

See the Bible

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Date: 16 November 2025

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[0 : 00] I'm very grateful for this opportunity for sabbatical. And so, because I'm going to be away for three months, I left my longest and most complicated and convoluted sermon for the final Sunday.

That way you won't miss me when I'm away. We're going to be in two places in the Bible for our reading. The first one is in Matthew 28. We just read it, but we're going to read it again. And then the second one in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. So if you can turn to those two places. Matthew 28 from verse 16 through to verse 20.

A very well-known section at the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Verse 16 reads, Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

[1 : 22] And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. Then flip forward to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the first letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians chapter 11. And we're going to read from verse 17. The Apostle Paul writes and he says, In the following directives, I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you has God's approval.

So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat. For when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk.

Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter.

[2 : 28] For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you. The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and he said this.

This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. So then whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

[3 : 38] So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home so that when you meet together, it may not result in judgment.

And when I come, I will give further directions. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray as we study together. Our Father, won't you teach us from your word this morning, your word which is truth. Your infallible and errant word, Lord. Would you speak into our hearts, won't your spirit work in us, we pray.

And we seek Christ. We ask this for his sake and glory. Amen. So we come to the very end of our series on worship, made for worship.

What it is that we do when we gather on a Sunday for corporate worship. Or for public assembly. We've talked about the elements. The things that are the sort of key components.

[4 : 43] The things we need to do to have a viable, a biblical worship service. We've talked about reading the Bible. We've talked about preaching the Bible.

We've talked about praying the Bible. We've talked about singing the Bible. And now the last one we're going to talk about, the last element, is seeing the Bible.

That is, we're going to talk about the sacraments. What we call the sacraments. In the 4th century, St. Augustine referred to the sacraments. And I think this is the first time this language is used.

But he referred to the sacraments as the visible word. That is, God is communicating something to us. He's communicating truth to us when we see the sacraments being participated in.

And so Protestant Christians then have always believed that there are two sacraments that are given to us by God. By Christ. Baptism, on the one hand. And the Lord's Supper, or communion, on the other hand.

[5 : 42] It's in those sacraments that we see the Bible. To use that sort of language. Now there's a whole lot we could be saying about baptism, about the Lord's Supper.

We could do a sermon series on each one of these. We could spend ten weeks easily on the sacraments. There are a ton of questions around the sacraments. Questions like, who are the worthy recipients of the sacraments?

Should we baptize believers only, for example? By profession of faith, should we baptize the children of believers? Who should take communion? Should we do what we call fence the table? As in say to some people, no, you shouldn't take communion, but others, you can take communion. And who should be in which category there? Who should administer the sacraments? Should a minister only administer the sacraments?

Or can any member of the church administer the sacraments? What about the mode? You saw some of that last week. If you were here last week or you were here this week, you saw two different modes of baptism. But should we baptize by immersion?

[6 : 38] Or should we baptize by pouring? Or by sprinkling? Should, there's mode issues as well when it comes to communion. Should we drink wine? There was wine in the Bible. Or should we drink grape juice?

Then there are even more complicated questions if you know something of your church history and you know the big kind of divisions of the global church. What are the differences, for example, between a Roman Catholic view of the sacraments or a Lutheran view of the sacraments or a Reformed and Presbyterian view of the sacraments or a Baptist or non-denominational view of the sacraments?

There are tons and tons of questions to be answered about baptism and the Lord's Supper. And these have created actually some of the most fiercely debated theological debates in history sometimes.

Sometimes blood was literally shed over some of these issues in the past. But I only have one sermon. So I'm going to try and sidestep some of the more complicated stuff.

What I actually hope to do is send you resources in the week so that you can dig into some of the stuff in more detail. I want to try this morning and speak more broadly about the nature of the sacraments as a collective.

[7 : 48] So keeping baptism and the Lord's Supper together as the two sacraments and why they are a key part of worship, what we do when we gather. So keeping in line with our overall series.

We'll touch on, we'll skirt around some of those questions. So you'll probably start to intuit some answers to some of those questions in what we talk about. But I'm not going to be directly taking on that stuff.

I do also want to remind you of the categories we've been using up until this point as we think about what we do in worship. We've talked about elements, things that should be there because we've got

good biblical warrant to have these things in our worship.

Forms, how we do the elements. And then circumstances, which are incidental things that are not in Scripture but we have to make decisions on because there are pragmatic decisions to be made around them.

So here's where we're going to go this morning. And this first part is going to be a little bit dense and a little bit complicated but hopefully it'll lighten up and ease up as we get further down. We're going to go, what is a sacrament first of all?

[8 : 47] Define that word. Maybe that word is foreign to you. We're going to go, what is a sacrament? Number two, do sacraments belong in gathered worship? And then number three, why do we need the sacraments in worship?

So really it's the what, the where, and the why is what we're looking at this morning. So here's the first one, what is a sacrament? Now straight away you might hear that language and that language might be alien to you.

You might say, I don't actually know what you mean by sacrament. Maybe you're familiar with the term ordinance, which is actually in our confession as well. But the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is a summary of the larger confession of faith, so it's got shorter, more succinct answers for you.

But the Shorter Catechism describes a sacrament this way. It says, a sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in which by perceivable signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.

So if you think about the rest of the Bible storyline, in the same way that God sealed His covenant promises to Noah by giving him a rainbow, or His covenant promises to Abraham by giving him circumcision, so the new covenant promises of the gospel are sealed through what we might call the ritual actions of baptism and communion.

[10 : 12] They function as signs which point us to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. So baptism, on the one hand, that's a sign of incorporation. It's like the entrance sign.

Incorporation into God's covenant people, into the visible church, and communion is the sign and the seal of ongoing renewal of God's covenant people. So you get baptized once, but you keep doing communion.

And the language there, that language of sign and seal, that also might be a bit alien to you. That actually comes from the Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 27, where it describes the sacrament as holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace.

So it's the sort of language you'll find in our confession, but actually more importantly, it comes from the Bible. It comes from Romans chapter 4, where Paul uses that language of sign and seal to describe circumcision, which was an old covenant sacrament.

It's one, thankfully, many of us are very happy about this, that we don't do anymore. But it was a sacrament in the Old Testament given to Abraham in Genesis 17. So in Romans 4, Paul says this about Abraham.

[11 : 18] He says that Abraham received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So that physical act of circumcision that he underwent, that there was a visible representation, a visible confirmation of the righteousness God offered to Abraham, if Abraham would take hold of that by faith.

Simple way to think about it is like this. A sign points the way to something, and a seal confirms it. So if you are going to travel over the holidays, and if you're going to fly on a plane, you might fly to an airport.

When you land at that airport, as you come off the plane, if you haven't gone the cheap way with FlySaf Air, where you've got your own carry-on luggage, and you've actually checked in some luggage, you're now going to come out, and you're going to see a sign that says, baggage claim, with an arrow.

Now that sign is not the actual carousel with your luggage going around and around, but it points the way to that.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper point to God's objective gospel promises to us. Inclusion into God's family, regeneration, the washing away of our sin, union with Christ, communion with God, the presence of the Spirit, newness of life, all of that stuff is being pointed to in those signs, saying God is offering all of this.

[12 : 45] In the gospel, God is giving you all of this stuff. But then the sacraments also seal the promises. So if you did history, medieval history particularly, you probably learned about seals.

Not the seals that you see at the beach here, but the seal where the king, if he wanted to demonstrate that this document that he was sending to another king over there was from him, they'd put a wax, a clump of wax on there, and he'd take his signet ring, and he would impress the seal of his tribe or nation or kingdom on there, and that would go hard, and then the other king would get that document and say, oh, it's got the king's seal on it.

This must be from him. This authorizes this, whatever's inside this document. It has his authority. It carries his weight. It confirms what's in here. Baptism and communion seal God's promises to us. They confirm God's promises to us. They underwrite them. They're basically saying God is going to be faithful to bring these things about. It's not just pointing out these wonderful things that you get in the gospel.

It's also sealing. God is actually going to be faithful to bring these things about. Brian Chappell, who's a Presbyterian theologian and pastor, puts it this way, and I often use this language when we do baptisms as well.

[14 : 07] He's talking here specifically about baptism, but it applies both ways here. But he says, baptism seals, and I quote, the pledge of God that when the conditions of the covenant are met, that his faith is present in the individual, he will then honor that faith by bringing about full redemption and adoption into his spiritual family.

So it's confirmed. You trust in that, and you are confirmed. You are guaranteed that God is going to follow through on those things that he's promised in the sign. So sacraments point the way to God's objective gospel promises, and they confirm those promises.

Now the other thing that was actually mentioned in that little section of the shorter catechism that I read at the beginning in the definition is that sacraments are instituted by Christ, and that's important. That is, these are things that he told us, his church, to keep on doing as part of worship. So that Matthew 28 passage is a very famous passage in the Bible. Christ's explicit instruction to his apostles that's going to form really the foundation of all the ministry that they're going to do going forward as he ascends up to heaven.

He says, Now we often talk about that great commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

[15 : 39] It's this great missionary passage. It's the foundation for our endeavors to take the gospel out to the nations so that other people might hear about Jesus.

But I want you to notice that a key part of this discipling the nations, of reaching the nations according to Jesus, is that we would baptize people, he says.

So he instituted there. Baptism is instituted by Jesus. It's not just something we've made up. It's not just a cultural practice that Christians, early Christians, appropriated from some other group.

You see a similar thing then with the Lord's Supper. So in 1 Corinthians, where Paul instructs the church on how to observe the Lord's Supper, and we've seen in several sermons that that Corinthian church has a lot of problems, and you saw in that reading that we did that they had a lot of problems.

But he's trying to sort out how they should do communion in a way that's not frivolous and that is not people getting out of hand. He says, 1 Corinthians 11, 23, he says, For I received from the Lord, that's Jesus, what I pass on to you.

[16 : 45] The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. For whenever you eat this bread and you drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. So again, we can clearly see that this is instituted by Christ.

He told us to do this. You go to Matthew, you go to Mark, you go to Luke, and the recording of the Last Supper there, you see the same thing. A sacrament is instituted by our Lord Jesus.

It is something that he has explicitly told us to do. It's on that basis then that the Protestant reformers from the 16th century argued that we actually only have two sacraments in Scripture.

Two sacraments. So at the time of the Reformation, when Martin Luther was starting the Reformation, there were actually seven sacraments in the medieval church. So there was baptism, there was the Lord's Supper, those two were there, but then there was confirmation and penance

and marriage and ordination and extreme unction, which I think today they called praying for the sick, like when they're on their deathbed.

[18 : 06] Only baptism and the Lord's Supper, the reformers argued, were instituted by Christ to sign and to seal the gospel promises of God. Those other things are not unimportant, but these two things are sacraments.

That's also why then they referred to the sacraments as the visible word, following on from Augustine. See, the basic idea of the gospel is that the gospel comes to you, is communicated in two modes.

It's communicated through preaching, preaching the word, and it's communicated through the visible signs, the visible word. Hence, in the sacraments, we see the Bible.

We see the Bible almost dramatized, if you like. The truths of the Bible illustrate and dramatized. Now, we actually do more than just see the Bible, but I couldn't, it wouldn't fit nicely with the sermon outline if I'd said see, touch, taste, all the other things that we do in sacraments, because we do all of those other things.

It's a full engagement. You're using all your senses to engage with the truths of the gospel. That's why John Calvin, the great reformer, would say that the sacraments are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God's word.

[19 : 21] We're using our whole body to engage in that truth and have the word of God confirmed to us. That's also why, in the ordination of ministers, Protestants have traditionally ordained them to the ministry of word and sacrament.

You might hear that language when a person gets ordained. If we ordain a new teaching elder at any point, we would say, this person is being ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament. That is, they're faithfully to preach the word and they're faithfully to administer the visible word.

Just like that other mode, preaching, the visible word, in the same way, needs to be taken hold of by faith. So you respond in basically the same way. In the same way, you hear God's word preached and you have to respond in faith to the truth of God's word.

In the same way, you come to the table or you get baptized and you have to take hold of those things with faith. So the sacraments don't just mechanically apply the gospel to people.

That's why Protestants, for example, reject something like baptismal regeneration. I know that's a complicated term, but it's basically the idea that the ritual of baptism itself infuses faith and causes regeneration in the person getting baptized.

[20 : 36] You'll find that teaching in the Roman Catholic Church. But Protestants would say, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. The ritual itself cannot do that. It is only a sign and a seal of regeneration.

It needs to be taken hold of by faith. So that would be kind of the one way people would go with the sacrament. The other way, though, where Protestants would want to push back on is we would want to say, but hang on, also, these sacraments are not merely symbolic.

That is, we believe there's real grace conferred to the worshiper when he or she eats and drinks with faith or by faith takes hold of what is signified and sealed in their baptism.

So the confession of faith in chapter 27 says this, the grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used is not conferred by any power in them.

Neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend on the piety or intention of him who administers it, but rather on the work of the spirit and on the word of institution which contains together with the precepts authorizing its use of promise of benefit to its worthy receivers.

[21 : 44] So that is, I don't make, by me being a minister doesn't make communion more effective to you as you participate. By it being this ordained sign given by Jesus, it doesn't mechanically convey the gospel, it has to be taken hold of by faith.

But when taken hold of by faith it really does communicate those benefits to you. It's not just a symbol. So there I think we have something of an idea now hopefully of what a sacrament is biblically speaking.

That was the most complicated part of the sermon so hopefully you were able to follow most of that there. It's all in the Westminster Confession of Faith so you can just go back and read chapter 27.

It'll help you with that and the next few chapters do baptism and the Lord's Supper in detail.

But I wanted to give you that overview there as we now move on to the next question which is well should the sacraments be elements of worship? Should we be doing this in our gathered worship?

See because sacraments are actually a little bit different from all the other elements that we've

talked about in that they don't happen in every single service.

We don't do baptisms in every single service. Even if we were a mega church I think it would still be tricky to pull that off maybe to have somebody professing faith each time and enough babies being born that we could fill the service of the baptism every single Sunday.

[23 : 05] But never mind baptism even the Lord's Supper the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper is something reformed and Presbyterian churches have often seen as being more in the form category than the element category.

They agree it's an element but the form of the frequency how often does it happen well there's debate. So we at our church we practice it weekly weekly and there are many who do that. John Calvin the great reformer although he didn't practice it weekly because the city council in Geneva wouldn't let him do it he wanted to practice it weekly he wrote in his works.

But other Presbyterian and reformed churches they practice communion monthly. Some of the churches in our own denomination practice communion monthly. Sometimes other churches practice it quarterly. Some churches in the Dutch reformed tradition only practice it twice a year. Now I think there's some very good cases to be made for more frequent observance of the supper so weekly or monthly but the fact that it is a live debate amongst confessional Christians means that the sacraments are a little bit different then from preaching and from reading scripture and prayer because those things are always in the service whereas we're not always going to have a sacrament in every single worship service.

So the question then is well should they be in the first place should we regard them as an element of worship? To that I would say yes. I would say yes because of the biblical evidence.

[24 : 33] So let's look at that for a moment. In that initial snapshot! that we get of the early church in the book of Acts chapter 2 straight after Pentecost and Peter preaching his sermon and all the people come to faith we get this picture of the early church.

We've looked at it several times in this series but let me read the longest section for you. It says they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Now I read the longer section, not just the first section where it describes the early church worship service because I wanted you to see that there are two mentions there in that section about breaking bread.

[25 : 39] Now the first one appears to be more formal breaking of bread. It actually has a definite article in front of it, the breaking of bread, within the context of worship. The second one later on seems to be a more informal gathering for meals in each other's homes.

And so I think there you've got an example in Acts chapter 2 verse 42 of communion as an element of worship, of worship service.

In fact this was so prominent that many critics of the early church accused them of cannibalism because they would talk about going together for worship and eating bodies and drinking blood. And so the people who didn't know what Christianity was were like well that's a little bit weird. So it's clear that this was a key part of their worship. Then you go to that longer passage 1 Corinthians 11 that we read, it seems fairly clear there that Paul is regulating communion within the context of a worship service.

So in verse 17 he starts the section with these words, he says in the following directives I have no praise for you, so he's pretty stern with them, for your meetings and there it's literally your assembling together, it's a similar word to what you find in Hebrews where the author of Hebrews says do not forsake synagoguing together, coming together for your religious service.

[27 : 02] He says your meetings do more harm than good. So we know right at the beginning of the chapter that he is addressing what they are doing in their public assembly, their worship, their Sunday morning gathering.

And then he goes on, outlining all their bad practices, the dumb stuff they were doing, and he instructs them in right observance of the Lord's Supper from verse 23 onwards. And so it's pretty clear that Paul thought communion was an element of worship, what we should be doing when we gather. Now baptism is actually a little trickier. And the reason I say that it's trickier is because we have examples of baptism that take place outside of a worship service. Probably the most obvious example is Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts chapter 8, where Philip meets this guy on the side of the road traveling, preaches the gospel to him, and then they see some water and he says, well, shouldn't I get baptized? He's like, yeah, you should get baptized. And so they go and they baptize him in the water. That wasn't a worship service. So why do we want baptism to take place in worship? [28 : 05] Why not just do baptism more freely and informally? Like why don't we just a couple of guys go down to the beach or to somebody's swimming pool and do baptism there? And to answer that, I think we have to build something of a theological case.

So the traditional Protestant argument from Scripture goes something like this. Number one, baptism is given to the church as an ordinance, not to individuals privately. Okay? So Matthew 28, that Great Commission, is given directly, and many commentators through history have pointed this out, is given directly to the apostles, who at that point are the official office bearers of the church. A key reason why historically Protestants, and this is not just a Presbyterian thing, you would have found this in historic 17th century Baptist, Anglican, Congregational, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed circles, have only ever allowed ordained ministers to administer baptism and to administer the sacraments, was for this reason, is that the ordained office of elder is in direct continuity with those original apostles to which the sacrament was given, to say you go and baptize people. It wasn't given more generically to their whole church. That's the first argument. Second argument is baptism, well the first part of the argument, second part of the argument is baptism signifies entry into a union with a visible church.

[29 : 31] So on more than one occasion the apostle Paul will use language to believers of having been baptized into one body. He says that in 1 Corinthians 12, he says it in Ephesians 4. And so it would be pretty strange then to turn it into a private act away from God's, the church's formal worship service.

It seems to sort of defeat the purpose of what's being signed and sealed in baptism, incorporation into God's church if you're going to go and get privately baptized somewhere with one or two people and not with the church of God.

That's the second part of the argument. The third part is that baptism and the word go together. Now we've been kind of saying this all the way along, baptism and the word go together. We've mentioned this already but baptism like communion is the visible word and so it seems strange then to separate it from the context where the word is preached regularly.

That's another reason why the reformed wanted the minister to preach the word and administer the sacraments because they're both the visible word and if you're going to task a minister with studying and ordaining him and setting him apart to preach the gospel then surely you want the same thing for the sacraments.

[30 : 46] So you want to keep it in the same context then. That's the third part of the argument. The fourth part is that baptism is a public testimony of God's grace not just for the person being baptized but also for the whole congregation.

So when you for example and you would have had this experience this morning when you as a baptized believer watch somebody else receive the sign of God's wonderful covenant promises you are reminded that that sign was placed on you too.

You're reminded that those promises are yours too and that God is being faithful to those promises in your life. And so it would be strange then to take that public testimony away into a private ceremony that then doesn't encourage and build up the whole body.

And so it makes sense that the most logical place for baptism is gathered worship. I think the situation like the eunuch's baptism in Acts 8 is exceptional rather than the norm and there were exceptional circumstances at work for why it was done there and done in that context.

For example the eunuch was en route back to Ethiopia as the first missionary to bring the gospel to Ethiopia. There was no church in Ethiopia to baptize him and so Philip baptizes him right there on the side of the road.

[32 : 08] It seems to me that we are right to think of the sacraments as being elements of worship things that should take place in the public gathering of the church even if they don't take place in every single worship service.

Then thirdly the why question. Why would God want us to observe the sacraments in worship? Why do we need to see the Bible in our gatherings?

When we preach it why do we still need to see it in this visible sign? Two things to say here.

Number one in worship we need objective truth telling.

We need objective truth telling. See the Bible that's what visible ritual signs are. They operate as objective truth tellers. They communicate to us truths about God and about us and about his working in this world.

So you think of circumcision for example. The old covenant sacrament. It's an outward physical sign of God's redemption promise to cut off and set apart for himself a people.

[33 : 11] Okay. Think about baptism. Similar thing. It's an outward physical sign of what God does for us in the gospel. He washes us clean. Taking away our sin. Listen. Signs in the Bible are primarily objective.

A lot of Christians I think get this wrong. That's why we come to differing views around baptism and stuff like that. But signs are primarily and this is from the Old Testament through to the New.

Primarily objective.

And what I mean by that is these signs do not primarily signify our subjective responses to God. It's not to say the subjective is unimportant that we don't need to respond in faith to these things.

But that's not what's being signified primarily. They signify God's objective work. What he's done.

What he's promised to do in us. That he's faithful to save.

And this is so very important for us. For you and me. We need objective signs in our life. We need it because we are such subjective people. All the time.

[34 : 13] Our mood. Our circumstances. Our behavior. The weather. The sports results. Those. Make us subjective messes most of the time. Going up and down and up and down. One day we feel on fire for God and the next day we feel like God is a million miles away.

And we can't really tell why stuff changed from yesterday to today. The very silly illustration of this. I might have shared this with you guys before but when I was growing up in Durban.

Our house had a view of the sea. And in the corner of our property which I could see from my bedroom was a palm tree that had branches coming out in different directions.

Now many of you know that I used to. I'm not saying I am because I have hardly ever been there but I used to be a surfer. I hope to be a surfer again in the future but right now the present tense is not working so well. But I used to be a very avid surfer in the sea all the time particularly in Durban where everybody and his dog surfs.

And so this palm tree helped me because every single morning I would look out of my window and I'd look at the palm tree and I'd see which way the wind was blowing based on which direction the branch is.

[35 : 24] So like there was a branch on that side that I knew if that wind was going there's a branch on this side of it bent this way I knew that wind was blowing. All the different kind of prevailing winds that you get in Durban because wind is critical for surfing.

So in Durban you have two prevailing winds that blow. You have a northeaster that blows down the coast and you have a southwester that comes up the coast. The northeaster brings horrible messy surfing conditions and those horrible little guys blue bottles that sting you and ruin your day completely.

The southwester comes up the coast and it brings nice clean offshore conditions that you need for surfing. And so every morning I'd wake up and I look out my window at the palm tree and I look and see is it a northeaster or is it a southwester.

And whenever it was a northeaster my entire mood would drop. I'd get miserable and grumpy. I'd just be that little bit more grumpy on those northeaster days than I would be any other day of the week.

And it actually had nothing to do with I was surfing that day or not. Even if I just knew the waves were bad and I wasn't even going to get to surf I was grumpy because the northeaster was blowing. We are such subjective people.

[36 : 43] Incredibly subjective people swayed by everything around us. Sometimes literally by every wind around us. And that's a real problem for our spirituality. It's a big problem.

Because it means that our sense of God's presence and of his love and of his comfort goes up and down based on a whole host of factors. When your work is under strain. When your relationships are in a difficult place.

When your job is under threat. When you're feeling family pressures at home. When you're struggling with bouts of anxiety or depression. There are all sorts of things that are running through your head in those sorts of moments.

Like God do you really care about me? Why can't I send your presence? Do you really love me? And then when you struggle with sin.

When you consistently keep messing up in areas that you think you should have gotten past. And then you start wondering has God really saved me? Am I really a Christian? Am I really his?

[37 : 42] Has he forgiven me? What subjective you and I need is objective truth to intervene in our lives. To cut through that subjectivity.

We need visible signs. We need visible signs that seal the truth of God in our subjective hearts.

That cut through the lies that we are tempted to believe about ourselves and about God.

And so when your heart comes along and your heart says well maybe God doesn't love me. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he hasn't forgiven me. You need something at that point. You need something outside of yourself that you can look up.

That you can take hold of and you can say no. this is what God has said. This is who he is. This is what he's done.

And that is the end of the story. We preach the objective truths of the gospel every single Sunday but you also need to come and you need to eat the bread.

[38 : 45] You need to drink the wine. And you need to have the water wash over you. Those are the objective signs of the gospel. Because friends subjective you and I will not survive without signs and seals that the Lord calls us to observe.

There's a growing trend among professing Christians to create very organic unstructured flexible versions of the faith. Where the ordinary means of preaching and the sacraments sort of become optional extras based on how you feel.

So maybe the Sunday I look I don't feel like dealing with people. I'm tired. It's been a long week so I just want to watch a sermon online. I don't want to gather with the people and break bread.

Friends I want to be deathly serious with you. I think that sort of self-designed spirituality that flexes around your own subjective experiences and desires.

I think that sort of spirituality will kill you in the end. Kill your faith. Now I get it. Life is full of demands. Our time, our energy is stretched and so many options are available now online as well to create this sort of flexible spirituality that works around your schedule, works around your personal capacities.

[40 : 05] I get the temptation to do that and to justify it. But here's the thing. What happens when you lose your job? What happens when your closest friend betrays you?

What happens when you are desperately sad and lonely? What happens when it feels like God has abandoned you? What happens when you're angry with God for the way things are going in your life?

If the quality of your spirituality depends upon your subjective experiences then your faith is going to crumble in the face of those sorts of difficulties. It's going to fall over and die.

You are not going to get online and watch a sermon at that point. You have no motivation to do it.

You won't have the resources to stand in the face of the storm.

You won't have that arresting, objective promise of God sealed in the sacraments. These are gifts to us. It's what God has given to them, to us.

[41 : 09] He's given us gifts. Gifts to steady the ship in any storm. If you give yourself to regularly coming into worship and participate in the sacraments you have a wonderful, wonderful gift at your disposal.

You have objective truth repeatedly breaking into your subjective world. Repeatedly telling you God is God and he has got this. You might not feel like it but he's got this.

That's the first thing. That's the first answer to the why question. The second answer is we need Christ. We need Christ. Now we've mentioned that there are sacraments in the Old Testament like

there are in the New Testament.

In many ways circumcision is the Old Testament corollary of baptism in the New Testament.

Similarly the Lord's Supper, has an Old Testament corollary which is Passover.

In Exodus chapter 12 and 13 where Moses is giving instructions on the details of the Passover observance. He says this in verse 9 of chapter 13. He says to the people of Israel, this observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that this law of the Lord is to be on your lips.

[42 : 23] For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. Now this verse and other verses actually like this in the Torah and the first five books of the Bible became the basis for the Jewish practice of tying little boxes to your wrists or to your forehead with actually tiny little pieces of the Old Testament law inside them, tiny pieces of the Torah inside them.

Now what we call today phylacteries. Now it's a bit of an extreme literal interpretation and application of Exodus 13 verse 9. Something that today we might say, well that's legalism.

That's just weird religious legalism. And while I do not think that Exodus 13 is commanding us to tie little boxes containing the law to our wrists and to our foreheads, the desire in Orthodox Jewish religion to have that sign front and center and to do something tangible to get the sign front and center.

I think that desire is commendable. See I don't think you have to have a little box on your forehead. But what are you doing week in and week out to make sure that the one with the crown of thorns on his forehead is front and center in your life?

I don't think you need to tie a little box to your wrists. But what are you doing week in and week out to make sure that the one with nails in his wrists is front and center in your life?

[44 : 00] At the end of the day the power itself is not in the sign, it's not in the ritual, it's not in the actual sacrament, it's in Jesus Christ. It's in his body broken for us, his blood shed for us, it's in his death that washes us clean, it's his resurrection that raises us to new life without consistent regular participation in the sacraments, that true and glorious gospel story of our crucified Savior, it starts to fade from view and it starts to fade from your heart.

We need Christ, that's why we come to the sacraments. We need to see him, we need to come face to face with him, to eat with him, to fellowship with him.

A lot of people have asked me what I'm going to be doing on sabbatical. My answer is pretty short, nothing. It's the main idea. As much of nothing as I possibly can do, but I was starting to think of some things that I'm going to do, I'm doing some reading I'm hoping to do.

And then one thing I thought that might be a fun thing to try and do is to write a song. So for those of you who've been in the church for a long, long time, you will remember that I occasionally used to help lead music sometimes.

The standard has risen and so I never get invited to do that anymore. But there was a point in my life when I was like, I'd love to write songs that we could actually sing in church.

[45 : 27] And when I was a youth pastor, I actually wrote one or two that I think actually did get into the church there. They were saying once or twice. I don't think they were very good, but we sang them. But one of my earliest attempts at songwriting, in fact, it's the earliest one I can remember at Christian songwriting at least, was to take the words of a 19th century hymn and to put them to music.

I came across this hymn in a theology book. It's by Horatius Bonar. And it's quite apt and appropriate to the subject we're talking about this morning.

It goes like this. Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face. Here would we touch and handle things unseen. Here grasp with firmer hand eternal grace and all my weariness upon thee lean.

Here would I feed upon the bread of God. Here drink with thee the royal wine of heaven. Here would I lay aside each earthly load. Here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven.

This is the hour of banquet and of song. This is the heavenly table spread for me. Here let me feast and feasting still prolong the brief bright hour of fellowship with thee.

[46 : 47] You want to see the Lord? You want to see the Lord face to face? You want that fellowship? You want to feast with your Savior?

Well then we need the sacraments in worship. We need to give ourselves to those sacraments.

Let's pray together. Our gracious God won't you continually put your love and your mercy in front of us that we may see it that we may touch it that we may taste it and that we may be reminded of your

object of goodness to us in the gospel.

may we return to these signs and seals week in and week out with faith clinging on to them knowing that they are true for us because of what you've done.

Father I pray for any person this morning who's sitting here who can't take hold of these signs and seals by faith yet who can't come to communion because they've never repented of their sin and trusted in Jesus for salvation. I pray that you would bring about faith in them this morning for the first time that they would turn away from a life lived apart from you repent of that and turn to Jesus and say save me Lord and that they would find forgiveness and salvation.

Father may we be a church that takes the sacraments seriously that puts them in front of people weekly to strengthen and to encourage and to nourish our faith as we seek to grow in you and our knowledge of the gospel.

[48 : 23] Help us to be that church we pray for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen.