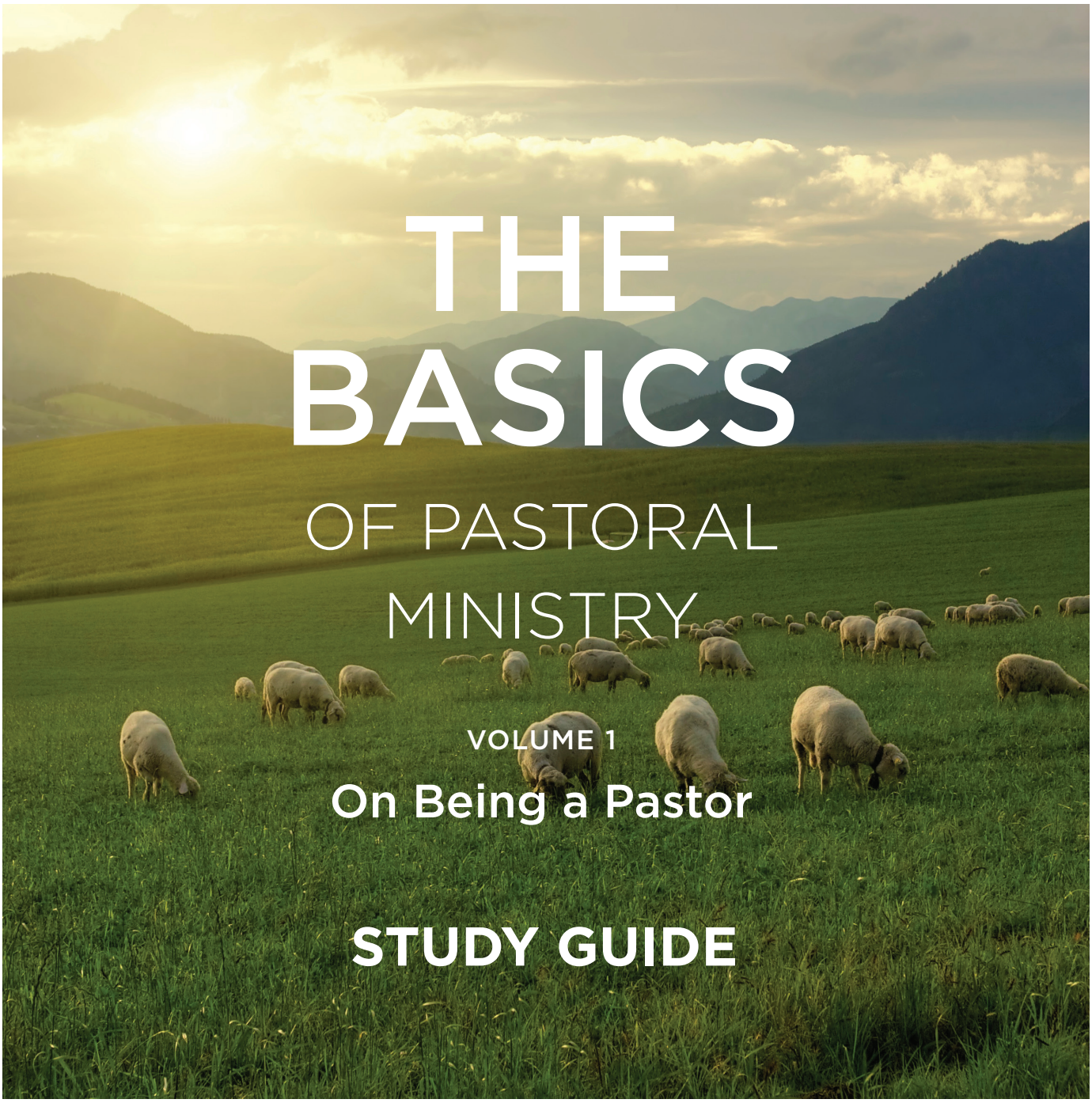

THE BASICS OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

VOLUME 1

On Being a Pastor

STUDY GUIDE

TRUTH FOR LIFE®

"Church history makes it clear that the church of Jesus Christ does not and will not progress beyond the spiritual progress of its leaders."

ALISTAIR BEGG

The Basics of Pastoral Ministry: On Being a Pastor (Study Guide)
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INTRODUCTION

The sermons in this volume are intended to help current pastors, aspiring pastors, and lay leaders to have a greater understanding of their calling and work. These sermons and lectures were not originally delivered together in one cohesive series. There is therefore some overlap in content between sermons. The messages in this volume were selected and arranged in order to provide the most help to those who are training for ministry. We hope and pray that they will greatly benefit you as you seek to glorify God wherever He has set you.

Each lesson includes four main parts:

1) Key Scriptures: important Bible verses that were referenced in the message and are flagged for further meditation and memorization

2) Notes: space (and outlines, when relevant) for you to jot down your key takeaways, thoughts, and questions from each message

3) Going Deeper: quotes and questions to help you process each message's main ideas

4) Ways to Pray: prompts that are meant to help guide your petitions to and your affections for God

Learning Objectives

- Examine the nature of the pastoral call and the primary commitments of a God-given ministry.
- Consider the importance of faithful leadership and how to persevere through ministry's highs and lows.
- Learn how to develop and implement a vision for a local church and how to lead a church through change.

Getting Started

1. Consider the pastor's role and purpose within the life of a local church. What do you think are the primary convictions and duties that a pastor should be devoted to in his ministry?

2. Ministry can be full of obstacles, setbacks, opposition, and various other disappointments. What are some of the major challenges that pastors will face?

LESSON ONE

The Marks of a God-Given Ministry

Paul's letter to the Colossians provides a standard by which today's church can determine the marks of a God-given ministry. Looking to Paul as a model, Alistair Begg walks us through the pattern, purpose, and pleasure of the pastor's work. By God's energy and enabling, pastors can present the Word of God in all its fullness, encouraging unity and spiritual maturity in their congregations.

Notes

Introduction

The Pastor's Pattern for Ministry

The Pastor's Purpose in Ministry

The Pastor's Pleasure in Ministry

KEY SCRIPTURES

"I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known." (Colossians 1:25)

"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." (Colossians 1:28–29)

"I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ." (Colossians 2:1–2)

Going Deeper

1. *"The pastor does not choose his task or his mission. Pastoral ministry is given by God, from on high."*

While all Christians are called to minister in various ways, pastoral ministry is a unique calling from God. If you are currently a pastor or have interest in being one, how can you recognize that you have been called by God? What are the potential dangers of becoming a pastor without such a clear call?

2. *"Any ministry which sets aside or denigrates the place and priority of the message of the fullness of God's proclamation is a ministry that will eventually tend to nothing."*

It is through the instruction of God's Word that men and women come to faith and are brought to maturity. Even so, ministry leaders are often tempted to build their ministry through something other than the proclamation of God's Word. How can you resist this temptation and persevere in prioritizing the preaching of God's Word?

3. *"It's a struggle to be prayerful. It's a struggle to be positive. It's a struggle to keep going, in light of setbacks, in light of discouragements. … It's a struggle to stay in pastoral ministry in one church, week after week after week after week."*

As Alistair mentions, ministry can be discouraging and full of struggles. How can you remain encouraged so that you stay the course in ministry?

Ways to Pray

- If you are sure that you have been called to pastoral ministry, pray that God would give you the resolve to fulfill your calling. If you think you may be called to pastoral ministry but are still unsure, pray that God would bring clarity to your calling.
- Evaluate the place and priority of the proclamation of God's Word in your ministry, and pray that you will be firm in your commitment to preach God's Word.
- Pray for yourself and other ministry leaders you know who may be discouraged in ministry. Pray that God would provide fresh encouragement and strength to persevere in the good fight of the faith.

LESSON TWO

The Call of Ministry

Those who preach the Gospel are tempted in many ways. Some may become consumed with self-glorification, others may shy away from preaching hard truths, and still others may lose heart, resorting to methodologies different from that of the apostles. Against such temptations, Alistair Begg points us to Paul's confident explanation of his ministry in 2 Corinthians 4. In the end, Scripture reminds us, the same grace that saves each pastor must also entice him to show grace to his flock faithfully.

Notes

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the 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. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:1–7)

Going Deeper

1. *"All Word and no Spirit, and the people dry up. All Spirit and no Word, and the people blow up. Both Spirit and Word, and the people grow up."*

God graciously gives both His Spirit and His Word to those whom He has set apart for ministry—but all too often, one is emphasized more than the other. Consider how you have seen that play out in your own life and ministry. What is the best way to ensure that neither the Word nor the Spirit are neglected in your ministry?

2. *"We do not dilute the Word of God so as to make it palatable."*

Everyone who teaches God's Word will be accountable to God for what they have said. How does this reality encourage you to faithfully represent what God's Word says instead of altering the message to make it more acceptable to men?

3. *"I cannot say, 'He is, He is, He is,' if I'm always saying, 'I am, I am, I am.'"*

Ministry leaders may not be able to prevent people from thinking too highly of them, but they can avoid cultivating such an attitude. What are some ways that you may intentionally or unintentionally promote yourself in your ministry? How can you nurture a ministry culture that encourages adoration and exaltation of Jesus alone?

Ways to Pray

- In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul twice states, "We do not lose heart." There are many good reasons to lose heart in ministry, especially when we lose sight of God. Pray that God would open your eyes to His love for you in the Gospel, and pray that the truths of the Gospel would encourage your heart so that you do not give up in the face of adversity.
- In ministry, you will be tempted to dilute God's Word out of a fear of man. Ask God to help you to fear Him more than man so that you faithfully preach His message.
- Paul says, "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:5). Pray that God would help you to have the same testimony for your ministry. Join the psalmist in praying, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory" (Psalm 115:1).

LESSON THREE

Pastors and Teachers

If the Bible is the rudder that guides us through the sea of life, whose hand helps to steer it, especially with regard to the local church? Ephesians 4:12–13 addresses the role of the pastor-teacher as given by Christ for the equipping of the saints. Alistair Begg discusses the ministry and the works of service that flow from it, as well as the unity maintained and attained among believers. When our lives are brought under the teaching of the Word, we can effectively do the work God has set before us, individually and as a church.

Notes

Introduction

Fundamentals of the Pastor–Teacher Role

Ministry

Unity

Maturity

KEY SCRIPTURES

"He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:11–13)

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." (1 Timothy 5:17)

Going Deeper

1. *"As within all leadership, there has to be a leader among the leaders. And it is most appropriate that the one who has the primary teaching role should be that leader."*

Alistair points out that all leadership teams will inevitably have someone who will take the primary leadership role. Why should the individual who has the primary teaching responsibilities typically be the one to take this position?

2. *"The ascended Christ gives a gift to the church: the role of the pastor and teacher. Those pastors and teachers, then, are to equip the people of God for the works of ministry, which they do, so that the body itself may then actually come to maturity."*

God has graciously given pastors as a gift to the church, and churches should recognize the significant role that pastors play. Yet all too often, pastors are expected to do everything in the church. Why will this view of pastoral ministry ultimately leave a church immature and ineffective in ministry?

3. *"There's many a small church where the problem actually is in the pastor-teacher; he won't face up to it. It's because he feels he has to do everything, as if somehow or another his credibility is at stake, and so he never draws around him people who are better than himself."*

While God has given pastors as a gift to the church, pastors do not possess all of the gifts needed for the church to flourish. Pride can easily prevent pastors from recognizing their need for other godly leaders to assist them. Why is delegation and shared leadership necessary for the stability and growth of the church? What benefits of shared leadership have you seen in your own ministry context?

Ways to Pray

- Pray for the leadership team within your church or ministry setting. Pray that this group will be faithful to God's Word, united, courageous, and full of Christlike character.
- Pray that the members of your church would be equipped for works of ministry through the preaching of God's Word. Ask God to stir up each individual in the body of Christ to use their gifts for the building up of Christ's church.
- Ask God to bring to light any areas of your church's life that have yet to be brought into conformity to God's Word. Pray for wisdom for how to effectively preach God's Word to your specific congregation so that its members might be brought to maturity.

LESSON FOUR

Leaders in the Local Church

Since a church will not progress beyond its leadership, appointing elders is a vital task that requires a clear understanding of Christian doctrine. As shepherds of the flock, elders work together to assure that God's Word is taught, God's Son is honored, and God's people are edified. Alistair Begg explains that biblical eldership is pastoral, plural, spiritual, and accountable. Diverse in giftedness and function, elders are accountable to God as they share the privileges and responsibilities of leadership.

Notes

Introduction

Pastoral Leadership

Accountable Leadership

Plural Leadership

Spiritual Leadership

KEY SCRIPTURES

"I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." (1 Peter 5:1–2)

"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." (Hebrews 13:7)

Going Deeper

1. *"The election to the Supreme Court of United States of America is nothing in comparison to the election of local leadership in a church."*

Do you think that the majority of the members of your church would readily agree with this statement? In our day and age, many despise authority and are skeptical of those in positions of leadership. This is especially true within the church. How can you encourage a high regard for local church leadership in your ministry setting?

2. *"The elder who takes this calling seriously lives under the constant pressure of knowing that 'the chief Shepherd' is going to appear [and] there will be an 'unfading crown of glory.'"*

Jesus is the Chief Shepherd who will one day return and hold all pastors accountable for their faithfulness in shepherding His sheep. Why should this motivate you to be earnest and faithful in your ministry? In light of Christ's return, which specific areas of your ministry could be most strengthened?

3. *"What, then, will protect the person who has the balance of the Bible at his fingertips and on his lips from becoming an arrogant, tyrannical, domineering, autocratic rascal? The corrective is built in, into the eldership itself, so that it is the responsibility and privilege of the elders together to make sure that none of us ends up in that position."*

Accountability is extremely important within the leadership of the local church and in any ministry setting. What are some common mistakes that churches and ministries make that lead to a lack of accountability? What should be done to ensure that these pitfalls are avoided?

Ways to Pray

- Pray that the leaders in your local church would continually minister with the awareness that Christ will return and hold them accountable for their ministry.
- Pray that the pastors of your church will make spiritual progress in their faith so that the entire church makes spiritual progress under their leadership.
- Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers into His harvest (Matthew 9:38). Ask God to raise up a generation of faithful shepherds who care for His sheep, bring new sheep into the fold, and restore the dignity of the office of pastor in society.

LESSON FIVE

Establishing a Vision

How leaders react to challenging circumstances reveals their characters and sets the tone for the reactions of others. As Alistair Begg demonstrates, Nehemiah is an excellent model of God-centered leadership. In prayerful dependence on God, Nehemiah established a vision and a practical plan for rebuilding the dilapidated wall around Jerusalem. Through his example, we see how God equips ordinary people with extraordinary gifts to meet out-of-the-ordinary challenges for His glory.

Notes

Introduction

Nehemiah's Reaction: Overwhelmed

Nehemiah's Counteraction: Prayer

Nehemiah into Action

KEY SCRIPTURES

"As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." (Nehemiah 1:4)

"And the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.' Then I was very much afraid." (Nehemiah 2:2)

Going Deeper

1. *"What do you find the hardest part of Gospel ministry? Is prayer not close to that? … The challenge of believing that if I were to spend significantly more time seeking God on my knees than scribbling about God in my notes, that, in actual fact, God may yet be magnified to a far greater degree than has ever happened."*

Prayer is one of the most important, yet often most neglected, aspects of ministry. Consider the place of prayer in your own ministry. What can you do to ensure that it is not neglected?

2. *"Within the heart of the pastor has got to be the intense longing for God and His glory, for the sheep under his care, for those as yet who have not been added to the fold, as with Jesus in John 17."*

Alistair shares that there are certain heart motivations that a pastor must have. Why is the pastor's heart so important to his ministry? How can you cultivate these heart longings?

3. *"Many of us are suffering from the illusion that we can, and it's only when we face the fact that we can't, then that we can."*

One of the greatest hindrances in establishing a vision is believing that can do so through your own charisma, skill, and personality. Why is the recognition of your inability necessary for establishing a ministry vision in the hearts of your people?

Ways to Pray

- Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you" (2 Corinthians 8:16). Ask the Lord to put into your heart an earnest care for His sheep, just as He did with Titus.
- Pray that the Lord would give you an ever-increasing zeal for His glory.
- Ask the Lord to give you wisdom for how to implement and establish a biblical vision in your ministry context.

LESSON SIX

Earthing a Vision

Getting Started

When God establishes a vision, effective leadership is necessary to communicate that vision clearly and practically to those whose efforts will bring it to fruition. In this study of Nehemiah 2:11–20, Alistair Begg examines the aspects of Nehemiah's leadership that helped to plant his vision to rebuild the Jerusalem wall in the hearts of God's people, even in the face of apathy and opposition. If a vision is God-given and humbly presented, then God will earth it in people's hearts and move them to respond.

Notes

Relaxation

Motivation

Examination

Exhortation

Information

Application

KEY SCRIPTURES

"I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.' And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work." (Nehemiah 2:17–18)

Opposition

Affirmation

Going Deeper

1. *"Rest is a necessary part of useful action. It is not something to be overlooked, neglected, denied."*

If you desire to be effective in ministry and avoid burnout, then rest must be a priority. Evaluate your own patterns of work and rest. Are you intentional about taking time off? How can you safeguard your times of rest?

2. *"The only thing that keeps one to the task is that God has put it in our hearts to do. And when we find ourselves full of vision, full of hope, full of potential, and are met by 'We tried it before, it didn't work; no one's excited; it's beyond us,' you gotta hold fast, you gotta tie yourself to the mast, you gotta ride it out, you gotta keep your foot in the door."*

If you boldly attempt to plant a biblical vision in your church, you will likely face disappointment and opposition. When the discouragement comes, what can you do to ensure that you will persevere in earthing the vision that God has placed in your heart?

3. *"What are we trusting God to do that is so incredible that it can only ever be achieved as a result of His divine intervention?"*

This question from Alistair challenges our small views of God and what He is able to do. The Lord has promised that all things are possible for Him (Matthew 19:26). In light of this truth, how would you answer Alistair's question?

Ways to Pray

- Pray that the Lord will give you firm convictions from His Word to which you will remain committed even in the face of opposition.
- Ask the Lord to clothe you with humility so that you are able to address resistance with wisdom and grace.
- Think of a goal or obstacle in your ministry that currently seems impossible. Ask the Lord to increase your faith, and pray that He would do that which seems impossible for the glory of His name.

LESSON SEVEN

Tackling Opposition to Change

Where there is life, there will be the need for change—and whenever someone proposes change, someone else will inevitably oppose it. Looking to Acts and Nehemiah for guidance, Alistair Begg explores the reasons people resist change, as well as the steps leaders can take to implement change and address opposition.

Notes

Introduction

Why People Resist Change

Why People Respond to Change

Overcoming Opposition to Change

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution." (Acts 6:1)

"So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." (Acts 9:31)

Going Deeper

1. *"We need to know our people, and we need to develop trust relationships with our people. That can only be achieved over time."*

It is a grave mistake to attempt to implement change in a ministry without first knowing your people and gaining their trust. What are some things that you can do gain greater trust with your people?

2. *"We'd rather not try anything than fail. And so, because we're so tyrannized by the prospect of failing, we just won't do anything. And that can as much be a paralyzing factor in the experience of the leader as it can be a debilitating factor in those who are responding to leadership."*

Fear of failure is an understandable reservation in implementing change. Yet there are certain situations that are worth the risk. What are some areas of your ministry that are worth the risk of attempting to implement change? What is keeping you from taking necessary action?

3. *"We overestimate what we can do in a year, and we underestimate what we can do in five years. That's why the change has to be incremental."*

Change should happen slowly and with the long-term view in mind. If we are impatient in implementing change, we will likely undermine the desired changes before they have an opportunity to get off the ground. Evaluate the changes that you would like to see in your ministry over the next five years. How can you gradually implement them?

Ways to Pray

- Pray that the Lord will give you a greater love for your people so that they recognize that you are a caring shepherd and not simply a ministry strategist.
- Remind yourself of God's love for you in Christ, and pray that you would increasingly rest secure in His acceptance of you. Then ask the Lord to help you to overcome a fear of failure and to give you the courage to take appropriate risks in ministry for the glory of His name.
- Pray that the hearts of those to whom you minister would be softened to Scripture's teaching so that they are willing receive whatever the Bible may say, especially in areas where change is needed.

LESSON EIGHT

Back to the Basics

Through His Word, God provides believers with the essential truths we need for the beginning, continuation, and completion of our salvation. In the hope of discovering new ideas, however, we often forget the fundamentals. Alistair Begg warns pastors to remind themselves and those under their care that God Himself is the only source of truth. God's people should never tire of hearing about the precious promises He has made.

Notes

Memory Matters

A Shared Faith

"Precious Promises"

Adding to Your Faith

An Eyewitness Account

Certainty of the Word

KEY SCRIPTURES

"I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder." (2 Peter 1:12–13)

"We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." (2 Peter 1:19)

Going Deeper

1. *"Whatever else our responsibility may be, we are … men set apart by God to the care of souls. It is that which ought to make us lie awake at night, and it is that which ought to get us up in the morning with a spring in our step."*

Pastors are called to oversee, serve, and care for God's people. It is very easy for pastors to lose sight of their calling and to coast in their duties. Why should you view this calling with a deadly seriousness?

2. *"It's very, very important that we ensure that we don't fail those under our care by forgetting to remind them."*

Ministry leaders will be tempted to impress their listeners with the latest insight or Christian fad, but Christians ministry should mainly be focused on reminding Christians of the truths that they already know. In your ministry, how can you make sure that you keep coming back to the same foundational Gospel truths in your teaching and preaching?

3. *"When we lose confidence in the authority and sufficiency and certainty of this book, then we'll bring in the dancing girls, then we'll bring in the flashing lights, then we'll bring in the road show, then we'll bring in the guy, the strongest man in America, who can break blocks of ice with his bare head."*

As Alistair indicates, our confidence in the Bible (or lack thereof) will influence our practice in ministry. Evaluate your current ministry practices. Do they reveal that your confidence is in God's Word or in something else? Why is it futile to attempt to grow the church with anything other than God's Word?

Ways to Pray

- Ask the Lord to help you to be diligent in your ministry calling.
- Pray that the Christians in your church and the other churches in your community would all seek unity in their shared faith in Christ. Ask the Lord the protect the church from basing its unity on secondary matters or even in opposition to that which is false in the world.
- Ask the Lord to protect you from hypocrisy. Pray that the Lord would help you to apply the truths that you preach to your own life before you call others to respond to God's Word.

EPILOGUE

On Being a Pastor

Key Takeaways

Answer the following questions based on what you learned from the sermons in this volume.

1. What are the marks of a God-given ministry?

2. What should a pastor's approach be in establishing and earthing a vision within a local church?

3. Why is it important for pastors to equip the saints for works of ministry?

Further Reading and Study

- *On Being a Pastor: Understanding Our Calling and Work* by Derek Prime and Alistair Begg
- *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones,* vol. 2, *The Fight of Faith: 1939–1981* by Iain H. Murray
- *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon*, edited by William Carus
- *Zeal without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* by Christopher Ash
- *Seven Leaders: Pastors and Teachers* by Iain H. Murray
- *Devoted to God: Blueprints for Sanctification* by Sinclair Ferguson
- *Lectures to My Students* by Charles Spurgeon

Additional Notes

ALISTAIR BEGG is the Bible teacher on *Truth For Life*, a daily and weekend program that brings the exposition of Scripture to a global audience through radio, podcast, and a wide range of digital and streaming platforms.

Since its launch in 1995, *Truth For Life* has featured teaching drawn from Alistair's decades of faithful preaching at Parkside Church, where he served as senior pastor from 1983 until 2025.

Alistair and his wife, Susan, have been married since 1975. They have three grown children and nine grandchildren.

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