

BOOK REVIEW OF “LET THE NATIONS BE GLAD” BY JOHN PIPER

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This paper is a book review of the book “Let the Nations be Glad” by John Piper. The first section deals primarily with an objective summary of the content of the book, whereas the second section is primarily concerned with offering a reaction to the material presented in this work. The second section discusses the quality of the points made and any missing content in the argument of the book; the author will also elaborate on the *most valuable points* contained in the book.

Section 1 - Summary of Content

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.

-John Piper

Chapter 1 – The Supremacy of God in Missions through Worship

There is a magnificent God beyond all comprehension that has sewn this intricate world together, with all of its dramas, beauty, color, musical strains, and rich emotion. This God is not only powerful beyond measure, but he is also merciful; that is, he acts toward those who have no hope...he thrives in meeting the needs of the inadequate. He is glorified when his merciful character acts; therefore, it is the job of the missionary to facilitate the merciful character of God in the world, to those who do not know this character. In this way, when the missionary executes this task effectively, the power of God works toward the endeavor, and is mightily glorified.

Therefore, a missionary should not focus on “working up” feelings and compassion for the lost, but rather see them as vessels upon which the merciful character of God desires to act and bless them beyond all measure.

This describes Piper's missional paradigm; that is, what is the lens through which Piper sees missions? It is fundamentally a lens that interprets missions as an act of worship by extending the mercy of God to those that currently do not know God. In Piper's words, "The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God". Where this gladness doesn't exist, the missionary seeks to spread the good news of God's love to bring about the gladness of heart at the joy of their salvation.

Piper defines "righteous" is to value that which "is truly valuable or rewarding", the opposite of which is to devalue that which is "truly valuable or rewarding". For this reason, those that suppress the truth in unrighteousness in Romans Chapter 1 do just that; they refuse to worship the magnificent God (they did not honor Him as God or give him thanks).

In this seminal chapter, Piper exalts the mercy of God; he describes the mercy of God, as "the apex of God's glory the way the overflow of a fountain is the apex of the fountain's fullness". Piper asserts that if a missionary has a zeal for the merciful character of God revealed to the nations, then truly that missionary will be a Christlike missionary. To be moved on the part of the "sheep without a shepherd" is truly the motivation of an effective missionary endeavor.

This chapter exhorts the reader to recall that God is a God, and in fact, is THE ONLY God that works for those who wait for him. In this way, the missionary should understand how the power of God is accessed through missionary work; the patient seeking of God's glory through making his merciful character known will indeed fuel the work.

Chapter 2 – The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Prayer

Christians have a mission; and it is indeed a fearful one. To whom much has been given, much is required. No man can serve two masters, either he will love the one and hate the other, or he will hate the one and love the other. The double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

Piper's well made point about prayer is summarized in this quote "prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of

darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den.”

Indeed, our lives are more accurately characterized in the biblical sense as warzones, not playpens. Piper makes the point that even the blessings that God gives us during this fleeting life are meant to be pressed into the battle. An absence of austerity in our living gives the enemy an opportunity as illustrated by the Screwtape Letters in relation to political wartime Christian health on-average. A rather unexpected part of this battle is actually the prayer for peace – why? Because peace allows the Christians to fight the real battle, which is the one that is not fought against flesh and blood, but against those nefarious unseen forces of darkness that lurk just beyond the visible realm.

When Christians combine the mission of reaching the world with the worship of God and the power of prayer, God is more glorified because the work is then clearly coming from Him and not from us. For this reason, it fits well in to the paradigm of missions as worship. God delights in working alongside and through the missionary by the power of prayer.

Chapter 3 – The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Suffering

Chapter 3 is a compelling chapter that primary emphasizes the richness of the love of God through suffering. The chapter opens with the compelling and emotional story of Henry Martyn. This is a man who abandoned countless earthly comforts in order to suffer discomfort amongst ungodly men indefinitely. On top of all this, Henry was a man in love, and never was able to satisfy this desire to its fullest extent. This and more he gave up for the cause of the lost.

Why does this story, and other stories about suffering emphasize the richness of God’s love towards those that are his? Because it is clear, if one gives up “all that he has” for this love of God, then that surely is compelling proof that the love of God is indeed something wonderful.

Does God actually cause his servants to suffer? Could a loving God do this? That is indeed the question. Furthermore, if Jesus already died a cruel and painful death, why are we

stilled asked to give our lives. Here Piper makes the following fundamental point: Jesus died so that we wouldn't have to die for our sins, not so that we wouldn't have to die for one another. Piper writes affectively to the end that we should "come and die" (Bonhoeffer) with Jesus outside the camp and bear his reproach. God does allow and ordain his servants to suffer for discipline sake (see Hebrews 12) just as he did with his beloved Son.

Chapter 4 – The Supremacy of Christ as the Conscious Focus of All Saving Faith

Chapter 4 focuses on common questions that revolve around the missionary endeavor, and more broadly, the gospel message; these are the questions of hell, the necessity of the work of Christ, what about those that have never heard?

The point that Piper would make in these chapters is a scriptural defense to the end that a) hell is indeed eternal, and as Leon Morris writes "It is not easy to see the fate of the wicked as anything less permanent than that of the believer", b) the work of Christ is absolutely necessary and that "salvation did not spread to the nations before the incarnation of the son of God" and during the "times of ignorance" the nations were left to run in their own paths unfettered by the pursuit of God, and c) the issue of whether one has to hear the name of Christ to be saved is dealt with through the Cornelius narrative in Acts chapter 10 – the conclusion of which is that Cornelius and any other in his situation could not have been saved prior to hearing the message.

Following in the line of thought developed in the previous paragraph regarding Cornelius, Piper asserts that the message of Romans Chapter 10 "indeed they have [heard]" is addressed to Israel, and they are without excuse because "their line has gone out through all the earth" emanating from Jerusalem (is the assumed thrust of this statement).

Chapter 5 – The Supremacy of God Among "All the Nations"

What does it mean when God tells Abraham that in him "all the nations of the world will be blessed?" The primary word used repeatedly in the New and Old Testaments (LXX) is the lexical "ethnos". This word should be understood to be smaller than a nation, and on the

scale of languages (ethnolinguistic groups), tribes, and families. When Jesus says in Mark that the gospel will be preached to all nations, does he mean nations, or families, or languages?

It has always been desired of God to reach the nations, as indicated in the Abrahamic covenant as well as in the story of Jonah, where a self-righteous Jonah did not desire to see the nations reconciled to God. Furthermore, both the apostle Paul and the apostle John had the nations in view; Paul saw his mission as the expansion of the gospel in a territorial manner so that the nations could be reached. John saw in his visions recorded in the book of Revelation that all peoples, tribes, languages would be gathered before the throne.

Piper ends this section with a moving exaltation in the desire of God for diversity, and how through this diversity the glory of God is radiated – specifically, God delights in diversity just as we delight in a choir that all sings the same piece of music but each with their own voice and expression. This unity in diversity magnifies the universality of the beauty of our splendid King.

Chapter 6 – A Passion for God’s Supremacy and Compassion for Man’s Soul

Here Piper moves toward two points – why worship and not glory, and why worship and compassion are inextricably tied. Much of Piper’s theology flows from the systematic works performed by Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century; Edwards was convinced of the centrality of the glory of God as the overall theological paradigm. Leaving this discourse on Edwards, Piper then raises the point to the readers attention that he did not use the term “glory”, but rather “worship”; he cites the fact that God is already glorified – the problem is that mankind does not savor this goodness.

The last point of the chapter is how the compassion for man can be linked with the desire to see God glorified. Piper quotes Edwards in both the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God” as well as another quote where Edwards asserts that it is much greater for a man to tell of how much the glory of God means to him rather than just simply talk about how great

the glory of God is. In relation to “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, Piper notes how much compassion Edwards had for the lost.

Chapter 7 – The Inner Simplicity and outer Freedom of Worldwide Worship

Worship should certainly not be viewed as the corporate gathering of believers on Sunday. Rather worship is worshipping in “spirit and truth”. Piper gives a thorough analysis of the greek word *proskyneō* and its conspicuous absence in the epistles, but evident in abundance elsewhere in the bible. It is explained that everywhere there is an object that is present to be worshipped, then *proskyneō* is used (such as the OT, the gospels, and Revelation”. This emphasizes the demphasis on outward forms and the emphasis on inward devotion; this is illustrated in Puritan thought by their choice to name their buildings “meeting houses”.

Piper makes a fundamental statement here when he says “the impulse for singing a hymn and the impulse for visiting a prisoner are the same: a freeing contentment in God and a thirst for more of God – a desire to experience as much satisfaction in God as we can.” Piper asserts that this satisfaction of God must be primary in worship, otherwise it would be like a husband that tells his wife that he delights in her so that she will cook a good meal.

With this singular view of worship, all external factors are stripped away and it leaves the simplicity of a man or woman walking humbly with their God.

Section 2 – Analysis of Content

When I saw the cleansing fountain, open wide for all my sin, I obeyed the Spirit’s wooing, When he said “Wilt thou be clean?” I will praise Him! I will praise Him! Praise the Lamb for sinners slain; Give Him glory, all ye people, For His blood can wash away each stain.

-Margaret J. Harris (1898)

On the Mercy of God and Paradigm for Missions

The Piper text is conspicuous in its absence of the primary missional concept, and that being *Missio Dei*, or the “Mission of God”. The *Missio Dei* is the understood paradigm that

God is and has been on a mission from the beginning of time. This view is strongly rooted in a Trinitarian view of the godhead.

Many texts utilize this paradigm in their explanations of the movement of God's Spirit throughout the ages to bring all nations to Himself. It can be seen in the Abrahamic covenant as Yahweh seeks out and finds a man named Abraham in the pagan worshipping culture of Ur of the Chaldeans, it can be seen in the movement of God to create the world *ex nihilo* – it can be seen in the movement of God in the garden as he approaches a guilty man and woman. It is seen at the end of the 400 years of silence when the angel of the Lord appears to a frightened priest by the name of Zechariah, announcing that he would have a son named John, who would *go forth* “in the spirit and the power of Elijah”. In a similar way, God is calling his church to participate in the *Missio Dei* through the great commission and bring the news of his mercy to those who sit in darkness, as he completes the story of the ages by calling all nations to come to Christ and be saved.

Rather, in this text, Piper uses the paradigm that God acts for his own glory. Surprisingly, Piper refrains from making a strong case that this is based in a Trinitarian view, but instead employs the explanation that God cannot seek the glory of anyone higher than himself, and so he zealously seeks His own glory. While this is certainly true, it falls short of the beauty of a triune God that has perfect community and love within Himself. With God, surely there is no such thing as self love, as God is love Himself. For this reason, it is actually necessary that God be a god of diversity and unity. Piper's paradigm could work if God was not triune, but simply “one”.

For this reason, the areas in which Piper's arguments are weak, center around the concept of the outward focus of compassion toward our fellow men. In fact, it is not completely clear why there is a mission at all if indeed our purpose were to simply adore God. To be fair, Piper's arguments are not altogether void of this motivation, but his arguments would be much more complete and satisfying if they were backed by this Trinitarian view of both the Mission of God and the Glory of God.

Why is this? Because the very nature of the love of God is one that acts. God's love is one that is expressed in mercy and lovingkindness. This is a missing vitamin in the spectrum of Piper's case for missions. This love exists within God himself. The Father acts to glorify the Son, the Son acts to glorify the Father. From this intense and beautiful love, the trinity is on a mission to bring a fallen humanity mercifully and undeservedly into the presence of this warm glow of unmerited love and rest.

Fundamentally, Piper underdeveloped the reciprocity principle of God's mercy as expressed in Luke 6 as well as in the book of James. In Luke 6:36, Jesus says "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful...", and "give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you" in Luke 6:38. God promises His people that, because God is merciful toward us, if we will give His mercy out, he will pour so much more mercy down upon us we will not be able to contain it all. In this way, God is the one that receives glory, since the mercy that his people are giving is not their own, since he simply replenishes the mercy that His people have depleted themselves of.

Piper approached, but stopped short of finishing, this concept later in the book, when in Chapter 7 he uses the example of someone who asks "Is it loving to give alms to others with a view to maximizing our own joy in God?". Piper then explains "the answer is a resounding yes, because in giving up worldly things to that we can meet the needs of others, our aim is to persuade them that the treasure of God, which frees us to give in this way, is so valuable that they too should embrace it and live for it and so join us in the joys of heaven." It can be seen in this quote that there might be a missing concept, given Jesus' explanation of the giving of mercy in Luke 6. Would this man in the example be giving out of his abundance, or out of God's abundance? While what Piper says is patently true, the author's assertion here is that it is an incomplete paradigm.

Piper's observation that there is a common theme in singing a hymn and visiting a prison in that it is both worship resonates very deeply with this student. Indeed, this is certainly

true in this: Paul said, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” and “that I might know Him in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings” (Philippians Chapter 3). Paul is saying that every act that I do on this earth is an act of worship because “Christ will always be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 3:20).

Therefore, it is this student’s assertion that active nature of the Mercy of God (the reciprocity of mercy) and the *Missio Dei* of God would further make the points of Piper, in that the worship of God necessarily involves outward action because the believer participates in the Mission of God and because the believer experiences the mercy of God through the fellowship of His sufferings. The latter result (but not the biblical foundation for the mechanism) is spoken about widely in Chapter 2 which is primarily concerned with an understanding of suffering.

Other Discussion

This section will engage in discussion with several smaller points of clarification that the author would like to make.

First, in the treatment of Old Testament missionary efforts, Piper is nearly completely silent on this point. Although Piper speaks of Jonah’s missionary saga, he only relates it to God’s desire to reach the nations in an ultimate sense. This student would also contend with the idea that Christ was not the path for salvation in the Old Testament – in fact the trust in Genesis 3:15 is displayed in Abel, Lamech, Abraham, and the Passover Lamb. While it is unclear as to whether Piper desired to eliminate the hope of Christ from the Old Testament as a means to salvation, it was not stated as such as observed by this student.

In Chapter 6, Piper makes the case that someone cannot be saved based upon simply a fear of punishment in hell. I would contend with this as this was just the method of this student’s salvation. Is not salvation simply an acknowledgement of guilt before God and a taking of refuge within the provision of Christ’s atonement on the cross? Does someone need to desire the joys of knowing Christ before they can be saved? Granted, knowing Christ is an immeasurably

wonderful thing, but the idea of being “saved” is being “saved” from a certain catastrophe. Just as the Philippian jailer said, “What must I do to be *saved*?”.

Another interesting point that was overlooked in this book was that the mission of the church is for the church. Therefore, the sum total of all believers everywhere (the universal church) should be reaching the unreached peoples for Christ. The gospel should be expanding into each people group everywhere. But does this mean that the mission of a grandmother should be to go and reach unreached peoples in Hong Kong? Perhaps it is, but not necessarily. Her job might be to raise grandchildren so that they will then go, or so that their children would go. So it can be seen that while Paul’s objective might have been to reach unreached peoples, today it is the church’s objective, but the church is composed of many members, all of which should be missional in different capacities.

Discussion of Points of High Impact

Overall, this book impacted this student. Particularly, the discussion of suffering in Chapter 2 was very motivating. The idea that Christ’s death for our sins enabled us to now die for each other was a point that this student had not previously considered.

There is no greater joy than traversing the dusty streets of a third world country to bring the light of the gospel to a dark hut on the outskirts of town. This book really helped this student to place this in the right perspective. Through the partial reading of this book prior to a missions trip to Cuba, the perspective of missions was made clearer through the lens that this book provided. While this student was in Cuba, one of the translators told him that “you are a real Christian in our eyes, because you have everything in America, and you came here to walk around in the heat”. There was no greater joy than walking in the blazing sunshine across a muddy field to bring the mercy of God to two families that would go on to start a house cell group that might someday blossom into the first church in that area. This is reminiscent of Piper’s last statement, “– and the Word will go on from glory to glory”.