

Thinking About God A Bit More

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0:00] Tonight, we're going to turn back together to the passage that we read for us. Let me read! Again, verse 3 from 2 Corinthians chapter 11. Paul says, 'But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.'

Over the past two Sundays, we've been working through a short series. It was supposed to be a three-part series. Looking at Knowing, Speaking, Thinking about God. But it's turned into a sort of four-part series because I've split the last one in two.

All three of these, Knowing, Speaking, Thinking about God, at one level, they're simple tasks. They're part of what we do at church each week. They're part of what we want to do day by day as we follow Jesus. But what I hope we've seen is that whilst it's true that at one level, they're simple and straightforward, at another level, all three of these categories are pointing us to some of the most profound truths of theology because all of them are reminding us of the magnitude, the majesty, and the unspeakable glory of God.

Because when we talk about knowing about God, we are talking about knowing about the most profound and majestic topic that we can ever consider. And God, as we've been saying, is just at another level altogether, another level of magnitude, of glory, of splendor and wonder.

That's why our minds will never be able to fully take in all that there is to know about God. Instead, we are gazing in wonder at all that He is. And that affects how we speak about God because when we speak about God, there's lots of things that we can say about Him.

[1:49] We can say that He is good and that He is wise, that He is strong, that He is kind, that He is glorious, that He is holy, that He is loving. And these are some of the most beautiful things that we can express.

And yet, even in these highest of categories of language, we are just scratching the surface of what God is really like.

When we say that God is loving, yes, we're saying something about God, but the truth is, what that love is really like is unspeakable. It's going further than our words can reach.

And that's also true when it comes to thinking about God. We're thinking about the most profound topic that we can ever consider. And we started looking at this this morning, and we focused on the words of Proverbs 1-7, where we said, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.'

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. And our focus was on the word beginning. And we used that to think about the fact that when it comes to our thoughts about God, there's lots of things that we think about Him day by day, week by week.

[3:05] There's lots of things that we're learning about Him. But we want to think about the beginning of that knowledge. And what we spoke about this morning was what theologians will often refer to as our first principles.

That when it comes to what we think about God, we have to give consideration to our first principles, the fundamental things that we believe about God.

And so as we think about God, that's the key question. What are our first principles? And the big thing we tried to express this morning, and that we're going to unpack a little bit more tonight, is that where those first principles about God land is going to have a huge implications in terms of where our conclusions about Him end up.

And in order for us to see that, we used the image of a mountain, a river, and a loch. I should have warned you this morning that it's the holidays, so when I'm about to go on holiday, we tend to just sort of go a bit mad with diagrams and everything else.

And we're definitely going to do that. We did that this morning. We're doing it even more so tonight, using slightly unusual diagrams, hopefully to help us learn some very, very important points. And the big point that we were trying to say this morning is that if you imagine a mountain, at the top of that mountain, it's only one step that determines whether you're going to go down one side or the other.

[4:32] So you take a mountain that's, say, like Mont Blanc, as we mentioned this morning, it's in between France and Italy. One side of that mountain, if rain lands on it, it's going to flow down and end up in France.

The other side of the mountain, it's going to flow down and it's going to end up in Italy. And the key point is that the destinations are miles apart, but at the top, at the point of first principles, it's only one step to go to one side of that line or the other.

And that's the key thing that we need to recognize. This is why our first principles about God are so important, because one step, one decision at the first principles level can have a massive impact on where you end up in terms of what you think about God.

And one of the things that we need to recognize is what Paul warns us in 2 Corinthians 11.3. He says that he's warning us about the fact that our thoughts can be led astray.

And that's part of what we were trying to get at this morning. It's part of what we're trying to highlight tonight, that if our first principles about God are wrong, if they're on the wrong side of the line, then our thoughts can so easily get led astray.

[5:59] And all of it's teaching us that when it comes to God, we need to think about our first principles. In other words, we need to think about how we think.

And so this morning, we looked at five examples of this, all arising from Proverbs 1.7. I'm going to just give you our fifth point this morning as a recap, as an example. It speaks about the fear of the Lord.

That's our first principle question. Do you fear God or do you not? And that's one decision that you have to make. And you have to think about whether you land on that side of the line or on that side of the line.

The person who lands on the do not fear God side of the line is going to end up thinking, well, you know, God isn't that big a deal. Your view of God becomes one where he's like, well, maybe he's there, but, you know, he's kind of a small part of my life.

And sometimes he's helpful. Sometimes he's convenient. And you almost end up with this view of God. You're either going to disregard him, or maybe you're going to kind of pick him up and put him down when you feel that he might be helpful.

[7:05] That's what happens if you fall on that side of the line. You end up going down the slope, and you end up in this loch where your view of God is one where he is really just quite small, quite convenient, and actually you decide what you want him to be.

If you land on the other side of the line, and you realize that God is the Lord, that he's the maker of heaven and earth, that he is the one to whom we owe everything, and he's the one to whom we give an account, we realize that he is the one whom we are to fear with reverent awe.

And that leads you to a very different conclusion in terms of what you think about God and how you respond to him. And so on that side of the line, one step on that side of the line will lead you to a loch where what you think about God maybe doesn't matter that much.

You land on that side of the line, you're going to end up in a loch where you realize that what you think about God matters more than anything else. And the big point is that those two destinations are miles apart, but the decision as to which one you end up in is one choice.

Your first principles make a massive, massive difference. So we looked at five examples of this this morning, and tonight we're going to look at five more, but we're going to make them a little bit more complex than we did this morning.

[8:40] This morning we just had this sort of side-on view of a mountain, one line, one choice, either way. And hopefully that was helpful. We're going to shift our perspective tonight.

So before we were looking at the mountain side-on, now we're looking top-down onto the mountain. So that's supposed to be like contour lines from a map. So those of you who read Ordnance Survey maps, you'd have known straight away what that was, I hope.

So you're looking down in the mountain, and this time we're going to add two axes, and we're going to add four elements. And that's showing us that in terms of the decisions you make, you can

actually end up in four different locations.

And we're going to just do five different examples of this, because again, it's so important that we get this right in terms of how we think about God. So this is the first example.

In terms of God, there's two first principle decisions that we've got to make. There's the decision, do we fear him or do we not? And then there's the decision, do we view him as kind or as unkind?

[9:48] And depending on which decisions you make, you can end up in one of four locations. So you might think to yourself that, you know, well, I'm pretty sure that for almost every example that I'm going to give, that lock number four, the bottom, what is it for you?

Bottom left one for you, is not where you're going to be. But it's important for us to remember where this takes you. The person who doesn't fear God, and the person who thinks that, well, even if this God of the Bible, he's not particularly kind, that's going to be a person who doesn't particularly like God and who doesn't particularly care.

And there are many people like that. They're not interested in God, and they think God is this kind of irrelevance. He's not, and they don't find the Bible particularly pleasant or helpful.

I think it's unlikely that we're going to fall into number four. But number two and number three are easy traps to fall into. Number three is where we might think, well, yeah, God's good and kind and helpful, but actually, I don't really need to listen to him, and I can live life on my own terms.

And you end up with a very kind of, with maybe a faith in God, but it has little impact in your life.

[11:14] And so, number three might be the person who might like coming to church on a Sunday, but then rest of the week has got no word of God because it's like, well, yeah, God's nice, God's good, but I don't really fear him.

Number two is a massively significant potential one because that's the person who recognizes that God is awesome and glorious, but you actually think he's not actually that kind.

And the reason why this is so important is because number two is the lock that Eve fell into in the Garden of Eden. And so that's what Paul speaks on in the verse.

He says, I'm afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray. And so the reason Eve's thoughts were led astray was not that God, not that Satan said, there's no God, you don't need to listen to God.

Eve knew that there was a God and knew that God had given the command, but Satan said that God is doing this command to hurt you. And he's giving you this command to restrict you.

[12:28] And actually, it's the fact that if you actually did take of the fruit, then it would actually make you even more than what God is promising you could be.

And so that's what led Eve astray. The question, the doubt that God was being good to her, the doubt that God was kind.

And that's a hugely, that's such an easy trap to fall into. Many people fall into that trap because there are lots of people who are kind of crushed by a sense of religious guilt and who think, who know that God's real and know that God's gonna, that God is to be feared.

And they look at themselves and they think, and they can only come to the conclusion that God does not particularly like them. And often, you know, if you find yourself in the situation where something bad happens in your life and you think to yourself, that's because I did this or that's because I'm this or that's because I'm that and God is getting me because I'm all of these things. If you're thinking like that, you're in lock number two because that's the kind of view that God is, he's actually quite unkind, that he's quite cruel.

[13:43] And the key thing we have to recognize is that both of these first principles, the decision that we're gonna fear God, but also the decision that we recognize that he is kind and good, that's where we need to land because that's the biblical truth.

And that's part of what makes God so glorious, that he is absolutely to be feared because he alone is God and he is impeccable in his holiness and he is glorious in his majesty and he is unapproachable in his perfection, but he's also kind and he is gentle and he is good and he's gracious.

And the song we sang captured that perfectly about Jesus, he's strong and kind. You must have that view of God. That's where your thinking of God has to be.

If your first principle about God is that he is going to be unkind to you and he's actually going to kind of get you because actually you're not really up to standard and you keep messing up too much and he's kind of fed up with you and he's losing his patience.

If you are thinking anything like that, you've fallen onto that side of the mountain. It's the wrong side. Jesus is so glorious, we bow before him.

[15 : 11] And we worship him with trembling hearts, but we also remember that he is so perfectly and majestically kind. That's where healthy discipleship lies.

That's where healthy thinking lies. God is to be revered and honored and gazed upon, but he is not cruel and he's not mean. Instead, he is beautifully kind.

God is the one that we can stand in awe before and yet at the very same time, we can fall into his loving arms. So we want to get these first principles right in our thinking.

That's what we think of God. Next one is to do with the Bible. Here's another important first principle decision. The whole question that whether we think the Bible is sufficient or insufficient.

So is it what we need to learn the truth about God or is it not enough? And then as we look at the Bible, is it going to have authority over our lives or is it not going to have authority over our lives?

[16 : 17] These are all first principle questions because all of these things are going to shape the way you read and understand the Bible. This was actually part of the issue that Paul was facing with the Corinthians. It was something that he faced with many churches that he had gone to preach the gospel to them, but very often others would come with additional requirements or additional messages.

Verse 4 of chapter 11 says that if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

And Paul is exposing the fact that he's preached the gospel to them, but others have come and have added a whole lot more and they've accepted them. And they're embracing all these requirements.

And this is part of the big argument that Paul is giving in chapters 10 and chapter 11. Part of the issue is that Paul has taught the Corinthians and he's written to them as an apostle.

Others have come in and are sort of saying, well, actually we're above Paul and we've got more to say than Paul says. And Paul is sort of writing to address these super apostles that have come and have kind of messed things up for the Corinthians.

[17 : 32] And later in chapter 11, we didn't read it and I'm not going to read it just now, but there's just this big section that Paul is saying that these super apostles and who come to say, oh, we've got this extra stuff and we're this and Paul's not this.

He actually goes through this long argument to say, actually, I'm all of these things. I'm a Hebrew. I'm the offspring of Abraham. I've been beaten. I've been shipwrecked. I've done all these different things. If you want qualifications, I've got them all.

But he said, actually, these are not the things that matter. What matters is the gospel. And it's all a big emphasis on the sufficiency of the gospel and of the authority of the gospel.

And so we have to look at these things in terms of our diagram. Where do you land with these first principle questions? Well, if you don't think the Bible's enough and if you don't think the Bible's an authority, then you're going to end up in Loch number four.

And that's the person who is looking for answers, but they're not looking for them in the gospel. So they're looking somewhere else. They're looking for peace and satisfaction and joy in their money or their career or their success or in some other religious movement or whatever else it may be.

[18 : 37] They're looking for stuff, but they're not looking for it in the Bible because they think they're going to find it somewhere else. Loch number three is a place where loads of people have landed, where you think that, yes, the Bible has got authority, but it's not enough.

So, yes, I need the Bible, but I need the Bible plus something else. Many, many people have fallen into this trap of, yes, I need Jesus, but I need something else.

Jesus plus a little bit more. And that's happened in loads of different ways. This would have been one of the big things at the Reformation where the Reformers recognized that the Roman Catholic Church were saying, yes, we recognize that the Bible is authoritative, but you need all this extra stuff on top of it.

And the Reformers were saying, no, it's the Bible alone that's authoritative and sufficient. But it happens to us as individuals as well. Loads of people, loads of people hear the message, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you'll be saved.

And then you think, but there's got to be something more. There's got to be an experience, or there's got to be something that happens to me, or there's got to be a clear answer to prayer, or there's got to be more knowledge, or I've got to learn more, I've got to sort myself out.

[19:57] And all the time you're in lock three, you're thinking, yes, I need Jesus, but I need a little bit more. I need a little bit more. I need a little bit more. If you're there, your first principles are wrong.

Because if believing the Lord Jesus is not enough for you, if you think you need more, then you fall into the wrong side of the sufficient, insufficient first principle question.

Lock number two, when you think the Bible's enough, great, but it's not authoritative. That's the nominal Christian, that's the Christian who's casual, who's thinking, well, yeah, the Bible's great, but actually, I don't really need to listen to what it says.

A lot of that, a lot of lock number two would be what we would call, would be what's often classified as liberal Christianity, where you would kind of, you know, take the Bible, but you just pick parts of it, and usually it's just the parts that you like.

Healthy thinking, healthy discipleship, is in lock number one, where you recognize that the Bible is sufficient, it's enough, it's giving me everything that I need, and it's authoritative, so I know that I have to listen.

[21:10] That's where our view of the Bible has to be. And can you see that wherever you land, it's going to make a massive difference to how you read the Bible. If you read the Bible and think, well, this isn't quite enough, then you're thinking, well, what else do I need?

And if you read the Bible and you think, well, this doesn't have authority, you're thinking, well, do I need to listen to this bit? It's going to massively shape the way you understand it. We've got to have our first principles right. The Bible is sufficient. The Bible has authority.

Example number three is humanity. Here again, there's lots of first principle questions that we need to work on and that we need to get right.

Our view of humanity needs to be correct. So, we looked at this this morning. Are we neutral or are we sinful? So, looking in here, are we basically good, basically fine, broken, or are we basically broken and guilty and in need of a Savior?

And then there's the question, well, how does that salvation work? Are we saved by our works? Are we saved by faith? That's a massive first principle question. If you get any of those wrong, you end up with a different gospel.

[22:19] And Paul summarizes the truth magnificently earlier in 2 Corinthians in chapter 5, verses 17 to 21. He says, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation.

The old has passed away, the new has come. All this is from God who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Those words are just a magnificent summary of the fact that the gospel works by God doing everything that we need for our salvation. And through faith in Christ, we are made new because of the perfect finished work of Christ.

We've got to get that right. Otherwise, we'll end up in the wrong locks. Because if you end up in lock four, you think, well, I'm neutral. I'm saved by my works. You basically think, well, I'm okay.

[23:27] And if I'm not, I can make myself new. I can present myself before God with my own efforts. It'll be fine. And of course, we know that that's not true.

But lock three and lock two are easy traps to fall into. Lock three is the person who knows that they're sinful, but they think they've actually got no chance of being saved.

Because we think, well, you know, I'm not going to be able to make myself new. I know that I need to sort myself out. I know I need to get better, but I can't, I can't shake off this guilt.

That was the huge problem that Martin Luther had, the reformer. He knew that he was sinful. There was all these works that he'd been told to do, and he's trying to do them all, and he's like, it's not working. I know that I'm still sinful.

And that's so often, that lock three is a kind of pit of despair where we're trying to get ourselves good enough, and yet we know that we can't. Lock two is the very opposite problem where you're like, well, there's nothing really wrong with me.

[24:33] I believe, I'm fine, I don't need to be made new. And there's a kind of resistance to confession of sin or to recognizing any kind of guilt before God, and instead there's just this sense, well, yeah, I believe, believe in God, and I'll be fine.

And there's kind of, lock three, you're kind of crushed by guilt, and lock two, you're blinded by casualness. Healthy thinking is in lock one where we know that we're sinners.

We know there's a problem. We know we need to be made new, and we know that we cannot do that ourselves. And instead, we're trusting Jesus to do it all.

That's where healthy thinking lies. Example number four, just to whiz through them, is Christian teaching. More first principle questions. Do we think that Christian teaching is true or untrue?

Do we think that Christian teaching is useful or irrelevant? You see this balance in 2 Corinthians chapter four.

[25:39] I'll just read these verses. Paul speaks of having this ministry by the mercy of God. We do not lose heart, but we've renounced disgraceful underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by an open statement of truth, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Even if our gospel is veiled, it's veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the God of this world has blinded their minds, blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. Again, going back to our locks, if we get our first principles wrong, we can end up in all sorts of places that we don't want to be.

Lock four is the person who thinks, well, Christianity is untrue, it's irrelevant. And to that person, the gospel is veiled. They just cannot see anything that's good in it.

Lock three is the person who thinks, well, yeah, Christianity is good, it's true, I value Christian morality, but I want to stay in charge of my own life and I don't particularly want to be shaped by anything that the Bible teaches if it gets in the way of my own choices.

[26:50] And that's really the mindset that has ourselves as Lord instead of Jesus. Lock two, in many ways you could describe that as actually a secular humanism where it's like, well, there's lots of things in the Bible that are useful, morality, love your neighbor, be kind, that's useful, that's helpful, but there's no ultimate truth behind it.

And ultimately, that means that these good morals we want to live by have no real foundation. Healthy thinking is in lock one where we recognize that what Jesus says is true and it actually makes a wonderful difference to our lives.

and this is one of the biggest lies that the devil can tell that, you know, by following Jesus, by obeying his teaching, it's going to spoil your life. It's never true. What Jesus teaches us, it's so useful, it's so beneficial, it's so positive, and it's true.

And when Jesus is Lord, when we recognize him as Lord, we realize that what he says is true and it's relevant and it turns us in a new direction. So we renounce underhand ways and instead we openly, willingly follow Jesus as our Lord.

Moving on quickly to number five, Christian living. Here, there's two massively important first principle questions about how we view living our lives as Christians and how we view following Jesus.

[28:16] Is it something serious or something trivial? Is it something negative or something joyful? You see this balance magnificently at the end of the letter.

Paul writes in chapter 13, he speaks about writing all these things to them while he's away and he's wanting to teach them and he wants them to listen because he says, when I come, so that I may not have to be severe in my use of authority that the Lord has given me for building up and for not tearing down.

So in verse 10, there, he is saying, you have got to take what I am saying seriously. I am writing to you with apostolic authority. You have got to listen.

And then he says in verse 11, finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you.

You've got this amazing balance, utmost seriousness in verse 10 and then a command, rejoice in verse 11.

[29 : 21] And these are the balances that we need to get right in our first principles. Lock four is the pit of despair where you're like, well, all of this is meaningless and I feel miserable with it.

Lock three is a kind of shallow, maybe half-hearted Christian. And so you're maybe like looking for happiness and looking for joy, but you're not really taking it all that seriously or anything like that. Lock two is where far too many people end up. Lock two is the swimming pool of the miserable Christian.

The Christian who is serious but sad. There's far too many of them. Because the Christian message is a message of joy.

It's good news. It's a message of hope. A message of victory. A message that God has transformed everything for us because his love for us is from everlasting to everlasting.

[30 : 31] And so that's where healthy thinking lies, realizing that Jesus gives us so much reason to be joyful. Now that doesn't mean we don't have hard days. We all have hard days. But in the midst of those hard days we still have joy that cannot be robbed from us.

And at the same time we're taking this so seriously. And when we're saying to Jesus, with your help we're going to follow you, we're not just saying we're going to do that for the next few days. We're saying, Lord Jesus, we're following you for the rest of our lives.

And you know, that healthy discipleship of lock one, it's actually what everybody's longing for. Because we actually long for seriousness. Nobody's looking for shallowness, even if they maybe make out like they are.

Everybody's looking for something serious, for truth, for something real and reliable. And everybody longs for joy. Nobody's looking for misery. And it's so important, so important that you don't get this first principle wrong.

Being serious about the gospel does not mean being negative about life. That's a first principle mistake. Being serious about the gospel should always be accompanied with the joy of the Lord and the wonder of what he's done for us.

[31 : 43] And so these are lots of examples of how we need to hold a healthy balance in our first principles. If you find yourself, and this is something that we all face, it's something that I face, if you find yourself in the locks of doubt or anxiety or depression or unfulfillment or legalism or of bad decisions, so often it's because we've got our first principle wrong.

And that's why it's so important for us to think about this, to think about how we think. because if we find ourselves in a lock where we don't want to be, it's almost always because of something that happened at the top of the mountain.

A decision that we made to view God or to view the Christian life in a way that's actually inaccurate. And yet the river of our principles leads us to the swamp of our conclusions if we get them wrong. Last of all, I want to give you a final example. We want to get our first principles about God right. We want to get our first principles about the Bible right.

We want to get our first principles about Christian living, about Christian teaching. We want to get all of these right. But there's one last one that we need to get right.

[33 : 18] You need to get your first principles right. about yourself. And that takes us back to the verse we started with.

In 1 Corinthians 11 verse 2 to 3 Paul says, I feel a divine jealousy for you since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

But I'm afraid as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

How is Paul describing you as a Christian or if you become a Christian? How is Paul describing you in these verses? What exactly are you?

you are Christ's bride. You are his beloved bride. The one who has been presented and betrothed to Christ as the perfect husband.

[34 : 29] And so to go back to our diagram one last time, it's so easy to get these first principles wrong. Do you sometimes feel like you're worthless?

And do you sometimes feel like you've been abandoned? Often we do. It's so easy to feel like that. But when you feel like that, you've got your first principles wrong.

Because you are never in lock four where you're worthless, abandoned, and hopeless. You're never in lock three where you think, well actually, I thought that I meant something to God, but he's actually given up on me.

And maybe I was following for a while, but I seem to have slipped away, and I don't think there's any way back. And you're never in lock two where you think, well maybe God is holding me, but actually he doesn't particularly like me, and he's just doing it because he has to.

You're never in lock one. You're never in lock two. You're never in lock, so you're never in lock four. You're never in lock three. You're never in lock two. You are only ever in lock one.

[35 : 55] Where you are being held forever by God because you are unspeakably precious to him. And I want you to press those first principles into your heart tonight and tomorrow and for the rest of your life.

Amen. Let's pray.