be found, only an ever-growing inner emptiness. What comes between Christ and the middle-classes of the first world is not material poverty but spiritual emptiness. The meaninglessness of life perceived by many sensitive individuals ever since the beginning of industrial development has now become a widespread experience among the mass of people in the first world: nothing delights them, nothing moves them deeply, their relationships are superficial and interchangeable, their hopes and dreams go no further than their next

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<sup>29</sup> 1 John 4:18

<sup>30</sup> Emma Green, “How Trump is Remaking Evangelicalism”, *The Atlantic*, par. 18, August 10 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/still-evangelical-trump/554831/>

holiday trip. For the majority, work is unsatisfying, pointless, boring. God created us as men and women with a capacity for working and loving. We participate in creation in our work and in our sexuality in the widest sense of the word. Fullness of life means amongst other things becoming a worker and a lover. For most people in the first world, however, life is more like a long death lingering over many years. It is pain-free: there are pills and to spare, after all; it is feeling-free: "Don't be so emotional" is an expression of strong disapproval in our language; it is without grace because life is seen as self-achieved and not as a gift from the Creator. It is life without a soul lived in a world which calculates everything in terms of what it is worth; nothing is beautiful and a source of happiness for its own sake, the only thing that counts is what you can get for it. We are empty and at the same time surfeited with superfluous goods and products. There is an odd relationship between the many objects we possess and consume and the emptiness of our real existence. While Christ came that we might have fullness of life, capitalism came to turn everything into money. That is the long death that looks out at us from so many empty faces. Just think for a moment of a traffic jam, everyone sitting alone inside their own tin can, slowly and aggressively edging their way forward. Frustration and hatred of the people in front and the people behind is the normal reaction. This is an image of life in its emptiness in the rich world"<sup>31</sup>.

She describes here, people living a life of an abundance of wealth, while missing out on the life more abundant that Jesus calls us to. She's specifically discussing the 'wealthy first world', but the line between searching for security through wealth and searching for security in personal safety is paper thin. If Christian America is to pursue our kingdom calling wholeheartedly, it will require turning away from living in such a way that we "calculate everything in terms of worth", starting with the worth of our own security.

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<sup>31</sup> Sölle, Dorothee, "Life in All its Fullness," *The Ecumenical Review* 35, no. 4 (Oct 1983): 377-384.

## CHAPTER 3

### Theology Chapter

In addressing the idol of security, it is necessary to go beyond simply historical examples in our examination. This chapter seeks to build up a case against the idol of self-preservation through a theological framework based on several key elements within the Reformed theological tradition. What does our understanding of the character and image of God tell us in regard to the idol of security? How does the Reformed tradition influence and affect our grasp of this nuanced topic? The goal of this chapter is to discern how our theology comes to bear on our desire for, and implementation of, security in our lives.

#### Addressing the Doctrine of God

Perhaps no doctrine has greater bearing on all other doctrines than the doctrine of God. How we understand the nature and character of God himself influences how we understand the nature of man, who bears God's image; the nature of Christ, who works to satisfy the father; the nature of salvation, which is effected by God; the nature of ethics, the norms of which are based on God's Character; and a myriad of other theological considerations, all drawing on our understanding of God<sup>32</sup>.

Dr. Sproul hits the nail on the head. In examining the idol of security (or anything according to Sproul), we must start with God. According to Louis Berkhoff, “the only proper way to obtain perfectly reliable knowledge of the divine attributes [of God] is by the study of God's self-revelation in Scripture”<sup>33</sup>. He goes on to describe options for classifying the divine attributes and settles on the distinction between “incommunicable and communicable attributes”<sup>34</sup> with the caveat that “none of the attributes of God are incommunicable in the sense that there is no trace of them in man, and that none of them are communicable in the sense that they are found in man

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<sup>32</sup> RC Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology: Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 25

<sup>33</sup> Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 55

<sup>34</sup> Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, 56

as they are found in God”<sup>35</sup>. In order to be pursue this examination of the idol of security, this chapter will focus solely on the communicable attributes of God observable through God’s self-revelation in Scripture and limited (where possible – there are certain unavoidable overlaps) to those attributes which are relevant to how we pursue and perceive safety. This is a vast topic, and as such cannot be covered exhaustively, but even a limited survey will provide the guidance and perspective necessary for this topic.

Within the communicable attributes of God, Berkhof further classifies these attributes into subsections as follows: (a) The Spirituality of God, (b) Intellectual attributes,<sup>36</sup> (c) Moral attributes,<sup>37</sup> and (d) Attributes of Sovereignty<sup>38</sup>. Each of these subsections include relevant aspects, and those of particular interest in regards to the topic at hand are the wisdom, righteousness, and sovereignty of God.

In seeking to understand the wisdom, righteousness, and sovereignty of God, we find Him to be both knowable in how He has revealed himself, yet incomprehensible in the utter magnitude with which he embodies these things for our limited perspective. In His wisdom, “[God] always strives for the best possible ends, and chooses the best means for the realization of His purposes”<sup>39</sup>. His purposes being “a final end to which all secondary ends are subordinate... the glory of God”<sup>40</sup>. For our part, this means that the Lord is knowable in that He will act in wisdom for His own glory, and yet he is incomprehensible in that we do not know what such wisdom looks like for all of our own circumstances. However, we are not without guidance in regard to how we are to pursue the kingdom and/or avoid making an idol of security.

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<sup>35</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 56

<sup>36</sup> This includes the knowledge, wisdom, and veracity of God. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 67-69

<sup>37</sup> This includes the goodness, righteousness, and holiness of God. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 74-76

<sup>38</sup> The sovereign will and power of God, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 77-81

<sup>39</sup> Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* 69

<sup>40</sup> Berkhoff lists the following scriptures as examples - Rom 11:33, 14:7,8, Eph. 1:11,12, Col. 1:16

Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom (Matthew 6:33), to love the Lord our God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27), and that we shall be known as disciples of Christ, and therefore kingdom oriented people, if we love one another (John 13:35).

A closer look at each of these three aspects (wisdom, righteousness, and sovereignty) will allow us a more fully developed view of why we can seek security in God, as well as why that is a better place to find our security than on our own.

- **Security in Regards to God's Wisdom**

Wisdom is an aspect of knowledge which renders knowledge useful, relevant, and significant in ways that knowledge on its own would not grant. If knowledge is facts, wisdom is the application of those facts to particular and relevant circumstances. While Daniel mentions the wisdom of God as “deep and hidden things” (Dan 2:22), generally we are to understand wisdom as “the skill of godly living.”<sup>44</sup> God, being God, is a master of godly living, while we slowly learn and absorb these deep hidden things as they are revealed to us. When it comes to security, God has given us ample wisdom to choose to pursue the kingdom instead of pursuing only self-indulgence. The entirety of the Scriptures is described as “God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). That is, equipped for godly living.

Unfortunately, in our brokenness, we ignore or forget this and we even balk at the wisdom of Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight”, and instead put trust in ourselves, leaning on our own understanding, and submitting to no one. When we do this, we

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<sup>44</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 507

attempt to rest in our own security, which cannot succeed as long as we are operating from limited wisdom, righteousness, and sovereignty. However, when we trust in the Lord instead of our own understanding, we gain a better perspective on our place in the world. If we are solely focused on avoiding discomfort from a hedonistic vantage point, or in a mislead understanding of the good news as a type of prosperity gospel, then we overvalue both our wisdom and our being. In our discomfort, there are opportunities for God’s power, justice, and wisdom to be revealed in ways that we miss when we are never in those spaces of discomfort.

We are called to respond to difficulties in our lives by asking God for wisdom and told that he will give it generously without reproach. As God imparts his wisdom to us, we are not to expect that the wisdom will necessarily lead to fewer trials in our lives, but rather, we will discover steadfastness in our faith. A steadfastness that leads to our being perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2-5). The assumption is that we *will* meet trials and that we *will* lack wisdom. For the Christian, trouble is implied even for the best Christians. Having access to the great joy of Christ does not prevent us from also being afflicted, and we should not think it odd when we are met with trouble, and it is for Christians a refining process<sup>46</sup>.

- **Security in Regards to God’s Righteousness**

In regards to God’s righteousness, it is necessary to frame our understanding of what is meant by that term in order to utilize it to point us in the right direction regarding security.

According to John M. Frame;

The main idea of divine righteousness is that God acts according to a perfect

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<sup>46</sup> “James 1,” Bible Hub, Matthew Henry *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Complete), accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/james/1.html>

internal standard of right and wrong. All his actions are within the limits of that standard. So God's righteousness is the form or structure of his goodness, and his goodness is the concrete, active embodiment of his righteousness<sup>47</sup>.

If God has a perfect internal standard of right and wrong, then we should be wary of any decisions we make that go contrary to that. This of course sounds like a supremely obvious statement, but in regards to how we pursue our own security, this reminder adds substance to the idea that we should not be choosing our safety over God's will. Because we do *not* have a perfect internal standard of right and wrong, when we pursue self-preservation in the face of God's wisdom, our actions are outside the limits of the structure of God's goodness. This is one of many reasons why it is idolatrous to do so. Frame goes on to write that the "righteousness that God expects from us is essentially to image his own ethical character – his love, his holiness, his righteousness"<sup>48</sup>. This expectation goes unmet in a myriad of ways in our broken world, but often the security or safety we pursue or covet is in direct opposition to his love, holiness, and righteousness.

- **Security in regards to God's Sovereignty**

The sovereignty of God is a key aspect to understand in our fight against the idol of security. In speaking of God's sovereignty, we must speak to both his authority and control. John M. Frame discusses the relationship between authority and control:

The relationship between control and authority is one between might and right. Control means that God has the power to direct the whole course of nature and history as he pleases. Authority means that he has the right to do that. From our standpoint as creatures, God's authority is his right to command, his right to tell us what we ought to do. When he issues commands, he is supremely right in doing so<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 446

<sup>48</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 449

<sup>49</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 80

Frame goes on to explain that God's authority implies his control and vice versa. While he does not specifically identify the combination of control and authority to equal sovereignty, it is no grand jump to qualify them as such. Sovereignty is having jurisdiction in a given sphere and ability to operate within it. It is having the power to work in a given dominion and having the permission to do so. The greatness of this sovereignty is grounds for us to incorporate an understanding of it into every circumstance that we are faced with, but especially in regards to circumstances relating to our security. It is his sovereignty which reminds us that nothing is too hard for God. Well, one might ask, "if nothing is too hard for God, why doesn't he get me out of my present difficulty?" The answer to that question requires that we avoid divorcing God's sovereignty from his wisdom, goodness, and righteousness. As each of these attributes describes a true part of God's character, they do not alone describe the true nature of who God fully is. His sovereignty means that he *can* free us from a specific predicament, but his wisdom or righteousness gives him ample amounts of reasons *not* to. These reasons cannot be fully comprehended from our human vantage point.

Based on a Reformed doctrine of God, the problem with seeking our own security above and beyond what God has called us to as his followers becomes evidently foolish. We cannot seek our own good and security above our kingdom calling because we are not wise enough to recognize what is best for us. We also are not good or righteous enough to trust that we are acting from proper motivations. So instead of attempting to exercise our own limited sovereignty over our limited spheres of influence we should trust in the wisdom, righteousness, and sovereignty of God to work all things for good. In the midst of trials or difficulties, God is still at work, and that work becomes even more evident in our lives than it would have been had we avoided the trials and difficulties altogether. In his sovereignty, he presents us with opportunities

to lean on him. Furthermore, if we never have need to lean upon his help and grace because we always feel self-sufficiently secure, then we will miss out on those occasions which are further shaping us into the image bearers that we are meant to be. Christ did not pursue his safety, but recognized God's sovereignty, and we are called to look like Christ. The more we look like Christ, the more fully "us" we truly are.

### **Addressing Man in the Image of God**

The understanding that man is made in the image of God should have a profound influence on our understanding of, and push against, security as an idol. According to Berkhof, "The doctrine of the image of God in man is of the greatest importance in theology, for that image is the expression of that which is most distinctive in man and in his relation to God."<sup>50</sup> It is so important because as Calvin puts it, "The image of God extends to everything in which the nature of man surpasses that of all other species of animals"<sup>51</sup>. In other words, that which is most distinctive in man in our relationship to God, is the part of our nature which surpasses that of the beasts of the field. We have the unique ability found nowhere else in the world, to be in a situation of danger and choose neither fight nor flight. The aspect known as free will allows us to evaluate any given situation, recognize that there is a chance for danger, and choose to pursue safety by means of fight or flight or choose not to pursue safety in an effort to maintain our momentum towards the kingdom. That does not mean that all paths towards the kingdom result in danger to our persons, or that by being kingdom oriented there is never a time to either flee or stand firm. However, the radical third option which is made available because of our being created in the image of God allows us to again recognize that security (flight) or victory (fight) is

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<sup>50</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Part 2, 206

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.15.3

not our main purpose. We have a radical third option, which is to take refuge in God. Our security is found in running to, and our victory is found in trusting in, him whose image we bear.

It may seem that there is a disconnect between being made in the image of God and the topic of security. However, Jesus sets a formidable example, as being the clearest representation of the image of God here on earth,<sup>52</sup> unmarred by sin, and in him we see that third path play out. Christ forgoes his own earthly security in heading towards the cross. His victory is not found through a fight, but through submission. This is the expression of that which is most distinctive in man in relation to God, the ability to self-sacrifice. This insight helps our recognition that any sort of security we might place above God in a given circumstance is misplaced, because if we adore our safety to the degree that it goes beyond our adoration for God, then we have not lived within the sphere of blessing that being created in His image provides. Any sort of earthly security is not a legitimate competitor for the sort of ultimate refuge we have through our access to God.

Furthermore, we overvalue self when we put our safety before kingdom calling: The image of God simply means that the object bears a resemblance to God. For example, the mirror does not have its value in itself but in what it reflects. The statue has its worth because of the person it represents. Man therefore has his worth not because of himself, but because he in some way reflects God<sup>53</sup>.

This concept presents an ironic predicament in regards to security and our bearing the image of God, in that, if we most resemble and reflect God when we look most like Jesus – who, as noted above, humbles himself to the point of death, forgoing all security he had every right to, as an act of trust in the Father. We look least like Jesus when we lift ourselves up to the point of avoiding pain, thus grasping for a security that we have no right to claim. The irony of such a mentality is

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<sup>52</sup> 2 Cor. 4:4

<sup>53</sup> David P. Scaer, “Man Made in the Image of God and Its Relationship to the First Promise,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (Jul 1977): 20-35.

that by idolizing security we put our own worth above our kingdom call, when in that moment, we are proving ourselves to be wholly unworthy. Idolizing security is a misuse of God's image.

### **Addressing the Sola Security Situation**

To more fully develop an argument within a Reformed theological framework, it is helpful to look at some of the Reformed tradition's key distinctives. Specifically, this section will look at the Five Solas and how they interact with, inform, and refine our understanding of the theological side of security.

- ***Sola Fide, By Faith Alone***

Seemingly Luther's trademark contribution to the Reformation, the doctrine of faith alone is also a hallmark for a discussion in Christian security. For it is not by works that we find security, nor by amassing power, money, acts of service, or knowledge which justifies us before God, but only by the faith we have in Jesus Christ. As sinners, we have no claim to ultimate security outside of the divinely imbued righteousness held by Jesus Christ, and extended to us by way of our faith in Him.

- ***Sola Scriptura, By Scripture Alone***

It is through scripture that we have a lasting, divine and authoritative revelation upon which we may rely for matters of faith and practice. The truth of the gospel of salvation, revealed in Scripture and interpreted responsibly, paints a clear picture for us about how we are to understand our safety. Scripture is paramount in examining and understanding that (1) our ultimate security is not found by our own devices, and (2) God calls us to prioritize Him over the false securities (idols) we seek in any given circumstance.

- ***Solus Christus, Through Christ Alone***

Ultimate security as we understand it, and as revealed in Scripture, can be found only through the life, death, work, and person of Jesus Christ. Without Christ, we are left in the end with no security, because all earthly things we pursue fade. We should “lay up for [ourselves] treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where [our] treasure is, there [our] heart will be also” (Matthew 6:20-21). Our treasure, where our hearts should be, is Jesus Christ and him alone.

- ***Sola Gratia, By Grace Alone***

We are saved by the grace of God, his unmerited favor, and nothing we do commends us to this grace. God does not owe us, and we can do nothing to gain reconciliation in our relationship to Him. Salvation is, from start to finish, a gift of God to those who are wholly unworthy and undeserving. This affects (or should affect) our outlook on the worldly idea of security. Being safe and secure may be a natural human inclination, but it is far from something that is owed to us. Our right to safety extends only as far as God’s grace wills it to. If our salvation – the restoration of our most fundamental relationship between ourselves and God – is fully defined by God’s grace alone then what claim can we make to being owed safety? Once recognized that we are not owed, nor do we have a right to safety, it is easier to knock security off its idolatrous pedestal.

- ***Soli Deo Gloria, Glory to God Alone***

This may be the most fundamental doctrine to utilize against the idol of security. If everything is done for God's glory and if humanity's prime inspiration is not to operate in our daily lives out of motivations of self-glorification, then security takes a major step back in our priorities. Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, if we do it to the glory of God<sup>54</sup> then that summarily puts us in a position of acknowledging that there will be situations in life where acting for the *glory of God* may mean not acting in our own best interests for whatever present circumstance in which we find ourselves. God's glory takes precedence not only over our own glory, but also over our own personal safety, if it comes to that<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Sentence inspired by 1 Cor 10:31

<sup>55</sup> Which as we see throughout the upcoming Biblical Chapter, this is often the case.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Bible Chapter**

A survey of Biblical texts and particularly Biblical narrative, will show that seeking security and safety by our own means has been an idol in the past. It should also convict us that as a church and society, we still struggle with this idol. A look through the Old and New Testaments will supply examples of how man has made security and safety an idol, help to showcase how it remains an issue currently, and provide insight into how we can attempt to rest in God.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive list of scriptural examples, but rather will highlight both the ramifications of seeking security against God's will, as well as the blessings of seeking security within God's will. In order to gain perspective and cognizance on modern idolatries of security, it is important to look to the Biblical precedents set by the men and women whom God chose to portray his kingdom work in the life of the world, as recorded via Scripture.

#### **In the Beginning**

The Garden. The serpent. The Fruit. Naked and afraid. The fall. The story is well known. Regardless of the stance one takes on the literalness of the creation narrative, the major themes of the initial chapters of Genesis are agreed upon. Adam and Eve had it all. They are the only couple this side of eternity to have fully interacted with the fullness of security. They are safe in the loving graces of their creator while simultaneously stewarding paradise. The first disobedience of man led to pain, power struggles, the hardening of the land, and the hardening of mankind's hearts. Although the first example in this chapter, their story shows little of the idol of security. Instead it is included because their story of willful disobedience is a precursor to the eventual idolatry of security. The waywardness of the first man and woman sets up a longing in

all who come after to have what they had: shalom. Wholeness. Flourishing. Peace between man and man, man and creation, man and God. Choices prioritizing security over the will of God are often misguided attempts to fulfill that longing. Misguided because in longing for wholeness man still seeks, just as Adam and Eve did, to go outside the boundaries of what God has created us for. Man reaches for safety or security in the immediate moment, often looking down at his own feet even while overstepping his bounds, instead of keeping his eyes up, along the path God has called him to tread.

### **The Father of Many Nations**

Abraham is instructed by God to go from his country to a new land, and told that he will be the start of a “great nation.” God tells him, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” In faith and obedience, Abraham goes, pursuing the Lord over a life of comfort and security in the land that he has spent the first seventy-five years of his life. Abraham’s story is rife with the struggle of pursuing the will of the Lord amidst danger. In some moments he succumbs to the temptation of self-preservation, in others he persists in the Lord to a degree that demonstrates the incredible depth of his faith.

In his first act of seeking to protect himself, Abraham tells his wife Sarai, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live” (Gen 12). Abraham seeks his own security at the expense of his duty as a husband to protect Sarai. Possibly Abraham assumed God would protect her and her honor for the sake of His covenant promise regarding an heir, but nowhere is it recorded that Abraham was told by God to conceal his wife, Sarai’s, marital status. Through Abraham’s presumption that he needed to lie for his own security in order to protect his

own life, Abraham was doubting God’s capability to fulfill his covenant agreement. Putting his wife—the one of whom God tells husbands to protect (Eph 5:25, granted, this was not yet written during Abraham’s time)—in harm’s way. Furthermore, through Abraham hiding behind the security of being a sibling instead of a husband, not only was he risking dishonoring his wife and obscuring his faith in God’s provision, he also ended up hurting others in the process: “The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abraham's wife. So Pharaoh called Abraham and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go” (Gen 12:19). Abraham’s desire for self-preservation overshadowed his faith in the Lord in these moments. He put his own purposes, if not before, then at least, on par with the purposes that the Lord had laid out for him.

Abraham pulls off this trick again in Genesis 20 and, as the apple does not fall far from the tree, Isaac operates in the same way in Genesis 26. The pull towards self-preservation again overpowers the expectation for God to follow through on His original promise in Genesis 12, “I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.” Yet, despite Abraham’s missteps and the consequent pain he causes others due to his mistakes, the Lord accomplishes the work that the Lord sets out to accomplish. In reviewing Abraham’s story, it almost seems as if he is *rewarded* for acting out of self-preservation. From Pharaoh he received sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels; from Abimelech, flocks, cattle, male servants, and female servants. Could this situation not be one in which rather than Abraham acting out of fear, he is simply an example of the scriptural mandate that Christ later gives to his disciples to be “as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves”? (Matt 10:16) After all, Abraham was probably right to

fear for his life based on his cultural context and understanding. So we can pursue the line of thought that he was acting in wisdom inspired by his fear. Similarly, it wasn't Abraham who bestowed plagues or terror upon the kings who were tricked by his half-truth. It was God. So, did Abraham do anything wrong? Absolutely.

Abraham put self-preservation above his duty as husband. In that regard, given Abraham's circumstance, he relegated God to second tier. Abraham trusted more in his mistruth to protect him and Sarai in that moment than he trusted in God to follow through on his word. How could God make good on his covenant to "make of [Abraham] a great nation" to "bless and make [Abraham's] name great, so that [he would] be a blessing" if Abraham was dead? Abraham's momentary lapse in faithfulness then is no different than our own lapses now. Time and time again, we forget the "big picture" and instead focus in on our own seemingly "important in the moment," but ultimately minute needs<sup>56</sup>. Dillard and Longman's, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, reminds us of the big picture, one that may have been difficult for Abraham to realize in the midst of fear for his life:

Theologically speaking, the centerpiece of this middle section of Genesis [Gen 12-36] is the Abrahamic covenant. Here God promises Abraham descendants and lands and finally assures him that he will be a blessing to the nations. The Old Testament acknowledges that these promises are fulfilled in part within its own time frame as Isaac is born and from him descends the Israelite nation... and Christians are now considered "Abraham's Offspring" ...Abraham received God's promise and then struggled in the face of obstacles to the fulfillment of that promise. [Christians] too have received the promise of God, but daily confront obstacles<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Thankfully we have a God who cares about even the most minute details of our lives, - Luke 12:7 - but that doesn't mean those minute things are the things on which we should base decisions.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond B.Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2011), 51

Abraham, however, did not have the sort of hindsight that we do. The fact that God still blessed Abraham in spite of his shortcomings should not be used to condone our own actions, actions that go against the grain of God's kingdom. Rather, this example sheds light on just how forgiving and graceful God is. Furthermore, we can learn from Abraham, as well as learn from the patterns and repetitions we see in the biblical narrative (those patterns and repetitions we see throughout the history of the church – ways that Abraham did not at the time have access to).

If Abraham's story was the only story that we had to gain understanding from, it would be easy to make mistakes conflating God's blessing with keeping ourselves safe and secure. However, the biblical narrative taken in its entirety reminds again and again that method matters. Process matters. The end goal may be to be blessed, loved, and connected with God, and God does pursue those ends for us, but what we do at the micro level of our lives still matters to God. Abraham was not protected and blessed through his lies, but in spite of them. Abraham was not blessed by his lies, but by God's grace. In that grace, Abraham grew strong in his faith, as noted in Romans 4:20-21: "No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." What seemed to transform Abraham from a man pursuing his own security (as seen in these two examples) to the man that Paul is referring to in Romans chapter 4, is the miraculous circumstance which brought about Abraham's having a son. In considering that "his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), [and considering] the barrenness of Sarah's womb" (Rom 4:19), Abraham is a changed man going forward. As seen in the next example, he is a man willing to put God ahead of even his most cherished possessions.

Abraham continues to be blessed by God, and eventually he has a son, Isaac. For the purposes of exploring the idol of security, we skip straight ahead to the seemingly infamous

moment that would bring fear and trembling<sup>58</sup> to any father, God testing Abraham. God says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:1-2). Abraham is being told to sacrifice as a burnt offering, the very thing that seemed to be his most obvious path forward to God’s fulfillment of his covenant promise of making Abraham the father of a nation. According to Tim Keller, this would be akin to “a surgeon giving up the use of his hands, or of a visual artist losing the use of her eyes.”<sup>59</sup> Abraham is being called to let go of the thing most precious to him. Or rather, as the passage begins, God was testing Abraham, to see just what was most precious to him. Abraham prepared, and escorted Isaac up the mountain.

Then Scripture reads:

“When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (Gen 22:9-14)

It would be overly simplistic to extract from this that God always provides a way out of hard decisions. Rather, God put Abraham’s commitment to the test. Dillard and Longman write, “By waiting until Abraham and Sarah’s extreme old age to give them a child, God demonstrates that this child is truly a divine gift. Isaac is not the product of purely human means.”<sup>60</sup> Isaac was not

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<sup>58</sup> A nod to Søren Kierkegaard’s 1843 book, whose titled work was a nod to Philippians 2:12

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 9

<sup>60</sup> Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 54

something that Abraham earned, nor worked for, nor deserved, but was truly and solely a divine gift. This is true of all good things (James 1:1), yet in Isaac's case, God left no room for doubt.

There can only be one God in Abraham's life. The person that Abraham worships, finds refuge, security, and purpose in, will be his god. Isaac had potential to become all of that for Abraham and if Abraham put his hope for these things in Isaac, then he has made Isaac an idol. If Abraham was putting his hope and the future hope of his family and descendants, as well as having a great name, all on Isaac and Isaac's progeny, Abraham would have been making an idol of Isaac. As Keller puts it, "Isaac was a wonderful gift to Abraham, but he was not safe to have and hold until Abraham was willing to put God first. As long as Abraham never had to choose between his son and obedience to God, he could not see that his love was becoming idolatrous"<sup>61</sup>. We, similarly, do not realize how idolatrous our personal safety, comfort, affluence, and general approach to a secure life have become. That is, not until we are willing to look closely at how we pursue security, no matter how wise that security may seem, and thus ask ourselves, "are we putting this before God?" If the answer is yes, then it is an idol in our lives, and we must be willing to put it on the altar for God.

In testing Abraham, God is reminding him of the divine, unmerited gift that is Isaac. It was never *because* of Isaac that God's promises would be fulfilled. It may be through Isaac, but it is *because* God graciously willed it. Comparably, any security that we are afforded in this life,, we must, as Christians, acknowledge as a divine, unmerited gift. It is not *because* of our security that God is good. It may be *through* security and safety that we see some aspects of God's goodness, but He is to be trusted as our ultimate refuge regardless of circumstance.

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<sup>61</sup> Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 13

## **Safety of the Nation**

Plucked from the river and raised as Egyptian royalty, Moses may be one of the most famous biblical figures outside of Christ. His story is well known and different aspects of his story are utilized for a myriad of illustrations both within and outside of Christianity. From the standpoint of security, Moses' story shows interesting interactions between himself and God, as well as between the people of Israel and God in regards to making God primary in man's search for security. We start in Exodus 3, when Moses encounters God within the burning bush:

The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.' When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?' He said, 'But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.' Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.' God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.'" And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel

shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians. (Exod 3:2-22)

God calls Moses to a heady task: To be a part of the rescue of Israel from slavery as well as the plunder of the Egyptians. Moses has wise and thoughtful questions about how this will work out. However, God tells Moses that “I will be with you... I AM [sends you]”, and then gives, in Exodus 4, signs for Moses to show in order to prove his veracity should any not believe. Moses then makes another point in order to avoid this mission: “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” To which the Lord replies, “Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” How does this encounter speak to the modern day idolatry of security? The short answer is that, like Moses, we often evaluate as unworthy tasks that we are called to; unlike Moses, we often are NOT standing in front of a burning bush which is able to reply to our concerns about our worthiness or lack of it. Moses was insecure about how he would pursue what amounted to a monumental task. We are often insecure about how we should pursue living in light of the gospel call. When our insecurities, fears, or even wise and thoughtful concerns, get in the way of a direct command from the Lord, then we have made an idol of staying secure. Was Moses making an idol of his security? No, because God was right there to stop him, re-orient him, and get him set in the right direction again. The Lord is available for us in a similar way, to offer us redirection. Like Moses, when we encounter the Lord and ask questions, he

guides. Unlike Moses, our conversations look more like study and prayer. The end result should look the same however, acknowledging that we will pursue the will of the Lord.

The Israelites who traveled with Moses could probably have an entire chapter to themselves in regards to where they look for security. However, for the scope of this thesis, two major examples will suffice: the red sea and bread from heaven.

During their rescue from Egypt, the Israelites are caught between the Red Sea and the army of Pharaoh. The ‘security’ that the Israelites had known as slaves, began to look awfully inviting given their current circumstance. Exodus 14:10-14 records:

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

Despite the miracles, plagues and signs that preceded this exodus, the Israelites still long for security, outside of the Lord. They want to be back in Egypt as slaves rather than to be in the wilderness ardently following God. It is difficult to blame them when we search the brokenness and humanness of our own hearts. We look for what seems to be the safer, easier, and more comfortable routes in life daily. What is unique about the Israelites in this moment is not that they shirk from danger or pain; rather that they do so while so closely intertwined in the miraculous narrative that God is unfolding in their midst. God shows grace despite the lack of faith:

The Lord said to Moses.... “Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground” ...Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left...Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. (Exod 14:16, 21-22, 30-31)

The Israelites didn't want God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The Israelites didn't want to build God's kingdom or pursue the path that He had set before them. No, in these moments of grumbling, the Israelites wanted to feel safe. Sadly, they were blind to the fact that the best place they could be was right where God had them. The desire for security can be that overpowering when it is given the gravitas of a god, becoming an idol in our lives.

Not long after, as the Israelites are in the wilderness, they begin to grumble again. Despite the great rescue and despite the Lord's victory on their behalf over the Egyptians and despite the fact that “Israel [had seen the] great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses” (Exod 14:31), despite all of that, it's not long before the Israelites are grumbling. “What shall we drink? What shall we eat”, they asked. They hunger and they thirst, literally, but they also seek for that security which we all hunger and thirst for. They want nothing unique, just the shalom and flourishing that mankind has sought since Eden – the ultimate security that comes with being with God. And yet, like others before them, and others after, they grumble for a security that is sub-par. They ask not for more God, but for more slavery:

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the

hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exod 16:2-4)

There is a desire when reading this narrative to be judgmental of the Israelites. Seeing the narrative written out over the course of a few pages leaves us asking questions like, “why don’t they get it yet?” However, it’s important to remember (though not an excuse) that for the Israelites, this narrative took days and weeks to unfold. They were in places they had never been before, both literally and figuratively. Judgment should be reserved because we often find ourselves in this very same situation: a new place, unsure what tomorrow brings, except for the promise of a God that we cannot fully comprehend.

The modern American Christian grumbles no less than those Israelites. The Israelites were simply lamenting the loss of what Francis Schaeffer calls in his book, *How then Shall we Live?*, personal peace and affluence<sup>62</sup>. The Israelites may have been slaves in Egypt, but slavery was comparatively peaceful and affluent compared to the situation they find themselves dealing with in the wilderness. The theme of complaint and ungratefulness persists throughout Israel’s story, as well as echoes in our own lives. Where will their next meal come from? How will they provide for themselves and their families? Where are they going? How long will it take? These questions must have been swirling in the Israelites heads and not without reason, for to follow God closely, to rely on Him to be a refuge, to trust in him to provide, often means relinquishing our grip on the things we seek to find security in on our own.

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<sup>62</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *How Then Shall We Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 205 -Schaeffer is not in this section of his book referring to the Israelites, but rather our modern day pull towards personal peace and affluence. While I believe we may be more subject to this than previous generations, and America’s cultural context may create an atmosphere that is ripe for pursuing these things, it is by no means unique to us. It is a part of the fall that we seek our security in personal peace and affluence, instead of in God.

Despite the Israelites (and all of our own) difficulties in letting go of things that provide traditional security, God is gracious with his provision. Amidst the complaining and grumbling, God tells Moses his plan for provision is this: “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily” (Exod 16:4-5). This is the way that the Israelites were fed, for forty years in the wilderness. They did not need to hunt, or grow crops, or create complex systems of trade, but only to trust that God would continue to provide. Again, it would be overly simplistic to understand the Israelite’s time in the wilderness as a lesson for our life that whenever we have a need, God will meet it. While in one sense this is true, God does meet our needs (Philippians 4:19, Psalm 34:19, Psalm 46:1, and many more<sup>64</sup>), in another sense it is inaccurate to assume that what *we* think are our needs are identical to what God thinks are our needs. Like the Israelites, our desire is to have our needs met, even if it means straying from God’s plan. We want to be fed, and to feel secure, and we long for that feeling of security, even if means “staying in Egypt” and even if it means remaining in bondage. This is the idol of seeking security in full force: obscuring the grace, goodness, and gifts of God and accepting something lesser in His place. According to Keller, “an idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure’”<sup>64</sup>. The only thing that we can look at and desire with our hearts of hearts that does not lead to idolatry, is the one true God.

### **Enter the Lion’s Den**

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<sup>64</sup> Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xviii

Daniel is a man maintaining hope in the land of his conquerors. Recruited to serve in Babylon, Daniel and his friends are pressured to live and eat like Babylonians. They push back on this pressure, leaning into their Jewish identity, and remaining faithful to the Torah, *even though it puts them in danger*. Obedient faith brings *insecurity* for Daniel and his friends.

Daniel's refusal to conform to the Babylonians begins with a simple request, one that eventually progresses to civil disobedience. It starts when he "resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank" (Dan 1:8). He asks that he be allowed "not to defile" himself, and after a trial period, was granted this permission. Later in Daniel, we see his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, go so far as to refuse to bow down to the statue of the king even though it means they will be put to death. Daniel chapter 3 describes the situation they find themselves in:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold... [and commanded] that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace... [Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego] pay no attention to [the king]; they do not serve [the king's] gods or worship the golden image that [he] have set up... Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?"<sup>15</sup> Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. (Dan 3:1-18)

This is a stark contrast to the type of responses seen in much of the rest of the Biblical narrative, as well as in our own lives. What an encouraging and inspirational faith these men show in the face of an absolutely terrible death. An important note to make is that these men had no assurance from God that they would be delivered. They say as much in verse 17, when they declare, “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand...” but if not, we still “will not serve you gods or worship the golden image.” They acknowledge the power of God to deliver them, and rest their security in *Him*, while humbly recognizing that He may not deliver them from this particular circumstance. They obey not *in order* to be saved, but because God is worthy of obedience.

After their response, “Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury.... He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated” (Dan 3:19) and the three friends were bound and thrown into the fiery furnace. While three went in, the King saw four figures walking amidst the flames, unharmed:

And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. (Dan 3:27-28)

Their faith and obedience in this case seems to have been rewarded and God was glorified through it. Here a king who was willing to kill others over not being worshipped, but one who now asks for God to be blessed. If we over-simplify, we are left with a moralistic reading of the passage, telling us that God saves the faithful, which is true. However, that simplicity fails to recognize the nuance that while God is ultimately reconciling all things to Himself, and that He

*does* save the faithful, he does not save them from all situations nor in all circumstances. Had those three men burned as martyrs, God would be no less a place of refuge.

Further along in Daniel chapter 6, we come across Daniel himself being persecuted for his refusal to obey an ordinance that restricts prayer to any but the king. Daniel, like his friends, is sentenced to death, (though begrudgingly by the king, because he knows and likes Daniel) this time by being thrown into a lion's den. Yet, the next day, he emerges unharmed. God again delivers him:

[Daniel's] God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed [Daniel], because [he] was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. (Dan 6:22-23)

Again, God is glorified for how he delivers. The furnace and the lion's den represent situations of very real danger for Daniel and his friends. Real danger of which these four God fearing men were aware, and yet chose to embrace over letting their safety become an idol and stumbling block before their God. In choosing to forgo security in lieu of faith, they were overwhelmed with a deliverance of miraculous proportions. Another way of saying this, is that they recognized and were committed to the sovereignty of God as above and beyond either the sovereignty of the earthly kingdom that they were defying or their own safety. This is a theme throughout the book of Daniel:

God is sovereign. He overrules and eventually will overcome human evil... we see God intervening in the historical circumstances of the characters and delivering them from danger and even using their distress to further their own careers and power...[this message is] directed to the people of God on how to act in times of oppression.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 348

However, had God not chosen to miraculously intervene, he would have been no less sovereign.

In what ways in life are we entering into the furnace and the lion's den? In our own lives we are faced with the same choice that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced. Perhaps the consequences in the moment are not so dire, but the decision to choose God, and the building up of his kingdom, or in contrast, to choose our own security is a choice we are faced with regularly. For those four men it came down to how they lived life in the day to day, on the micro level. From their food choices, and personal actions, they were thoughtfully faithful, not in order to provoke but in order to remain obedient. Daniel's refusal to submit to the idol of security led to God being glorified and the kingdom being furthered. He pursues faithfulness instead of pursuing security, which ironically in Daniel's case, leads him to being put into a situation of danger and encompassed by a supernatural level of security.

In both of these cases, God is exalted as the true God because of how the Lord delivers Daniel and his friends. So, can we expect a supernatural level of security every time we choose to remain faithful in spite of persecution? Should we always expect to walk out of the fiery furnace unsinged? No. Unequivocally no. 2 Timothy 3:12 tells us, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Taken in tandem with 1 Peter 2:19, "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly," we realize that not only should we expect persecution, but we should expect to endure suffering. In other words, while God is our refuge and our deliverer, we should not expect to be delivered in the same way as Daniel and his friends in all of our circumstances. Furthermore, it never seemed to be Daniel's or his three friends' *expectation to be delivered* in their particular circumstances. They were not pursuing God for immediate safety, they were pursuing God because He is *God*, and *ultimately* it is in his sovereignty that we find our security. Even if Daniel and his friends

hadn't been given this supernatural level of security, what they were doing was *right*, and that's why we are called to it as well. We don't obey because it keeps us safe, we obey because it is right, and what is right is more important than our personal safety. Of course, we will do this imperfectly, because we are imperfect, but we are nonetheless called to it.

### **Suffering and Endurance**

Paul is one of the most prominent characters in the Bible. Between his conversion, letters, and ministry, his story and influence is rife with God's working through him. He travelled thousands upon thousands of miles as an Apostle teaching and preaching the word of God, as well as being persecuted for it. Paul's zeal for God's kingdom put him near the chopping block on a number of occasions, but his persistence and faith mark him as one of the most influential people for both the spread and understanding of Christianity.

Paul's life and Biblical narrative is an important piece to any discussion about how Christians seek security, primarily because Paul did an enormous amount of work for the kingdom with very little in the way of security. In Paul's own words he suffered,

...countless beatings and [was] often near death. Five times [he] received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times [he] was beaten with rods. Once [he] was stoned. Three times [he] was shipwrecked; a night and a day [he] was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from [his] own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Cor 11:23-27)

Paul is exemplifying what Jesus had explained in the Gospel of John, “‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Persecuted, but persistent in pursuing the Gospel, Paul often pays the price with pain. Surely this must have deterred him! It must have slowed him down and made him long for taking an easier path.

Choosing to obey and follow despite being in harm's way on a regular basis is absolutely antithetical to the personal peace and affluence culture of modern day Christian America. Paul's account of the insecurity he faced throughout his ministry to this point shows us an impassioned, God-fearing, servant of the Lord, who does not seek to put his personal safety, nor his version of peace, nor affluence, before or in place of his God.

This by no means makes Paul's work for the kingdom go smooth or unhindered. It's likely that, similar to Abraham, Paul on occasion sought his own needs above kingdom needs, while acknowledging the issue with that. He reveals feelings of perplexity, persecution, and feeling pressed in upon in his second letter to the Corinthians, as he attempts to encourage them:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. It is written: "I believed; therefore, I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Cor. 4:7-16)

The treasure in jars of clay – all surpassing power from God – is something we carry around *even though* we feel hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. It does not prevent these things from happening, but gives us endurance and perspective. It allows us to see above and beyond our immediate circumstances to realize that by God's grace, though we may feel these

things, ultimately we are not crushed, not abandoned, not destroyed. And through that endurance and perspective, life is at work in us, and that life reaches others and they gain endurance and perspective and are thankful for it in a way that is glorifying to God. However, to exchange all that for seeking our own immediate self-preservation, to fix our eyes on ourselves so fully, is to fix our eyes on what is temporary. Paul encourages the Corinthians (and also us) not to lose heart, because these troubles are momentary, temporary, and outwardly affecting us. We are called to fix our eyes on the eternal.

It's only through Paul's understanding of what Christ means to the world – the eternal hope that Christ brings to bear on the temporary and momentary circumstances of life – that Paul can hope to endure. His ability to endure does not come from some sort of supernatural miraculous heavenly intervention. While there were situations that Paul miraculously escaped from, his desire to get into those situations over and over again for the sake of the Gospel come from his understanding of where his true security lies, i.e., his focus beyond the momentary, resting his eternal hope in Jesus Christ. Paul's ability to endure hardship, to make the non-secure choice when it meant following God as opposed to the 'safe' choice of not putting himself in harm's way comes from his robust understanding of the hope of the Gospel, that life is at work in us. In Galatians 5:1-5 we see a different facet of Paul's understanding of the Gospel which can help prevent us from falling into idolizing safety. He writes:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:1-5)

Justified by faith, we have access to that which we have been longing for since the fall – peace (or shalom) with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The reconciliation of the relationship that is most important is granted to us not by our works or our good standing, but by way of faith and the good standing of Jesus which he graciously extends to us. So not only should safety not be our number one priority over God in our life, but Paul says we should “rejoice in our sufferings”<sup>66</sup> because the end product of suffering with a Gospel minded view is that it produces greater depths of hope. Pursuing security outside of God’s will does not yield hope; it yields delusions of self-sufficiency. Where would Abraham, Moses, or Daniel and his friends be if they pursued security instead of the will of God? In each of their stories, the possibility of suffering produces, in the end, hope. Not just a personal hope in their God as a refuge or rock, but hope that went beyond their own personal stories. This is a hope that God has multiplied across cities, nations, and the world, that there is good news.

Paul is able to reject the idol of security and encourage us to do the same because he sees how suffering can lead to hope. That hope is a hope in Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection holds the key to our understanding how putting ourselves first is the last way to flourish in this fallen, broken world.

### **Wilderness, Gardens, and Crosses**

Finally, we come to the epitome of what it looks like to trust and pursue faithful obedience in the name of the Father. Let us look at the hero of heroes, Jesus Christ. Despite knowing that the path ends in death, Jesus moves forward, eschewing personal safety to the fullest by dying on the cross. While the entirety of Jesus’ life serves as an example of putting

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<sup>66</sup> Not to be confused with rejoicing THAT we suffer... but in the MIDST of our suffering.

God in His proper and holy place, for the sake of relative brevity (in conjunction with the main topic of this thesis), we will focus on three moments of Christ's incarnation. The first is Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted and unrelentingly pursuing God over self. The second is Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, displaying probably the most humanizing and poignant moments of the gospel narratives. In the Garden, we encounter a perspective of Jesus that shows how difficult the path of God is to tread, even for the God-man. Thirdly, we will look at Christ on the cross and attempt to distill that ultimate moment in human history down to an applicable approach for us as we wrestle with recognizing the idols of security we have in our own lives. Our hope is to find, through Christ's example, is to find our rest ultimately in God.

Since the fall, man has looked for security in places outside of God, essentially *seeking* life that actually ends up *bringing* death. In the ultimate judo move, Jesus clinches our ultimate security by *embracing death* for himself in order to *bring life* for others. Jesus embraces death in a way that we are all called to, in order that we might live the kingdom life. Jesus leads by example, showing everyone who encounters him that there is something and someone good and true for them to trust wholeheartedly with their ultimate security.

After Jesus is baptized, (the beginning of many parallels to the Israelites' account in Exodus)<sup>67</sup> Jesus enters the wilderness, recorded in the book of Matthew:

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so

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<sup>67</sup> Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 66

that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matt 4:1-11)

Jesus’ forty days parallels Moses’ and the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness. The temptations with which He was met by Satan are all issues that the Israelites faced with Moses: grumbling for bread, testing God, and not worshipping God only. In every aspect that the Israelites fail, Jesus succeeds. In every facet that the Israelites looked outside of God for their safety and security, Jesus looks directly to God. Jesus exhibits to his followers, then and now, what obedience looks like in the face of discomfort and danger. Furthermore, this remains pointedly relevant to our lives today, because while the milieu that we occupy may be vastly different from the one that Jesus walked in, the underlying themes remain the same. Are we tempted by worrying about what we have to eat?<sup>68</sup> Are we tempted to test God? Are we tempted to worship and bow down before things that are not our God, in return for power and prestige? The answers to all of these questions are: yes! Each of these temptations harken back to that longing we have for shalom – that deep seeded desire to be within a reconciled place that is flourishing. What Jesus does in these verses reminds us that while we are in the wilderness (earth) before we have entered the Promised Land (heaven), our longing for shalom should point us to God, and not away from him. In each of these situations, Jesus had an opportunity to pursue the easier path, the path that leads to immediate security of sustenance, or security of faith, or security of power. But instead of pursuing the easier path, he pursues the kingdom oriented one.

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<sup>68</sup> Or to be provided for in some other way: money, safety, relationships.

Would that we could offer a resounding “no” to Satan in all the temptations he presents in the same way Jesus did.

Following His time in the wilderness, Jesus goes on, in situation after situation, to push back against the effects of the fall. He heals, forgives, blesses, “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matt 11:5). While he does this, bringing the kingdom of God to bear down on this broken world, we see Jesus debate, teach, and correct, but after the wilderness, we do not see him overtly tempted.<sup>69</sup> That is, until the night before his crucifixion, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

When it comes to making an idol of security, nowhere in history would the ramifications have been so severe, and the reasons have been so just, for an individual to pursue their own safety over the will of God, as the night that Jesus spent praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Though as fully God and fully man, we can infer that Jesus was tempted in all the ways that a normal man might be. However, His reactions in such extreme circumstances in the wilderness, it is no doubt that he would meet any and all temptations going forward with the same kingdom orientation He demonstrated in the wilderness. In other words, I’m making the assumption that if Jesus resisted temptation at his weakest (40 days with no food and being alone), then other temptations throughout ministry are probably not noteworthy.

<sup>70</sup> Matt 26:36-42

His soul was sorrowful. His desire was that this cup should pass. This is not an overt temptation in the way that Jesus' time in the wilderness was. This is a plea from a basic human instinct: self-preservation. Jesus knew that death was on the horizon. He knew that pain, and suffering, and separation were included in this package. He prays here out of a desire that every single man, woman, and child in this world can empathize with: "God, we're scared of what comes next." There have been martyrs. There have been people who knew that they were walking to their death, and pursued God into it courageously. Men like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and countless others through church history. But never had anyone or has anyone since been undeserving of the curse of death in the way Jesus was. He was not fulfilling His debt, but ours.

In this passage, speaking to the aspects within it regarding security, we see Jesus doing an extraordinary thing: Knowing the path He is on leads to death, knowing the path he is on leads to glory for the kingdom, and choosing to walk the path leading to death *because* it leads to glory for the kingdom. This moment in Scripture captures the painful reality that we are all called to and often fail to embrace. Every single one of us is called to deny self and take up our cross and follow Jesus.<sup>71</sup> If given a choice between life/limb and following our kingdom calling, the choice for Christians is clear: The kingdom takes precedence. This may sound like an obvious statement, and in one sense it is. However, we don't need to look far, probably no further than our own hearts, to see that we consistently, in multiple aspects of our lives, choose self over kingdom. Like Adam and Eve, we choose disobedience. Like Abraham we lie to save ourselves and we must grow in faith. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we grumble. Our faith falls short of Daniel, and we bow to the golden statue of self-preservation. God is only put in His proper place in our lives, when we put him first. Putting God first means recognizing, as Jesus did, that

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<sup>71</sup> Matthew 16:24

when two paths diverge, one which seems to lead to safety, security, or self-preservation and the other seems to lead towards suffering and death, we must look down as far as we can see to try and discern which path leads towards glorifying our God, because that makes all the difference.<sup>72</sup>

Jesus, after His time agonizingly praying, puts the will of God first. His pursuance of the flourishing of this world leads him not to a safe, secure, protected space, but to a death on a cross. His unwavering orientation towards the kingdom doesn't gain Jesus peace in each circumstance, but pain and suffering. "Jesus, in His death as in His life, was entirely directed to the ultimate welfare of others...He was so utterly secure in himself that he was free for others in a way we can scarcely imagine."<sup>73</sup>

Jesus offers the disciples insight throughout his earthly ministry on how to pursue this sort of unfettered kingdom alignment, but perhaps no place more directly than in the Sermon on the Mount. In it he gives a poignant summary of the major indictment contained in this thesis, when he says:

Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.<sup>74</sup>

We, still so often of little faith, regularly let anxiety and fear for what will happen to us rule over us. Worrying about what to eat, drink, and wear, concisely summarizes the major self-

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<sup>72</sup> This sentence inspired by Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*

<sup>73</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2005), 75

<sup>74</sup> Matt 6:27-34

preservative aspects of human nature. In worrying about those things, and not only worrying about them, but pursuing those things before pursuing the Kingdom of God, we make little gods of all of them. These are the things we look to which become our idols of security, when instead we should “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” C.S. Lewis paraphrased this nicely by writing, “Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth ‘thrown in’: aim at Earth and you will get neither.”<sup>75</sup> The sentiment is essentially the same, and yet two thousand years later, we continue to struggle with letting God be our security.

Jesus’ life, sacrificial death, and miraculous resurrection, only constitute good news in the context that he has procured our ultimate security. If security is still up to us, then what good news was it for which Jesus came? The answer is that we can now pursue the kingdom of God and his righteousness, with a hope that ultimately, despite our downfalls and brokenness, we are still invited into the kingdom – that is good news. Our ability to fully contextualize the Gospel allows us insight into encouraging its coming, because if we do not understand why Jesus came, what he did, and how it draws us into a preserving embrace that goes far beyond any sort of self-preservation that we could attain for ourselves, then we will not be able to relinquish our grip on the idol of security.

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<sup>75</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 134

## CHAPTER 5

### **Integration Chapter**

Nothing written to this point of this thesis should be particularly off-putting to a modern American Christian. Between church history, theology, and Biblical examples, we have covered the topic of security as an idol in a way that many would probably nod their head in agreement with if it was preached on a Sunday morning. It is neither a profound nor novel concept to those who have spent much time in study or prayer: we are a broken people who often fail to put God first in our lives. However, within this chapter, we seek to look more specifically at how this idol of security specifically and currently manifests itself within Christian America, as well as to investigate what we can do about it.

Fully contextualizing the Gospel within our lives is necessary in order to understand how to put security in its proper place in relationship to God, that is, as a good thing but not an ultimate thing. In attempting to do this, several questions come to mind: How does the Gospel change our opinion about security? What does the Gospel help us to pursue or not pursue in regards to security? Where do we fall short most often? In order to address these questions coherently, it is necessary to explore them on both the micro and macro levels.

From the micro level, the Gospel is good news for us as individuals. The good news is that our deep longing for relationship with our creator – that deep seeded brokenness suffered in the fall – is healed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From the macro level, the Gospel is the good news that the entire world is being renewed, healed and mended from the years of harsh and thorny abuse under the curse of the fall. Both the micro and the macro view of the Gospel should affect how we engage with the idea of security.

From the individual (micro) level, our longing for shalom has been addressed. We don't need to be anxious about what happens to us, because we are invited into a relationship that ultimately brings about our flourishing. With this in mind, what our focus should be on instead of our self-preservation, is the glorifying of the kingdom. In pursuing the good of the kingdom, there we find our own good.<sup>76</sup> To do that we must address and grapple with what specifically is glorifying to the kingdom. In order to understand this concept, we need look no further than Jesus as He (1) puts God first, (2) submits to the Father, and (3) obeys the Father. These three aspects make up an interconnected framework for which we can articulate and navigate whether our endeavors are kingdom glorifying. The aspects are interconnected because it is very difficult (if not impossible) to put God first without submission and obedience, yet we can also look at each aspect individually to understand them more clearly. In order to examine this, let's look at a few current, real world issues such as the often controversial gun ownership consideration and the similarly controversial subject of refugee policy in America. Specifically, we will consider two issues: First, not making security an idol and secondly, attempting to pose ideas about how Christians should engage with these topics.

Utilizing each of these three standards for behavior as we view the topic of gun ownership for self-protection (as opposed to hunting or sport), we must ask, (1) does/can owning a gun put God first? (2) In what ways are we or aren't we submitting to God by owning a gun? (3) Are there any specific commands that we are disobeying by owning/not owning a gun for self-protection?

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<sup>76</sup> A take on Jeremiah 29:7

In addressing the first question, we must first begin with a caveat: there are many different reasons for owning a gun. What this section is specifically addressing, in line with the subject of this thesis, is gun ownership for protection/personal safety. Therefore, there will be no attempt to address whether owning a gun for sport or recreation puts God first. That being said, guns are created for the specific purpose of causing death. Either the death of an animal or the death of a human. This is the reality, which immediately makes ownership of a hand gun or assault weapons difficult to reconcile with the fundamentally life giving vision of Christ, which as Christians, we are called to make our vision as well.

Christ offers us life abundant, full and whole, while commanding us to love all, *even* our enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.’” (Matt 5:43-45). So even out of extremely honorable motivations of protecting a family, it is difficult to avoid the fact that owning a gun does not put God first. If we are commanded to love even our enemies, and we are choosing to instead be prepared to shoot our enemies upon entry of our home, then we are not obeying the command to love them.

Christ depicted for us a radical, world altering alternative to hating our enemies. He pursued life and peace, even in the face of death.

We must do our enemies all of the active good we possibly can. We can love them even while we oppose their evil designs. We must plan a peace for our enemies that will ultimately do them as much good as it does us. Anything else is on a completely sub-Christian scale. Jesus' reference to loving enemies is an indication of his realism. A righteous man will have enemies. He will be compelled to go one mile and even in the interim should be ready to go two<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> Straton, Hillyer H. “Jesus, Exegesis and War,” *Anglican Theological Review* 26 no. 1, (January 194): 42-48.

Submitting to this radical example will result in a philosophy of living that will reflect a posture of pursuing life and peace for ourselves as well as our enemies. This is difficult to square with owning an instrument of death. Christ's example to us is that we are not called to avoid death at the expense of submitting to the will of the Father. It makes sense that we would want to protect ourselves, because we are human and a fear of death is natural. But as Christians, we know that life wins out in the end and we are called to affirm that we believe and have hope in life winning out. We may never lose our fear of harm and death this side of paradise, but by not letting those fears dictate our actions we can prevent them from being an idol. Instead, we lift up Christ, whom we should and must trust more than a gun.

In regards to specific Scriptural references to guns, obviously there are not any. So, instead, we turn to Scriptural references regarding protection of self and of family. In this vein, there are several relevant Scriptures which we are helpful to examine: Exodus 22:2-3, Luke 22:35-38, 1 Timothy 5:8, Matthew 26:52-54. Each bears weight in understanding what Scripture has to say about whether or not gun ownership for self-protection falls under the idol of security.

Exodus 22:2-3 states:

If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.

So a thief in the night may be killed, guilt free, but not if the thief is killed in the day. In the dark of the night a homeowner from biblical times wouldn't be able to identify the burglar in order to bring him to justice. Neither would it be evident what the burglar's intent was. Given both of these premises, a death blow struck in defense of life and property is excusable, but that same

excuse is not considered relevant in the light of day<sup>78</sup>. This makes sense in Biblical times (and even in some situations in developing countries in our current times) given the absence of electricity and video cameras. However, if the intent is that the homeowner is guiltless in the night and not during the day because of the difficulty in identifying the perpetrator and his intent, then that same guiltlessness could not hold true in modern day America when we have access to automatic lights, motion sensor video cameras, and cell phones at our fingertips to call police. Our nights are not the same as the nights of the Exodus. Furthermore, the verse is worded such that the intent of the homeowner was not to kill: “if a thief... is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt” does not mean the same thing as: “If you intend to kill the thief you catch breaking in, there shall be no guilt”. Again the original intent given the context of the Scriptures here points to a physical struggle that *may* result in death. This is widely different from owning a gun and intending to “protect ourselves” by shooting and killing the intruder<sup>79</sup>. In addition to both of these points effectively rendering the original context of the verse quite incompatible to modern day gun owners looking to it to justify their own security, there is a further problem in that there are non-lethal options (stun guns, bean-bag rounds, pepper spray) which can incapacitate an intruder. These seem like an obvious alternative opportunity for Christians who desire security in their home, while still taking very seriously the charge to love our enemies. In the end, Exodus 22 does not seem to overtly convey a sentiment for or against gun ownership for Christian security, though it may be a supplemental verse in the case against it.

Luke 22:35-38 states:

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<sup>78</sup> Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge 1918) 224

<sup>79</sup> Of course, a gun owner may plan to shoot to deter/scare/wound an intruder, in which case this argument against Christian gun ownership changes slightly. Though compared to a physical hand to hand altercation, there is a much higher risk of an intruder dying when a gun is involved, even if it is not the intent of the shooter.

And he said to them, “When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “Nothing.” He said to them, “But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.” And they said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “It is enough.”

This passage is often used as a defense of Christian gun ownership for self-defense. On the surface there is a clear directive from Jesus, “...and let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one.” This verse – taken literally at its face value – puts a lot of us Christians in a difficult place, since, hardly any modern American Christians have ever had a cloak to sell, nor bought a sword. The context allows for the verse not to be taken literally, but as an indication that the disciples relationship with the world is about to go through a deep change. No longer will hospitality, peaceful acceptance, and honored security be the norm. Rather, persecution would be the new standard<sup>80</sup>. Before, the disciples were sent out in their own country, on short journeys, with no great danger; but now, they were going out as both strangers and foreigners, and often in danger, and self-defense was a proper provision. Barnes commentary expresses it in this way:

The country was infested with robbers and wild beasts. It was customary to go armed. He tells them of those dangers - of the necessity of being prepared in the usual way to meet them. This, then, is not to be considered as a specific, positive "command" to procure a sword, but an intimation that great dangers were before them; that their manner of life would be changed, and that they would need the provisions "appropriate to that kind of life." The "common" preparation for that manner of life consisted in money, provisions, and arms; and he foretells them of that manner of life by giving them directions commonly understood to be appropriate to it. It amounts, then, to a "prediction" that they would soon leave the places which they had been accustomed to, and go into scenes of poverty, want, and danger, where they would feel the necessity of money, provisions, and the means of defense. All, therefore, that the passage justifies is [that] 1. It is proper for

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<sup>80</sup> Fredrick W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St Luke: With Maps, Notes, and Introduction*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge, 1902) 329.

people to provide beforehand for their wants, and for ministers and missionaries as well as any others [and] 2. That self-defense is lawful. Men encompassed with danger may lawfully "defend" their lives<sup>81</sup>.

As it pertains to the idol of security, and specifically to this chapter, this passage does little to strengthen the case for Christian gun ownership as a purpose to make Christians feel secure. If Jesus is speaking metaphorically or abstractly as a warning about what the future holds for his disciples, then there is certainly no reason for modern day Christians to utilize this passage as a defense for gun ownership. However, even if in this passage Jesus is making a direct command that his disciples arm themselves, it still would be a poor pro-gun argument for followers of Christ. For one, a sword can be used as a defense-only weapon if need be. Whereas guns are inherently offensive weapons. A gun cannot be used to block incoming attacks. The ‘defense’ associated with the use of a gun is not actually defense. It can be a deterrent, by the threat of its offensive capabilities (in the same way that a preemptive strike can be a deterrent) or it can be used in retaliation, but a gun is not used in ‘self-defense’ in the same way that a sword would be. On top of this, if the disciples were called to a sword because of the dangers of the wide-world they were heading into, of beasts and persecution. Modern American Christians face hardly any beasts, and certainly a great deal less persecution that could result in our bodily harm than the early church would be dealing with.

1 Timothy 5:8 states: “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” This is another passage which has been used<sup>82</sup> to reinforce the decision for Christians to arm themselves in order to “provide” safety to their house. Context seems to imply here that this passage speaks much less to the

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<sup>81</sup>Farrar, *The Gospel According to St Luke: With Maps, Notes, and Introduction*, 330

<sup>82</sup> Did not come across scholarly or peer reviewed articles in regards to this verse, but blog posts and tweets (which in our current day and age hold a separate but nonetheless important weight within the public discourse)

defense aspect of protecting a home and much more to the act of providing in terms of food, money, etc. Patrick Fairbairn's *The Pastoral Epistles* points out that this deals with the obligations of relationships, which are neither "annulled or relaxed by the gospel, only thereby rendered the more sacred and imperatively binding." Additionally, those who refuse to minister to the comfort and sustenance of those belonging to them "are not true to the moral instincts of their own nature and fall beneath the standard which has been recognized and acted on by the better class of heathens"<sup>83</sup>. Far from being an argument for gun ownership, the doctrine here as extrapolated by Barnes, is that this passage points to how a "Christian ought not to be inferior to an unbeliever in respect to any virtue... [and] that a Christian ought never to give occasion to an enemy of the gospel to point to a man of the world and say, 'here is one who surpasses you in any virtue'"<sup>84</sup> In this regard, should Christians not hold human life – as humans are bearers of the image of God – in a higher regard than non-Christians? If the answer is yes, then how does that square with the willingness to take the life of another fellow image bearer? Christians should hold the highest view of human life of any people in this world, as well as being engaged with the radical message of the gospel that points us towards sacrificial love over "safe" hate.

Matthew 26:52-54 states:

"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

The argument made from this passage is often articulated in some form of the following: "Jesus tells Peter to put his sword back in its place, *not* to get rid of it entirely." But as has already been

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<sup>83</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, (NC, Lafayette: Sovereign Grace, 2001), 197

<sup>84</sup> Arthur Carr, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: With Maps, Notes, and Introduction*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge 1881) 286

noted, swords and guns do not carry equal defensive ability. Furthermore, Jesus immediately follows up his command to put the sword away with a reminder that those who live by the sword die by the sword. We do not want to live by the sword any more than we want to live by bread alone, “but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). Jesus telling Peter to put away his sword, as opposed to telling him to get rid of it entirely, fits the mold that Jesus is not anti-sword. Nor does he seem to be against Christians protecting themselves. However, to convey Peter’s action just prior to this verse, and Jesus’ reprimand of Peter because of it, as somehow pro-gun, is a reach. Peter was brash on several occasions, and certainly he is in this moment when he alone attacks the men coming to arrest Jesus<sup>85</sup>. Jesus explains to Peter several things; that this is not the time nor place for such things, that this sort of living would eventually lead to death by the sword, and that Jesus has no need for defending because of the powerful protective relationship he shares with the Father.

These reminders to Peter lead us to good questions for our own time regarding guns. In modern Christian America the time and place for the use of guns to defend ourselves? Where does this sort of living lead to – a place of peace and security or a place of fear and wariness? Do we currently have a need to protect ourselves with the threat of lethal force, given the relationship we have with Jesus Christ? Furthermore, we must ultimately answer, (whichever side of the debate we fall on) whether or not we are choosing our security over the radical compassion and love that we are called to as Christian men and women of the present day. Our security is not more important than the building of the kingdom. Our safety cannot come at the expense of our ability to live in this world in a manner to which we are called, a manner which

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<sup>85</sup> Carr, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: With Maps, Notes, and Introduction*, 288

says, “I do not fear, for the Lord is with me. He will strengthen me and help me and uphold me with his righteous right hand”<sup>86</sup>.

While the above argument addresses just one example of the Gospel relating to our security on the personal level, there is also work to be done as we apply what the good news means from ten thousand feet up. The Gospel is undoubtedly and beautifully working in the individual lives of people, but it is also good news that *all things* are being made new. Our governments, communities, and culture do not go unaffected by the Gospel. Using this same framework of prioritizing, submitting to, and obeying the Lord, let us look at the complex and nuanced subject of refugee policy as an example of how to incorporate the big picture of the Gospel into the big picture of the policies we seek to enact.

As per the example of Christians utilizing guns for self-defense, we will pursue this topic using the following three criteria: (1) Does/can refusing entry to refugees put God first? (2) In what ways are we or aren't we submitting to God by refusing refugees entry to the country? (3) Are there any specific commands that we are disobeying by refusing or allowing refugees entry into the country?

The answer to our first question is very straight forward. Two passages highlight very clearly how we as Christians are to interact with the refugee. Matthew 25:33-40 states:

He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and

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<sup>86</sup>A take on Isaiah 41:10

visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

Jesus is with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. He is not only with them in the sense that he is on their side, but when we serve ‘the least of these’ we are actually serving Jesus. How we treat people in these categories is an extension of how we treat Jesus. The stranger, the refugee, the immigrant who is not necessarily a refugee, falls under the label of strangers. We are called to welcome the stranger, and if we are not welcoming the stranger out of fear for safety or job security, then we are not welcoming Jesus. The second passage that solidifies our call to embrace the refugee comes from Luke, by way of the story of the good Samaritan. After Jesus is asked “who is my neighbor?”, he responds with a story about a Jewish man being robbed and beaten. In his beaten state he is ignored by a priest and a Levite, before being cared for by a Samaritan man. Jesus then asks, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise” ( Luke 10:29-36). Our neighbor is not limited to those we already get along with or those who we care for. If we are to prove to be neighbors, it is in the form of our mercy and compassion on those who need it. It is clear from these passages that the refugees and immigrants are not only strangers to be welcomed, but neighbors to be cared for. In refusing to care for them, we are not putting God first.

Recently, refugee policy has been even more of a hot button issue given the fear (however remote the probability) of terrorists or extremists entering into America as refugees seek asylum. This is primarily where the interaction between refugee policy and the idol of security occurs and is a major conflict that must be addressed. Is it right to refuse what is clearly

a godly call to compassion and mercy on the basis of the fear for our national security? This is a space where we, as Christians, submit to God by talking, being, and voting for policy which demands compassion, instead of policy that condemns compassion in lieu of personal safety. As we have seen throughout this paper, submitting to God often does not look or seem safe, yet we are called to submit nonetheless.

As for Scripture's being either for or against allowing entry of refugees into a country, the above passages already make a strong case *for* allowing (and there are many others to choose from which would support that case already made: Exodus 22:21, Deuteronomy 10:18-19, Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:1-2, I John 3:18). We will instead explore whether there is any scriptural reason to *not* welcome refugees.

This is a hotly debated political issue currently, yet the closest verse or story to be used against the welcome of refugees would be Nehemiah's story of rebuilding Jerusalem. And the argument is tenuous. It quickly falls apart – as a case against welcoming refugees – since Nehemiah was responsible for rebuilding the city and wall in the very city *where Jesus* would be one day *making his points* about welcoming the stranger and loving the neighbor. Nehemiah's actions and story do not carry more weight than Christ's call to action.

These above examples are just that, examples. An attempt was made to grapple with the micro and macro aspects in which we seek security while acknowledging that both subjects chosen are highly nuanced and complicated, and were nowhere near covered exhaustively. Still, the list of ways that we pursue security instead of God, knowingly or unknowingly, is legion<sup>89</sup>. It makes sense that we would want to seek security, because we want to take care of ourselves, our

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<sup>89</sup> As noted in the intro, I am just referring to the personal safety aspects of security, but even within that realm we build higher walls or fences for homes or gated communities, we engage in racial prejudices, we opt in for policies which keep people out of our spaces in order for us to feel more secure at the expense of their security- we trade others actual safety for our 'felt' safety.

families, and our communities. It makes sense throughout the world, but specifically as Americans, because from a very young age we are taught that we have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. While this is a beautiful (and in this author's opinion, true) sentiment, ultimately if we are proclaiming Christ then we should be proclaiming that it's not about *our* life, *our* liberty, or *our* individual pursuit of happiness; rather it is about the kingdom. It is about utilizing the life, liberty, and security that we have been blessed with to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The question needs to stop being just about ourselves, and become "how is the *kingdom* best served?" And in pursuing the answer to that question, we are able to experience life in abundance<sup>90</sup>, freedom from the slavery of sin<sup>91</sup>, and a protection<sup>92</sup> beyond any that we could secure on our own by putting up walls or sleeping with guns ready for intruders. But so often – too often – we make it about ourselves anyhow, and we try to build our own kingdoms.

GK Beale, in his book *We Become What We Worship*, writes:

You knowing what you desire and why you desire it directly impacts your relationship with God and your relationship with others. How you exist in the world is shaped by knowing your identity at a deep enough level to be able to identify these types of things. Is the impact you're having for good or for bad. Is it to make things whole or to break things down<sup>93</sup>.

Our worship and devotions exemplify how we operate; it can be aimed at our ruin, or our restoration. If we are becoming what we worship and if we worship and revere security, safety, and self-preservation while being *oriented towards* self, then we are heading toward ruin. If, however, we are oriented towards God and his kingdom, then our worship and devotion are

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<sup>90</sup> John 10:10

<sup>91</sup> Romans 6:22

<sup>92</sup> John 10:28-29

<sup>93</sup> G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 310

moved away from self and moved toward God's image in Jesus; this focus allows us a security of flourishing and restoration that we could never achieve by our own means. We exist in relationship, and our decisions affect those with whom we share relationship. If our desire for security is born out of fear, that fear does not remain only with us, but resonates throughout our relationships. Similarly, (but oppositely), if our desires for security stem from a desire of restoration and flourishing within and amongst those with whom we share relationship, then restoration and flourishing resonate throughout our relationships. Knowing what and why we desire security, based on deeply understanding our Gospel-centered identities, immensely changes the "how" that we pursue security. Keeping a kingdom oriented perspective helps us achieve impact for good in the spheres we operate.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

The fall is not forever. There is a path back to Eden, where it is even better than it was at creation. The new heaven and new earth, a place where our longing for shalom is finally fulfilled by God, who will dwell with His people, wipe away every tear from their eyes, and wipe away death, mourning, crying and pain along with those tears. There is a city that is flourishing, surrounded by a great high wall, with twelve gates that never close, and the glory of God gives the city light (Rev 21). John describes it further for us in Revelation 22:

The river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev 22:1-5)

This absolutely stunning picture fully encompasses the integration that we as people so often lack and yet long for. In this place, our security is no longer a question. Our fear and pain are gone. This is the new Jerusalem, and there is a path to it. That path is through Christ, not through any created thing we lost from Eden. Idols can give us only a pale version of security. And while that imagery is of a city that has not yet been fully realized, we are already invited in. We are invited to become citizens, *while we* live here on earth but we should be committed to that glorious place. Beal writes, “All humans have been created to be reflecting beings and they

will reflect whatever they are ultimately committed to. Whether the true God or some other object in the created order. We resemble what we revere either for ruin or restoration”<sup>95</sup>.

Security that we achieve while outside of the confines of pursuing God’s kingdom is simply a parody of the true security we find in God. Our idols of self-preservation, whether in reaction to our fears or presenting themselves as wisdom can only be ultimately conquered by the same God who sent his Son to reconcile us and restore us to himself. If we revere only the security, we are led to ruin. If we revere the Lord, we are led to restoration. However, even in the midst of pursuing that restoration, the cities and walls that we build here on earth, even as we build them for the glory of God, will never shine in the way that this new Jerusalem will shine. Yet, even so, we are called to fully pursue our kingdom calling now, amidst the wilderness of our exile.

How do we pursue our kingdom calling? Does turning away refugees who come from broken places look more or less like kingdom described in Revelation? Is the Kingdom a place that says “no vacancy”? Does every Christian owning a gun, ready to shoot intruders in their home, look more or less like the kingdom? Is our thirst for security now overwhelming our ability to put into proper perspective the role we play in kingdom building? Revelation paints us a picture of what that ultimate and true security looks like: it alone can quench our appetite fully. In being reconciled and restored to a right and flourishing relationship with God, we must ask ourselves, “Is my safety what God wants most”?

We Christians must examine our own hearts, recognizing spaces we hold fast to, as acts of entitlement of our security. Then, as Paul advises, we need to prepare ourselves to “share in

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<sup>95</sup> G.K. Beal, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 307

suffering for the gospel by the power of God” (2 Tim. 1:8). We cannot do this by cultivating stoicism or asceticism, but by honing in on “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:8), who is presents us with a security which is better, more valuable, more joyful, and more permanent than the pale shadow of safety we often settle for on our own.

We need to count the cost (Luke 9:57–62). When we have a realistic sense of what it means to follow Jesus, of how following does not mean immediate personal safety – even if it does mean immediate personal salvation – and when we have diligently counted the cost of what it means to prioritize God’s kingdom over our own self-preservation, then we will be more steadfast as disciples. If there is an increase in steadfast disciples, there should subsequently be an increase in steadfast church communities that are no longer made up of individuals looking out for themselves, but kingdom-called congregants who have made the mature decision to put the kingdom before self.

If we fear that such a gospel presentation will keep people from being saved, we must come to terms with two important things. First, the good news of the Gospel, Jesus Christ pursuing us even into humility and death, is not an invitation into a cozy life of peace and affluence. Secondly, the Holy Spirit draws people to Jesus, not because of our attractive presentation of the message, but because He is relentlessly pursuing those he loves. These two points are evidenced in Paul’s life story, here concisely and relevantly retold by minister and professor, Donovan Smucker:

The supreme symbol of this is the case of [Paul], the violent religious fanatic killing and punishing Christians. When Stephen died for the faith with tender words of forgiveness he was having more influence than he knew with [Paul]. This assault of love led to a chain reaction which eventually brought the Damascus road and the love-conquered heart of Paul; the Paul of the charity chapter and Romans 12. Clearly there is this possibility. But, alas, there is also the possibility of persecution and death from those who do not

respond in faith and repentance. Even Paul himself died at the hands of the very Roman Empire which he had blessed with the Providence of God in Romans 13.<sup>96</sup>

Paul comes face to face with Stephen's faith, a faith that showed love and forgiveness to the end and beautifully reflected Christ's own love and death. Paul saw firsthand from Stephen and others that a Christian life did not bode well for present peace or well-being. Stepping into the faith of Christianity was taking several steps closer to persecution and death. How much more unattractive could a presentation of the Gospel be than watching someone die for it? Yet, Paul is fully changed when he comes face to face with another, Jesus. Because Paul was a fanatical persecutor of Christians before becoming one himself, he fully understood what he was signing on for, and it is no easy task.

As Christians we should not be surprised or caught off guard by suffering (1 Pet 4:12). We should endure suffering without compromising our integrity (2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Pet 2:19 and the book of Daniel). We are called to love our enemies and those who persecute us and pray for their welfare (Matt 5:43–47). We need to put our trust in God in the midst of our suffering so that our responses to suffering and injustice are not in anger, but instead to do good (1 Pet 4:19). We can use our suffering experience as a platform for comforting others who suffer (2 Cor. 1:3–7). We do not rejoice in our suffering because we enjoy the pain, rather because Jesus is so worthy in our eyes and hearts that we delight in being identified with him, safe or not (Rom 5:3-5). Above all, we are not called to fix our eyes on our own problems or insecurities, but to fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:1–3). We fix our eyes upon him and attempt in all we do to follow his lead. We do this not because he is safe, but because he is good; he's the king.

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<sup>96</sup> Donovan E. Smucker, "The Theological Basis for Christian Pacifism," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27, no. 3 (July 1953): 163-186.

Paul puts it succinctly in Romans 8:18, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” He continues several verses later by reminding and convicting us about the sufferings of the present, those sufferings that we fear will separate us from the love of Christ; “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword” but he continues, “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:35-39).

We cannot prioritize security over accepting and demonstrating the love of God in Christ Jesus. Self and safety cannot be our ultimate concerns if we are to follow Christ in the way we are called. The idolizing of our safety will not bring lasting joy, but continued fear and anxiety. Let us pray against these things. Let us live against these things. Let us fully realize that our ultimate security and safety lies in the hands of the Triune God!

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